

**“New Beginnings”**  
**September 22nd, 2019**  
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Last August, fresh out of graduate school and starting my first job as a minister, I thought I had a pretty good handle on new beginnings. I had just moved to Massachusetts, was preparing to meet my new congregation. Fall was coming, the school year was about to begin, Rosh Hashanah was around the corner. New beginnings all around. And then I went to the bookstore in downtown Concord one day, while I was exploring my home, and I happened upon this book called “Transitions: Making sense of life’s changes” by William Bridges. I flipped through it, and there was a whole section on new beginnings. Perfect. Except that it was the last section in the book. So I brought it home. Incidentally, I went to a training a few weeks ago with the UUA and this book was on the required reading list.

In this book, Bridges essentially makes the argument that transitions consist of three stages: endings, a neutral zone, and then new beginnings come last. In the preface he says this, quote, “Change is situational. Transition is psychological...it is the inner reorientation and self-redefinition that you have to go through in order to incorporate changes into your life. Without a transition, a change is just a rearrangement of the furniture.” End quote.

And that gave me pause. I had wanted to check “new beginning” off my to-do list the moment I unpacked my final moving box. And yet part of me knew that wasn’t really the way things work. A new beginning is something much deeper than a change of address or circumstance. Our sense of ourselves changes.

I have moved a lot in the last decade, and I have found that there's this burst of excitement to be in a new place. Morning has broken! And then there's the realization that you don't know how to get to the grocery store, or there's the striking absence of the community and place you left behind. We have to learn a new way of being in the world. We realize that we are unmoored.

I moved to San Francisco after college and I remember being totally disoriented for months because moving from the east coast to the west coast meant that the ocean was suddenly on the opposite side of me. So I didn't know which way was north. I felt physically lost, even as I began to know my way around.

This happens with the school calendar, too. There's this build up of starting the new year, of starting kindergarten, or moving your youngest child into their college dorm. The first day of school! And then you have to learn how to be a kindergartener, or you have to drive back home and face an empty nest. We expect the new beginning to come first, and then are left with the actual process of transition.

Something has ended, we have left some version of ourselves behind, and yet the shift to who we will be hasn't really happened yet. This happens when relationships end, too. This is the neutral zone before a new beginning. The space of disorientation and loneliness, confusion and wilderness. The growing edge. We have to do the work of self-transformation ourselves and it is painful, but it is also holy. The space between is sacred.

As I reflected on these three stages – ending, neutral zone, and then new beginning, I was reminded of the wisdom of the High Holidays in the Jewish calendar, and Holy Week in the Christian calendar.

Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, is next Sunday, and it marks the beginning of the High Holy days, which end with Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. This is one of the most important times in the Jewish calendar and it lasts for ten days. Referred to as both the days of repentance and the days of awe, it is a time for reflecting, for making amends. It is the neutral zone, liminal time. And this all comes to a culmination on Yom Kippur, a day spent in temple fasting and praying. It is said that on that day, God inscribes each person's name into a book, sealing their fate for the next year. It is after the wandering and the reflecting, the release of the past, it is after this that the new beginning becomes possible.

In the Christian calendar, this wisdom that death, and a time of emptiness precede new life is held in the story of Easter. One of the moments I find most poignant and beautiful in the Holy Week liturgy is the stripping of the altar. I worked at the University Church at Yale, and being there was the first time I experienced Holy Week. So I sat stunned as the flowers and fabric and candles were removed from the altar as the congregation sat holding the silence. The lights were turned out and we were left in the stillness and shadow of the sanctuary.

I was raised in a fairly humanist UU congregation, and I had gone to seminary knowing rather little about Christianity. I never really understood Easter. And it was in that moment of watching the ministers remove everything that the loss that comes before new life became real to me. It's like the last walk through an old apartment after everything is gone - what has ended becomes clear. There is no turning back and it can be devastating.

In the space between death and resurrection, on Holy Saturday, after Jesus had died and been buried, the disciples didn't know what would come next. They couldn't see the new beginning on the horizon, couldn't imagine what it might be like. The experience of transition is

one of utter disorientation. And that's actually a good thing. I have found it is not a fun thing or a particularly joyful thing, but there is holiness and wholeness and healing in the waiting, or at least there can be.

In "Transitions," Bridges points out that, quote, "the Hebrew word for 'wilderness' in which Jesus, Moses, and Buddha spent time during critical periods of their lives is the same word that means 'sanctuary.' This unmappable nowhere was...*holy ground*," he writes.

Last year I served as the ministerial intern at First Parish in Concord, which in our denomination is the space between school ending and life as a minister beginning. It is a time when our identity changes from student to minister. We become something different. And now, in this new season, I join you here at UUCSW as your minister. This is the beginning. And I've found in life that people are very curious about how or why one would choose such an unusual career. It is a joy and an honor to be joining this congregation as your minister, so I'd like to tell you the story of how this journey started.

After college I moved to San Francisco thinking I wanted to be a wedding planner. I had studied the sociology of religion in college and had worked in various creative jobs during the summers, so I thought it would be the perfect union of my skills and interests. The week before I left New England I got an email about a job that sounded perfect, and within a few days of arriving in California I was offered that job.

This was January of 2011 and a few months into my new life, a tsunami hit Japan. One of the florists I worked with was Japanese and her family lost everything. Being in the business of planning events, there was a benefit put together by San Francisco's coolest events people to raise money for relief efforts. And at this party I experienced a moment of total disenchantment. The people around me were talking about the decorations, not the reason we had gathered to raise money, and I felt

frozen. I left that night knowing that if I spent my life planning parties I would cease to know myself.

And so I spent the next month going to work and then wandering the hills and neighborhoods of San Francisco when I got home. I didn't know what I would do with my life, but I knew that walking helped and it was about the only thing I could do.

In clergy circles, people like to talk about discernment, which is the process of coming to a meaningful decision. But discern is a verb, an action of recognizing and distinguishing. I think Bridges would argue against this way of describing the wilderness that I found myself in. Because in fact it is a time of emptiness, confusion, and a sense of chaos. The past is over and the way forward is completely unknown. It's more like living in the twilight zone than it is an active process of sorting out the right thing. It's weeks of wandering San Francisco alone in the literal fog with no sense of what might come. Perhaps you know the feeling.

And then one Friday night I decided to take a sabbath. I went through my usual routine of wandering the city alone, I went to bed early, and I decided I would sleep in and plan nothing for the next day. So I slept and the next morning I woke up with the clarity that I would be a Unitarian Universalist minister, which was not an option that had ever occurred to me before. But somehow I knew then what lay ahead of me. I didn't know it would take a decade of winding paths and restarts, but I knew who I was becoming. And when I told my family, no one was surprised. They actually seemed relieved that I was choosing to be myself, and not who I had imagined I should be.

Now, all these years later, I find myself here, in this place, in this beautiful congregation with all of you, a blessing I couldn't have imagined all those years ago.

We are all in our various ways and moments experiencing transition in different aspects of our lives, not only individually but collectively. Having a new minister is itself a major transition for a congregation, which is why the UUA assigned Bridges book to all of us entering new ministries this fall. Because to hire a new minister inevitably means that your last minister is gone, you've spent some time sorting out how to move forward, and at the very end of it all there's someone new standing before you trying to learn your names and stories. That's where we find ourselves now amidst all the welcome events and committee meetings and laughter. We have new faces and returning faces and so much joy at our being here together.

But transitions are not as straightforward as they sometimes seem, and I don't assume that the only feeling amongst you is joy. Perhaps some of you still miss Rev. Bev, or you've felt confused, or maybe you're still sorting through pain or anger or disappointment about how things went. And that's okay.

There is space here for your joy and your grief, excitement and anger, love and frustration.

I might be the newest person here, but I can tell you that you are a resilient people. You are incredibly kind and love this place and each other with a joy and a fierceness that not all congregations have. In fact, that's why I chose you. I chose you because you are a people who love each other.

I remember going to my first board meeting in August and being floored because you all thank each other for all the work you do. Every time. And you mean it. There is an abundance of gratitude and kindness in this place and I feel incredibly lucky that you are my people.

And amidst all the joy and excitement of our meeting, I want you to know that there's still space for the wilderness, collectively as a

congregation and in your individual lives. Maybe you've just experienced a significant loss or change - a relationship ending, a move, a new diagnosis, the death of someone you love - and maybe you find yourself wandering in the fog, not sure of who you are now. Maybe you've been hoping you can just go straight to the beginning and find yourself disoriented or frustrated that things just aren't settling into place yet. Or perhaps, today, you find yourself at the beginning - steadier, more in touch with yourself, clear that something deeper, something in your spirit, changed in the space between the end and the beginning.

Wherever you find yourself in the process of transition, I hope you remember the love of this place. I hope you remember that there is space here for grief and wandering, ambivalence and joy.

Transition is a time when our understanding of ourselves changes, individually and as a community. So before you rush towards the beginning, may you rest in the place of getting to know yourselves again. This is the growing edge. We are on holy ground.

Amen.