Navigating Transition

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The months of May and June often bring transitions related to academic promotions, graduations, and other milestones related to the culmination of years of dedication and hard work. At this time of year, we often celebrate loved ones as they move from one phase of life into another. We wrap up another year in the school or church calendar, and move into the different pace of life that summer often brings.

Beyond these expected changes, transitions occur in all parts of our lives and often at unpredictable times. How we navigate a wide variety of transitions can reflect our capacity for change.

Transitions that are rooted in celebration are welcomed, and joy is usually inherent in the acknowledgment of weddings, births, and birthdays. The transitions that are more challenging are those that we didn’t anticipate and didn’t ask for. The reality of change may hit us harder when we unexpectedly lose a job, end a marriage or other relation, or when we or someone we love goes through the ultimate transition: that from life to death.

The world around us is in constant transition. Particularly now, in this time of pandemic, climate change, and worsening inequality, change is never-ending. Before the pandemic, more people felt able to have some degree of disconnection from the impacts of modern day life on the planet and how systems of oppression impact the vast majority of beings on the planet. The pandemic has been a flashpoint and a transition for humanity that we are still grappling to understand fully.

We know that the world will never be the same after the past few years. The impacts of oppression and the devastating results of extractive capitalism are harder than ever to ignore. The realities of our changing climate and the stresses of continued inequality are sure to mean more widespread, global transitions are ahead of us. Though many people have always been aware of these realities, some people with privilege still often plead ignorance through their own mental gymnastics and the mistaken belief that we live within a meritocracy. In the short term, privilege may afford some people a better chance at surviving climate chaos and other large global transitions, but the impacts will eventually be felt by everyone.

Amidst the uncertainty of the future and where major global transitions will take us, there are ways we can prepare to weather the coming (literal

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TRANSITION

How do you relate to transition? What role has transition played in your life?

MICHAEL
CLF member, incarcerated in WI

I relate to transition as a beneficial force of life, a change to the inner attitudes of your mind to change the outer aspects of your life. Embracing transition has saved me through many hardships. Dying is easy — it’s living that’s hard.

RUSSELL
CLF Member, incarcerated WI

I’m a man who welcomes transitions. I embrace transitory moments like a breathe of fresh air. I’ve learned that stagnation causes sickness, boredom, complacency, and above all: a lack of growth.

Imagine if a caterpillar never entered a cocoon? Transitions in my life have been my cocoons. Each time, good or bad, I have learned the hidden meanings of every stage I was forcing myself to develop through.

Poverty, heartbreak, loss, and worse have all given me the resilience to meet my transitions head on without running away. Running away would only temporarily delay the transition instead of get rid of it. I embrace it all like the rough medicine it is because I know it will empower my greatest self.

The role of transition in my life will always serve as an instant reminder that I’m not done changing into the best version of myself despite what this world may think. I will always make an effort to keep myself in transition. After all, that’s what lets me know that I’m still alive!
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and figurative) storms as best we can. The tools, practices, and structures of spiritual community have a lot to offer us as we seek to become more resilient within the changes we are already experiencing, and any larger changes to come.

Ultimately, transitions that bring unwelcome change can cause fear and anxiety. This is a completely appropriate response to events that sometimes shake us to the core. Being part of a community and strengthening our connections to one another is part of what grounds us during times of transition. We connect to celebrate, to lament, to find comfort and to know we are loved and not alone. This makes a difference, no matter what type of transition we find ourselves in.

As a faith community without geographical boundaries, the Church of the Larger Fellowship finds ways to invite people into connection and care with each other. We want you to know that you are not alone. While our community does not meet in person in the way that brick and mortar churches do, we offer connection in every way available to us. Being imaginative with how we build community and strengthen relationships is one antidote to the uncertainty of unwelcome transitions and change.

As you navigate transitions in your current life, or anticipate changes to come, always remember: your community is with you. We will always hold your sacredness and belonging, through the many transitions ahead.
Rethinking the Transition Out of Prison

GARY
CLF member, incarcerated in NC

"Transition" has become a byword in the corrections field over recent years. It has come to encompass classes bearing such fanciful titles as "Thinking For A Change," "Crossroads," "Men In Transition" and "Ethical Choices."

Yet, despite these, recidivism rates in the U.S. run from 41–79%. How is this possible?

As a prisoner now in his 32nd year of incarceration, I have taken part in the above named courses and many others and I have come to a conclusion.

Well-intentioned as they may be, transition services for the incarcerated contain wide gaps in content and scope of inmates addressed. Practical knowledge on such everyday mundane activities as navigating the internet, use of a cell phone, Facebook, Google, Twitter or any number of other such taken for granted resources which are totally foreign to most prison inmates.

America’s prison population is aging as well. I, myself, entered prison in 1991 at 31 years of age. Today I am 64. With this aging comes chronic health conditions and the need for transition services beyond job search skills, resume writing, and interview tips. Senior citizen prisoners will not likely be released to pound the pavement looking for a job. I dare say, employers would be reluctant to hire such for the insurance and health liability alone. Factor in the "scarlet letter" of being a convicted felon, and the elderly prisoner being released following a prison term of any length is left virtually with few or no resources.

In a recent transition class, a full 50% were above the age of 50, 20% were older than 60, five were over 65 and two were 70 or above. This is a typical demographic in American prisons. Inmates are locked away for lengthy terms to satisfy U.S. injustice and once their care becomes too costly, many are suddenly found “suitable for parole,” quite literally tossing seniors out on the street with a “gate check” and, if lucky, a 30 day supply of any current prescriptions and nothing more.

Who can forget the infamous scene in the film Shawshank Redemption when the elderly prisoner librarian Brooks was suddenly paroled. Having been in prison since before the automobile he was totally lost. He completed suicide.

Keeping prisoners for lengthy terms and providing no transition services to aid in a successful reintegration into society is a moral crime in which everyone is a victim.

Transition by its very definition means to evolve, adapt, and change. With our world’s largest percentage of the incarcerated (20%, while the U.S. is only 4% of the earth’s population), it is paramount, even critical, that the scope of transition be broadened to address the needs of an aging, growing prison population.
The Gift of a Sensitized Soul

DONNA

CLF member, incarcerated in CA

My experience has taught me that many adults who seek a new spiritual connection have, like myself, been particularly sensitized to the suffering of the world. Maybe some people have been taught to be sensitive in this way. Either way, I would like to see us broaden our empathy for each other in beloved community by celebrating the gift of “a sensitized soul.” Whether we were taught it or given it as a result of grief and loss, whether we were given it as neglected or abused children or from social oppression, we have it.

I have spent most of my life begrudging and resenting my experience of a discontented soul and longing for the ease and comfort that privileged conformists appear to have. I realize now, at age 70, what needless suffering I went through by holding onto these resentments. I kept myself in soul-slavery, even though intellectually I was successful and creative. In my late 40s, the rage and terror of my wounded inner child (affected by childhood trauma and my repression of my true feelings) exploded in a violent crime. I went to prison.

After 20 years of recovery from my criminal and addictive survival personality, mental illness, and criminal acting out, I realize that I spent my first 45 years trying to change the world without validating and healing my wounded soul. Looking back I see how my wound was a gift — the gift of motivating me to take my own path in life and not settle for mindless conformity. What I’m trying to say is that celebrating our woundedness as sensitive souls can be a way of deepening beloved community and preventing younger sensitive souls from exploding, like I did. I feel validation of my worth and integrity as a sensitive soul trying to learn to live my ideals and validation of the inner and outer work required to accomplish them that could have gone a long way toward preventing me from living totally “in my head,” as I used to do.

The spiritual journey is counter-cultural in today’s world, yet, I believe, it is our only solution to maintaining our health and sanity in spite of today’s world. Wounded souls and sensitive souls need a community where we can experience unconditional acceptance. This doesn’t mean I agree with everything everyone else in the community does, but it does mean that I don’t judge others, and rather seek to understand and accept that their ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving are meeting their needs at this time. I feel only at the level of unconditional acceptance can we
motivate others by example to
grow. Self-righteousness and judg-
ment only stop growth.

To me, unconditional acceptance is a
relationship skill as well as a spiritual
attitude. I have learned it in prison.
In a communication class, I learned
how to reflect others’ emotions as
well as the content of what they were
saying. We were taught: reflect the
emotion first, as in, "it appears that
you are sad." The other person will
agree or correct you right away. Once
you have emotional rapport, then it is
possible to discuss the content openly
and creatively. Self-acceptance is also
key. If I don’t unconditionally accept
myself as imperfect yet growing,
I can’t do this with others. Finally,
loving boundaries are essential. My
unconditionally accepting others is
an attitude of validation toward them,
not an invitation to hurt or walk all
over me. The most loving way I have
learned to set boundaries is with
"I" statements, as in, "I feel uncom-
fortable when you talk down to me,
please don’t do that anymore." If it
continues, it is essential to walk away
when it happens again, to let the oth-
er person know you are serious. This,
of course, presumes that the other
person is mentally healthy and able to
understand.

Introducing the "gift of a sensitized
soul" into Unitarian Universalist
worship and group thinking would, I
feel, encourage deeper empathy and
unconditional acceptance of each
other within our communities.

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Beyond the “End”

RICHARD

*CLF member, incarcerated in NY*

Do you believe in heaven?
Then there is no end.
Do you believe in hell?
Then there is no end.
Do you believe in spirit?
Then there is no end.
Will man destroy
what God has wrought?
Maybe.

You’d think we’d learn
That we don’t really count
in the grand scheme of things.
The scheme put in place
millions of years ago,
the scheme that will end
millions of years from now.

Our place here and now is but an eye-blink,
but we are here.
We are all part of the scheme.

After all —
We helped create it
and what we do
between beginning and end
is entirely up to us.
How have you been held (or not held) through big transitions in your life, or in the wider world? What role has community played in those transitions?

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