

There is a quip about change that you might see around. It's on t-shirts and bumper stickers. It's even the title of a leadership book about managing change. It goes like this:

Change is good. You go first.

Those two simple sentences sum up all of our ambivalence and angst about change. We know in our heads that change is inevitable. We even know that our lives would be boring without change. And, yet our hearts know that change can be hard. Even the changes that we initiate and want / can be difficult.

Organizational consultant William Bridges makes a distinction between change and transition. He defines change as situational. It's those external events that make things different than how they have been. Those events that bring something new, welcome or not—a birth, a death, a marriage, a divorce, a job change, a career change, retirement.

Transition, on the other hand, is psychological. It's an internal process that includes reorientation to the world and redefinition of ourselves and our role in the world.

Bridges tells us that, the irony of change and transition is that very little that we do to prepare for a change actually prepares us for the transition. We can make arrangements for a change, like an expectant parent prepares for the arrival of a new baby; they get the basic stuff like a car seat and diapers, and they make space in

their environment. Yet none of these things prepares them for the internal shift from being a person without responsibility for a child to being a parent. That transition requires a whole different process.

In many cultures, including ours, we have rites of passage to mark the change that help with the internal transition: weddings, child dedications, funerals or memorials. Even the Joys and Concerns that we share each regular service is a way to mark changes and help with the internal process of transition. These rites of passage help because transition requires it's own preparation and process.

Bridges says that every transition has three phases: a beginning, a middle and an end, but not quite in that order. Actually, the beginning of every transition is an ending, a goodbye. Once there is a change, the first thing that happens in transition is goodbye; disengagement from what was, dis-identification with how we used to be, and disorientation; things are not as they were. With every transition is a sense of loss, even when the change is welcomed.

After that ending, comes the middle phase, what Bridges calls the neutral zone. This is the in between, where there is emptiness and uncertainty. Things are not as they were and not yet as they will be. Some people call this liminal space, some call it sacred space. This phase requires us to surrender to the unknown, to step into the mystery not knowing where it will lead us. Like the ancient story of the Israelites freed from slavery in Egypt, who then wandering the desert for 40 years, the neutral zone is wandering in the wilderness. It requires us to trust, to be vulnerable and open.

The last phase of transition is the new beginning. This is where we reengage and adopt a new identity. Transition doesn't happen overnight, so it may be untidy and take a while, but in order for a change to "take," these phases of transition are all necessary.

The past year or so, this fellowship has experienced several changes and is going through transition. I would characterize it this way. The fellowship went through a change—hiring a minister. You had a discernment process, then once it was decided, went through the process of making it happen: raising funds, the search process, inviting me to join you, setting up a team to help implement the change. All of those steps were necessary to make for a smooth change to having a minister.

Most of those things you and we did to prepare for the change, didn't prepare us for the transition to shared ministry, which was something all together different. It will take much longer and is still in process. The transition began with my arrival as the fellowship said goodbye to being lay led. Those of you who were here for my first sermon in October may recall that it was titled "Hail and Farewell." I talked about hellos and goodbyes. I had just said goodbye to the church where I'd been a ministerial intern for nine months and was saying hello to you. You were saying goodbye to being lay led and saying hello to me. On that day, I invited you to consider all that you were saying goodbye to, and to not skip over that phase. Every transition begins with an ending.

Over these past few months, we have been in the neutral zone in the transition to shared ministry. We've stepped into the unknown

and navigated the waters of new relationships. We've explored new ways of working and being together. We've adjusted and adapted, noticed shifting responsibilities, power and authority. We've wandered in the wilderness together, figuring things out and experiencing the sense of new beginning on the horizon.

While the addition of a minister is a significant change event and transition from identifying as lay led to shared ministry is important, I suggest that it is just part of a larger transition that the fellowship is also experiencing. The change is growth. Growth is causing the fellowship to transition from a family sized to a pastoral sized congregation.

The folks who research congregational growth talk about the four sizes of churches and how each size requires a different form.

The two largest sizes of congregations are called program and corporate. Program sized congregations have a Sunday morning attendance of 150-350 people. Notice that we are counting those who attend worship, not those who are members. Research has shown that attendance is one of the best indicators of growth and change. The UU congregations in Salem, Eugene and Corvallis are about this size; they're program congregations.

The program churches offer a variety of quality programs to engage a wide diversity of people. They are big enough to have some diversity in their membership and programs, with resources to support full and part-time staff. The board transitions from attending to operational matters to attending to policy matters, and the structure is complex.

The biggest size congregation is called a corporate church and has 350 or more people who attend worship. This would be like First Unitarian Church in Portland. Corporate churches are known for their size, their presence, their large staff, and their menu of “something for everyone.”

Most UU congregations, indeed most congregations of any denomination, are not big enough to be either program or corporate. Most fall in one of the other two categories: family and pastoral size.

The smallest size church is the family size, because it feels like a family. The worship attendance for this category is up to 50 people or so. It is a single-celled organism where most, if not all, of the people participate in most of the events. In a family sized congregation, everyone knows everyone else. The church decisions are often made informally and the congregation is typically held together by the matriarchs and patriarchs who keep things going. If there is professional ministry, it is part-time and short-term.

The next size up is the pastoral church, which has attendance of 50-150 people. The shift is from a single-cell organism to a multi-cell organism, a series of overlapping family-friendly networks. The advantage of a pastoral congregation is that it is big enough to feel like a thriving church, and small enough to feel personal. The family sized organization becomes too big to be handled informally, so more policies and procedures are put into place. It is called pastoral because the glue that keeps the different parts

together usually shifts from the matriarchs and patriarchs to a pastor. Now, I want to be clear that pastor-centered does not mean pastor-dominated. The most successful pastoral congregations have a good team relationship between the pastor and the Board and other leaders. I think we'd call that shared ministry.

When I arrived in the Fall, attendance at regular Sunday services was about 45-60, sometimes more for special services like the holiday potluck. The fellowship had regular growth each year, and was reaching the upper limit of a family-sized church.

Over these last months, we've seen attendance grow to as much as 100 last month. The fellowship is growing faster. There is clearly a calling for this fellowship in this place. Now, I'm not saying this to claim any kind of credit or toot my own horn. I am talking about this because it puts the decision to hire a minister in the context of the changes that were already happening in the fellowship and that have been brought into clear focus lately. Growth is a change. The internal shift from a family sized to a pastoral sized fellowship is a transition. I think the fundamental identity of the fellowship has been challenged, not only by adding a minister, but by adding people, by growth. Don't misunderstand me---This is not a bad thing! For those of you who have been around a while, you might feel like there's been a lot of change this year, requiring internal work to transition, and you'd be spot on. For those of you who have joined us recently, this might help you understand some of what the fellowship has experienced lately.

The transition from a family-sized to a pastoral-sized fellowship is, well, a transition. The change in size has required some

adjustments to make the change possible, like more money in the budget, a few more committees, and better coordination. The transition is a less obvious process and will take longer. It might look like renewed and different attention to the welcome of visitors and new members. It might mean not knowing everyone on Sunday morning and people whose paths don't cross in fellowship activities. And, it probably means sharing leadership with a minister.

The research on congregational growth suggests that when the size changes, the congregation must also change in form—how it is organized and how it functions. And, historically if a church doesn't make the changes and the transition needed, much of the time it will get stuck at the level that its form supports. If a family sized fellowship doesn't make some changes as the Sunday morning worship attendance moves into pastoral size, it will likely eventually stay as a family size congregation; that's what the organizational form can support. Some congregations make the conscious decision to grow. Some congregations make the conscious decision to not grow. Most make the decision to not grow unconsciously, often saying that they want to grow while not making the changes and transition to support growth.

So, what makes transitions so hard? I think there are a number of things, and I also think that perhaps the main reason is that transitions require us to be vulnerable. I don't know about you; being vulnerable is not exactly my go to position. As much as I know that living whole-heartedly requires vulnerability and that it is the source of creativity and joy, it is also the source of fear. Transition requires that we step into the place of grieving a loss,

being uncertain and not knowing, not being in control, and being open to what new things may come. Being vulnerable requires that we step into the mystery, that we embrace the unknown, and that we risk opening ourselves emotionally. Vulnerability requires courage; not bravery or fearlessness, but courage: being afraid and doing it anyway.

Social worker and researcher, Brene Brown offers four actions that help support the spiritual practice of vulnerability:

1. We can let ourselves be seen. This doesn't mean letting it all hang out and having no boundaries. It means being who we are and speaking our truth in love.
2. We can practice gratitude. Being vulnerable means noticing that we are connected to all and that we are given much just by our being alive. We don't earn most of what we are given. Notice and be grateful.
3. We can believe that we're enough. In our culture of scarcity, it is good spiritual practice not only to notice how much we have, but also how much we are. We are enough.
4. We can love with all our hearts. Love. With all our hearts.

Growth, transition and change. Oh, my! These are not easy things. And, I know that I have added to the sense of even more change by telling you this week that I will not be available to serve you next year in the event that you want me to. One more change. Another part of the transition. And, just when we were getting into a routine, feeling some sense of comfort in a new beginning.

As part of my first sermon for you in October, I said this:

Over the next weeks and months we will have some conversations of hello. We will get to know each other, with luck we will fall in love, and one day—whenever it may be—we will say goodbye. It is the nature of ministry. It is the nature of life. It is the nature of love.

And, here we are. We said hello, we fell in love, and we will say goodbye.

Over these next few months, part of what we'll do together is articulate what we've learned this year, things that we didn't know last year. There is one lesson that I want to hold up today. I believe that one lesson you've learned, maybe even the most important lesson, is that you can love and trust a minister, and that you can be loved and trusted by a minister. You were vulnerable, you stepped into the mystery, found courage to take the risk, and loved with all your heart. Now you know that you can do it, and what is possible when you do.

I will give the last word to the poet John O'Donohue from his blessing "For A New Beginning":

Then the delight, when your courage kindled,
And out you stepped onto new ground,
Your eyes young again with energy and dream,
A path of plentitude opening before you.

Though your destination is not yet clear

You can trust the promise of this opening;
Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning
That is at one with your life's desire.

Awaken your spirit to adventure;
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk;
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm,
For your soul senses the world that awaits you.

And so may it be. Amen.