



CONSCIOUS TRANSITIONS

Conscious Transitions:
The Seven Most Common
(and Traumatic)
Life Changes

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*“Every process involves
breaking something up.*

*The earth must be broken
to bring forth life.*

*If the seed does not die,
there is no plant.*

*Bread results
from the death of wheat.*

Life lives on lives.”

- Joseph Campbell

An Overview of Transitions

Whether moving to a new city or having a baby, changing careers or going through a break-up, transitions are a part of life. While in the midst of change, even if the change is toward something joyous and positive like a wedding or moving into your dream house, it is normal and healthy to feel:

- grief/heartbreak
- confused
- angry/enraged
- disoriented
- scared/terrified
- numb
- lonely
- vulnerable

What most people lack around transitions is basic information that would help them to contextualize these emotions, make sense of them, and move through them effectively. Culturally, we focus on the externals of a transition – planning a wedding, buying the car seat, packing the boxes – to the exclusion of the inner realm. While the externals are important, when we bypass

working consciously with the emotions activated during transition, we decrease our chances of adjusting to the new life as cleanly and gracefully as possible. This can have long-term negative consequences not only during the transition at hand but for our lives in general.

Every transition involves passing through three phases:

- **Letting Go** – During which we separate from the old life, grieve the losses, express and explore fears and expectations about the new life.
- **In-between or Liminal** – During which we're in the liminal (limbo) zone of transition – detached from the old life but not yet established in the new one – a highly uncomfortable place characterized by feeling numb, disoriented, depressed, and out of control.
- **Rebirth** – In which we embrace the new life and identity and feel confident, comfortable, and excited about the possibilities of growth that a new beginning holds.

You can see these stages visually depicted through the “Seasons of Transitions” diagram that I’ve included on the next page.

Everyone goes through multiple life changes each year that, with simple information and consciousness, could be

transformed from stressful and depleting events to life-affirming and transformational events. We habitually think of transitions as “hard” or “negative”, but what most people fail to recognize is that embedded in these predictable life-cycle occurrences are opportunities that invite us to spiral into our fears and grief so that we heal at deeper levels each time. Instead of powering through transitions as quickly as possible, we would benefit greatly by embracing them as the gifts that they are.

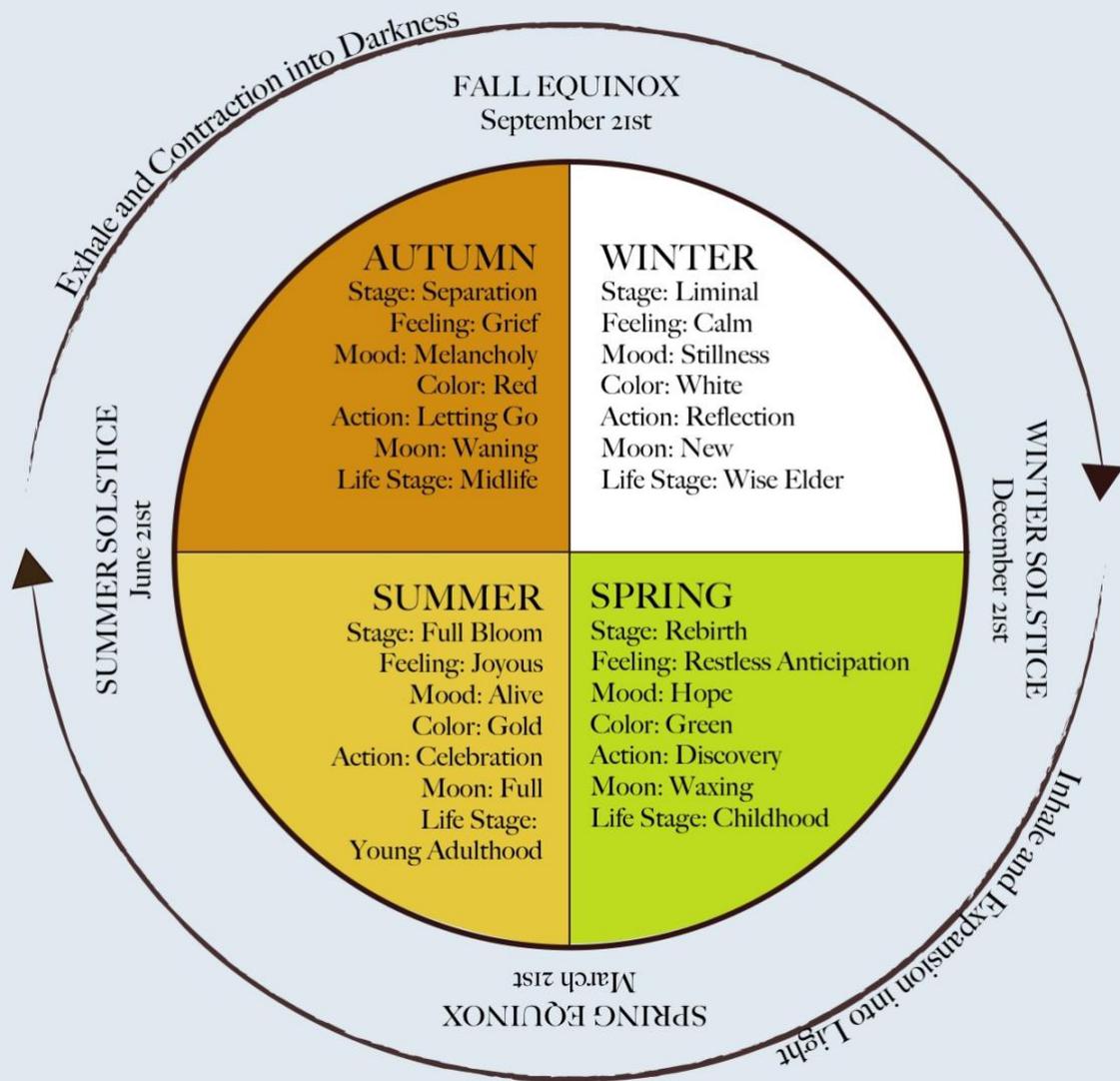
From a spiritual perspective, every transition is an opportunity for growth. As we learn how to let go into the ‘groundlessness’ that defines the in-between stage of transition between the end of the old life and beginning of the new, we move into a more effortless alignment with life. Life is ever-changing, and when we approach transitions consciously and with the intention of growth, we eventually learn how to accept this truth with grace.

This is not an easy task. Transitions require no less than the willingness to die (symbolically), to sit in the uncomfortable void, and to be reborn. Who would willingly embrace this task? For some of us, we have no choice. Transitions seem to pull us into the underworld and create such fear, pain, confusion, and disorientation that we must seek help. While in the throes of the challenge, this may seem unfair and we may be plagued with questions like, “Why do others seem so blissfully happy during their engagement when my joy is accompanied by a sense of

loss? Why do others move to a new city effortlessly when I feel terrified? How come she was able to re-marry so easily after her break-up when my heart is broken and I still have dreams about my ex?”

Yet when we finally emerge from the pain, we see that the struggle was well worth it. For to enter into the death-void-rebirth cycle is to embark on the hero's/heroine's journey. And when the heroine returns from her voyage, she carries the boons—or jewels—of her travels. One of the great boons is that she knows, at a deeper layer of consciousness, that there can be no light without entering the darkness, and that with each descent into her darkness, the light shines ever more brightly. He knows that next time he is pulled into the darkness—which most likely will occur in the midst of his next major transition—he will be able to navigate the journey more gracefully. She trusts that, even as she cries and rages, she is exactly where she needs to be.

SEASONS OF TRANSITIONS



Moving

Have you ever read the statistic that says that moving is the third most stressful event you can endure, following death and divorce? I'm always stunned by this statement. Let's take a moment to digest this: Death, divorce, moving... Wow. Clearly, for it to rank so high on the list, the stress cannot possibly be solely due to the practical aspects; it doesn't equate that packing up one house and moving to another location would trigger this level of emotional response. But in the worldview of Conscious Transitions, it makes perfect sense. Furthermore, the level of stress that moving typically instigates is equivalent to the level of healing that's possible when we approach this transition consciously.

Like every transition, there's a practical element and an emotional piece. Moving, like the wedding or preparing for a baby's arrival, certainly comes with a host of items that need to get done. But when we only focus on the practical elements to the exclusion of the emotional realm, we miss the real work that needs to be done and risk sending ourselves into emotional chaos. The culture tells us that if you stay organized and follow your timelines and checklists, you'll avoid the stress and chaos. While it certainly helps to stay organized, this alone will not prevent the emotional upheaval that moving often activates.

Moving is so stressful for several reasons:

1. Moving forces us out of our familiar and comfortable habitat. At the core, we are creatures of habit and we like the safe and the familiar. We like knowing where the spatula is. We like being able to drive to the supermarket on auto-pilot. We derive a deep sense of security from the predictable and knowable aspects of our lives. When we move, chaos is unavoidable. Our ability to surrender into chaos is tested. The more we can ride the waves of chaos and remember that it will end, the easier it will be to manage.

2. Moving triggers our deepest issues around control and loss. All transitions are fundamentally about learning accept feeling out of control, but because moving includes the piece of moving out of your physical space and comfort zone, it's particularly triggering. Again, when we can remind ourselves that it's normal to feel out of control, it's easier to surrender to the wave and allow it to tumble us around for a while until we're eventually tossed onto solid ground.

3. In dreams and the world of the unconscious, the house is a symbol of Self. When we move, we shake up our selfhood to the core, like a self-imposed earthquake. In this vulnerable stage and encouraged by the act of sorting through our stuff which may span back to childhood, we often find ourselves

immersed in old memories which can trigger layers of grief and loss that need release. With the veils peeled back, core issues emerge which you can either sideline as you quickly move onto the next task or sink into and thus relieve a bit of pressure.

4. Moving activates a return to the child or infant self. Stripped of the familiar external trappings of our life and rendered to a state of vulnerability, we're as raw and primal and as we can be. Without support, guidance, and a context within which to make sense of this experience, we attempt to fill up the empty spaces and barricade against the rawness with the practical aspects of the move. It's scary to be in this stripped-down state, but with the right information and approach it's bearable and, eventually, fruitful.

As always, having an emotional roadmap and context can ease the chaos considerably. When you understand what's being activated inside of you, you can address it and move through the move, so to speak, more fluidly. As with every life transition, our culture only offers advice for how to manage the practical aspects. An internet search on "moving stress" will provide immediate suggestions for how to deal with externals, offering checklists, timelines, and step-by-step protocol on how to go about moving. While helpful, these suggestions do nothing to address the emotional undercurrent that fuels the majority of the stress. Do we really believe that the stress is about packing

and unpacking? Sometimes the superficiality of this culture really irks me...

Popular and habitual thought tell us that the more quickly we zip through our checklists, the happier we'll be. Actually, the opposite is true. Let's imagine you're cleaning out a box of old papers and you find some journals from high school where you wrote about your parents' divorce or breaking up with your first boyfriend. A wave of grief swells up inside of you. You can either ignore the grief and keep going, as advised by our culture, or you can take a few extra minutes to pause, let the grief swell to full release, and cry. Like all transitions, moving provides a powerful opportunity to heal layers of ourselves that often don't emerge unless we're in the midst of a transition. When you release the grief, you release pressure inside of you which will give you more internal space and energy with which to continue the external tasks. On the other hand, when you bottle it up, the pressure builds until you end up snapping at your partner or yelling at the moving company.

Here's the emotional context and roadmap:

Moving follows the three stages of transition: letting go – liminal – new beginning. The transformational potential of moving lies in our ability to utilize the practical tasks to access the emotions

inherent to each stage.

1. Packing up and Letting go: In stage one, we pack up our old life, sorting through what we no longer need and putting everything into boxes. What a perfect metaphor for this first stage of transitions! In sorting through what we no longer need on a physical level, we also activate aspects of our emotional selves that we're ready to relinquish. When you come across letters from an ex-boyfriend, you may feel a wave of grief about that relationship and then decide to let them go (both the letters and the grief). Packing provides countless opportunities to heal layers of old transitions and losses if only we pause long enough to allow the feelings to surface and release.

2. Liminal (in-between): With the house packed up and furniture moved out, there's usually a day or two when the house is empty. There are few things in life as emotionally empty as standing in a freshly packed house. Not only does it trigger grief, it triggers memories. Suddenly you see the spot where your partner proposed to you. You see your children running around chasing each other. You see the corner that used to hold your favorite comfy reading chair. This is the moment to let your tears flow. A good cry will transform a melancholy emptiness into a bittersweet one so that you can find the sweetness among the sorrow.

Disorientation is one of the key hallmarks of the liminal stage. The literal emptiness that surrounds us on either side of the move mirrors the internal emptiness which easily disorients us. We're fundamentally creatures of habit, and when our routines and physical signposts are removed, disorientation is inevitable.

3. New beginning: When we unpack and reorient physically, we also have the opportunity to unpack and reorient emotionally. We organize the kitchen and we organize our internal structures. We learn a new city or a new neighborhood and we access new resources within ourselves. With the emotional decluttering that occurred in stage one, we have more internal space which allows for new qualities that we consciously and intentionally invite to emerge.

Ritual is important when moving, especially if children are involved. It's always hard to say goodbye but especially so when it's a home that you've loved and has sheltered hundreds upon hundreds of memories, positive or otherwise. The more you concretize the experience through an activity like making a book that tells the story of the move (visually guiding yourself and kids through the three stages through photographs) or writing a goodbye letter to the old house, the more you will be able to let go of what needs to be shed and prepare yourself to embrace the new life.

Breaking Up

How long does it take for a broken heart to mend?

In the bathhouse of grief,

tears are everywhere:

scuttling down the windshield;

drying on the pane;

on morning blades and violet petals.

Reminders that

even as I ache

an entire world joins me in the weeping;

telling me, even as we part, that

I am not alone.

There's a reason why the state of grief following a break up is referred to as having a broken heart. The pain of separating from someone you have loved and with whom you've shared much of your life is so searing that it feels like you're being split in two. The grief screams through your body through the night and you awaken feeling like someone has died.

And someone has died. Many things have died. The relationship of the two of you is over. The fantasies and dreams of your imagined future together fall like frozen flower petals and hit the floor with a painful thud. You will never take that vacation. You'll never walk toward him down the aisle. You'll never have the kids whose names you've already chosen. The person that you were is no longer. The person that you will

become is not yet. You sit in the in-between void of nothingness and wonder if you'll ever feel alive again.

Like all transitions, separating from someone you love is a death experience that requires sitting with the grief until it passes through. And like all transitions, there are immense opportunities for growth inherent in the aftermath of a break up. For there are reasons why the two of you didn't last. And the more you learn about the reasons that contributed to the demise of the relationship, including the impulse for choosing your partner initially, the more prepared you will be to enter the next relationship from a healed place within.

But the first stage of a break up is simply to allow yourself to grieve. We live in a culture that has a timeline for grief: you're allowed to feel sad for a month or two, but beyond that you're met with the message, overt or otherwise, that says, "Get over it. Pick yourself up and move on."

Grief has its own timetable. No one can tell you how long it's appropriate for you to grieve. You listen to your heart and allow it to cry and rage against the pain of separating from a loved one. You hold yourself with tender arms and seek comfort from supportive friends and family. There are no timelines for grief. The heart knows when it's ready to face the world again.

In the meantime, you find the loving ways to be with grief. When you find a letter from your ex tucked into an old book, you breathe into the pain and let yourself cry. You might feel scared of the grief, but the truth is that when you block it, its pain increases tenfold. When you simply embrace it with acceptance and breathe into the empty places, the tears wash through you and you're ready to face the next moment. One of my clients, who is in the midst of a break up, recently said to me, "I used to be so scared of my pain. But when I can just be with it, it actually feels good! Does that sounds strange? I'm accepting the pain instead of resisting it. The memories come and I write them down. The pain comes and I cry. It's all okay. In the moment it feels like the pain will never end but I know I'll move through it."

When the Grief Doesn't End

There is, however, a point when the pure state of natural grief becomes tinged with other, unkind voices. You find that you're unable to let go of your ex. You're thinking about him or her constantly. You rationally know that the relationship wasn't healthy, but you're having a hard time letting go and moving on. You find yourself obsessing on the following thought: "If we loved each other so much, why couldn't we make it work?"

When I'm working with clients in the aftermath of a break up, the most common reason that they're unable to move on is because they're still mistakenly equating "passion" with real love. We live in a culture that elevates passion and chemistry to god-like heights and sends the message that great sex equals great love. Nothing could be further from the truth. A chemical reaction actually has nothing to do with the ability to give and receive love.

In this sense, part of the grief following a break up involves grieving the fantasy of your misguided conditioning about love. The fantasies shatter like glass all around you. You ask yourself, "Did I ever really love him? Did he ever really love me? What is love?" In this stage, I'll hear people say, "You know, I always said I was so in love with him. But the truth is that I'm not sure I really *liked* him as a human being." She then has to ask herself, "What is love? If it's not chemistry, what is it?"

This is certainly no small question. I'm not sure anyone can say with certainty what love is. I've devoted an entire lesson to the question of real love in my Conscious Weddings E-Course, much of which comes from M. Scott Peck's writings on love in his seminal book, The Road Less Traveled. He writes:

“I therefore conclude that the desire to love is not itself love. Love is as love does. Love is an act of will – namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love.”

Just this statement alone flies in the face of everything you’ve been taught about love in this culture. We’re conditioned to believe that love “happens to you,” that it’s an act of fate and destiny, that if you’re lucky enough to find your *soul mate* or your *one true love*, the two of you will effortlessly glide into a harmonious dance of eternal love. (Words in italics are buzzwords that our culture insists on propagating but only perpetuate a fantasy of love.) Sure, you might fight once in a while, but at the core you just *know* that you’re a match. And perhaps that’s how you felt about the ex until everything fell apart. But the fact that everything fell apart is a sure indication that something wasn’t as right as you thought it was. The fundamental problem could have been that the relationship was predicated on chemistry, fantasies, and a fear of intimacy, which caused a perpetual game of tag-teaming chase, none of which is the basis for a real love relationship.

In the letting go stage of this transition, when you’re in a puddle of grief and longing for relief, allow for the fantasies of love to

shatter. The more you grieve what you thought was real love, the more you will clear the way for real love to take root in healthy soil.

“What’s Wrong With Me?”

Some of the pain initiated by a break up is also caused by a series of false beliefs. Because this particular transition is intimately connected to love, a break up can trigger old beliefs about self-worth that began in childhood when we formed blueprints based on our first love relationships with our parents. As children, when we don’t receive the love we need from our well-intentioned but wounded parents, we assume that there must be something wrong with us.

The truth is that your caregivers were incapable of giving you the love you needed, but if a child were to assimilate that truth, she might fall apart from the devastation of it. So she adopts the belief that there must be something wrong with her because this is something she can control. She thinks, “If I do it just right – if I’m perfect enough or smart enough or sporty enough – maybe I’ll get them to love me.” Of course it doesn’t work, and she’s left with a false belief that follows her into adulthood that says, “If someone’s not loving me the way I need to be loved, it must be because there’s something wrong with me.”

This belief can wreak havoc on the psyche in the aftermath of a break up. But once the belief is excavated and brought to light, you can begin to work with it consciously with a dialoguing process that I teach in my courses and in my book, *The Wisdom of Anxiety*, which seeks to replace the faulty beliefs with loving truths. If you're enduring a break up, take some time to sit with yourself and write down the beliefs that are creating your depression and/or anxiety. The list might look something like this:

1. He broke up with me because there's something wrong with me. If I did things differently, maybe I could get him back.
2. I'm not worthy of love. Other people can have love but I can't.
3. I'll never have the love I want and need.
4. I feel abandoned.

Okay, now let's take a look at that last belief. There's a crucial difference between feeling the natural pain and grief of a break up and feeling abandoned. Abandonment implies a child-like place; in other words, children get abandoned, not adults. So this means that the break up has triggered a wounded child place in you that *did* get abandoned a long time ago. Again, as

with the false beliefs, this is an opportunity to heal an old and wounded part that needs attention.

Many of us come to relationships with the intention to try to fill up and *get* love. We're arrive on the shores of love tattered, incomplete and hoping to be rescued from our misery. In the beginning, when the love-drug of hormones and pheromones take over, you might think that your prayers have been answered. You feel happy, complete, fulfilled. But when the feelings of in-loveness fades, as it always does, you're left with yourself, right back where you started. And if the relationship ends, the old beliefs come rearing back with full force.

At this point, many people throw themselves into the dating world to try, again, to find relief and rescue. This is what we call "the rebound." But of course, even if they do find another partner, the same pattern begins again and no real work has been done to heal the false beliefs and dysfunctional conditioning about love and relationships. The break up is the time to stop, take stock, and ask yourself, "What is it time to let go of?"

Breaks ups, like all transitions, carry immense potential for growth and transformation. As the searing grief subsides and the liminal stage arrives, it's time to ask the important questions

that will plant the seeds to allow new ways of being to grow. In the fallow stage you ask, "What is real love?" In the emptiness you ask, "How can I learn to love myself and create my own fulfillment so that I begin my next relationship as a whole person?" In the silence of your own company you wonder, from a curious and loving place within, "What part did I play in creating the dysfunction that lead to our demise?" Then you set your intention to learn about real love, first with yourself, and then with another, and continue to explore the myriad manifestations and tremendous learning potential of your time alone.

Getting Married: For Women

If you're reading this article, it's probably because you and your partner have decided to marry. You wear the ring of engagement. The date has been set. You have been perusing magazines looking for the "perfect" gown and, in the process, perhaps feeling bombarded by advertisements for china patterns and flower arrangements. Your parents are delighted; your friends are thrilled; your fiancé is beaming. And while some of the time you share their enthusiasm - after all, in a few months you will be marrying a wonderful man - there is this anxiety that seems to sneak up on you at the oddest times.

Perhaps this anxiety seeps in while you are falling asleep at night, as you are running over the lists of all the things you have to do. Perhaps it finds you in the early hours of the morning, unable to sleep one more wink because of this sense of urgency that races within. You thought this was supposed to be the most exciting time of your life, but then why this anxiety? What is happening inside you? You hesitate sharing your feelings with your friends and family for fear they will think that you are doubting your decision to marry. So you keep the feelings to yourself, all the while wondering... what is going on?

It's the prewedding blues. The prewedding blues is a topic that you will not find discussed in typical bridal circles. No one wants to admit that they're feeling sad and afraid, yet nearly every bride feels the prewedding blues at some point during her engagement. Most try to talk themselves out of it, telling themselves over and over again that there is absolutely nothing to fear. Yet the anxiety will not go away. A typical response to this anxiety is to get busier than ever, creating more lists of things to do as a way to avoid this uncomfortable emotion. Because until now there have been no words that would help a bride understand what is happening inside and no context in which to place the very normal and expected feelings of fear, anxiety, confusion, and sadness that live alongside the joy and bliss within the engaged woman.

Why would a bride feel fear and sadness in the months preceding her most cherished day? In order to answer this question, we must look at the wedding as a rite of passage. We have all heard the term rite of passage, usually in reference to adolescence, midlife, the birth of child, and old age. Simply, a rite of passage is a major turning point in life where we experience a change in identity. It is a time of transition where the old way of life ceases to fit and the new life has not yet taken hold. In traditional cultures, members experiencing a rite

of passage are guided by the village elders through an elaborate series of ancient rituals and ceremonies for the purpose of thoroughly shedding the ties to the current identity. These cultures understand that the old identity must completely cease to exist in order to allow space for the new identity to arise. As the current identity is shed, the initiate experiences sadness and fear, for how can we let go of something that has been with us our entire lives without feeling grief, and how can we avoid feeling afraid when we do not know what the new life holds? A change of identity involves loss; and loss always, no matter how beautiful and bountiful the gains, involves grief.

How does all of this apply to the bride and her wedding? The moment you become engaged, your rite of passage begins. From this point on, you begin to cut your ties to your identity as single woman so you can slowly prepare for your transformation into wife. What does it mean to "cut ties" to something as intangible as an identity? It means spending some time thinking about the elements that have come together to form your identity as a single person. It means realizing that after you marry your relationships to your girlfriends, sisters, mother, and father will be altered and allowing yourself to grieve these changes and separations. It means acknowledging that being single means being free, and that when you marry you will sacrifice an aspect of this freedom. In fact, in traditional

cultures, the members consider all rites of passage as a sacrifice and a gift, a separating and a joining, a death and a rebirth. As much as the wedding is a time of celebration, happiness, and new beginnings, it is also a time of saying goodbye to an entire identity and grieving the losses.

A rite of passage also involves fear. For many women, the sadness about leaving a singlehood identity is dwarfed by the fear of marriage and commitment. Questions circle their mind like plane waiting to land. Questions like: What does it mean to be married? What in the world is a wife these days? What if my husband cheats on me? What if I cheat on him? What if it doesn't work out and we divorce? But these fears have no place to land because our culture does not encourage women to feel fear before their wedding. So what happens? The fear is suppressed, she distracts through the planning, or she finds herself spinning into anxiety a few days before, or on, her wedding day. She doesn't know that fear is a normal and necessary part of her transition. How could she not feel terrified when she's stepping into the unknown?

When women are given the words and context in which to understand their inner world they breathe a great sigh of relief. There are countless guidebooks that assist the bride with the practical end of her wedding; but there is little information that

helps the bride navigate through the challenging emotional road that begins at the proposal and continues into the first months of marriage. So if you find yourself crumbling into a heap of tears at the end of the day, or lashing out in anger at those closest to you, take heart: you are experiencing the prewedding blues. It is normal, expected, even necessary. The more you can allow yourself to express the difficult emotions like grief, loneliness, and fear, the more you are letting go of your identity as a single woman and honoring the fear that accompanies this ride. And the more you let go, the more space you will have inside to arrive at your wedding day serene, joyous, and prepared to greet your partner at the altar. It is a psychological truth that joy and fear, celebration and grief, live in the same internal box, so the more you allow yourself to understand, explore, and feel the difficult feelings, the more you will have a joyous day and, more importantly, feel prepared for the adjustments of the first year of marriage.

Getting Married: For Men

Given that I'm a woman, my interest in the emotional world of weddings naturally led me initially to interview, talk with, ponder, and ultimately write about the experience of women during this rite of passage. But shortly after the publication of my first book, *The Conscious Bride*, I began receiving hundreds of emails like the following:

Are you aware of a similar resource for the other person involved in this rite of passage? I bought The Conscious Bride for my fiancé after skimming it in the bookstore, and now I am jealous. It's so perfect for her; she's gained a whole new level of understanding and awareness. Any suggestions?

- James

When I speak to men like James, it's clear that they feel bereft of information to help guide them through their transition.

Whereas the books for women focus on planning the "perfect" event, the scant books and magazine articles for men either inform them of proper etiquette and what they are traditionally responsible for or they downplay the emotional intensity of this rite of passage. I have yet to encounter an article that offers real information that will help men understand their fears and make sense of the magnitude of this transition. Hopefully, the following information will begin to fulfill this need.

A Rite of Passage

What do I mean when I say "a rite of passage"? We've all heard the term, mostly in reference to the major transitions in life: adolescence, birth of a child, midlife (retirement), and old age. A rite of passage is, simply, an event that triggers a significant life change. As a part of this change, a major part of one's lifestyle and identity is left behind so that the new life can emerge. Think about adolescence: you were leaving behind the innocence of childhood so that the responsibility and maturity of young adulthood could begin to grow. The new life cannot take root until the old life is relinquished. This is true for all rites of passages.

A wedding, however, is rarely spoken of in terms of a rite of passage. There are plenty of reasons for this exclusion, the primary one being that our culture views the wedding as only a celebration and doesn't acknowledge that there are a host of difficult emotions that need to be worked through on the road to welcoming in the joy. If we are unwilling to discuss the cords that need to be cut and the losses that need to be grieved, we will be unable to fully experience the joy and gain of the day and the wedding will only be viewed as a big party instead of one of the most significant transitions in adult life. If we are to walk into the new life with our eyes open, we must be willing to

discuss what we are leaving behind.

What Are You Leaving Behind?

What are you saying goodbye to? In a word: your bachelorhood. Once you marry, you no longer exist as a single person in the world. The term bachelor carries many meanings and the sacrifice of this identity holds different ramifications for each man, but grooms must realize that once he crosses the wedding threshold he will no longer be the man he's always been. His singlehood, his youth, a portion of his freedom, and his attachments to his family of origin will begin to change as he approaches the wedding day.

All too often, we see men who enter marriage without having relinquished this identity. They consciously or unconsciously think that life will carry on as before. While on the outside, especially if the couple has been living together, it may appear that nothing has changed, internally each person is undergoing an emotional earthquake. Even if the way of life does not radically shift after a wedding, your bachelorhood and the people who helped form this identity need to be examined if you are to step into the shoes of marriage feeling joyous and prepared.

The Faces of Singlehood

As I mentioned, each man experiences the transition differently. Take a moment to read the following list to determine which aspects of this transition feel most prevalent for you:

- **"I'm no longer on the field."**

With an engagement and impending marriage, the realization hits that the days of flirting, dating, and sleeping with other women are over. If the single way of life has comprised a significant portion of your identity, this can be a sobering thought! Even if you've been living with your partner, the commitment that a wedding seals creates a finality that needs to be recognized. You may be marrying the woman of your dreams, but there is still a loss of an identity and lifestyle, and the more you make this loss conscious, the easier the transition into a lifelong commitment will become.

- **"I'm losing my freedom."**

As Robert, "I can't just go out and drink with the guys and play hockey whenever I want. There are responsibilities now. It's over. My god, it's over!" Yes, the time of limitless freedom, of being a bachelor, of having no one to be accountable to, is over. While you are hopefully very much aware of the gift in having someone who cares about you and wants to know your

whereabouts, at first this aspect of commitment and marriage might feel restricting. But, as with all aspects of transition, the more you are willing to acknowledge and talk about your fears and losses, the more quickly you will remember the beautiful and irreplaceable gains of sharing your life with your chosen partner.

- **"This is the end of my youth."**

Connected to the loss of freedom is the realization that your youth is over. Youth is about freedom, about staying up all night with your friends, about exploring who are you and carving out your identity. You are responsible to no one but yourself. If you mess up financially, it doesn't directly effect anyone but you. If you drink all night long and wake up hung over, there's no one standing over you the next day with a curious expression on her face. While your decision to marry indicates that you rightly realize that at some point every boy needs to grow up, it still may be difficult to let go of the youth mentality. Again, it is essential to realize what you are saying goodbye the old ways so that you can offer a sincere and proud hello to the new life.

- **"My singlehood is over."**

Once you marry, you will no longer be just an individual; you will be one becoming two. For many men, this is one of the most difficult adjustments to make. Men are conditioned in our

culture to watch out for number one and to establish themselves as individuals early on in life. If a man has lived alone, he has probably become firmly established in his ways and it may be difficult to make compromises and think for two instead of one. With marriage comes the reality that there is another person who is directly affected by your actions.

Different than just living together, marriage solidifies a bond and commitment that defies tangible reality, and this can take some adjustment. On the other hand, you now have someone is thinking about and considering you in her decisions and actions. This is one of the beauties of marriage.

- **"My relationship to my parents is changing."**

Men are taught to break away from their parents early in life, so it is quite common for men to have already established an identity and value system separate from their parents' by the time they marry. However, I often work with men who still place their mother's opinions above their fiancé's, as often comes out around planning issues. With the new marriage, you are creating a new family. While it's important to maintain healthy ties with your family, the primary allegiance needs to shift from family of origin to wife if the new relationship is to take root in healthy soil. (By the way, the same is true for her.)

What To Do

Once you've realized how you're feeling, the next step is to take action so that these feelings don't obstruct your ability to feel joyous and present on your wedding day. Try taking these three simple steps:

1. **Acknowledge Your Experience:** Remember that you may feel sad, confused, and scared during your engagement. These feelings are a normal, expected part of your transition.
2. **Feel Your Feelings:** For most men, this is easier said than done! Unlike us women, you're not exactly conditioned to have a good cry when you feel overwhelmed! But it's important that you find a way to release your feelings, whether it's through focusing on them while you're punching the bag at the gym or driving out to the ocean and having a good scream.
3. **Get Support:** Talk to your family and friends about what's going on internally. If you have a close male friend, take a risk and let him know some of the prewedding thoughts and feelings you're having. Your married friends might be a good place to start. Also, consider sharing your experience with your fiancé. I can guarantee you that she

will appreciate your honesty and willingness to be vulnerable and it will certainly bring the two of you closer during this time.

Job Loss/Change

Every transition carries a core emotional task that, when consciously embraced, is an invitation to grow. When you move to a new home or city, the core task is about definitions of security. When you endure a break up, the core issue is about the fusion of self-worth with others' love. When you get married, the core emotional task is about letting go of your identity as a single person. And when you lose a job, the core task is about the fusion of self-worth with job title. The through-line question is always, in the words of William Bridges who wrote the groundbreaking book, *Transitions*, "What is it time to let go of?" As he says in a brief article on his website:

"Transition is not just a nice way to say change. It is the inner process through which people come to terms with a change, as they let go of the way things used to be and reorient themselves to the way that things are now.

"If your change was the loss of your job, what might you have to let go of? Let's see: a regular income, a group of colleagues and friends, a regular place to go every morning, a way to use your talents, a way to structure your time, a bunch of plans for the future, a way to get appreciated. You'd also lose an identity—or at least an answer to the question, "What do you do?" Those are the things that losing your job would force you to do without.

"To cross over the line into the transition, you need to ask yourself what inner relinquishments you'll need to make

because of the change. What needs will you have to find other ways to get met? Because of your change, what parts of yourself are now out of date?"

Job loss is a potent and alive topic for many people in this country right now. Many of my clients and friends are enduring this challenging transition, which has inspired me to observe it from new angles. For example, I currently have a client who was fired from her nursing job. What's interesting about her situation is that she was planning on leaving the job anyway because the work environment has become toxic and, having recently married, she wanted some down time before trying to conceive a baby. But when the dismissal came, she felt surprised and bewildered by how to handle the emotions and questions that it activated.

Before she could address the questions, she needed to allow herself some time to grieve. Like all transitions, the loss of a job follows the three stages of letting go, in-between, and new beginning. In the letting go stage, my client let herself grieve the loss, which was challenging at first because it was a loss that she wanted. This can be a confusing aspect of the letting go stage when we're walking toward something wanted – like a new job or a wedding or a baby. You might ask, "Why am I grieving when I wanted this to happen?" But in order to gain something new we must relinquish the old, and in my clients'

case, the old meant the old job. For although the job had turned toxic in recent months, it was a place where she had felt comfortable, had a group of colleagues and patients to whom she felt connected, and a measure of job satisfaction. So for the first several weeks she grieved these losses. She wrote in her journal. She breathed into the memories that surfaced, positive or otherwise. She actively engaged the art of letting go.

Eventually, after weeks of grieving, she found herself in the in-between, liminal zone – no longer at the old job but without a new job. For the first time in her adult life, she had time on her hands. And in this empty, fallow zone, the beliefs about her worth surfaced. She wondered, “Am I worthy if I’m not working? Is it okay to do “nothing”?” (She wasn’t actually doing *nothing* as she was taking a few classes that she had wanted to take for some time.) The questions spoke to a dominant message in our cultures that equates worthiness with productivity. In other words, if you’re not working, you’re not worthy and, conversely, the harder you work, the worthier you are.

I hope you can see the dysfunction in the message. Our culture does not allow for down time or *being* time. We value the provider in the family over the homemaker because the former is out in the world making money. We don’t value the one who tends to the home, cooks nourishing food for the family, or, by

simply creating peace within her or himself, is spreading peace to the world. When we lie down on a couch and look out the window, we often wonder, “Is this okay? Am I just being lazy? And who am I if I’m not a working in the world?”

For many over-achievers and Type A personalities (which seem to be the type of person who often find their way to my virtual door), they grew up believing that if they worked hard enough, striving to achieve the ever-elusive goal of perfection, they would receive the love they needed. I explain the concept of core shame at length in the article on Breaking Up, so suffice here to say that instead of recognizing that the lack of love was a result of their caregivers’ deficiencies, a child assumes that there must be something wrong with her or him, and if she can only fix the problem she’ll receive love. So she spends the next twenty or thirty years with her self self-worth intimately tied to her external achievements until a job loss, a wedding, or another transition illuminates the dysfunction and invites her to explore a healthier, more loving belief system.

For my client, as soon as she recognized the faulty belief, she worked tirelessly to replace it with the truth, which is that she’s a worthy, good, kind, creative, honest person and her worth has nothing to do with her outward achievements or her place of employment. She spent months working hard *internally*, which

was actually the most productive work she could do to prepare her inner soil for conceiving both a baby and her own rebirth. She learned that she valued her down time and enjoyed taking long walks alone with no destination in sight. She explored new interests and hobbies and took classes in a field vastly different from nursing. She knew that she wanted – and needed – to go back to work soon but she wasn't sure that she wanted to be a nurse anymore. There was another passion niggling at her soul, begging for her attention: she has always longed to become a chef. So she started planting the seeds that would allow her passion to take root.

For many people who find themselves out of work, the challenge is identify the belief that equates their worthiness with their achievements and their identity with their job title. There are other, external challenges, of course, and by no means do I mean to diminish the stress of not knowing where your next paycheck will come from. But the purpose of this article is to address the internal struggles that arise in the aftermath of losing a job or proactively changing careers.

It's never easy to let go. If you've been at a job for ten or twenty years, the location and job title have become woven into the fabric of your being. But in order to discover what's next, you need to consciously grieve and relinquish attachments to what

no longer exists. The only way to do this without losing your entire sense of your self is to realize that you are not your job; you are not your achievements; you are not your titles. You are *you*, the unchanging, essential you that came into this world. So the question then becomes: Who am I? And that's quite a question, one that requires time and attention in a culture that defines you by externals and achievements. But the only way to embrace the opportunities waiting for you in the new life is to let go of the old: the identity that needs to be relinquished and redefined, the values that need to be turned on their head, the belief systems that need to be buried and resurrected anew, grown and watered by a definition of yourself that extends beyond what you *do* and is rooted firmly in the acceptance and self-love of who you *are*. There is a new life waiting for you. There are new possibilities itching to unfold. When you rinse the old film from your eyes, you will be ready to see them.

Becoming A Mother: Pregnancy as Preparation

Pregnancy is a power time. In the Native American worldview, pregnancy, like a woman's moon, is a time when a woman is intimately connected to the feminine principles of intuition, softness, vulnerability, and receptivity. It is a highly spiritual time when not only are a woman's five senses heightened, but her sixth sense, her spiritual radar, is exquisitely alive. When we attribute a pregnant woman's mental and physical states simply to fluctuations in hormonal levels we overlook the immense richness that this rite of passage holds. Every transition carries an opportunity for growth but none so much as pregnancy, where the body is almost literally turned inside out and invites the mind, again and again, through various tests in the trimesters and ultimately in the initiation of labor, to change, release, and grow.

Typical of Western culture, we view the challenges – sickness, exhaustion, pregnancy depression, back pain, uterine pain, bed rest, labor, postpartum depression - as something to solve and immediately search for answers to the problem. We address the symptoms not with the intention to learn and grow, but with the intention to suppress and deny. What we culturally fail to recognize is that the greater the challenges, the greater the

opportunities for transformation. We celebrate the ease and bemoan the struggles, and while we should exalt in the inestimable joy of pregnancy, we need also to re-frame our perception of the less joyous parts. Western culture's complete absence of a spiritual framework is a massive disservice to the five million women who bear and birth babies every year. A simple context, vocabulary and reorientation of her perception of pregnancy could radically alter the way a woman moves through the threshold that begins her life as a mother.

Part of pregnancy's power is that it's a liminal time, a zone where a woman is between lifestyles and identities. Removed from the ordinary life and stripped of her familiar defenses, a woman is primed to release negative habits and receive new information. As the physical body rounds, so the rough edges of the invisible body (emotional, psychological, spiritual) are softened. In this malleable state, a pregnant woman is like gold that has been warmed enough to be molded into its next shape. She may become acutely aware of a critical part of her that emerges around her spouse. She may begin to notice how quickly she acquiesces to her superiors at work. She may re-visit – or visit for the first time – aspects of her relationship with her mother, friends, or other family members that are unhealthy and need to change. In the liminal zone, life's non-essentials are widdled away and what remains are core beliefs and

inarguable truths. With the slightest reorientation of her primary focus – away from the external of baby stuff and ultrasounds and towards her inner world – a pregnant woman’s astonishing capacity for transformation is revealed. As one woman, now pregnant with her fourth child, noted, “I can point to each pregnancy and say in one sentence what it was that I needed to learn.”

Not only does Western culture overlook the power of pregnancy, it also overlooks its function in preparing a woman to become a mother. It takes ten months to gestate a baby; it takes at least that long to gestate a new mother. While the body is miraculously making an entire placenta, baby, and nourishing milk, the mind has the opportunity to prepare slowly for what it means to leave the old life behind and enter an entirely new phase. It’s an opportunity not often taken as most women power their way through pregnancy, unaware that the body’s urge to slow down is an invitation to the mind to follow suit. If the shock of new motherhood is to be lessened, a woman must begin to assimilate the reality of the change before the baby arrives.

Transformations require time; transitions find completion only in the quiet moments of a day when a woman allows herself to notice her thoughts and feelings. We have become masters at

commanding our bodies to obey our will and ignoring the wisdom inherent in physical symptoms. If there was ever a time for a woman to listen to her body, to trust that her nausea or exhaustion, her desire to withdraw from the world and stop watching the news, her need to move slowly, to lie stretched out on the chaise for hours on end, might be telling her something, this is the time. For there is no job more important than growing a baby and no task more important than making oneself ready to become mother to the child when he or she enters the world.

It can be difficult to prepare for a transition without the context, information, and a roadmap to delineate what is happening for the woman in each trimester and what the work is that needs to be addressed. Yet mainstream culture offers very little to help a woman understand the spiritual vicissitudes of her experience. She knows that the forty weeks of pregnancy are divided into three trimesters, but she is denied the potent knowledge that each trimester holds an emotional and energetic experience. She has several books to help her understand how her physical body is changing, perhaps even one that describes what is happening to her fetus day by day. How she loves reading each page and learning that on day 34 her tiny baby's heart can be seen, he measures 1/3 of an inch and his kidneys have been formed! But she also needs to know what is happening to her,

as a growing mother, on day 34. The books can help her understand that her overwhelming and debilitating nausea is caused by the hormones required to grow a placenta, but she needs to put this nausea in a greater context, acknowledging its function as a spiritual test that, when approached consciously, can help her become a mother. Bereft of this information, women understandably try to ignore the challenges and focus on the concrete aspects of pregnancy, thereby suppressing their feminine intuition that knows the power and purpose of this time.

There is a spiritual framework that delineates the three trimesters not in terms of the baby's growth and the physical symptoms of pregnancy but in terms of how a woman is born as a mother. Through my interviews, research and counseling work, a roadmap materialized, an ebb and flow of energy that, quite simply, looked like this:

First trimester: Contraction

Second trimester: Expansion

Third trimester: Contraction

Just as the uterus contracts and the cervix expands to open the passageway for a child to be born, so the invisible body

contracts and expands over forty weeks to release the old life and unhealthy patterns and prepare a woman for both her birth as a mother and the emergence of new, expanded parts of herself. Each stage of pregnancy, culminating in the final initiation of labor, offers challenges, tests, and lessons that help a woman to open herself to receive the new life and adjust more easily to the new identity as mother.

The first trimester pulls a woman into an underground world. There, in the contracted space of silence and stillness, she begins the long process of assimilating the enormity of her transition from non-mother to mother. Through the symptoms of exhaustion, nausea, and depression that affect 95% of women, she is asked to slow down her pace and deepen her internal wells – or resources – that she will call upon during her life as a mother – self-trust, endurance, staying present, and gratitude. Just as nausea (which 65% - 75% of women suffer through) is the body's response to growing a placenta and a signal to avoid potentially harmful foods, so it is also an invitation to the invisible body to withdraw from stressful situations and release old toxins. A primary fear appears in each trimester. The fear during this trimester is about the possibility of miscarrying. The conscious approach encourages a woman to work with fear proactively so that it doesn't dominate the rest of her pregnancy, labor, and her life as a mother.

During the second trimester women generally expand with a burst of energy. With the physical challenges of exhaustion and sickness behind her, she has a window of time where she is clear enough in mind and body to attend to the more active emotional and psychological work of pregnancy. It is during this trimester that a woman needs to address her fantasies about her unborn baby, her fantasies about motherhood, and her expectations about how her marriage will respond to parenthood. The face of fear in this trimester centers on her baby's physical health. As she takes time to address her fear actively, she deepens her wells of self-trust, faith and gratitude.

The third trimester is the time to prepare spiritually for the initiation of labor. Once again, the physical body, now as full as the moon, asks the invisible body to slow down and contract. For the 20% of women who are ordered to bed rest, this is a brilliant opportunity to alter their pace to come into alignment with baby time and do the work which they may have avoided during the previous two trimesters. All women in this trimester have to be cognizant of avoiding the magnetic pull towards the consumer world of buying the right baby accessories and decorating the baby's room. Instead, if she is to enter labor and new motherhood grounded, she will begin or hone a spiritual practice that will help her during labor. She can also participate

in a mother shower, as opposed to a baby shower, so that she is ushered into motherhood with the support of her community (instead of with merely more baby socks and blankets).

There is a small percentage of women who are connected to their body's wisdom and naturally follow their feminine intuition when they are pregnant. But for the other 95% of women who need the support of information to validate their inner knowing, traveling through pregnancy with a spiritual roadmap could dramatically alter the way they enter motherhood, possibly even avoiding being one of the 10-20% who suffer from postpartum depression or the 50-80% who struggle through postpartum blues. When a woman trusts the signposts of her pregnant body – stopping at the flares in the road, moving forward at the green lights – when she drops into the natural rhythm of pregnancy, taking time to ponder her expectations and grieve the life she's leaving behind, her mother identity takes firm root during pregnancy and she finds that she is ready to welcome and embrace her new child, her new identity as a mother, and her new life.

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Slowing Down Into Retirement

A woman named Erin from Ann Arbor, MI recently sent me the following email:

“I am currently helping listening to my mom as she struggles with approaching retirement and redefining herself as retired woman/grandmother/etc. I would love to hear your thoughts on your blog or wherever about this transition... It is so surprising to me how similar her sadness, mourning, and life reflections are to what I went through during my engagement. I’ve been translating your work and recommendations for her to address the retirement transition and it’s provided a great deal of comfort to her.”

As she astutely wrote, transition is transition, so the emotional content of letting go of being single is exactly the same as letting go of the identity of a working person and moving into the next stage of life. In order to embrace the renewal or rebirth stage – whether it’s being married or being retired – there needs to be a conscious recognition that the current life stage and identity are ending. With this ending comes grief, reflection, and a fair amount of restlessness and floundering around in the realm of unknown as the skin of the familiar identity begins to shed but the new skin hasn’t quite grown in yet.

While I obviously have not walked through this particular

transition myself, I've given it a great deal of thought as I've watched my own parents and my friends' parents respond so differently to this later life stage than I would have expected; most older people I know have refused to slow down and retire. This is in stark contrast to people in my grandparents' generation whose entire life was geared toward preparing for "the golden years" when they could travel, take classes, knit, garden and, at the top of their list, be grandparents. In fact, one of the most frequently told stories in my family was that my grandparents were so anxious to become grandparents that they bribed my parents into having my oldest brother; they knew my parents didn't want to start a family until they traveled to Europe, so they told my parents they would pay for their trip if they promised to get pregnant when they returned home.

My grandparents loved being grandparents. While they worked hard during their

younger years, neither of them strongly identified with their jobs, so I'm sure they were more than happy to jump fully into the role of grandparent when the moment arose. My grandfather identified so strongly with the role that when we would bring friends over to their house, he would introduce himself as "Grandpa"; when he was in his 70s we bought him a

hoodie with the word GRANDPA printed on it and he wore it nearly every day into his nineties until it finally fell apart; also in his 70s we bought him a personalized license plate that said GRANPA7 (I guess there were 6 other GRANDPA license plates already), which he proudly made people aware of whenever it remotely came up in conversation. And my grandma was the consummate grandma, cooking delicious food for us, knitting us blankets and hats, sewing our clothes, giving me manicures, baking cookies and delicious cakes. We spent every weekend there and went camping with them for two weeks each summer. We loved being their grandkids as much as they loved grandparenting us. It was a mutually satisfying and fulfilling relationship.

While I'm sure there are many grandparents who cherish their role and dive into it completely, the model I see around me is quite different. I see older people who refuse to slow down. They may love being grandparents or may not have grandchildren yet, but regardless of that particular role they continue to work and keep themselves busy in other ways. It seems that it's more and more difficult for people to allow themselves to *retire*. The meaning of the word *retire* – *to withdraw or remove oneself* - sheds more light on this changing phenomena: what does a person contemplating retirement need to withdraw or remove oneself from? From the identity of a worker, from the busyness and fullness of a working life, from

familiarity of a daily routine, from the fast pace necessitated by work.

We move so quickly these days. We communicate quickly, we travel quickly, we work quickly, we eat quickly. We're so out of touch with the natural pace of life that it makes sense we would refuse to slow down during transitions, especially the transition of retirement which requires not a temporary retraction of pace but an entire reconstruction of the speed at which life is lived. Most people move at breakneck speed until illness or the depression that accompanies transition forces them to slow down. This is a blessing when it leads to a wake-up call that inspires the person to get in touch with their emotional life.

Some transitions, like pregnancy, alter the physical body so radically that most women have no choice but to slow down. This is a blessing. I'll never forget the woman I met in my first childbirth preparation class who shared with us that the mandatory bed rest of her third trimester, while initially cause for panic, ended up being a blessing in that it forced her to withdraw (retire) from her busy corporate life and prepared her for the slow pace of motherhood like nothing else could. When a transition doesn't involve a physical change, the body will often communicate through illness until we take notice and, hopefully, slow down enough to decipher the coded meaning.

Most people avoid slowing down because they subconsciously sense that a cascade of memories, emotions, thoughts, dreams, and reflections live in the silence and solitude that accompany the slowed down state of non-doing. This can be especially true in the older years when the build up of memory and emotion could fill volumes. But as we often say in the world of psychology, what we resist persists, so the longer the person in transition avoids turning inward, the more persistent the physical symptoms or emotional turmoil becomes.

When a person does decide to slow down enough to retire, they may spend some time grieving for the end of the current lifestyle and identity; they may wade into the sea of memory and feel as if they're re-living painful and joyous times in their life; they may wake up each morning awash in the realm of the watery dream world. They may feel overwhelmed for a period of time and might benefit from the support and guidance of a counselor as they navigate through the initial onslaught of inner life. But after a while, the intensity will diminish and they will find themselves happier and more at peace than they've ever been. And they may even find they enjoy the freedom to dwell internally, to reminisce, to dream, to write new letters and read over old ones. Once the old life is grieved and the challenging work of letting go is done, there are great boons and wondrous possibilities waiting in the golden years.

Death: The Soul Has Work To Do

Note: I wrote the following two articles in Spring 2010 about our cat's Mocha process of dying and death. Obviously, losing a pet is not comparable to losing a person, but the same concepts regarding dying apply regardless of who is leaving this earth.

A couple of days ago one of my brothers called to check in. After hearing about his life, he asked about mine and mentioned that he had read my recent post about Mocha. He said that it was hard for him to read about her condition and implied that it was time to put her down. We proceeded to have a tense conversation where I attempted to convince him as to why I believed that she deserved to live out her life according to her own timetable and he expressed that he didn't think it was right that I was allowing her to suffer. The tension finally dissolved when we acknowledged that we each understood and respected the other's position and we said a peaceful goodbye.

The conversation left me feeling frustrated and unsettled. I trust that I'm communicating enough with Mocha to know that she's not ready to go, but trying to explain that beyond what I had written in my post to my extremely smart and scientific brother was challenging. I was lacking some key words or vocabulary that would contextualize what I intuitively know. The next day, I relayed the conversation to my friend Lisa, who worked in

hospice for many years and isn't afraid to talk about death, and she said, "Elizabeth Kubler-Ross talked in her books about how important the dying process is because, even if someone appears to be gone, in a vegetable state or struggling with dementia, there's something happening that we can't see. *The soul has work to do*. Some of the most important work happens during the dying process."

As often happens when I hear a statement that resonates true for me, my entire body reverberated *yes* to what she said. *The soul has work to do*. We can't always see what that work is; most times, I imagine, neither we nor the person who is dying has any idea what that work entails. But just because we can't see it or touch doesn't mean it isn't important. The more scientifically-minded we are, the more we focus on the tangibles of what we can see and touch. My brother sees that Mocha has a tumor under her tongue that prevents her from completely closing her mouth, he imagines himself in the same scenario, and he says, "It's time to go." It's a valid response and one that I'm sure few people would argue with.

But I'm coming from a worldview that believes passionately in the idea that transitions carry tremendous potential for emotional and spiritual growth. We grow when we marry; we grow when we become parents; we grow when we move or change jobs or lose a loved one. Many spiritual traditions teach

that the two most powerful transitions we experience are birth and death, for those are the times that we're most open and vulnerable to the portals that connect us to another realm. The more open we can remain during these transitions, the more we can access the potential for growth.

Furthermore, transitions not only affect the one in transition, but everyone who's touched by the transition process. When my clients who are engaged are stumped by the fact that their mother or sister or father is having a hard time, I remind them that that their marriage is also, to a large degree, a loss for their family. As always, this loss must be acknowledged and grieved before the family and friends can truly support and celebrate the marriage. Likewise, as Mocha dies, I'm watching Everest grow and learn about death. He's also learning about compassion, about what caring for a dying friend requires, and about tolerance as we have to accept the unsightliness and smell of her tumor. He's learning that dying is often a process as it's been about two months since we received her prognosis and through that time we've been able to have a few conversations about death. I would never elevate his learning above her need to die; in other words, if I felt it was her time, I would take her in. But as long as she's still here and showing strong signs of wanting to be here, we'll embrace this experience, as painful as it is, as an opportunity to learn and grow.

Death is so hard to talk about. As I was putting Everest to bed that night, we looked out at the giant cottonwood trees outside the window and mentioned how we'll probably start seeing the owls perched on those branches soon. Remembering the family of rabbits we watched hopping around our yard that morning, Everest asked, "Will the owls eat all the rabbits?" I said, "No, not all the rabbits, just what they need to survive." Everest rubbed his eyes as he does when he feels sad. I explained that it's important for owls to eat the rabbits because it maintains the balance of nature, but my explanation fell on deaf ears. Everest was furiously rubbing his eyes now and hiding his head under the pillow. For most of us in this culture, especially the sensitive among us, death is hard to talk about. But it must be done if we're to have the conversations that allow us walk through transitions consciously. He can hide under his pillow when we're talking about rabbits being eaten up by owls, but he won't be able to hide under the pillow in a few days or weeks when it's time for his beloved cat to make her way to "cat heaven."

Death: Last Day

Everest's favorite book is *Charlotte's Web*. We've read it at least 6 or 7 times and he knows many parts by heart. There's one page, however, that he always asks me to skip: it's the final page of the chapter entitled "Last Day" where Charlotte dies. He knows that she dies but he doesn't want to hear the details. I'm happy to oblige. We all have sections of books and movies that we'd rather not read or watch.

But I couldn't skip over Mocha's death. I prepared him as best I could. I offered to read books about pet loss (which, as I've said, he refused to allow me to read) and I tried to help him find a way to make sense of life's most challenging reality. But I couldn't protect him from the pain of losing a beloved friend. Just as Wilbur grieves the loss of his best friend, Charlotte, so Everest will find a way to grieve the loss of Mocha. In fact, I think he may have already found a way.

About a year and a half ago, Everest started telling stories about "the kitten crane", an enormous structure, "bigger than the universe", where mining cats live. In the world according to Everest, everyone comes from the kitten crane and we'll return to the kitten crane when we die. Asher, Everest's little brother, was most recently at the kitten crane before he came to earth to be a baby. Everest has created elaborate stories about this

“place”. Needless to say, in Everest’s mythology, Mocha will be traveling there when she dies.

About a week ago, Everest decided that he needed to draw a map and print out a code so that Mocha would know how to get there and could scan the code to open the door when she arrived. I could see that creating this map and codes, which he taped together then put into a large envelope along with a can of cat food, a cat toy, and several photos from our life with Mocha, offered him a sense of control over her death. One of the most difficult aspects of transitions is the feeling of being out of control. The purpose of rituals, like those that comprise a wedding or a funeral, is to give the person or people in transition a container that can hold the enormity of their grief, fear, doubt, confusion, and uncertainty.

Context and rituals together contain the feelings activated by transitions. By context I meant the roadmap of understanding the three stage of transitions. By rituals I mean any consciously creative and sacred act that tangibly contains our feelings. Everest, in his 5 1/2 year old mind, has created both.

Of course, the one who was most affected by this transition was Mocha. I’m not sure how much animals understand about an impending death, but yesterday morning I found her shivering on the floor, looking up at me and asking for attention.

I picked her up and held her on my chest for a couple of hours, whispering words of encouragement into her ear: "You're okay. You're going to be free of this painful body soon. Let go. It's okay to let go. You've been the best cat in the world. We'll be okay. You're going on a wonderful adventure. Thank you for being our beautiful, sweet cat. We'll always love you." After about twenty minutes, she stopped shivering. Her body relaxed. She jumped off my lap and settled onto her place on the carpet, watching her two boys at play.

Mocha died at 2:45 pm, April 21st, 2010. She died in the room where Asher was born, one day before the anniversary of my grandmother's death. These synchronicities, which so often occur around transitions, bring me comfort as they remind me of the mysterious web of life where everything is interconnected. She died peacefully purring in my arms. After she left, I curled my body around her curled body and could almost feel her rough cat tongue licking away my tears, just as she had done countless times in life. I allowed myself to surrender fully into the first wave of grief without my sons on my radar.

After a bit, I went into the yard to find my husband and sons. Everest's first question was, "Did she make it?" I assumed he meant to the kitten crane, so I responded, "Yes." I didn't know what to expect from Everest. He had told me that he was going

to be grumpy after Mocha died, but he was in good spirits, happily swinging on the swing and asking many questions. My husband soon proceeded to dig two holes, one for an evergreen tree and one for Mocha. Everest and Asher played close by. Everest asked how long it would take for Mocha's body to disintegrate. He asked what it was like when she died. He asked about her heartbeat and her final breath. Surprisingly, he said he wanted to see her before we buried her. I brought her out and held her curled on my cross-legged lap. Everest petted her and talked to her. He said that his head felt heavy and he smiled as he said it must be because Mocha's spirit was sitting on it.

He had told me that he didn't want to have anything to do with her burial but he was intimately part of the experience. He threw the first fistful of dirt over her body. He said a prayer. When she was completely buried and the grass packed down over her grave, Everest decided we needed to place flowers on top. He picked five daffodils, fixed them into a circle, and, accessing a beautifully primitive place within, made his own flower garland.

There was something celebratory and holy in the air. I'd like to think that the weeks we spent preparing for this day paid off. At the core of my work with transitions is the tenet that the more emotional work that occurs during the first letting go stage, the

more easily we can move into the third stage of a new beginning. We had talked about Mocha's death, written stories about our life with her, and encouraged Everest to prepare in his own way. Just as I encourage my clients to do, in the months preceding her death, he grieved and raged and questioned in his own way. And just as Everest surprised me when he bravely and happily witnessed Asher's birth at home, so he surprised me again by participating in the events surrounding Mocha's death. Either we prepared him well or he's more resilient than we think – or, most likely, a bit of both.

Mocha's on her way to the kitten crane, finally free of the suffering of this body and on to a glorious new adventure. For us left on earth, we grieve, we breathe into the empty spaces and painful reminders of her absence (the place where she ate, her favorite sleeping spots), and then we transition into our new beginning, which will eventually invite another furry friend to join our family. And perhaps Everest has had a positive first experience of death. Perhaps it's not something he'll fear in anticipation next time we encounter it. And perhaps he'll even allow me to read the last page of chapter twenty-one of *Charlotte's Web*.

Note: To read an update on Everest's relationship to death as well as one of the most painful and growth-producing transitions of my life as a parent, [please see this blog post](#).

Further Support:

If you would like to deepen your work around how you navigate transitions, consider taking one of my courses, which you can [find here](#).