

From Change to Transition ©

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on May 15, 2016

In January, when I first read your ministerial search packet, it was evident that this Fellowship is currently in the midst of significant change. In the past year you have moved into this new worship space, one that will likely become your own in the not-too-distant future. As a result of the move, you have had to go from one service on Sunday mornings to two. Because your new home needs some renovating in order to serve your needs, you will soon have to find other space in which to hold worship services while construction is underway. And in the midst of all of this, you are saying farewell to your minister, the Rev. Dr. Nina Grey, who has been with you for nearly five years as you were preparing for the other changes I just mentioned. You are way beyond familiar with change. Clearly, you are immersed in it. It seems to me that with all of these changes you might feel similar to how Alice felt after running headlong into the rabbit hole—uncertain about all manner of things.

As I thought about all of the changes I just mentioned I felt compelled to address the topic. Yet while it seems both appropriate and necessary for me to speak to the matter of change, I had to wonder how it might be taken. Here I am, a relative stranger, coming in and talking about change, an issue that often involves disruption and can easily create strife in the life of a congregation. When I thought about this I recalled an old saying that goes something like this; fools rush in where angels fear to tread. Since I know I am no angel, that seems to leave only one other option. As I share with you some thoughts about change and transition then, my hope is that you will view my choice to talk about this important matter as a caring and courageous decision as opposed to a foolish one. So as I stand before you about to tumble forward into the rabbit hole that is change, I wonder what I, and we, will encounter—where the tunnel will take you and me, and what discoveries will lie ahead on this journey. Here we go then, into the tunnel as we seek to learn about change and the transitions that may be ahead.

I think it is highly probable that all of us would agree that the situations I identified earlier are what I called them, changes. But we might want to consider how we come to identify something as a change. I would assert that a change is something that can be seen, heard or physically felt, and everyone here can see, hear or feel that something is different with each of the situations I mentioned. When I say the word change then we all have a reasonably good idea of what I am talking about. I don't expect, however, that we would have the same level of understanding about the word transition. If you were to read the definitions of both words, change and transition, it would seem that they are synonymous. Looking in *Webster's New World Thesaurus*, transition isn't listed as a synonym for change. When you look up transition however you are directed back to change. You might ask then what does it mean when I refer to going from change to transition.

In his book *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*, Williams Bridges writes:

Change is situational.... *Transition*, on the other hand, is psychological; it is a three-phase process that people go through as they internalize and come to terms with the details of the new situation that the change brings about.”

According to Bridges, change is a specific event or series of events that are often external. Transition is what happens within each of us as we seek to make meaning of the change or changes that have taken place.

Our reading this morning, from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, is a good example of one portion of the transition process. Alice was clearly trying to make meaning of the question the caterpillar was asking her as she was struggling with all of the changes she had experienced since entering the rabbit hole. At the time of that conversation, Alice was a mere three inches tall and just moments before she had been so large that she filled an entire house. Oh, the changes she was going through, going from her typical height to quite tall and then to very small. The changes had her uncertain about who she was and what to expect. Alice was in the middle phase of the three part process that Bridges speaks of.

Bridges claims the first phase of transition is an ending. An example of an ending for this congregation was moving from the Senior Center, where you previously gathered for worship. I understand that some of you were glad for that ending while others didn't see the need to leave there. That change resulted in the end of certainly about the where, and to some degree, the what you had come to associate with worship. The change to this new space redefined aspects of worship that you had become accustomed to. This is where phase two begins. With the move came the need to find a new sense of personal understanding and comfort with this new space. Bridges identifies phase two as “the neutral zone.” The neutral zone typically feels almost anything but neutral. It is usually filled with all sorts of emotions. There can be highs and lows—gladness to sadness and excitement to anxiety or fear—and so many other emotions as well. All of this occurs as we strive to make meaning of the change and attempt to find a new sense of stability. That new sense of stability is what Bridges identifies as the third phase which he calls “the new beginning.” Phase three is where the internal work that we do during the neutral zone, the work of meaning making, allows us not only to accept the change, but to make the most we can of it.

From what I have been told, a great number of the members and friends of this congregation have put in countless hours to make the situational change from the old worship space to this new building. People have attended meetings and voted on proposals, moved boxes and furniture, developed plans for how the space will be renovated and utilized, painted and hung things on the walls. All of this was done to make this space your new home. Such work has been and will continue to be important and essential. But I am certain that other work has been going on as well. That work is within each of you. Having moved seven times in the last ten years I think I have a sense of what some of that work is. For example, every time I move I have to relearn where things are located. The old mental maps I have used in the past just don't get me where I want to go the way they used to. I have found this to be especially true the first night I wake up in a new living space and need to find the bathroom. Through trial and error, I have learned that it is best to take some time to think about where I am before

hopping out of bed in the dark. One of the hazards of being in the neutral zone is running into unseen walls or tripping over obstacles I didn't realize were there.

For you as a congregation, moving to this building was the change. The transition, the inner adjustment, is still underway. The transition can be harder to see or hear. It may be felt by each person but that may not always be clearly evident to others. And today, another change is on the horizon. As you all know, in just a few weeks Rev. Dr. Nina Grey will be retiring. Her departure will be a loss for this congregation as well as the larger community. With her leaving date approaching, the members of the Fellowship will vote later today to determine whether or not you will call another minister to continue the work she has been doing. This will be an important decision for all of you and for me as well. However that vote comes out, all of us will be going through another significant change. And with the change, whatever it may be, will come a time of transition. Everyone will be able to see, hear or feel the change, the situational event, that will occur. But much of the transition will likely be hidden. It will be hidden like the hungry caterpillar after going into its cocoon. It will be hidden because it will be within each of our hearts and minds as we seek to find new meaning, to discover a new equilibrium—as we update our relationship maps.

It is certain that a change will occur. It will occur with an ending as Rev. Dr. Nina Grey departs. The transition that lies ahead is not as certain. From my years of experience in assisting individuals, families and groups who have been in the midst of change I am reasonably certain that this congregation will go through what Bridges refers to as the neutral zone. A time of turning inward. A time of reflection and self-examination. As you prepare for that phase, I want to assure you that it is only a phase. It doesn't last forever. And as you are in that phase I hope you remember what I am about to tell you.

I want you to remind yourself and those around you that you will make it through this phase. And when you make it through the neutral zone phase, you will have a new sense of who you are and what the possibilities are for you and for this religious community you are a part of. As I said previously, the neutral zone typically seems anything but neutral. But when the neutral zone time comes to an end, I can imagine the transformation that will have taken place. I can see this congregation emerging from a cocoon and unfurling its beautiful wings. And once those wings have had time to dry, I see this congregation catching the breezes that come down the mountains and taking flight. The changes that are underway and are soon to occur offer you, each of you, and me as well, the opportunity to become more than we have been before.

So in the midst of all this change it might be helpful to recall the title of the book our reading came from, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. I would propose that all of us are Alice and all of us are in wonderland. As is so evident in that book, wonderland can be confusing and unsettling at times. So as we undertake this adventure, may we keep a keen sense of wonder and curiosity. And may we remember to be compassionate towards one another. For wonder and curiosity will be essential as we journey down the rabbit hole of change, into and through transition, which will lead to new discoveries and beginnings. And compassion will help us support and care for one another in this ever changing and often confusing world that we share together.

So it is and blessed be.

