

Character and . . .

Transitions

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The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.

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Character and Transitions

Annalee R. Ward


Off to college. A move to a new place. Marriage or relationship changes. A new job or a job loss, retirement, illness or death. These are a few of what Bruce Feiler calls “lifequakes,” which we often think of when we think about transitions (79). But the reality of our lives includes so many more “disruptors” (71). We soon realize that our lives require us to walk through numerous transitions moving from this status to that status, from this way of life to that way of life, from the old to the new.¹

Transitions are commonplace occurrences in individual lives. “The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another,” argues Arnold Van Gennep, an early scholar of transitions (2-3). He continues:

For groups, as well as for individuals, life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way. And there are always new thresholds to cross. . . . (189)

To be human is to face change, to encounter loss, and to move onward.

Transitions also occur on a larger social scale—organizational changes (think of how technology changes functions and sometimes purposes of organizations), institutional transitions (consider new definitions of marriage), national turnovers (witness the Taliban retaking Afghanistan) or even transitions on a world-wide scale (think about climate change).



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This issue of *Character and . . .* uses the theme of Transitions to address very different situations from the personal to the organizational to the world-wide. Jeff Haverland navigates the pain of a son leaving home and moving to

college. Jim Romagna examines some of the ways transitions happen in sport and the use of rituals to grow through those transitions. Ann Mauss explores the moral consequences of our increasing dependence on computer decision-making through algorithms. Mary Emily Duba steps back to call us to truth-telling in a world transitioning to post-truth. The issue concludes with a response essay from Rick Olsen who brings a model of Community Resilience to his understanding of these essays. This diversity of topics began, however, in common readings and discussions about the nature of transitions. I'd like to highlight a few of the things we took away from our readings and discussions by describing the nature of a transition before introducing the individual essays.

Transitions

Whether we find them in a remote tribe studied by anthropologists and ethnographers, in scholars' applications to various disciplines, or in self-help books which help navigate life, transitions continue to be of concern for human thriving. The work of Arnold Van Gennep followed by that of Victor Turner laid the groundwork for understanding that transitions encompass three phases and often employ rituals to move forward to a state of transformation.



Our lives require us to transition from the old to the new.

With their anthropological and ethnographic work, we have seen how various cultures practice rituals and rites of passage as a means of moving children to adults, for example. The transitional process begins with some interruption to everyday life. It may include specific rituals in which everyday practices and norms do not apply and ultimately culminates in a new or different way of being.

In Van Gennep's language, the three phases of transition include separation, margin, and aggregation (Turner, *Ritual* 94). The margin state, also referred to as liminality, particularly in the scholarship of Victor Turner, constitutes the disorientation of living "betwixt and between" (*Ritual* 95). Much of these scholars' work focuses on the power of rituals and rites of passage, enacted in that liminal, middle state, to act as a catalyst for the change that occurs when one moves to the third phase. Crossing the threshold or limen into the disorienting margin state, according to Turner, creates a loosening

or suspending of norms that typically have bound one’s life (*Dramas* 13-14). At this time social rules and structures may be questioned and possibly even ignored. Liminality provides a space for creativity and community of fellow transitioners. These bonds may be temporary but also might provide support at a time of stress.

The language referring to these three parts has been modernized and applied particularly to individuals in William Bridges’ work, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life’s Changes*. He sets up a contrast between change as situational and transition as psychological (xiii). Building on Van Gennep and Turner’s work, he too identifies three parts to a transition but labels them as follows: “1) an ending, 2) a neutral zone, and 3) a new beginning” (4). Bridges believes the transition is a linear process. One must go through an ending and neutral zone before the new beginning (18).

Transition Phases

Van Gennep/Turner	Separation	Margin/Liminal	Aggregation
Bridges	Ending	Neutral Zone	New Beginning
Feiler	Long Goodbye	Messy Middle	New Beginning

A more recent work by Bruce Feiler, *Life Is in the Transitions: Mastering Change at Any Age*, expands Bridges’ work. Feiler interviewed over 250 individuals and coded their stories. He emphatically argues that transitions are not neat linear experiences (310-11). People might start a transition in the three phases differently and may circle back to a stage they’ve been in before, but they gravitate to the places that they are most able to manage. The three stages are similar to what others have identified, but Feiler speaks of “the long goodbye, the messy middle, or the new beginning” (311).

When we put moral character in conversation with transitions, we often speak of necessary virtues such as courage, perseverance, and gratitude. Key to the conversation of working through a transition with character is the



Key to the conversation of working through a transition with character is the practice of reflection.

practice of reflection. The looking back and looking forward brings perspective and can move us in positive directions. This practice is complicated, however, by technology that enables constant connection and can prevent endings/goodbyes, thus interfering with the

transition. Without goodbyes, the growth into something new is stymied. Consider the metaphor of entering a long tunnel—something a transition can feel like. When we can't see the other side, the darkness is disorienting and disturbing. If we choose to keep looking back at the entrance, we don't come through the tunnel. We don't grow or change. Character matters in making transitions transformative experiences.



A transition can feel like a long tunnel.

Journal Essays

Jeff Haverland's deeply personal essay, "Life in Transition: Using Reflection and Gratitude to Discover Hope, Optimism, and Resilience," endeavors to help us understand the nature of that in-between time in a transition called liminality, particularly at the individual level. By working through his own challenges with a transition he reminds us all of the need for practices of thoughtful reflection and gratitude. These practices fuel hope and build resilience. Being active in allowing the pain of the transition to form us contributes to growth. While transitions are often very difficult and involve loss and change, coming through them can lead one to a place of greater strength couched in the humility of having worked through something difficult.

Rituals emerge as valuable coping tools employed in the messy middle state of liminality. In many traditional cultures, we see them as rites of passage. Jim Romagna, in "Ritual in Sports: Transition and Transformation," considers the role of rituals at the organizational level in the culture of organized sports. He examines three rituals implemented by coaches to help their teams navigate transitions well and makes suggestions for coaches and athletes as they develop rituals to promote character growth with their own teams.

Rituals used in organizations enable both reflection and forward movement. Respondent Rick Olsen comments:

Ritual provides the symbolic space for transformation, and is often the act that formally changes someone from a teammate to a captain or from a groom to a husband. But it does not make them an effective captain or a good husband. The ritual is the symbolic catalyst for such

transformation. It gives permission to the self to embrace the new identity more easily and more fully. (76)

Symbolic practices such as rituals and rites of passage function as anchors during the disorientating time of being “betwixt and between.”

These essays focused on individual and organizational examples of transition. Ann Mauss’ essay, “Stepping over the Brink into Artificial Intelligence,” moves to broader cultural considerations when she questions our growing practices of ceding decision-making to computer algorithms inherent in Artificial Intelligence (A.I.). This transition from individual input to programmed judgments raises numerous concerns about character and ethics.



Transitioning to computer-based decisions raises character concerns.

Whether A.I. is advising judges on sentencing, providing traveling directions, or “only” making purchasing suggestions, the motivations behind what A.I. was taught and the ethics and values inherent in it ought to be of concern to us.

Now consider if the data input is coded with layers of cultural assumptions as well. A National Public Radio story describes the prolific hacking of our computer data by countries like China. The author points out that they are indiscriminate in collecting data, using a “vacuum” approach in order to have a lot of data with which to train the AI.

The reason we should care about that is because of the role AI plays in our everyday lives. It is becoming the mechanism by which insurance rates are calculated, credit is given, mortgages are approved and health care data is calculated. . . . As it builds out its AI, China can social engineer to its priorities, to its mission, she [Kiersten E. Todt Managing Director, The Cyber Readiness Institute] said. And that mission may be different from ours. (Temple-Raston)

A.I. algorithms require lots of data. If the data collectors are not concerned about character and ethics, those who depend on the algorithms can easily be manipulated. Info can be skewed or distorted to create false realities.

“Does the Truth Matter? Truth-Telling as Resistance and Hope in a Post-Truth Era” by Mary Emily Duba engages a meta or big picture perspective

on what is being claimed as a transition to a world of post-truth, a world where truth is not the norm or the expectation. The political realm brought this perspective to the forefront. For example, opinion writer Paul Krugman notes, “Whatever the explanation, post-truth politics has expanded its domain to the point that it overrides everyday experience.”

We cannot survive long if we do not commit to truth-telling. As Duba points out, we are facing global crises that can only be tackled if we agree to face them with truth.

Rather than accepting a transition to a post-truth world, Duba argues that commitment to truth-telling as a relational practice acts as faithful resistance to the cynicism and distrust that ensue from lies and falsehoods. By telling the truth, we are willing the good of others, the common good, she argues. In this practice, we abandon even the possibility



Global crises demand truth.

of transitioning to post-truth and live out of the hope expressed by Jewish and Christian prophets that we will someday walk together in the peace of “shared reality.” To that end, Duba makes several practical suggestions that each of us could begin now to counter the forces of “post-truth.”

The final article, “Navigating Transitions with Intention and Resilience,” by respondent Rick Olsen, weaves these essays together by highlighting definitions and themes. Using the theoretical model of Community Resiliency, he challenges us to harness the power of communication to ask good questions, particularly during times of uncertainty.

The essays in this journal represent a semester of reading, talking, and writing about ideas that captivate us and shape our past, present, and



Transitions should be times of growth and discovery.

future. Whether we experience transitions individually, organizationally, or globally, understanding the pain of endings, the disorientation of being between the past and the future, and the discovery of the change emerging, we hope you will find resources here to encourage and aid you on your journeys. May your transitions become times of growth and discoveries of new possibilities.

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Notes

¹ Feiler estimates that on average adults will experience “between thirty and forty” “disruptors” or one every twelve to eighteen months (71-72).

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