

# Character and . . .

# Transitions

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ANNALEE R. WARD

*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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# Navigating Transitions with Intention and Resilience

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Rick Olsen

My daughter, whom I love deeply, was a very headstrong first-born child. She wore us out even as she lit up a room (and still does) with her smile and energy. As young parents, we barely hung on and actually decided to sell all the baby stuff when she was two years old . . . only to find out a few months later we were pregnant again. Life is full of planned—and unplanned—transitions! Ironically, our second child, a son, was mellow, played independently, and went to sleep rather easily.

As one might imagine with such diverse children, the disciplinary encounters went quite differently. My daughter wanted most infractions to be argued before the Supreme Court. My son put himself in timeout without us even knowing what he'd concluded he'd done wrong.

One day my daughter brought stern attention to her observation that “Caleb never gets in trouble and you are always yelling at me but not him!” I took a breath and decided on the following plan. We went to the garage and I got an empty aluminum can and foam cup from our recycling bin. I then got a hammer and board. I put the can and cup on the board and gave her the hammer. I asked her to flatten each one as best she could. The cup flattened with the first hit and she finished with just a few additional taps. Then she tried the can. Not so easy. I encouraged her to (safely) swing harder. A few dents but nothing like the cup.

“Which one is you, and which one is Caleb?” I gently asked as she paused in frustration.

After a long pause she answered somberly as she looked down at the board. “I’m the can and Caleb is the cup. . . .” Yep. We followed up the object lesson with a good talk about how parents try to help shape their kids’ character

and that Mommy and Daddy can get frustrated too, just like my daughter did with the can.

What does a story like this have to do with *Character and . . . Transitions*? I will highlight two connections: First, we are all in process. We are all simultaneously formed and in formation. She was right, I was a parent who yelled too much, yet who was also trying to be and become a great dad. She was a strong-willed child figuring out her best self as a five-year-old. Second, change is inevitable and navigating change well requires intention. Intentional responses to change help us see *transitions* in what might otherwise seem vague, ambiguous, hostile, or random. My goal in the encounter was not to *change* my daughter, but to help her grow toward excellence in her character.



*No such thing as “one-size-fits-all” in character formation*

I will begin by defining some key terms. Next, I will explore two commonalities and connections across the four articles in this issue. Third, I will have a brief “conversation” with each article and author. Finally, I will offer what I hope is a useful “so what” after our engagement with issues above.

## Defining Some Key Terms

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The title of this issue of the journal provides two of the three key concepts. The first is *character*. According to the Wendt website, “Character is about excellence. It is not just about being excellent in one area, such as in one’s profession, or in one’s personal life, or even in one’s religious devotion. It’s about being excellent as a whole human being” (Ebertz). There is a lot to like in this definition in that it transcends mere expertise in a given skill set or sphere of life. I would push further that character is as much about being open to growth and transition as meeting a fixed measure of excellence. Many tragic figures from great literature and films draw their nobility of character from their striving, regardless of whether they succeed as intended. Good character manifests in the striving.

The second concept is *transitions*. Transitions seems a simple term, but there are several definitions and dimensions. It can be both a noun (“Fix this transition on page three.”), or a verb (“He transitioned from high school to

college well.”), or even an adjective (“We are in a transitional phase”). What seems to make *transition* distinct from mere *change* is a greater sense of intention or at least awareness. Ideally there is also a sense of purpose or *telos*. *Telos* is an ancient term that refers to the ultimate purpose or inherent purpose of something. The Westminster Catechism asserts that the ultimate purpose of humanity is to worship God and enjoy God forever. That is a powerful teleological statement. Articulation of an ultimate end or purpose can help us navigate transitions as we seek to become people of excellence.

The final concept I will define briefly as a catalyst for creatively navigating transitions. The Community Resiliency Model (CRM) is a holistic approach for fostering resilience in response to trauma. It “trains community members to not only help themselves but to help others within their wider social network. The primary focus of this skills-based, stabilization program is to re-set the natural balance of the nervous system” (“Community Model”). A key goal of CRM is to help individuals and communities respond to trauma by making intentional transitions toward their desired future.

*Character is as much about being open to growth and transition as meeting a fixed measure of excellence.*

I imagine you might be saying that “not every transition is traumatic” and that is true. Some are eagerly anticipated. But invoking this toolkit does help us look with fresh eyes at both mundane and significant transitions, even if they are not traumatic. And many of us can attest that even anticipated and positive transitions, like marriage and fatherhood, can come with unexpected stressors and challenges where tools like CRM can be helpful.<sup>1</sup>

## Two Uniting Themes

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This collection of essays is diverse in subject matter and approaches. Nevertheless, there are two themes that inform them as a whole. The first is the timelessness of the challenge of transition.

Whether it is the personal transition of helping a child leave the nest or the seemingly limitless and more ethereal challenge of living in a world of algorithms, we have actually wrestled with versions of these transitions before. The very definition of family has changed over time as we transitioned from a predominantly agrarian society with family farms, through the industrial revolution, and then into an information age and

technological age where, for the most part, children are told to explore and find their own hobbies, sports, goals, and professions. The navigation of dependence, interdependence, and independence has been a challenge for families through every era.

Even in the challenges of the internet, we see footsteps from previous explorers. Plato called on his students to be wary of the shadow casters who presented a false but compelling “reality” on the walls of the cave



*Plato's allegory of the cave*

(Gendler). Those shadows are now cast on screens not caves and the fires are tended more by algorithms and bots than by humans. But the struggles transcend time and space: What is truth? Who am I? What is my purpose? Changes in culture, institutions, and technology may influence our answers or even how we go about seeking our answers, but the challenges are timeless.

The second unifying theme is the intersection of continuity and discontinuity within transitions. All transitions have elements of both. Yet many transitions emphasize one or the other. We cannot invoke amnesia about the past in order to transition from it. We need intentional transitions that emphasize discontinuity in order to move forward. Steve Jobs actually performed a “funeral” for a very successful operating system as a means of respectfully breaking free from the limitations of OS 9. The innovations he planned were not an update, but a re-envisioning (“Apple”).

Other transitions are actually intended to foster continuity. My stepmother would tell the “miracle birth story” at each birthday celebration of her oldest daughter. There was both change (you are now a year older) and continuity (you have been a miracle and a fighter your whole life and we want that to continue).

These larger themes provide our first connection with the Community Resilience Model. CRM is a set of skills designed to minimize the negative effects of trauma on people and communities. To transition in life is to navigate both continuity and discontinuity. We emphasize discontinuity when we assert “I am not my past.” Yet we might later leverage a negative experience as a source of power during a transition: “I have survived the hurricane. I can survive this.” While not every significant transition is

traumatic, successfully navigating transitions of any kind requires awareness and intention.

## “Conversations” with the Essays

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Three of the essays align in interesting ways with the three contexts for trauma within CRM: family/personal, community, and environmental. For example, a divorce or food insecurity are family traumas. Community gun violence or an underfunded school system would be a community trauma. Hurricanes and heat waves are examples of environmental trauma. Following this progression we will first engage the family transition offered by Jeffrey Haverland followed by the communities formed within sports teams in the essay by James Romagna. Third, I will treat technology as an environmental factor (Thitivesa) as we explore the insights by Ann Mauss on algorithms. We will conclude with Mary Emily Briebl Duba’s fine work that transcends all three areas. By using this CRM lens to engage each article I hope we see new and creative ways to navigate transitions even when they are not traumatic.

*To transition in life is to navigate both continuity and discontinuity.*

*Liminality, Gratitude, and Resilience* Haverland offers many insights on how to respond to liminality. I was struck by the following: “Life is not perfect, and we often get lost in trying to make it so” (16). When we are in a liminal phase of life, we delay learning and growth if we attempt to control our circumstances rather than ourselves. The irony is that such efforts to minimize the discomfort may actually extend the discomfort. That is one reason to embrace liminality. There is another that ties back to my first common theme: we are all in transitions.

My university has a lifelong learning program for community members who are over 50 years of age. Most members are 65 or older, vibrant, curious, and opinionated. I was invited to speak at a fall kick-off event and my theme was we are *all* “tweenagers.” While that concept has a very specific definition to advertisers and marketers, I reminded them that I had never been 47 before and they had never been 63 or 72 or whatever their age before either. And maybe they had just become grandparents or retired or moved. There is an undercurrent of liminality to all of life that rises like a gust of wind at times to highlight more significant transitions in our lives.

There is a “mirror” concept to liminality that further illuminates the challenges Haverland shares with his readers. The term is *relational dialectics* (“Relational Dialectics”). While it sounds complicated, it simply means that every relationship (such as Dad and Jack) has imbedded tensions that must be intentionally managed. Researchers have identified three universal tensions: Autonomy and connection, stability and change, and expression and nonexpression.

Dad and Jack wrestle with their ongoing challenges of staying connected while embracing the greater independence of college. They also process memories that show a desire for stability but also share excitement for the coming changes. Finally, we see a high level of openness and expression, but we can easily imagine that not everything each of them is feeling has been expressed. Perhaps Dad holds back sharing feelings that could make Jack feel guilty for leaving. Perhaps Jack holds back excitement that seems insensitive to Dad’s struggles as well.

While relational dialectics help to clarify Dad and Jack’s challenges, there are two important differences between dialectics and liminality. First liminality is characterized by “neither this nor that” and is the ambiguity of the in-between. Dialectics is characterized by “both this and that.” Second, liminality is primarily chronological. It is grounded in a specific time.



*The liminality of graduation*

Graduation is liminal. No one wants to stay in that cap and gown forever. It is a temporary transitional state as one moves from college student to college graduate. Dad and Jack are intentionally navigating a transition in their relationship. But their newly defined relationship will require the ongoing and intentional management of dialectics’ three universal tensions.

CRM provides a series of questions for resiliency counselors to ask (*Community Resiliency Activity Booklet*). One is “Who or what is helping you the most now?” The goal is to move the focus from negativity to the resources and active role a person has in creating their desired future. Haverland’s account shows how gratitude can be one such resource: “Even amid our darkest liminal moments, gratitude will illuminate the blessings in our lives. Through gratitude, we have hope of uttering appreciation contrary to the circumstances in our lives and finding joy in unintended places”



(18). The intentional invocation of gratitude fosters resilience and frees us to pursue our desired future.

*Ritual, Routine, and Memory*

When we think of “the human condition,” most of us do not think in biological terms. We tend to think in social terms: relationships, social events, heartache and triumph. With the social comes the semiotic and the cultural. We live in a world of meanings, and rituals are essential for managing such a world.

Romagna illuminates the power of ritual within the world of sports and that is quite fitting. Professor of Classics David Sansone has actually defined sport as “. . . the ritual sacrifice of physical energy” (D’Evelyn). The essence of this bold claim is seen most clearly in amateur competitions where the outcomes are primarily symbolic: pride, trophies, and adoration



*Crowds applaud the effort.*

of the crowd. And because the crowd is witnessing sport for the “ritual sacrifice of physical energy,” they can cheer for the loser or even the wide receiver who *almost* makes the catch. They applaud the effort—the expense of energy on behalf of the team and game.

Having defined sport itself as ritual, we can more easily see the importance of ritual within sports. Anthropologist Eric Rothenbuhler defines ritual as “the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life” (27). His emphasis on symbol (meaning) and the serious life offers important points of distinction between ritual and routine.

A routine is adopted primarily for practical significance not symbolic significance. For example, coaching legend John Wooden of UCLA taught his players what he called the “UCLA Fold.” Early athletic socks were known as “tube socks” and had a very squared-off toe, leaving excess fabric because the outside toes are shorter. He and his coaching staff had their athletes systematically fold the sock over the top of the foot to minimize potential for blisters. It was a practical habit, but Wooden also used this routine to express higher values of preparation, attention to detail, and the confidence that comes from such efforts. He also created a comprehensive Pyramid

of Success that connects character with high performance (“Pyramid of Success”).

Key for both Rothenbuhler and Romagna is the notion of “the serious life”—a life of self-within-community, a life of intentionality. In his summary of the impact of the “hot seat” ritual, Romagna concludes that “This is a moment of self-reflection: Who do I think I am? Who do others think I am? Who really am I? The pivotal moment is the ritual, but the most important moment is the one that follows, as that is the moment with the potential for actual transformation” (35). These questions connect directly back to the definition of character above—excellence in all things.

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.

It also gives the community permission to transition. The community is brought to reflection as well: Not just “who is she?” but “who are we?” Like ritual, CRM is grounded in community. There is an aspect of ritual that requires a witness. Whether we are rising to the challenge of athletic competition or becoming an Eagle Scout or volunteer fire fighter, a key source of our transformation and of our resilience is found in the community of which we are a part. So if I could add a sixth item to Romagna’s helpful list it would be:

*Like ritual, CRM is grounded in community.*

- 6) Bear Witness. Model and teach the value of bearing witness. Help everyone feel the value of participation—as the central figure or as the witness. Both are transformed from the experience and both can help one another through the transformation.

*Digital Climate Change* Technology is a tool. But it can also be usefully understood as an environmental factor. We see this when we talk of the “digital divide” between those who have adequate access to digital resources and those who do not—much like those who have clean water and those who do not. CRM takes into account sources of trauma that originate within the family, the community, and the environment. And often the environmental challenges are the most universal. Such is the case with algorithms and artificial intelligence as explored by Mauss.

Mauss notes that “Unregulated A.I. is the greatest existential crisis humanity faces today. Computers permeate every facet of our societies, and because they are no longer confined to one physical machine, data and algorithms can persist forever. We need to consider all of this before ceding our thinking to them” (51). Similar statements have been offered about climate change. Both are having an impact “everywhere” and will not be resolved without massive collective responses that go against many short term interests. Thus her call for virtue is not mere idealism but a necessary precursor for the work to be done.

But how are algorithms and A.I. and technology part of our environment and not simply our toolbox? If we understand environment to be the surrounding conditions *within which* we operate, then we can better see how our technology often functions as an environmental feature. We live within a mediated world that is often created and curated for us by algorithms. They function invisibly and therefore “naturally.” Our mediated reality is experienced just as we experience other environmental features of gravity and light. While we each access certain environmental features more than others—swimmers find the water, hikers find the trails, and gamers find the screens—we did not create the water, we did not clear the trail, we did not code the game.

*Her call for virtue is not mere idealism but a necessary precursor for the work to be done.*

While drafting this essay, I received an e-mail from a vendor promising to show me how to use A.I. in my college admissions process. Their webinar summary promised the following:

- Answers to your long-standing questions about using AI or machine learning in your admissions, enrollment, and student success functions
- How to define a data-first culture and how you can begin to lay the foundation to create a data-first culture
- How AI and data help you understand your students better and make more informed decisions in your role (Inside Higher Ed)

I am confident that the architects of this software would make the case that they are removing human bias and “bad moods” and “late afternoon crashes” from the selection process and making the selection of students and distribution of financial aid more objective. After all, I can use their software to build a “data-first culture.”

But Mauss replies to such claims in her conclusion: “We need to look at the data these algorithms use, how they address any bias in this data, and how they come up with answers. By becoming a more virtuous society and providing proper oversight, we can develop an A.I. that reflects back the values we want to see” (51). This is more easily accomplished for the objective categorical data like income and demographics, but far more challenging if we ask A.I. to analyze college application essays. Could the sentiment analysis discussed by Mauss keep up with the nuanced evolutions of language used by the typical and—perhaps more importantly—the atypical high school seniors applying to colleges?

In CRM one of the questions used to foster resiliency is “When you have experienced other difficult times in your life, who or what helped you get through?” Participants are encouraged to reflect on previous hardships and how they overcame them through resources and relationships. Human history is littered with tragedies and misuses of technologies, but we have also seen cooperative acts as well: The Paris Accord, the elimination of land



Geneva Conventions signing in 1949

mines, and Geneva Convention laws and protocols. The UN was created in response to the (then new) reality that the tools and reach of humanity were now global in scale. Perhaps there are similar initiatives in our future that will emphasize the dignity of our humanity over the power of our technology.

### *Truth, Faith, Hope, and Resilience*

We have now tracked transitions through family, community, and the environment of the internet. Duba raises questions and solutions that permeate and transcend all three.

While it may be true that we live in a “post-truth” era, most major religions assert that the heart is the greatest of deceitful things and the hardest journeys are inward. So, something else is going on. I suggest it is the scale and reach of deceptive individuals, ideas, and institutions. When conspiracy theories were promoted primarily by shouting on street corners and handing out flyers, the reach and harm was minimal. Now a fringe group can have global reach, often for less than it cost to print the paper flyers. The deceit of pornography was once limited to shops on the “wrong side of town” but is now ubiquitous across the internet. Reach is a challenge. So is the issue of permanence.

Plato was fearful of writing because, even after a written argument has been refuted, the record of that erroneous argument does not go away; in fact it is left unchanged by the refutation. Many deceptive and factually incorrect ideas are permanently archived and advocated on the internet: flat earth, chip implants, stolen elections, the Denver airport is an alien portal, and many, many more. Duba astutely notes: “Deceit, denial, and distraction allow us to take shelter from hard truths in alternative realities built of ‘alternative facts’” (58). It can be easier to believe totalizing lies than engage in the critical thinking that good character and responsible citizenship require.

Duba’s key solution is truth-telling “to ourselves, to one another, and to power” (56, 60, 63). I can easily support such a call, but critical thinking is harder than it sounds! We must overcome personal biases, cultural biases (both are often unconscious), selective perceptions, limited knowledge, confirmation bias and more. And we also must realize that our desire for certainty—that we have “the truth”—can actually further inhibit our search for truth! There are also different kinds of truths. Phew! Let’s unpack this challenge a bit more.

*It can be easier to believe totalizing lies than engage in the critical thinking that good character and responsible citizenship require.*

Some truths are about “the world as it is.” Truth and truth-telling become matters of correspondence or alignment with the way things “really are.” Examples: the laws of gravity and how much to feed the cat each day so she stays healthy. Other “truths” are grounded in

consensus or agreement rather than alignment. Stop signs work through common agreement. How best to celebrate a significant birthday is grounded in agreement.

Being “truthful” then begins with discerning what kind of truths we are exploring. And when we are exploring physical reality, we invoke the critical thinking rules for exploring such reality. Our current best set of rules is given the label *science*. But even the strongest proponents of science would say their conclusions merely represent their best current understanding. For metaphysical reality we have disciplines like philosophy and theology and we invoke their standards as appropriate.

When exploring personal perceptions and preferences, being “truthful” means being honest and humble and expressing our position as our own.

Truth-telling is an invitation to trust, even across differences in experience. When we speak honestly and listen to one another with humility and openness, we build trust across differences, not based on identical experience, but on the basis of neighborly hospitality, which is itself sacred common ground. (Duba 61)

We can say “this is my experience and this is my current understanding” and also be open to the experience of others that may change and refine that understanding. Even when we may not be able to land on a fixed or permanent truth, we can strive for transparency.

A key principle within CRM is “grounding.” When someone is sharing a difficult story of trauma or transition, we want to make sure they feel physically stable: children should sit on furniture that allows their feet to touch the ground, for example. Counselors will ask if someone would like some water and ask if the water is cool enough to ground participants in their immediate physical surroundings. Duba’s essay reminds us there are other forms of grounding: Truth, faith, hope can be sources of grounding. They are resources for intentional acts of resistance to the instability brought by self-deception and deception within larger systems of family, communities, and more. Resilience and resistance require effort and intention. Knowing how we are grounded can help with such effort.

## Conclusion

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Quentin Schultze insightfully frames human communication as symbolic stewardship (Schultze). It is the intentional management of words, images, sounds, and signs. Likewise, CRM is designed to focus all participants on stewarding their resources to transition toward the desired future. How can we use what we have to get us where we want? Being intentional about our path is essential when navigating transitions.

*One of the most powerful speech acts one can engage in is to ask good questions.*

Communication is among the most powerful resources we have in order to co-create our desired future. It is fundamental to how relationships are built and maintained, how our communities gain their collective stories, how truths and ideals are advocated, and how our perceptions are clarified and

tested. And one of the most powerful speech acts one can engage in is to ask good questions.

The authors in this collection offer declarations of truth to power, loving affirmations of self and others, and formal and ritualized communication that invokes core values. The application of CRM to these examples emphasizes the power of communication in the form of key questions—questions that focus our attention on the right things: our virtue, self-awareness, resiliency, and resources. I conclude with one of the more powerful questions CRM encourages us to ask: “When did you know you’d be OK?” With any transition, even a joyful one, there is uncertainty. This question allows us to focus on when that uncertainty felt manageable and perhaps even thrilling! This is a powerful way to encourage a “resiliency pause” that reframes the transitions with *us*—not the *circumstances*—at the center of the story. It is an important question for all of us as we look to build and express our character in transitions.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Another reason for invoking the CRM frame is that creativity experts use “exaggerate the problem” (or the solution) as a technique for fostering more innovative solutions. For example, what if “going off to college” was forever? How might it foster preparation strategies that one might not otherwise think of?

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