

“New Beginnings” (aka, “It’s Just a Phase”), with Pam El-Dinary, worship associate

New beginnings. Going through the different phases of life. What stirs in us as we face these changes in our lives? Whether clinging to the past, living in the present, or forging into the future, what are the spiritual lessons in life’s transitions? *(topic inspired by Aaron El-Dinary, winner of Pam El-Dinary’s worship associate auction sermon)*

Introduction

“New beginnings. Going through different phases of life. Having nostalgia for the old days and how to stay focused on the present and enjoy where you’re currently at.” That’s the topic posed by the top bidder of my auction sermon----and, full disclosure, my son, Aaron.

What **stirs** in us spiritually as we face changes in our lives? Whether clinging to the past, living in the present, or forging into the future, today we’ll strive to unearth some nuggets of spiritual wisdom found in life’s transitions.

Phases of Life

Although humans are complex creatures, theories of developmental psychology can shine some light on “how we move through different life goals at different times.”¹ That’s the insight of life coach Elizabeth Perry, who writes about the stages of life and what we can learn from them.

Noting that there are many theories of human development, Perry focuses on the work of Erik Erikson, famous for defining these eight stages of life:²

1. Infancy
2. Toddlerhood
3. Preschool years
4. Early school years
5. Adolescence
6. Young adulthood
7. Middle adulthood
8. Late adulthood

¹ <https://www.betterup.com/blog/stages-of-life>

² Ibid.

At each stage, there's a central conflict--a turning point characterized by a struggle to achieve a core virtue, bringing on transition into the next stage.³

Let's walk through these phases of life⁴ with a fictional character we'll call "Chan." Casting each virtue as a spiritual quality, we can think of this as a path of spiritual development.

1. In **Infancy** (ages 0-1),
the conflict is _trust vs. mistrust_,
striving toward the virtue of _hope_.

Chan receives sufficient care and is more likely to grow up trusting that someone will help them in challenging situations, creating hope.

2. In **Toddlerhood** (ages 1-3)
the conflict is _autonomy vs. shame and doubt_,
striving toward the virtue of _will_.

Caregivers nurture autonomy by encouraging Chan's growing independence. If Chan is scolded for their curiosity or mocked for their efforts, insecurities may start to build. As confidence in body and mind grows, so does a sense of will.

3. In **Preschool years** (ages 3-6)
the conflict is _initiative vs. guilt_,
striving toward the virtue of _purpose_.

If initiatives are met with criticism, Chan may develop guilt over striking out on their own, demotivating further ambitions. Initiative that's encouraged can grow into a sense of purpose.

4. In **Early school years** (ages 7-11)
the conflict is _industry vs. inferiority_,
striving toward the virtue of _competence_.

With accomplishment and praise, Chan becomes industrious. In contrast, a lack of recognition can breed feelings of inferiority and failure. Feeling validated and supported helps cultivate competence.

³ Ibid.

⁴ The following section is also informed by <https://www.simplypsychology.org/erik-erikson.html>.

5. In **Adolescence** (ages 12-18)
the conflict is _identity vs. confusion_,
striving toward the virtue of _fidelity_.

Self-discovery becomes all-consuming and often confusing, as Chan looks ahead to their future roles in adulthood. As they yearn for peer acceptance, healthy support networks promote Chan's ability to form relationships with fidelity.

6. In **Young adulthood** (ages 18-40)
the conflict is _intimacy vs. isolation_,
striving toward the virtue of _love_.

Chan is building foundations needed for the rest of their life--
social, professional, financial.

An identity crisis may occur in the process--
and yet, learning from failures can also emerge.

If Chan avoids intimacy--due to fear of failure, disappointment, or commitment--
they are likely to feel isolated.

By establishing a solid social network,
Chan feels understood and connected,
increasing their capacity for love.

7. In **Middle adulthood** (ages 40-65)
the conflict is _generativity vs. stagnation_,
striving toward the virtue of _care_.

Generativity means passing on what one has learned to younger generations.

If Chan feels unhappiness and resentment about their life,
they may choose to wallow in it and avoid contributing to society.

Engaging as a productive member of the community cultivates the virtue of care.⁵

8. In **Late adulthood** (ages 65+)
the conflict is _integrity vs. despair_,
striving toward the virtue of _wisdom_.

Deep reflection and introspection are hallmarks of this time.

If Chan is haunted by regrets and failures, they may feel despair.

In contrast, pride in the life they've led--a sense of integrity--
engenders an experience of peace at the end of life, with the virtue of wisdom.

⁵ <https://www.betterup.com/blog/stages-of-life>

When applying Erikson's theory, or any theory of human development, Perry reminds us that

"we are all individual humans with unique experiences. The stages of life framework is simply meant to be a lens through which to see our lives."⁶

- Hope
- Will
- Purpose
- Competence
- Fidelity
- Love
- Care
- Wisdom

These virtues seem like useful spiritual qualities to use as a lens for our lives.

New Beginnings

Now that we have a framework for the phases of life, let's turn to the subject of **new beginnings**. As Elizabeth Perry observes:

A dramatic lifestyle change often characterizes the transition to a different stage of life. People often say that someone is entering a new stage of life when they move out of their home, graduate, retire, or have children.⁷

Here's an incomplete, unscientific--list of New Beginnings:

- Birth
- First word, first steps
- First day of school
- First kiss
- Driver's License
- Graduating
- Starting a job
- A new home
- Marriage

⁶ <https://www.betterup.com/blog/stages-of-life>

⁷ <https://www.betterup.com/blog/stages-of-life>

- Children
- Empty nest
- Retirement
- A new diagnosis or surgery
- Mental and physical decline
- Death

Notice here:

Endings are also beginnings -- a transition to something new.
A graduation. A breakup. A move. A retirement. Even death.

Transitions

That brings me to the topic of Transitions.

Change guru William Bridges makes a distinction between change and transition.

He says "change is situational," like the New Beginnings that I listed.

Quoting Bridges-:

"Transition, on the other hand, is psychological. It is not those events, but rather the inner re-orientation or self-redefinition that you have to go through in order to incorporate any of those changes into your life. Without a transition, a change is just a rearrangement of the furniture. Unless transition happens, the change won't work, because it doesn't 'take'."⁸

Among the synonyms for transitions,

some--like passage or development--suggest a gentle, gradual change;

some--like leap or evolution--suggest a more powerful impact;

some--like metamorphosis or transmogrification--suggest a "whammo" life-alteration.

I was thrilled to see the word **transmogrification**, giving me a rare opportunity to reference the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes* in a sermon. Six-year-old Calvin invented

⁸ from May 2020 Soul Matters Worship Resources packet [W sm_2020-05_sg_thresholds.docx](#)

a transmogrifier (from a cardboard box) to transform into various creatures to escape everyday problems. For example, he turned himself to an elephant (who never forgets) so he could ace his spelling test.⁹

Transmogrify: to transform in a surprising or magical manner.

In my son Aaron's life, after a few harrowing years of mental health crises, the past two years have seemed like a **transmogrification**--nothing short of miraculous. It happened through his consistent, life-giving actions--culminating recently in joining a band, getting his learner's permit, and moving out of our basement and into a condo.

Calvin used his transmogrifier to escape the challenges of everyday childhood.

Aaron's transmogrification leans into ownership of his life and its challenges of everyday adulthood. Maybe you've witnessed this kind of transformation in someone you love.

Perhaps you've even experienced it in your own life.

⁹ Google AI

Nostalgia

Adjusting to transition isn't always easy.

We may find ourselves in nostalgia for the carefree days of our youth.

It's easy to forget that youth had its own set of struggles.

Think of Erikson's 8 stages--the conflicts at each stage.

Think of Calvin, using his transmogrifier to escape the challenges of childhood.

Happy memories can be a harmless pleasure of life.

In the extreme, however, longing for the past can become a heavy clay that binds our feet from action and our souls from growth.

William Bridges says:

We resist transition not because we can't accept the change, but because we can't accept letting go of that piece of ourselves that we have to give up when and because the situation has changed.¹⁰

Clearing expert Stephanie Bennett Vogt¹¹ offers a spiritual practice that could be adapted--either as an actual ritual or as a thought experiment--to letting go of nostalgia for the past. It might go something like this¹²:

1. Gather items that symbolize the phase you wish to release--or just call to mind that time of your life.
2. Take a moment to center--perhaps light a candle or call on a higher power.
3. Name the blessings of the past phase, listing things you loved about that time.
4. Thank those experiences for the joy they brought you.
5. Now imagine letting them go. Allow yourself to feel any emotions that bubble up.
6. As you release the past, imagine that you are making space for something new.
7. Set the intention of staying open to what your new phase of life has to offer.

¹⁰ from May 2020 Soul Matters Worship Resources packet [w sm_2020-05_sg_thresholds.docx](#)

¹¹ *A Year to Clear: A Daily Guide to Creating Spaciousness in Your Home and Heart* (2015) Stephanie Bennett Vogt. Hierophant Publishing, San Antonio, TX.

¹² These are my suggestions, based on my work with several of Stephanie Bennet Vogt's clearing practices.

Presence

That brings us to the present.

Eckhart Tolle writes, in his book *The Power of Now*:

Unease, anxiety, tension, stress, worry - all forms of fear - are caused by too much **future**, and not enough presence.

Guilt, regret, resentment, grievances, sadness, bitterness, and all forms of non-forgiveness are caused by too much **past**, and not enough presence.¹³

Aaron's inquiry, then, is "**how** to stay focused on the present and enjoy where you're currently at."

I have a few thoughts.

- First, an affirmation I find helpful is:
"I am here. I am now. I accept. I allow."
- Second, it may help to intentionally give **awareness** to the gifts of the present. Inventory the great things about your current circumstances and this phase of life.
- Third, I think that our **agency** plays a big role in our attitude. It's probably easier to love a transition in your life if you chose it. Yet, even if the change wasn't your decision, you can still choose it--embrace it and make it a new beginning.

¹³ *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/1577314808?iv=shuf&channelId=500&plpRedirect=mhFallback>

[Tinybuddha.com](https://tinybuddha.com) offers these 10 paths to presence for living in the moment.¹⁴

1. Play

Go with the flow of life as it comes, without judging.

2. Perspective

Create moments in nature to reset your perspective.

3. Pauses

“Build pockets of nothing into your everyday...”

4. Poetry

Immerse yourself in the beauty of art, music, dance.

5. Pleasure

“Relentlessly pursue joy.”

6. Pen and Paper

Journal about your everyday experiences.

7. Pictures

Write down your dreams. And, I would add, curate images that speak to you.

8. Patterns

Notice patterns all around-- in nature, in art, in life.

9. -Pathy

As in Empathy.

Any opportunity you have for a real connection: use it!

10. Ponder

Wonder, meditate, contemplate. Allow mystical experiences and enjoy inner peace.

¹⁴ <https://tinybuddha.com/blog/living-in-the-moment-10-paths-to-presence/>

Forward Momentum

Eckart Tolle advised against too much past and too much future. He didn't say NO past and NO future. I think there needs to be a healthy balance between being present, learning from the past, and growing into the future. To avoid stagnation, we need a bit of forward momentum.

With this in mind, here's life coach Elizabeth Perry's advice on how to "navigate and thrive" through life's phases:

"prepare yourself to take the lessons of one stage into the next [so you can] keep growing into a happier, better version of yourself as you progress through the stages of life." ¹⁵

Therapeutic tools she recommends for doing that include:

- a self-discovery journey -- to understand your patterns and priorities
- inner child and shadow work
- processing your childhood trauma¹⁶
- enlisting support of others as you commit to changes

These help you grow in respect for yourself and others, compassion, and self-awareness. So that: as your age increases, so does your maturity.¹⁷

¹⁵ <https://www.betterup.com/blog/stages-of-life>

¹⁶ with the help of mental healthcare professional

¹⁷ <https://www.betterup.com/blog/stages-of-life>

Conclusion

This topic “Phases of Life, New Beginnings, and Life Transitions” has certainly given me much to think about. I kid you not: I have four more sermons brewing from the grounds of this one. Thus, the end of this sermon is just the beginning of our exploration.

For now, I end with the wisdom of Elizabeth Perry:

Progressing through the stages of life can be challenging, but it’s exciting because it gives us the opportunity to become our authentic selves. If you can learn how to navigate through the waves of change, you’ll be grateful for all the chances life gives you to grow.¹⁸

May it be so, and Amen

¹⁸ Ibid.