

First Unitarian Church

July 18, 2021

Reading: "As You Set Out for Ithaka," by C.P. Cavafy

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51296/ithaka-56d22eef917ec>

"Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you will have understood by then what these Ithakas mean."

This poem by C.P. Cavafy is one of my favorites. He was born in 1863, a gay man in Alexandria Egypt, and his poem is as timeless as Homer's story of Odysseus that inspired it. There is truth in the image of life as a journey that takes us to unexpected ports, collecting wisdom and treasure.

It is true, isn't it? How we set a course in life, and then life takes us here and there. Sometimes you feel like the captain of the ship, and sometimes you feel like a barnacle on the bottom of it. There are clear skies, and there are storms. Actually, I'd say that life can change so much, our uncharted journeys can be even more dramatic than dropping by a strange port. It can be like quickly switching modes of transportation. In February of last year maybe this church was like a ship. Right now it's more like a spaceship!

We find new ways to move forward. It's baked into being human. If we are lucky enough to live long lives, we'll experience several quite radical changes. First from the womb to the arms of our caregivers, then from childhood to adolescence, then to young and middle adulthood, and finally into our senior years. All of these changes are visible on the outside, but they also require an interior shift, a change within us.

And while that's happening, life presents other changes as well.

Relationship changes- not only break ups or deaths, but children moving out, or new partners or pets moving in. Changes in our home life- a move, a renovation, or a change to the environment outside of our homes. Changes to yourself or your health- changes in lifestyle, ability, or appearance. Even getting a new job or a promotion can be really disruptive. And inner changes count, too: a transformative spiritual experience, new social or political awareness (like the kind that comes from learning to see and understand racism with new eyes).

Do you find yourself in the midst of any of these? Or maybe a different kind of change? If you're experiencing one I haven't named, you're welcome to share it in the chat box, if you'd like.

Esther Perel is a psychotherapist and a scholar of general systems theory. That's basically the study of how everything fits and flows together. She says "every living organism straddles stability and change, in nature, in companies, in societies... if you change all the time you go chaotic. You dysregulate ... and you may ... disintegrate. If you don't change at all, you fossilize,

you go stale, and you may also disintegrate.”ⁱ So, to recap: too much change- bad; not enough change- bad.

I suppose this explains why we humans are wired both to be highly adaptable, and also highly resistant to changes. We are capable of astonishing creativity and growth—and responding to life in that way can lead to deep joy. But it’s not guaranteed. The natural feelings of grief, loss, or anger—feelings that reflect our love for or attachment to that which is impermanent—those feelings that are natural and healthy can also turn to lasting bitterness, or even into a failure to thrive. Those, I think, are the Laistrygonians and Cyclops, and the angry Poseidon Cavafy mentions in his poem. In ancient Greek mythology the Laistrygonians are a tribe of giants that eat humans. Poseidon is a violent, ill-tempered God. Cyclops is another giant that eats people. These mythological figures represent forces larger than ourselves, that threaten to devour our lives.

So what does it mean when Cavafy says,

you won’t encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you?

A more modern writer, William Bridges says, “It isn’t the changes that will do you in, it’s the transitions. They aren’t the same thing. Change is situational. Transition, on the other hand, is psychological...”ⁱⁱ

Bridges is the author of a classic book called *Transitions*, and another one called *Managing Transitions*. I’m going to be drawing a lot from both of those for the rest of this message today.

Change is situational, he says. So most of those things I mentioned a little bit ago (and the ones you placed in the chat box). Change is easy to point to because it’s what you can see. Transition is psychological. It’s the adaptation or transformation that happens on the inside. Change can happen quickly, but transition usually takes at least a little time—and sometimes it takes years.

Every transition begins with an ending and ends with a beginning. You end an old way of being or of relating to what was, and you begin a new way of being or relating to a new reality. You start with an ending, and end with a beginning. And every transition also has a middle part, where you’re in between. Each part is important. Each part takes the time it takes. But it helps if we have words and ideas that allow us make sense of what is happening and what inner work we are needing to do.

Here’s how Bridges depicts transitions. (See last page)

For those of you who can’t see the slide, what we’re looking at are waves that represent the ending, the middle part, which Bridges calls the neutral zone, and the new beginning.

In the slide, the three phases are kind of layered up on each other, they overlap. But the ending is biggest at first—it takes up a lot of space at first, and then as time goes on, the new beginning becomes biggest.

William Bridges says

Considering that we have to deal with endings all of our lives, most of us handle them poorly. This is in part because we either take them too seriously or not seriously enough. We take them too seriously by confusing them with finality—that's it, all over, never more, finished! We see them as something without a sequel, forgetting that they are the first phase of the transition process and a precondition of self-renewal. At the same time, we fail to take them seriously enough. Because they scare us, we try to avoid them.ⁱⁱⁱ

“What's done is done,” we might say, or “I don't want to dwell on the past,” even as the past remains strangely active. A relationship ends, and months later you still go out of your way to avoid passing landmarks that remind you of it. You get a new job, but struggle to adapt to the new workplace culture, bringing instead your habits from the old one. Or, a first baby joins your family, and even though it is a joyful event, you feel a nagging sense of loss and a fear that you don't even recognize yourself anymore.

Saying goodbye is a process of intentionally letting go. It is noticing what in your life was designed to suit the old reality, and dismantling the parts of it you no longer need, in order to make room for something new. It may also mean letting go of a certain identity you've held. Saying goodbye may also involve letting go of beliefs—something Bridges calls “disenchantment.” As we move from childhood toward adulthood, for example, we typically have to let go of the belief that our parents know everything (or that they should), or are in control of everything, or that they do not make mistakes. The first phase of a transition is saying goodbye. What are some other beliefs a person might have to let go of?

Is it time for you to say goodbye to something? Or are you in the process of doing so? Is it scary? Exciting? A relief? A great sadness? All of the above?

Once we acknowledge an ending and allow ourselves to experience it, what often follows is a period of disorientation. You've let go of an identity. Now who are you? You've moved into a new home. Now where is everything? You've accepted a change in your health or lifestyle—what will the new one look like?

Now we are in the second phase: what Bridges refers to as the neutral zone.

Bridges calls it “neutral” because it's in the middle. When you're in it, you're not fully on either side of the transition. However, the experience of being there is anything but neutral! This time can be extremely anxiety provoking. You may feel adrift, lost, unsure what you want, or even of who you are. If the change is one you actively worked to bring about in your life, you may begin to fear you've made a terrible mistake. Depending on the nature of your transition, you may even wonder about the meaning of life itself. In the neutral zone, you may not be able to imagine the path forward or how you'll ever figure it out.

All of this is a normal part of being in the middle of a transition. Interestingly, it's also a time when people sometimes report having mystical experiences or awakenings.

Anybody find themselves in a neutral zone this morning?

The anxiety of the neutral zone can make you want to take action, right away, any action, to make the anxiety stop. But that can be a mistake. It can prevent us from the development or discovery we need to do, or—if we try to revert back to whatever the old normal was—it can prevent us from successfully navigating the transition at all.

The name of the game here is surrender. Don't panic. Trust that the neutral zone is valuable. This is when inner realignment and reorientation are taking place.

Give yourself some space. Carve out some time to be alone if you can. To just be.

It's a time to have faith. Faith in the process. Faith that you will discover what you need to learn, if you allow yourself to.

Although it may feel uncertain, in the neutral zone you are making your way toward the third phase of transitions: a new beginning. It may not arrive with fanfare, or make itself plain right away. Maybe it begins with an idea or a subtle shift that you can only pinpoint later, in hindsight. Maybe it's the day you no longer feel like an imposter in your job or your life. And maybe it's still mixed for a while with those other two phases.

Can we look at that slide again?

Transitions are not necessarily straight linear processes. They are wavy. Endings may still be happening in one way or in one place in your life. New beginnings may be clear in another. And in another area, you still feel that neutral zone chaos.

Does this resonate with you? Maybe it applies to your experience of this time in the pandemic, this time we can call "early emergence." The world has changed. The change is still underway. And with it, a transition within each of us.

There's one more thing I want to say about all of this: it's that these phases apply to whole organizations, too.

As a congregation, the last several years have been a time of big changes for us. A long time senior minister retired, and you called a new senior minister. Our old sanctuary building was at last renovated—several years after we moved into our new one. We were ready, and this change as welcome, and yet it perhaps it was startling for those of us who had many memories in the old room with its big curved wall. It was one thing to move into the new sanctuary, and another thing to say goodbye for good to the old one.

Then, when we had only been in our renovated social hall for maybe ten Sundays—at the most!—we had to close our campus and become a virtual church. Each of these changes required us to make a transition—with an ending, a neutral zone, and a beginning. In fact, when we went virtual, we hadn't even fully learned how to use our new social hall yet. We were still in the neutral zone!

Now, before long, we will re-open our campus for Sunday services. When we do, we will again be called to embrace some change. One example is that instead of holding two services on campus like we used to, one of our weekly services will continue to take place on Zoom.

In this transition, too, there will be an ending, a neutral zone, and a new beginning. Some who miss our campus but cannot yet return may feel sad and worry about being left behind. Meanwhile others who do attend in person may be surprised to discover what else has changed. Masks in the sanctuary... Singing outdoors instead of inside...

There will be joy as well. In the sanctuary, it will be wonderful to hear the piano again, to see the mural and the wildlife habitat and each other, even in this different way. And I predict that those of us who continue on Zoom will begin to develop a deepened sense of community in this service. Virtual attenders will have something in common—a more cautious way of navigating early emergence, and a relationship with your church that is so important to you, you have been among the most adaptive UUs in sustaining it.

Next week, I'm going to talk about some spiritual practices that can help us navigate this time together.

Today, what I want to leave you with is this:

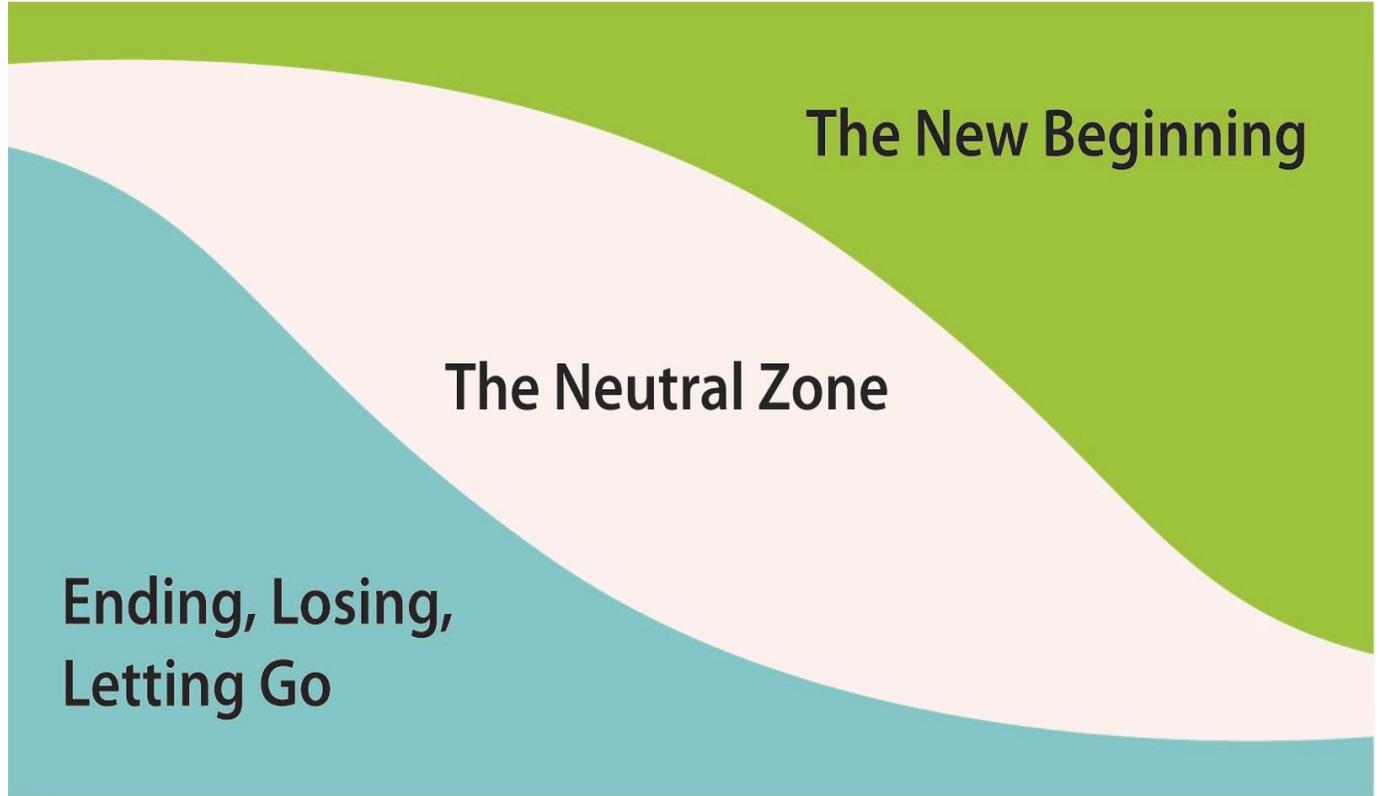
that each of us is going through a transition right now, and some of us are experiencing more than one;

that it is natural to have a lot of feelings in a time like this, including feelings of confusion or anxiety;

that Bob and I are holding you and this church in our hearts;

and the fact that you are here means that you are not alone.

Time →



ⁱ Interview. "Esther Perel - The Erotic Is an Antidote to Death." *The On Being Project*, 7 July 2021, onbeing.org/programs/esther-perel-the-erotic-is-an-antidote-to-death/.

ⁱⁱ BRIDGES, WILLIAM. *MANAGING TRANSITIONS: Making the Most of Change*. NICHOLAS BREALEY PUB, 2017. (p.3)

ⁱⁱⁱ Bridges, William. *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*. Da Capo Lifelong, 2020. (Kindle edition; beginning of ch. 5)