

The Weight of Our Transitions

Hi everyone. I'd like to say a special thanks to Reverend Pam, who isn't here today but who invited me—or more accurately, allowed me to invite myself—to speak to you again. I'm delighted to be here. The title of my talk today is ***The Weight of our Transitions.***

When Pam first gave me this date to speak, I immediately started thinking about the significance of the month of January. I personally am not very fond of January. I'm chronically cold, I'm pale, my skin itches, and my sweaters are all pilled. It's a long way from my last art fair in October and my first one in March, which means my bank account is dwindling AND it's too early to get excited about doing new artwork.

But perhaps worst of all, January finds me watching televised golf. And not because I like golf--although who doesn't secretly carry a torch for Phil Mickelson?--Basically I'm watching golf though because wherever Phil is, it's sure to be bright, sunny and warm, and seeing the green, green golf course and all those guys in short sleeves make me feel hopeful.

The turning over of one year to the next also makes me think about **change**. New year's resolutions. Starting over. Transformation. And especially **transition**. I, along with some of my closest friends, happen to be going through a whole lot of transitions right now. A friend of mine just lost his nineteen year-old cat, Little Folks. Another friend lost his mom. This month my husband and I sold the house we'd lived in and loved, for 20 years. Went from living in the country to living in the city. From working in rented studios in a well-populated part of town to working from home. And just this past Tuesday we lost a dog.

There was nothing easy about our transition from the house in Chickamauga to the house on Missionary Ridge. I could tell you all about how the first offer we got for our house was \$60,000 below our asking price, and how we yanked it off the market for a month in retaliation. (Oh and in case you're wondering, realtors love when you do this.)

I could tell you about how the second offer was better though, and how ecstatic we were but then how our house failed inspection—to the tune of \$8000. I could tell you how the third offer we got was even better than the 2nd and how we rejoiced and started packing--and then that couple backed out also.

I could tell you all that and more. How we only remembered the clutch on the truck was out **after** we'd loaded a thousand pounds of trash into it to take to the dump. How we ourselves made an offer on a house and then got cold feet and retracted it.

How we mopped and cleaned obsessively each time someone wanted to look at the house, then loaded up the three dogs, two handicapped and one with a panic disorder, and drove them around and around for hours as prospective buyers traipsed through our newly remodeled, authentically designed farmhouse and returned verdicts like, "Grossly overpriced. Average housecleaning. Needs updating."

How two of the dogs became suddenly un-housetrained, and the third, suddenly terminally ill. I could tell you about all of that, but instead I'm going to simply lump it all together and talk about one thing: **the idea that change, though it may seem so at times, is not our enemy.** That our **transitions, painful or unwanted as they may be, have the power to take us places we could never have imagined. How our transitions carry a weight worth bearing.**

I know, having talked to enough people by now, that our story of moving is much like anyone else's story of moving, which is much like anyone else's story of any kind of transition, which is much like the story of the ocean: on the surface, things may appear calm, but underneath are murky waters teeming with scary and unknowable things. For me it was things like, ***will the dogs adjust? Will we be able to make the higher mortgage payments? Will I miss the old house? If so, how much? Unbearably much?*** I liked the new house all six times we looked at it, but that was on balmy summer afternoons. ***Would I like it in the winter? In the dark? In the rain? And lastly, why are we suddenly so angry, so distracted, so seemingly unenlightened about everything? Is it a sign? Does this mean something about the move, the marriage, the house, us? Or is this just the nature of change, of shifting direction, of transition?***

Just before we moved, I wrote a column for the Times Free Press called *The House is a Martini*. What inspired the column was a night out with friends during which, instead of my usual glass of red wine, I ordered a martini.

Now, I had never had a martini before. I didn't know what was in them, how you made them, whether they had pleasant crunchy little pieces of ice in them, or whether they were even cold at all. I didn't know whether you sipped them through a tiny straw or drank them with your pinky extended. I only knew that I wanted to try something different from my usual glass of cabernet.

It turns out this little switch was a BIG DEAL. Everybody—all of my friends—commented on the fact that I was having a martini instead of wine. One of them, a die-hard beer drinker, even ordered one himself.

Their reaction made an impression on me. I thought I was just trying a new drink, but suddenly I wondered if it was more significant than that. It wasn't until later that night, when my husband and I opened the door to our house and looked around at the disarray--all the stacked boxes and half-packed boxes and things still waiting to go into boxes--that I got it.

The ordering of the martini was a microcosm of the re-ordering of our lives. Of leaving the tried and true behind and stepping out into the unfamiliar. Here we were, taking a risk on a new life in a new house without knowing exactly what we were getting into, what might go wrong, whether we would like it, how it would feel.

"The new house is a martini," I said.

It was about embracing the mystery of the unknown.

Which got me to thinking: what IS change, if not the opportunity to choose mystery over familiarity. Even when we make new year's resolutions-- literal ones like losing weight, walking a mile a day, or standing up for ourselves more—there is mystery in the offing, whether we know it or not. We THINK we know what it would be like to be thinner, stronger, or more assertive, but the fact is, we *have no idea*.

If I look at one of the significant changes I made in my life—quitting smoking at age 32--I see not only the absence of cigarettes, but a whole string of changes that resulted from that one. Changes that reverberate through my life to this day. It's safe to say they're changes I didn't see coming, and didn't even have the foresight to hope for.

It's even safe to say I was *angry* about having to quit smoking, because I believed it was part of my mystique, part of what made me the unique person I was. (This was how we thought, way back in the 90's.) Damn my father's cancer, and then my mother's cancer, that made me have to take quitting smoking seriously.

Here's what I expected: I would give up my beloved cigarettes and in their place I would suck down copious amounts of candy just to get through my interminable, tedious workdays at the mental health center. Someone suggested that to keep my hands busy I buy a set of drumsticks and drum on my leg. At home, it was advised that I spend a lot of time in the bathtub with my hands wet so I couldn't smoke.

Over time, the urge to smoke would lessen, and I would be able to simply grit my teeth in order to get through my long days at work. Then, in maybe six months time, I'd be clean-smelling and vice-free, and my hands, those perpetually free-wheeling agents of expression, could do whatever they wanted without feeling they couldn't do the **only** thing they wanted, which was to scissor-grip a tobacco filled tube.

Here's how it actually played out: without a cigarette to hold onto, my hands did in fact feel bereft. Keeping them wet did seem like a good idea, but who had time to bathe fifteen or twenty times a day? Instead, I decided to learn to throw pots. Which, I found, was creative and fun. Because my pottery teacher made his living as a potter, I started to believe I could make a living as a potter. Because I believed I could make a living as a potter, I started to do outdoor art festivals. Because I started to do outdoor art festivals, I quit my tedious and unfulfilling job at the community mental health center. Because I quit my tedious and unfulfilling job at the community MH center, I decided that I could pursue my very fulfilling dream of being a writer.

If we invoke the principle of causality here, then it's obvious that quitting smoking made me into a writer.

Given the power of change to fortify and enrich and steer our lives in completely unexpected directions, it's curious that we fight and fear and often hate it so. That we make resolutions and don't keep them, shy away from trying new things, avoid the unfamiliar. Elizabeth Lesser is the author of *Broken Open: How Difficult Times Can Help Us Grow* and she writes, "How strange that the nature of life is change, yet the nature of human beings is to resist change. And how ironic that the difficult times we fear might ruin us are the very ones that can break us open and help us blossom into who we were meant to be."

It's not like I don't get it. When I'm in the throes of change and transition, the last thing on my mind is appreciating whatever opportunity might be in store. There have been a million times that I've looked back on some difficult time in my life and recalled the misery of it; had anyone suggested I open myself up to the opportunity of it, I probably would have punched them. I remember when I was younger and going through a difficult time, my parents imploring me to appreciate things.

"Life is a gift!" they cheered, and I remember thinking how invariably life feels least like a gift in the moment someone feels compelled to tell you it is.

Isaac Asimov said it best when he said, "Life is pleasant. Death is peaceful. It's the transition that's troublesome."

At one particularly low point during our house-selling process, my husband and I put our three dogs in the car and drove away so that yet another prospective buyer could see it. It was late afternoon and raining hard. Ordinarily we would either drive around for an hour, which would keep two of the three dogs pacified but give the third panic attacks, or we would drive ten minutes to the Chickamauga Battlefield and walk for an hour, which kept us pacified but was hard on the dog with arthritis and the dog with congestive heart disease.

But on this night, because of the dark and the rain, we simply drove to the park and sat in the car, lights on, wipers pumping. Two hours earlier I'd gotten word that I'd been passed over for a grant I desperately wanted and believed I would get. This, along with my continued inability to land an agent for my book, was simply more than I could bear. There, in the backseat of the car, in the dark, in the rain, I cried for a solid hour. All I wanted was to go home and grieve alone, in the privacy of my bedroom. When at last the realty center called and said we could return home, the car battery was dead. It was another hour before Triple AAA would get to us. There was nothing I could do but sit there, under the crushing weight of my grief.

There's a quote by Pema Chodrin, Buddhist monk and author of many books on fear and change, that says, "We think that the point is to pass the test or to overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don't really get solved. They come together and they fall apart."

If I can look at matters that way, I can see how everything--whether it's a new years resolution, some heroic effort at changing some fundamental way of being, or a failed attempt at a grant, is just a line in the ongoing narrative of my life, a piece of the story, rather than the end of the story.

Chodrin reminds us that the point has never been to "figure it out," whatever *it* is, or put the thing behind us, whatever the thing is, but to see everything that happens to us as a part of the ongoing, up-and-down-and-around nature of what it is to be alive: constant transition. The point isn't to stop the movement, or to control or corral it; the point is to embrace the mystery of it, to live as best we can in tandem with it.

And lastly--besides seeing change and transition as necessary and unavoidable parts of our lives, there's something here about *honoring* it. About holding sacred that uncertain, uncomfortable, inexact place that exists between the what-is and the what-will-be.

“In the space between chaos and shape there was another chance,” says Jeanette Winterson, in her book *The World and Other Places*.

This past Tuesday night, I had to euthanize my sweet cocker spaniel, Brie. Besides the panic attacks, which were not going to kill her but did make her life difficult, she had congestive heart failure. At 11:30, I realized she was not going to make it through the night, and so I wrapped her in a blanket and took her to the emergency clinic on Amnicola. We were put in a room with a sofa with big, soft pillows. I cradled Brie on my lap, and within just a few minutes of the injection, she passed away. The vet staff was wonderfully compassionate, allowing us to stay there for as long as I needed to say goodbye.

Brie was a strong, athletic dog; at 32 pounds, even ill, she was muscular and taut, and her body sank into me on the sofa. Sitting there, feeling the weight of her, I remembered how my friend Cindy had had her cat's ashes sewn into a pillow so that she could hold her on her lap forever.

Brie's death marks a big transition in my life. She was a loving but difficult dog, prone to fighting with her sister, with a bad case of separation anxiety and many, many fears. I spent a lot of time and energy worrying about how she would adjust to the new house. That she was only with us there for a week seems almost unbelievable, and I worry, in years to come, that because her time was so brief I will not remember her there at all.

What I will always remember, though, is holding Brie on my lap as she drifted off. Sweet Brie, who didn't like to be without me, headed out to wherever doggie souls go, leaving behind a heaviness, the weight of her body, on my lap.

Our transitions, if we will let them, have weight. It is a weight that honors their presence in our lives. We may at times feel our transitions are too heavy, that they are weighing us down, or we may feel the grounded by the weight of the happier ones. Either way, there is a mass, a gravity, to the things that shift and remake us, that asks that we not turn our heads away, or ignore, or fight, or fear, or solve. It simply asks that we bear the weight, and in bearing the weight, bear witness. END