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THE TRANSITION FROM COLLEGE



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IN TRANSITION FROM POINT A TO POINT B

BY MAT WEISS

IN TRANSITION FROM
POINT A TO POINT B





My transition from university to full-time work was just how I like my life-changing experiences to be: abrupt and dramatic. After graduation, I landed a pretty decent job (it had “analyst” in the title), bought a brand-new truck, and began wondering where I’d get an apartment. Things were looking good.

The Friday before I was to start my new job, my parents’ house, where I was still living at the time, burned down. I literally lost everything but the clothes on my back, and I had to throw those away due to smoke and soot damage.

You can call me an airhead, but over the weekend I had forgotten all about the fact that I was to start work on Monday. That is, until late Sunday night. I panicked. I jumped into my brand-new truck, which reeked of smoke and looked singed (the finish had been ruined due to the unfortunate fact that it was parked next to the burning house). Luckily, the mall was still open for a few minutes so that I could quickly buy some clothes.

Feeling anxious, I rushed around the store, trying to find clothes for the next day. *Now, what do the other people wear there? I don’t know; I’ve never worked there!* Recognizing that I was unable to make a rational decision about what to buy, and not wanting to ask the clerk to pick out my clothes for me (like I was some pathetic moron who still lived with his parents, which of course I was), I did the next best thing. I bought the same clothes a mannequin was wearing; he sort of looked like me, only he didn’t have a face. With that accomplished, peace flowed through my being as I drove to the hotel where the insurance company had put us up. Peace remained as I drifted off to sleep.

However, panic returned when I woke up and realized I was late for work. I rushed to work, hoping the smoke smell in my truck was gone so it wouldn’t seep into my clothes. It wasn’t and it did.

A new coworker met me at the door, “You know we started at eight o’clock.” It was after nine.

Although I had a prepared an eloquent statement for just that kind of remark, all I could say was “My house burned down.” *Oh no*, I suddenly realized. *I’m that guy*. I mean, you always know of people—peripherally—whose lives track chaos like a piece of toilet paper stuck to their shoe. I just didn’t know I was *that guy*.

I was introduced to the director of the department. His first statement was “You know we wear ties here.”

Stupid mannequin!

“He says his house burned down,” offered my helpful coworker.

The director grunted and walked off. That was probably the high point of my working relationship with him.

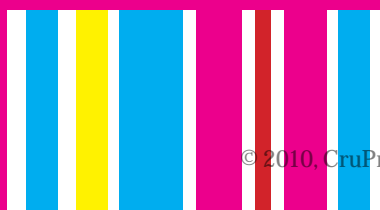
Most likely, your transition to the workplace will be less dramatic (hopefully not involving the fire department) but certainly just as significant. The transition from student to working life is one of many transitions you’ll experience in the years ahead. Some other life transitions include these: moving to another city, state, or country; changing jobs; getting married; having children; watching your children leave home; experiencing the aging of parents; experiencing the death of your parents or siblings or spouse; and having that moment when you realize you’re old (this is when dressing like mannequins becomes normative).

Learning to transition well is a key part of walking with God for a lifetime. If my observations are correct, your college years may be the time in your life when you are the most zealous and devoted to Christ that you ever will be. Like we read in the parable of the soils (Mark 4), you may, in fact, become that seed choked by the thorns. Will the cares and concerns of life lead to your fruitlessness?

You may be thinking, *Not me! Even though everyone else falls away, I won’t.*

If you say so. But I ask, why not you? Because you’re so involved in the ministry on campus? Because you have awesome devotional times each day? Because you have an incredible group of believers you meet with in Bible study?

It has been my observation that, in times of transition, essential parts of a person’s support structure are disrupted, and unless you’ve identified your nonnegotiable convictions and you’re intentional about rebuilding that support structure, you can subtly fall into fruitlessness or spiritual stagnation.



Take, for example, the strong relationships you now have with other Christians on campus—the people who keep you accountable. But now you're graduating and your Bible study is breaking up as you all move to different parts of the country. Where are your strong relationships now? You're in a new city. People are different. It's hard to find new people to have intimate relationships with. In fact, it's so hard that you don't build new relationships. It's easier not to. Then one day you meet some zealous college student. For some reason he or she is telling you about this awesome thing the Lord taught the student, and you find this all rather annoying, but you aren't sure why.

Enough! I don't want to hear any more!

Okay, good, then we agree that transitioning well from college to the workplace is critical to a vibrant, lifelong walk with Christ. So, if we are to transition well, we'll need to have a good picture of what transition is. When I think about life transitions, I think about changes in six areas of my life:

1. Internal changes: my sense of identity, the physical, mental, and emotional aspects of my life.
2. Spiritual changes: my walk with God, personal ministry, and accountability.
3. Relational changes: support structures, friends, family, and church family.
4. Routine changes: my routines and rituals. Mocha at the coffee shop every morning. Having my quiet time at 6:30 A.M. in my favorite chair.
5. Geographical changes: where I live and work.
6. Vocational changes: work—the useful thing I do every day.

Life transitions tend to be characterized by a significant change in two or more of these areas at a time. Often a change in one area triggers a change in another that can, in turn, trigger a change in another. The importance of each area is person relative, and different people have different thresholds before the transition becomes significant. For example, women tend to be more impacted by changes in the relational area, while men tend to be more impacted by changes in the work area. A significant change doesn't necessarily mean a bad change; it just means things are different than they formerly were.

TRANSITION

SIX AREAS OF TRANSITION

What does all this have to do with graduation?

Well, you're probably going to experience significant change in almost all of these six areas. That's a seismic transition. For example:

1. Internal changes: You're not a student anymore. You're an entry-level employee learning the ropes.
2. Spiritual changes: Your personal ministry has changed from reaching out to other students (a somewhat homogeneous group) to reaching out to your coworkers and neighbors (who are in various stages of life). Your friends who provided spiritual encouragement and accountability have moved on, and honestly, you know you will grow apart from them.
3. Relational changes: Your daily friendships are going to change. You may be moving to a new city and having to find a new church, or you may be back living with your parents.
4. Routine changes: This is a big one. You won't be hanging out in the student union anymore; you will have no summer vacation; and you'll have only two measly days off at Christmas. And in your first year of work, you may not have any vacation at all.
5. Geographical changes: You'll probably be in some office, not a school. You will possibly be in a different city and state.
6. Work: You'll not be working as a student anymore. You'll be entry-level. You might even be on probation.

And knowing this helps me how?

Well, an important part of a successful transition is simply recognizing that you are in a transition and knowing the areas of your life where you should expect a loss of equilibrium. Important parts of your life are in flux, and sometimes it is hard to see the forest for the trees. Things may not feel right anymore, and you may not know why. You may feel stressed. With that stress, depression and anxiety (they're kissing cousins) creep in. Before you know it, your world is upside down, and you might not know why or know how to set it right again.

Some of the ways you may experience this stress include doubt (feelings of being out of God's will), lack of motivation, sleeping more or less than you used to, a fall into bad habits at home, escapism (watching even more TV or playing even more video games), a change in eating habits, and my personal favorites: irritability and a lack of concentration.

Experiencing these things is normal, and it is not wrong. As you get used to the changes, your life will feel normal again. Trust me, it will.

There are, however, healthy and unhealthy responses to stress. Without realizing it, you may be responding in unhealthy ways, such as overeating, escaping into video games and television, and isolating yourself. A

NON-NEGOTIABLES

Okay, having thought through which areas in our lives might be changing, the next thing we need to identify is how these changes are going to affect the nonnegotiables in our life. Nonnegotiables are those things that you believe are so essential to your walk with God and fruitfulness that if you don't keep up with them, you're going to spiral out of control.

Some of my nonnegotiables are these: (1) being involved in my local church (not just showing up, but really being involved); (2) maintaining an inner circle of friends not only with whom I can share things but also who will challenge me and call me on the carpet if something isn't right in my life; and (3) living the financial standard that my wife and I committed to when we were married. (That last one means that, if God chooses to bless me even more monetarily, I'm not going to run out and super-size my lifestyle with a new house, car, boat, home theater system, and so on.)

NON-NEGOTIABLES AT RISK

You are now aware of the kinds of changes to anticipate, and assuming you've done some serious soul searching in the last three seconds, you should also know your "I'll kill you if you touch these" nonnegotiables. Our last step in mental preparation is to identify what nonnegotiables are at risk in light of the anticipated changes.

For example, while living in Oregon, I would meet with my missions pastor regularly. Nothing quite as formal as mentoring or discipleship, but it provided important accountability nonetheless. But of course, when I moved from Oregon to Florida, it meant I wouldn't be hanging out with him anymore. The implication was that I would have to search for and find new friends to meet with for accountability.

For someone like me, that is hard to do. I don't like it one bit. In fact, it is so uncomfortable for me that it would be easy to ignore it and just not look to develop these new relationships. And you know, if I didn't pursue new relationships, things wouldn't go to pot overnight. I'd probably coast along just fine for a while, but then one day, let's say at a men's retreat, God would thump me on the head and show me that

healthier response is to use your transition as a time to draw closer to God. Continue doing the right things, the things you know to do.

Why are you making this transition sound so bad?

Transitions aren't all bad. Often the new life before us is an improvement over the way things were. It's just going to take a little while to get there, and transition is the necessary path to this better life. What we are trying to do is negotiate the transition in such a way that our trajectory doesn't go off course—away from intimacy with Christ, away from a fruitful life. Unfortunately, the best way to prepare for this transition is to face reality and in so doing normalize what will feel abnormal.

Some of my nonnegotiables may not be the same as yours, and some people have more nonnegotiables than others. These are between you and the Lord (and your spouse, if you have one). If you haven't already thought about these kinds of things, now is the time to start. As time passes, it becomes harder to place such anchors in your life.

Put another way, transition implies certain compromises. You will not be able to do certain things or live in certain places or be with certain people. Yet in a time of compromise, your rudder through the churning seas of change are your nonnegotiables: those things that will never be tossed overboard.

I've wasted a few years of life in fruitlessness. I don't know about you, but I don't like being thumped on the head, particularly by God. So, what do we do?

Well, to continue the example, not only do I determine to pursue these new relationships, I have someone hold me accountable. You should do the same. It doesn't have to be your closest friend who keeps you accountable. This person doesn't even necessarily have to know what he or she is holding you accountable to. You can ask your new non-Christian coworker to ask you in two weeks if you've done this thing you need to get done, and if you don't do it, you'll give that person \$20. I guarantee you that in two weeks, at 8:00 A.M., your coworker will be asking you about it.

In some cases, I'm so motivated by my commitment to my nonnegotiable that I don't need someone to hold me accountable. I know I'm going to do it because it is that important to me. You know yourself and what you need. The point is, putting things in place will help to ensure your successful transition.

MID-TRANSITION REFLECTION

A practice that both Christian leaders and secular life coaches recommend is taking time out a few times each year to reflect on our lives: where we are and where we are going. In Christian circles we might call it “taking a day with the Lord” or practicing the spiritual discipline of solitude. You’re looking to step back and reconnect with your nonnegotiables, as well as God, and evaluate where you are with your life. You’re also looking to renew or refresh your heart.

It may even be more helpful to connect with your close Christian friends from college for a weekend. Plan a road trip. Reconnecting to these friends can be a good anchor for the soul as well as a plumb line to gauge how you’re doing spiritually.

In your first year after graduation you should consider planning two or three time-outs like this to gain objectivity on where the stream of transitions has brought you.

As Christians, we all long to hear Jesus say, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” as we stand before Him at the end of our lives. How we transition to this next phase of life, which is really the bulk of our lives, is extremely important if we are to hear those words. To prepare for that transition, we need to be aware of those aspects of our life that are changing and how those changes will impact us. Identifying steps we can take to ensure that our support structures and nonnegotiables remain intact is important. And in the execution of these steps (let me again remind you), accountability is essential.

At my first Christmas conference, on the day of outreach, we were dropped off in the Dallas suburbs two by two. We were coupled as an experienced person with an inexperienced person. I was paired with a cute girl. As the van drove away, leaving us standing on the sidewalk under the gray Texas sky, we looked at each other and asked, “You’re the experienced one, right?”

We both answered no.

“Should we tell someone?”

I thought it was a little late for that but didn’t say so.

We went door to door. One older gentleman asked us in. While he sat in his easy chair, we went through the spiritual interest survey. We learned that he was a Christian and that when he was our age he was zealous for the Lord just like us, involved in all kinds of Christian activities. I saw his Bible on the bookshelf across the room, clearly unused. He didn’t go to church anymore. He didn’t read the Scriptures. He didn’t pray. I asked him what had happened. He said nothing in particular had happened. He had experienced no sudden death of a child causing a crisis of faith. He had no descent into alcoholism. It was just life that had happened.

It is my earnest prayer for you that you fight the fight, run the race, finish strong. Do what you have to do to transition with Christ.

REFLECTION

1. What changes do you anticipate after graduation in the six areas?
2. Which change will have the biggest impact on your life?
3. What are your nonnegotiables?
4. Devise a plan to ensure your top nonnegotiable isn’t compromised.

Mat Weiss is currently IT co-director for Campus Ministry. He has 16 years of IT experience. Before joining the staff of Campus Crusade, he was an Internet consultant and had helped a number of dotcoms. He paid for college by “blowing things up” with the Tennessee Army National Guard. He lives in Orlando, Florida, with his wife and son.