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APPROACHING THE DOORS IN OUR LIVES

CONSIDERING A CHANGE

*For everything there is a season,
and a time for every matter under heaven:*

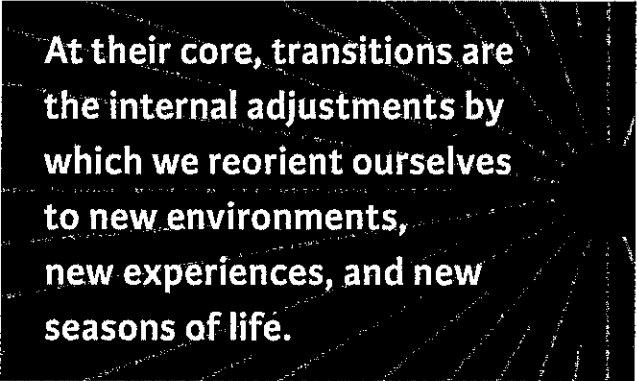
*a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up.*

ECCLESIASTES 3:1-3 (ESV)

I WAS SIX YEARS OLD WHEN the floods destroyed my home. We had not been planning on moving, but it is hard to argue with five feet of water. The Pearl River runs from central Mississippi down to the Gulf of Mexico, passing straight through my hometown of Jackson. The rains that caused the flood had fallen upstream of us, out of our sight. Such is often the case with sudden changes: their causes are unseen and often entirely unrelated to us. The comptroller general of the United States eventually determined

At their core, transitions are the internal adjustments by which we reorient ourselves to new environments, new experiences, and new seasons of life. These changes wear different guises at different stages in our lives, but for many of us the first major change we experience is our graduation from high school. The transition to college life or the job market comes more gradually. No college student feels at home on the first day of classes. But mastering this transition—weaning ourselves from familiar places and habits and embracing independence from our childhood lives—sets us up for future success.

Changes disrupt our lives and move us into new seasons, where we must begin the process of transition. Sociologist Ann Swidler has written persuasively about the difference between “settled” and



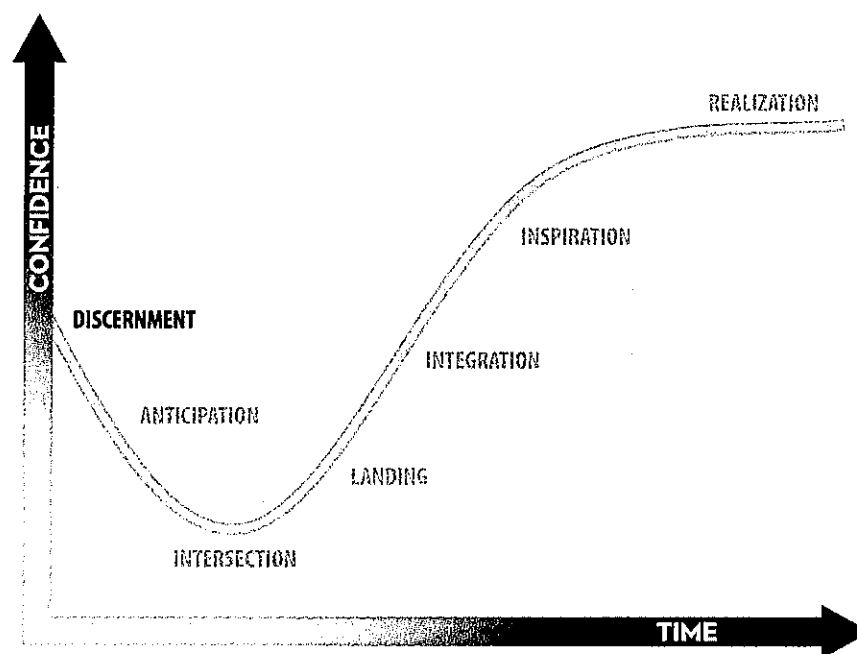
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“unsettled” times. Settled times consist of “traditions and common sense; [within which we] refine and reinforce skills, habits, and modes of experience.”² These settled times are where most of us spend nearly our entire lives. They are the familiar and comfortable seasons of life in which our environments and habits are well understood. We are guided within them by routine because that is how we simplify and make sense of life. In the *unsettled* times, not routines but new ideas are the forces driving us forward. In these times, we “create new strategies for action.” These unsettled times are what I usually call transitional periods.

Our lives are an ongoing movement between settled and unsettled spaces. We use familiarity and routine for as long as we can,

reached out for a quick chat—and ended up firing Dimon. He was forced out over a weekend. That evening, as he told his family what had happened, his youngest daughter asked if they would have to move out of their house and live in the streets. Jamie Dimon was certainly not penniless, so his daughter was not going to sleep in the streets. But his story illustrates an important point. It does not matter how successful, wealthy, or good you are at your job: a major life change is never more than a phone call away.

Because of their unpredictability, unexpected changes are often the most difficult to handle. But just because something is unpredictable does not mean it is unpreparable. In fact, the unpredictability of these changes actually makes the scope of preparation quite narrow. The best way to prepare for an unseen transition is to keep in mind how close one could be and to develop the virtues—such as humility, courage, and self-control—we will need to make good choices when the hinge moment presents itself.



journal or memorizing Scripture—are resources we can draw upon in times of upheaval and uncertainty. Indeed, daily practices that improve our character are the most straightforward way to prepare for the unexpected.

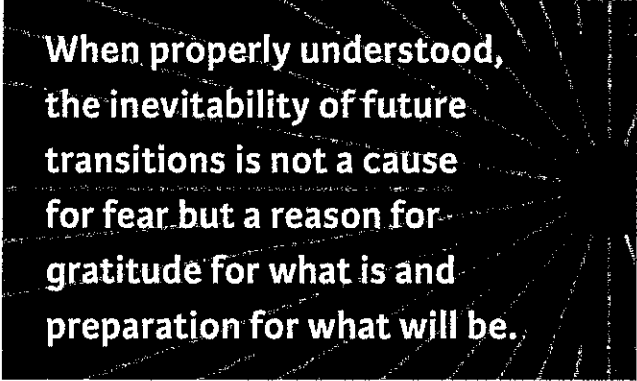
RESPECT YOUR RESTLESSNESS

For those who are made particularly uncomfortable by unforeseen change, there is good and bad news. The good news is that sometimes

we get to pick the timing of our transitions; the bad news is that sometimes we get to pick the timing of our transitions. Voluntary transitions may lack the sting of unforeseen change, but they bring distinct challenges of their own. Almost always, these voluntary transitions in the lives of my PLATINUM study subjects began with a feeling of restlessness or dissatisfaction. It seems that sometimes if we stay in the “settled times” for too long, we grow tired of the routine and the comfort, and begin to crave something new. A feeling of restlessness is not cause enough to quit your day job, but you should listen to it.

I got to know Bruce Kennedy a year before he died. Bruce had served as the most successful CEO in the history of Alaska Airlines. In less than ten years on the job, he matured the company from an obscure, regional carrier to the nationwide brand it is today, growing its revenue tenfold. And then, all of a sudden, he stepped away:

I started getting restless in about my tenth year . . . and I couldn't quite put my finger on it. . . . Somehow it wasn't



When properly understood, the inevitability of future transitions is not a cause for fear but a reason for gratitude for what is and preparation for what will be.

transition. For Bruce it was his wife, a very natural choice. But it could also be a mentor, a pastor, a coach—anyone who can serve as a sounding board. Having long-term mentors and trusted friends is essential during these seasons.

There is also another source of counsel and wisdom: faith in Christ. In transition, people of faith know not only that God has ordered their steps but also that he is responsive to petition and prayer. That's why in addition to consulting others, Bruce also prayed for guidance and confirmation. For many, Paul's words to the Philippians are especially comforting in seasons of change: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7 ESV).

Finally, and most soberingly, Bruce reminds us that leaving is tough. It often really hurts. But leaving a settled time opens the doorway to new possibilities, to even more enriching experiences. Bruce stepped away from being one of the best CEOs in the global airline industry and moved to China to teach English to refugees. That may not be the same move you make, but the impulse is the same: responding to a restless heart and pursuing a new season of fulfillment. The sense of restlessness that prompted Bruce to step away from being the best of the best prompted him also to pursue something that gave him an even deeper sense of purpose.

A sense of restlessness can creep up on anyone. So why do we so often try to fit "new wine into old wineskins," as Jesus put it, instead of respecting the new vintage (Mark 2:22)? The answer is obvious: change is hard, and so we fear it.

2

STANDING OUTSIDE

WHY CHANGE HURTS YOUR HEAD

*There is nothing like looking,
if you want to find something.
You certainly usually find something,
if you look, but it is not always quite
the something you were after.*

J. R. R. TOLKIEN

AT ROOT, CHANGE MEANS the partial or total abandonment of the norms, safeties, and patterns of behavior that make our lives manageable. Decision-making is mentally taxing, so we tend to replace assessments and evaluations with automatic reactions and instinctive habits whenever we can. Change entails losing familiar crutches that we lean on. If every day were our first day on the job, or if every time we drove to work, we had to concentrate on the map directing our travel, we would eventually wear out. This is also why vacations to new places, especially international


would only need system one to arrive at the correct answer.

System two is very different. It is the process by which we think slowly and deliberately to calculate and produce answers to difficult questions. Any response that is not auto-

matic makes use of system two. Focusing on a project at work or remembering where we first met someone require system-two thinking because they entail the processing of information that is not immediately known. If I were to ask you to solve for x : $1,389 = 237x$, you would likely be able to give me an answer after some time, but it would require effortful calculation.

System one exists to make our lives easier and more manageable. We coast through much of our day with system one's automatic responses to known questions. It forms the mental shortcuts that help us get along without much effort. It allows us to ration our mental energy so we can save it for the more taxing questions as they come along.

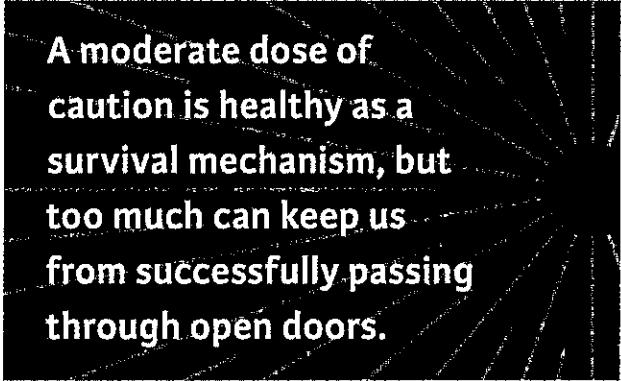
When the automation of system one is lost because of changes in our lives, it is replaced by system two. This is the case even for small changes. I once asked a student who worked in my office what he considered the hardest thing about moving to college. His answer surprised me: "Having to pick what to wear each morning." He had come from a school that required a uniform every day; he had never needed to think about what he would wear or try to remember how long it had been since he had worn a particular outfit. The burden of choosing what to wear each day is a minor



At root, change means the partial or total abandonment of the norms, safeties, and patterns of behavior that make our lives manageable.

industry-leading firm that specializes in nonprofit consulting. Bridgespan exists to help people help others by maximizing the positive social impact of nonprofit organizations. Tom himself was leading a successful life in the private sector before he began the more civic-minded Bridgespan. He credits much of his success now to an early hinge moment in his life when he decided to check his caution and take a healthy risk.

When he was applying for a job right out of college in California, he did not even own a suit jacket for the interview. After a few minutes, his interviewer told him that they would like to offer him a job . . . in Algeria. Tom did not



A moderate dose of caution is healthy as a survival mechanism, but too much can keep us from successfully passing through open doors.

even know where Algeria was, but he was excited by the new venture, so he took the job. The experience and the people he met working in Algeria for two years in his early twenties permanently altered his trajectory for the better. It takes a lot of willpower to overcome the natural caution you might feel at the prospect of moving across the world for an entry-level job. At first glance, that move might come across as foolhardy. However, taking risks like that (especially in your younger years) can be instrumental in determining your future. Hesitation at the prospect of major life transitions is normal, and wisdom should always prevail. But the data suggests that we humans may be *overly* cautious—to our detriment.

Dr. Steven Levitt of the University of Chicago conducted a relatively simple but illuminating study on major life decisions and

PLANNING VERSUS PREDICTING

Determining the “when” of a transition is always difficult, and there are more factors to consider than I can list here. Yet it’s the sheer number of relevant variables that makes having some sort of plan so indispensable. The obvious benefit of long-term planning for change is that you have more options. Before the pen touches the paper, there is no theoretical limit to how the characters in a novel might develop. The same goes for us at the start of a life transition.

The closer we are to the fruition of our expectations, however, the more reality will temper them. It is probably unrealistic to have the goal of owning your own successful business next week if you are currently a sophomore in college, but it is perfectly reasonable to set that as a goal for fifteen years from now. This is the creative benefit of future planning: we can envision with relative freedom and minimal limitations the reality we would like best. This freedom is diminished as the time frame shrinks between *now* and *one day*. But at the moment of planning, the freedom is immense. And this ought to inspire us to dream away.

But the downside of future-casting when compared to more immediate planning is that it is notoriously inaccurate. The truth is that very few of us end up doing exactly what it is we set out to do. Even more discouraging is the fact that less than 30 percent of working Americans who attended college are working in a job related to their major.³ This is not so much a problem with *planning* but with *predicting*. Sometimes we think we know exactly what we will be doing, but more often than not, our forecasts are wrong.

Predictions are a natural part of thinking about the future, but they are also—fundamentally—liabilities. History is rife with

the secular workplace is not outside of God's purview. Rather, the scope of matters (including careers and workplaces) that God cares about is vast. Dave told me that for most students, once he is able to persuade them to this way of thinking, their sense of their future possibilities goes from "the size of a checkerboard to the size of a football field." In short, the first step toward making a plan is to expand the range of possible vocational paths available so that we can view the world more like God does. Everything we do can be sacred.

One of the more intriguing aspects of what Dave teaches involves something that he calls the Odyssey Plan,⁵ which involves simply projecting a five-year plan for yourself and then describing how that plan measures on a few scales like coherence and likability. The brilliance of the technique is that students produce not one but three distinct plans for the next five years. The first is a standard plan; the second is a backup plan; the third is one with no restrictions on resources (like money). The point is simple: "There is no one idea for your life. There are many lives you could live happily and productively."⁶ This is a fundamental truth about planning for transitions in life. There are always many doors before you, which you might choose to open or close. There is never only *one* correct choice.

In some ways, we have to adopt the mindset of a serial entrepreneur—namely, a willingness to try out different options and to take some risks in our own life planning. One of the most impressive examples of this over the last decade is Praxis, which Dave Blanchard cofounded. Based in New York City, Praxis seeks to advance a faith-centered approach to starting new ventures called "redemptive entrepreneurship." Through mentorships that

changes. Your flexibility on the date of the change will diminish, until the day you have planned for becomes certain enough for you to circle it on your calendar with a red Sharpie. At any given moment, it is always possible that you may be forced through a door by floodwaters or an angry boss. These sudden changes throw wrenches into our plans, but they also provide opportunities for restructuring and renewal. And even in the future, when we have run out of red circles on our calendar, when we have no boss to fire us and our ten-year plans are twenty years old, it may be then that a sense of restlessness creeps into our life—calling us, nudging us to look for a new doorway and to consider what our next hinge moment has to offer.

DON'T LET FEAR STEAL YOUR FUTURE

The Old Testament tells a poignant story reflecting the anticipation phase of transition. As the Hebrew people were approaching the Promised Land, Moses sent twelve operatives to scout out the land. They were hopeful but nervous.

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel. From each tribe of their fathers you shall send a man, every one a chief among them." So Moses sent them from the wilderness of Paran, according to the command of the LORD . . . and said to them, "Go up into the Negeb and go up into the hill country, and see what the land is, and whether the people who dwell in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, and whether the land that they dwell in is good or bad, and whether the cities that they dwell in are camps or strongholds, and whether the land is rich or poor, and

When you scout out a plan of action for your transition somewhere, focus on the milk and honey rather than the supposed “giants.” There may be giants, but that does not mean they will defeat you. And they certainly should not dissuade you from following the Lord’s leading. There is no one on earth who can subvert the call of God.

I interact with countless high school students each year who are in the midst of a serious transition: deciding which college to attend. Today, there are two million *fewer* college students in American than there were eight years ago.⁹ There are several reasons for this, but the response from colleges has been obvious. They are more actively engaged in persuading students to attend their school than ever before. They are doing everything they can to get prospective students to believe their school is precisely what they are looking for. The quality of programming of admissions days has necessarily improved, the care given by admissions staff has increased, and the cultivation of a positive image is managed much more closely. Colleges are not being deceptive, but they are being deliberate in how they market themselves.

As a result, I talk with a lot of students about their college decision-making process. The truth is that many schools *look* similar in their presentation and marketing. And I certainly encourage students to visit any college they are seriously considering attending, but that is not enough. To know what the school is really like you have observe the institution in moments when not everything is curated for you.

The best advice I give to high school students looking at a certain university is simple: spend a weekend, or at least a Friday or Saturday night, on the campus. Get to know the campus culture