

Am I Still Me? Finding Yourself When Life Changes

Article by Benjamin Vrbicek Pastor, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

I recently reflected on my last twelve years. It's been a time full of flux personally. I went from single to married; from relying on my parents to being a parent myself; from a classroom to a cubical, and then to a church; from just a little money to lots of money, and then to something less than "lots"; and also from Division 1 college athlete to less-athletic dad.

Eight different houses; five churches in four denominations; four job changes in four different cities in three different regions of the country; and from zero children to now having six, with a miscarriage in there, as well.

That list explains my sense of vertigo. It's difficult to get your bearings when the world beneath your feet keeps shifting year after year.

Transition Vertigo

The Bible is full of transitions. We move from just two people in a garden to thriving cities; from one man (Abram) to a nation; from local, tribal rulers to mighty kings; from prosperous ease to crippling desolation, and around the dizzying Ferris wheel a dozen more times. The people of God transition from the intermittent altars used by the patriarchs to the portable tabernacle; then to the fixed temple; and then to the curtain torn in two.

We also see transitions at the individual level. Abram leaves his family; David goes from shepherd to king; the disciples from fishermen to church leaders; and untold numbers of sinners to saints. Consider the upheaval in Moses's life and his three major transitions: from being raised in the family of a foreign king to life as an obscure shepherd and finally to leading the Hebrew people. He knew as much as anyone what it means to be disoriented by transition and change (Exodus 3:11).

"Who Am I Now?"

If you're like most people, your life will be full of transitions, perhaps not of the magnitude of Moses's, maybe not with the frequency of my last decade, but you will experience change. During these changes, many good questions will arise. You'll ask questions like these:

What am I passionate about?

Who am I now?

Who do I want to be later?

What do I want to be known for?

Your answers to these questions will move in one of two very different directions. On the one hand, you can "re-invent yourself." In our culture, re-inventing ourselves is typically a self-centered and godless exercise. By "godless," I don't mean it's the sum of all evil. It's not. By "godless" I simply mean transition and change without any consideration of God. People look inward: Who am I? And they look outward: I want to be like these people, and not like those people.

Throughout the re-inventing process, the underlying assumption goes something like this: Life's outcomes are infinitely malleable, and if I try hard enough, then I can be whatever I want. Again, rarely is God in the picture — inward and outward, but not upward.

The Life You Now Live

For the Christian there is another, better option. Christians should use transitions not as opportunities to reinvent ourselves, but to re-identify with who we are in Christ. Transitions are a time to reaffirm that the defining reality of my life is not in my marital status, nor where I live, not in my children, income, vocation, looks, education, or popularity. Rather, transitions are opportunities to re-identify in this: Jesus Christ loves me and gave himself for me.

The apostle Paul thought this way: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). Paul is saying that in the life he "now lives" — that is, just before, or during, or just after all of life's transitions — he is resolved to live in the knowledge that God loves him. This is where he anchors his identity — identifying and re-identifying here again and again.

This same dynamic was also at work in Jesus's life. When Jesus transitioned from carpentry to full-time, itinerant ministry, God the Father publicly shouted his delight over his Son. "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17).

A Pillar in the Shifting Sands

Historically speaking, I've not been great at finding my identity in Christ. During my most recent job transition, several aspects of my job changed as well. It wasn't until the transition occurred that I realized how much identity I derived from one particular aspect of my job: preaching. If my preaching was strong, then I was good, I was loved, I was valuable. If I was preaching poorly, then I wasn't. In a previous decade in my life, the issue was my performance in school or sports. If I crushed an exam, then I mattered. If it crushed me, then I was crushed. Academic success was my identity.

This isn't the gospel. In the gospel, Christians have an immovable source of identity: God's love for us. Through repentance from sin and faith in the substitutionary death and victorious resurrection of Jesus Christ, God now feels toward me the same way he feels towards his own Son: delight.

Currently I'm experiencing a time of relative stability and don't see any transitions on the horizon, but I am still striving to *re-identify* deeper with the gospel and God's delight for me in Christ. God wants this same focus for you in your next transition, because the gospel offer of "green pastures" and "still waters" is the only reliable remedy for the nauseating vertigo caused by a life and world in constant flux (Psalm 23:2).