

Writing Through Transitions: Letting Go

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How many times have you been tossed around by a big life change—a divorce, the death of a loved one, moving to a new home, switching careers, taking on a new role? Most likely you are in the middle of at least one major life transition right now. You may be feel happiness, dread, or a mixture of emotions surrounding the change. One thing is certain: our world fosters deeper and more rapid change than ever before. As coach, I help people figure out what changes they really want and how they can shape those changes—expected or not—in positive, creative ways.

Journaling is a powerful tool in helping you discover the power of your transitions. Change experts sometimes refer to the benefits of journaling, but little is said about explicit writing tools and techniques that support transitions and mine their creative forces.

By “transition” I mean any significant change in a role, situation, or life view that affects your functioning. The transition is actually a series of emotional stages that we all must go through for successful change: letting go, living in-between, and embracing the new way. You move through these stages in your own unique psychological timeline, and in each stage, the tasks you complete offer you potential growth. For example, if you recently lost or quit a job, you must first understand what has ended with that job and what has not ended. The next stage brings a time of living in-between, with uncertainty and rootlessness, followed eventually by the possibilities of the new way.

How can writing guide you through these stages? I believe that journaling your transitions restores self-trust. I know to be true in my own transition journaling. The journal counteracts the social and cultural pressures to move through change too quickly for fear of looking “weak” or self-pitying. In fact, this pressure to fix it fast and move on is one reason people get stuck emotionally in transitions and never complete their endings. Your journal gives you permission to define your transition according to your own timeline. You may have started the new career, but emotionally you may still be struggling to let go of the old one.

Journaling helps you trust yourself in dealing with the dark unknowns of transitions. Myth, legend and the world religions teach us that change can lead to wisdom and transformation if we are willing walk the wilderness of fear and uncertainty, where our passions and dreams lie hidden. If you lack the rituals to help you break open, to surrender to the dying and renewal, let your journal serve as ritual. Journaling can be a sturdy ladder into and out of the shadow. You can put the truth of your transition out there, on the page, and determine how you will integrate that truth into your new life.

The first step in your transition is identifying what is ending for you. As you journal, name what you are letting go (whether it is tangible or intangible). Every change, even the most desired one, includes loss. Your journal gives you the power to name things, acknowledge their endings, and create space for what is new. You begin to clarify feelings, find an order and an emotional progression, a sense of control—especially when you see in writing what you are letting go and what you are keeping.

In your journal writing, consider these questions as prompts: “What am I really leaving behind?” “What is changing and what is not changing?” “Who and what will I need to say goodbye to?” “How will I honor my endings?” As you move through the stages of your transition, come back to these questions about letting go. You may well discover that what you thought was ending or what was not ending has now shifted, and your journal records your new insights.