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# Prayer During Life's Transitions

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**D**uring the last few years, I have become increasingly interested in the transition process and the impact a major transition has on one's spiritual life. In my work with men and women as a spiritual director and in retreats and workshops, I consistently find in them a yearning to understand and negotiate the spiritual crises resulting from transitions, especially the disruptions in their prayer life.

The psychological literature is generally helpful in facilitating the self-understanding needed to accomplish the successive phases of adult development. Erikson, Loevinger, Sheehy, Levinson, and Vaillant all describe predictable stages of adult development, each researcher identifying the distinctive features of these stages in terms of his or her own system. Jung and his followers emphasize the characteristics of the transition that occurs at mid-life, which invites adults to direct their attention to aspects of human development that they neglected during the first half of their lives. In the past several years, a growing body of literature has shed light on the experiences adults undergo in between these predictable stages, the confusing periods we have come to call transitions. Gail Sheehy's *Pathfinders* and William Bridges's *Transitions* focus specifically on these periods; and lately Fowler, Kraft, and the Whiteheads have written on spiritual development and stages of faith in relation to the experience of adulthood.

I find that in this literature little attention is given to the problem of how to continue to pray while one is in the chaos of transition. In my work as a spiritual director, however, I frequently hear people in transition describe difficulties in prayer, a nostalgia for their former relationship with God, and guilt related to either not praying well or abandoning prayer altogether.

It seems that an active prayer life during periods of transition can be maintained in two distinct ways. In one, the individual's belief system remains intact: there is no serious doubt about who God is or what one's relationship to him is. In the second, the person undergoes a collapse in the experience or expression of a previously held system of belief. People in both situations frequently find prayer difficult, but their reasons differ enormously.

## WHEN BELIEFS REMAIN COHERENT

Those whose spiritual world remains coherent and intact perceive transitions as coming from external circumstances. They feel that God remains in alliance with them and that they have access to him, even though their lives may be in emotional chaos. An example of this situation might be a man or woman who has been terminated from a ministry position, or a married person whose spouse has died suddenly. These individuals may be dealing with turbulent feelings, but nonetheless may have a firm anchor in religious faith. They may feel that though life seems to be in a shambles, somehow God is still a comforting and reliable presence, a source of great strength. They may find themselves able to confront their situations, supported by God and significant others, and dare to attempt something new. The person who must now look for another ministerial setting may even consider a change into a ministry that would have seemed unlikely before. And if the person who lost a spouse is a woman, she may find herself embracing an independence that previously she had not sought because of the necessity of caring for her children.

In transitions perceived as caused by external circumstances, people may have moments of great

peace and reassurance that help them move through emotional turmoil and decision making. Their major difficulties in prayer will come from physical fatigue and negative feelings.

Fatigue is one of the most common physical aspects of the transition process. Many people undergoing transitions report falling asleep when they attempt to pray. The combination of emotional strain and the demands of the work they continue to do requires more than ordinary energy. In this instance, sufficient rest and renewed attention to physical exercise can significantly increase their ability to cope with the stress of the change and to pray as well.

If people respond to transitions with grief, anger, or any other painful emotion, they may resist entering into prayer, because these feelings are likely to reemerge as soon as they become quiet and get in touch with themselves. Beginning to pray may become associated with tears or sadness, which they would prefer not to feel. In addition, anger is usually a part of the grief process, and angry persons may experience this feeling as potentially threatening to their relationship with God. They may wonder how they could dare to be angry at God for this event in their lives when they need God to help them through it. They may fear that God will desert them if they are honest about their anger in prayer.

### SOLUTIONS ARE AVAILABLE

There are several ways of preventing strong affective states from disrupting the prayer experience. One is emotional honesty within the prayer experience. The person who prays needs to bring the distress to God by being willing to experience it in God's presence and then offer it to God. Frequently, persons become blocked in their prayer because they censor feelings or experiences that they believe are inappropriate when they pray.

Another is for people who are accustomed to prayer that is restful, contemplative, and peaceful to give up the expectation that prayer ought always to remain this way. These individuals often subtly resent the deprivation of this particular form of consolation. At the same time that they let go of this expectation of peacefulness, they need to acknowledge to themselves and to the Lord their frustration and its absence.

A third solution to disruptive emotions in prayer is finding additional leisure time "just to be." Often, people who complain about spending their prayer time crying or filled with anger are living lives so filled with activity and flight from their own feelings that the only time these feelings can emerge is during prayer. If these people can grant themselves some more time just to be—to grieve and to get in touch with themselves—they might be able to accomplish something else during their

prayer time. Then they might be able to be open to the way God may choose for drawing near to them at this time. In some circumstances, it could be helpful to combine all three of these solutions.

### WHEN BELIEF SYSTEM CHANGES

A complex and profound crisis occurs when someone's belief system collapses or changes dramatically during a time of personal transition. James Fowler's elaboration of stages of adult faith development suggests that major change in one's appropriation and conceptualization of faith is an expected aspect of maturation. Sooner or later, transition to a new psychological stage usually initiates a similar spiritual development.

This particular type of crisis in faith can become especially acute when persons in active ministry begin to redefine themselves in relation to religious institutions and their members. For example, today many women are experiencing the effects of feminist consciousness raising on Christian faith and practice. For them, participating in the liturgy and trying to do what is expected of them as ministers become extremely painful. They consciously experience oppression from the same institution that has fashioned their religious symbol system and practice. In this instance, women's interior change gives rise to dissatisfaction with previous images of God and forms of religious expression. It appears to them as if the institution is in charge of God, instead of God's being in charge of the institution. The way in which they think, feel, and express themselves with regard to God begins to diverge from that of the established community.

This experience of conflict often produces feelings of guilt. These women want to believe in God and to participate in a community of faith, but they can no longer believe in the same kind of God that they once believed in. Consequently, they often feel as if they are acting in bad faith, i.e., going through the motions without real commitment, with overt hostility.

### EFFECTS ON CLERGY AND MISSIONARIES

The current change in ministerial styles can evoke a similar crisis for the ordained clergy. When priests begin to perceive that the contemporary church requires a ministerial style very different from their traditional one, they too must negotiate personal change within a confusing social context. A change in or from the priestly role will require changes at the level of role, identity, and spirituality, which the priest must deal with while continuing to hear demands from parishioners, other clerics, family, and friends to maintain his earlier role.

A third experience that can initiate the collapse of a particular form of belief system for both men

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## The loss or change of forms of mediation can be a strong temptation to rebellion and stagnation, a compelling call to spiritual growth, or both

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and women is one that missionaries have in Third World countries. Frequently, they find that evangelization requires enculturation in their new country and the relinquishment of their native cultural assumptions, which have become intertwined with their Christian faith. Consequently, not only does their religious system of belief change, but they also define themselves differently in relation to cultural patterns.

In these situations, and in many others involving persons with different goals and varying life-styles, the spiritual crisis or transition can be characterized as the movement from conventional faith to postconventional faith in the sense that Fowler describes. It is the process of becoming rooted in a tradition in which people have the inner freedom to appropriate both personally and critically their own religious experience and the doctrines that describe it. Unfortunately, there is little training for this development, with the result that many adult believers are taken by surprise when it occurs. The emergence of postconventional faith is a process of creating a self who stands alone, as an individual before God, confronting both the mystery and the terror of a God who is no longer adequately mediated by the forms of conventional religion. It takes place in individuals who become conscious of their relationship to social structures and human institutions and who must adopt a conscious attitude toward them, choosing either to support and maintain them or to change them. It is precisely this growing postconventional faith that is the most sustaining during times of personal transition, because it is less dependent on conformity than conventional faith and more deeply rooted in personal experience.

### LOSS OF MEDIATION

Sometimes less drastic but not less painful are the spiritual crises brought about by the temporary loss of a significant mediation of God. This kind of deprivation and the consequent pain and confusion

are akin to the loss a married person feels when his or her relationship is disrupted by death or divorce, especially if the spouse has been the primary symbol and embodiment of the person's relationship to God. The married person experiences not only the rupture in the relationship but also the loss of that which gave meaning, coherence, and religious significance to life. In the same way, some religious men and women today sense this kind of loss of religious mediation when they find themselves at odds with their religious institutes. After twenty or thirty years of commitment in the context of a particular religious family, some find that they can no longer be faithful to both the expectations of their communities and the call of God's Spirit to undertake a new ministry, engage in prophetic witness, or initiate a new form of religious living. A community that was one of the primary mediations of God's will is now perceived as opposing what one discerns as the will of God.

Similarly, some professionals, such as scientists or doctors, have initially committed themselves to their profession as a response to God's call to be of service to other people, but, once established, have found it necessary to relinquish their jobs or even change professions because the institutional interests or the particular projects available to them posed serious threats to the well-being of people whom they were called to serve.

Another example of loss of mediation is that which results from attachment to specific forms of prayer styles. John of the Cross, in *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, describes the spiritual indulgence of people who are overly dependent on particular religious images, places of prayer, or ceremonies. Although this may appear to be an unimportant problem, I was reminded to take it seriously when a dedicated woman who is a therapist, wife, and mother described how at sea she felt religiously for many years after she lost the quiet Latin Mass she had loved so much without discovering anything to replace it. Finally, someone suggested that she might find spiritual direction helpful. In a very short time, she found a particular style for prayer that was appropriate for her at that time, without needing to return to the old liturgical form.

These losses of mediating prayer forms can be either private or communal. Many feminists find it painful to be present at a liturgy that reminds them, through the symbol of the male priest, of their systematic oppression in ecclesial situations. They once found consolation and nourishment in Eucharist, but they now find themselves filled with rage while trying to pray. The symbolism of Eucharist, which by its nature is meant to be unifying, reconciling, and inclusive, becomes the effective symbol of exclusion and division. Likewise, changes in religious life itself, because of smaller numbers and more diversified ministries, may make it almost impossible for religious to live in a

place where it is possible to have a chapel or to gather regularly for the liturgy of the hours or Eucharist. If these communal forms of prayer provided the primary supportive matrix of one's contemplation, their loss or irregular frequency may leave a serious void in one's prayer life.

The loss or change of forms of mediation can be a strong temptation to rebellion and stagnation, a compelling call to spiritual growth, or both. If people respond to the grace of the call, idolatry (i.e., making into gods things that are less than God) is conquered, and a deeper trust and faith become possible. God presents God in a new and mysterious way and is experienced as doing something unprecedented and at first unnoticed. (See Is 43:18-20.)

### FOSTERING SUPPORT AND GROWTH

The response to such crises involves a delicate combination of passivity and activity. The spiritual work in this profound transition requires an experience of "the death of God," particularly the diminishment or loss of images of God. This time of waiting, of emptiness and nothingness, creates the space needed for new images of God to arise, images that will express more adequately the experience of a God who heals, makes whole, and frees. It is also a time for critical thinking. It is necessary to analyze the various strands in the tradition that have reinforced the oppressive stereotyping of both women and men spiritually, politically, and economically within the ecclesial community and to reclaim those strands that carry wholeness, inclusion, and liberation. Finally, the spiritual work entails new vision and demands experimenting with less conventional behavior. It requires saying no to dependency and yes to independence, no to security and yes to risk. This spiritual work is at once surrender to the God emerging from the experience and engagement in the appropriate activity at the level of ego and identity required by a newly developed self-definition.

There is also much in all these transition experiences that can only be lived through passively, and cannot be understood until reflected on after or near the completion of transition. Yet there are three basic resources that should be made available to everyone. In order to benefit from these, it is essential that one have a firm basic commitment to the active and passive processes of spiritual growth, even though one may not fully understand them much of the time. This commitment is a kind of perseverance, not in maintaining old forms or practices when they are no longer helpful, but in choosing to "hang on" in the midst of chaos and confusion in preference to angry rebellion or bitter stagnation. Underlying this tenacity is an implicit belief that not only will God see one through, but God is in fact *initiating* the growth.

In *Pathfinders*, Gail Sheehy presented a consistent pattern in the men and women she studied who had successfully negotiated various passages in adult life. She stressed the importance of a support system, a purpose in life, and what I described earlier as postconventional faith. I believe that the religious crisis often experienced during times of life transition is a call to move to a greater spiritual depth, which itself will support and complement growth in other areas of life.

### SUPPORT SYSTEM NEEDED

In the midst of a spiritual crisis, as in any other personal crisis, a support system that reinforces one's freedom and self-esteem is invaluable. Growth in the spiritual life is characterized by increased poise and freedom from various internal compulsions and external coercions. Yet the movement toward greater freedom is fraught with anxiety and risk. Sebastian Moore, in *The Crucified Jesus is No Stranger*, describes our almost overwhelming fear of becoming who we are. It is his contention that our fear of realizing our full potential is so great that we resist all evidence of this occurrence in other people's lives, including the life of Jesus. One of the manifestations of our universal sinfulness is this fear of fullness of life; it tempts us to avoid becoming more whole. It is no wonder, then, that support for growth is extremely important.

Within the contemporary church, many people are finding this kind of support in a relationship with a spiritual director, in a therapeutic collaboration (especially if depression is present), or in the embrace of friends who love and accept them despite their difficulties, failures, and insecurities. The supportive other in each of these relationships must be capable of the generative love of which Erik Erikson speaks. Friends or companions on this journey toward fullness must be capable of desiring the development and wholeness of the person in transition, regardless of the outcome for themselves. Some people are threatened by the change they experience in their friends (because they need them to remain as they are) and consequently may undermine the growth of the person in transition. Such individuals could hardly be considered a part of one's *support system*.

### A PURPOSE IN LIFE

The second internal resource that carries one through personal and spiritual crisis is the strength of one's purpose in life. This purposefulness may be felt and expressed in a variety of ways, even in the middle of a transition. One's purpose in life is revealed in feelings and actions that draw one to care for and about someone or something that is beyond yet includes the self. It may be an inner

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conviction that God desires one's freedom and growth, and at the same time relationships with others. Many women who suddenly find themselves heads of households often say that the only thing that gave them the courage and strength to develop a wholly new life-style was the absolute need to care for their children. Purposefulness may be experienced by the creative writer or artist whose communication of meaning through words or visual beauty connects him or her to the larger community. It may also take the form of helping others in a way one sees as significant, whether through social change, spiritual guidance, or the relief of immediate needs.

Purposefulness also includes something that at first may appear to be selfish, especially where women are concerned. Ordinarily, one moves from meeting the needs of the self to caring for the needs of others. Carol Gilligan, in her recent book *In A Different Voice*, observes that many women learn to care for the needs of others before they learn to care for their own needs. Women are maturing rather than regressing when they can continue to care for others while learning to care for themselves. This developmental pattern is the reverse of that more often seen in men, for whom the movement toward the other usually occurs only after the needs of the self are met. Women who have found meaning in their lives solely through caring for others are often propelled into a crisis when the focus of attention unexpectedly returns to the fulfillment of their own wants, needs, and desires. This is the movement toward independence that Richard Vaughan described in an earlier issue of *HUMAN DEVELOPMENT* ("Counseling Religious in Crisis," vol. 4, Spring 1983) as one of the primary forms midlife crisis takes for women. Because many women have been taught that it is selfish to place themselves first, they experience a great deal of guilt and conflict when they begin to claim autonomy; however, the result of this autonomous development is an increased freedom for self-tran-

scendence and for interdependent rather than dependent relationships.

For men at midlife, the sense of purpose in life may be enhanced by personal involvement in caring for family or significant others. The man's earlier experience of the meaningfulness of his work may have come from his ability to support his family materially or from the self-worth he derived from his capacity to meet the demands of his work; but at midlife these extrinsic rewards are no longer sufficient. A man can grow to value more than power or status the quality of his interpersonal interaction with his family or colleagues and the meaningfulness of his work or its impact on others. His affective experience can deepen dramatically in this shift from distance to closeness, and he can discover profound meaning in the world of feelings.

However meaning or purpose is experienced by men and women, the effect is a sense of the significance of one's life and work and a quality of action that might be described as active love. The person in transition can be sustained by this conviction of meaning if he or she discovers it in some form in the present experience. If newly discovered meaning is insufficient to carry one through transition, or if no meaning can be found anywhere (as in depression), psychological and medical help should be sought.

### POSTCONVENTIONAL FAITH AND PRAYER

The third resource comprises certain active qualities of faith and prayer, which may take different forms during the spiritual crisis evoked by major life transitions. As I stressed earlier, the experience of faith and prayer in transition should be characterized by both active and passive qualities, by both doing and surrendering. The recommendation most frequently received by people undergoing spiritual purification and experiencing the confusion of midlife crisis is to "surrender to the experience"; but this advice emphasizes only the passivity. It is better, in my view, to alternate between the passivity of surrender and an integrative activity that assimilates and acts upon the changes that may be introduced quite against one's conscious will. Faith, as both the experience of God and the belief system itself, is often severely challenged; prayer too is radically altered. Thus, there is no more important time in life to balance passivity and activity in the context of a faith community.

### EXPERIENCE OF GOD

During profound transition, one's image of God may be severely challenged. Persons who picture a loving, protective Father-God may not be able to reconcile this image with life experience that seems

harsh and beset with difficulties. Persons who imagine God as always nurturing and protecting may need to relinquish this particular image and expand it to one that is more able to sustain the paradox of nearness and distance, protection and challenge, intimacy and awe. Examples of image-change are as numerous and diverse as the people who experience them.

New experience may require a temporary loss of a specific image of God because it is not adequate to the present circumstances. This loss of a God-image may then make it necessary to live for a time with a more generalized conviction of a God who can support one with a power and a love greater than one's own. Confidence about who God is becomes a more tentative sense of God's reality or of what God wants to be in one's life. The image of God that encompasses this new reality will come later. This time between distinct images is often painful and frightening, but it also allows one a new experience of God, the Holy Mystery that encompasses one's life. When one loses a clear image of and certainty about God, a new moment of surrender becomes possible. "Certitude" is replaced by deeper commitment to this living God, trust in the outcome, and willingness to work through the salient life issues even before all is clear. Entering into this new relationship with God, then, is real activity balanced by the surrender of acceptance.

### **BELIEF SYSTEM REVISED**

Such a change in one's experience of God necessitates a change in one's belief system. This process is one of critical reflection and renewed personal appropriation. The great mysteries of faith either take on new meaning—a meaning rooted now in one's experience—or fade into doubt. One begins to develop a way of thinking about faith that goes beyond what one was told to believe or expected to do, and one learns to take into account viewpoints differing from his or her own. Thus, while rebuilding a personal belief system by accepting some beliefs and excluding others, the person now also becomes able to accept ambiguity and tolerate intellectual complexity. The new system of belief, formulated as an expression of one's own experience, does not achieve coherence all at once. One moves from an unconsidered coherence to a lack of coherence to an ability to sustain paradox in a newly integrated belief system.

### **SUPPORTED BY PAST ENCOUNTERS**

Often, what sustains the person through this ambiguity and confusion is a personal history of mystical experience. Without presuming that everyone is a fully developed contemplative, I believe most people have memories of moments in which they felt themselves to be in communion with a reality

greater than themselves. These religious experiences may have taken place in widely differing situations—in contact with nature, in moments of prayer, in the presence of intimate friends, in graced interchanges within the Christian community—but they are invariably characterized by a deeply felt, heart-touching realization of the presence of a benevolent God. What is important is that people have experienced at some time in their lives the "spiritual awakening" that typifies the beginning of the conversion experience. It may never have been acted on or responded to by commitment to a spiritual life, but it is a sacred time that is accessible to memory and whose existence need not be taken on trust. One form or touch of Loving Mystery can be enough to support men and women through their transitory doubt and ambiguity. This is true even if they have experienced this Mystery only in hope and desire, and not as a palpable presence.

### **FAITH COMMUNITY HELPFUL**

Yet another resource is participation in a faith community that can offer support during a transition. Such a community must be characterized by a climate of emotional honesty and the capacity of its members to be empathetic to someone who may be confused, doubtful, angry, or ambivalent. There are many different kinds of believing communities that can help to meet this need: prayer groups, theological reflection groups, support groups, local religious communities, study groups, liturgical communities, affinity groups, Scripture study groups, ministry groups, and so on. By participating in a group in which members share their faith experiences respectfully and honestly, the person who is reconsidering his or her relationship to God and the Christian community can maintain a meaningful relationship to the larger community of believers. This experience of trust and connectedness is usually nourishing to the person in spiritual crisis and helps to prevent alienation.

Because the person searching for a supportive community is often vulnerable, the search requires considerable risk and courage. A faith community can aid a person's growth during transition only if it has enough members who themselves have reached a postconventional level of faith. These people can accept and support the experience of others in all their ambiguity. They will neither reject nor judge another's attempts at critical reflection or renewed appropriation of belief, because they will not feel that their own systems of belief are threatened.

The spiritual crisis associated with a major transition can be painful and difficult, and at times it seems endless. In the spiritual journey there are also spiritual passages during which no one and nothing except God can relieve the distress and