

Gail Jones: The three stages of recession transition

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“Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Our country is in a major transition, beyond the scope of what most of us have been taught how to embrace. Many people mistakenly think a transition is an external event. When you get married or divorced, switch careers, start a new business, retire or face a health challenge, you confront change. Our country’s recession is a significant current “event” certainly fueling an upheaval in many people’s lives.



Yet, the outer circumstance is only the impetus for the internal changes many will encounter, and the resulting identity shift. Think of this analogy: Having a baby may make you a mother or father, but learning to parent is a lifelong journey.

The average adult transition of integrating the external change into a new internal identity typically takes at least between one and three years. If you’ve lost a loved one, for example, the one-to-three days of bereavement mark the event, but learning to live as a widow or motherless child takes a lot longer.

So, as we confront the challenges of our changing economy, I encourage you to understand that a deep internal process is occurring for many of us, and it is marked by three key stages. Embracing each of these stages with compassion for ourselves helps us move forward more gently.

The first stage of transition is “letting go”—grieving the previous life as you knew it. Feelings of loss or despair often occur during this period, and giving yourself permission to feel and release them is key to moving on. Keeping “a stiff upper lip” is unhelpful because feelings not expressed often come back later to haunt us.

The second stage, which I call “the void,” is the period of not knowing—sort of what many of us felt when our new president took over, hoping life would improve, but not quite sure how. Some of you seeking work or a lifestyle change may be experiencing this stage now, and as uncomfortable as it can be, you cannot “will” it away. Our deepest level of faith is required during this period, yet it is often the most transformative stage of transition as a new self is being birthed. This stage represents a time of experimenting, feeling confused, lost or even apathetic as we are unsure of next steps. These feelings will pass if you can allow them in and accept they are normal. Give yourself permission to relish “being” not doing. Answers and ideas often come to us in quiet times.

The third stage is “re-creating” or “new beginnings,” like when you land the new job or get that business off the ground. While at first it’s exciting to move forward, it also can feel a little shaky. You’re in the new job, but not quite sure yet of your competence in the unfamiliar surroundings. Indulging in

exquisite self-care is as important here as it is in all the other stages. Choose to be extra kind to yourself.

With our recession, whether you've lost your job or a significant portion of your life savings, comprehending these psychological stages will help you accept the internal adjustments of a new life that is unfolding.

Despite what your bank account is showing, you may soon become richer in other ways, like the increased time you have with your family or a shift in priorities that leads you to follow that dream you've had on hold for a long time. Many of us also need to rest after being on overdrive during the more prosperous years, keeping ourselves so busy we forgot to balance those check books, or worse, make contact with long lost friends or family members in a caring, loving way.

Focusing on "lack" or what is missing from our lives versus opportunity keeps us stuck in pain. It's OK to visit the losses, and in fact, is healthy to do so. But staying there keeps you a victim. It's a lot more fun and rewarding to live life as a creator.

Laid off suddenly myself recently from a part-time job that significantly helped support my family, I can appreciate the fear — particularly as a single mother responsible for two children. I cried. I prayed. I walked. I called friends. I attended yoga as frequently as I could to center myself. Rarely do we create something wonderful from fear; peace is a better avenue for starting anew. Finding ways to calm yourself is critical.

My strategy to conquer doubt, or any other internal naysayers, was choosing to use my increased downtime to be loving to myself, my children and all those with whom I came in contact. As a result, my energy started shifting, as did my hope.

I continue to have fun chatting with store clerks, neighbors, and the service people who support me. The distance between us has narrowed, realizing all of us are in this recession, and the resulting reorganization of our national psyche, together.

Seeing challenge as temporary and expecting new possibilities to emerge out of adversity keep us open to experiencing life in the present as joyful, no matter what the outer circumstance may look like.

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