Spiritual Care in Times of Transition
By Nancy Gordon, CSA director

It's probably no accident that the topic that came to me for this, my first article in "Spirit," is "Spiritual Care in Times of Transition." The CLH Center for Spirituality and Aging is itself in transition as I move into the position of director. This position was ably held by Donald Koepke since the Center's inception 10 years ago. Don is in transition as he moves from active director to director emeritus. And I am in transition as I seek to "fill his shoes" (not possible, I know!) and adjust to life in southern California after almost 20 years in the Chicago area.

Those of us who work with older adults know that they face many transitions—often in quick succession. Retirement, the loss of a spouse, a major change in health status, the loss of long-time friends, a move to a retirement community, the loss of possessions, a move from one level of care to another within a retirement community are just some of the transitions older adults encounter.

William Bridges in his book Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes describes transitions as having three parts: (1) endings, (2) the in-between neutral zone, and (3) new beginnings. He stresses that we need to mark and grieve the ending, and give ourselves that in-between neutral zone to heal and to gradually discern and move toward a new beginning with a sense of hope and energy. Our tendency as a culture is to want to rush through the process, not recognizing the meaning and the impact of the ending, allowing little time for reflection and healing, but to move immediately to the new beginning—whatever it is.

And we often expect the same of the older adults we serve. But I'm wondering if we wouldn't better serve them if we intentionally set about finding ways to mark and to grieve endings, to provide presence and reassurance in that disorienting time in between the old and the new, and to celebrate new beginnings. We can begin by paying attention to our own transitions and perhaps changing our expectations of ourselves. We can teach staff about transitions—for their own use and so that all will be ready and better able to assist our older adults with their transitions.

Some suggestions for spiritual care during transitions that can be shared by all staff:

**Marking endings:**
* Validate the losses and the feelings those losses provoke.
* Listen to the story of what has been lost and the importance it held in the person’s life.
* Suggest ways to mark the ending—whether it be a ritual, creating a remembrance piece or taking a symbolic action.

**Support in the in-between neutral zone:**
* Elicit stories of prior changes and transitions they have navigated and help them remember the strengths that got them through those.
* Provide activities that give them a taste of fun and creativity, a reminder that their lives are not all loss and change.
* Encourage them to intentionally practice being grateful even in this difficult time.
* Be present and attentive.
* If it's congruent with their tradition, pray with them and for them.

**Celebrating beginnings:**
* Create a ritual of celebration and blessing.
* Encourage them to tell their story and share it with others who may be going through a similar transition.
* Ask them what this experience has meant and what they have learned.
* Affirm the future. It may not be the future they once thought they had, but they do have one.

As spiritual beings we have a need to have meaning in our life and to believe that there is hope and a future. Assisting our older adults through transition, inviting reflection on its meaning and helping them to glimpse a new beginning and a future is spiritual work and a great service.

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