

## SERMON

### “Living in the Neutral Zone”

Rev. Stephen Landale, UU Congregation of Grants Pass, 4/6/20

What interesting times we are living in now. Perhaps more literally than the author of Ecclesiastes imagined, this is indeed a time to “refrain from embracing” – at least physically embracing those outside of our household. There is a time and a season for everything, and this season too, shall pass.

And it is seeming more like a season than a few weeks. For some of us, the lucky ones, this season, while limiting, may be like the video we just saw of John and Yoko, walking into their home, a beautiful home filled with light and John’s music. John Lennon was imagining a world of peace and freedom from materialism. We can imagine that, too. We can also imagine getting along with our household loved ones as well as they seem to be. Of course, give John and Yoko a month or two stuck inside, and they might be having their quarrels over toilet paper usage or something else.

For some, especially those in healthcare, food delivery, cleaning, security, and other essential jobs, and those who have lost their income, this is a shocking and frightening time. As Florida Scott Maxwell wrote, “Life does not accommodate you, it shatters you.” Indeed.

As a hospice chaplain and grief support group leader, I can’t help but notice the stages of grief we have been cycling through during this pandemic... shock, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. And that’s for everyone, even those of us fortunate enough not to have suffered a major loss: the death of a loved one, the loss of a job. For those who have, the grief and fear is compounded. Even the near-misses are frightening – the relative or friend or coworker suffering from Coronavirus-like symptoms that turn out to be something else, for instance.

In this sermon I’ll be turning for guidance to the work of William Bridges, particularly *Transitions* and *The Way of Transition*, from which I collected the literary quotations Elena and I just shared. I’ll also be turning to popular TV shows from about fifteen years ago, “Lost” and “Battlestar Galactica.”

My key point is this: We are living in The Neutral Zone. Not the Twilight Zone... The Neutral Zone. This is a concept I learned in the work of William Bridges (how lovely to be born with the name Bridges when one is to write books on Transitions). He picked up this concept from a Dutch anthropologist, Arnold van Gennep, who published in 1909, *Rites of Passage*, a study of non-Western rituals used by tribal groups to negotiate the turning points of their lives.

The Neutral Zone is the bridge between the ending of one phase of life and the beginning of another, whether that change be caused by adolescence, the death of a loved one, an engagement or marriage, a divorce, a move, or an illness. Many transitions move underneath the surface, as one may let go of an old habit or way of being, while still being in the same external situation.

The Neutral Zone also applies when change is forced by external events, such as an earthquake, a hurricane, or a pandemic. Or a war or terrorist attack, an economic recession or depression. The Neutral Zone is often a time of great turbulence; it can also be a time of quiet, of time seeming to slow down. Think of the times you've lost a loved one, how grief can put you on a roller-coaster of emotions and change, and yet how empty and flat you may feel as well.

And, mysteriously and beautifully, we may also be graced during times of grief and crises by an inexplicable sense of peace, that all is well. A moment in eternity, a taste of Heaven.

In the Neutral Zone, just as in grief generally, the most important thing is to feel what we're feeling, to allow all of the unrest we're experiencing be like a tilling of the soil, disruptive and yet bringing in oxygen and making place for seeds to grow. The only way through grief is through it. We may never "get over" the loss of a loved one, but we are changed by their loss. Some of these changes may even be blessings to ourselves and others, such as deepened sensitivity, compassion, and resilience.

And this is how it is in all experiences of The Neutral Zone... yes, tend to the practical tasks. *But don't rush the feelings.* Allow the time of turbulent change to be a teacher, a revealer of a new, emerging self.

A key concept of Bridges is the difference between *change* and *transition*. The change is the death, the end of a relationship or job, the move, the pandemic and the treatment: social or physical distancing leading to economic devastation.

The *transition* is the accompanying *internal* changes that do or do not take place. Moving on with our life, internalizing the best qualities of our lost loved one, and with a more compassionate heart for others who have experienced loss. Allowing our souls to be deepened by the seeming failure of a relationship or work venture, so that we are in a way different people in our next relationship or work venture. And so on.

Bridges writes, "*Transition does not require that you reject or deny the importance of your old life, just that you let go of it.*" He describes The Neutral Zone as a place where we have "a ringside seat" to observe oneself, particularly the ways we habitually and not necessarily helpfully tend to react to change.

The Neutral Zone is a time to foster new ways of adapting to change. So, for all the losses we are experiencing during this pandemic, and all of the understandable anxiety and fear about very plausible scenarios for others and ourselves, *this time is also one of opportunity.*

It will be a lost opportunity if we do not allow ourselves, during this time of cataclysmic change, to experience an inner transition as we continue to settle into this time of social distancing and all that comes with it. *It will be a lost opportunity if we do not make a meaningful transition back in the weeks or months ahead, if we are the same people, with the same habits.* As Goethe said, “Everybody wants to be somebody; nobody wants to grow.”

Speaking of “Lost”... I’ve been thinking of that ground-breaking TV series that ran from 2004-2010, beginning just three years after 9/11 and running through the great recession. The show begins with its characters finding themselves on a tropical island after their plane crashed onto the beach. The plane crash is what Bridges calls a “change.” One hour, you’re flying from Australia to Los Angeles. The next, you’re marooned on a beach with about fifty strangers, many wounded, and the bodies of those who did not survive. How the characters adapt to this change is what Bridges calls “transition.”

Some adjust more quickly than others. The first and main character, Jack, wakes in a jungle, gradually remembers the crash and runs to the beach, where he immediately tends to the wounded. He seems to have transitioned remarkably quickly. Not really. Jack is a surgeon, and tending to the wounded is what Jack has done for years. He has carried over parts of his former self, putting them to good use. But this does not mean he has transitioned. He passes on an opportunity for transition when he declines an invitation to preside over or even participate in a funeral service for those who died in the crash. Returning to the States from Australia with the body of his father, Jack is traveling literally with his dead father but has not yet done the soul-work of transition following his death. That, of course, follows in a later episode.

A young woman named Shannon resists transition to an almost comical degree, tanning herself on the beach, asking her brother why he bothers with so much activity when the rescuers will be there any hour. She continues in this vein for days. Watching this again this week, I couldn’t help but think of our President and some governors being in denial of this Pandemic, and all those beach-goers in Florida during spring break and this weekend in southern California. “Denial” is not just a river in Egypt. 😊

Charlie, played by the same actor who played Merry the hobbit in the Lord of the Rings movies, is not a natural hero, leader, or adventurer, yet he surprisingly volunteers for a dangerous mission to seek out the cabin of the airplane, believed to be inland. His motive for this mission turns out to be most un-hobbit like, however, as he climbs over dead bodies to get to the bathroom, where he reaches into the latrine to recover his “precious”: a bag of heroine.

I can hardly imagine a stronger image of a character responding to change with action and apparent bravery, yet resisting internal transition than Charlie going back to the monster-guarded plane, and even to the toilet, to recover his drugs. Later I noticed a tattoo on his arm: *“Living is easy with eyes closed.”* Charlie takes every opportunity in the early episodes to mention that he is a bassist and backup

vocalist in a popular band -- inconsequential skills on this island. He has one of the most difficult transitions, giving up a rock-star identity, a drug addiction, and a habit of living with eyes closed.

*Charlie could easily represent The United States of America in our current predicament. We think we're the stars of the world, we're addicted to so many things, and we find it easier to live with eyes closed.*

*Again, Bridges writes, "Transition does not require that you reject or deny the importance of your old life, just that you let go of it." We can resist this letting go in myriad ways, embracing change while resisting transition. People who jump from relationship to relationship or from job to job or from one obsession to another may appear to be liberated or fearless in their embrace of change, but often these external changes are superficial: the person behaves essentially the same way in the new relationship, job, or activity. We've all seen this in others. And here's a secret.... others have seen it in us, too!! ☺*

These external changes are made precisely to avoid true transition and all of its accompanying discomfort and uncertainty. Being the comfortable, flawed version of oneself may keep bringing the same, predictable, often miserable results, but that can seem a safer choice than the risk of transitioning to a new self with unknown results!

*To make a true transition, rather than jump into the next superficial change, one must be willing to enter the disorientation of The Neutral Zone – perhaps it is a little like The Twilight Zone! – the place of Unknowing. Each transition is a little like adolescence, when we're part child, part teenager, and part adult, and nobody knows (least of all ourselves) which self will emerge in a given situation.*

The magical nature of the island in the "Lost" series resonates because there is something other-worldly about the Neutral Zone. And, of course, there is something other-worldly about most science fiction, including one of my favorite TV series, the rebooted Battlestar Galactica series of roughly the same years as Lost.

"Lost" begins with a plane crash. "Battlestar Galactica" aired in 2002, just months after 9/11, and begins, within the first hour or so, with all but about 100,000 humans being destroyed in a massive attack by the Cylons – robots originally created by humans to serve human need.

This kind of sudden, catastrophic, civilization-destroying change is a closer fit -- albeit much worse -- to our situation, with a pandemic and economic devastation. And oh yes, we still have the growing effects of human-caused Climate Change to contend with. Remember the devastating brush fires in Australia? Seems like years ago now, but it was only the last four months of last year.

In *Battlestar Galactica*, as in our situation, the first key strategic decision needed to save tens of thousands of lives is the same: retreat. *Galactica*'s unlikely hero is Lara Roslin, the Secretary of Education, who learns in short order:

- 1) She has cancer.
- 2) The world has come to an end. The Cylons have in a single day nearly destroyed all of humanity.
- 3) She has succeeded to the office of the Presidency because the President, Vice-President, and the other forty government leaders ahead of her on the line of succession have been killed.

Roslin could have panicked. She could have remained in denial. She could very easily have ceded her power to military leaders who were naturally taking charge. She did none of those things, at least not for long. She transformed herself from teacher and Secretary of Education into President, even as she was taking her oath of office.... Watch this...: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5w5uMVU16E>

Roslin is a case study in Transition: her inner transition likely saves the lives of all other people. As President, she also successfully transferred the parts of her old role and self that were useful to her new role and self. She realized that the only real choice was to protect the children, including hope of future children, and run away. But in taking the oath of office, she becomes a decisive leader who provides clear direction for her people. Her hardest task is convincing Commander Adama.

Commander Adama offers compelling, decisive leadership as well. He is truly remarkable.... As a military commander. Like Jack the surgeon on *Lost*, he does not hesitate, and his actions save lives. But none of this changes the fact that he is fighting a vastly superior and better-prepared foe. All would be lost if Adama does not make a critical internal transition and realize that the school teacher, as he called President Roslin -- at least he didn't call her "that woman" -- all would be lost if he doesn't realize Roslin was right: the only rational choice is to run away and hope people start making babies.

Interestingly, Adama changes his mind when he is distracted during an important conversation to observe two young adults flirting in the background. That is his brief "Neutral Zone" moment: he uncharacteristically loses focus on the task at hand, lets his mind wander, and sees the big picture.

By listening, by taking time to observe what his unconscious mind guides him to notice, by conscious choice, Adama transitions from commander of a force recklessly attacking invaders to commander of "a rag-tag fleet, bound for a place called Earth." He also seems to develop not only respect but also a soft spot for the school teacher President, but that takes a while to develop. 😊

It's interesting to note how sci-fi myths have changed. In the 1960s, as we put a man on the moon, we watched *Star Trek* with Commander Kirk's mission "to boldly go where no man has gone before." In the 1970s and 80s, as we were in a Cold War with the Soviet Union, we watched *Star Wars* with its

war against “The Evil Empire,” and our real-life President, Ronald Reagan, described the Soviet Union with those words: “The Evil Empire.” In *Blade Runner* a few years later, good and evil became less well-defined, and even the lines blurred between humanity and technology.

Then, we began to worry about human-caused Climate Change and the unintended consequences of U.S. foreign policy in the Mideast that contributed to 9/11. And our new sci-fi heroes in *Battlestar Galactica* are saying things like, “Why are we as a people worth saving? We still commit murder... we still visit all of our sins upon our children. We refuse to accept responsibility for everything we’ve done... We decided to play God, create life. When that life turned against us, we comforted ourselves in the knowledge that it really wasn’t our fault, not really. You cannot play God and then wash your hands of the things that you created. Sooner or later, the day comes when you can’t hide from the things that you’ve done anymore.” -- Adama’s words at the decommissioning of the *Battlestar Galactica*, shortly before the surprise attack of the Cylons.

In the face of a massive threat to human life, we are having to do the same thing the *Battlestar Galactica* heroes did: retreat. Run away from the threat. Find home and stay safe. But once we’re safe, it’s time to face the truth about the problems we’ve created.

And you know, at some point, we’ll be changing back to something resembling normalcy in terms of freedom of movement and of gatherings. ***I believe that the well-being of future generations depends on the degree to which we – all of us who find ourselves in this difficult time – transition, internally, before and during that change.***

When we have a job we value, and start feeling sick with a possibly contagious illness, will we fall back into the familiar thinking that we can either “tough it out” and go to work or “exercise self-care” and stay home, so we can work more next week? Because you know what? As the daughter of a hospice patient said to me recently, *these choices are both inherently self-centered. Our choice is actually to go to work for any reason and thereby endanger others, or practice care for others and stay home.*

The coronavirus pandemic did not CREATE the need for this shift in perspective. It has REVEALED it to us. *Every year since 2010, twelve thousand to sixty thousand people die of influenza in the United States alone.* Over ten times that number become so ill that they are hospitalized. Stop and think of that. How many lives could have been saved, and could now be saved, if we stopped thinking in terms of “Do I push through and go to work, or do I rest now so I can work more later?” and *start thinking in terms of others first?*

This is a radical change. It’s time to stop complaining about how narcissistic our President is, and realize that only in a narcissistic culture could such a person come anywhere near the Presidency.

*And we'd better watch out, because this kind of shift in thinking just might snowball. We might stop living in denial of Climate Change, and how our individual choices contribute to it. We might reconsider that destination wedding we were thinking of having or attending. We might realize that two annual cross-country flights to see family isn't perhaps entirely necessary. Perhaps that could be one trip, or one every other year, and stay longer! Or save the money from flights and buy an electric or hybrid car for the trip! And fill in the gaps with Zoom! Which we all just love now, I know. 😊*

There's been some lovely videos of the skies clearing up over Wuhan and many other places – and in Venice, people can see clear to the bottom of the water again! The earth is getting a breather, and people are wondering how much more resilient the earth will be to our abuse because of this breather.

The breather for the earth will surely help. It might give us an extra year or two, perhaps more. But as we all know, slowing Climate Change requires massive changes in human behavior. If we are truly to change the course of this Titanic we're on, heading towards the devastating effects of Climate Change, *then the breather many of us are receiving is even more important* than the astonishing breather the earth is receiving.

During this breather – if you are privileged to be having one – you may find inspiration in music or art, in imagining with John Lennon a world without war, without materialism, without ideology and theology driving us apart.

You might find a mindfulness re-set. Practices of awareness.

You might find in religion, stories that inspire and give meaning and direction. Religious stories sustained and inspired President Roslin in *Galactica*, as she accepted the role of a prophesied leader. In our world, religious stories and structures have shaped American history in positive ways: we can see Exodus very much alive in the spirituals American slaves sang, and in the speeches of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and other Civil Rights leaders.

You might find in secular history, inspiration, guidance, and especially warnings. Those who do not know history are bound to repeat it.

Or you might find meaning in existentialism, a philosophy that says humanity is not inherently good or inherently evil: we are precisely what our actions show us to be. You might find meaning in realizing that with every action and inaction, you are defining humanity. *Commander Adama finds meaning in this approach by answering the question, "Are we worth saving?" moment to moment, in how he lives.*

*What an amazing shift in perspective: from asking “Will we get through this? Will we survive?” or even “How will we survive?” to asking, “How can I make us more worthy of saving? How can I be, in this moment, the best humanity has to offer?”*

We are in a great time of change now, devastating change. There will come a time when we can return to our old ways, for the most part. *But let’s remember that change means nothing if there is not an internal transition.* God or no God, intrinsic meaning in the universe or no, we are, most of us, outside of the hospitals and other places, on a time out. We are in the Neutral Zone, no longer living the life we were, and not yet living the life we hope to be living in the months or possibly years ahead. *We have a ringside seat to see how we’ve been living: great in many ways, poorly in others, and downright abusive to the earth, which is therefore less hospitable to us.*

***This is a crisis, a once-in-a-lifetime crises.  
It may also be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.  
But only if we change – from the inside out.***

Only if we start thinking less about ourselves and our needs and especially the countless wants we mistake for needs.

Only if we stop spending money on things we don’t need and align our financial investments with our values.

Only if we stop fighting wars and stop pretending they aren’t happening (with American weapons) or we can’t do anything about them.

Only if we stop complaining about our elected leaders and *take fully active roles* in our precious Democratic Republic, *seeking the betterment of all and the belittling of no one.*

Only if we start thinking more about how our actions and inactions affect others and the interdependent web of which we are a part. The interdependent web of which we are *a part*. Not the apex. Perhaps not even an essential part. *The earth sure as hell can thrive without us. We cannot thrive without it.*

In Battlestar Galactica, the survivors were *Bound for a Place Called Earth*. It was like paradise to them, and they weren’t even sure it existed. *Well, we’re here – it’s hard to imagine a more magnificent planet in the universe.* Really... miracles upon miracles, wherever we look.

*We are Bound TO a Place Called Earth. Let’s make this crisis the opportunity for inner transformation that leads to global transformation.*

*And let’s remember – the real work is with ourselves. Our everyday habits. The version of humanity we present to our families, our neighbors, the most vulnerable in our community, and especially those we may consider our enemies. And to all living things on this miracle we call Earth, our home. In many ways this time is a gift... let’s use it well.*