

Changing the Self Involves Transition

It has been well over a year since I last contributed a column on psychology to *The Northerner*. I have been at the University of Calgary completing the class requirements for a Ph.D. in Counselling Psychology. Since I can complete my dissertation and candidacy exams while living in La Ronge, I am back with my family and community. It feels as tho I am the same person that left over a year ago, but I know that I have changed in some ways. How we are depends on how we see ourselves, and I see myself differently. Therapist William Bridges called the kind of change that results in a change to the self a “transition”.

My latest transition was planned, but most are not. Bridges, who made a career of helping people in transition, said he did not really know transition until he experienced the infidelity and subsequent death of his wife from cancer. The raw and conflicting emotions he had that resulted in him becoming a different person are detailed in his 2001 book, *The way of transition: Embracing life's most difficult moments*. Planned transitions are easier to handle.

Ordinary counselling may involve changes in approach, problem solving or perception, but psychotherapy involves planned changes to the self. The self includes identity. For example, I am a father, brother, counsellor, friend, writer, student and chess player, but I am more than the roles I play. The self is also about feelings of continuity, how I am the same from year to year; distinctness, how I am unique from other people; and agency, how I can make things happen. We cannot avoid change. Changes to the self happen over time, but we have the ability to plan those changes. We can structure who we are and who we want to become.

My research is about how people construct their sense of self and how that structure may be mapped. I believe that understanding and empowerment for self change can flow from thinking about who we are and how we came to be. While you can make these changes on your own, a psychologist can help facilitate the transition.