

M|E|A

The Anatomy of a Transition

The End

Messy Middle

New Beginnings





Welcome to the world’s first midlife wisdom school—and to a community built on navigating transitions, cultivating purpose and owing wisdom at our a beach-front campus in Baja California Sur (Mexico), our Online programs, or at our new Regenerative ranch 2,600-acre ranch outside of Santa Fe, New Mexico. MEA has nearly 4,000+ alumni from over 44 countries and 26 regional chapters.

Meet The Authors



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Introduction

Certain periods of life are filled with change and transition. Early on, childhood adolescence transitions into “adulthood,” where we craft an independent identity, build careers, and establish long-term relationships.

But the transitions of middle age have a different flavor and cadence than those in our youth. We know ourselves better. We are more selective. Life doesn’t seem quite so endless in middle age. We often feel like we have a limited number of moves left to make. We bring with us responsibilities and commitments to family, businesses or careers; not to mention our history. Our decisions start to feel increasingly consequential.

Careers change or end. Relationships change or end. Our role(s) in life change. Some changes hit us out of the blue, and some have been brewing for decades. Suddenly the words “legacy” and “mortality” have a more profound and urgent pull. This sometimes makes transitions in midlife a confusing and lonely place to be. Other times, these transitions bring a tremendous sense of freedom and adventure.

Change is situational, transitions are psychological. We are faced with becoming something new. You may not be structuring your life around your job anymore, due to retirement, acquisition or furlough. That is a change. How you adapt to your new identity without that work or that title is a transition. Your children may not live in the house anymore. Yet, how you address this situation as an “empty nester” lies at the heart of a healthy—or not so healthy—transition.

What do we mean by Midlife Transitions?

Life is filled with change, whether we like it or not. Yet inner transitions in midlife are richly unfolding all around us. Sometimes we aren't fully aware of them at all, let alone understanding where we may be in each transition's trajectory. At the Modern Elder Academy, 1,000+ people have passed through our physical campus or flagship virtual program in our first three years of operation. Everyone who went through our programs identified with being in some aspect of "midlife" whether they were in their late 30s to mid-70s.

From Silicon Valley executives to bohemian artists to stay-at-home parents, they became aware that many things in their life were shifting. They arrived at our shores and doors in states of flux, depression, excitement, curiosity, frustration or grief. Many with a mix of them all. We've found midlife offers a rich opportunity to sort out transitions in several categories. We call them **The 6 P's of midlife transitions**:

1. **P**ersonal Transitions: moving, empty nesting, divorce, sense of pace
2. **P**hysical Transitions: changing hormones, diet, sensuality, physical or cognitive health
3. **P**sychological Transitions: feeling anxious or depressed, inflexible, lonely, angry
4. **P**andemic/Passing Transitions: fear of death, facing mortality, uncertainty, loss
5. **P**rofessional Transitions: retired, changed career, lost job, starting new business
6. **P**urpose Transitions: finding legacy, spiritual connection, new direction

For some, even one of these transitions represents such a singular and overwhelming experience, it supersedes all else. For others, it is the sheer volume of simultaneous transitions that puts us on our heels and feeling reactive, overwhelmed or stuck. Rarely are we managing one transition at a time.

Some transitions may be just starting, like working out with a trainer after being inactive to build not only new muscle but a new habit. Some transitions can be in flux for years, like eating healthier off and on, but now facing a health diagnosis that requires real change. And some transitions have essentially been internalized and feel exciting and new, like the awareness that can come after a broken heart—if we give enough time and reflection for the understanding to come that being on one’s own doesn’t have to mean a life alone...or feeling lonely.

Many people struggle with the idea of aging. It is unconsciously reinforced by society at large. Decade milestone birthdays are filled with “over the hill” jokes and cards featuring caricatures of decrepit “old” folks to represent us turning 50 or 60. Society tells us we should feel old, yet most do not resonate with that notion whatsoever. Is midlife old?

When the Social Security Act was passed in 1935, the official retirement age was 65. At the time, life expectancy for Americans was around 58 for men and 62 for women. Today life expectancy is closer to 80-years-old depending on where you live. In 70 short years, we have gained an extra 30 years of life. With innovations in medicine, pharmaceuticals, joint replacements and holistic treatments, these extra years of life are far from a passive rocking chair existence.

Today’s adults in the second half of life are active, engaged, and capable of tremendous impact. However, the collective mindset has remained stuck in the ageist idea that getting older means the inevitability of becoming frail, useless and a burden. This mindset is one of the first elements to address in order to explore the transitions of life that are before you now. What kind of a life do you want to create? One that is as deep and meaningful as it is long?

Are your Transitions Regenerative or Regressive?

Think of someone you know who's not managing a transition well (could it be you?) Maybe an overly-attached parent having a hard time letting go when their child leaves home, feeling a deep void but pining over the budding adult so much that they push them further away. Or how about the person whose spouse leaves them, they disparage their ex to anyone who will listen, but promptly enter into a carbon copy relationship. Or the business leader who sells their company, no longer has the identity, office routine, or accolades of their profession, and is now lost and angry despite their successes.

When facing significant change that requires an internal transition to occur, sometimes our fear overrides the impulse to grow.

We hold back. Stay stuck. Don't move. When that happens, we become more irritable, frustrated, impatient and anxious. This could be considered an example of a "regressive" transition, with little forward movement.

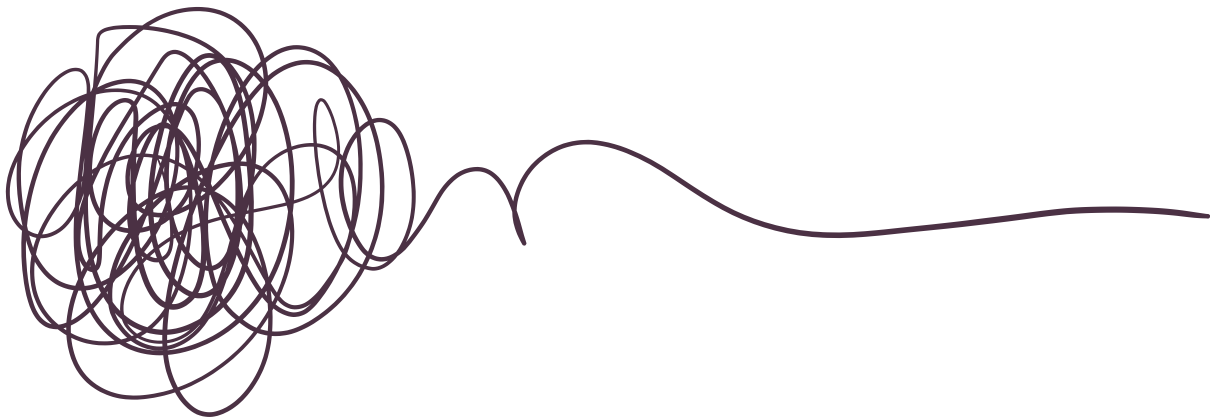
On the other hand, sometimes letting go of the old to embrace the new becomes truly transformational. You feel yourself growing, changing, improving and shifting. While the steps at hand may require the same amount of effort, the outcome is quite different. We call that a "regenerative" transition.

Using the examples of regressive *reactions* to transitions above, a regenerative *response* looks very different. The empty nester sees opportunities for freedom in their own life and opens up to new horizons they were unable to explore while actively parenting. The suddenly single person pauses to take stock of what was missing from their marriage and decides to get support to help heal the loss and envision the kind of relationship they want in the future. And the business leader focuses on how to share the wisdom they've gleaned in their successful endeavors and finds meaningful ways to share with others.

Developing the awareness to understand when transitions are happening is key. From there, using a set of tools to move through the stages of transitions can help you to navigate regeneration in your life. Curious? Let's get started and break down the Anatomy of a Transition and explore how it can help us to better understand midlife. An anatomy implies a living thing; something to be examined, explored and understood.

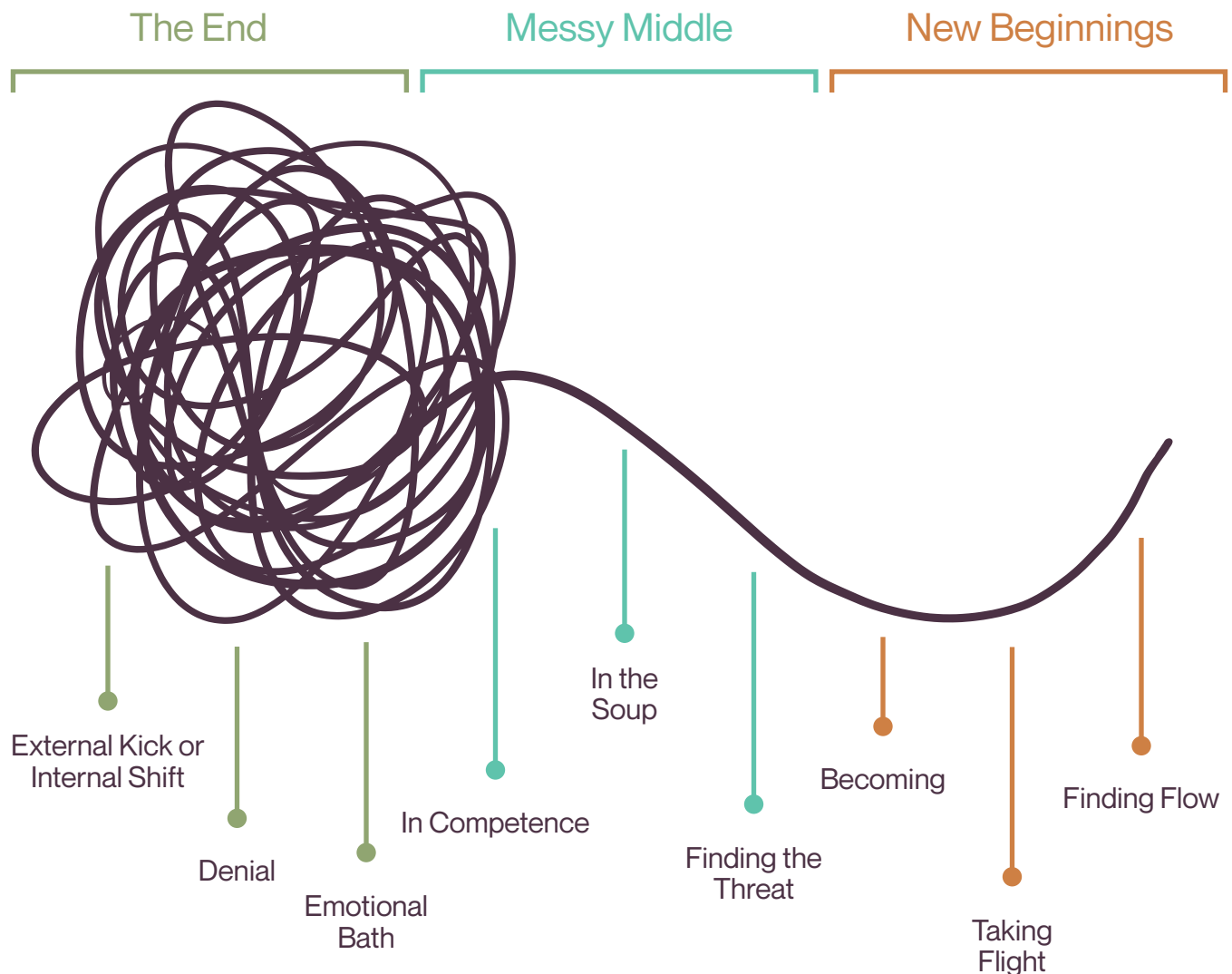
So what does a transition look like?

Damien Newman, a San Francisco-based designer, created what has come to be known as the “design squiggle.” Designing something new is messier than anyone likes to admit. We saw a lot of similarities between the design process and the realities of transition... check it out. Does this look familiar?



This design insight is a great starting point in contemplating the Anatomy of a Transition. There are predictable phases. Naming these component parts helps us better understand the transitions we are in. From there we can get a sense for the process ahead of us, and navigate the stages with greater speed, insight and positivity.

The Anatomy of a Transition has Three Parts:



Each of the three parts in the Anatomy of a Transition has three phases. We will break each one down so it feels more like a map. Being able to see the territory ahead makes taking the necessary steps so much easier.

The brain loves to integrate emotional subjects with metaphors. It's why we love stories and myths. The most obvious metaphor for transitional change is the butterfly. The caterpillar builds a cocoon and emerges a butterfly.

As we look at our own transitions this metaphor is packed with value. Considering the phases of our own transitional journeys there are moments when we are feeding, filling ourselves with whatever it is we will need to grow and develop just like a caterpillar.

There are also times we need to be still, to rewire ourselves into something completely new. The cocoon is rich with interior a potent metaphor as the caterpillar will literally 'digest itself' into a nutrient rich soup. This soup is subsequently organized into its next shape by a set of imaginal cells, each cell a blueprint for what comes next that often were contained within the caterpillar itself.

The idea that we carry the blueprints for our future selves from our youngest days, that even as we dissolve into the soup of transition or the crises of midlife that we have the ingredients for our next recipe of self is extremely attractive. Then we will emerge as a butterfly and literally take flight. We are feeling settled in the new reality.

This metaphor can be helpful to create a framework for our own transitions, particularly when you are feeling emotionally overwhelmed. But it isn't the end of the story...

We are not caterpillars. Our progression to butterfly-hood is not guaranteed. The challenge of humanity is that living a long time does not guarantee wisdom. Age does not guarantee growth.

Unlike the caterpillar, we must actively choose to dissolve ourselves into transitions. Life will not assure that we rewire into a butterfly.

We must consciously choose that path for ourselves. To do that we need to understand the component parts, nuances and risks we face in our own transitions. We need a clear anatomy for transitions. Let's take a deeper dive into these three parts are corresponding phases of transition.

Part 1: The End

We begin with the end in mind.

As paradoxical as it sounds, most transitions begin with an end.

Your partner ends the relationship. You receive a health diagnosis that ends your period of wellness. You move out of your home. When an ending occurs, our habits, patterns, and routines are disrupted and nothing is going to be the same again. Something has to die for something new to be reborn. The life of the “comfortable caterpillar” is coming to a close. Whether we want it to or not.

Sometimes our endings are intentional in that we initiate them ourselves, and sometimes they are unexpectedly forced upon us by outside forces. Endings always represent a break with the past. And, let’s face it, endings are hard. They can be dramatic and awful. But they don’t have to be. **Elegant or “regenerative” endings require as much skill and determination as chaotic or “regressive” ones. Endings can be incredibly painful. Yet they are vital in life as they create the space for something new to come into our lives.**

Our society doesn’t like endings or the death of anything. We don’t like to talk about it or plan for it. If a relationship ends, it’s often considered “a failure.” If a job or career ends, it is considered “a loss.” This mindset results in a lot of wasted time that could be spent moving on, as well as unnecessary suffering—when we don’t realize that as soon as we let go of the shore of the past, we can ease into the center of the river and begin floating to our next destination in the future.

Phase 1 - External Kick or Internal Shift

Sometimes transitions hit you right smack between the eyes or feel like a punch in the gut or a kick in the face. We've all experienced at least one of these feelings. **The External Kick is a forced transition in your life that comes at you from left field.** You're fired. Someone dies. A relationship abruptly ends. All of these are external kicks that are so unexpected, we may "kick up" our own resistance in the path to transition and change. An external kick often leaves us reeling without a sense of personal agency.

We are forced into transition.

The **Internal Shift** is different. These are the transitions that come from within you, when you are no longer satisfied with the status quo. The gnawing voice inside that whispers to you at 3am that you can't go on like this anymore. The "gut-knowingness" that this relationship is not going to work. Or, the day you realize you hate your job and cannot tolerate another day. It's the realization that a change has to come and you don't know exactly what to do, but you know you must do something.

An intrinsic shift is a transition you initiate. Naturally this may come with some guilt, resistance or procrastination. In either case the *transitional journey* is the same, but reckoning with how you got here is a necessary first step.

Phase 2 - Denial

Mark Twain is rumored to have first said, "*Denial ain't just a river in Egypt.*" Whether he did or not, the next phase of our transitional anatomy is denial.

You can tell you're swimming in the waters of **Denial** when you find yourself claiming, "nothing is wrong," despite what just happened to you, or what you are feeling inside. Perhaps while in denial you start displacing your own needs to external factors. For example, you want to end a relationship (intrinsic shift), but you're scared, and rationalize, "I don't want to change my relationship during this stressful time at work" or, "I can't move out until the kids have grown up."

Or maybe you received an extrinsic kick of a serious health diagnosis. While in denial you continue living exactly the same way. Ignoring the dietary and health changes you know could make a difference, putting it off until the next deadline to give up the coffee, sugar or alcohol.

Resistance laces up with denial in interesting ways. Many of us fear change and as we get older we hold on to the comfort of the known. Comfort is incredibly seductive. Comfort will often lead to us asking questions like, "can I both change and stay the same?"

Does that sound implausible? How many people in midlife wrestle with a deep desire to pursue a new calling, but persuade themselves to stay safe (and miserable) in their current job? (We are sensitive to the fact that many have lost jobs during the pandemic, and refer to the times when more people have had a choice to "keep their day job," or not, and take a leap toward the unknown.) Or what about those who place their attention on a new relationship while continuing to struggle in the one they're still in?

You can't fit two drinks in one glass, and comfort has been the killer of many a dream.

The last part of being in denial is being unable to imagine the size of the river in order to reach the other side. How long will it take for me to reach dry land, and just how uncomfortable am I actually going to be? Denial and resistance reflect a refusal to accept things as they are.

Phase 3 - The Emotional Bath

The **Emotional Bath**. It's a complicated mix of hot and cold emotions including: uncertainty, fear, loss, guilt, anger and resentment meeting up with intuition, confidence, determination and excitement. The scary emotions of transition make your blood run cold. The exciting emotions get you revved up. It is hard to get it “just right.”

Whether hot or cold, the Emotional Bath of swirling reactions often kicks out a healthy dose of shame, whether it's from an External Kick or an Internal Shift. The self-flagellation of, “I should have known better,” can be intense. Many are often left with an identity crisis—a sense of not knowing who we are. What is my identity? How do I matter anymore?

The challenge with the Emotional Bath is we are usually not in it alone. Friends, family, colleagues and community can also be right in the bath with us, letting us know how they feel about who we should be. Finger pointing, judgment or gossip are simply reflections of how challenging transitions are for humans. It's easier to judge someone else's journey than to get in the bath ourselves. Becoming someone new can be scary to those we know and love because it's a signal that we are shifting out of the ending phase and moving deeper into the journey.

Part 2: Messy Middle

The **Messy Middle** is the in-between. We like to call it being “liminal” or in “liminal space.”

lim·i·nal

/ˈlɪmᵻnəl/

adjective *technical*

1. relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process.
2. occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold.

The divorce is underway. The job ended and nothing is on the horizon to replace it. The house is empty. But you're not yet whatever you will become next: feeling comfortable and stable as a single, writing that book, or selling the suburban family home to get a cool new condo in the city. You ain't there yet.

Not. Yet.

The messy middle part of the Anatomy of a Transition gets even messier when you find out you're likely managing concurrent transitions across the “6 P's” of midlife. As are the people around you. A friend called this the “Meta Messy Middle” that can feel like an existential crisis. Diagrammatically this transitional mess looks something like this...



Phase 1 - In Competence

The first phase of the Messy Middle often begins by being stuck in your own competence. You are so “IN” your competence of what you’ve always known or always done, you can’t start embracing new possibilities. Being **In Competence** has now become an obstacle to overcome.

Knowing exactly how to deal with your life, how to manage the stresses and strains (however great) is better than not knowing what the future holds. Being “In Competence” is comfortable even if you hate your life. You’ve gained mastery and are able to demand respect for your experience.

The idea of exiting the “world of knowing” is valuable. But who wants to let that go? Going into the unknown is not an appealing option for someone stuck in their competence. If you have always been an accountant, but you want to be an artist, how do you let go of the calculator for the paintbrush?

Letting go of being good at who or what we once were while in a transition is a huge challenge of the messy middle. This phase can be humbling. We can feel trapped by what we have, by what makes us comfortable, by what we can manage. The discomfort of displacement can lead to spirals of getting lost, stuck or losing the confidence and motivation required to move ahead.

People return to what they know.

Fear, the lack of tools, and the challenges we face internally and externally hold us back. Because we must choose our evolutions, the temptation to return to what we know can be overwhelming. This is how we get stuck.

Phase 2 - In The Soup

For those brave enough to keep going, the next phase of moving from your competence is derailing yourself into the vulnerability of being someone, something or somewhere new. Nothing is yet defined or clear. The timeline is unknown. This is the deep work of the messy middle. You are **In the Soup**.

You are left feeling soupy. Perhaps a little gooey. Unsure of what's going on. Surrendering to the dissolved liquid of no longer being who you once were, and not yet knowing who you are to become, requires a leap of faith. Eventually, understanding and accepting that the messy middle contains all the ingredients for your next life allows you to dissolve into the possibilities of uncertainty. The messy middle soup can become anything.

Acceptance is a personal journey. Accepting that:

“This is the journey I am on.”

“I am deeply liminal and between one thing and another.”

“This may all take me longer than I had anticipated.”

“This is normal. I bet I have friends who've been through this.”

You know you're reaching the end of this phase when there is a sense of finally accepting that it's all OK. That is being in the soup. It may feel like a Dark Night of the Soul. It may feel like an abyss. **Yet, the only way out is *through*.**

Phase 3 - Finding the Thread

As the messy middle comes to a close, the final phase is **Finding the Thread** of who you are at this moment. You will merge what you know and do well with the new ideas, experiences and people that help you transcend your old self.

Eventually, the darkness is replaced with the glimmer of hope. Signs emerge that a new path may be appearing. Somehow it becomes easier to enjoy the messiness of it all. This part of the messy middle is all about living through your core values, stretching yourself and finding your joy.

Messiness becomes meaning.

“Finding the Thread” is all about being curious, understanding how your skills and mastery fit into your new direction. The excitement of seeing things click together, take shape and form a direction or an intention is a sign of what is to come. This phase is defined by finding momentum, overcoming your fears and embracing a growth mindset. In the career world, we often call this “Same Seed, Different Soil” which suggests you are using your acquired mastery, or wisdom, in a new way.

One of the keys of transcending out of the messy middle is taking a first small step. And then another. It’s making a micro-commitment to the new. As the messy middle fully gives way to a new form, this is the moment to recognize the gorgeous beauty of pure potential yet untested.

Part 3: New Beginnings

Beginnings are exciting and fragile things. New projects, new partnerships, new lives show a world full of possibilities. You are energized, validated, and feel centered on your new path.

Despite this, the world can often be unexpectedly hard and complicated even when it's new. The new relationship is causing friction in the family. The new consulting career has ups and downs. The only way out is through.

Phase 1 - Becoming

You have become someone new. You are renewed. Who am I? Who do I want to be? Where do I fit into my new future? What are my values, my strengths and how might I live them? Who else do I wish to go on this journey with? Who or what else might I need to embrace that I hadn't considered before?

This is the moment to recognize who you've become. You have grown, changed and transformed. This is the moment you get to define your next purpose based on what you have become.

So many people arrive at a transition wanting to immediately arrive at this point. Not knowing what is next is uncomfortable, but arriving at your next purpose, your next identity before you have done the work can only lead you in one direction. Back to what you already know. You have grown.

Phase 2 - Taking Flight

Now that you are practicing this new stage of being, you will certainly be challenged. But not too much, and in a way that feels exciting and new—like riding a bicycle. You start imagining the unimaginable. A direction. Intention meets action. You find your people, mentors and unusual teachers. You learn. You let others lead and help you. You build new relationships, find new resources.

You move.

You are **Taking Flight**.

You know you are in the phase of Taking Flight when you experience moments of alignment, congruence, momentum, and clarity. Little synchronicities show you that you are on the right path. Your intrinsic motivations meet your lived experience.

And again, because we are in the “midlife calling” stage of life, and not in an adolescent stage or a naive fairytale, we are wise enough to understand that things don’t always work out the way we expect. New careers may falter, new relationships hit a bumpy patch, and optimism can occasionally fade to days of flashback depression.

Remember.

You are *learning* to fly.

It is wise at this stage to heed the advice of Paul Saffo, “never mistake a clear view for a short distance.” Even as we begin something new, we are constantly making course corrections, getting things wrong, experiencing doubt and building the experience that will allow us to fly true. While there may be little wins, there are also little disappointments, and course corrections or adjustments in expectations have to be made.

In this phase we can truly live the idea that **success is not about *winning*, success is about *learning***.

You may be on your way, but you are not done. The trick is to keep recognizing the wins, celebrating the milestones, and managing your own narrative towards a growth mindset as you move ahead.

Phase 3 - Finding Flow

Eventually, if everything goes well, you begin **Finding Flow**. The world feels centered again. You are with your people, your community, you are leveraging your new mastery and are finally seeing the yields and benefits of your work. Your well is deeper, your vision widened.

Being in the present moment. Finding opportunities to experience awe or joy. It is being reflective and grateful for how far you've come. It is about giving back and lending a hand.

It's time to celebrate.

This is often a moment to realize that the last cycle of transformation has opened up a vista on the next cycle of necessary change. Perhaps in a different part of your life, perhaps in the same area.

Transitions never end.

The way you look at and explore the Anatomy of a Transition makes a significant difference in how you approach each part and corresponding phases. We have dedicated enormous time, energy, research and experience into developing a unique and regenerative trajectory of midlife transitions in the hopes of sparking a movement of growing whole, not just old.

Learn to celebrate the Anatomy of YOUR Transitions. Learn to become a guide or role model for others at all ages and stages of life who are also struggling without tools. Remember, "wisdom is not taught, it is shared."



There's an entire culture out there telling us that getting older means becoming less relevant. Luckily, **we're old enough to know better.**



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