

Change and Transition and why they are different.

In preparing for our forthcoming Transitioning to The Third Act workshop in Galway, 12th November (Connacht Hotel, 9.30am to 1pm), I was reflecting on the difference between change and transition and why they are not the same thing.

John Maxwell expresses it well when he says, “*change is inevitable, growth is optional*”. This could equally read, “*change is inevitable, transition is optional*” because change happens ‘out there’ anyway, without us having to do anything about it, whereas transition happens ‘in here’ through our own conscious efforts.

For instance we can see how this plays out in our response to climate change. We have just passed 400 PPM, which is a measure of the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Since the industrial revolution, the amount we have put into the atmosphere versus the amount the plants can take out, has been rising steadily.

This has led to a rise in air temperature, to a reduction in the glaciers, expected rises in sea levels, and all sorts of other consequences, changing weather patterns, changing ecosystems and a much more unstable future. But that’s the change going on ‘out there’, what about the transition that is going on ‘in here’?

The average Westerner is living a four-planet lifestyle by which is meant, we are consuming four times what is sustainable to live on one planet. If you took the total number of acres on the planet and divided it by the number of people (7.3 billion) you would end up with each person having about 5 acres to live off. Westerners consume four times that amount, i.e., 20 acres.

Can we continue to live our lives knowing that what we are doing is unsustainable? Yes it seems we can. We have this wonderful ability to acknowledge the facts on the one hand while ignoring the consequences on the other, assuming that whatever transition has to be made will be made by someone else.

Another example is **our response to human longevity**, which is what we want to focus on today. I use the example of climate change because acknowledging the change is just the start; the real work comes when we have to address the consequences of transitioning.

Human Longevity

We are familiar with how the world population has almost tripled in our lifetimes. At end of the second-world-war for instance the population was north of 2 billion; it is now 7.3 billion and is likely to rise to 9-10 billion by 2050.

But it's not just more people – more of these people are also living longer. Life expectancy at birth in the developed world has now risen to 80 years, up from 35 years at the start of the industrial revolution. If you are 60 you have a 50% chance of living until 90.

Looking back we have been adding 2 ½ years in life expectancy per decade, which is 3 months per year or 6 hours per day. As a result, 2/3rds of those who have ever lived over the age of 65 are alive today. This is undoubtedly one of the great social achievements of the modern era.

There were of course old people in previous centuries, it's just that there wasn't as many of them. Life may have been more sustainable then, but it was much harder, with high infant mortality, widespread communicable diseases, tougher physical work environments and fewer supports.

For instance, when Bismarck introduced the pension system in Germany in the 1880's, he set it at age 70 when average life expectancy was in the early 40's. Only 3% of the people actually reached pensionable age.

Today the majority of people reach pensionable age, set at around 66 with life expectancy at 80. In fact if you apply Bismarck's logic, the pension age would start in our early 90's - an age at which 3% of people will live too.

Also, our lifespan a species has also been extended. Long thought to be “three score and ten” i.e., 70 years (Aristotle spoke about this and we also this in the old testament), this no longer holds. Today living to 100 is exceptional but not unusual.

There are for instance 60,000 people in Japan age 100 or more. Fifty years ago that number was less than 1,000. And some believe we are on the cusp of a new era in human longevity where we could routinely live much longer. And why not.

Other organisms live much longer; the giant tortoise lives to 100 years, the humpbacked whale to 200 years and the immortal jelly fish – well he can theoretically live indefinitely. He has the remarkable capacity to return to being young when he is old. Who wouldn't want a bottle of that kind of rejuvenation?

The change has happened

What we can say for sure is that the change in human longevity has happened whether we like it or want it. That leaves to figure out what sort of transition do we need to make, individually and collectively?

In some countries for instance (Germany, Spain, Italy), 25% of the population are over 60. Combined with a reduction in the birth rate, this was radically altered the population profile with more people now over 60 than under 15.

Those in the belly of their second acts' are looking forward and seeing this tsunami of ageing - this 'double, double, toil and trouble' - and wondering, "how is society going to pay for all these old people"? They however are only seeing the change that has happened and not the transition that has yet to occur.

And that's because society is stuck in out-dated view age and ageing. The WHO for instance still says that you are old at age 50, but 50 year olds don't feel old. And nor do many 60 and 70 year olds. In fact if you ask people on the street what old is, they tend to say 80, and that's about right. And yet we still have retirement and pension ages set at a time when life expectancy was much lower.

The golf club

An acquaintance of mine told me of a financial review at his golf club where honorary membership is given at age 65. This of course made sense some 30 or 40 years ago when people died much earlier. It was a recognition of service and a gift that didn't cost the club as there weren't that many older people out playing.

Fast forward to-day and with new hips, new knees and new stints, there are lots of older people playing golf and doing so at honorary prices. They no longer have the responsibility of conventional life, jobs, their kids have hopefully left home and they are left with this new gift of time. Life is good

The gate has already closed

The thing is that, if 70 really is the new 50 or 60 the new 40, then they (and society at large) can no longer pretend to have all the benefits of improvements in life conditions, without also accepting the responsibilities as well.

And that's where we want to get to to-day – to what are the personal consequences of human longevity for you in your life?



And don't worry about trying to change society for now – that's a big job that takes time. Know however that when society does decide to change it won't ask you. It will wake up one morning and realise that someone really has moved the cheese.

In the meantime there is the inevitable change in longevity that is occurring in your life and the transition that needs to occur.

We look forward to exploring this more with you on the 12th November.

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The Third Act

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