

Reveal your authentic self

From the day we are born until the day we die, we encounter a seemingly endless series of wanted and unwanted changes in our lives. How can we discover and develop the resilience we need to live our lives to the fullest, continue making our unique contribution to the world around us and shape our calling amidst constant change?

In a series of interviews, Klaartje van Gasteren, Marnix Reijmerink and Jakob van Wielink talk to famous international thinkers, all of whom demonstrate that discovering and recognizing our vulnerability allows us to uncover our talent and potential. These are the stories of people who dare to show themselves and invite and challenge readers to do the same.

In this interview, Robert A. Neimeyer talks about leadership and shaping transition. The present time challenges us to face our own discomfort and our inclination to focus on the satisfaction of short-term needs. Leadership at any level requires the willingness to take off our armor and to enter into dialogue so that hearts will open, new ideas will come into being, and energy will start to flow (again), making real change, big and small, possible.



*A dialogue with Robert Neimeyer
about shaping transition in times of crisis*

Take off your armor.

Surrender to 'not-knowing'

Robert (Bob) A. Neimeyer is professor emeritus of psychology at Memphis University (US). He enjoys international recognition as one of the greatest authorities in the area of grieving as a meaning-making process and is the founder and director of the Portland Institute for Loss and Transition. We have been profoundly influenced by his work, and even more so by his personality. A man who candidly and vulnerably shares how his own life experiences have shaped and shape him, thereby setting an example to many.

Authors: Klaartje van Gasteren, Marnix Reijmerink & Jakob van Wielink

*The past and present wilt—I have fill'd them, emptied them.
And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.*

*Listener up there! what have you to confide to me?
Look in my face while I snuff the sidle of evening,
(Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay only a minute longer.)*

*Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)*

I concentrate toward them that are nigh, I wait on the door-slab.

*Who has done his day's work? who will soonest be through with his supper?
Who wishes to walk with me?*

Will you speak before I am gone? will you prove already too late?

Song of Myself, Part 51 – Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

We talk to Robert (Bob) at the time the world is dealing with the second wave of the corona crisis. A time in which the lives of people are under pressure again. "2020 differs from 2019 in every possible way. The world has changed and we have to change with it, whether we want to or not," Bob says. "But the question is whether we are able to change at this pace." In many areas, this crisis requires us to make unnatural moves.

Commit yourself to shaping transition

"Much of our behavior is an attempt to defend and protect ourselves against uncomfortable situations, feelings and emotions. We

try to shake off the fear we feel as a result of the confrontation with things we cannot control,” Bob shares with us. This asks a lot from each of us, and therefore we see that many people are feeling a certain fatigue or even exhaustion because of this health crisis, he notices. “It requires humility and modesty to face and embrace not-knowing and the fact that we cannot control everything.”

Bob describes modesty as the ability to take up a position as an equal and to be curious to know how someone else experiences and views the world. It is the willingness to place our own truth second to a bigger truth that is hidden as a promise in the meeting with the other.

He explains how, in a certain way, we are actually always living in the past. Our previous experiences and lessons we have learnt from them color our communication and interpretation in the present. This makes the search for that bigger truth that is waiting for us as a promise more difficult. It is therefore a challenge to keep up with the pace at which the world around us is changing. And when we cannot keep up any longer, and we feel that we are losing our grip and control, this results in the inclination – because of the discomfort arising from it – to close our minds, our eyes and ears, and to move inside, to cut off contact, so to speak.

It is exactly at this moment that transition stagnates. The moment we are no longer able to integrate the change into our lives. Transition is made possible by maintaining the dialogue with others about not-knowing and accepting that we do not have a monopoly on the truth. “We have no control over reality, but we can influence it, together with others. In contact with others, we can integrate the new circumstances into our lives, which allows us to look to the future in freedom.”



About Bob Neimeyer

Robert A. Neimeyer is professor emeritus at the faculty of psychology of Memphis University. He has an active clinical practice in Portland. He has published over 30 acclaimed books, including *Grief and Bereavement in Contemporary Society: Bridging Research and Practice* and *Constructivist Psychotherapy*, both published by the American publishing house Routledge. He is also the editor of *Death Studies* and was chairman of the Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC) and chairman of the International Work Group on Death, Dying and Bereavement (IWG). In recognition of his contributions, he has been granted the Eminent Faculty Award by the University of Memphis, made a Fellow of the Clinical Psychology Division of the American Psychological Association, and given Lifetime Achievement Awards by both the ADEC and the International Network on Personal Meaning.

Long-term focus

The current health crisis is a severe test of our resilience. There is a tendency to be somewhat impatient: we want to get rid of this situation more quickly than reality allows. This is not surprising, considering that we all have a deep-rooted need that surfaces when we are faced with a crisis: we evade the actual pain that change calls up in us, rather than look it in the face and live through it.

We try to preserve our existing reality and do everything we can to keep things as they are, so we will be spared the pain of the change. "Our tendency to focus on the short term and the benefits gained from this prevent us from facing the losses that are the result of our short-term focus. "To step into reality, we need to let go of our constructed story of the future." The question is whether we are prepared to use this pandemic as an opportunity to change the manner in which we look at our way of life drastically." It is a challenge to postpone our short-term needs and to do what is necessary in the long run.

Make the solution bigger than yourself

It requires a different type of leadership, on both a small and a large scale, to bring

about a change. In that new type of leadership, we can be more altruistic than we are used to as human beings. Less focused on the self, but more on the collective. This far-reaching change at the level of the identity of people requires patience and a clear focus, with the aim of creating a world that is safe and just for all of us. "But are we prepared to relinquish our luxury, to make concessions?" Bob wonders.

As counselors, we can play a crucial part here. We can open the minds and hearts of people here to this – one by one. By accompanying people on a search for their calling – *Who am I? And what do I want to set in motion in the world?* – we take them by the hand to find out in what way each of them can make their own unique contribution.

"As a leader in an organization you also have a crucial part in this. Especially in these times of corona, crisis and uncertainty, you have to be present in a state of openheartedness," says Bob. "You need to appear emotionally, before you can do so strategically." This requires a manager to enter into dialogue with the employees, to listen to their uncertainty and their fear. To overcome that tendency to close eyes and ears for what is going on and to solve problems in the short term. Only when the emotional needs have been met, there will be room for the next step. A step of exploring which move is appropriate for the (long-term) future.

The enormous importance of dialogue – including the internal dialogue with ourselves – is something Bob knows from his own experience. At an early age, he lost his father to suicide. This has been a source of inspiration for his own professionalism and growth from the very first moment. He knows that giving meaning to seemingly meaningless events is possible



"You need to appear emotionally, before you can do so strategically"

and that this is a slow process. Recently, he had to part with an intimate friendship. 'In that parting I was confronted with my own fear of departure and abandonment. I had to experience again how deeply grief took possession of my entire body and mind. Under normal circumstances, my friends would have been physically close, and now, because of the crisis, I looked for support and solace at a distance. I discovered on the one hand how the distance – as well as getting tired of Zoom sometimes – threw me upon my own resources and that this involved feelings of loneliness. On the other hand, I discovered that by actually allowing myself to dwell upon the pain and to let go of control, I facilitated an internal dialogue. Secure bases such as writing and painting helped me give meaning to the fundamental questions as to my identity. And I was also surprised how, even from a distance, friends can come so close and be so helping in the depths of despair.'

Bob says that he discovered that his professional expertise in the areas of bereavement, grief and giving meaning did not exclude him from what life has in store for him. 'And of course, I knew this.' However, reality now forced itself on him and invited and challenged him to let go of control and take off his armor. 'Slowly but surely, I could surrender to not knowing.'

Surrender

The need for control, holding on to the familiar, fear of what is to come are the most important motives for our behavior in situations of change. As Edith Eger would say: 'There is no return in a crisis, only transition. Like being born again.'

Especially in the present crisis, which for many people cannot in any way be compared to earlier experiences in our lives, this requires surrender to 'not knowing'.

"Surrender does not mean that you are weak or passive. It does not lead to fatalism

or capitulation. On the contrary, there is true power in surrender – a power that comes from within. Those who surrender to the essence of life will live in undisturbed peace and calm, even if the whole wide world goes through one turbulence after another."

– Elif Shafak

In surrender, space to explore new perspectives is created. For us as counselors, inviting the client to explore this space to the fullest extent and to use it to reshape the future in the new reality is at the heart of our profession. ■

Klaartje van Gasteren is an international trainer and supervisor in (personal) leadership. She helps directors, their teams and individuals become a secure base for themselves and the people they live and work with.

Marnix Reijmerink is an international trainer who assists teams and their leaders. He instills a sense of love and adventure in people's hearts. In doing so, he helps translate the themes of attachment, transition and signification into sustainable development and growth.

Jakob van Wielink helps leaders and their organizations live based on their calling. He serves as faculty mentor for the Portland Institute for Loss and Transition (USA).

The authors are all affiliated with De School voor Transitie | The School for Transition.
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