



**The Advocacy Project
Discussion Paper Series**

No. 09-1

**Resistance:
*A Primer for Advocates and Change Agents***

Roger L. Conner, J.D.

April 2, 2009

The Advocacy Project
Vanderbilt University Law School
131 21st Ave, So
Nashville, TN 37215
email: roger.conner@vanderbilt.edu

Resistance

A Primer for Advocates and Change Agents

Roger L. Conner¹

©2009

I. Introduction:

There is an old saying that “one per cent of the people in the world make things happen; nine per cent of the people *watch* them make things happen; and the other 90% sit around saying, ‘what happened?’”

In the world of social services and public policy this latter group—the one per-cent—is called by many different names: Activists, entrepreneurs, leaders or (by people who would rather talk about football) boors. Whether liberal or conservative, religious or secular, individualistic or communitarian, these are the thinkers, organizers, agitators, doers, dreamers and professional troublemakers who keep America stirred up by spending their days (and, too often, their nights) working to advance their favored causes. I call them “advocates.” This essay is for them, for anyone who aspires to become one of them, and for those who follow, fund and hire them.

II. Distinguishing between transition and change

A. The concept of “transition” in standard usage

According to the dictionary, change is “the act or instant of . . . becoming different;”² something passes from one state or phase to another.

In ecology, for example, a former wetland that has been filled with debris and paved is “changed.” For a psychologist, a recovering alcoholic with ten years of sobriety has changed. For an advocate, change might be illustrated by Nashville restaurants, previously segregated by law, and now integrated by both law and custom; or, the difference in the relationship of the residents of the thirteen British colonies of North America and the rest of the world after September 3, 1783.³

If “change” is the word used for the difference between “now” and “then,” “transition” is a word most often used for the space in between. Ecologists, for example, refer to what happens between a clear-cut logging operation and the re-emergence of a climax forest as a “transition.” In music, a “transition” is a passage that connects distinct themes or sections or changes of key. For novelists, playwrights and essayists, a “transition” is a phrase, paragraph or section that connects different chapters and scenes.

¹ Adjunct Professor of Law, Vanderbilt University Law School, Director, The Advocacy Project, and coordinator, the Andrus Transitions Learning Team. I wish to acknowledge the helpful suggestions for this manuscript from my colleagues Patricia Jordan, Robert Tomasko, Dr. Margaret Blair, Dr. Jay Rothman and Meghan Clarke; to thank Sabena Leake and Steven Kelban for what they have taught me about transitions and about patience; to thank Dean Kent Syverud and Dean Ed Rubin for inviting me to be part of the Vanderbilt Law School community; to thank my colleagues on the Learning Team for generously sharing their insights; and most of all, I acknowledge the courage and the entrepreneurial spirit of the Andrus grantees who have helped me to more deeply understand the challenge of applying the Transition Framework on the ground. Any errors contained herein are my own.

² The Oxford American Dictionary of Current Usage, at www.Oxfordreference.com

³ This treaty, signed on Sept. 3, 1783, between the American colonies and Great Britain, ended the American Revolution and formally recognized the United States as an independent nation.

The word “transition” is also frequently used in public policy. For example, in 2002 Congress recently enacted a law known as Sarbanes-Oxley that requires major changes in governance of publicly traded corporations. It is a *mantra* of commentators and consultants that “implementation of Sarbanes-Oxley is still in the transition phase,” by which it is meant that some companies are exploiting loopholes or failing to change their procedures, some CEO’s are dragging their feet, regulators have not yet clarified ambiguous provisions, and lawyers are still arguing amongst themselves about what the law really requires.

The observation that Sarbanes-Oxley is “in transition” is another way of saying that the passage of a statute does not, in and of itself, automatically change the behavior of the thousands of people who run large corporations, any more than an ultimatum issued to a teenager will change the hour at which she actually turns out the lights and goes to bed. There will have to be many incremental changes in behavior by many different actors that must occur before “here” becomes “there.”

B. An alternative meaning: transition as an inner process of psychological adjustment

William Bridges, a best-selling author and specialist in the field of Organizational Development, argues that there is another important dimension to what happens between “here” and “there:” an *inner* process of psychological adjustment that individuals inevitably go through as they adapt to *external* situational changes. Writing in 1980, Bridges used the word “transition” for the “gradual psychological reorientation process that happens inside of us as we adapt to the external change.” As applied to the work of public policy advocates, line workers in foster care agencies, or anyone else who works to cause other people to change, his observation is that changes in behavior, attitudes and beliefs *necessarily* requires people to go through a stressful process of inner psychological adjustment—a *transition*.

The notion that a significant change in external circumstances is accompanied by an inner psychological journey did not originate with William Bridges, of course. Think of The Odyssey or the Book of Exodus, not to mention an endless supply of pop psychology self-help books on subjects ranging from career change to dying. Bridges’ distinctive contribution is a simple framework that has been used by his many readers, managers and specialists in Organizational Development to describe how these inner transitions manifest themselves in feelings, attitudes and behavior.

In Bridges’ Transition Framework, the change triggers an inner process of psychological and emotional adjustment—he refers to this process as “transition”—with three distinct and predictable phases: ⁴

⁴ Bridges based his framework, in part, on the writings of pioneer anthropologist Arnold van Genep who coined the phrase “rite of passage.” The Bridges Transition Framework is also intriguingly similar to one of the earliest psychological models of personal change, developed by Kurt Lewin, generally considered the father of Social Psychology. Lewin’s model also consisted in three stages; the first he called “unfreezing”. It involved overcoming inertia and dismantling the existing “mind set”. The second is a period of confusion, when we are aware that the old ways are being challenged but we do not yet have a clear picture to replace them. The third and final stage he called “refreezing”. The new mindset is crystallizing and one’s comfort level is returning to previous levels.”

An “ending,” in which people let go of who they were and how they did things in the old situation⁵;

a “neutral zone,” in which people are in a confusing, in-between state where they have let go of the past but have not yet integrated a new identity;

a “new beginning,” in which people start to grow familiar with the new reality and begin to identify with the situation again. (Linkage, 1998)

After the “new beginning” is completed we feel comfortable with the new job, the new policy and the new relationship or new behaviors become more or less automatic. Like an experienced dancer, we can move about the floor without mumbling “*one*, two, three, *one*, two, three,” and stories about the journey we have been through no longer pack an emotional charge.

C. Implications for changes in public policy and individual behavior

Public policy change typically requires many individuals to alter their patterns of conduct, and may also challenge pre-existing attitudes and beliefs. Assuming for purposes of argument that the Bridges Transition Framework is correct, each of the people who is required to change will go through a period of inner psychological adjustment in response. So what?

Consider the example of Sarbanes-Oxley. It requires the board of directors to have unfettered access to the Chief Financial Officer (CFO). Direct, private meetings between the CFO and members of the board have historically been forbidden by explicit policies as well as norms, to prevent senior corporate managers from “going around the back” of the CEO. The Bridges Transition Framework predicts that the new policy will encounter resistance, foot dragging and noncompliance, but not (or at least not *solely*) for reasons that outsiders suspect. The participants will have difficulty with the “endings” required to let go of norms and habits that previously defined loyalty and professionalism; they will be very uncomfortable in the “neutral zone” as they grope for a new set of boundaries and norms to promote transparency without opening the door to backstabbing and inner division; and only after a time of tentative, awkward experimentation will they become comfortable with a “new beginning” where certain meetings between the CFO and board without the CEO are routine, and a new set of explicit and implicit ground rules will have grown up to create boundaries around these conversations. The Transition is not completed until this new set of behaviors has become so accepted and normal that no one remarks on them.

Note that the Framework does not predict that the changes intended by the authors of Sarbanes-Oxley will happen. Instead, some corporate boards will not be able to negotiate the “endings;” they will revert back to old practices until a scandal or perhaps a change in personnel shakes up the *status quo*. Some will come up with creative approaches to complying with the new law while in the “neutral zone,” some of which will serve to evade the law and some of which will be stronger than the law requires. Today, several years after enactment, some board members are still resisting the change (endings), some are still confused about their new duties (neutral zone), and some have embraced the new law and moved on (new beginning).

⁵ Bridges’ three phases of Transition are sometimes preceded by a “pre-ending,” his term for an individual who remains in denial of the reality that change has occurred (*e.g.*, a person who keeps spending money even though s/he has been fired) or who holds onto a fantasy that the changed situation perfectly meets all of his or her needs (*e.g.*, adoptive families often go through a “honeymoon” period when they imagine that the adopted child is perfectly content and grateful).

II. The Transition Framework as a tool for advocates and other agents of change

A. Fear of transition generates resistance to proposals for change that is separate from opposition based on resonance or self-interest.

William Bridges argues that any proposal for change generates a reaction in three domains: “change, resonance, and transition.” From my own experience as a paid professional advocate in the world of public policy, I translate this into “the message, the memories, and the mess.”

The first reaction—to the change itself—is based on a logical analysis of the costs and benefits (the message): Is this proposal good for us or bad for us? “Resonance” is Bridges’ term for a reaction that emerges when the proposed change or its author brings to mind past experience, negative or positive (the memories). Third, he argues that virtually all people resist, to at least some degree, out of fear or anxiety about the stress of the transition that inevitable comes with change (the mess): endings produce anxiety because the present is familiar, even if it is flawed; the neutral zone is risky because anything can happen if existing policies and power relationships are suddenly up for grabs; as for the new beginning, “the best laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley.”

Someone who disagrees with an advocate is unlikely to declare, “Excuse me; I don’t want you to think I am necessarily opposed to your position, but I am feeling anxious about the transition that your proposal would require.” Yet, as in interpersonal relationships, spoken words can leave unmistakable signals of what is going on below the surface. Consider these examples:

Statement	Likely source of resistance
1. “The problem is that you don’t understand the kind of tradeoffs that your proposal involves.”	<i>Signals resistance to the change.</i> The emphasis on “tradeoffs” suggests a zero-sum game where any change will produce winners and losers, and the speaker thinks s/he will be on the losing end.
2. “The problem with people like you is that you don’t care how your demands will affect other people.”	<i>Voices resonance.</i> accusations about hidden agendas or motives that are, in essence, a projection based on someone else’s conduct from the past are frustrating but common reactions to an advocate for change.
3. “The problem with your proposal is you have no idea how hard we had to work to get where we are today.”	<i>Likely a concern over the effort of transition.</i> Comments about “process” issues are often the outward expression of an inward groan about the endless meetings, inter-agency task forces, reports, and approvals that change would require.

Advocates typically make demands on authority figures who know how much effort is required to change a policy, the behavior of employees, or the attitudes of other stakeholders. Even if the decision-maker were to agree with the advocate’s substantive position, s/he knows

intuitively—without ever having read William Bridges—that change will create trouble and stress.

The first time I heard this explanation I had an immediate reaction of my own: “That’s their *job*. What a bunch of whiners!” Consider, however, that every training program or self-help book for leaders admonishes them to “*focus, focus, focus!*” In other words, a key responsibility of leadership is to fight off most of the proposals for change that arise, because they will get nothing done if they take on too many of them. And it is they, not the advocate, who will take the blame if the idea for change gets bogged down in the neutral zone or produces minimal benefits once the new beginning arrives.

I am not trying to justify transition-based resistance any more than I would try to justify gravity if this were an essay about flying. I am saying only that whenever an advocate tries to persuade or compel someone else to change, that person, group or institution will resist based on the fear of transition *in addition* to any fears about the change itself or resonance from past experience. However, it is extremely common, in my experience, for advocates to assume that any opposition is coming primarily or exclusively from the “other’s” irrational or illegitimate resistance to the proposal itself (*i.e.*, the *change*).

The next reaction that I had, as an experienced advocate, went something like this: “OK. You got me. I don’t think about transition-based resistance when I’m dealing with oppositional behavior. So what? What difference would it make if I did?” The balance of this essay is devoted to what grantees of the Andrus Family Fund and the coaches and consultants with whom I work have taught me about the answers to that question.⁶

B. Advocates who address transition-based resistance directly and intentionally may minimize resistance from resonance and fear of the change. The opposite is also true: failure to address the target’s concerns over the necessary transition may increase opposition.

1. Example: Foster Care.

I will begin with an example involving a single advocate—a social worker-- a social worker with an Andrus grantee, and a young person who is assigned to her case load. The youth was recently removed from his foster home and transferred to a group home because his foster parents could not stop him from skipping out of school and running with a gang that intimidates and steals from younger children. The first couple of weeks in his new placement have not gone well; the young man has been confrontational and generally intimidating with residents and staff alike, and has been trying to make contact with his old gang as well. The social worker is an advocate in the sense that I am using the term because she is by no means a neutral onlooker or even a supportive therapist. She wants to see behavior change, and she is encountering resistance.

There is a natural tendency for the social worker to assume that he does not want to change, *i.e.*, that he rejects the message, perhaps he *likes* being a feared gang leader who has access to ready cash. The Bridges analysis merely invites the social worker to consider that the resistance might also be coming from “resonance”; perhaps he is projecting onto the social worker memories of the police officers who lied to convict him, the teachers who assumed he

⁶ Readers should note that the opinions expressed in this article are my own. I am a *grantee* of the Andrus Family Fund, not a *representative* of the fund. For authoritative statements about the Fund’s programs and the purposes readers are directed to www.affund.org and www.transitionandsocialchange.org.

could not learn, and the parents who abandoned and abused him, or perhaps he has tried to change in the past and faced ridicule from peers and suspicion from adults.

In addition, the Transition Framework suggests that fear of “the mess”—the transition that any significant change would require—may also be at work. As a successful gang leader he probably has the ability to become a leader in a more positive sense. However, if the required ending (giving up his “tough-guy” persona and the adulation of his new-found friends) were not reason enough to shrink from the task, the neutral zone questions (how to make friends, get respect, what to talk about instead of voicing anger, does this mean I’m turning into a “nerd”) make the Israelites’ forty years in the wilderness look like a cakewalk by comparison.

This example also illustrates how fear of transition is not necessarily illusory or even exaggerated. In the musical *West Side Story*, Tony, the leader of the Jets, believes everyone associated with the Sharks is loathsome, especially their leader Bernardo. Then he meets Maria, Bernardo’s sister. To acknowledge his love requires an ending: giving up a caricature of the Sharks and their families that has defined his very identity. The plot thickens as he struggles in the neutral zone to become tolerant and non-violent, and then prepares to step into the new beginning by consummating his love. Unfortunately, Bernardo, too consumed by jealousy and rage to negotiate such an ending, provokes Tony’s buddies who are caught up in the confusion and uncertainty of the neutral zone. For anyone who is unfamiliar with the movie or with Shakespeare’s version of the same tale (*Romeo and Juliet*), let’s just say the new beginning is short-lived.

Bridges’ advice to the social worker would be that *resistance based on fear of the required transition is a given*, and it *will* be expressed—whether in the youth’s attitude, words, conduct, or all of the above. If she reacts to the oppositional behavior as if it were primarily resistance to the changes that she seeks, her actions will confirm his suspicions, make him angry at her failure to acknowledge what he is up against, and soon their mutual misperceptions will have morphed into self-fulfilling prophecies.

The Andrus grantees who report the greatest benefits from the Transition Framework develop a habit of going through a three-step sequence, over and over: *assess, acknowledge, adapt*. To *assess* means to name the change and to monitor where the target is in the transition process; to *acknowledge* means to explicitly voice a recognition of the personal and psychological stresses and risks that the person on the other side of the conversation will be compelled to endure; to *adapt* means to supplement conventional tools used to bring about the desired *external* change with unconventional tools to support the *inner* transition that must occur for the change to be sustainable.

Assessment begins with being clear about what is changing and what is not. To prevent escalating fears about the transition, the officer needs to be clear about what she wants to change and what she is leaving alone. Will she be satisfied if he stops fomenting disruptive behavior by others in the group home? Or does she expect him to change from being a gang-leader/high school dropout to a responsible leader, a mentor for other young people in trouble, and diligent student who is preparing for college?

Assume that she has chosen the latter—she wants to challenge him to fulfill his potential. If she is like most advocates, her instincts are to convince him that the status quo is bad and the proposed changes are good. To deal with the fear of transition she needs to understand what it looks like from his perspective. One of the tools Bridges has developed in the business contexts is a “risk/loss analysis,” a list of what the target would have to give up, the losses he would incur, the risks that concern him, and the expected reaction to the change from others. His losses may include: some of the hours he spends hanging with friends listening to music, relationships of long-standing if his buddies are not prepared to follow him when he turns positive instead of

negative, the feeling of competence and power that comes with commanding an intimate group; and his source of ready cash for stylish clothes. The prospect of changing his lifestyle so that he is attending school *with* status-conscious peers and *without* an up-to-date wardrobe may be truly intimidating. Then there are the more tangible risks of former rivals or victims who could lay in wait for him at school, eager to provoke him into behavior that will land him back in the group home or perhaps to exact revenge.

Having done a rudimentary risk/loss analysis, the social worker is ready to locate him in the transition process. Is he still in denial that he is at risk of living in a group home for a long time or even ending up in jail (pre-ending)? Is he arguing with the social worker over whether his placement in the group home was fair or necessary, or sneaking out to hang with his old buddies (endings)? Has he said he wants to change, but yet he periodically “forgets” to attend the anger management class, is alternately confessional and defiant, to the extent that the social worker doesn’t know what to expect from one day to the next (neutral zone)? Has he begun to participate openly in group counseling sessions, openly criticized a peer for aggressive behavior, agreed to move in with an aunt who lives in a different neighborhood so he will be less tempted to fall in with the old crowd, but still shows flashes of anger when frustrated, leaving the social worker with hope tinged with anxiety (new beginning)? Is he talking in the past tense about his life with the gang, offering to be a mentor for other teens, and showing the social worker the brochures he received after writing to several colleges (post-transition reminiscing)?

The next step in the transition three-step is equally difficult. For the social worker to “acknowledge” the challenge of the transition is not to excuse the young man from being responsible for his actions or to suspend consequences. It is, rather, to talk about the pink elephant in the middle of the room that is stinking up the place and making it so hard to find a chair. It is to walk a mile in his moccasins so she can understand why he is limping so badly. It is to speak the truth, and so doing she may open a crack in the armor of suspicion and anger that protects him from yet another disappointment with adults. Being heard, perhaps he will be able to listen.

Acknowledgment is mostly expressed in words, which will be discounted without the third step, “adapt” the conventional response. Where the object of the advocacy is holding back due to issues connected with endings, the advocate looks for ways to replace or compensate for losses, or counsels acceptance where compensation is not possible. Tactics to help people get through and profit from the neutral zone include providing clear directions, constantly restating the purpose, and being flexible to take advantage of the creativity that happens when old patterns are broken. To facilitate successful new beginnings, symbolic affirmations and connecting with others who have gone through the same transition can be helpful. From my own experience in the world of public advocacy I would add one more: any agent of change needs to mobilize the power of hope by painting the new beginning in primary colors or telling stories that are compelling from the other’s perspective, given their values and their frame of reference. Dreams of a spouse and a house might motivate the social worker, for example, but a street-wise teen might need something different to shoot for.

The transition three-step—assess, acknowledge, adapt—is like a dance step. It has to be a little different each time the music changes or the other dancers move around. To what extent, if at all, is there a connection between a social worker who wants to change the behavior of an at-risk youth and a public policy advocate who wants to change the positions of powerful people and institutions? The next example addresses that question.

2. Example: Harassment of GLBTQ youth in a Brooklyn High School.

Make the Road by Walking--better known in New York as “Make the Road,” is a community-based, grass-roots organization in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn that has

made its reputation with a series of discrete projects, each led by community residents, using a traditional mix of neighborhood organizing, street demonstrations, media, litigation, and lobbying. For example, they used noisy demonstrations to stop New York City school bureaucrats from closing a local high school, and they secured a wage increase for low-skilled employees at a Bushwick hospital by publicly embarrassing executives of a large hospital chain.

One of its current projects is a youth-led initiative to protect gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender and questioning (GLBTQ) youth in the local high schools from being demeaned, hazed, cornered or beaten by other students. Make the Road's young leaders came to believe that the teachers, security officers and administrators of the schools were ignoring the problem, looking the other way, and sending GLBTQ youth a very clear message: "Deal with it on your own." Some of the students were losing enthusiasm for school, while others had dropped out.

Following its well established pattern, Make the Road did legal and policy research to develop seven demands about protecting GLBTQ youth, including prompt investigation of hazing complaints and a clear school policy to discipline any students involved. However, when they raised these demands with school officials they met a wall of resistance. Administrators insisted that there had been very few complaints and teachers bristled at the thought of shifting time and effort away from other priorities.

A different Make the Road project might have interpreted such a response as foot-dragging, denial, or intransigent hostility and reacted accordingly. However, the young people in charge of this particular project had discovered the Transition Framework on the Andrus web site while researching foundations. After considerable discussion with the Andrus staff about "reconciliation" and what it meant to "systematically and intentionally apply a Transition Framework," they accepted the conditions and changed their approach.

With the Framework in mind, they chose to treat the initial resistance as a predictable expression of the fear of transition rather than an indication of implacable hostility to the seven demands. They also took a step back from those demands and started a different analysis. To assess where the school officials were, they supplemented their standard "power analysis" with a "loss analysis" and became aware of some tough endings that administrators and teachers at the three neighborhood high schools would need to go through if they agreed to any serious changes. Among them were: giving up the belief that the problem was only "a few bad eggs" and the time and energy currently being devoted to other pressing issues. Some might also fear being forced to reexamine or abandon personal moral and religious beliefs about homosexuality and face criticism from their families, friends or fellow church members. Also there was the potential danger of becoming a poster child for outside political groups on one side or the other of the controversy over GLBTQ issue, as had happened after the book Heather has Two Mommies was briefly added to the New York elementary schools' approved reading list in 1992.

To assess their situation more deeply and to develop an integrated strategy to deal with both interest-based and transition-based resistance, Make the Road used the Collaborative Change Approach developed by Dr. Jay Rothman, the ARIA Group, and the Andrus staff (ARIA Group, 2005). Rothman, a leading international expert in conflict resolution, is convinced that unless both advocates and the objects of their advocacy give up their understandable desire to be in control of naming the change, they will never be able to overcome their mutual resistance to genuine collaboration and reconciliation when it comes to making the change happen. The Collaborative Change Approach invites advocates such as Make the Road to put their "demands" on hold, at least temporarily, so that they can step back and enter into a structured dialogue with representatives from all the stakeholders around three separate questions: "What"—what are the desired results in very broad terms; "Why"—why are these goals important to each person and each group; and "How"—how could each goal be achieved. The "What" conversation is about

what people want for the future, but may be reluctant to say aloud; the “Why” conversation is about the pain of past disappointments and the roots of current longings; the “How” conversation concerns the concrete steps required to make things better.

Most public advocates begin with the third question—how should policy be changed?—precisely what Make the Road had done when it created the seven demands, virtually guaranteeing that a dispute will follow. While other approaches to strategic planning and conflict resolution also help participants work on shared goals (What) before action plans (How), most of them are designed to steer people away from the “Why” questions because they tend to escalate into pointless arguments over who is to blame.

Rothman’s experience is that people want to be heard about “Why” with such intensity that it actually needs to go first, despite the risks, before any negotiation over shared goals can begin. Through the use of a questionnaire, people from each stakeholder group who have agreed to participate define their goals, why they care, and how they can be achieved. In separate meetings for each stakeholder group, each individual is given the floor to explain “Why” s/he feels so strongly about the issue. Each person is allowed to speak without interruption to be heard about what concerns them most deeply. These “Why” conversations can be a powerful experience, especially for those who feel they are being heard for the first time.

Participants next work out a consensus on shared goals. After each stakeholder group reaches consensus independently, an “inter-group” meeting is held where representatives from each group work out a consensus for the whole community on goals for the future. Only after agreement is reached on future goals does the conversation finally turn to the development of an action plan as well as a transition plan.

In Bushwick, the inter-group meeting generated an overarching goal within a few hours, one that captured the longings of students and the aspirations of administrators and teachers: “to make the school a safe place for *all* students to be themselves and to learn, including GLBTQ youth.” Of course, there is the maxim that “no good deed goes unpunished,” and having achieved a common statement of the desired change from a diverse group, the next challenges would be even more daunting.

The loss analysis and the “Why” conversations helped Make the Road understand that the school officials needed solid, demonstrable data before they could negotiate the ending required to acknowledge the problem as a serious one. With the Transition Framework in mind, Make the Road hit the books instead of hitting the streets. They found a national study showing how GLBTQ youth under-perform in school or drop out if the environment is hostile. They conducted a survey among Bushwick students that confirmed their worst fears about the extent of local GLBTQ hazing. Eventually, they were in a position to approach a larger group of skeptical school administrators with powerful individual anecdotes from the “Why” conversations (such as the gay teen who had joined in beating a gay boy out of fear of becoming a target himself) combined with hard data that explained why administrators had not heard complaints: students were afraid to talk to the adults who were supposed to protect them.

The response of school officials to these findings was a critical moment in the transition that Make the Road was experiencing. Would the administration treat their conciliatory approach as a sign of weakness? Was it safe to start a conversation without first proving they could back up statements in the office with demonstrators on the front lawn? Would Make the Road’s senior staff be labeled “soft” or “naive” by other community activists for giving officials the benefit of the doubt? Would the young leaders of this project be criticized by veterans from previous campaigns who were more comfortable with adversarial tactics?

As it turned out, school officials treated the national data, the local school survey and the compelling individual stories as sufficient to generate an ending to their “it’s-not-enough- of-a-problem-to-deal-with” defense.

In short, each party took risks. The advocates had to give up their monopoly over their demands and also their assumption that the school officials needed to be pushed; the school officials had to give up their assumption that honest dialogue and sharing the power of initiative with outside advocates would get them into trouble. And all of them were rewarded.

Of course, their “reward” was being launched into the “now-that-we’ve-admitted-we-have-a-problem-what-do-we-do-next” part of the neutral zone. Bridges’ counsel is that, in the neutral zone, people need to be reminded of the purpose; thus the action teams were asked to keep the goal statements in front of them in a literal sense. Another neutral zone tactic is to provide structure; so one of the action teams found a research-based curriculum for teachers from a large urban school district as a starting point; another action team worked on detailed draft guidelines for Administrators on resolving factual disputes. In other words, the teams assessed where the teachers and administrators were, in this instance, the neutral zone; they acknowledged the difficulty that was to be faced; and they adapted their standard responses, away from persuasion and towards information-gathering.

One of Bridges’ many insights concerning changes involving groups as distinguished from individuals is the “marathon effect:” runners in the Boston Marathon are sorted by ability, so that by the time the slowest runners line up to start, the speedy ones are in the tent drinking Gatorade and talking about the day. Similarly, by the time any large-scale change plan is announced in a company, school or community the leaders have a tendency to forget the effort required for their own transition and to become impatient when others resist. Make the Road was especially concerned about this marathon effect among students, so they developed a plan to organize a summer retreat to bring more students into contact with the core group so that a larger circle would have an opportunity to start their own transition.

By collaborating with other stakeholders in naming the change and by addressing the transition-based resistance intentionally, Make the Road not only reduced the fear of transition, it also accomplished two other things:

Resistance based on resonance (memories) was reduced. The people who had initially been skeptical or resistant to their demands noticed a difference from their past experience with other advocacy groups. Not only were their fears lessened, the new tactics brought back *positive* memories about Make the Road’s work on behalf of the schools.

Resistance to the proposed change (message) was minimized. By acknowledging the legitimacy of the fear of transition and by inviting the “other side” to a common table, Make the Road was led to reframe the issue in terms that connected with a core commitment of school officials: safety and security. This reframing reduced the danger of collateral attack on the school officials. It also offered community members who are part of Make the Road’s constituency a way to support protections for GLBTQ students without being forced to make an ending as to deeper convictions based on their moral or religious beliefs.

As of this writing, the controversies that have been stirred by GLBTQ issues in other school districts has yet to happen in Bushwick, although many questions remain unanswered at this early date. Will the students who attended the retreat abandon their promises in the face of ridicule about “political correctness?” Will the principals back off if press attention arouses outside political groups? As the initial core group encounters the marathon effect will they

become self-righteous and impatient? Will the members of Make the Road be satisfied with an incremental strategy of making the *school* a safe place, or will they escalate demands before the new beginning is secured and push their allies beyond their comfort zone?

There is no way to predict. What has happened to date is consistent with the hypothesis that reconciliation doesn't mean giving in or going soft, that tough-minded, passionate advocates can use the Transition Framework as a strategic tool without "enabling" people who don't "get it," and that even the smartest advocates have something to learn from people who are on the "other side."

From my own perspective of a person who studies public advocacy, I would say that Make the Road's experience illustrates how the Transition Framework is to advocates what the weather is to sailors. You don't need to understand it for short outings. But it's quite helpful if you plan a long trip over big water and hope to arrive at your chosen destination in one piece.

III. Transition-based resistance and the path to reconciliation

Up until this point I have been making an argument that explains and, to a degree, defends the theory of change that the Andrus Family Fund is acting on.⁷ I argued that any advocate will face transition-based resistance to proposals for change, whether they are dealing with one person or with multiple competing agencies and constituencies. Then I contended that change agents who address this fear of transition by collaborating with competing stakeholders to determine goals and then pay attention to transition in implementation will not only diminish the fear of transition but also reduce resistance that comes from fear of the change and from resonance. I then gave a hypothetical example of a social worker and a real-life example, Make the Road by Walking, where dealing explicitly with transitions helped them come up with a win-win proposal after their initial demands met with resistance.

Life is not always so simple. The defenders of the *status quo* may not believe that an advocacy group is really interested in reconciliation, at least not at first. They may demand unacceptable concessions from advocates as a condition of being invited to the table. They may want to retain a monopoly over the power to initiate change. They may wish to subvert and diminish the legitimacy of the advocate for reasons that are entirely unrelated to the specific issue at hand.

What if the powerful opposing groups or the relevant government officials are opposed to any sort of collaboration with an advocate's organization or group? It is my view that applying the Transition Framework is equally important *whether or not the source of resistance is willing to collaborate*, because being aware of transitions will help advocates avoid a common mistake—treating a person or a group as if they *are* and evil enemy simply because they are *behaving* like an evil enemy. (Conner,

This statement seems nonsensical on the surface. Return, for a moment, to the foster care example that I discussed earlier in this article. The social worker could try to use "push" approaches, such as warnings, penalties, or recommending court action. She could use more invitational approaches, such as talking to him about his potential as a leader, finding a mentor, introducing him to role models who had turned their lives around, finding an after-school athletic program, or giving gift certificates as incentives for regular school attendance.

⁷ It is important to note that I am not a representative of the Andrus Family Fund, but rather a *grantee*. Readers should refer to www.affund.org and the Fund's staff for authoritative statements.

Effective social workers need *all* of these options in their toolkits. But *if she and the young man come to see each other as enemies she is likely to overuse coercive tactics and he will tend to fight back* even though it gets him into trouble.

Fortunately, social workers, therapists, social workers and others in their line of work are trained to see oppositional behavior as a signal of inner psychological and spiritual struggle, so they react (or *try* to react) with compassion and empathy rather than fear and anger. Advocates receive no such training. When someone on the other side of an issue attacks, most advocates fight back, and soon they are in a tit-for-tat game with no end. In my other writing I call this the “Advocacy Trap” because it is so hard to escape once the pattern is set.⁸ Treating the other as an enemy to be overcome by coercive strategies only works if you have enough power to win, *and* if you do not need the willing cooperation of the sore loser to get what you want.

Needless to say, these conditions are rarely met in our personal lives and even more infrequently when it comes to public policy advocacy. Opposing public or private groups and the government agencies with whom they contend often feed off of each other’s energy until each side has enough resources to punish the other but not enough to impose their policy preferences by force. If they persist the dispute devolves into something like a “scrum” in rugby. The two teams line up on either side of the ball, they lock arms, and the whistle blows. What happens next is a lot of pushing and grunting, but very few goals.

This explains, in part, why Andrus encourages grantees to reach outside of their comfort zone to engage with other stakeholders and groups to find out what they *really* think instead of projecting fears onto them. Explicitly identifying and acknowledging the risks of loss that our proposals impose on others and self-consciously addressing the resistance from a fear of transition appears to have the effect of humanizing the opposition in our own perceptions.

When Make the Road’s seven demands were initially rebuffed they could have attacked the school officials for being “in denial,” two-faced, homophobic, cowardly, or unfeeling. But the community had everything to lose if the community became embroiled in a controversy with their local school, considering that hostile bureaucrats in the central office of the School District had tried to close the high schools earlier. If Bushwick had become a poster child of the culture wars, not only might they have handed the School District bureaucrats a fresh reason to shut down the school, the their own constituency—made up of immigrants, many of them Catholic—could well have become divided over this hot-button issue.

Make the Road’s leaders were aware of this danger, knowing how public disputes take on a life of their own once they get started. The Transition Framework gave them a way out of the dilemma. It helped staff and grass roots members understand that the initial reaction was an understandable expression of resistance rather than a signal to head for the barricades. And the explicit discussion of transition-related dangers between grass roots activists and their leaders caused them to “walk a mile in the moccasins” of the other side, to recognize and acknowledge how they were asking others to take risks. The most passionate supporters of policy change were able to develop a new, more complex mental picture of the other side. The old image was all about *power*—a picture of authorities who had all the power they needed to solve the problem but willfully refused due to illegitimate motives. The new mental image added *struggle*—imperfect human beings subject to forces outside of their control, fearful of the transition that change would require, and exposed to danger if they were to try.

⁸ See Conner, Roger, “Strategy and Stance: A Framework for Understanding Public Advocacy,” available at: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=862244.

This new mental image did not disarm Make the Road, deprive them of their determination to cause change, or make them excuse the officials for failing to act. Nor did Make the Road surrender the right to push if school officials refused a reasonable offer of collaboration (just as a compassionate social worker would not give up the right to impose consequences for misbehavior merely because she empathized with the furies that besetting a client).

It thus appears that the intentional, self-aware use of the Transition Framework brings to the advocate's mind a mental image of a struggling, imperfect person that, in turn, neutralizes some of the hostility created by the conflict and animates the feelings of empathy and compassion that are essential to any hope for dialogue, reconciliation or cooperation at the end of the day.

IV. Reflections:

Based on my own experience as a public advocate and interviews with other grantees of the Andrus Family Fund, several ideas are emerging as potential hypotheses to be tested by further research, experimentation and evaluation:

Proposition 1: Fear of transition will generate resistance to the just demands of public advocates, and this resistance is separate from resistance which may arise to the proposed change based on resonance or a logical analysis of costs and benefits. In order to be successful, advocates need to engage and defuse transition-based resistance.

Qualification 1: Where an advocate has enough power to force a target to change, and where the subsequent voluntary cooperation of the target is not required for the change to be effective, engaging and defusing resistance from fears of the transition will not be essential.

Proposition 2: Advocates who address transition-based resistance will also minimize unnecessary resistance from resonance and self-interest. Failure to address the target's fear of transition will increase otherwise avoidable opposition.

Qualification 2: Addressing the transition-based resistance does not eliminate the need to accumulate and use power. It supplements rather than replaces tactics such as organizing, coalition-building, making the test case, and other actions necessary to overcome misunderstanding, inertia and interest-based resistance.

Proposition 3: Acknowledging and addressing the cost and risk associated with transition will help advocates and their constituencies resist the tendency to de-humanize their opposition, which will help them to keep their minds open to the possibility of reconciliation.

Qualification 3: The proposal that they should use the Transition Framework because it will help them maintain a stance of empathy and compassion for opponents will generate resistance from most public advocates. All will react due to the fear of transition; some will fear the idea based on resonance; and some, will resist the change because perceiving the other side as an enemy is a central part of their strategy.

V. Conclusion

The Transition Framework is useful to *any* advocate, including one who believes s/he is dealing with an irredeemably evil adversary. All it takes to test the Transition Framework is a piece of paper, a pen, and a cup of coffee. Start with a sentence or a phrase that names the desired change, one can list the decision maker(s) and the interested group; do a quick and dirty

risk-loss analysis for one of the key opponents; finally, do some rudimentary brainstorming about what it would take to make the Transition seem less formidable or dangerous to them.

Whether this exercise is done on a scratch pad in a quiet room or through a formal process with facilitators and flip charts, Make the Road's experience suggests that being self-aware about their transitions can help us see the other as imperfect, limited, constrained, struggling. And once that image takes up residence in the consciousness it will delete the image of a powerful, mean-spirited enemy, but it will likely change that picture: instead of one dimension, two; instead of simplicity, complexity. Anger and fear may well remain, but compassion and empathy will join the mix. Experience from some of the 20th century's most powerful advocates, from Mahatma Gandhi to Martin Luther King Jr. to Rosa Parks, suggests that empathy and compassion are keys to effective advocacy, especially if progress will ultimately require some people on the other side to change voluntarily.

Resources and References:

On the Transitions Framework and social change, see www.transitionandsocialchange.org

Bridges, William. *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*. Da Capo Press, 2003.

——— *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*. Da Capo Press 1980; 2d. Edition 2004.

Dionne, EJ, *Stand Up Fight Back: Republican Toughs, Democratic Wimps, and the Politics of Revenge*, Simon & Schuster (2005).

Gee, Gordon. "Chancellor bids farewell to the classes of 2005 (May 13, 2005).

<http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/newspub/bjfTyg?id=19702>

Linkage, Inc., in association with William Bridges & Associates. "Managing Organizational Transition." William Bridges & Associates, 1998. <http://www.linkageinc.com/>

Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth. *On Death and Dying*. (New York: Macmillan 1969).

Markley, Robert, "Exterminate the Brutes: Fighting Back against the Right," in ebrinfo,

<http://www.altx.com/EBR/EBR2/2MARKLEY.HTM>.

Rothman, Jay. *Resolving Identity Based Conflicts in Nations, Organizations and Communities*. Josey-Bass, 1997

Rothman, Jay. "Reflexive Dialogue as Transformation." *Mediation Quarterly*, Vol. 13, #4, 1996.

For a good summary of conflict resolution theories and techniques with an emphasis on international conflicts, see: Hauss, Charles. *International Conflict Resolution*. Continuum, 2001.

For information on the tools available for dispute resolution in the context of large-scale multi-party disputes see:

The Meridian Institute, <http://www.merid.org/>

Mayer, Bernie. *Beyond Neutrality, Confronting the Crisis in Conflict Resolution*. Josey-Bass, 2004.

For formal training in the application of the Transition Framework, contact Linkage, Inc.

<http://www.linkageinc.com/>

For information on the Andrus Family fund see www.affund.org. For a short description of the C-3 process see: <http://www.uc.edu/arc/documents/ariac3.pdf>. For more detail on the theory and practice principles underlying the C-3 process see www.ariagroup.com.