Life Transitions

We begin our life with the writing of Chapter One. Words and pictures describe the important firsts - first step, tooth, birthday, Christmas and countless other events that will shape how we see the world. Family members, school friends, teachers and mentors will guide us, at times positively and at other times negatively, based on their own past history. As children we navigate the coping mechanisms of others around us, and through our experiences begin to adapt some of these as our own.

Looking back, it is hard to believe how quickly childhood passes and adolescence begins. It is a time of challenge for both parents and teens. Adolescents want more freedom and parents worry while trying to be supportive. In a world of increasing reliance on technology new issues are arising amongst adolescents and adults. Overuse and addiction to screens are creating health issues, mental and physical. A CBC News Health-Social Media article on the internet talks about how the internet, Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites are affecting teen’s concepts of friendship and intimacy. Research is beginning to explore how this is fostering a lack of capacity for empathy. “Young people feel socially supported by having large networks of on-line friends they may never see.” Patricia Greenfield, a UCLA Developmental Psychologist further stated in the article that “The whole idea behind intimacy is self-disclosure. Now they’re doing self-disclosure to an audience of hundreds.” Through social media, adolescents are publicizing details of their lives that were once reserved for intimate relationships. In addition, these acts of self-disclosure are easily misinterpreted and can lead to problems such as cyber bullying, reduced self-esteem and safety concerns.

Unfortunately, these findings are also impacting adults. For example, texting or emailing between couples throughout the day can become the grounds for an argument when they get home. It is hard enough to correctly interpret the meaning of what someone is saying based on tone and verbal cues.

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Imagine how easy it is to misinterpret the meaning(s) of a text message. Do we need to be in constant contact? It may be helpful to text a teen if they are late coming home or to ask a spouse to stop at the store for milk, but when is it too much?

Technology is here to stay and that brings us to the final chapters of the book. Adulthood, middle age and old age cover a span of seventy years or more past adolescence. There are many challenges and uncertainties to face as we move out into the world. Will I get a good job, meet someone, go to college/university, have children, and or travel? The questions and choices are endless. Albert Einstein said “Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance you must keep moving”. So in our 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s and beyond we keep peddling. In our 20’s and 30’s we embrace first jobs, relationships, marriage, parenthood, educational accomplishments and travel with excitement, anxiety, uncertainty, hope and promise. When we reach middle age, in retrospect these years seem to have passed very quickly as we begin to assess where we have been, wanted to be or might like to go. Parenting is one of the most challenging yet most fulfilling jobs we will ever face and yet at this stage we are now faced with what happens once they are gone and do not need us anymore. We ask ourselves what is next, not having realized that we would need a new plan.

What happens when one spouse decides to make a drastic change and go back to school or get another career? Have couples nurtured their relationship so they are able to endure the empty nest syndrome? Individuals within a relationship both change over time, the challenge is to find ways to grow both as individuals and as a couple. One of the key factors in successful long term relationships of any kind is the capacity to respect individual differences.

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Friendships have been based on this principle for a long time so it makes sense to apply it to our intimate relationships as well. Change is inevitable, even when we do not seek it. Look at technology and how we have had to continually adapt to newer rapidly developing concepts in our jobs and personal lives.

Change can be as frightening and as challenging in adulthood as it is when we first discover the freedom of adolescence. Viktor Frankl once said: “When we are no longer able to change a situation - we are challenged to change ourselves.” I believe that this challenge to adapt and grow is a life long journey.