

When Is the Shower Done?

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Today, I took an extra-long shower. The hot water felt great on my tired muscles. As the hot water poured over my body, I asked myself, “How do I know when a shower is done?” Surely, if a shower is done when I am clean, it would only take about 45 seconds. It doesn’t take long to get clean. At some point, I decide it is time for the towel.

Similarly, deciding to launch into your next life trajectory often comes without a measurable or quantifiable decision matrix. Second Curve Coaching clients make qualitative statements: “It just feels like the right time to do what I have always wanted to do since I was young.” Simultaneously, quantitative analysis is undertaken. “Do we have the finances to carry us through the potential income delay until the second curve is fully established?”

When second curves are launched against your wishes, it can be extremely challenging. This past week, my airline seatmate said they were blindsided one day at work. “My boss walked in and said, ‘We will be reducing staff next month, and your position has been eliminated.’ I suddenly found myself without an income and trying to develop a business base as a freelancer.”

Medical diagnoses or changing health situations often require sudden shifts in life trajectory. For example, “My doctor told me that I cannot lift over 5 pounds, but my job requires that I lift far more than that.” Even more challenging are diagnoses requiring immediate and full-time intervention, such as a life-threatening cancer diagnosis. One day you are cruising through your life trajectory. The next day you are scheduling chemo treatments, further evaluations, and surgery.

Whether you choose the moment to launch a second curve or the moment is chosen for you, the outward change can happen in a day, but the inward transition follows the same slow road. Neither path skips the middle.

Charles Handy, the Irish social philosopher who gave us the language of the second curve, drew it as an S lying on its side. He argued that every career, venture, and calling starts slowly, climbs, peaks, and eventually declines. His counterintuitive counsel, set out in *The Empty Raincoat* (1994), is that the right moment to begin the second curve comes before the first one peaks, while you still have the time, resources, and energy to carry the new thing through its awkward beginnings. In shower terms, you reach for the towel while the water is still hot.

That is easier to draw than to do. So how do you know you are near that point? Herminia Ibarra, who holds the Charles Handy Professorship of Organisational Behavior at London Business School, studied professionals in the middle of career change for her book *Working Identity* (2003). Her findings overturn the advice most of us were given. We assume we must know what we want before we act, but change usually runs the other way: “Doing comes first, knowing second.” People discover their next season by trying it on through small experiments, new conversations, and side projects, often while the first curve is still paying the bills. That is what my clients mean when they say, “It just feels like the right time.” The feeling is often the fruit of experiments already run.

But not every shower ends by choice. Sometimes the hot water simply runs out. My seatmate did not get to pick the moment. Neither does the person reading a pathology report.

Here William Bridges helps. In *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes* (1980), he distinguished change from transition. Change is situational: the layoff, the diagnosis, the new address. Transition is psychological: the slower inner work of letting go of an old identity and growing into a new one. “Every transition begins with an ending,” Bridges wrote. Between the ending and the new beginning lies what he called the neutral zone, an in-between season that feels like lostness but, in his view, is where reorientation actually happens.

That distinction is the bridge between the chosen curve and the unchosen one. Whether you reach for the towel or the water heater quits, the outward change can happen in a day. The inward transition takes longer, and it travels the same road: an ending, a wilderness, a beginning. The person who chooses to launch still has to grieve what she leaves behind. The person forced to launch can still, as Ibarra describes, experiment his way forward. Neither gets to skip the middle.

Which may make the more important question not “When is the shower done?” but “Who will walk with me through the neutral zone?”

The Bible answered this question before we ever asked it. The Psalmist knew that even if he walked through life's darkest valley, God was with him. Notice that the psalm doesn't leave him in the valley. By the last verse, goodness and mercy are following him all the days of his life. Because he knew God's character from personal experience, David knew who would walk with him through the neutral zone.

While walking to Damascus, the apostle Paul's life trajectory changed instantly. His second curve launched unexpectedly, and he even kicked against it. Eventually, his second curve

included imprisonment and legal trials. Paul's trial taught him a hard lesson: when everyone abandoned him at his first defense, only the Lord remained faithfully at his side. Paul's answer to "Who will walk with me through the neutral zone?" is the Lord!

The shift from "When is a morning shower completed?" to "Who will walk with me through the neutral zone?" offers a fabulous second curve-life lesson. God Himself walks with you through the middle seasons. During your next shower, ask yourself two questions: "When is the right time to move into what is next for me?" and "Who will walk with me through the neutral zone?" Enjoy the hot water.

