



## Dealing with Transitions Thanks to Janus

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### Abstract

This article suggests a reflection on transitions through the lenses of depth analytical psychology and the representation of the mythic Roman god, Janus. Some transition-related factors and signs of being lost in transition will be explored as well as the implication of having an one-sided vision. Finally, the author proposes an interpretation of Janus's symbolic characteristics to help to understand and manage transitions.

**Keywords:** Transition; Janus; Perspective; Prospective Hindsight; Symbols

### Introduction

The first month of the year is dedicated to Janus, the two-faced Roman God. Janus comes from the Latin *Ianus*, which means the door; *Ianito*, the guardian of the gates; and *Ianuaris*, January. Janus is the god of transitions, passages, beginnings and ends; therefore, he is the guardian of the doors and passages. This mythic god can be easily recognized as he has two heads oriented in opposite directions enabling him to look forward and backward simultaneously. At the beginning of the year, our thoughts and attention focus on both the past and the coming year. Therefore, January can be considered as a month of transition and the door giving access to the New Year. Furthermore, the two faces of Janus are often depicted differently; one is older than the other. Janus has two other significant attributes: a staff in his right hand and a key in his left hand and thus, he is responsible for opening and closing doors and choosing the right moment. All these symbolic characteristics are relevant for understanding and managing a transition period. However, before dwelling on the symbolic meaning of the representation of Janus, it is worth recalling

what a transition is and examining its related factors.

### Definition and Transition-Related Factors

The term transition is commonly understood as a change of state, place, or role to another. It also refers to an in-between period that links two distinct stages. The former one has not fully ended, and the new one has not fully started. It is a time of uncertainties but also significant potential change, opportunities, and possible turning points. Decisions will be made according to one's values, aspirations, personal development and psychological process. At last, a transition is also a time of exploration and self-reflection.

A multitude of transitions occurs throughout life, whether professional, personal, or developmental. Developmental transitions are defined by age-related factors and involve the interplay of major transitions on multidimensional levels such as cognitive, physical, emotional, social, and identity-related. The transition from adolescence to adulthood implies, for instance, leaving parent's home, shifting from

school to work, and thus developing a professional persona and a role in society.

Pearlman K [1] identifies several transition-related factors, such as the onset of the transition (voluntary-involuntary initiated), the transition's prediction (anticipation-unanticipated), and the transition impact (high-low). Even though his reflection focuses mainly on work-related transitions, these factors can also be applied to personal and developmental transitions. Some of them have a normative timetable, like the age of retirement.

The onset of voluntary transitions is usually triggered by the individual's desires, aspirations, needs and interests, or dissatisfaction with a current situation. It can take the forms of a career change, a better work-life balance, a new role in one's professional or personal life (e.g., parenthood) or a change in one's attitude toward life, such as being less ego-driven. It can also be felt as an inner call, and what comes from deep within needs to be actualized in the outer world. On the other hand, involuntary transitions tend to be triggered mainly by external events or circumstances (e.g., organizational or economic constraints, illness of a loved one or traumatic events) or biological markers (e.g., adapting to a chronic disease, puberty, menopause or andropause).

Another identified factor is the anticipation of the transition. The advantage of anticipating it, even though it has a negative connotation, is the relatively quick activation of former coping skills and defense mechanisms. It might lessen the negative impact. However, if the transition comes as a surprise or even a shock (e.g., traumatic events, widowhood, or becoming a caregiver of a disabled spouse), individuals may feel overwhelmed, confused, and disoriented. It may require important adjustments and emotional regulation.

Finally, the psychological and emotional impact of the transition will also depend on how challenging and critical it is in one's lifespan and how much difference there is between the new and old situation or stage. All kinds of emotions may be elicited, such as insecurity, a sense of losing one's former identity, loneliness, confusion, anxiety, nostalgia, excitement, curiosity, uncertainty, doubt, and fear of new responsibilities.

### Lost in Transition: Yesterday Never Dies-Tomorrow Never Comes

Even though it seems, at first, easy to go through a transition, it does not always operate smoothly, and one may feel lost in transition. The shift can be quite abrupt, sudden and unexpected. A discontinuity is observed when extreme events occur. Furthermore, an introspective attitude related to transition is frequently overlooked. The ensuing issue of being stuck in an obsolete phase and not succeeding in

engaging in the next stage can take different forms.

When yesterday never dies, individuals may have difficulty of:

- Letting go;
- Grieving a loss;
- Healing psychological wounds;
- Dealing with the reactivation of past traumas (e.g. flashbacks, nightmares).

And when tomorrow never comes, people may:

- Have difficulty making a decision;
- Procrastinate;
- Lack direction and guidance;
- Feel lost about the demands of a new role;
- Lack of engagement because of low intrinsic or external motivation
- Show low persistence in adversity
- Reach one's breaking point

As mentioned in Dr. Westerhof's interview, growth through adversity can be complex. It implies emotional regulation, goal regulation, and thus being able to adjust it according to the circumstances, step back to do a life review, and have a supportive environment [2].

### A One-Sided Vision? Backward or Forward?

What happens if someone's focus is essentially turned toward the past? Nostalgia, bitterness, resentment, and regrets (e.g., "I should have...", "I could have achieved..."), may prevail, along with an inability to find guidance and direction in developing new projects. As seen above, emotional regulation is essential. If needed, a practitioner will help to heal past wounds and traumas. Having difficulty leaving a stage may have other reasons, like feeling too comfortable in the current stage of life. For some young adults, it could be remaining an eternal student and not wanting to be confronted with the working world, or for others, being unwilling to leave their parent's house despite having financial autonomy.

In contrast, the past may quickly be swept away by rushing forward, always looking for new experiences or opportunities. Dwelling mainly on the future can induce anticipatory anxiety, a sense of urgency, some restlessness, and constantly having the impression of running out of time. In both polarized attitudes, living in the present moment seems problematic. Therefore, reflecting on transitions opens up an introspective attitude on one's journey and an awareness of one's values, aspirations, and needs impacting relevant choices and decisions. Here the question to ask is how decisions are aligned with one's values and needs.

### Helpful Stance to Adopt in a Transition

As Janus is the god of transition, beginning and ending, understanding his symbolic characteristics will be helpful in adopting the right attitude to manage transitions. Janus, as the gatekeeper of doors and thanks to his two faces, watches the entrances and exits simultaneously. As a facilitator and initiator, he holds a key in his left hand. The key is a symbol of higher authority; whoever possesses the key is responsible for opening the way or giving access to a new state [5]. Janus can also use the key to lock doors. Symbolically, it means ending a previous stage or state or protecting oneself from intrusion. As a guide, Janus holds a staff in his right hand to show the direction and the way. The staff has several purposes. Pilgrims have one to support them in their long journey; shepherds use it to move the sheeps in the right direction, and others use it as a weapon to protect themselves. The staff symbolizes power and sovereignty, protection, support and direction [4]. In short, Janus decides not only to give access or not to a new stage but also provides guidance and support to manage it. In order to be able to do that, he possesses a strong asset, his two heads oriented in opposite directions.

Janus' dual vision and the age difference between the two faces are key ideas in dealing with transitions. The representation of an older face suggests a greater accumulation of life experiences, whether constructive or deleterious, compared to the younger one. Opposite looks involve different perspectives and meanings. Viewing a situation from different angles will mitigate biases and stereotypes, and decisions will be more aligned with one's values. At that stage, the questions raised are: What are the meaningful learning experiences, the level of satisfaction of past achievements, and what remains un-lived? And then decide what needs to be addressed, pursued, or changed.

Moreover, the opposite of glances can be understood on both temporal and spatial levels. Looking backward means focusing on the past as well as looking behind. Having a rear vision could symbolically mean becoming aware of what comes up and is going through the inner gate of consciousness. Looking forward means focusing on the future and looking ahead. Based on Mitchell DJ, et al. [3] research on prospective hindsight that involves projecting oneself in the future and then looking back, some leaders conduct pre-mortem exercises to increase positive outcomes of their projects. Paradoxically, a leader may ask his team to imagine a negative result of an event or project and then generate all possible reasons for the project's failure. This exercise increases the chance of making appropriate decisions, identifying potential pitfalls, considering what is at stake, developing a better course of action, and increasing the probability of success.

Finally, a third relevant dialectic dimension between the inner and outer world is observed. A look inward toward the inner world promotes the awareness of bodily sensations, feelings, intuitions, and inner self-talk. Conversely, looking toward the outer world focuses on current events, the environment, and the people one interacts with. Both inward and outward focus are essential; one does not go without the other. The inner world will impact the outer world, and the outer world will influence the inner world.

It is certainly not that easy to simultaneously maintain attention in opposite directions. One tends to favor one of the poles at the expense of the other. Plus, the society reinforces this attitude by valuing the future more than the past and productivity more than reflection. Hence, what are the benefits of focusing on both past and future?

### Benefits of Focusing on Past and Future

The older face of Janus turned toward the past may emphasize on:

1. Reflecting on one's life journey by stepping back to have a life review. Learning from the past might prevent future mistakes and provide a better orientation of one's life. Thus, the risk of regrets is mitigated, and the choices will be more aligned with one's deep personality;
2. Anchoring in one's roots and resources to become more stable when a storm of a crisis occurs;
3. Becoming aware of one's personal values to prioritize what is essential;
4. Healing past wounds and traumas in the here and now to move forward bravely.

As for the younger face of Janus, looking forward may mean:

1. Staying connected to the inner, curious and creative child;
2. Adopting the beginner mindset;
3. Being open to new possibilities;
4. Projecting oneself into the future by developing new projects;
5. Approaching events and people with a new perspective without any biases.

### Conclusion

In regard to what has been said, holding the focus on opposite directions and maintaining the dialectic between different perspectives will facilitate a transition and enhance a sense of continuity. Being Janus-like also refers to decision-making and seizing the right time to open and close the symbolic door. The Kairos is the opportune moment to take decisive and appropriate actions. Having such a comprehensive vision promotes new insight and the chance

of getting the right key to open the door to the next stage of life. At last, it brings about a more meaningful life and more authentic way of being.

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