



## **William Emery Bridges**

**1933-2013**

William Bridges, the author, teacher and consultant whose pioneering work on transition transformed the way people think about change, died on February 17, 2013, at his home in Larkspur, California, from complications of Lewy Body Disease. His death was confirmed by his wife, Susan Bridges. He was 79.

Through his books, including *Transitions and Managing Transitions*, his public speaking and the international network of experts he certified to coach people, Mr. Bridges had a global impact upon educators, psychologists, corporate executives, business consultants and non-profit leaders as well as the general public. The Wall Street Journal named him one of the top ten executive development presenters in America.

As John Alexander, former CEO of the Center for Creative Leadership, observed, “Bill’s contribution was incalculable. He gave us a vocabulary for understanding and talking about change that was entirely absent before. He helped us understand how people actually experience change and what they need to get through it.”

William Emery Bridges was born in Boston in 1933, the son of Ronald Perkins Bridges and Helen Emery Bridges. He lived as a young child in Maine, Arizona and California. He received his BA in English from Harvard, his MA in American History from Columbia and his PhD in American Civilization from Brown University. He served in the US Army in Germany. He married Ramonda Kump in 1959.

Mr. Bridges held the Aurelia Henry Reinhard Professorship of American Literature position at Mills College in Oakland, California, in the late 1960's, when he became interested in the psychology of literature. In 1970, he led a three-week training program in humanistic and depth psychology, bringing some of the era's most influential thinkers together. He would later become President of the Society for Humanistic Psychology.

In writing about transition, Mr. Bridges relied on a phrase from Emerson's classic essay "Self-Reliance", reminding him to "Say what is true for you and every heart will respond to that iron string." Mr. Bridges took this advice and began to write not as an academic but "as if I knew what was true." In the mid-seventies he moved his family to an intentional community of seven families in Northern California, where he continued to write.

In 1980 he published *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*. In it he set forth the idea that, while change was situational, transition was psychological, and needed to be better understood, especially in America where change is both endemic and rapid. *Transitions* proposed that individuals experience change in three stages: first as an ending, followed by a period of confusion and distress, and then followed by a new beginning. He noted that because Western culture offers few rituals to mark the passage through these stages, people often try to skip from the first stage directly to the last. Instead, he asked individuals to spend time in what he called "the neutral zone" as a way of psychologically accommodating the space between.

The book struck a strong chord with readers and it was followed by *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* in 1991, also a national best-seller and now in its third edition. In 2001, he published *The Way of Transition: Embracing Life's Most Difficult Moments*, which in part explored the pain of his own transition following the death of his first wife, Mondie, of breast cancer.

In 1994, he published *JobShift: How to Prosper in a Workplace Without Jobs*, which was excerpted and featured on the cover of Fortune Magazine. Exploring the consequences of flattening hierarchies and the disappearance of management jobs that characterized the recession of the early 1990's, Mr. Bridges accurately predicted the explosive growth of self-employment and helped people understand how to prepare for a world in which secure jobs would be increasingly scarce.

In the 1980's, he began consulting with individuals and organizations about managing transition. He founded William Bridges & Associates and developed customized training programs for organizations experiencing transition. These programs were conducted worldwide. In 1998, he married Susan Mitchell, a colleague and established leadership development consultant, who joined him as a partner in the business. Mrs. Bridges became President of the company in 2007.

In 2000, Mr. Bridges was approached by Steven Kelban, Executive Director of the Andrus Family Fund, a division of the Surdna Foundation. The Andrus Family Fund makes grants to non-profits working in foster care and community reconciliation. They began a collaboration that Mr. Kelban said has made a substantial difference in helping both young people and damaged communities adapt to change by incorporating transition management principles.

Jim Kouzes, author of *The Leadership Challenge*, noted, “Bill’s major contribution was to give us permission to talk about the pain and difficulty of change and acknowledge that it can be very confusing. Americans have shame around pain—success is somehow supposed to be easy. If you’re struggling, it’s as if you’ve failed. Bill moved past that relentless optimism and said, yes, you can find real meaning in change but only if you are willing to experience the pain.”

Tom Yeomans, founder of The Concord Institute, notes that the Emersonian tradition continued to affect Mr. Bridges’ work. “Trust informed Bill’s process and trust is the core idea of self-reliance—trusting your instinct, what you know, your potential to be more truly yourself, trusting the process of change and moving with it. Bill’s work was profoundly consistent, built on the recognition of a deep human pattern, but he found many ways to develop it. Because he remained deeply connected to Emerson and the transcendentalists, he helped open organizations and individuals to the possibility of transcendence.”

Mr. Bridges is survived by his wife, Susan Bridges, his daughters from his first marriage, Anne Gavin (Curtis Gavin), Sarah Bridges, and Margaret Bridges, seven grandchildren, and his brother, Daniel Bridges. Memorial services are pending.

Donations may be made to the UCSF Foundation for the "William and Susan Bridges Neurohospitalist Program Fund B2390" and sent to S. Andrew Josephson MD, Director, Neurohospitalist Program, UCSF, 505 Parnassus Ave, Box 0114, San Francisco, CA 94143.

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