



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

S E R I E S

THE SUMMARY OF HINGE MOMENTS

By D. Michael Lindsay, PHD
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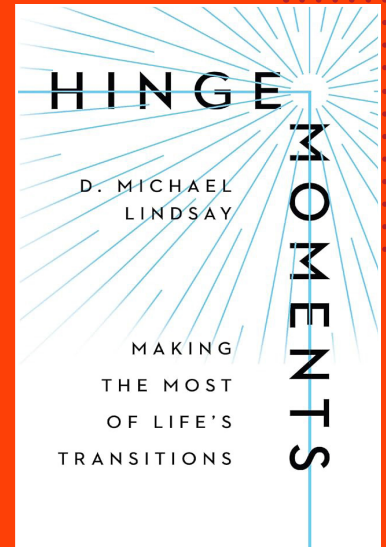
Introduction

There are particular moments in our own lives when we realize, in a flash, that something has to change—is going to change—whether we like it or not.

What follows these instances will depend intrinsically on the decisions we make and the actions we take. These are *hinge moments*—opportunities to open (or to close) doors to various pathways of our lives.

Such moments are axial by nature, representing a fixed time, place, or event with consequences for the rest of our days. Getting them wrong can pose problems for years to come. Each of us is given a finite number of these hinge moments in life. In total, they may represent only a few hundred minutes out of our total lives of seventy or eighty years, but they have an outsized impact on the other thirty-seven million minutes of our time on earth.

Some periods of transition are predictable in their arrival. You plan to ask a certain someone to marry you, and you plan for months—even years—in advance. Or you start contemplating your college decision as a junior in high school. Or you start planning for the



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birth of your first child the moment you see a positive pregnancy test. These are the sorts of significant transitions that we can anticipate, even prepare for. Death is the last of these hinge moments we face in life.

But some profound changes arrive in the blink of an eye. A beloved family member is killed in an accident, or your boss tells you that your job is being eliminated. And because these kinds of bombshell transitions entail uncharted territory, we cannot always lean on the typical securities of our environment.

By the time they have turned eighteen, most Americans will have moved at least twice. Most thirty-year-olds will have moved six times. But the end of our lives, most of us will have pushed that number up to eleven. The average American worker holds ten different jobs before the age of forty, and this job transience is only expected to increase in the years ahead. Add to these the slew of major life changes such as college or vocational training, marriage, and having children, and it becomes clear how many different phases our lives actually have. For all of us there is only one thing that remains the same—the fact that nothing does.

All these major decisions, though different in nature, are the same in that they determine our future trajectory. There are no neutral choices—no loitering on the threshold of destiny. Each of these moments will either help or hurt us, depending on how we handle the transition between one space and the next.

It is difficult to overstate just how much is changing post-COVID-19. Companies are rethinking how they do business. Workers are looking for new places and new ways to work. Families are postponing having children. Universities are rapidly coming to terms with what it means to be an institution with no students on campus. As a result of this, tens of millions of people in this country are undergoing major transitions, both voluntary and otherwise.

Most of the things that happen over the course of our lives can be readily characterized as “good” or “bad.” Getting married: good. Losing a loved one: bad. Periods of transition are different; even the best and most welcoming transitions are still the results of *change*, and that is universally unsettling. This is what sets transitions apart from the other barriers and blessings in life.

Typically, when the good and the bad come knocking at our door, we have roots and community to laugh or cry with us. The problem with hinge moments is that they have to be managed in the disorienting space between communities, in the time between the uprooting of the old and the planting of the new.

The challenge with life is that we have to live it moving forward, but really only understand it looking back. Every day offers the promise of preparing us to best respond to the next hinge moment of our lives.

In the full-length interviews I conducted with 550 of America’s top leaders I have come to understand that to study leadership is to study the science of transition. For these top leaders, moments of change were almost always converted into moments of opportunity that propelled them upward. I am convinced that what made the difference in their lives was how they managed times of change, how they responded to their hinge moments.

Each of us experiences transition through a series of seven stages, similar to the stages of grief we experience during seasons of loss or pain. There is a temporal aspect to these stages since we process them over time and in a particular order, but they can go fast or slow depending on the circumstances. And the phases bring on differing degrees of confidence as we move through them.

We begin a given transition with a stable measure

of assurance because we start in a relatively settled environment, complete with sources of support and recognized routines. But then as we enter a stage of discernment about a possible change, our confidence wanes. We eventually reach our lowest point of confidence at the liminal moment in between our old and new ways of life. At this intersection we know the least about our future but also recognize that our past will no longer provide the same degree of support for what lies ahead. Gradually, the tide turns, and we move into a new space. We emerge with a stronger degree of confidence and confirmation than when we began the whole process.

Finally, we reach a stage of realization in which we recognize that the whole experience has allowed us to mature and deepen in ways that would have been impossible without the change.

One of the most valuable takeaways from my study was that the most successful people in our society are not altogether different from you or me. There are many reasons the top leaders of today got where they are, but a common thread is their excellent management of the transitional events in their lives. The world is filled with people who, through God's guiding hand and divine wisdom, are able to see these moments as chances to learn and grow—leveraging twists and turns into new opportunities.

1. Approaching the Doors in Our Lives

Considering a Change

Change is like a flood. It often comes on quickly, and you might not see it coming. But transition is different. Transition is a gradual process that follows a major change in life. If you quit your job and move to a new city to start a new job, that change happens quickly. Or for younger people, one day you are living at home with your parents; the next day you are liv-

ing at college. These changes are instantaneous and definite. Thankfully, unlike change, most transitions are anticipatable, and we have some measure of control how they play out.

Transitions are a process, not a moment. At their core, transitions are the internal adjustments by which we reorient ourselves to new environments, new experiences, and new seasons of life. Changes disrupts our lives and move us into new seasons, where we must begin the process of transition. Our lives are an ongoing movement between settled and unsettled spaces. We use familiarity and routine for as long as we can, but when change occurs, we are often forced through new doorways and have to adapt to new ways of thinking, new modes of actions. Change moves us out of our previous settled time; transition moves us into the next one. While changes are significant to our lives, it is the success of our transitions that will determine our satisfaction and effectiveness in the days and years to come—whether we will succeed in college or find satisfaction in our new job.

There are at least three kinds of changes we face: those we wouldn't choose but can see coming, those we choose ourselves, and those that flood our homes at two in the morning. The first two offer us some choice about how and when we pack our bags; the third offers us none. It does not matter how successful, wealthy, or good you are at your job: a major life change is never more than a phone call away.

Because of their unpredictability, unexpected changes are often the most difficult to handle. But just because something is unpredictable does not mean it is unpreparable. In fact, the unpredictability of these changes actually makes the scope of preparation quite narrow. The best way to prepare for an unseen transition is to keep in mind how close one could be and to develop the virtues—such as humil-

ity, courage, and self-control—we would need to make good choices when the hinge moment presents itself.

The good news is that sometimes we get to pick the timing of our transitions; the bad news is that sometimes we get to pick the timing of our transitions. A sense of restlessness can creep up on anyone. So why do we so often try to fit “new wine into old wineskins,” instead of respecting the new vintage? The answer is obvious: change is hard and so we fear it.

As we move from the *discernment* to the *anticipation* phase of transition, we become filled with a confusing combination of positive and negative feelings. This is why the change feels even harder than it may be; our minds are trying to make sense of the mixed signals we pick up consciously and subconsciously. Our confidence level drops, and we begin to anticipate the many challenges the change will require. It is at this moment that we most need to remain level-headed and remind ourselves that this is the usual way God carries us through the changes of life.

2. Standing Outside

Why Change Hurts Your Head

At root, change means the partial or total abandonment of the norms, safeties, and patterns of behavior that make our lives manageable. Decision-making is mentally taxing, so we tend to replace assessments and evaluations with automatic reactions and instructive habits whenever we can. Change entails losing familiar crutches that we lean on. If every day were our first day on the job, or if every time we drove to work, we had to concentrate on the map directing our travel, we would eventually wear out. This is also why vacations to new places, especially international ones, can be exhausting, even if they are a pleasure. The body cannot tolerate a steady supply of adrenaline. Eventually, we move to a more stable state, but

before then we must pass through the *anticipation* phase of transitions.

By nature, we humans are risk averse. The unknown makes us wary. A moderate dose of caution is healthy as a survival mechanism, but too much can keep us from successfully passing through open doors. The reason why change hurts your head is because the option to relax a little and fall back on default actions is not available, because in transitions there are no default actions yet—not until we establish our new patterns and ways of life.

Determining the “when” of a transition is always difficult, and there are more factors to consider than I can list here. Yet it's the sheer number of relevant variables that makes having some sort of plan so indispensable. The obvious benefit of long-term planning for change is that you have more options. There is no theoretical limit at the start of a life transition. But the closer we are to the fruition of our expectations, however, the more reality will temper them. This ought to inspire us to dream away. But the downside of future-casting when compared to more immediate planning is that it is notoriously inaccurate.

The truth is that very few of us end up doing exactly what it is we set out to do. This is not so much a problem with *planning* but with *predicting*. More often than not, our forecasts are wrong. Predictions are a natural part of thinking about the future, but they are also—fundamentally—liabilities. Basing major life decisions on predictions is dangerous but basing them on plans is a different thing altogether. Long-term plans can be intensely useful guides. The key is not to rely solely on one plan that depends on one particular prediction, not matter how guaranteed the outcome might seem right now.

It is also important not to let fear steal your future. Today, trust in major institutions is approaching an all-time low. The Pew Research Center finds that nearly half of all American young adults are “low

trusters”—and are “more likely to see others as self-ish, exploitative and untrustworthy.” Obviously, it is difficult to evaluate a possible future when we trust institutions so little.

And yet, our well-being depends on overlapping networks of trust. People who have a productive, meaningful life find ways to trust and to be trustworthy. This sense of trust means a reduced sense of anxiety, which helps them make better decisions about their future and create positive opportunities for themselves as well as their families and friends.

To succeed in your transitions, you have to look before you leap. This means doing your due reconnaissance, scouting out the area’s institutions and organizations. Yet watch out for fear and anxiety, which will creep in to steal your future or at least cause such distrust that you are not able to move to the next phase, which is found only at the meeting place of your old life and your new, of your past and your future.

3. Straddling the Threshold

The Space Between Spaces

As we reach the mid-point between our old and new lives—between being single and married or leaving one job and starting another—we find ourselves straddling a threshold, existing in the space between spaces. Here we encounter the *intersection* phase of a transition. Because of the inherently insecure nature of this stage in which we are betwixt and between, our confidence reaches its lowest ebb and our connections to others (in both our old and new places) are weakest. With the fewest sources of support, we rely almost entirely on immediate family members, lifelong friends, and mentors to sustain us and help us navigate. And because self-doubt and second-guessing are most common in this phase, seeking their counsel and following their advice is among the most important things we can do.

However, *mentors* are just as important as peers, and even more so when crossing a threshold. Indeed, they may be the most important resources in this phase of our lives. Mentors, by definition, have already walked where you are about to step, and they’ve had time to process the lessons they learned along the way, so a peer who gives good advice might be a great assist, but that person isn’t a mentor. True mentors can be invaluable sources of advice and direction when you need them, taking some of the edge off the hard decision-making early on in a new “space” because you can lean on their expertise where yours may be lacking.

During a transition, be sure to keep in touch with any mentors you had in your last setting. Just because you are “moving on” to a new phase of life doesn’t mean you should leave behind your old mentors (you absolutely should not). In fact, these people can be some of the most useful mentors for you at the onset of a transition; they already know you better than anyone in the new space could.

Never cut important ties to people or organizations simply because of your own irritation, ennui, or short-term bad experience. Despite confidence in your own predictions, always leave open the possibility of an about-face or return to base. Resist the temptation to tell your boss what you really think of the company you are leaving. He or she may be a reference for you later. Watch your tone when you talk to others about your breakup with old boyfriends or girlfriends, especially on social media. Slandering your ex might make your next potential date afraid of being a future victim of your ire.

It is seldom a good idea to “burn your ships.” In fact, I’ll be clear here: *nothing good will ever come of burning your relational ships*. Remember, fortunes turn quickly; you never know who will be your boss one day.

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Thresholds are powerful symbols because they separate what was previously mundane from the world of new adventures and dangers beyond. Yet even those people who look before they leap must eventually leap, or else they will find their open doorways have closed and become windows of what might have been.

4. The Welcome Mat

Landing in Your New Space

There will be plenty of times in your life when you will have the opportunity to serve as a host. But when you experience new transitions, when you cross a threshold into a new space, you become (albeit temporarily) a guest. This phase will not last forever; eventually, you'll feel more like a mainstay than a newcomer. As long as you are a guest, however, you should do what my Southern mom always said as went out the door: Be on your best behavior, say "thank you" often, and don't do anything to embarrass our family.

You should give as much thought and preparation to your first days in the new space as you gave to the deliberation process prior to the transition. *There is absolutely no substitute for a good first impression.*

The *landing* phase of a transition is filled with making impressions and forming options. Much of your time will be dominated by meeting new people, learning new routines, and establishing new patterns. Although you will be nervous about all the unknowns and eager to make friends and settle in, the landing stage is not nearly as scary as the liminal reality of the intersection phase. At this point, you've brought your adopted baby home, you've started the new job, or you've moved to your new home. Each interaction becomes an additional data point as you gain your bearings and start making sense of your new reality.

As a guest in the early days of your transition, it's important to understand the concept of culture and to grasp its implications in your new space. Eventually, you will become one of the builders of this culture. Culture, simply put, is the sum of all the behaviors, practices, and norms that are maintained by people in a community. Culture can be described as meaning making.

There are many ways you can see evidence of culture in your new space. It is not only about rules and policies but also unspoken expectations. It is made evident in the way we organize work and workflows, in the various roles that people occupy, and in the ways that we recognize and reward one another.

Sometimes the regular, everyday culture of a space is difficult to "hear" above the sounds of all the messages the governors of the culture want to communicate to you. Your boss, your peers, your new university, even your new in-laws want to make a good impression on you. They want to share two things with you: things *you* want to hear, and things *they* want you to hear. The former is all about that the message that this is a good space to be in. The latter is about how you're expected to behave in this new space. And they will send these messages both overtly and subtly. Yet, culture can't help but communicate itself, sometimes indirectly. For better or worse, these are norms to which you will be expected to conform.

First days are for learning about the culture of your new space while you are still a guest. First days are for first impressions. And first impressions are springboards for second and third impressions, which, if you work hard enough, might just change you and your new space for better as you land well.

5. The Deadbolt

Earning the Key Through Trust

True happiness and satisfaction in life come from belonging. Being needed means that you have a role, an important purpose, and that people are relying on you, confident that you can and will carry it out. Being needed means, simply put, that you belong.

As you enter the *integration* phase of transition, you will develop deeper connections with others in the new space, and you will find more people you can trust even as they find you trustworthy. In the process, you'll develop a deeper appreciation for this place where God has led you and find ways to become invaluable to others.

At the start of a transition the door before us is open and we focus on crossing the threshold. Toward the end of successful transition, however, we will begin to see the door closing behind us. All doors have to be able to close—and many to lock. As you transition from one space to another, it will be up to you to take on the identity of the limited number of people who *belong* behind this locked door. It will be up to you to earn your key.

Full adoption into membership and belonging in your new space is neither discrete nor instantaneous. It is a process. You may get the keys to your new home or your ID badge for school or work on your first day there, but membership rightly understood is a process of becoming both *trustworthy to* and *trusting of* the institution and the people in it. And family transitions—such as getting married or becoming a parent—are fundamentally about becoming trustworthy and trusting the other. Trust is the gateway to meaningful contribution. This is how you discover and embody God's purpose for your new place in life.

Trustworthiness and reliability require consistent and predictable actions every time, not merely when convenient. Deliver quality results and make good on your promises long enough, and you will transition in the eyes of your peers and supervisors from “the new guy” to a full-fledged member of the team.

When trust flourishes among people and across groups, their organizations and communities dramatically improve and thrive. The best settings are those that have high expectations, room to fail, and trust that flows in both directions.

Teams with shared goals and bi-directional trust are going to be able to do more than individuals or trustless teams could ever hope to accomplish. That's why a successful transition is nothing less than effectively establishing yourself as someone who belongs on the team—someone whom somebody else needs and trusts.

The difficulty of transition is always in that liminal space between spaces, where the new trust and membership you need in order to succeed is there potentially but not yet actually. Trust—more than talent, temperament, or even tenacity—is the key to your long-term success.

6. The Hinge

The Virtue of Affixed Flexibility

More than the threshold or the lock, the humble hinge is the most important part of the door. Without a hinge, the door would be merely an unwieldy slab propped up against a gap in the wall. The hinge makes the door usable but also fixes it into its frame. So it both enables and limits: a well-hinged door is both free and fixed.

Like a hinge, a “hinge moment” changes everything. It entails an abrupt turn from one thing to another,

but it also means new possibilities—new avenues to new spaces. These are the moments when we are tested, when we either make the most of our transitions or we waste them. Or worse, we let them waste us. When we aren't properly prepared for our hinge moments, we can panic and make choices we regret later and maybe for the rest of our lives. But if we have robust, reliable hinges, we can make the choices and take the actions that lead to successful transitions.

Once you move beyond the low point of the intersection stage of transition, the landing and integration phases provide opportunities for your confidence to grow and your comfort level to increase. And now you reach the *inspiration* stage of transition. This is the point when you become a resource for others, and you also begin to make sense and find meaning behind the changes you've experienced—even tough ones like losing a loved one or being laid off. In so doing, your confidence level continues to rise, and you begin to see yourself flourishing—at least in part—thanks to the transition that has occurred.

Pivoting well requires firm and unshakeable hinges in your life. These are the constants that keep you steady and stable when you have to make changes. Historically, philosophers and the fathers of the faith called these life hinges the cardinal virtues. The four virtues of prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice have been a mainstay of both sacred and secular Western ethical thought for thousands of years.

Prudence is applied wisdom, in the sense of being able to see ahead, to make decisions *now* based on *what is likely to be*. A life of applied wisdom, the pathway of prudence, must be one intentionally focused on the *other*. That's really the only way to acquire and embody the virtue of prudence.

Fortitude is what we might today call courage, endurance, and steadfastness. This side of eternity,

there is much that we do not understand—why God acts some times and not others. But ours is not a God who stands off and leaves us to suffer alone. We are not called to be successful, only faithful.

Temperance, or proper and reasonable self-restraint, has meaning beyond the mere acknowledgement of “everything in moderation.” It's also much more than avoiding intoxication, promiscuity, or gluttony. It includes humility, self-control, the ability to control your own ego, and forgiveness. In some sense, forgiveness is self-control turned outward.

Justice is what love looks like in public; it is giving people what they are due. This plays out most often in cases where dueling understandings of right and wrong call for a ruling by a disinterested third party. Equal cases (as with two adults) should be treated equally, and unequal cases (as with an adult and child) should be treated with equity. The challenge for all of us is to pursue justice by responding with sacrificial love to meet the needs of those God puts in our paths.

This, therefore, is the distinctive life hinge of the Christian faith. You will find in other religions various calls to wisdom, self-control, and courage, but the expansion of rights and justice to all people of all tribes is rare. You would do well to have a sturdy hinge for yourself that requires you to treat the people in your new space the way Jesus commanded—like neighbors, worthy of their Creator's love and yours.

7. Passages

Growing Through Major Life Changes

Classical economic theory had long assumed that human beings were rational actors who used all the information we had to weigh options and make decisions that corresponded to our expectations for maximum utility (a term only economists would use to mean general happiness and well-being). It was

also thought that we viewed gain and loss in equal and absolute terms. In other words, losing ten dollars would change our happiness in one direction by the same amount proportionally that gaining ten dollars would change it in the other direction. It turns out this is not even close to reality; we are loss-averse creatures.

Research suggests that our fear of losing things is roughly twice as strong as our desire to gain them. Losing a sum of money hurts twice as badly as the happiness we get from gaining that same sum. When we are close to making a good decision, we are still timid about shouldering the burden alone and want the safety net of another's opinion, even if it's only a random coin-toss.

Fear of loss can include fear of failure, which can keep us from grabbing hold of a great opportunity because we are scared we aren't qualified or won't be impressive. In those moments, when we are weighing the potential losses and gains, we need to remember that embarrassment and failure are not terminal illnesses.

Eventually we reach the final stage of transition: *realization*. Here the benefits of our growth and development come to fulfillment, producing greater maturity and strength in our character and lives. Then having moved through the stages of transition, our overall confidence has grown, making it more manageable to face similar or lesser changes in our future, or—if faced with an even tougher change down the road—we have gained wisdom, experience, and strength for the journey ahead.

In my own life, I have found the hardest hinge moments have become the most important crucibles for growth and character building. Even when the change isn't one we chose, our transition is all about choices as we choose to allow God to shape and bless us through difficulty.

Sometimes even when we are trying our best to listen to the voice of God and follow his directions, our efforts seem to bear no good fruit. These are times when God is teaching us invaluable lessons. Certain things can only be taught by experience on the job and in the midst of life's inevitable transitions. These transitions provide unrivaled lessons that serve us well for the rest of life.

In hindsight, it is easy to pick out the turning points that shaped the trajectories of our lives. But it is not so easy in real time. Sometimes these moments announce themselves as they approach, and other times we suddenly find ourselves knee-deep in living-room flood waters that lead us to entirely new futures. When that happens, it will be too late to get ready. The only way to respond is to trust that the disciplines we have been practicing and the values and virtues we have cultivated will, with God's help, serve us well in the moment as we weigh our options and move forward.

I do not know exactly just how many transitions you will have in your life. But all of us, no matter our station, are given opportunities, and I am certain you will fail in some of them. But risking failure is the only way to have a shot at any of the big breaks that can end up being as meaningful.

Conclusion

There are transitions that allow for time to think, and there are those that hit you like a ton of bricks, challenging you to react and testing your courage and character in an instant. But all transitions—even voluntary ones like a job offer or celebratory ones like a long-awaited pregnancy—begin with change. As I said earlier, only one thing remains the same: the fact that nothing does. You can't control everything (or much of anything) that happens to you, but you can choose how you respond to those changes and

how you manage the transitions you walk through in the process. Small, incremental changes can also become proving grounds for much larger, more challenging turns in your life.

As we process these changes, we move through seven stages of transition—discernment (when we decide if it’s the right move), anticipation (when we actively prepare for the move), intersection (when we stand in the threshold between our past and our future), landing (when we are actively learning our new way of life), integration (when we develop ties of trust and mutual support), inspiration (when we begin to make sense of the change and use that to help and inspire others), and realization (when the benefits of the change come to fulfillment).

It’s virtually impossible to stand in the present moments of your life and predict what will happen in the days and years ahead. Each new threshold you cross and home you enter will produce consequences for what happens to you over the rest of your life. Never doubt the manifold possibilities God could have in store for you. Part of the thrill and excitement of changes in our lives is that they afford us new opportunities to do good.

The decade between age twenty and thirty is filled with hinge moments, and what happens during the college years typically exerts an outsized influence on the rest of our lives—for good or for bad. We each,

in God’s providence, have a unique role to fulfill through our lives and our callings. We never know how the Lord will use our circumstances and our experiences to be a blessing to others, but the wonderful thing about our God is that he chooses to accomplish most of what he wants in the world through ordinary people like you and me.

The surest way to prepare for our uncertain future is to practice virtues that we want to embody when difficulties inevitably arise.

In sum, the way we respond to change is largely about the choices we make through the various stages of transition. We may not have control over much, but the way we respond to whatever occurs is one major way that we can embody virtue. Remarkably, it is through stages of transition that we develop the maturity and wisdom to handle changes as they come, and with each successive journey through the seven stages of transition, we emerge stronger and better. Ours is a God who works in and through the changes of life to shape our character and use us in ways that reflect God’s glory. And the great gift of the life of faith is that God accompanies us on the journey; as Isaiah says, “This is the way; walk in it” (Isaiah 30:21).