

The Trapeze Zone-Preparing for Transitions  
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In the early '90s Elena Kirschner, Les Hibbard, and I made a presentation at the spring guides meeting. It was about the guiding community and transitions that we inevitably must make from full time to part time, or no time. With a few exceptions most guides will come up to a transition edge; an edge where their body is screaming at them, their bank account is too empty, or their mate is making less than subtle hints about the future—or all three. On that edge, all are faced with the often daunting question, “What will I do with the rest of my life?”

In his book, *Warriors of the Heart*, Danaan Perry talks about this edge, which he calls the Trapeze Zone:

Sometimes I feel that my life is a series of trapeze swings. I'm either hanging on to a trapeze bar swinging along, or for a few moments in my life I'm hurtling across space in between trapeze bars.

Most of the time, I spend my life hanging on for dear life to my trapeze-bar-of-the-moment [guiding in the Grand Canyon]. It carries me along at a certain steady rate of swing and I have the feeling that I'm in control of my life. I know most of the right questions and even some of the right answers. But once in a while, as I'm merrily (or not-so-merrily) swinging along, I look out ahead of me into the distance and what do I see? I see another trapeze bar swinging towards me. It's empty and I know, in that place in me that knows, that this “new trapeze bar” has my name on it. It is my next step, my growth, my aliveness coming to get me. In my heart-of-hearts I know that for me to grow, I must release my grip on the present, well-known bar to move to the next one.

Some of you know this feeling, and have either resisted it, or have developed a strategy that allows you to be prepared for the next step. We all know former or current river guides who have found a niche in the Grand Canyon. Larry Stevens, Kenton Grua, Mike Walker, Brad Dimock, Martha Clark, and many others are currently involved directly and indirectly with the Grand Canyon and still getting paid to do work they consider meaningful. Many others have gone on to careers in law, business, teaching, recreation, and other fields too numerous to mention. Still others continue to work as guides, either full time or part time, and find gainful employment during the off season.

The Whale Foundation was set up as a support to the Grand Canyon river guide community in a variety of areas of need. When Elena did research in the early '90s for her Masters Thesis, she chose to focus on public health issues, and was surprised to find that the number one issue with the guides she surveyed was retirement. I suspect what many of those guides meant was, what do we do after the Canyon?

This is not an easy issue with which to deal. We are incredibly fortunate to be working in such a magnificent place, doing the work we are doing, that affords us the opportunity to provide people with a first class and often life changing experience of the Grand Canyon. Admittedly it is not easy to find an adequate

replacement for such a unique job. And if we wait until the last minute, or after, to make plans for our next job, the transition becomes even more challenging. As Danaan Perry says: I have noticed that, in our culture, this transition zone is looked upon as a “nothing”, a no-place between places. Sure, the old trapeze-bar was real, and that new one coming towards me, I hope that’s real too. But the void between? That’s just a scary, confusing, disorienting “nowhere” that must be gotten through as fast and as unconsciously as possible. What a waste! I have a sneaking suspicion that the transition zone is the only real thing, and the bars are illusions we dream up to avoid the void, where the real change, the real growth occurs for us.

If a new guide came to me asking for advice about how to take advantage of her/his time in the Canyon, I would say pay attention to the opportunities that exist all around you. If you decide you want to stay connected to the Canyon after you become part time or no time, look around you and see what holes need filling. That’s what Bruce Helin did when he created Professional River Outfitters (pro), and the last time I looked he was doing quite well and still rowing trips in the Canyon. Also take advantage of the diversity of your passengers. We are fortunate in that we make significant connections with people from all walks of life. While these people are on your boat and in camp, why not get to know more about what they do—what they like about their work, what they don’t like, and what they would change to make it more enjoyable and meaningful. Just think about the rich library of information and contacts you can collect that can be helpful in choosing your next career, and maybe even your next job offer.

I call the space between working full time and your next job as the Neutral Zone. It is a necessary and powerful place, which most of us avoid. As Perry says: ...the transition zones in our lives are incredibly rich places. They should be honored, even savored. Yes, with all the pain and fear and feelings of being out-of-control that can (but not necessarily) accompany transitions, they are still the most alive, most growth-filled, passionate, expansive moments in our lives.

At some point in your guiding career, you will be faced with this Trapeze Zone. Some of you are already seeing the other trapeze coming toward you. Others have started to let go of the one you are currently swinging on. If you are a current or former guide, you can help make this trapeze zone a more certain and comfortable place to be. To support the guiding community, the Whale Foundation would like to gather stories from former and current guides describing what you have done to prepare for letting go of the guiding trapeze bar. What did you do to facilitate that during your time in the Canyon? What have you done to stay involved with the Canyon? What is the work you are doing now, and how did you go about preparing for the transition? Also if you know of other former guides who have moved on and are not members of gcr, what are they doing, and how can we get in touch with them to learn of their process? We would like to accumulate a list of current work of present and former guides. Help the Whale Foundation help the guiding community. Thank you.