

The Hero's Sherpa: Your Guide Through Life's Challenges



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PREFACE

The Hero and the Journey

Change: A disruption in expectations.

The definition is simple. Yet, navigating a major disruption can be one of life's most difficult challenges.

Despite this fact, we all do it over and over and over again. Sometimes it is by choice, sometimes by circumstance. We face life's challenges, and we fumble; we stumble; we crawl and we cower; we run; we march; we walk; we wander our way through the changes we encounter.

Each one seems so different. Changes in social mores affect how we are treated, or how we are expected to treat others. New strategies at work change how we do our jobs, who holds more power, and who holds less. The birth, maturing, marriage, divorce, moving, and ultimately the death of others who are close to us send seismic waves through our daily lives.

Yet while each is so different, the truth is, how we respond to them is not. In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell introduced "The Hero's Journey," a universal set of patterns by which man through the ages has faced and moved through life's most difficult challenges.

Looking back at what had promised to be our own unique, unpredictable, and dangerous adventure, all we find in the end is such a series of standard metamorphoses as men and women have undergone in every quarter of the world, in all recorded centuries, and under every odd disguise of civilization.¹

Nancy Duarte writes of *The Hero's Journey*,

There is a moment in every story where the character overcomes reluctance to change, leaves the ordinary world, and crosses the threshold into an adventure in a special world. In the special world, the hero gains skills and insights—and then brings them back to the ordinary world as the adventure resolves.²

This is the journey that we take each time we face a significant challenge. And, in facing those challenges, in taking on those journeys, we are heroes. We are setting out on "our own, unique, unpredictable, and dangerous adventures."

What Campbell has made clear, however, is that while our journeys may be our own, may be unique, may be unpredictable, and may even be dangerous...the path does not have to be a complete mystery. We do not need to wander toward their destination. There is a "series of

¹ *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell. New World Library, 2008; p. 8.

² *Resonate*, Nancy Duarte. John Wiley & Sons, 2010; p. 32.

standard metamorphoses” that we will experience along the way. While the catalysts for change seem to be infinite, the way that we as human beings respond to those changes are not.

The Sherpa

Sherpas are an ethnic group whose roots are in eastern Nepal. They gained notoriety for their mountaineering skills, guiding climbing expeditions safely throughout the Himalayan Mountains, including Mount Everest. Today, the term “Sherpa” is used to refer to any guide that helps others navigate difficult challenges. This book is offered as your Sherpa to your most difficult challenges.

For five decades, I have been a student of—and practitioner in—change. This practical learning has allowed me to develop a deep understanding of The Hero’s Journey, and what is required to traverse it. Out of this has grown my own version of The Hero’s Journey consisting of five key elements: Create Your Change Story; Prepare for the Journey; Plan for the Journey; Take the Journey; and Live the New Reality. This is The Hero’s Sherpa model, and is at the heart of *The Hero’s Sherpa*. Through my intentional focus on change, I have learned hundreds of important—and universal—lessons. Some have been learned through successful navigation; others come out of painful mistakes. Each is offered as a gift to you.

A Note for Sherpas

If you are a Sherpa in life—a coach, therapist, counselor, teacher, mentor, change practitioner—these lessons are applicable to your own changes. And, they are easily integrated into your Sherpa practice, whatever form it may take. Because the patterns of navigating change are universal, what you will be learning is applicable whether you are working with an executive leading a global business transformation, an individual undergoing a significant personal change, or anything in-between.

INTRODUCTION

Ready? Your Next Big Change is Coming

When Ben Franklin wrote that “in this world nothing can be said to be certain but death and taxes,” change generally came at a more leisurely pace than it does today. There were respites in between. The changes were, for the most part, far less complex. Though it might not have seemed so for those who were experiencing the changes back then, those were “the good old days.”

For you and me, a year or two from now (or perhaps sooner), today will be “the good old days.” There is another big change heading your way. It may be of your making, or not. It may be on your radar, or not. It may be business-related, or personal, or driven at the societal level. It won’t be the first big change you have faced, and it is unlikely that it will be the last.

Who knows what it will be. Who knows when it will get here. Who knows how it will disrupt your world, your worldview, your experience of life, of work, of... Who knows what its impact will be.

Get ready.

But how do you get ready for what is coming your way when you don’t know what it is?

That is one of the things that I love about change. As unknown as the changes to come might be, how you respond to it is predictable. How I respond to it is predictable. How those around us respond to it is predictable. It doesn’t matter what the change is; it doesn’t matter where the change originates; as Joseph Campbell noted in *The Hero’s Journey*, there are underlying patterns in the human response to change. Some of those patterns lead to success; others lead to failure.

The first thing you do to get ready is to learn those patterns. In five decades of this work—including three decades of intentionally studying the patterns—I have never had to “unlearn” any of them. Our understanding gets deeper, and broader. New patterns continue to emerge as we continue to research and experience change. But, even a fundamental understanding of the patterns is better than approaching each change like it is unique. Whatever that next change is that is heading your way, having an understanding of the human response patterns will stand you in good stead.

Ensure that those around you know the patterns. Those with whom you work should know them. Those to whom you report should know them. Those who report to you should know them.

But don’t stop there. your family, friends, and others in your communities should have an understanding of them. I am considering how to advocate for “change education” in school curricula. Perhaps your child is her high school valedictorian. She heads off to the Ivy League and suddenly finds herself no longer the smartest person she knows; suddenly, she is in the

middle of the pack...and unprepared for the change in status she experiences. Or, she is a state All Star in her sport and heads to college on an athletic scholarship only to sustain an injury that ends her ability to compete. Wouldn't it be great if she knew how to navigate this difficult change journey, instead of being surprised and caught off guard by it? Our children, our families, our colleagues, our neighbors, our friends...none are immune to the disruption of change. Knowing these patterns doesn't make us immune to them, either. However, it does make change that much less disruptive. And, it increases the odds that you will successfully move through the changes you face. Shouldn't we all lessen the disruption by knowing what that experience will be like, and learning how to successfully navigate it?

Consciously develop your change skills. Understanding is necessary, but not sufficient. You understand that resistance is inevitable, even when people perceive a change as positive...but how do you respond to it? You understand that there is a difference between putting the elements of a change in place and experiencing its promised benefits...but how do you deliver the latter? You understand that there is a replicable process for building commitment (your own, as well as others)...but are you prepared to adhere to it?

Know that you will not succeed without courage and discipline. If big change were easy, everyone would be successfully making it happen. They aren't. Whether professional, personal, or social in nature, most big changes don't deliver what they have promised. The reasons are both simple to state, and challenging to address.

What are you doing to prepare yourself and those around you for the next big change?

*My Background as Author of *The Hero's Sherpa**

While today I am serving as a transformation coach, my roots are in the field of change management. The truth is that as a coach, it is change, not change management, that is at the core of what I do. But *change management* is the foundation for my work.

I began in the early days of change management. Back then, I knew that I was excited by supporting the successful execution of change. My first big change attempt was also my first failure. In 1967 I was a freshman at Syracuse University, and was doing youth work on the nearby Onondaga Reservation. It quickly became clear to me that the stereotypical "Saltine Warrior" that was the university's mascot was xenophobic. I tried unsuccessfully to lobby the administration—sometimes alone and sometimes with the support of Native American leaders—over the course of my undergraduate days. It was a period of great change in the United States...from Civil Rights to the Viet Nam war. I was hooked on change.

One of the first big changes I was involved in professionally was the implementation of MBO (Management By Objectives) in the Department of Residential Life at Syracuse University. I was a residence hall director, and had been hired to establish a living learning center. The idea of concrete, measurable objectives was not foreign to me. I was fresh out of serving four years as a Basic Military Training Instructor—"drill sergeant"—in the Air Force; I understood performance

measurement. But, for many of my peers it required a totally different mindset about what was expected of them; their background was in the much “softer” field of Student Life. Despite our different backgrounds, we got through it, and life settled down again. That’s how it was back then. There were periodic big changes; but then there was time to settle into the new whatever, and be free of disruptive change for a while.

This “history” is important, because this was the same time as the nascent field of change management was emerging. Daryl Conner (*Managing at the Speed of Change, Leading at the Edge of Chaos*), one of my mentors and a pioneer in change management, began his work in 1974. William Bridges (*Managing Transitions*) started at the same time. Other early pioneers in the field began to make this the focus of their work within a few years one way or another.

Over time, other management trends took hold (or didn’t). Theory Z; Management by Wandering Around; Matrix Management; TQM (Total Quality Management); BPR (Business Process Re-engineering); Empowerment; 360-degree feedback; Six Sigma… these were some of the “what’s changing” that provided the organizational laboratories for observing the underlying patterns of the human response to change. At the personal level, the human potential movement, psychotherapy—and more recently neuroscience—have contributed significantly to this understanding.

It was more than a decade after my MBO experience that I met Daryl. By then I had moved on to re-launch a moribund annual giving program; to successfully implement a major university’s first travel policy during the period of airline deregulation; and to redesign core processes for a university engaged in refocusing its mission. I had supported more than one college/university merger, and helped shape a recommendation that another merger not take place based on desired vs. likely outcomes. While there was more than good intuition and occasional good luck at work with these change projects, until 1988 it was not clear to me that there was a science to this thing called change. Then I met Daryl Conner, and began to train in change management.

The science of change management has taken root, grown, and matured in the last four-plus decades. There are professional associations: the Change Management Institute was formed in 2004; the Association of Change Management Professionals had its inaugural conference in 2011; the Project Management Institute (PMI)—long recognized as the leading authority on project management—now has own change management protocol. And, more and more, larger organizations are developing internal change management practices, either licensing a change management methodology or developing one of their own.

Jump forward to today. Some of the changes we face are of the MBO, Six Sigma, Managing by Wandering Around variety. But, more and more, the changes we face (whether in our society, our organizations, or in our personal lives) are significantly more challenging. There are no clear answers, and many possible answers. These changes significantly disrupting a substantial number of lives; they shift the politics of power and interaction; and they bring us face to face with highly difficult and totally unfamiliar challenges.

We (personally, organizationally, socially, or in combination) may be facing more than one such change at a time. At the same time, less disruptive changes keep coming. We've stopped predicting that "the next big thing" will lead to a slowdown, an easier life; we now know that "the next big thing" leads to "the next even bigger thing."

To face these challenges in our own lives, we need every bit of knowledge there is about change management today. And, we need to continue to deepen that knowledge. It is essential to not just survive, but to thrive, in today's turbulent change environment. And we need to know how to apply that knowledge at the most personal and intimate level.

When It Comes to Change, There Is No Immunity.

Change: A Disruption in expectations.

You think it's going to be sunny, and get caught in a rain shower. You plan on retiring from the employer you have been with for twenty years, and find out they are closing their US operations two years before your intended retirement date. You, or someone close to you, is diagnosed with a life-threatening illness.

Change...

What you see as a minor change may be significant to me. What I see as a positive change may be a negative one to you. Change is an optical illusion. Each of us looks at it and sees it through a different lens. For one person, moving the office coffee pot is a major change; for another it is only a minor disruption, adapted to before the end of the day. For one person, starting a new job is an exciting—perhaps even appealing—challenge. For another, it is life's worst nightmare.

Let's apply the definition of change (*a disruption in expectations*) to the experience of starting a new job. Over the course of my career, I have held at least 18 different positions doing at least a dozen different types of work in 8 different industries. (Throughout all of these, the single common thread has been having the responsibility for playing some role in *change*.) Clearly, for me, starting a new job is exciting. It gives me the opportunity to take all that I have learned and apply it in a new context; to face new challenges; to learn new things; to develop new skills; and to meet new people. And, as I look at my decision to leave jobs, it has been made when I have accomplished what I set out to do; when I have moved from addressing the challenges for which I was hired to maintaining the status quo.

At the other end of the continuum is a man I met a few years ago. Bill went to work for the New York State Thruway Authority directly out of college. Decades later he retired from the same employer, in the same department as he started. Within two years, unable to adapt to retirement, he became a consultant. You guessed it; he consults to the New York State Thruway Authority.

Clearly, for Bill and me, the act of starting a new job has a very different meaning; it is a very different change.

Change is an inherent part of life. There is no immunity. Whether it is a personal change or work-related, ultimately, it is personal. You spend a little more than you had planned on your children's back-to-school wardrobe, and cut back for a week or two on the grocery bill. You have unanticipated auto repairs, and cancel this summer's upcoming road trip. You realize your current career is short-lived due to new technology, and decide that you need to prepare for a whole new career going forward. Sometimes the changes are minor, and sometimes they are transformational.

Change...

Some people will tell you they avoid change as much as possible. Others will tell you that they embrace change.

As you have probably guessed by now, I am one of the latter, so let me tell you what that really means to me. *I look forward to the challenges of change. I look forward to the lessons that I will learn, the growth that I will experience, in going through my own change or guiding another through change. I look forward to the opportunity of sharing my fifty years of change experience with others so that they can learn what I know, and so I can continue to learn and grow.*

Let me tell you what else it means. *I look forward to change selectively...Not coming at me from every direction, not thrust on me unexpectedly by others. I look forward to enough change to keep me challenged, but not so much change that it overwhelms me. I look forward to change when I am able to balance it with stability and equanimity at the same time.*

Change...

There is no immunity.

There are, however, inoculations that will help reduce its impact. We will be exploring these throughout this book. What those of us who have immersed ourselves in the field of change have learned is this. *While the nature of the disruptions to expectations may be countless, the patterns of human response are consistent, and they are predictable.* It doesn't matter whether the change is inconsequential or transformational. It doesn't matter whether the change is perceived as positive or as negative. It doesn't matter whether the change is at the deeply personal level, is a change at work, or is societal in nature. It doesn't matter whether you are in Tampa, or Topeka, or Tokyo. All of these factors may affect the catalyst of the change, and even the outward reaction to it. What they do not affect is the predictability of the underlying response patterns.

This deep understanding of change provides strong guidance on how to successfully navigate any change. Let me just highlight a few.

- First, no matter who initiated the change, don't allow yourself to be victimized by it. You may not be able to call for the hand to be re-dealt. You can control how you respond to the hand that you get.
- Prepare for change. Learn the patterns. Know, for example, that even when you see a change as positive, if it is a major change, the time will come when you will strongly resist it...or at the least, will consider doing so. (Just think of the journey from dating, to commitment, to marriage, to building and sustaining a long-term relationship.) If you understand that, then you will recognize that your doubts, your questioning, those very specific problems you encounter are not signs of something being wrong, but are a part of the inevitable cycle of change. With this understanding, you are able to respond differently.
- Knowing the patterns allows you to also prepare for—and thus execute—any specific change differently. Given that change is driven by disruption and a loss of control, for example, you can focus on how, when, and to what degree you are able to regain a sense of control.
- Strengthen your own resilience, and the resilience of those around you. Resilience is the ability to re-calibrate to disruptions. The more resilient you are, the more quickly you will “come back to 100%” after experiencing change.
- Don't judge a change by only looking at it through your own eyes. Understand how difficult it will be *as seen through the eyes of each of those who have to travel it*. Is it a major or minor disruption? Do they perceive it is a positive or negative change? Does it require changes in behavior, or does it go deeper, requiring different ways of thinking as well?

Underlying this book is the application of these understandings of change and more. My understanding of change guides how I approach each aspect of each disruptive change in my life; it guides every aspect of how I approach change with my TransformingLives.Coach clients. Having this understanding doesn't turn “change” into “unchange;” change is still disruptive. But knowing what to expect does lessen the level of disruption and provides clear guidance on shaping the path forward. It helps me never feel like a victim of change, even when it comes from the outside and I see it as negative.

Change is inevitable. Every change is different. Every change is the same.

All Change is Personal

People talk about personal change, organizational change, and social change. The truth is, *all change is personal*. Neither organizations nor societies change unless the people in them change.

If you have ever been involved in a large organization seeking to undertake a major strategic shift, you have seen this principle in action. The person above you may, or may not, have

embraced the change. She may have told you to “keep on doing things the way we always have,” or may have expected you to adapt the new ways of thinking and acting. Some of your peers may have decided they would wait it out and see if the change stuck. Others appeared to make the shifts in public, but behind the scenes kept doing things the old way. Maybe you were an early adopter; or maybe you were a resistor. The point is, the change either succeeded or failed based on individuals, not on an entity known as “the organization.”

Never forget that all change is personal. Whatever the catalyst that initiates the change, it is your personal response to that catalyst that is at the heart of your success or failure. While it is important to understand what those outside forces are when they are at play, working to make the change personal—to take charge of your response rather than being the victim of change—is critical. I was fortunate to learn this lesson as a young boy. My grandparents taught me to play Pinochle. One of my grandfather’s sage pieces of counsel was, *You can’t determine the hand that is dealt to you; you can decide how to play it.* This is true in all aspects of our lives, not just card games. It is our responsibility to determine how to play the changes that are dealt to us.

Every Big Change Needs a Roadmap

The best way to successfully get from here to there is to know where “there” is, to prepare for and plan the journey, and to get on the road while anticipating you may encounter delays and detours along the way. While every change is different, there exists a universal set of patterns underlying change that allows us to remove a great deal of the mystery, and significantly increase the probability of success. As Joseph Campbell tells us, every Hero’s Journey is the same. Every major change is a Hero’s Journey; as a transformation coach, my role is to guide others on that journey. In order to do so, I have developed a model that is based on Joseph Campbell’s work. There are five modules to the model, five legs to the journey.

- Create the change story
- Prepare for the change
- Plan the change
- Take the change journey
- Live the new reality

This is an overview of the roadmap that I apply to every change journey; the remainder of this book goes into more detail on each leg of the trip. While I call the elements out as separate, they are highly inter-connected; depending on the specific change, there will be times that you may be working on one, two, or more of them simultaneously.

Create the Change Story

Major change is not an intellectual exercise. Really big “good ideas” may be enough to launch a change; they aren’t enough to see it through to a successful conclusion. It’s likely that you have

launched—and failed to fully deliver on—great ideas in the past; I certainly have. Creating the change story is a way to help move past this challenge. The process begins by ensuring that the change is not just a good idea, that it is in fact an imperative. The story itself comes not only from the head, it comes from the heart and the gut. It serves as a guide for planning and preparing, and as a catalyst throughout the journey.

Prepare for the Change

Going on a road trip is risky without adequate preparation. You may take the car in for a tune-up. The gas tank gets topped off. Suitcases or backpacks are filled. Snacks are prepared; the cooler is stocked. A major change journey requires preparations as well. Just as with a road trip, the preparations and the planning are highly inter-related. What (and who) are you taking with you? What (and who) are you leaving behind? What will you need along the way, when do you need it, and how will you get it? Preparation is a time for thinking, for reflecting, for identifying key catalysts and potential roadblocks. Some of your most difficult decisions are made during the preparation. Failure to make them at this point can significantly inhibit both your planning and your execution.

Plan the Journey

When you plan a vacation, it is likely that you select a time, a destination, and a mode of transportation. You make your reservations. There is a lot of talk about how badly the vacation is needed, and how good it will be to “get away.” Yet all too often, what is forgotten is planning to let go of all those things that we are trying to “get away” from. We liberally distribute our contact information before leaving; once we arrive, we are posting to Facebook, and reading every message in any format from anyone as soon as it appears on our mobile devices. We plan to physically arrive at the destination, but fail to address how we are going to achieve the anticipated benefits of being there. Planning the change journey is the same thing. It’s not just about the things you need to put in place to get from Point A to Point B. It’s also about all the things that you need to put in place so that you arrive at Point B with the skills and mental attitude that are required to truly derive the full benefit of the journey. It’s about planning to avoid those things that you don’t want to happen.

Take the Change Journey

No matter how clear the destination is in your mind; no matter how well you have prepared; and no matter how well you have planned, if this is a really significant change, you are most likely still in the honeymoon phase. You don’t know what you don’t know. There will be surprises; there will be mistakes; there will be major obstacles and/or detours; there will be resistance, even from yourself. When it comes to big change, it is never a truly smooth ride.

Live the New Reality

If you've done it all right (which means that you have overcome the surprises, rebounded from the mistakes, moved beyond the obstacles and detours, and worked through the resistance), the time will come when your change journey is done. You get to celebrate, rest, and reflect. If you haven't already, soon enough it will be time to create your next change story.

A Few Reminders: Key Change Principles

For an old student of change like me, keeping track of change principles is in my DNA, but for most people, it can get overwhelming. To provide you with a quick reference, here is a summary of the change principles that underlie the journey that unfolds through the course of this book.

- **Know the principles of change.** It doesn't matter whose change it is, or what type of change it is. Whether it was initiated at headquarters on the other side of the world; by the boss two desks away; by a spouse or life partner; by your client; or by some life circumstance (accident, illness, death)···the principles that underlie how people respond to change are constant. *One of the most important keys to change success is learning the principles.* They don't make you immune to the disruptions of change. However, they can lessen the surprises, and provide strong guidance on how to navigate the journey successfully.
- **Be your own leader in your change journey.** Own the change. Don't be a victim to it. Take control, whatever the source of the disruption. Choice isn't always between good and bad; sometimes we get to select between two (or more) good choices, and sometimes we have to select from among the bad ones. And, there always is a choice, so make it intentionally.
- **Time is irreplaceable.** That doesn't mean "jump into action;" it does mean, don't waste it.
- **No one has all the answers.** Mistakes will be made···sometimes small ones, and sometimes mistakes that are huge. Own them. Learn from them. And let them go.
- **Big changes demand that you let go.** Try holding onto a railing, or door knob, or heavy piece of furniture with one hand then start walking away from where you are holding; you won't get very far. Change requires us to let go so that we can move forward. Letting go doesn't mean letting go of everything. Even when it seems like "everything is changing," it's not. Be conscious of what you can hold onto, the "anchors" that provide stability and direction during the change. And consciously chose what you have to let go of.
- **There is a world outside of this change.** Things are changing outside the change that is being addressed. Keep an eye "out there" as well. Whether it's family, friends, community, socio-economic, or cultural shifts, if you aren't careful, you may find that you have successfully executed your change in terms of the destination you set out to reach···and the benefits you sought to achieve are no longer there.

- **Communication is critical, with the right people, in the right way, at the right time.** In the world of big change, there is no such thing as “flying solo.” Talk with those who are going to agree with you no matter what. Talk to those you respect, and those who will challenge your thinking. Talk to those who will encourage you to look at things through new and different lenses. Talk with people who can mentor you. Not every lesson has to be learned the hard way; Just as you are learning through my journeys, you can learn from those who have traveled similar paths before, those who know how to navigate the path you are taking.
- **Be intentional.** Maintain balance, set boundaries, and ensure that you take the time to relax and have fun. Our bodies, our minds, and our psyches require recharging every bit as much as our mobile devices. While change is less draining when it is driven by something we believe in, it is still draining. Be careful that you don’t set yourself up to “crash and burn.” That’s going to set the change back more than making the time for renewal.
- **Find your passion in every change.** If you aren’t passionate about it and the change is big, you may struggle through it, but you will never truly thrive as a result of it. There is more and more research supporting the importance of passion...in our careers as well as in our personal lives. Invest your change energy in things you are passionate about. If the change is driven from outside—you may have no choice but to make a change; choose a path forward that you passionately want to make successful. As I write later, *When life gives you lemons, you don’t have to make lemonade. Sometimes, lemons are just lemons. Sometimes, the best option is lemonade. And, sometimes lemons open the possibility for us to make cherry pie a la mode.*

CREATE YOUR CHANGE STORY

Overview

We know the power of story; we create stories for ourselves all the time, and we often share them with others. There's the story about that important conversation you're going to have with a significant other, or a friend, or a client later today. You've probably replayed it in your head a dozen times or more, and in the retelling you have felt more and more prepared, or more and more scared. There's the story about what you're going to do to relax this coming weekend, or on the next vacation. That one gets retold every time you feel over-worked or over-stressed; it lets you catch your breath and puts a smile on your face, at least for a moment. There is (or was) the story of "happily ever after," the first draft appearing before the emotion of the first kiss wore off. Stories have power.

Neuroscience tells us that our brain responds to stories in the same way that it reacts to actual events...as do our bodies. Stories can cause goosebumps, chills, and the hairs on our arms to stand up just as easily as a stranger calling out from right behind us in the dark. While a well-developed change story cannot guarantee the success of a change, a poorly developed one almost always ensures a less-than-optimum outcome, if not outright failure. For this reason, the first step in my journey with clients is always focused on their change story. Our work may entail editing it to make it stronger, or it may involve starting to write the story from the beginning.

In this section we will examine the overall structure of successful change stories; some of the "do's" and "don'ts" of writing your change story; the relationship you should forge with your story; and the process of story writing. We also explore why it is important for you to not only write your story, but to embody it.

What Is a Change Story?

First of all, it is a story. It's not a plan, or an elevator speech. It's not a dream, or a fantasy, or a wish. It's a story.

Like many stories, it has a "once upon a time." However, the "once upon a time" is not in the past; it is now, meaning the story is written from the future. "I'm really here." "We did it." "The finish line has been crossed!" Even reading these few words, you can recognize how much more powerful they are than, "When I reach my goal..."

The change story is not just written from the head; it captures as many of the senses as possible. "I'm really here. Looking out I see... In the background I hear... My heart is filled with gratitude for..." You get the idea.

The change story speaks from the future, and it speaks of the journey to get there. It focuses on some of the key milestones along the way. A colleague of mine and great change-story facilitator, Stephen W. Maye, uses as an example a family building a lake home. This is how he describes the milestones; you can begin to feel their experience, their change journey, even in this summary.

Three Months: We can visit the site any time we want, and know exactly what the drive up from the main road is like.

Four Months: We experience the view from key areas of the property, and a sense of the view from our respective rooms. We can even camp overnight on the site.

Seven Months: A feel for walking through the place and being able to visualize the approach to the house. We can “camp” inside—entire weekends if we want!

Ten Months (Spring): A fully functioning house. Sleep in a bed, read in front of the fireplace, and have morning coffee on the back deck overlooking the lake. Not ready to entertain or boat.

Thirteen Months (Summer): Start boating. The dock and ramp are ready; enjoying the lake much like we imagined it.

Fourteen and Half Months (Mid-Summer): We are entertaining. Parking for everyone, easy to enjoy the lake to its fullest (boathouse), a place to gather outdoors in the evening (fire-pit, etc.), and guests are able to retire to a private apartment with a spectacular view.

Sixteen Months (End Summer): Final landscaping in; grass established. And there is no sign of anything that says “construction site”. We enjoy the lake house just as we imagined it. Everything says “peace retreat.”³

Note, it's not: “Survey site, establish route for main driveway, mark and clear trees and underbrush.” The change story is about the experience!

Why is the change story important? How is it used?

Once the change story is written, it becomes the guide to preparing and planning for the journey. In the example above, we know that we need a contractor who will clear land, and we know when he or she is needed; the architect has a clear sense of our timeline, and a high-level understanding of what structures are (and are not) expected, how they will be sited, etc. We

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know what expectations to set for those who may be eager for an invitation to come visit us. In short, we know what to prepare for and when; we know what to plan for and when.

As the change unfolds, the story continues to provide guidance. When new change opportunities arise, they can quickly be assessed against the story. Would this new change contribute to taking this journey, and to achieving the desired result? What resources will it take away from this change, if it is not contributing to it? Which is our priority?

It also provides motivation. Just like any other major change, the journey to the successful occupation of this lake home will include both mistakes and surprises. "When the going gets tough" the story can reignite a sense of purpose and commitment that dreams and plans cannot.

You write your change story! If there are others close to you who are taking the journey with you, engage them in the writing. Talk with one another, ask each other questions to help find and articulate the story. *But while others may be invited to contribute to the story—and to own their personal pieces of it—you are responsible for your own story.* Otherwise, it will never be fully owned, embraced, internalized by you.

Because all change is personal, even when the change is being driven from the outside, I invite my clients to write their own change stories. When doing so, it is important that they recognize that if it is to serve the purpose of a change story, it needs to fit within the parameters of their larger story, otherwise it is just a fantasy. For example, if the story is being driven by a major change at work, are you committed to staying with the organization through this transformation? If so, what will it be like for you when the organizational change is a success? What are you going to do to make success happen for yourself? If not, what are you going to do to successfully transition, and to what and/or where are you going to make that transition? When?

The change story is written once the decision to make the change has been made. It takes concerted effort, and time. As I write below, don't get ahead of yourself by making plans, or committing to actions, until the story is written. The process of writing the story can bring forward some significant "Aha" moments, not all of which may be received positively. I have been engaged with clients who come to the realization when writing the story that they do not have the resources, or the commitment, to proceed with the actual change.

Write the story first. Then keep your eyes on the reality as the change unfolds. You should be prepared to revise the story when needed. Perhaps the ground where the lake house is to be sited is less stable than needed, and pilings will need to be driven. If this is going to extend the construction time, reflect that in the story. It may no longer conclude "At the end of summer..." It may need to end "As the first snow falls." Other elements of the story may need to change as

well. If you keep saying “at the end of summer,” everybody is going to be whispering under their breath, “Yeah, right…dream on.”

Where Are You Going? What is Your Change?

Don't Start with a Plan!

One of my most valued mentors, though we have never met, is Simon Sinek. I first learned of Simon, and benefited from his wisdom, when I watched his TED talk “[How Great Leaders Inspire Action](#).” I have long been interested in the art and science of true leadership. For me (as for Simon), leadership is about the person, not the position. For this reason, Simon’s talk resonated very deeply when I first heard it; and it still resonates today. I credit Simon for the lessons I am sharing with you now.

While his focus is on organizational leadership, the same insights apply for you as you face your own changes. One of the keys to success is to *be your own leader in your change journey*. With this in mind, a key question becomes, “How do you inspire your own actions?”

If you are familiar with TED, the speakers frequently use powerful visuals projected on large screens to reinforce their messages. Simon only used a single page of a flip chart on which he drew three concentric circles. As he spoke, he labeled them: *What, How, Why*. He refers to this illustration as “The Golden Circle.” The message of The Golden Circle is simple, and it is vital to achieving success if the change you are facing is significant.

Great leaders think, act, and communicate the same way! They lead from the inside out! (Simon Sinek)

Simon illustrates the power of this approach—starting with “why”—with several examples including Apple, the Wright brothers, and Martin Luther King, Jr. The point really took root for me when he said of Dr. King, *He gave the “I have a dream” speech, not the “I have a plan” speech*, (Simon Sinek). I had always given planning a great deal of respect; I still do today. But you don’t start with a plan; you don’t start with “*what*” you are going to do. You start with what is in your heart. You start with *Why*.

What is your *Why*?

Don't Just Leave

Too many change journeys start at an ending. They are about leaving the current situation: a relationship, a job, a career, a shifting market, an outmoded product line or production process.

Change does require letting go; it is essential to release some of the old to make room for the new. The challenge is this... Many roads might lead you away from where you are. But if you don't know where you are going, which is the right one to take? As my friend and colleague Tony Carnesi often says, *Those who are unclear on their destination have an unusually acute sense of accuracy.*

Sometimes it is important to leave before knowing your destination. For whatever reason, the situation is untenable: an abusive partner or boss; bullying from co-workers or classmates that cannot be stopped. Sometimes the choice isn't yours: a layoff or termination, a divorce announced, a career choice no longer in demand. When this happens, find the nearest safe way-station in your journey. This may be physical: a shelter, a family member's home; I have one client who—upon being laid off—set up “office” in a corner of the local Starbucks the next day; she was there five days a week as she prepared for her journey.

You may require an economic way-station: finding a new job, finding new clients so you can fly solo, going to work for a temp agency. I have been let go from my job before; I have been dumped by a long-term partner in a relationship before. It isn't easy! As I reflect back, I remember the counsel of one of my mentors: *Don't confuse the present with the total. It is a moment, the one you are in now. But in another moment there will be a different present. Each present is real. But none is forever.* Find your way-station; then use it as the launching pad for your change journey. Know it is a way-station; it is not forever.

The Art of Creation

You may know Elizabeth Gilbert as the author of *Eat, Pray, Love*. While that is her most popular and successful book, I personally drew greater learning from *Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear*. *Big Magic* broadened my perspective in a big way. What the author helped me to see is that the patterns of change that I have worked with over the decades are the very same patterns that she, as an author, works with each time she creates a new piece of writing, whether it be a magazine article, a short story, or a full-length book. They are the same patterns that every creative person works with, regardless of medium. They are patterns that can defeat us if we are unaware of their existence, or of their flow. And, they are patterns that can sustain and guide us if we learn and apply them.

I guess this shouldn't be surprising... After all, change is about creation, “to cause something to come into being,” (www.dictionary.com). So why would it matter whether that something is a new relationship, a business start-up, a shift in society's response to gender identity, a new photo project, a new book, or a new career?

It doesn't.

For example, if it is “significant” and we perceive it as positive, we begin with naive anticipation. We don't know what we don't know. As we move through the process, reality sinks in. It is tough

work; it takes courage and discipline to keep moving. Not everyone is willing—or able—to complete the journey. (Elizabeth talks about the different jobs she held while writing and attempting to get published, and about the friends who stopped writing when success didn't come quickly and easily enough.) And, sometimes in creation, no matter the subject or the medium, the best we can do is not good enough. "I once threw away an entire completed book because it didn't work. I diligently finished the thing, but it really didn't work, so I ended up throwing it away," (*Big Magic*, p. 248).

Big Magic also offered a reaffirmation for me. All too often people say to me, "I'm not creative." For years after I switched my undergraduate major from architecture to cultural anthropology, I told myself the same thing. But the truth is, each of us has the potential to be creative. We may not be Michelangelo, Mozart, or Hemmingway. But in our own mediums, in our own lives, we create. And whether we are creating music, a career change, a new marketing strategy, or an amazing blended family, the principles of the human response to change apply. What are you creating through your change journey?

Dream the Impossible

The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it. (Michelangelo)

A few years ago, when I was still doing change management consulting, I spent a voluntary weekend fostering dreams. I wasn't working in a sleep-deprivation lab... I was facilitating an intent workshop. The organization was a small nonprofit, founded to memorialize and honor the victim of a hate crime. In their early years, they focused on creating a physical memorial in his name, and provided victim services. They testified on behalf of hate crime legislation. Everything was done by volunteers. Most of them moved on. The organization languished.

However, one person kept the spark alive. He knew the work wasn't done. He wasn't ready to let the memory fade, or the underlying causes of the attack be left unchallenged. He still felt the pain of loss, the shock of a friend dead because of who he was. He struck on an idea: produce children's videos that address issues of difference and acceptance. He found a college teacher who was willing to make this a class assignment. An educator offered insights into key elements of the content. Students storyboarded, presented, and produced two videos. Now, where would they go from here?

The typical response would be to "grow bigger." Establish a funding stream. Find money to hire a staff. Produce more videos. Market them. In fact, this was the approach a graduate student in nonprofit management recommended as he helped them to produce a strategic plan. The plan was sound. It highlighted many of the challenges that the organization faced, and provided practical guidance for addressing them. But, we did not move forward by figuring out how they "grow bigger" and produce more videos. Instead, we started off by dreaming. We took to heart the counsel provided by George Bernard Shaw in *Man and Superman*, "The reasonable man

adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man." We became unreasonable.

It is 2020. We are fostering social change in thinking and action, moving beyond tolerance to embrace diversity, empathy, acceptance, and non-judgement. What are we delivering to children, to their parents, to teachers, to learning systems (schools, youth groups, etc.), to our funders, and to the organization itself? What do we need to put in place to produce the outcomes that we are seeking to achieve?

We spent two solid days in the world of the future. We clarified the organizational intent. We defined, at a high level, how they will deliver on that intent. We developed principles for decision-making and design as they move forward. We validated our work.

When I am working with my coaching clients, I ask them to not only visualize the future, but to describe what it looks like, smells like, sounds like, tastes like, feels like. It's the difference between saying, "I plan to move to the beach in three years," and saying, "Here I am...my first morning waking up in my beach house. The sound of the surf guided me to sleep last night; as I wake up, I can smell the ocean on the breeze that is blowing through the window..."

Don't Ask How Big the Change Is

Ask "How tough will it be to succeed?"

All too often, the needed investment for a change is measured by its financial cost or by how long it will take. But the only way cost measures into success and failure has to do with whether you have available and are investing the necessary financial resources. As you prepare to launch a new business strategy, you can invest thousands on a new technology and a fancy website. This may be a big expense; it is not a big change. On the other hand, you might make a shift in work hours that costs little, but generates an incredible growth in clients.

How tough is the change?

That is the important question.

Not all change is created equal. The tougher the change, the more time you will have to invest in its success, and the less likely you will be successful.

So, what makes a change tough? We are going to look at three things. 1) How disruptive is the change? 2) How important is the change? 3) What determines success?

1. How disruptive is the change?

Why is this important? The more disruptive it is, the more physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual energy it will require; the more attention it will take away from your day-to-day life.

What makes a change disruptive? One of the things that I always want to determine is how invested my client is in the status quo. If that investment is minimal, the disruption will be less than if the change is going to significantly alter “how he does things now,” or “how she thinks about things now.” It is important to remember, it isn’t whether or not they like “how things are,” it’s about how easy—or difficult—it will be to let go.

The greater the number of people that will be affected by the change, the more disruptive it becomes. In a family situation, a change that rocks (or destroys) a long-standing status quo is highly disruptive. From an organizational perspective, a change that rocks (or destroys) a long-standing practice—but only affects a small unit—is a small change. *(NOTE: It is important to keep in mind that some changes that are small to an organization may be incredibly large to some individuals within the organization. Being sensitive to those who are significantly disrupted by a change is always a good practice.)*

Another thing to determine is how the disruption will affect: a) what you and others do and how you do it; and b) how you think about yourself and what you are currently doing. The most disruptive changes require shifts in both thinking and doing.

2. How important is the change?

Not very? No big deal? That’s easy. If that is your change and it starts getting tough, it is likely you will just drop it.

It’s a matter of life and death? There’s no future if the change doesn’t succeed? That makes it tougher. Regardless of other demands, obstacles, distractions, doubts; despite anything and everything that might come at you…you have to keep going. And that can be really, really tough!

3. What determines success?

Growing up, I remember the phrase “keeping up with the Joneses.” If the outcome you want is to keep up appearances, the change is going to be a lot less tough than if you actually want to get results.

- Complete the diploma mill degree and put the new letters after your name. Done.
- Marry your high school sweetheart. Done.
- Buy the house in the elite suburb. Done.

Keeping up with the Joneses…

If you are going for results, not so fast… The education, the learning, the quality of the school and the program become more important than the degree (not that it won’t hold its own

significance). Getting married is different than building a life-long relationship. Buying a house may be quick, but belonging to a neighborhood takes time. Each of these changes takes a significant investment; requires changing priorities; and calls for new ways of thinking and acting. With any of these changes, you have a tough change on his hands!

Why is it important to look at how tough the change is?

If it is really disruptive and difficult to achieve success, but not all that important...maybe it's not worth doing.

If it's really important, but otherwise not very tough, it can be easy to lose sight of, to let slide.

If it measures high on each of the toughness scales, then your client needs to spend time preparing himself—and in some cases others—for the road ahead. He needs to be prepared to focus his time and attention on the change. He has to figure out how to engage his best self in ensuring its success. He needs to respect it—and respond to it—as the big deal that it is.

When Life Gives You Lemons, Make Cherry Pie ala Mode!

Life gives us lemons. It's not that we ask for them; we may not even expect them. Then—suddenly—there they are. Your best client calls to tell you that their business has taken a downturn, and they will be using your services a lot less starting today. Your business partner doesn't come back from vacation, and you open the bank statement to find the accounts drained. Your life partner tells you that you can spend all the time you want at the office; he (or she) is leaving you. That casual aside about your boss that you thought you said in confidence after one-too-many drinks now has you sitting in front of her desk.

What we are often told is, *When life gives you lemons, make lemonade*. Sometimes, a lemon is just a lemon. There is nothing that we can do with it. Sometimes, lemonade is a good option...especially if you like lemonade and it is a hot summer's day. For many years, I thought this was a great response to the negative surprises—large and small—that are a part of life. However, I have learned that while it is sometimes a good response, it is not always the best one. If you permit me to shift analogies for a minute, I can explain.

When you fall off a horse, the first thing you should do is get back on. If you are an equestrian, and you are not injured, this is the case. It shows the horse that you are not afraid of him, and that he cannot get away with throwing you. But if you are not an equestrian, it may not be the right thing to do. It may be a signal that you should head toward the pool, or the tennis court, or maybe even get out the water colors and easel. The simple truth is, not all of us belong on the back of a horse.

You may have grown up on the farm or ranch. Perhaps you come from a multi-generational family of horse riders. Or, you thought you could gain fame and fortune on the back of a horse. But, when you fall off a horse, it may be a good time to re-assess your reasons for riding in the

first place. *Whether you have been riding for a day or for decades, is it still right for you tomorrow?* If it is, then get back on the horse. (Sometimes lemons are just lemons.) If it is not, then do you continue to pursue a riding-related option such as barn manager, blacksmith, or even veterinarian...the equivalent of making lemonade? Or, is it time to step back, reassess things, and go in a totally new direction?

Sometimes the best advice is, *When life gives you lemons, make cherry pie a la mode.* Don't be a victim. Don't stick to what you know even when you know it is not right for you. Go for what you want. For me, cherry pie a la mode wins out over lemonade almost every day!

"The Future Ain't What It Used to Be"

If you guessed this is a Yogi Berra quote, you are right. In many ways, Yogi was as insightful about the human condition as he was about baseball, if not more so.

At one level, it's easy enough to agree with Yogi...and, so what? Things change. That's the nature of time, and of life. At one time, an area code would tell you the location of the caller. (Some of us remember when "Diamond" and "Murray Hill" and "Hubbard" were exchanges that preceded five-digit phone numbers.) When you got a job, you kept the job. More often than not, you retired from the company that gave you your first job. You got married, had a family, stayed married. You were in the closet—perhaps deep in the closet—and you stayed in the closet.

The Future Ain't What It Used To Be.

Today, an area code is more likely to tell you where the caller bought the cell phone than her current location. People don't just change jobs and companies, they change career paths completely. Marriage, children, divorce, re-marriage, single parenting, and blended families are all increasingly major threads in our social fabric. Coming out is now a multi-generational reality for children, teens, parents, grandparents, and even great-grandparents.

Whether we are looking at our personal lives, our lives in organizations, or our lives within the greater society, Yogi's message resonates. The future that our grandparents envisioned for us and for our parents is not the future we are living. The future our parents envisioned for us is not the future we are living. And, it is unlikely the future we once envisioned for ourselves is fully alive in our experiences today. The volume, momentum, and complexity of change all continue to accelerate. We can selectively (and even collectively) try to wall ourselves off from it, but that creates its own set of stresses and conflicts as the world becomes more and more alien to us; that is also a future that isn't the future once foreseen.

Listen to Yogi as you create your change story; listen to Yogi as you prepare for the change journey; listen to Yogi as you plan for the change; listen to Yogi as you take the journey; and

listen to Yogi as you live your new reality. Whether your change is personally initiated, driven by work, or shaped by societal shifts, you need to know that the unexpected may require you to reform your story as you moves forward.

When preparing for the change, brace for the reality that there will be surprises, that the future won't be what you anticipate it to be right now. As we will discuss later, you have to plan for all of the shifts in thinking and behavior that your change will require; you also need to be prepared to revise your planning as forces in the environment affect where you are going and/or how best to get there. Moving through the change, don't allow yourself to become so focused on executing the plan that you fail to look up, or look up to only see those things that reassure you. Because the environment is changing, because the unanticipated is inevitable in any big change, you have to remain attuned or it is likely that you will be derailed along the way.

Yogi is right; the future you will be living when your change is complete will be a different reality than you set out to create. The paradox is, if you understand this before you start the journey, if you apply that reality along the way, it will still be a future that you have called forth.

To ignore Yogi on this one is perilous at best.

What If You are Concerned that Your Change Will Hurt Others?

If the change is big, pain is inevitable.

What do you do?

First, take a look at some of the ways in which pain might be felt.

It may be the pain of disrupted expectations. "Why are you changing things now? You've always done it this way, and it's worked just fine." "Why would you move half-way across the country? Everybody likes having you live near the family." "Ever since you were little you wanted to be an architect; why do you want to switch your major to anthropology?"

Often it is the pain of loss... perhaps a lost job, a lost base of power in the organization, the loss of a title or job classification, the loss of a dream.

Sometimes it goes deeper; it is the pain of feeling betrayed. "I've worked here my entire career. I'm two years away from retirement, and now you're eliminating my job?" "I moved my family across the country to work for you, and now you say I am not a good fit?" "When we married, I thought it would be forever. Now you want a divorce?"

Change can cause pain; big change can cause big pain! How is the pain of the change being felt? How is it being felt by others around you, and how does that affect you?

One of the most important questions to ask considering a major change is, “Why? What is the reason for this change?” Is it a good idea, or is it imperative for the future that you want for yourself?

Next, ask whether the pain of not changing is (or will become) significantly greater than the pain of the transition. If not, then you should really reconsider whether to move forward with the change. If it is an imperative, consider looking for alternatives that will deliver the future with less pain.

Your next question has to do with how you will respond to the pain that will result from making the change. Some people shrug off the pain they are causing others. Acting indifferently to the pain of others—especially when you are driving the change causing it—is perilous at best. There is a big difference between being seen as strong, decisive, and caring, and being seen as cold and heartless. If you are driving this change from a cold and heartless place, it is likely that you will quickly lose the support of those whom you want to accompany you on the change journey.

Move forward with empathy. Pain is personal. Your response should be as well. Be honest with yourself and others about your own pain. Offer the same invitation to others who are at risk of being hurt by the change. Think through options for turning the pain into a positive incentive for moving forward in a new direction.

The fact that change will hurt others is a reality that you will either face, or run away from. My encouragement to my clients is to face it with strength and courage; face it with commitment to the change that you are undertaking; and face it with empathy for those who are being hurt in the process.

The Importance of You in Your Change Journey

How Often Are You Present With Yourself?

At its core, change is about letting go of old ways of thinking and doing in order to replace them with new ways of thinking and being. Doing so requires self-awareness. While we will be diving deeper into presence when we move into *Planning for the Journey*, it is important to begin considering your relationship to presence now.

How often are you present with yourself?

When I ask my clients this, I often get responses like, “I’m always with me, except when I am asleep,” or “My brain is always going...working, reading, daydreaming.” Sometimes I hear “I talk to myself all the time, planning what I want to do next, or telling myself what I just did wrong.”

And, every once in a while it is, “Why would I want to be present with myself? I’m so (boring, lazy, stupid…)”

While each of these responses speaks to some form of mind-body connection (or lack thereof), none of them speaks to presence. As I am using the term here, the core characteristics of presence with oneself include self-awareness in the moment (self-observation) and non-judgment. Let’s look at each of these characteristics briefly, and discuss why they are so critical to change.

Self-Awareness in the Moment; Self-Observation

If you are not observing yourself in the moment, the triggers will click and the old habits will respond before you are able to intervene. Self-awareness in the moment allows you to say, “Stop! I want to practice a new response.” It allows you to execute that new response consciously. And it allows you to evaluate the effectiveness of the response once it has been executed.

Non-Judgement

Passing judgement on how you have responded to situations in the past doesn’t change those old responses, but it can undermine your belief in yourself. Passing judgment on a response you are about to make may or may not change that response; however, it is liable to undermine your resolve to act. (“I’m going to try this new way of responding to this situation and make a total fool of myself!”)

When it comes to being present with yourself, non-judgment is critical. It allows you to explore responding to circumstances in ways that you haven’t before; to evaluate the results relative to the outcome that you are seeking; and to determine whether you want to continue to apply the same response in the future (to “habituate” it), to make some modifications to it, or to continue to explore alternative responses.

If you are working with a mentor, coach, consultant, or even a therapist, it is possible that they can help serve as a reminder for your self-presence during your time together. You might also ask others whom you trust—and who will do so without judgment—to call your attention to the triggers when they occur. (The non-judgment part is important here… Just like you don’t want to be judging yourself in the moment, you don’t want that from others.)

Even in the best of circumstances, though, it is unlikely that others will be with you—and be present—to alert you each time your triggers are fired. That is why cultivating your own self-presence is so important.

Whose Change Is This, Anyway? Does It Really Matter?

Sometimes we are very conscious of the process that has brought us to the verge of—or even into the heart of—a life-altering change. The light bulb came on. We reflected on the idea, shaping it, “fleshing it out.” We engaged others in our thinking, taking their feedback to further refine it. When we were ready to move forward, we were proud to face the world (or some portion of it), and say “I am changing…”

Then there are the times when it was somebody else’s light bulb that went off. The first time we hear of the change, it hits us like the proverbial whack on the side of the head. The company is downsizing; the compensation structure is being significantly modified; the divorce filing is waiting on the kitchen table when you get home from another way-too-long day at work.

Whose change is this anyway? How would you answer?

- The company is downsizing; you are being laid off. My Change Not my change
- The compensation structure is being significantly modified; you will have to think and work differently—perhaps significantly harder—to earn the same income. My change Not my change
- When you left for work, it seemed like any other day; the papers filing for a divorce are waiting on the kitchen table when you get home. My change Not my change

For some people the answer to the first two (or even all three) scenarios is “Not my change.” This can be played out in any number of ways, but the bottom line is: “I am a victim of circumstances.”

One of the early lessons I learned about change is this: *We cannot always control the hand we are dealt. We do have the ability to control our response to it.* What that means for me is, quite simply, if the change affects me, it is my change. It doesn’t matter if I formulated it. It doesn’t matter if I didn’t have a clue that it was heading my way. It doesn’t matter if I have everything—or nothing—to say about the how, why, what, when, where, or how of the change. I do have a say about my response to it.

Perhaps the most powerful application I have seen of this principle was in the early 1990’s. I was Deputy Director of Bailey House, a nonprofit providing permanent housing and support services

to homeless men and women who were living with AIDS. Back then, an AIDS diagnosis was often seen as a death sentence; the treatments available today weren't even on the horizon. Yet over and over again, our clients refused to accept the role of victim. They would step up to this life-challenging change and say, "This opens up the opportunity for me to get the support that I need to take control of my life and turn it around." And, over and over again, they did just that!

Whose change is it anyway? Does it matter? If it affects you, it matters whether or not you claim it as yours. It matters whether you approach it as victim or victor.

Tear Down the Walls!

We act like there is work, and there is our other (some call it our "real") life. In this scenario, events that occur in one have nothing to do with the other. The reality, however, is very different.

Much like the Berlin Wall, the walls that we so often try to put up between different parts of our lives are not impervious. They may help to conceal things for a while. They may allow us to compartmentalize how we spend our time, and with whom. They may elicit excitement as we slip over the "pleasure" wall after a grueling day (or week, or month) at the office. They may even become forgotten, as invisible to us as they are to everyone else. But sooner or later, like the Berlin Wall, they will probably come tumbling down.

Why?

Simply put, they are an illusion. You are only one you; I am only one me. What affects us in one aspect of our life carries with us into the other areas of our lives as well; no wall can prevent that. You may no longer be recalling that grueling experience at the office, but as you relax on the beach (or the slopes), your body does. It feels the exhaustion, it lets down its defenses, and before you know it, you are sick in bed or struggling to stay awake on the lift, or...

Some people are really good at putting up those walls, and fortifying them. They have an affair that last for years. They run a Ponzi scheme that deceives hundreds or thousands of others. They are in the closet. They have an addiction. They have some aspect of their life that they do not want to share with others, or perhaps to even acknowledge to themselves.

These walls are strong. They are high, and thick, with deep foundations. But they are not impenetrable. After all, those who build them know that they are there. They know that when they are on one side of the wall, there is another side as well; they may even move back and forth between the sides.

Walls don't sustain themselves; they need to be maintained. The cost of maintenance is high. There may or may not be a financial investment needed, but, there is incredible mindshare and emotion involved. And, that is mindshare and emotion that cannot be spent on either side of the wall, since it is going into keeping the wall in place.

I often work with clients, helping them to face their walls, and to tear them down. Every once in a while, someone wants to put a window in the wall so they can get a clearer view of life on the other side, or a door in the wall to make it easier to pass back and forth. But once they do that, they inevitably decide that as hard as it might be to take down the wall altogether, they want it gone.

Tearing down a wall is hard work. It directly impacts your relationships on both sides of the wall; it directly affects your relationship with yourself. It takes courage, and strength, and time. When the wall is gone, you find that you've made a really big change in how you spend your life, how you invest your time and mindshare and emotional energy. Tearing down walls allows you to live your life more fully as yourself, more fully in integrity with who you truly are. Tearing down walls can be transformational, changing your relationship to the entire world around you.

Sometimes when you tear down walls, you need to replace them. If so, replace them with boundaries, not other walls. Properly established boundaries don't require the same emotional and mental investment to maintain. They let the real you show through. They can be flexible when that is the right thing to do, and they can be rigid when doing so is the better choice. They are easier to declare, when declaring them is appropriate.

If you find that you are having great difficulty maintaining a boundary that you have set, either it is not set properly or there is a wall that needs to be torn down first. You may not see it, but I can almost guarantee that it is there. If boundaries are about living truly into yourself in the here and now and you are not able to do so, there is something else going on. Find the wall. Get others to help you find it, if needed. It may be a family member, colleague, a mentor or coach, or even a therapist, depending on the wall. Find the wall and tear it down. Then re-establish the boundary and live into it.

I Would Do It, But...

You would do it, but... But what?

I'm not sure I know anyone who hasn't started a statement this way more than once. I certainly have. I hear some form of it from virtually every client that I work with. I hear it from family, and from friends.

I would do it, but...

Sometimes the “but” has true legitimacy.

- I would go to medical school, but I’m 58 now and really want to retire at 65.
- I would move to Argentina, but I have found out that my credentials (on which I depend for my living) are not recognized there.
- I would buy my apartment in a heartbeat, but it is in a rental building and not for sale.

More often than not, however, the “but” is legitimate in the mind of the speaker…and it has no factual basis.

- I would apply for the job, but why waste my time when I’m not good enough to get it?
- I would move in with Peter, but what happens if it doesn’t work out?
- I would start my own business, but I’ve never run a business before. What if I fail?

It’s true. You might not get the job; things might not work out with Peter; your business might fail. And, if you apply for the job with the belief that you are not good enough, if you move in with Peter believing the relationship might not work out, if you start your own business with your eye on failure…chances are good that failure is on the horizon.

Henry Ford once said, “Whether you think you can or you think you can’t, you are right.” We need to listen to him more closely. Almost all of us develop limiting beliefs along the way. They define our world, and how we relate to it. They are taught to us, intentionally or not, by our parents, our teachers, our religious institutions. They grow from our own experiences; we learn them from our peers and our colleagues. They define what we do, and don’t, pursue in life. They define our level of happiness and our degree of success.

- I’m not good enough.
- I’m not worthy.
- It won’t happen because I am (fill in your “other” status here, e.g. woman, gay, person of color, illegal immigrant).
- I don’t deserve happiness.
- I deserve to be abused.
- I’m too old.
- I’m too young.
- I’m too skilled.
- I’m not skilled enough.
- I’m too stupid.
- I’m too (fill in the blank).
- Others are better than me.
- Others are more deserving than me.
- Others get breaks; I don’t.
- We live in a world of scarcity; I’m always going to be living on the edge, trying not to fall off.

Most people think that reality shapes our beliefs. In fact, it is the other way around. Our beliefs shape our reality; we interpret our experiences through them. No one dared sail too far from the shores of Europe; they didn't want to risk falling off the edge of the world. And then someone did, and proved the belief that the world was flat was, in fact, wrong. Those who believe that global warming is real behave in one way relative to our environment; those who believe global warming is a hoax often behave very differently. Our beliefs shape our reality.

Letting go of our limiting beliefs can be scary. It calls on us to be more courageous as we face the opportunities that open up for us in our lives.

- I will apply for the job. I am more than qualified.
- I will move in with Peter. We will work together to make this relationship work.
- I am launching my own business. I have a lot to learn, and I can be–will be–successful!

Letting go of our limiting beliefs can also allow profound shifts in our lives, and in the lives of those around us. I see it again and again and again with my clients. Impossible futures become possible futures and then become real. Lives are transformed. Realities are transformed.

Here is just one story of someone who let go of his limiting beliefs, and change his life. My son Brandon is adopted. I first met him when he was 15 years old. He reached out by email to request an interview for a photography project he was doing in school. He had to write the biography of his favorite photographer and, he told me, "I Googled gay photographers, and you're my favorite." During the course of the interview Brandon learned a bit about me, and I learned a bit about him. Most importantly, I learned that he was living in an abusive home environment, and attending a school where he was getting assaulted on a regular basis. Moreover, he didn't have an adult figure in his life that he could turn to for guidance, and whom he could trust. I offered him the opportunity to stay in touch, and he accepted.

As time went on, I learned that at home Brandon was told that because he is gay, he would never amount to anything, that he would end up living on the streets. School was not much healthier. Students would stand outside in the morning, praying for him. A teacher once asked whether he was ever going to "get better." And he was told he would end up as a hairdresser, a florist, or a male prostitute.

When I first began talking with Brandon about his future, he was already committed to moving beyond the "guidance" he was receiving from others; he had identified a one-year photography trade school that he hoped to attend. As a sometime photographer who knows how difficult it is to make a living that way, I encouraged him to think in terms of "both/and." What would he like to study in addition to photography?

By the time Brandon graduated high school, he had been thrown out of his home, and I had taken him in. He had been accepted into a five year BA/BFA program at The New School in New

York City, with plans to major in psychology (BA) and photography (BFA). Midway through his sophomore year, he made the decision to discontinue the photography major, and focus fully on psychology. The next year he applied for, and was admitted to, a BA/MA program. This program allowed him to take graduate-level courses his junior and senior years, and granted him admission to continue on for his master's degree without going through the traditional GRE and admissions process. His senior year courses would also be credited toward his MA.

The journey has not been easy for Brandon. If he had believed in the future that others painted for him, he may never have even reached out to me. But he shut out those voices in favor of his own. And, despite the negativity of so many people in the first eighteen years of his life, Brandon is creating a positive future for himself...one in which he will be helping others to believe in themselves as well.

Brandon hadn't heard Henry Ford's quote until well along in his journey. Nonetheless, he has shown us all how true it is. "If you think you can do a thing, or you think you can't, you are right."

What would it be like if you were to let go of just one of your limiting beliefs, to think you can instead of thinking you can't?

Intuition. You Can't Always Trust It.

Do you rely on your intuition? For those of us who do, the reason is simple... Most of the time it serves us well. However, if you are facing (or in the midst of) a really big change, intuition is one of those things that can all too easily lead you astray. There are times that difficult change calls for counter-intuitive action.

If you have a "Type A" approach to life, you may well find yourself in a leadership position when faced with change, whether at the personal or organizational level. Among the characteristics often seen in Type A's are: rigidly organized, impatient, and avoidance of mistakes (or at least an avoidance of admitting to them). Day-to-day, these characteristics might serve you well; if the change you are facing is highly disruptive they can do just the opposite.

By definition, the really big changes we face come with surprises, unexpected twists and turns, unanticipated challenges. Yes, being organized helps prepare you, and allows you to move through the change in a more certain way. *The caveat is "a more certain way," not a certain way.* Being too rigidly organized, having an expectation that things will all go the way they are planned, will test your patience...certainly not healthy if you are impatient to start with.

Impatience, the swift move from decision to action, is a risk from the outset of large-scale change. Impatience can easily get you on the wrong path forward if you have not clearly

articulated your story. In addition, it will put distance between you and others whose understanding, commitment, and alignment are essential to the success of the change.

As for mistakes...they are part of the territory. You will make them. If you don't acknowledge and own them, you are not going to be able to correct them, make the needed adjustments, and get back on the path to success.

"Don't worry. Be happy!"

This may be a useful lens for seeing things during relative calm. Whether at home or at work, lower stress and satisfaction lead to higher productivity and a better quality of life. But, the disruption of change brings with it worry; frowns are liable to replace the smiles at times. If you want to keep people happy, lessen the change. If you want the change to deliver on its promise, find ways to help them be successful despite their discomfort. And remember, the same holds true for you as you move through the change... You won't always be comfortable; you can be successful.

What's Stopping You?

Chances are, you are sitting on a change that you want to make in your life. It may be really big...perhaps a move toward a new career, entering or leaving a personal relationship, selling or buying a home. Or, it may be somewhat smaller...a change of hairstyle, getting a tattoo, or hiring a professional to redo the garden.

What's stopping you?

That's not to say that every change we think about should be acted on. In fact, I tend to think toward the other end of the continuum. We should save our change energy for the really important ones, for those changes that are imperatives for us. So, if you are sitting on it, and it doesn't feel as if it is an imperative, see if you can let it go. Saying no to these ideas—sometimes really good ideas—is necessary to conserve our change energy. Let it go for those things that you have to say yes to.

But what if that change you are sitting on is one that you have to say yes to? And you are still sitting on it? What's stopping you? It's not uncommon for me to work with clients who find themselves "stuck" in this way. They want to move forward with an imperative change, but they don't know how, or they are uncertain as to what to do to move forward, or they are afraid they might be making a bad decision, or they are uncertain as to whether they will be successful, or...

The reason for moving forward on an imperative is simple. You must.

The reasons we find for not moving forward are many. They are often strong. And most of them are legitimate.

So, what do you do when there is a change you have to make, and something is stopping you?

The first thing to do is to identify what that something is, or those somethings are. Naming it will help you to find the “antidote” to overcoming it. Don’t do so casually. Really dig deep. For example, at first you might think “I don’t like to take risks.” Ask yourself, “Why?” Take that answer, and ask yourself again, “Why?” Keep going deeper. Go for five “Why” answers if you can. You may end up at that “Don’t take risks” tape that you heard from your parents for your entire childhood and that still replays in your head endlessly. Or, you may find yourself with the memory of a risk you took that ended up badly, perhaps causing significant pain for yourself or others. The antidote may be as simple as using as a mantra Wayne Gretzky’s quote, “I miss 100% of the shots I don’t take.” Or it may mean re-visiting that “risk gone wrong” to see what lessons it has to offer other than “don’t take risks.”

Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Depending on the “what” that is stopping you, it may be that family, or friends, or co-workers can assist you in removing the obstacle. Or, it may be that it is more appropriate to get assistance from a therapist, coach, mentor, or religious or spiritual advisor. Be thoughtful in where you seek your support. Remember, you are working to remove an obstacle to progress on a change you have to make.

Another way in which you can work to break through whatever is stopping you is to strongly, deeply create your change story. The process of creating and embodying your change story actually uses the neuroplasticity of the brain to more strongly connect you to that future state. This will increase the pull to “get on the road,” and help motivate you through the tough times including, if need be, moving through whatever is currently stopping you.

Don’t put yourself in the position of looking back some day and regretting that you didn’t act on an imperative for change. Dig deep to uncover what is really stopping you, and find the antidote for it. Seek help if needed. And create your change story to help get you on the road.

It’s Your Choice

It’s your choice.

How do I choose?

I don’t have a choice.

When it comes to choice, all too often we approach the situation with a fundamental misperception.

We think “choice” means selecting between good or bad, right or wrong, easy or difficult.

Sometimes it does.

But sometimes it doesn't.

Sometimes choice is between bad and bad, between right and right, between difficult and difficult. In the Old Testament we have the story of Abraham being commanded to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. In the more recent past, we have the work of fiction, *Sophie's Choice*, in which Sophie is forced to select which of her children is gassed to death in the concentration camp. Choices are not always good, or easy. But, there is still a choice.

Daryl Conner, one of my change mentors, tells the story of Andy Mochan, the Piper Alpha oil rig worker who jumped 150 feet into burning oil in the North Sea after the rig had exploded. When interviewed on Nightline, Andy stated that he had *chosen probable death over certain death*. Andy made a choice—not an easy one by any stretch of the imagination—and lived to tell his story. 166 of his fellow workers on the rig died.

Daryl uses this story as a metaphor for the resolve that we each need when we are facing difficult changes. In executing your change, it is likely that there will be choices that are easy to make along the way. These are the “god/bad,” “right/wrong” kind. But there will also be antagonizing, difficult choices to be made...ones for which you are ill-prepared, for which you want more time and/or information, ones for which you shudder at the possible consequences of any decision you make. These, too, are choices.

Change Isn't a Solo Journey

Are You Talking With the Right People?

It is great to be supported by the people around you. It feels good to be acknowledged. It's super to have others tell you that you are right. When the going gets tough, having a tight-knit circle of friends and supporters makes it seem a little easier. But if those are the only people you are talking with as you define, prepare for, plan, and carry out your change, you are making a big mistake!

One of the realities of how we as human beings approach change is that we have a tendency to “play to our strengths.” One person may conceive of and shape the change incessantly for

months on end. Another may plan it out to the most minute detail. Someone else may take the “Fire, Ready, Aim” approach. One risk of limiting those who advise us to those who think like us and support us without question is that sometimes playing to our strength may be a mistake. Those of us who are creative are often much better at starting things than at bringing them to a successful conclusion. All the planning in the world won’t move you forward; nor is it ever possible to execute a major change “according to plan.” (As the old saying goes, *People plan, and the gods laugh.*) Nor is jumping into action too quickly the best idea.

Another risk that comes from surrounding yourself with nodding heads is that you will end up with a limited perspective on the circumstances driving the change, as well as the approach to addressing those circumstances. Abraham Maslow put it this way. “If you only have a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail.”

When facing a major change, you need more than a hammer in your toolbox. You need counsel from people who see things through different lenses. You need to hear from others who have faced similar situations. You need to listen to those who have attempted this change journey before. Especially listen to those who have failed. Those who were successful may or may not know what contributed to their success; those who failed will have a clear grasp of what went wrong.

Several years ago, Daryl Conner and Linda Hoopes of Conner Partners extensively researched personal resilience. (Linda continues this research today through her organization, Resilience Alliance.) They identified a series of characteristics that distinguish more and less highly resilient people. One of those characteristics is “flexible social.” People who score high in this characteristic are likely to go outside their familiar circle of advisers when facing unfamiliar circumstances. They want to bring additional frames of reference to bear, to gain insights and understanding that would otherwise be unavailable to them.

If you take this approach, you need to be open to challenge. You have to suspend your judgment, and to consider alternative perspectives. You also have to have trust in those you are listening to. If what they have to offer is going to do more than “go in one ear and out the other,” you need to believe that they have credibility regarding whatever the topic may be.

My own approach is, perhaps, a bit of a hybrid. I have a small circle of people whom I refer to as my “heart friends.” These are the friends that will be there for me no matter what, 24/7, 365 days a year, without hesitation or question. When facing change, I will often consult one or more of them, to seek their insights and counsel.

At the same time, I don’t hesitate to go outside my comfort zone, to seek out others who might be knowledgeable in ways that will help to inform me. When I founded an AIDS nonprofit in the mid-90s I established an advisory board that included not only people in various AIDS-related fields. There was a futurist, who could help us think through alternative futures for a world living

with AIDS. We had an IT professional who could offer guidance on the use of online bulletin boards to build community. Other advisers included a Catholic college president, a systems theory expert, and a consulting psychologist. Each brought a unique frame of reference as to how we might change America's response to AIDS.

Value the perspective of those who are optimistic about your chances of success; they will give you encouragement along the way. Also value those who are pessimistic; they may be pointing out the potholes that you will want to avoid (or to be prepared to address) along the way. Appreciate those who are focused; they can help keep you from being distracted and moving off-course. Those who are proactive may compel you forward; their counterparts may be able to keep you from moving too quickly. Listen to people who can tell you what is just noise, and what is critically important for you to address.

It may only take adding one or two people to your circle to significantly broaden the voices you hear. But, they need to be people whom you trust, people whose thinking can cause you to change your mind, to think and/or act differently. It may also require that you task those who have traditionally supported you, helping them understand that you need both their support and their challenges as well.

In all of your conversations, be clear as to who is making the decisions. Listen with an open mind. Don't shoot the messengers. Finally, set the expectation that you want total candor, and that you will carefully weigh the counsel you are receiving. And, be clear that once you have made up your mind, you expect their support.

At the end of the day, listen to yourself.

Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma—which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.

Steve Jobs

What's Your Story?

Words Matter

It is way too easy for our message to be lost in the words we use to deliver it!

How often have you heard (and/or said) the following?

- I plan to...

- It will be really important if we...
- That's not what I wanted to hear!
- This is a priority.
- That was a bad idea.
- I am just (a struggling artist; a working stiff; an okay spouse)

These words, and many more expressed in similar fashion, have the power to undermine your change, or to prevent you from even stepping into it in the first place. Word matter! Yet all too often, we "ready, fire, aim" when sending them into the world, and even when thinking them to ourselves.

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of these phrases. That's not what is important; what is important is hearing the messages they convey, and learning how to avoid them. Let's take a look.

I plan to... How committed do people generally get to a plan? How motivated are they to give it 110%, to put aside what they are now invested in doing in order to execute a plan? The plan may be necessary, but results are only achieved in the execution. Don't talk about your plans. Talk about what you are—or will be—doing. Talk about what you aspire to achieve. What is your dream? What is your story? What will life be like once it is achieved? That is the language you need. That is the language that others need.

It will be really important if we... There are a couple of stumbles embedded in this one. If "it will be really important if we..." then it is really important now. "If" makes it optional; optional things aren't really important, so just forget them. Work with *It is essential that we...* or *It is critical for us to...* Move away from equivocation.

That's not what I wanted to hear! If it's not what you wanted to hear, then it is important that you hear it! If all you are being told is what you want to hear, then you are listening to the wrong people. You are not getting the insights and alerts that you need to stay on top of the risks that your change is facing. You are being lulled into a false sense of successful progress. Big changes face big risks and big challenges. It isn't a question of whether or not things go wrong; it is a question of what will go wrong, and when. Unless you are saying, *That's not what I wanted to hear! That's a problem. Thank you for your candor in telling me,* you are setting yourself up for failure.

This is a priority. And? So are this, and this, and this, and this, and this, and that thing over there. Our professional lives are filled with priorities. Our personal lives are filled with priorities. And, as we all know, if everything is a priority, then nothing is a priority. Limit your priorities to what you, and those supporting you in the change, can accomplish. Put the rest of it away for another time. Then you are left not with *This is a priority* but with *This must get done. It is make-or-break.*

That was a bad idea. If it was a bad idea, why did you try it? If it was a possible solution to a problem, or a reasoned next step based on what was known, then it may have been a mistake; it wasn't a bad idea. When working on the electric lightbulb, Thomas Edison didn't have bad ideas; rather, he said, *I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work.* When was the last time any of us tried 10,000 ways (literally, or even figuratively) to do anything?

Given that words matter, how do you make sure you are using the correct ones?

1. *Give yourself time.* Think it through. Write it down. Read it. Put it aside. Read it again. Read it aloud. Mark Twain wrote, *I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one.* Do everything you can to make it short, even if it can't be made sweet.
2. *Make it clear to the stranger on the street.* You may not actually ever communicate it to her...but it should be written so that she would understand if you did. Get rid of the jargon. Get rid of the "50 cent" words. There are times when—especially if you are working in an organization—you may need "special terms," words that carry a specific meaning and facilitate communication. Limit the terms. Limit their usage. Wherever possible, give them context that allows them to be understood by outsiders as well.
3. *Make it clear to those who need to hear the message.* Don't "soft peddle" bad news, thinking "They'll get the message." Deliver the message, not some mushy, sugar-coated, "hint, hint" version of it.
4. *You're not communicating with goldfish.* According to some recent research, their nine second attention span is a second longer than ours. Don't waste the first eight seconds of your message! Communicate with your readers from the first word on the paper (or out of your mouth).

What's Your Story? Guidelines for Writing Your Change Story

No, I am not referring to your "elevator speech." Some major changes in our lives (for instance, beginning a new job) may require the elevator speech. *Every major change we face warrants a story.* Virtually since the advent of oral communication, story-telling has been with us. It is a way of passing on our history, of sharing our experiences, and of vocalizing our dreams. Skilled story-tellers are able to arouse our deepest emotions, and to move us from intellectual curiosity to committed action. They bring stories to life.

So why do I believe that every big change in our life should have its own story? The first reason has to do with attainment. By definition, major change is tough; it carries with it a real chance of failure. While we may begin full of optimism, at some point, we start to understand the many challenges that stand between us and success.

Think about it. Whether it is a personal change or a global business transformation, if the change is perceived as positive, it begins with a honeymoon. But, honeymoons are not forever. Daryl Conner of Conner Partners, a strategy execution consulting firm, refers to this as the move from *uninformed optimism* to *informed pessimism*. When pessimism takes over, it is much harder to remain focused, to stay committed; it is much more challenging to maintain the momentum.

If we have our story—and it is well constructed—we are better prepared for the inevitable shift to informed pessimism. Quoting Mahatma Gandhi,

If I keep on saying to myself that I cannot do a certain thing, it's possible that I may end up by really becoming incapable of doing it. On the contrary, if I have the belief that I can do it, I shall surely acquire the capability to do it even if I may not have it at the beginning.

Implicit in Gandhi's quote is the second reason I find stories so important when on the change journey. The change story (whether your own, your family's, or your business's) is not written to be told once and to sit on the shelf. You don't "acquire the capability to do it" in one telling, or a dozen. Change stories are constructed, and then they are lived.

Several years ago I worked with a client who was preparing to retire. She had been a high-level executive in a nonprofit organization for many years. The thought of no longer coming into the office truly frightened her. She had formed a mental picture of herself as an unhappy old woman, angry at the world for taking away the meaning in her life. In fact, together we crafted a very different story, and she moved into a very different retirement... one of both peace and purpose. And along the way, she lived her change story.

Underlying each of these reasons for creating your change story is the neuroscience of story. fMRI's show that the brain responds to story in the same way that it responds to lived events. Stories activate the same locations in the brain as actual experience. Stories release the same chemicals in the brain. Stories engage, shape, and rewire neural networks. Your change story—well-crafted and embodied—will do all of these things for you as you prepare, plan, and move through your change.

Guidelines for Writing Your Change Story

Writing your change story isn't a task you can delegate. Nor is it likely that you should make it a solo experience. It takes reflection, challenge, exploration, commitment, and a lot of hard work. Chances are, writing your story will be cathartic for all those involved in the process. To help you in the process, here are a series of guidelines.

1. Start with your why.

Where do you start? Earlier, I referenced Simon Sinek's Golden Circle. His message is simple, and profound. *You don't start with a plan; you don't start with "what" you are going to do. You start with what is in your heart. You start with Why.* Your story needs to be written based on that why. The change you are writing about, the change you are facing, is big; it is tough; it has the capability of defeating you, your organization, or both. You can't win that battle with intellect alone. You need passion; and you need courage and discipline. Unless the change comes from your heart, you are unlikely to reach the destination you have defined.

2. Write from the future.

Envision life when you are realizing the full range of benefits that your change has to offer. That is your destination, and that is where you begin to write your story. Make it real. What does it look like, feel like, smell like, taste like, sound like? It is less about what you and others in the story are doing, and more about how you are being.

I recently worked with a client who was shaping a major personal transformation in his life. This is not the way to begin his story.

Once I come out, I will feel free. I can do what I want, when I want, and how I want. I will get divorced, move into my own place, and be able to live my own life. I will feel really good.

Here is what I mean when I say to write from the future.

This morning I woke up feeling free. If I have ever had this feeling before, I cannot remember it. Today I am truly understanding for the first time what it means to live my life fully as who I am.

3. Identify how you will know when you have reached your change destination.

Yes, your journey requires putting certain things in place. You may need a new financial plan. If your change affects your organization, you may need new technology, or to address certain legal or regulatory issues. New skills may be required. You may need to gain fluency in a new language, or find a home in a new location. People may need to not just act differently; shifts in how they think might also be necessary.

Too often, whether as individuals or as an organization, these types of things become the milestones by which change is measured. However, putting the components of the change in place is different than realizing its full benefit. Know how you will determine realization of your change. Identify a small number (no more than 5-7) critical indicators along the path from the present to the future state.

In the first example above, coming out was an installation measure, as was my client moving into his own place. Both of these may occur, and yet he may end up just "feeling good;" that was

not the end state he was seeking. The second example illustrates realization...achieving the full benefit of his change. *Today I am truly understanding for the first time what it means to live my life fully as who I am.*

For my client this became his measure of full realization. Other realization milestones along his path included things such as coming to terms with the religious stigma he has felt as a closeted gay man; resolution of his relationship with his family and friends; and being at peace with his sexual identity.

As you write your story, you don't have to know how you will achieve everything. In fact, it is unlikely that you will have more than a clue about what will be required for some of them. However, you do need to know what these critical milestones are; identifying them is one of the reasons that this is not an easy process.

4. Establish your time frame.

How long will this change take, really? You need to set a time frame for full realization of the change, as well as for the interim steps. If you leave it open-ended, you will find that progress is elusive; you are working toward a dream, not a future reality.

You've identified your critical realization milestones. What are their interdependencies? What is the sequence in which they should be achieved? Lay them out on a white board, a piece of paper, or with sticky notes on a window or wall.

Be realistic. We tend to over-estimate what we can accomplish in the short term, and underestimate what we can accomplish over time. Define a realistic length of time for achieving each of your realization milestones. Which ones can you be working on at the same time? When you put the times to them, are you achieving realization within an acceptable period of time? If not, you will need to either commit more resources to the journey (e.g. invest more of your time per week), or modify the desired realization so it is achievable within the time frame required.

5. Create a "sparkline."

If you know of Nancy Duarte, you know how well she understands both the science and the art of storytelling. In her book *Resonate* she spends considerable time discussing how to create "sparklines." In essence, the sparkline of a story is its flow from *what is* to *what could be* to *what is* to *what could be*... While Nancy is focused on visual presentations in her book, the process for constructing a sparkline is the same for your story. A sparkline creates contrast.

Let me briefly illustrate the sparkline in action with a story you know, Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech.

(What is): *I have a dream*

(What could be): *That one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."*

(What is): *I have a dream*

(What could be): *That my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.*

What are you moving from? What are you moving to? Your sparkline will help tell the story of your journey.

6. Determine who the participants in your story will be, and the roles they will play.

This is not an easy one! And, you may not be able to fully answer it at the outset. Nonetheless, it is important that you give significant thought to who the participants in your story will be, and the roles that they will play.

1. Who are the people that are anchoring you—keeping you in place—now?

2. What is the nature of the anchor each plays?

3. What is the relationship that exists between the two of you?

4. Now, reflect on each of these relationships again, applying a "from the future" lens. Will each of these people still play an anchoring role in the future? If so, will it be the same as it is now, or how will it be different?

Let me give you an example.

A client of mine, Frank, had been brought in to head up a manufacturing facility that was one of several in a global organization. The facility had been built to produce a product that had been designed by his predecessor, Steve. Steve was a hero not just at the facility, but throughout the organization. And, Steve was an extremely weak leader. Here is how Frank thought through these questions regarding Steve.

1. Steve has to be a participant in this story.
2. Steve is anchoring this facility in two ways right now. On the positive, he is seen as a guru, the reason the facility is here. If anyone has any questions about the product, thoughts on improvement, etc., they go to Steve. On the negative, under Steve's leadership the facility has developed a poor performance record. There are major quality and productivity issues resulting from Steve's poor leadership that Frank has been brought in to address.

3. In discussions with Steve before he accepted the assignment, it became clear to Frank that Steve had never wanted to lead a facility, and was glad to be able to step out of that role. At the same time, Steve felt threatened; if he left his current position he felt that he would lose prestige, and might well lose any relationship he enjoyed with the facility and its people.
4. Frank had negotiated the right to terminate Steve. He also knew that doing so would be extremely disruptive and undermine his credibility. Not only was Steve highly revered; he was the “source of knowledge” regarding all aspects of their only product. As we talked things through, Frank decided that, if at all possible, the future story had to include Steve in a position that would allow him to continue to bring value to the facility.
5. A new position was created for Steve. He became “Product Guru.” Frank and Steve worked together to define his responsibilities so that it was clear to everyone that Frank was in charge; Steve (gladly) stepped out of any operating responsibility. A program was set up that allowed Steve to develop a pool of employees who had a deep understanding of the product. Finally, the Board of Directors renamed the facility in honor of Steve; it became the only facility in the company that was known by the name of a person, rather than its location.

At the outset, Frank could not know how the story might end... He did know that Steve needed to be a part of it.

One more step is required to fully complete the participant list for your story. That is to identify those who have not been participants in the past, but are needed to bring your story to fruition in the future. If your story has you comfortably enjoying your retirement, it may require a financial planner. In the example I just laid out, Frank knew that he needed the guidance of someone who understood the patterns of change.

Who are the new participants that you will need to write into your story?

7. Honor the past.

Looking at the example above, you will see that one of the things that Frank did was to honor the past, to recognize and value what Steve had made possible.

All too often when planning or in the midst of change, the past gets rewritten. The mindset seems to be, “If they had done things differently, we wouldn’t be in this situation today.” The truth is, no matter what has been done in the past, change is inevitable. And, sometimes, big, highly disruptive change will happen.

Look at the past for what it has made possible. It has brought you to this point. It has given you (and/or your organization) the knowledge and the resources that are now available to help successfully navigate to the future. It has helped to shape the thinking that will allow that future to be defined.

Breaking with that past is always difficult; that difficulty is made worse when those who created and sustained what is in place are the ones who will have to now dismantle it. Sometimes the unconscious (or even conscious) decision is made to disparage the past as a way of making it easier to let go. (How many times, for example, have you seen someone who regularly has talked about enjoying their job in the past, suddenly begin to bad-mouth everything about it as they prepare to leave for a new job elsewhere?)

In my own experience and that of my clients, the truth is, if we can find a way to honor and respect what has come before, to acknowledge what it has made possible and where it has brought us, it is much easier to stand on that and step forward into the future.

How will you honor the past in your story?

8. Respect and believe in yourself.

Frequently I will have a client say to me, “Why did I wait so long to…(decide to change careers, decide to start my own business, redirect our organizational strategy, decide to come out, etc.)?” All too often this will be followed by some form of negative self-judgment. This only undermines your belief in yourself, and in your ability to create the future that is your why.

How will you demonstrate respect for, and belief in, yourself in your story?

Those are the eight guidelines that I use with my clients, whether organizations or individuals, as I work with them to write their stories. I invite you to use them as you create your own change story.

Telling Your Personal Change Story

If your story is about a personal change, who do you tell it to?

Look in the mirror. You are your first audience. And, you will be your most frequent audience going forward. Why? Remember Henry Ford, “If you think you can do a thing, or you think you can’t, you are right.” Wherever your thinking is today, it will shift. Some days you will have a greater belief in your ability to succeed than you do today. Other days, you will have less. That is why you write your story from the future. It speaks to having succeeded, to achieving what you have set out to attain. You need to believe that it can—and will—happen, or you will never get there. The larger, more disruptive the change is, the truer this is.

A few years ago I was on a spiritual retreat. One of my personal stories surfaced in a group session. It was a painful one, but one that I believed was true. The facilitator worked with me to write a new story, one filled with promise and positive outcomes. That was the easy part!

He then brought me in front of a full-length mirror, and had me look myself in the eye. He asked me to tell myself the new story. Hesitantly, with uncertainty, I struggled through it. For weeks after, every morning in front of the mirror I struggled to tell myself my new story. Sometimes I was eye-to-eye with me; sometimes my eyes were averted. Then, one day, I stood there, told my story, and started smiling. A loud, heart-felt belly laugh erupted. It was clear that I believed the story, and was on my journey to achieving it. That story is still alive today. It is becoming more and more fully realized. And, each morning I stand in front of the mirror, and I tell myself the story once again, from my heart.

Tell it to your personal anchors who are, or will be, taking the journey with you. Perhaps they helped to write the story. Perhaps they will help you to edit it as you move forward, to adjust it to the shifting environment, the unexpected obstacles, the unanticipated encounters. What you want most is for them to anchor you in the story; to hold you accountable for living into it.

- *Stand in front of the mirror, story in hand,*
- *Look yourself in the eye, and*
- *Start telling yourself of your future life, and how you will get there.*
- *As you talk, also listen, and feel it in your heart, feel it in your gut. Don't just know it. Feel it.*

The Go or No Go Decision

Do You Really Have to Make This Change?

Is this a really good idea, or it is essential that you make the change? Big change takes a big investment. It requires time, money, physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual energy. It requires saying "No" to things that are important so that you are able to say yes to the change. It's risky, and success is never guaranteed.

Making a major change requires reexamining the relationship that you have with the various anchors in your life: people, places, things... In some cases you will need to let go of old anchors, and form new ones. You may need to change your relationship with some of your anchors, becoming closer or more distant, more or less intimate, more or less engaged.

Major change requires changes in the way you look at, and think about, things. It requires you to do things differently. Perhaps you need to learn new skills, to engage with other people in different ways, or even to shift the way that you think about—and relate to—your own body.

Big change is tough; it is demanding; it is hard.

Sometimes you don't have a choice. You've been laid off. Your company is relocating. You experience a serious health issue. When change is thrust on you in this way, change is going to happen... Take charge of it. Approach it as a victor, not a victim.

But when you do have a choice, think it over carefully. Talk it over with unbiased others. Ask yourself, *Do I really have to make this change? What is the price I will pay if I do not? What is the cost of doing so?*

Sometimes, the most important thing I can do for a client is to help her think through a change that she is ready to charge into...and have her realize that doing so is a good idea, but is not imperative. Sometimes, I help a client come to the answer that, *No, I don't really have to make this change.*

Fear of Success

Fear can undermine success, but it isn't just fear of failure. You can also undermine yourself with a fear of success.

Earlier we talked about the danger of limiting beliefs ("I Would Do It, But..."). These frequently take the form of fear of failure...the reasons that we believe we will not be successful. The truth is, we can also set ourselves up for failure by a fear of success. I have had many clients who face this challenge. Here are just a few of the ways that it has been voiced.

- I would grow my business, but I don't want the headaches that additional employees would bring.
- I know that I could make a lot more money, but I don't like what has happened to my friends who have achieved that goal; they're just not nice people any more.
- I would apply for my manager's job when she retires, but I know the crazy hours she works, and I don't want that for myself.

The first question I always ask is, *How do you define success?* If you define it as a larger business with problem employees, that is what you will achieve...if you move forward. If success is making a lot of money, and becoming the type of wealthy person that you detest, that is what you will become...if you move forward. If it is getting a promotion and working untold hours as a result, that is what you will do...if you move forward.

Overcoming the fear of success requires that we refuse to accept other people's definitions of what success means. You can grow your business, and avoid hiring (or retaining) problem employees. You can become wealthy and still "be a nice person." You can obtain a promotion (whether to your manager's position or another) and maintain a healthy work-life balance.

If you begin with the truly big picture, you can prepare—and plan for—the changes required to get there. If you start with only a piece of the picture, the other pieces will end up being challenged to accommodate that one. If you set your path toward someone else's definition of success, it is likely you will undermine yourself along the way...or be extremely disappointed when you achieve it.

Overcoming the fear of success requires that you define success on your own terms. Your definition may include whatever you want...This is your success we are talking about. I encourage people to think broadly. We tend to look at personal success independent of our professional lives, and professional success independent of our personal lives; neither is true. What is the income you are seeking to earn? The bank balance (and/or retirement fund) you want to have? The nature of the job you want? The work environment you are seeking? The personal life you desire? The balance between personal and professional?

Give success your definition, one that balances all aspects of what you are looking for in your life, and then work to achieve that.

How Bad Does It Hurt?

Big change is difficult; if the pain of the present state—or the anticipated pain down the road—is not bad enough, you may set out on the change journey, but you are not going to make it all the way.

More often than not, change-based conversations focus on how rosy the future will be. The bigger the change, the rosier the future seems to be portrayed. There is very little talk about how difficult the journey will be; the obstacles to be faced; the challenges to be overcome; perhaps, quite literally, the tears to be shed. The expectation is that the hope offered by the future will be enough to propel you into the change and through to that ideal future state.

It won't. Hope isn't enough.

Earlier I talked about "uninformed optimism," the honeymoon phase of big changes that we see in a positive light. And, I described the "informed pessimism" that inevitably follows as the obstacles, challenges, and unexpected difficulties arise. While hope may be enough to get you to this point in the journey, it won't carry you through... This is when people begin to check out.

Sometimes checking out is public. It may take the form of walking off the job, or calling off the wedding, or announcing a return to "the way it was before." Sometimes checking out is more private. People retire on the job. They have affairs. They "go through the motions" without ever investing enough time, energy, etc. to make meaningful progress.

The hope of a better future is necessary, but it isn't enough to propel us through major change. There also needs to be pain associated with the present. The bigger the change, the deeper that pain needs to be.

Why?

Quite simply put, if where we are is comfortable, it's hard to leave. And if the journey gets really difficult, it's too easy to come back. Comfort doesn't mean that everything is perfect. In fact, it may be far from it. We have all heard stories—perhaps know someone or have even lived it ourselves—of an abused person remaining in the relationship, or leaving the relationship, only to return. For her, or him, the uncertainty of the transition is more uncomfortable than the certainty of the abuse.

If you are facing a change now, what is your pain?

It doesn't matter if the change is being driven by a problem or an opportunity; it doesn't matter if it is the current state or the future that is driving it.

What matters is how badly failing will hurt.

Identify that pain. Sit with it. Know it. Envision what it will be like to live with it. If you decide you can live with it, even if uncomfortable, then my best counsel—unless you are in a threatening situation—is, don't proceed with a really big change. You may begin it, but it is unlikely you will carry it through.

If others are taking the journey with you, whether family, friends, or co-workers, they, too, will need to feel the pain. It may be felt differently for each one; that's okay. But, each person on the journey has to feel the need to leave the status quo, and to know that the price of going back is too high.

If the change is big and success is not imperative, it is unlikely that true success will be achieved.