

Making Sense of Life's Changes

From Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* ---"Who are YOU?' said the Caterpillar. This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, I--I hardly know, sir, just at present-- at least I know who I WAS when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then".

Unlike Alice, we probably don't change several times in a day. But as individuals we do experience frequent change on three different levels. One could be thought of as situational, that is, moving from one job to another but doing the same thing. A second type of change may be thought of as developmental, major changes in role and activities, for example leaving the workforce to be a stay-at-home mom. Finally, we all experience emotional changes in our lives. Significant emotional events often challenge our ways of thinking and preconceived notions about our world and ourselves. This can often lead to personal growth.

Changes that conflict with who we think we are or with our values affect us the most. These challenges may be particularly painful and they often happen in the following areas:

Behaviors – we voluntarily modify some behaviors, like adjusting our golf swing. Other behavioral change may be mandated by circumstances or by others e.g. giving up smoking or losing weight. Anyone who has ever tried to alter a long standing habit knows how difficult this is. What percentage of New Year's resolutions is actually accomplished?

Belongings – By this I mean much more than physical possessions like our homes, cars and other things we own. I am referring to the trappings of our lives which we want to be permanent and to which we may feel entitled. Many tend to think we have a right to our jobs, our residence, our personal time and our medical coverage. We all get attached to these "things" and any challenge to that sense of entitlement is difficult.

Beliefs – Changes in our beliefs may be the hardest to accept. We have deep-seated loyalty to our values and beliefs, based on strong family and personal ties. People we trust, and institutions we believe in, help us form complex systems of beliefs which can be changed only with much anguish.

Change challenges us. Some we can control and might even welcome. Other change is imposed on us and forces us to adapt. We can anticipate the need for some change but our emotions may catch us by surprise. We need stability and predictability in our lives because we perform best when we are secure. Change disrupts that stability.

Accepting change is a life skill that needs to be developed like other skills. We may understand in an intellectual way that real innovation and positive growth only come from change, but how do we prepare ourselves for it and make the best of the situation? Can we really become proficient, as individuals, at change?

Here are four positive ways we might deal with the change we face:

- **Recognize that change does happen. Life is filled with risks but we can't stay in bed all day. It's necessary to get out there, take on challenges and accomplish things. This tough talk to ourselves is an important first step.**
- **Do a self assessment. Some things are important and should never be changed but other things are less fundamental. Find that anchor, that thing that provides us stability when all else is changing. We should be flexible about everything else.**
- **Be positive in both actions and attitudes, think of the new opportunities that come with change. Developing a positive attitude and positive behaviors is critical.**
- **Openly recognize that all change is challenging. All change represents a loss. Even positive change (getting married, having a child) represents a corresponding loss (our old lifestyle, our independence, another path not taken). It is important to realize that at some level all losses must be recognized and mourned. Give yourself time to adjust to the new situations of your life. Be tough on yourself in recognizing the need to change, but be kind to yourself by allowing time to adjust.**

The Caterpillar asked Alice "Who are you" and she responded in a whimsical way even hinting that she looked forward to the change of Alice becoming a better person. As we start a New Year, let's try to embrace those things that will transform us for the better. It is hard work, but well worth it.

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