

THE CHANGE-LOSS CONNECTIONS IN PERSONAL GROWTH

People who say in my office that they want to change their behavior are often bewildered by the difficulties they encounter: it's hard to get started--or it doesn't work (fast enough)--or maybe another person should change first! Something about the process is painful. And if it is more painful than staying the same, then the decision may be to remain with the familiar, even if "the familiar" is destructive.

Over four years of counselling individuals--alone, in couples and in groups, I have become increasingly aware of the connection between change and loss.

My assumption in this article is that all change--whether experienced as positive or negative--carries with it an element of loss which is not always acknowledged or understood.

Turning a corner means leaving someone or something behind.

A lot of energy is spent, I believe, repudiating a change-loss connection, especially when we fear that to acknowledge loss is inappropriate.

By "loss", I am referring to a sense of incompleteness--a situation in which the thread of meaning, of continuity, is for the time being, broken. We are no longer quite "the way we were", whether we have changed homes, habits, wardrobes or lovers! Though the situations vary, I believe there is a common struggle to pick up the thread of meaning--to make sense out of the change. Even before a significant change occurs, there may be a struggle--to find some balance between the urge to stay put and the urge to turn the corner.

An ambivalence toward change is nurtured, I believe, by our perception of societal restrictions. Our need to face loss and to grieve may be inhibited by such platitudes as "You made your bed; now lie in it (without complaint)" --or "You haven't lost a daughter; you've gained a son" --or "He isn't dead; he's just away"... Acknowledging the natural grief reaction that accompanies change seems to be the task we are least prepared for.

Some changes bring obvious losses for which there is some permission to grieve: loss of life, health, job, or an intimate relationship. There is even some acknowledgment of loss following what is thought of as positive change: the little death ("post-partum depression") that may accompany birth. But what about respect for the loss of a support system that goes with a change in schools or a job promotion? What about the loss of a goal (by giving it up or by reaching it)? --What about losses related to age changes, broken dreams, the "limbo" in which we wait for the unknown outcome? In such situations, our feelings are discounted when someone else tells us who to be, what to feel and what to do. Whether the change is considered positive or negative, it may be hard to accept the need to grieve--our own need or someone else's. Permission is lacking. Writer-philosopher Jess Lair (1969) makes these observations:

"We owe it to the people who are grieving... to let them grieve... to accept their sorrow. But we won't and can't do it... Their loss... frightens us because we can see ourselves losing the same thing...
"Grief isn't just when people die. Grief is all kinds of things. Like I grieve at leaving Minnesota... I need my sorrow, and there's nothing wrong with it. Acceptance makes anybody I've ever seen feel better. And also it's pretty rare".

Yes, indeed, it is rare. Far more common, it seems to me, is the avoidance of a confrontation with the fact of loss. Denial inhibits grief temporarily or permanently. Psychiatrists, I have been told, must deal with many people for whom such avoidance, such denial, has become chronic.

Behind this response to loss must be some profound terror related not only to the lost person, place or thing, but more importantly, to the part of our vested selves that we have lost. When we lose for the moment whatever has had meaning for us, we are left to consider our own death--and that, perhaps, is the terror. We would like to be powerful--immune to destruction--yet much of our existence seems beyond our control.

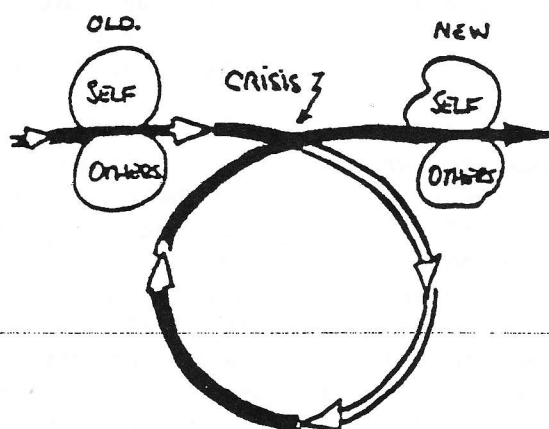
I have suggested that--largely through fear--we try to hold our old, familiar boundaries together, to avoid the new and frightening, to deny the inevitability of our own death. Such a response is spontaneous--and the denial wears the face of a bargainer: here is what I will do to survive, to gain the right to live or make my life too valuable to take away (Keleman: 1974). I will try harder to achieve (prove = worth); I'll compensate for the loss by substituting something else; I'll look to the past or the future rather than the present which is too dangerous; I'll fight; I'll go to sleep. Only please don't let me hurt so much. I'll change if I can stay the same. I'll face the loss if I can call it something else.

The grief process has been aborted. Fear of death and of life--of loss and of change--strangles growth until we break through to make some freeing sense out of who we are now, what we are doing here, and what significant place we still have with those close to us.

Management of Loss

What if--rather than fight against change--we were to opt for the slower process of working through it?

Stanley Keleman (1974) diagrams his view of the transition through which we go from experiencing loss to resolving it:



"The descending side of the loop is where loss occurs, where new space is created and where the emotional reactions to loss and to space are experienced. The ascending side is where new boundaries are formed..."

"Life can be described as a migration through many formative loops, many little dyings. Growth, change and maturing occurs by deforming the old and forming the new". (Keleman; 1974, p. 26)

Resolution of significant change and loss seems to require the re-generating of energy, directing it toward framing our lives a different way.

It's a risky business. I suggest that we begin very simply.

For me, the first step toward resolution is to acknowledge that something is, in fact, different--that we've turned a corner, leaving behind something familiar. Again from Keleman,

"Turning points are the cauldron of our lives, the steps of our birthings, our self-formings. There are no turning points that are not accompanied by feelings of dying; no self-forming occurs without endings and loss".

Experience teaches. When we take shortcuts, we miss the total experience. In order to make sense out of lives in change, it seems to me that we take slower steps through grieving.

The second step, I think, is to allow ourselves time, and if necessary, assistance to grieve. (As we have seen, in a hurry-up world, such permission is not easily sought or granted. Professional assistance--not unlike that of certain casual friends or neighbors--may even present difficulties. Action--oriented therapy does not always take into account the need for a process of mourning to work itself out). When there is time, and someone supportive to walk beside, there is also freedom to incorporate the lessons of grief rather than repress them.

If the first lesson of grief is to acknowledge the change, and the second is to allow permission to be vulnerable, then the third lesson follows naturally: to experience all the feelings (including the "ugly" ones) associated with what we have just acknowledged. Anger and depression are common responses. Staying with them may be difficult. "Staying with" does not mean prolonging the agony until it becomes so familiar that we have simply substituted one form of dependency for another. It does mean being wary of burying pain alive. Depression--with the accompanying loss of energy--is a natural part of grieving.

So is anger.

"I'm past the point of going quietly insane.

I'm getting quite

noisy about it.

The neighbors must think

I'm mad.

The neighbors, for once,

think right." (McWilliams: 1976)

When anger and hurt are directed inside, they can be destructive and self-punishing. Part of managing these feelings is to get them on the outside where they can be dissipated in less harmful ways. And Sheldon Kopp (1972) reminds us to forgive ourselves over and over again.

It may take quite awhile--and much patience--to heal.

How do we know when it's happening? There are signs: we begin to think more clearly and trust our judgment; concentration improves; our knothole on the world

becomes wide enough to include others; some of the sting goes out of the hurt--and positive feelings are reborn as we become stronger, more independent. Integration has begun.

As the pain subsides, acceptance grows. We may see that change and separation are in fact natural and necessary. They have been since our birth! More than that: whatever we have lost left us something valuable. For example, the man who has been mourning the loss of a position to strive for, may discover that his energy and management ability, redirected, make him an asset in other organizations. He still has the resources, and perhaps a new maturity.

Being open to new possibilities means trusting ourselves. And it means risking new relationships--reframing our lives.

Sad memories return, and we go through the "loop" again, though perhaps not as deeply this time. An evolutionary process is going on. Having faced our different situation, our vulnerability to sadness and anger, our loneliness and separateness, we may open the door to discovering that we still have more going for us than we had expected.

Gathering resources, forming new boundaries, re-focusing our energy--we move on. And that, I would suggest, is the fourth step to recovery, the fourth lesson grief teaches. Moving on means letting go of what was lost and realizing it isn't everything after all. There is something to gain.

In the process of making sense out of the new experience, we may find out who we are, authentically, in a new situation. Frightening, perhaps, but conducive to new growth.

The theme of change and loss is a repetitive one. In the process of "working through", we change again--and so the process continues. Resolution goes together with unpredictability. Integrating what was with what is, we have "arrived" as we say goodbye, time after time!

To return to the people in my office, with whom I began this article:

Usually, they have made an incomplete connection between change and loss, or no conscious connection at all. But whether they recognize it or not, they have done a new thing by coming to me for counselling. The often unspoken statements I "hear" in the first meeting are:

1. Something in me wants my life to be different (better) but I'm not sure I can let go of what's familiar.
2. I'm scared. I've already had to let go of something by coming here: some pride or hope regarding my ability to handle this myself.

If there is a struggle with change going on at some level from the beginning, I want to be aware of this struggle, to respect it, and to help the troubled one get at the root of it. That means, for me, being open to and ready to check out the various possible ways the struggle may be expressed.

It is important that I offer a supportive atmosphere, permission for the feelings to come, acceptance of the person at whatever stage he/she is, and responsible encouragement for the process to continue... And I want to be able to draw authentically on my learnings from working through the change-loss connection in my own experience.

..."I am being freed from the past
with appreciation
and freed for the future
with readiness
a particular hope is shaping
a careful joy is rising
don't hurry it
don't analyze it
it is being given --
even as
it is being received
I am happening"

(Raines: 1976)

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Figure 1: PHASES OF INDIVIDUAL CRISIS

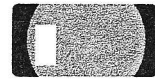
REFERENCE POINTS

PHASES	Self Experience	Reality Perceptions	Emotional Experience	Cognitive Structure
1. Shock	Threat to existing structure	Perceived as overwhelming	Panic helplessness	Disorganization; inability to plan, reason, or understand situation
2. Defensive Retreat	Attempt to maintain old structure	Avoidance of reality; wishful thinking	Indifference of euphoria (except when challenged; then, anger)	Defensive reorganization; resistance to change
3. Acknowledgement	Giving up existing structure; self-depreciation	Facing reality	Depression, bitterness	Defensive breakdown 1. disorganization 2. reorganization in terms of altered reality perceptions
4. Creative Adaption and Change	Establishing new structure, sense of worth	New reality testing	Gradual increase in satisfying experiences	Reorganization in terms of present resources and abilities

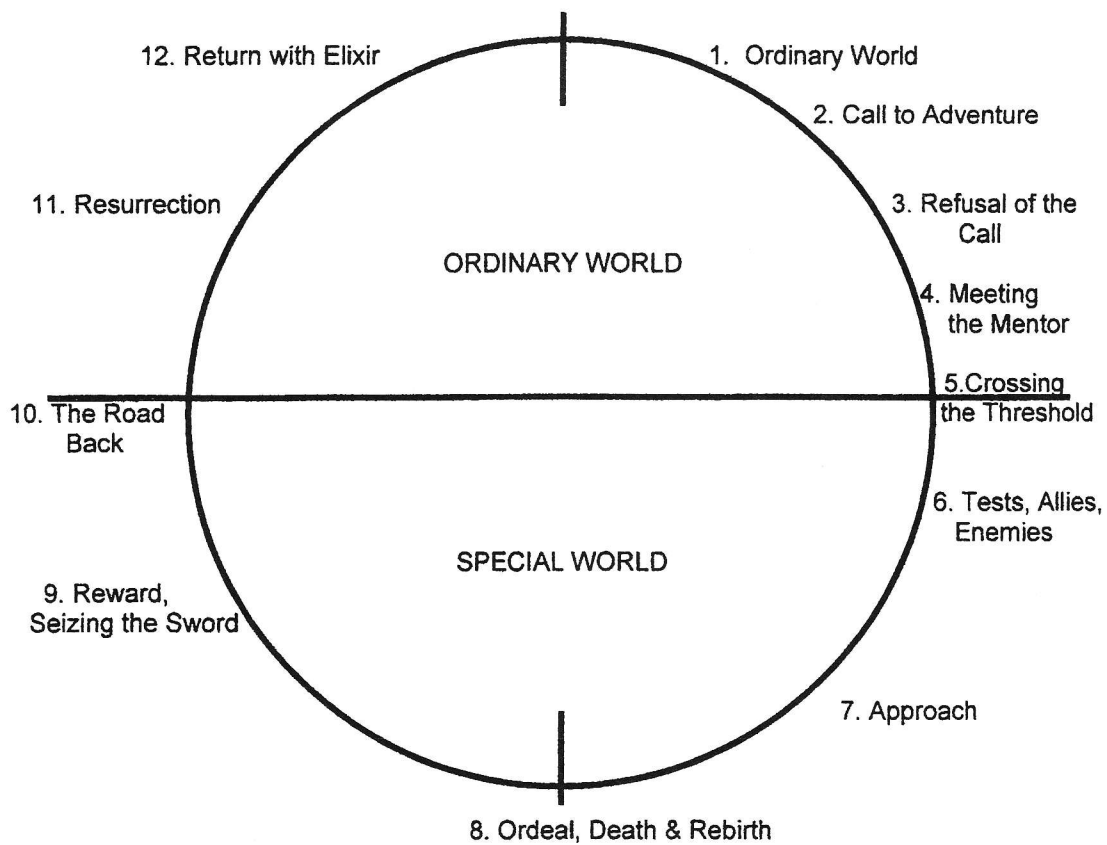
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hero's journey The Hero's Journey is a pattern of narrative identified by the American scholar Joseph Campbell that