

Saying Yes to Change

Excerpted from *Saying Yes to Change: Essential Wisdom for your Journey* by Joan Borysenko, Ph.D. and Gordon Dveirin, Ed.D. Hay House, 2006

Sometimes you get guidance that you don't understand until much later. My husband Gordon and I woke up one morning a few years ago with an idea that we couldn't shake. We were to write a book about change. That book was published by Hay House two years ago, and it helped us adapt to the sudden change in the economy that has affected our entire family. The wisdom from *Saying Yes to Change*, which drew upon what we'd learned in two very different professional lives (Gordon is an organization development consultant or "change agent" and I'm a biologist, psychologist, journalist and speaker) continues to inspire me personally in what the media likes to call "turbulent times." I hope you'll enjoy this excerpt from our book.

We were watching the movie *Cast Away* starring Tom Hanks. A friend of Joan's, Jim Curtan, had done an exciting exegesis of the film at a course that she'd attended, and we decided to watch it together from the perspective of change and transformation. *Cast Away* is not only the story of an unexpected catastrophic change, but a truly elegant demonstration of a three-part process of transformation that's been described by anthropologists as a rite of passage.

Hanks' character is a hard-driving, clock watching FedEx trainer who metaphorically worships *Chronos*, the God of Time. Tick, tick, tick is his watchword, and nothing is more important than shaving a few minutes off of worldwide delivery times. The relational aspect of Hanks' life is a pale specter in comparison to his endless work as a harried road warrior. There's no time for the woman he loves, he wolfs his food down on the run, and he can't even look his colleague- whose wife is dying of cancer- in the eye. He's not a bad guy, just a preoccupied, unconscious one.

Hanks' old life ends abruptly when the FedEx plane carrying him to Malaysia crashes in the South Pacific, and he's the only survivor. Marooned on a desert island for four years, he's sustained by the antique pocket watch his fiancée gave him for Christmas on the night they parted. The mechanism is ruined when the plane crashes and time stops- both literally and figuratively. *Chronos* has, in fact, become irrelevant in the new dimension he's entered. It's the picture of his lost love, mounted in the top half of the watch that keeps him alive. Several FedEx packages wash ashore with him, and one contains the other source of his salvation, a soccer ball. He paints a face on it with the blood of his wounded hand and names it Wilson, the brand name on the ball. It's this imaginary friend who becomes integral to Hanks' developing compassion.

His four year sojourn in the ocean wilderness is a time of transition. His old life went down with the plane, and he hasn't yet been reborn to a new life. He's in a kind of No Man's land, a transitional place, where there's plenty of time to think about the meaning of life. The end of his long transition from the man who he was to the man he is becoming nears an end when the metal carcass of the plane's Portapotty finally washes ashore. He builds a raft and uses the metal structure as a sail. The ordeal at sea on the tiny raft is terrifying, and the defining moment comes when Wilson washes overboard in the aftermath of a storm. Torn between swimming out to sea to

rescue his friend and losing his own life, Hanks chooses life. His grief is almost unbearable, a tribute to the humanity that's been growing inside him during his ordeal on the island. At this point in his journey, magic happens. A whale keeps watch over him, singing mysterious songs of beauty. In the nick of time a ship passes by and rescues him. The Hanks who returns to America, however, is a far different man than the one who left.

On the FedExplane home- just after his rescue- he looks straight into the eyes of the man whose wife was dying when he left. With deep humanity, he apologizes that he wasn't there for him. Hanks has become a mensch- a wise and compassionate human being. His fiancée, meanwhile, believing him dead, married and has a child. Their reunion is poignant, and while it's clear that she'd give up her marriage to be with him again, he knows that she's found a new life that needs to be honored.

The film ends with a reflective, mature Hanks standing at the intersection of four dusty country roads, the same place where the film began. It's a deeply symbolic image, both a crossroads and a cross. Father Thomas Keating, a modern Christian contemplative, speaks of the cross as symbolic of two movements in our lives. It's horizontal arm represents the death of our time bound false self, the ego that developed early in life to keep us safe by conforming to other people's notions of what it means to be human. The vertical arm represents resurrection into the realm of *kairos*, the eternal present in which our true nature resides. Moving from one to the other, from the fearful, time-bound world of *chronos* to the compassionate, timeless world of *kairos* is at the heart of the transformational journey. But what does this mean in practice? How does the shift from one story to another happen?

Sometimes in life, particularly when the rug has been pulled out from under us, and we can't rely on our old ways of thinking and acting to keep us safe and happy, we have an insight. Something clicks. King Lear, for example, was fatuously trying to hold on to his royal privilege and inflated sense of power despite the fact that he was over the hill and everyone knew it. He just didn't get that the king story was over. Finally, humbled to nakedness by the events of his life, his true nobility emerged. He had a realization. There was a click, a recognition that, "I am but a foolish, fond old man."

At that moment an astounding transformation occurred. The shell he'd formerly presented to the world as his identity dropped away and shattered. From it emerged the pearl, the luminous dignity, of his undisguised being. Lear became vulnerable and human- the person that he really was when he gave up trying to play a role. That's the secret of transformation. The person we're transforming into is none other than who we really are.

In rite of passage stories, the protagonist recognizes and embodies his real self in a three-part journey. First, he or she is forced to leave the known world, and all that's been loved. The loss and separation are wrenching, irrevocable. Perhaps you've had that experience. Maybe you lost your job, or had to declare bankruptcy. Maybe you've had a health challenge. When a person is diagnosed with cancer or AIDS, they often say that it feels like the earth has opened up and swallowed them. Nothing is the same as it was just a moment before. They've died to the person they were, and have not been reborn as who they will some day become.

That sudden catapulting from the known into the mystery is the end of the first stage of the transformative process, which is always marked by separation and loss. In the second phase of the journey, the main character enters a transitional state, what Cornell anthropologist Victor Turner, who studied ritual in the Ndembu tribe of Southwest Zambia, called *the liminal phase*. The initiate stands at the *limen*, the *threshold* of something new, but they haven't arrived there yet. The boy who leaves his mother's hut to go into the forest for circumcision is no longer a boy. But he's not yet a man.

This intermediate stage is a place of magic where chaos rules and even the usual constraints of physics may be overcome. The Belgian-American physicist Ilya Prigogine won a Nobel Prize for his theory of "dissipative structures." In essence, breakdown can lead to breakthrough when chaos allows systems to reorganize and "escape to a higher order" of

complexity. This transitional phase of the journey is often marked by synchronicities and unusual events that couldn't be planned. Healing, salvation and breakthrough are often surprising, non-linear occurrences. New people may arrive in your life and become allies on the journey, and wisdom can appear in many forms. The whale that accompanies Hanks through the end of his liminal phase is a non-ordinary ally, typical of the kind of grace that often appears at this point.

Getting through the transitional period of liminality in traditional rites of passage involves facing numerous ordeals. Circumcision is just one of them. Ordeals abound in the rite of passage stories we read as children. Jason has to slay dragons to get the Golden Fleece. Snow White has to be poisoned and go into a state of apparent death before love awakens her. One of the most remarkable aspects of these ordeals is that they can't be faced and overcome in the usual linear manner of the *chronos* world. The initiate must become still, and give up his personal will to attune with the higher wisdom of *kairos*. This is a challenge in its own right because it's contrary to the usual way that the ego functions, using personal will to push forward. The transitional period when we stand at the threshold of possibility crackles with both danger and opportunity. The danger is getting so stressed out that anxiety, depression and despondency take over. The opportunity is self-realization.

The third stage of the rite of passage is return. The Ndembu boy who left his mother's hut in the first phase of his journey usually spends a year or two in the bush. He's no longer a boy during this liminal phase, but he's not yet a man. In his transitional period he learns from other men what's it means to be a warrior and a man of heart. And he also spends time alone, like Hanks in *Cast Away*, learning to know himself. The person who finally returns from the initiation is not the same person who left. The boy has become a man with authentic wisdom to give to his tribe. The journeyer, having found true strength, offers it to the community for the common good.

There's a Buddhist saying that at the beginning of the journey to one's true nature mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers. In the middle of the journey mountains are no longer mountains and rivers are no longer rivers. And at the end of the journey mountains are mountains again and rivers are rivers. T.S. Eliot expressed the paradoxical ordinariness of the extraordinary transformative experience beautifully in the *Four Quartets*, "... and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and to know the place for the first time."

Mythologist Joseph Campbell described this transformational sequence of self-realization as the Hero's Journey. Hollywood films often use it as a storyline, because there's an innate understanding in each of us that we're watching the greatest story ever told- the soul's true journey home. Framing the stories of change in our own lives as rites of passage, Heroine's or Hero's journeys- gives us a way to see through and to grow beyond surface appearances that are often so discouraging. What would change be like if you saw it as an initiation to wholeness, a transformation to your true nature?

Reader's Reflection: If you're in a change process, where in the three-part rite of passage are you right now? How, while in the liminal phase, can you come to the required stillness so that necessary insights can more easily come through to you?

Traveling through the liminal stage of the stage process is a lot like going on a vision quest. It involves facing both inner and outer ordeals, and if all goes well, emerging with new strengths. Just surviving the transition between past and future, and coping with the loss and confusion that change brings on, takes a lot of energy. Undergoing transformation requires even more. Cultivating the warrior's courage to stay present to your unfolding flow of experience is an exacting, and sometimes exhausting task. And if you let yourself get stressed out and depleted on the journey, vision is much harder to find and claim.

Part of the practical wisdom of dealing with change is to stay aware of just how stressed you are, so that you can avoid going off the deep end. That's a practice that involves mindfulness

as well as discipline. What are your moods like, for instance? If you're feeling touchy and irritable, blowing things out of proportion, sometimes the most basic stress reduction tools like getting more exercise and sleep can restore you to balance. This may seem like mundane wisdom, but transformation is out of the question if you're throwing a tantrum.

When Joan was the director of a stress disorders clinic at a Harvard Medical School teaching hospital during the 1980's, they kept a close eye on how much stress patients were experiencing. It turns out that if you add up how many changes people have to cope with, you get a pretty good idea of how much psychological and physiological strain their system is under. The actual strain varies with a person's coping skills, of course, but change scales are still a good starting point. Medical researchers Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe devised the first scale of common life changes in the 1960's, with the hope of quantifying how stress impacts health.

The hypothesis is that the more change a person has to cope with, the more likely they are to get sick. Most everyone has experienced that. Stress initiates a fight-or-flight response in the body, which prepares every system to meet unusual challenges, whether they're physical realities or psychological fears. The result of too much fight-or-flight can be elevated blood pressure, irregular heart beats, muscle tension, breathing problems, digestive disturbances, headaches, and immune dysfunctions that make you more prone to allergy, autoimmune illnesses or infection.

Death of a spouse is considered the most disruptive of all life changes, so it rates 100 life change units (LCU's). Minor violations of the law, like getting a parking ticket, rate 5 LCU's. But even positive changes like getting married (50 LCU's), or having an outstanding personal achievement (25 LCU's), can upset the status quo and create stress while you adjust to the new circumstance. Writing a book, in our estimation, ranks at about 75 LCU's. Writing a book with the spouse you've just married, as in our case, is just plain over the top.

People who score high on life change (250 LCU's or above) are generally more prone to physical illness and psychological distress than people with lower scores. But even life change scores can't possibly tell the whole story. The meaning of the changes we experience can either decrease their disruptiveness, or increase it. Joan remembers a patient who checked off change in religious beliefs when given the Holmes-Rahe scale to fill out. When they discussed it, the patient spoke about being a recent immigrant from Haiti where he'd been raised in the Vodun (Voo Doo) religion. After coming to the states he met and married a woman who was one of Jehovah's Witnesses, so he converted. The two religions couldn't be more diametrically opposed, and the man was experiencing tremendous inner turmoil as he wrestled with his beliefs. The point score assigned to the life change, in his case, seriously underestimated the readjustment that "a recent change in religious beliefs" required.

When the scale was created in the 1960's there were no categories for modern life events like terrorist attacks, blended families, teenaged children with multiple body piercings, major computer crashes, and corporate downsizing. Holmes and Rahe, in fact, estimate that life is 44% more difficult now than it was 50 years ago. And it seems to be getting more challenging by the minute as we form a global community. But in addition to keeping up with the political and social implications of events happening in dozens of foreign countries, just keeping up with your email can be a significant source of stress. Technology is changing so fast that soon only human beings under 10 will have the advanced neural circuitry required to use the remote control on the VCR.

You may want to Google up the Holmes-Rahe scale and find out just how stressed you really are. But don't worry if you don't have time. Research shows that one of the best measures of stress is to draw a line on a piece of paper and mark the left end 1 and the right end 100. Then decide where on the line your stress level falls between the Great Calm of 1 and the Great Upset of 100, and make a mark. That's called a visual analogue scale. Right now Joan, having had less than 6 hours sleep last night, rates about a 70. In her experience, that's too high a stress level either to feel happy or to do any kind of decent work, so she's forsaking the computer for a brisk walk in the mountain air, in the hopes that she'll return with a stress level below 50. While these particular numeric levels make sense to her, only you can figure out what levels correspond to in

your own experience. If you get into the habit of using this simple scale, you'll soon get a feel for your normal stress levels, for the levels that correspond to optimal performance and flow, and for when you're over your personal stress limit. The challenge is to reduce your stress in general, and in particular during times of change, so that you'll be available for the wisdom and transformation that can accompany these disruptive times.

Joan's books, *Inner Peace for Busy People* and *Inner Peace for Busy Women*, are filled with simple strategies to center yourself. Managing stress doesn't have to be an elaborate undertaking. It's primarily a matter of common sense. Aerobic exercise is probably the fastest way to counter stress, but even a half-hour walk, a 20-minute period of yoga or meditation, or 30 minutes of classical music can reduce stress levels substantially.

In the development of body wisdom, just as for mental wisdom, the key to progress is self-reflection. You can't reduce the stress of change to a level where your highest self becomes accessible, unless you notice when it's risen too high. The wisdom then is simple. Take a break. Take a rest. Do something nourishing that reminds you that life is worth living, and that beneath the veneer of stress a world of wonder awaits your return.

Reader's Reflection: On a scale of 1 to 10, where one is calm and ten is maximally tense, how stressed do you feel right now? What's one simple thing you can do for yourself when your stress level gets too high and compromises your ability to cope? What keeps you from doing it when you know that you need a break?