

Big Change, One Stroke at a Time

(I give a copy of this article to each new coachee)

"To journey without being changed is to be a nomad. To change without journeying is to be a chameleon. To journey and be transformed by the journey is to be a pilgrim." Mark Nepo

Having walked through a few wildernesses and addressed some big and lasting change in my own life, I know that sometimes you volunteer for it—you may even have a vision for it. I also know that sometimes big change tosses you around, like a kid in the breakers. There are a couple of classic storylines I think of. The first is simply, A hero goes on a quest. The second is quite different: The crisis or the villain arrives before the hero knows there's a new reality. The hero has to wake up and then grow into her calling.

If you're going to go to all the trouble to create, march into or tumble through big change, you want the process to be as life-giving and sustainable as possible.

However change comes, I work with people and organizations to help them think through what happens next: What to expect and to pay attention to, how to hold steady in the process, how to think about obstacles (and those little hecklers and resisters in your head) and how to talk about it along the way.

If you're my coachee, these are some of the first questions I'll begin to get curious about in our conversations together. I'll wonder about stuff like:

- *"What kind of a person do you want to be? What kind of a vision or sense of calling is beginning to emerge for you—and maybe anchor you?"*
- *"What is it about that sense of purpose that gives you moments of excitement or even joy?"*
- *"How will your personal strengths help with your vision? What are they?"*
- *"In our first few weeks and months of work together, what do you think you are ready to work on, leave behind, do more of, do less of or get better at? Why do these things matter to you?"*
- *"Who else is in your thinking as we talk about these things?"*

You may have responses from more than one area of your life, and your spouse, important relationships or team members probably have their opinions. The playwright Lillian Hellman said, *"Nothing, of course, begins at the time when you think it did."* The beginning of change can be sudden, or it can take years. Sometimes when I ask, *"What do you want to work on?"* I hear a hunch, an idea just forming. Sometimes I hear a clearly defined commitment. A writer I coach is several months into the development of a novel. She's researched 1840s Scotland, developed some fascinating characters and written some vivid scenes. And she's told me that she's getting increasingly committed to the reality of this book. In her words, *"I'm not married to it yet, but I'm not seeing anyone else."* She's steadily, creatively on the move. And she feels deeply about it.

Here are some other answers that have come in response to my *"what-do-you-want-to-work-on?"* question:

- *"I want to be more inspiring and out-going."*
- *"I need a new job—maybe find my life's work."*
- *"My leader just doesn't stop to listen to me—I feel disrespected (and not for the first time). I need to figure out my part in that."*
- *"I want to lead my team better—and to see them collaborate better too."*
- *"I want to lose ten pounds."*
- *"I think I could become the next CEO."*
- *"It's time for me to write something."*
- *"I'm ready to find a life partner."*

- “We’re having a baby.”
- “The last baby is leaving home.”
- “I need to make money without losing my soul.”

Coaching is famous for helping people to grow more curious and awake to their sense of purpose, discovering, testing and creating action by finding the next step. The process isn’t very linear. Sometimes what seems like a great idea is just not right for you. If it’s “not right” then why? The answer might be where it gets brilliant. Something else—better, deeper and unexpected—might come to you. The process is about paying attention, exploring, testing and learning in ways that are both focused and well-paced.

As my coachee, you’ll hear me talk often about the “goldilocks zone”—not too hot/cold, hard/soft, big/little. But just right. We’ll challenge the status quo with solid, right-time, calculated risks and I’ll ask you to think about who’s in your corner. The calculated risks grow with you, and with each win, the pros for the change begin to outweigh the status quo. This doesn’t mean there aren’t big scary, sometimes uninvited and uncomfortable moments.

You’ll hear me talk about “the wilderness.” It’s that span of time that usually begins before a clear ending and lasts well into the new beginning. The wilderness takes time too. It goes something like this (the biblical story of Moses comes to mind): You get a lot of questions from the people who depend on you: *Where are we going? Are you sure you know the way? What was so bad about the old situation anyway?* These people will appreciate extra patience and engagement. You may think there are more important things to talk about, but they don’t. In the wilderness, I may challenge you to make extra time to keep your followers (and those who love you) especially well-informed and close.

As confusing, ambiguous, scary and fluid as the wilderness is, it’s tempting to hurry through it. But it’s where many of the biggest breakthroughs and creative opportunities come into focus. Like any hero on a quest (even a reluctant one), you will meet with resistance that must be understood, overcome, accepted or danced with as the transformation becomes irresistible. You become more awake than you were before.

Like Moses in his wilderness, you will learn things about being resilient, patient, open, willing to repeatedly test and learn and, through it all, to listen to your life and to the core people in it.

You can tell you’re “at the beginning of the end” of the wilderness when your new direction begins to look like the new normal. You are determined, open, seeking, continuing to make small choices in the right direction. Relapses, second thoughts, discouragement and “squishiness” begin to diminish.

In this phase too, as your coach, I will continue to listen deeply, challenging and supporting and asking and occasional hard question. And I will acknowledge the character and strengths I see in you.

This level of courageous growth and sustainable change affects your life in every way—spiritually, emotionally, physically, socially and in the way you savor your days and relationships. The amazing people I work with tend to keep it going, both as they work with me over time, and as they find and grow their own coaching voice—the one that will stay with them as they continue on without me.

A coaching relationship can be a life-changing pilgrimage in the middle of a cherished life, and it is my privilege to travel with brave people like you through some of the most significant and magnificent parts.

Read more about it . . .

[Helping People Change](#). Richard Boyatzis. 2020