

Big Change, One Stroke at a Time

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, and that sometimes you're tossed around, like a kid in the breakers.

And if you're going to go to all the trouble to make (or tumble through) a 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 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.

A first question any good coach will ask you is some version of, "*What do you want to work on, leave behind, do more of, do less of or get better at?*" You may have responses from more than one area of your life, and your spouse or team 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.

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 boss just doesn't stop to listen to me—I feel disrespected and may need to start a job search soon*
- *I want to lead my team better*
- *I want my team to do work better together*
- *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*
- *I have to give a keynote address to a 1000 people!*
- *We're having a baby*
- *The last baby is leaving home*
- *I need to make more money without losing my soul*

Coaching is famous for helping you to get more curious and awake, discovering, testing and creating action and accountability. 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 your coach, you'll hear me talk often about the "goldilocks zone"—not too hot/cold, hard/soft, big/little. But just right. We will usually challenge the status quo with solid, right-time, calculated risks designed and managed with solid support. The calculated risks grow with you, and with each win, the pros for the change begin to outweigh the cons. This doesn't mean there aren't big scary, sometimes uninvited and uncomfortable times in the transition.

And as your coach, you will also 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 to you. I may challenge you to find or build extra support people.

As confusing, ambiguous, scary and fluid as the wilderness is, it's tempting to hurry through it. But it's where many of your biggest breakthroughs and creative opportunities come into focus. Like any hero on a quest, you 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 maintain an emotional connection with the people in your life.

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 and "squishiness" begin to diminish.

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

This level of courageous growth and sustainable change affects your life in every way—spiritually, emotionally, physically and in the way you savor your days and relationships. The amazing people I work with keep it going, both in continuing work with me over time, and as they grow their own great coaching voice.

Coaching is a pilgrimage in the middle of a cherished life and it is my privilege to travel with you through some of the most significant and magnificent parts.