

## CHANGE, PERCEPTIONS AND LISTENING TO UNDERSTAND

I began exploring this process of Change in my early years as a therapist. If I was to help people change, I wanted to know more about how this happened. What were the elements and could it be made easier? Then as a mediator and eventually, working with organizations, what was the process that could support change and even make it desirable for people?

And another reason: while I had experience much change growing up, living in other countries and other cultures, I wasn't always comfortable with change as an adult. As a child I had the stability/Status Quo of my family when change happened, and, often an American community in the foreign country. As an adult, I was on my own, no family, often unsure of how to handle situations. I wanted to know, for myself, and to help others, how to deal with change effectively, peacefully and from integrity.

Two other things spurred this interest. The wonderful Virginia Satir, one of the founders of family therapy, said to a group of us:

"You can't always help a person change the situation, but you can help them change their reaction to it."

Which is similar to Buddhist thought: Suffering is caused by our perceptions of a situation.

We all have our own perceptions. Our perceptions paint our reality. We hear, see, feel, smell, taste, touch something and immediately we make meaning of that/we interpret what just happened. What do we base that meaning on? On our life experiences, our expectations, our needs, desires, beliefs, values. Then from the meaning we are going to have feelings about the situation. That's going to be our reality until we get more information that changes that perception.

Monday, I was driving home from Chicago, enjoying the early morning, when I thought rocks from the pick up truck in front of me were crashing into my windshield. Initially I felt irritated, ticked at the guy driving the truck, then scared it would break the window.

Suddenly it became a deluge of "white rocks" that shattered when they hit my windshield. I remember in that moment of watching the shattering, I became curious, there was a type of acceptance, a type of calmness. Oh, wait a moment that's not it at all, they aren't rocks they were huge sized hail. In that moment of calmness, seeing an overpass, I pulled under it and stopped my car.

I based my first meaning of the situation on there being a truck in front of me, until I had more information and then when I got curious about that additional information, I could make a more accurate meaning of what I was seeing.

This is a process that happens hundreds of times a day. Something is going along just fine when something else come in and disrupts the direction or upsets the situation.

Did anyone plan to make it to Forum this morning but at the last minute something prevented you from getting here? If not this morning, surely you've had that type of experience at some point in your life, planning to do something, then something else prevented it. In the Change Process we would say that the something that prevented it was the Foreign Element interrupting your Status Quo.

First there is the SQ, that which is known, familiar, the way things are, the same ole' same ole'. Then something jangles, topples, collides with our way of doing things or our a desired outcome. That's the Foreign Element.

Can you take a moment and remember a status quo in your life that was interrupted by a foreign element? Maybe it was a time when you got "no" when you were expecting "yes", or when you had something contradict your beliefs, opinions, values, wants. Do you remember how you reacted? For most, what naturally happens is that we then enter a phase, that you won't be too surprised to know, is termed CHAOS. Those of you in the corporate world might know it as the second stage in the process of Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing. (Bruce Tuckman, 1965)

When we go into CHAOS, another thing that often happens, is that we stop breathing. Even remembering it we might have stopped breathing. Will you check that out right now?

And while remembering to breathe, can you go back to that situation you were thinking about earlier when something unexpected happened? What was your response?

I'm going to take the next few moments to outline the Chaos stage for you and as I do so, see if you can relate it to any feelings or reactions you had when you experienced your status quo interrupted by the foreign element.

I do want to say this is my charting of Change primarily using the work of Thomas Kuhn's (1983) and his Stages of Scientific Change, of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, and many of you know her work about the stages of grief, and of Virginia Satir, again, one of the founders of family therapy.

So first we have Status Quo, something new happens and we enter Chaos. In chaos, we go through a version of Kubler-Ross's stages of grief, which are most likely familiar to many of you: Shock/Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and eventually Acceptance. In order to cope with these stages - which are not usually linear, often cyclical, or we might skip a stage- we find ourselves using coping strategies described by Satir.

In Shock/Denial we shut down our emotions and become, in Satir's words "super reasonable". We may feel confused and vulnerable so we shut down emotionally and go to our heads to try to figure out what just happened.

A client, of mine who was in her 30s at that time, (and gave me permission to tell this story) was home visiting her mother who could be fairly emotional as well as pragmatic. They were at the kitchen table having a cup of coffee and quiet conversation before go shopping, when she decided right then and there to come out to her mother whom she knew didn't have a clue. She said, "Mom, I need to tell you that I'm gay. I'm lesbian." Her mother stared at her with a perplexed expression on her face, and finally said, "Now does that mean you don't wear dresses anymore?" My client laughed.

Her mother had shut down emotionally, and was trying to make some sense of this, to figure out the practicality of it. After all they were going shopping and she needed to know how this new information impacted that.

Often we need to shut down emotionally, in order to process because the information causes too great a disruption. Sometimes the vulnerability is too great and we can't immediately let it in or even make sense of it.

This is what many of the survivors of 9/11 experienced. Later, it was found that it would have better not to have them talk about the experience right away but to wait a bit before engaging them in conversation about what had happened because it was too hard to make sense of it.

We may just need silence and space to catch our breathe to be able to move on. And we need to give this to others, especially if we are the one who has created the disruption.

When we do begin to feel, it often is anger. Anger is about eliminating the what happened so we use blaming to deal with the helplessness or powerlessness we feel, hoping to getting rid of that awful FE. And I can guarantee you, when we are angry or raging we aren't breathing much. Not much O2 is getting to the brain. We just want the other person, the situation, to be wrong, bad, whatever it takes to disparage it or them. We want it gone.

When we can't succeed at that, we may placate in the Bargaining stage. Maybe we can bargain with the person who changed things, maybe we can talk some sense into them to change it back or do it a way that is more comfortable for us.

If this fails, we distract/avoid in the depression stage because we feel hopeless to change the situation. People often use normal, every day activity to an excess to avoid. Like alcohol, drugs but also excessive exercising, reading lots of books, watching too much TV. One person went into a gardening frenzy to avoid dealing the chaos. At a seminar I did once, we filled a board with our own favorite ways of distracting to avoid facing what had happened.

So what to do, what to do? First we need to take a breathe. First we need to open up to the existence of the change. It is there! No amount of not wanting it there is going to change it if it is there. As my dear friend, respected teacher and sometimes tormenting mentor, Joe Maciejko, would softly say, "Est quod est." It is what it is.

This is the time where it is beneficial for us to refocus our energy from fighting against, from resisting what is out there and bring our focus, awareness and energy back home to ourselves. To become aware of, and acknowledge what's happening in here. To acknowledge our feeling about the situation. In acknowledging our feelings, there is an acceptance that the situation exists, of not fighting against it but talking about where we are in relationship to it.

Up to now, we tried to avoid feeling confused and vulnerability. We've felt angry but anger is not a primary emotion. That means that we resort to expressing anger in order not to feel what's underneath anger and that is either a feeling of fear, of sadness or hurt. When I'm feeling angry, I will ask myself, "What is the fear, or the sadness or the hurt?" And one of those feeling is always there.

We may also need to acknowledge our feelings of self doubt or not being able to handle the change and eventually any hopelessness of it being the way it was.

Often at that moment of acknowledging, there is a loosening of the tension, an acceptance. Accepting that the change exists, is not saying you agree with it, but accepting that it is there and not resisting it.

This focuses us in the Present, in the Moment. And in this moment of not resisting, we can become curious, we can engage in DISCOVERY. We can explore and look for all the possibilities of what can be. We can go beyond right and wrong, good and bad into curiosity, exploration and discovery.

Discovery is the power of opening yourself up to all that the Universe has to offer. Not one way or the other but All the possibilities.

That's the fourth stage of change: to Explore New Ways and New Behaviors/ OR new ways to respond to the foreign element or to integrate it.

The great theologian, Matthew Fox, or certainly in my mind, he's great, was writing about new ideas, and wrote: "they are hard to trust, for they bear within themselves, precisely because they are new, the capacity to disturb the peace, to question the peace, to rock the status quo, to wonder about the way things are, to suggest that at times chaos - which precedes birthing - is holier than the order that currently reigns".

New ways are hard to trust yet here is the place of a fresh and new perspective if we are willing to... go beyond our perceptions, our filters of our past and the blinders of our expectations. Not always easy. Some tell me "that takes time." My answer, "Yes it does take some time because we need to process but maybe not as much time if we have COMMITMENT to the process."

This is the commitment of Exploration and Discovery, to look at...  
what we don't know,  
to suspend evaluation,  
to be willing to see what is,  
to give up our manipulations and agendas to engage in Curiosity, Exploration and Discovery.  
For Discovery sees beyond the fight to an open realm of possibilities, where right and wrong becomes inquiry and creativity.

This is the time where questions are asked, answers are explored. Sometimes to re-evaluate the initial change. If we think the change is a good idea so we go forward with it and integrate it into the system. Or, what if upon curious exploration we decide it might not work, or only part of it works or needs to be rethought and explored again.

A French writer, Emile Chartier, said "Nothing is more dangerous than an idea when it is the only one you have."

That's a rigid belief system and anything that jeopardizes those boundaries must be defended against. If we can commit to exploration we don't need to defend our ideas, we explore them. Can they fit? Does something that fits well for another person or situation really fit for us.? Or do we need to develop something new for ourselves? Exploration lead to discovery.

Can we explore the ideas and hear the perceptions of all? That means listening to understand the other person and the way they see things even if that is not your perceptions?

Are we willing to be vulnerable enough to kindly and compassionately tell our truth knowing it may be disturbing to others. Are we able to do this without blaming and name calling?

Can we be vulnerable enough to hear another's truth when it makes us uncomfortable? Being vulnerable means we could get hurt. Being vulnerable also is the place of creation.

Are we willing to share power and hear from all especially those who will be affected by the change?  
Are we willing then to co-create with each others?

After we have established or integrated the new way, which is the 5th stage of Change are we willing to give it time to sink in roots, to nourish it so it can flourish, accepting what it produces. We can prune if necessary, for while pruning temporarily hurts, it creates strength, richness and depth. If this change is effective for our purposes, we can keep it and it creates a new Status Quo, the 6th stage.

But if the new way isn't effective for our goals, doesn't match our vision, are we willing to acknowledge that, to interrupt the new status quo and re-create again? And at the same time, not judging what was ineffective as having been bad, just ineffective for what we wanted. Also can we see that the way that was effective is not the only way-----it is a way.

In times of change, are we willing to leave dualism behind. Dualism that engenders fear, that separates us into good/bad, right/wrong, weak/strong, those having validity/those who don't matter. Dualism forces us to take sides. Dualism wants to control. Instead can we stretch to more dialectical thinking of both/and which provides acceptance of all parts and offers a forum for discussion and exploration. Can we see all the parts of a person, all the aspects of a situation? Dualism wants to deny the tension and differences which, if acknowledged, could lead to creativity.

Today is Holocaust Remembrance Day. We have this to remember because a little man who wanted power built a society based on dualism. Dissenting voices were not allowed to be heard. Diversity was not held for the richness it contains. There were secrets, secret language, secret divisions, hidden agendas. In order to survive, to stay alive, people had to succumb to blackmail conditions, they had to make deals that wouldn't normally have had integrity for them. There was no place to go to be heard if you disagreed with those in power. You were marginalized, became the enemy or done away with. We know how horrific that was, a system built on duality instead of working to honor the differences and to create from the diversity.

So finally, as our wise friend, Joe, would again softly say, "Sumus quod sumus, we are who we are." Are we willing to accept and love ourselves, compassionately befriending all our own remarkable, and our trying, annoying, parts in order to compassionately befriend each other with all the other's remarkable and trying, annoying parts? Can we build our community by being willing to stay with the discomfort of exploring new ways, in order to discover possibilities to create a way that fits for us, not any other group, but for us? Are we willing to go through the pain of Chaos to the place of creation in order to birth something that brings joy to all of us.

A final story: Two years ago, in a moment of amazement, in a moment of awe, I held my grandson in my hands AS he was being born and BEFORE he took his first breath. I tipped his tiny, bluish body and rubbed his little chest to help him take that first breath. From that silence and from breath came his voice. Here was this creation born from both male and female, from my daughter, breathing thorough the struggle of contracting tension and pain, finally letting go to birth this child for all of us to love and to enjoy. All the beauty we birth is not birthed antiseptically or without discord. Beauty and pain can come together in an awesome power of new creation.

But first we Are we willing to speak honestly, to listen deeply and to hear each other patiently. Are we willing to go beyond fear to the love of creation, to the love of our community. In order to create a system that enriches us, we must first know each other, to have connection with each other, first we must breathe and let the pain be pain, so our joy can be joy.

When You Change Your Thinking,  
You Change Your Beliefs...! !  
When You Change Your Beliefs,  
You Change Your Expectations...! !  
When You Change Your Expectations,  
You Change Your Attitude...! !  
When Change Your Attitude,  
You Change Your Behaviour...! !  
When You Change Your Behaviour,  
You Change Your Performance...! !  
When You Change Your Performance,  
You Change Your Life

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