

EMBRACING CHANGE

October, 2007

To be born is to enter an evolutionary process of growth and change. We all grow in physical size and emotional capacity. We are all called upon to navigate the stages of life. Change is inevitable and non-negotiable.

If life were utopian, we would enjoy the present moment, let go of what is over, and to adapt to what has come. But life is neither ideal, nor easy, nor neat. Adaptation to a new reality is met with more or less resistance within all of us, due to the comfort of sameness and the disorientation of giving up a familiar (even if unsatisfying) today in exchange for an unknown tomorrow. Even a happily anticipated tomorrow can be railed against because going into the unknown provokes insecurity about needing skills which could be untested.

Most of us do not consider the fact that the only thing that does not change in life is the fact that we will die. We organize ourselves into daily routines so that we need not have the mandate for change in our conscious awareness. There is comfort in being robotic. We all create routines to make life easier and to minimize the need to think about everyday responses. To a large degree, this works well. But, time marches on and sooner or later something comes along that disrupts the predictable flow of events and shoves the need for change in our faces.

Infertility is not a change which is a part of that predictable flow. Infertility brings the status quo to a screeching halt; in fact, the status quo loses its status. Rather, I would call the diagnosis of infertility an abrupt and violent blast of an unwanted reality. There is nothing gentle or gradual about either the diagnosis or the treatment of infertility. With infertility, as with other violent intrusions, our internal gyroscopes go haywire and life as it has been known seems upside down, inside out and backward.

We are never prepared for this kind of change. But even a natural, evolutionary kind of change can come wrapped up in ambivalence. Evolutionary change can be tracked in young children (which we all were). One moment the three year-old is having a tantrum because he wants to tie his own shoes before he has the fine motor co-ordination to do such a task (he embraces change). The next moment he is hanging onto his mother's leg refusing to get into the mini-bus to go to nursery school (he resists change). The child (and the remnant of the child in each of us) can simultaneously want to meet the inevitability of change and fight against it. The tug and pull of the human condition between homeostasis (sameness or state of equilibrium) and change is a fact. By remembering our own ambivalence in the face of change, we can understand why resistance to the need for adaptation is normal.

Throughout life we flop back and forth between the lure and excitement of evolutionary change and the seeming gravitational force of homeostasis. Homeostasis seems to be our default mode, more so for some than others. The expectation of sameness serves to maintain the equilibrium, and the equilibrium serves to maintain the sameness - in families and in society - sometimes for generation after generation. Even now, in our fast-paced world, the expectation of technological change is actually part of a new homeostasis. Nevertheless, living on planet Earth

comes with a guarantee that something sooner or later will blindside us and toss us into that place of violent change. After that, life can eventually be better, but it cannot be the same.

When we get blindsided by an event or circumstance that takes away the comfort of sameness, we are disoriented by the fact that we cannot rely on the thoughtless comfort of homeostasis and we are called upon to do things differently. The need for change may scream, but if homeostasis screams louder, we are vulnerable to our own habits which resist giving way to a new reality.

Fortunately, another aspect of the human condition is the hard-wiring for the capacity for change as well as the need for it. Unlike other animal species, we can think about what we think about. We can recognize that old habits of being who we have been as individuals or in relationships may not be working. The challenge comes in seeking to learn what it would take to allow the violent spike on the change screen to eventually settle down to a blip.

To embrace change in the midst of the quest to add to your family can serve you well. Basic to the process is the acceptance of the unwanted reality. Life as you knew it is history. You cannot go back to old assumptions that your plans can be in your control. You cannot go back to habitual routines. You could be very likely to discover that you cannot go back to a certain ease of relationships with friends or family. You cannot go back to an uncomplicated sex life. You cannot go back to work, or play for that matter, without the shock of being unable to concentrate. You cannot go back to spending money in the same way, unless you have unlimited resources. The infertility becomes the neon elephant that has taken up residence in the middle of your life and is impossible to ignore. Yet, to eventually accept the unacceptable gives you your best shot for the end of the story to result in a new and improved version of yourselves as individuals and couples. Acceptance allows us to deal with what is and move forward toward solutions.

Thus, the primary challenge of infertility from which all else can flow is to accept the unwanted reality. This can take time. It would be unreasonable to expect yourself to embrace change without feeling the pain of the infertility, which created the need for consciousness about what needs to change in the first place. Our emotions are meant to be felt. That is the only way that they can be effectively metabolized. This is a process that needs not only time, but also support, information, co-operation, patience, confidence in your capacity for endurance, and self-awareness about what you are feeling.

If self-awareness can be brought front and center, then navigating the acceptance of infertility allows tuning in to your feelings and balancing that with tuning in to the feelings of your partner as you seek solutions.

Unfortunately, to be blindsided by as violent a change as infertility often spins our heads around so that we do not have a clue as to what we feel besides the generic and understandable depression and/or anxiety.

Unfortunately, many of us grow up in families where feelings are sidelined as too complicated or too inconvenient. As a result, under the adverse conditions created by infertility, honoring your feelings could be a skill that is undeveloped or underdeveloped but which would serve you best if it could be developed post haste.

Also unfortunately, you and your partner may have different coping styles, which may feel, or seem to be, incompatible. Consciously tuning in to yourselves and each other in the midst of upset may not have been necessary when life was going according to your plans. But you can rest assured that it can be the difference that makes all the difference now.

Fortunately, anything that feels like part of a crash and burn disaster becomes an opportunity to resist our tendency toward homeostasis, and an opportunity take up the challenge to change. After acceptance, the quality that matters most is conscious awareness. Together acceptance and awareness can ultimately make the infertility struggle a double blessing. A double blessing? Yes. 1) You will be better armed for any of life's future challenges as you build confidence in your inner strength and capacity for teamwork and 2) you get a more finely-tuned maturity to bring to the parenting process.

To ultimately arrive at acceptance and conscious awareness is a tall order. If this strikes you as difficult, keep in mind that there are many who are qualified to help you. If you fear asking for help, all the more reason to do so. Infertility not only is the change, but it is also the provocateur of changes that can, in the final analysis, be for the best.

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