



# WAKEUP CALL

It's time to embrace change as an essential part of life *By Liza Finlay*

**AS A CULTURE,** we just love clichés. We quote them as if they're Proustian. But often these trite maxims are in fact wrongisms. Here are a couple of my favourites: "Don't go to bed angry." Wrong. Sleeping on it is often very prudent. And, "You only make the same mistake once." As if. Consider: sex with your ex. Enough said.

But my favourite wrongism—the wrongest of the wrongs—is this one: "People don't change." Yes, they do. We change all the time. We grow. We evolve. We auto-correct. Change is, in fact, an essential part of living. I'm not saying it's easy, just that it's both possible and desirable. Charles Darwin said, "It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the

most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change."

He's not the only great thinker to trumpet the virtues of adaptability. Psychotherapy pioneer Dr. Milton Erickson believed that rigidity, the inability to adapt, was the single biggest predictor of who would get stuck in life.

And it seems we get stuck at predictable junctures. We suffer most at milestones (graduation, marriage, first child, mid-life), chapters in which the storyline shifts, the plot thickens and the landscape of our life changes, forcing us to change with it. Or not. But refusing to shift gears is a one-way ticket to discontent.

I like to think of milestone moments as pit stops on the highway of life—rest stops at the intersection of doing and being. If we're smart, we'll use these moments to stop and take stock—embracing what's right and changing what isn't.

Change is what gets us unstuck when we, inevitably, suffer a stalemate. We've all suffered the vague sense that we're spinning our

wheels—a sort of spiritual malaise over the soul-sapping daily grind. Or perhaps you're plagued by a not-so-vague unhappiness over the direction your life has taken. Whether the rut you're in is big or small, change is beckoning.

There's no question that change is uncomfortable, at best, and downright scary at worst. Perhaps it's fear of the unknown that keeps you glued, but then "better the devil you know" is one of those wrongisms that guarantees you will be staledated. Or maybe you avoid changing course and instead stay comfortably moored in your cozy dock because you can't quite figure out which direction to take. Either way, you're stuck and until you become unstuck you fail to flourish.

"The brain gets grooved," explains therapist and author Bill O'Hanlon. "We stay in those grooves until something forces us to change." Sometimes that force is external—there's a radical shift in our job, our health, or our living situation. Life pulls the rug out from under us >

and change is thrust upon us. But sometimes the wake-up call comes from inside—our feelings of discontent become too big to ignore. A little voice nags at us to listen. Change is calling and we need to answer.

Elisa Kosonen recalls just such a moment. As a 20-year-old university student, she had an epiphany one day while sitting in an English class. She realized that while in that class she was on fire, alive, awake. That was it. "I switched from kinesiology to English literature, I started working at the university newspaper and all this possibility opened up to me."

Since then, change has become something Kosonen, now 29, welcomes. After starting a career in media, Kosonen followed a yellow brick road of possibility until finally landing in a public relations post for an eco-friendly beauty company. She's criss-crossed the continent chasing down job prospects, educational opportunities and, yes, romance.

But change didn't always come so easily. As a child, Kosonen was so desperate to have things stay the same that she cried at birthdays. Deftness with the inevitable ebbs and flows of life was something she learned. But how?



Andy Warhol once said: "They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself." That's right, Madonna didn't become



the mother of reinvention by sitting on the sidelines of life. She rolled up her sleeves and got busy. And so can you. Here's how.

## 1. TAKE BABY STEPS.

Over the winter, I lost my exercise mojo. I just could not get myself motivated to work out. The thought of an hour in a sweaty, stinky gym sapped my life force. The tire around my middle, though, made me feel worse. One day, as I was walking my son to school, it struck me that our route took us right by the track in our local park. *Hmm.* That day, on my way home, I ran two laps. I ran two laps four days that week. The next week I ran three. I'm now up to eight.

Change does not require us to overhaul our lives. Sometimes all that's required is a tweak. O'Hanlon suggests that the three easiest places to make small changes are in our doing, our viewing or our setting. So, consider tweaking your daily activities (could be your job or your hobbies); try shifting your perspective, deciding to focus on the positive, not the negative (because as Marcus Aurelius once said, "Our life is what our thoughts make it"); or attempt to subtly change your environment (redecorate, renovate, book a vacation). Sometimes that's all it takes.

My friend Bonny Reichert made small changes to her "doing" to great effect. After 16 years as a magazine journalist she realized that it was time for a life change. Taking her underlying love of culinary arts as a starting point, she enrolled in classes to become a professional chef. Reichert now freelances as a food writer and consultant. Although she's happy with her career at the moment, Reichert says it doesn't

mean she won't feel the need to shift gears again in the future.

"Change and reinvention are good," she says. "We all resist change. It hurts and feels funny, but it's our life's work. We have to do it to stay on top professionally and to stay happy spiritually."

So, advises O'Hanlon, don't set yourself up to fail by fixating on a goal of complete metamorphosis. Simply do one thing differently and see where it takes you.

Question to ask yourself: What area of your life makes you unhappy? What one small change could you make to that area of your life?

## 2. SEE YOUR LIFE AS A SERIES OF EXPERIMENTS.

Sometimes you know what makes you unhappy, but you don't know what will make you happy. If that's the case, experiment. "I tell my clients to live their lives with a question mark rather than a period," says O'Hanlon. "We evolve by action and experimentation."

The formula goes something like this: Do something different, notice the results, make adjustments, try again. Of course, it takes courage to break old patterns and try something new. I mean, what if it doesn't work out? Well, the beauty of the trial-and-error approach to change is that there is no wrong answer. If the change you make doesn't result in the happiness you seek, move on. "You can always make course corrections if you see you are heading in the wrong direction," says O'Hanlon, but you can't change your course if you stay stuck in port. O'Hanlon reminds his clients of the sailor's saying: You can't steer a ship until it's moving.

Kosonen has become an expert in the process-of-elimination school of >

change. In just six years she's lived in four different cities, each move in response to an exciting new professional venture. "You have to be open to trying new things," she says. "You have to really listen to your gut...Sometimes your gut takes you in directions you're not expecting, but sometimes it can open new possibilities."

The feeling of joy is a powerful beacon. You'll know you've hit the jackpot when you feel unadulterated bliss. Says O'Hanlon: "When you feel really alive, you know, 'This is it!'"

Question to ask yourself: When have you felt truly excited to be alive? What would you have to change to bring more of those moments into your life?

### 3. TAP INTO YOUR TRUE SELF.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Polonius advises his son Laertes, "To thine own self be true." Polonius turned out to be a total hypocrite, but still, his sage words resound through the centuries. Ultimately, the most deeply gratifying changes are the

ones that take us closer to our cores, closer to our true passions. Often the change we seek isn't so much a departure as an arrival—a return to a part of ourselves that we've lost, or been separated from.

I have a friend who, as a child, never stopped singing. After a successful career as a lawyer, she now works part-time so she can spend the rest of her time in front of a microphone. Reichert recalls a childhood in which many happy hours were spent in her parents' restaurant. When I was young I wanted to be a psychiatrist; I'd pretend to analyze friends. Today, when I'm not writing, I'm working toward a doctorate in psychology. Going back and finding a lost part of ourselves is often the key to change.

In his book, *The Human Odyssey: Navigating the Twelve Stages of Life*, Thomas Armstrong posits that a key task of early adulthood and mid-life is to remember and recapture what was sacred in childhood. It's a sad,

but true, reality that often we go off course and the lives we live are not aligned with the passions we pursued as children, when we explored our outer worlds and inner playgrounds unfettered by the expectations of others or the constraints of social norms.

In *Reviving Ophelia*, psychotherapist and author Mary Pipher counsels us to find our North Star—that internal compass we can always count on to guide us home when we can't make out the shore. She reminds us that we stay on course by staying true to who we really are.

Question to ask yourself: What parts of yourself have you abandoned along the road to adulthood? How can you incorporate them into your life now?

After all, remembering who we once were isn't just a trip down memory lane—it's a journey that could just save your spiritual life. As O'Hanlon says: "Every day the world is trying to make you someone else." Often the change we need is really "a coming home to self." □

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