

# Welcome to “Permanent White Water”

*It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.*

—Charles Darwin

THESE ARE CHALLENGING TIMES. If you’re reading this, chances are you’re confronting some change you never asked for—perhaps a loss of job. Or some dream. Maybe you have to learn to work in new ways or find a new place to live. I’m sorry if it’s difficult. I’m hoping that within these pages you’ll find the support and the practices you need to successfully ride the wave of this change, whatever it may be.

Take comfort that you’re not alone. In my work as a “thinking partner,” I spend a lot of time speaking to people in all walks of life, from the CEO of a joint venture in Saudi Arabia to a stay-at-home mom who needs to enter the workforce. From where I sit, whether they are searching for a job, looking for funding for a startup, trying to stay relevant at age sixty in a large corporation, dealing with lost savings, coping with a big new job that has one hundred

direct reports, struggling to get donations for a nonprofit, or fearing losing their home due to unemployment, people of all ages and walks of life are scrambling to deal with vast changes happening today in every part of the world.

Take the publishing industry, where I've spent thirty years, first as an editor of a weekly newspaper, then as an editor of monthly magazines, a book publisher, and now, for the past seven years, an author. None of the companies I worked for are still in existence. Neither are the distributors. One of my dear friends, a top writer at the *Washington Post*, just took a buyout because the newspaper can't afford to pay top talent—even the most prestigious papers are drowning in red ink. How we create, distribute, market, and promote media products is completely different from even a few years ago. Where it is all heading we truly have no idea. Phil Bronstein, former publisher of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, declared recently, "Anybody who professes to be able to tell you what things will be like in ten years is on some kind of drug."

And that's only one corner of the evolving big picture. In 2006, creativity expert Sir Ken Robinson, speaking at the TED conference (Technology, Entertainment, Design) stated, "We have no idea of what's going to happen in the future. No one has a clue about what the world will be like in even five years."

The only thing any of us can know for certain is that life will continue to change at a rapid pace because the world has gotten more complex and interdependent. Organizational consultant Peter Vail calls this "permanent white water," referring to a time of ongoing uncertainty and turbulence.

We can't see exactly where these changes are headed or where the submerged rocks are, yet when we're tossed out of the boat, we want to make sure to swim, not sink. Experienced rafters know they're going to get dumped out at some point. The difference between them and the rest of us is that they're prepared to get bounced out and to recover swiftly. They expect the white water. And so should we.

Have you ever encountered that “life stress” list that rates changes such as moving, death of a spouse, getting married, etc.? The folks who created that list in the 1960s estimate that life is 44 percent more stressful now than it was fifty years ago, and they came up with that estimate—I have no idea how—before the 2008 global meltdown. I'm not sure we even want to know the new number!

We find ourselves in uncharted waters. How do you cope with the falloff in business of your tiling company due to the implosion of the housing industry, as an acquaintance was telling me about yesterday? Or what should my twenty-three-year-old client do about not being able to drive to work because she can't afford the gas because she gets paid a pittance at her wonderful social services job? What should my husband's fifty-five-year-old friend do now that his job has been rendered obsolete because people aren't buying CDs anymore thanks to the proliferation of downloadable music? What should a sixty-year-old friend of mine do about being upside down on her house? What should a dentist I know do about the huge debt he's carrying from paying for rehab for his son? Which is the more stable situation—the job that my client has had for fifteen years with a company that has just been sold to a

conglomerate and is experiencing a shrinking profit margin, or the opportunity with a start-up with seemingly greater risks and rewards?

When people present me with such dilemmas, I don't pretend to know the answers. I'm not a crystal ball reader. Nor do I understand every industry trend. Or how a given company should be positioning itself. What I do know a lot about and what I can help you to do, too, is to develop the necessary mind-sets and actions to adapt well to whatever changes come your way. Knowing that you need to change, or even wanting to change, isn't enough. Without rewiring your thinking and knowing what actions to take, all you get is wish and want and, often, stuckness. I want to help you *actually develop the ability to adapt*, to get up to speed with the attitudes and skills required to make the changes that life and work require.

Why do I place such emphasis here? Because the ability to adapt is, as far as I can tell, the key indicator of success in these turbulent times. It's the capacity to be flexible and resourceful in the face of ever-changing conditions—to respond in a resilient and productive manner when change is required. Another name for it is *agility*. In a recent McKinsey survey, 89 percent of the more than 1,500 executives surveyed worldwide ranked agility as very or extremely important to their business success. And 91 percent said it has become more important over the past five years.

According to *Webster's*, *agile* means “the ability to move with an easy grace; having a quick, resourceful and adaptable character.” *Webster's* has it a bit wrong, I'd say. I don't think it has anything to do with character. It's just that

some of us already know how to adapt easily. The rest of us need to learn—quickly. Otherwise you’ll end up spinning your wheels, complaining, or contracting in fear when faced with change.

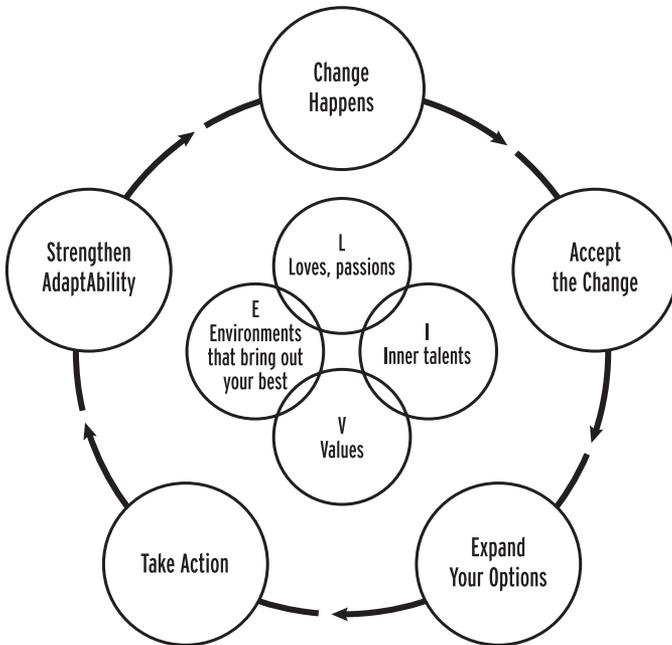
Aikido masters say that to be successful in life, three kinds of mastery are required: mastery with self, which means understanding our feelings and thoughts and how to regulate and direct them; mastery with others, which means being able to create shared understanding and shared action; and mastery with change, which means having the capacity to adapt easily without losing our center—our values, talents, and sense of purpose. This book is focused on the third, although mastery with change requires a certain amount of mastery with self as well. It is my hope that as you go through the changes life brings your way, aided by what you learn here, you become a Change Master, an expert at riding the monster waves of change.

This mastery begins with understanding the process of AdaptAbility. Conversations with my colleagues Esther Laspisa and Dawna Markova have helped me to understand that the process looks like this:

We do this process naturally when a change is small. Say you’re planning to go out to dinner tonight with a friend and she calls at the last minute and cancels. You think to yourself, *Well that’s out (accept), what else could I do this evening (expand)?* Then you go do it (take action).

It’s when changes are big, painful, confusing, and/or disruptive of your hopes and dreams, that it’s hard to see there is a process at work. Being aware of the process can help us avoid getting stuck along the way, suffering

needlessly and using up precious time. For we're not just being asked to adapt these days, but to do it speedily. What differentiates the Change Masters I know from other folks is how quickly they can go through the process—*okay, that's over, now what?* They expect to bounce back and are able to see the opportunities that change presents. Fortunately, once you become conscious of how the process of adaptation works, you, too, can face future changes with greater confidence and swiftness rather than getting hung up on the rocks of denial, anger, or helplessness.



The Process of AdaptAbility

Want further incentive to learn AdaptAbility? Experts in mind-body medicine have shown that people who are master adapters live longer and healthier lives than others. How come? Because they counterbalance the stress hormones that wear down our bodies with positive attitudes and behaviors that release feel-good hormones, which restore balance to our cells, organs, and tissue. That's why many health experts define health itself as adaptability. These positive attitudes and behaviors are at the heart of this book.

In order to help you learn to adapt gracefully, I begin with “Seven Truths About Change,” which teach you that change is inevitable and explain why it can be such a challenge. The rest of the book takes you through the AdaptAbility process outlined above—“Accept the Change,” “Expand Your Options,” “Take Action”—and offers the attitudes and behaviors you need in order to move successfully through each phase. The final part is called “Strengthen Your AdaptAbility,” which is a process of noticing what you've learned and recording it so you can use it again when needed—which of course you will because adapting to life is a never-ending process.

You may be at one or another of these phases as you pick up this book. As I always say, do the practices and take the advice that seems most helpful to you. Everyone is distinct, confronting unique challenges, and in need of different support. Whatever you're facing, I want to encourage you to use this book as a life preserver, enabling you to better understand and navigate the shifts that change will require in you.

As you go through this journey, you'll learn the following:

- our bodies' physical and emotional reactions to change
- the mental and emotional qualities of a Change Master
- why self-care is crucial
- how to live with uncertainty and to respond in as positive and healthy a way as possible
- how to identify new opportunities
- how to use what's happening to align even more with your talents and values

As with my previous books, this book incorporates insights from brain science, organizational and positive psychology, spirituality, and my own brand of New England pragmatism. In these pages, you'll learn all the tools, techniques, attitudes, and behaviors I know of to be a Change Master. I'll offer many examples from my work with Professional Thinking Partners (PTP), a firm that helps people recognize and develop their unique talents and use them to maximize individual success and collaboration with others. PTP has worked with tens of thousands of individuals in dozens of large and small companies, nonprofits, and governmental agencies around the world. You'll meet PTP's lead consultant Dawna Markova, PhD, who has taught me many of the approaches and techniques you'll find here. And you'll meet many of my clients and friends (in disguised form to protect their confidentiality unless I

use their full names), people just like you, dealing with the challenges of life as it is rapidly evolving.

As we face today's realities and try to adapt, it's not surprising that we may need support. Who among us took a class on how to cope with change? In the past, changes happened more slowly, and our need to adapt was much, much less. Here's just one example of the acceleration of change. Starting at AD 1, it took 1,500 years for the amount of information in the world to double. It's now doubling at the rate of once every two years. No wonder we're scrambling to keep up!

What's puzzling about this absence of training in AdaptAbility is that companies all know that their employees' capacity to change is one of the key factors in business success. According to the Strategic Management Research Center, for instance, the failure rate of mergers and acquisitions is as much as 60 to 70 percent. Why? Not because it's not a good idea to bring two organizations together to create efficiencies and synergies, but because the people in them fail to adapt to the changed circumstances. I was just speaking yesterday to a woman in a huge oil company who had been part of an effort to create a standardized process for gathering information across departments. She'd left to work on another project and discovered that, two years and millions of dollars later, the effort had failed. Why? Because employees kept using the old system they knew, rather than learn the new one.

Examples of the lack of ability to change don't have to be that expensive or dramatic. They happen every single day right where you live and work. I would say at least

half of the folks I coach on a weekly basis are looking for help adapting to new positions or circumstances where they must drive results in a different way than they have before. The behaviors that have gotten them where they are today are simply not working. And these are all folks who have jobs—those without work need even more support in learning new skills and attitudes.

Resisting change wears down our bodies, taxes our minds, and deflates our spirits. We keep doing the things that have always worked before with depressingly diminishing results. We expend precious energy looking around for someone to blame—ourselves, another person, or the world. We worry obsessively. We get stuck in the past, lost in bitterness or anger. Or we fall into denial—*everything's fine, I don't have to do anything different*. Or magical thinking—*something or someone will come along to rescue me from having to change*. We don't want to leave the cozy comfort of the known and familiar for the scary wilderness of that which we've never experienced. And so we rail against it and stay stuck.

When the environment changes and we must therefore, too, it's appropriate to complain—to take, in the words of Dr. Pamela Peeke, the BMW (Bitch, Moan, and Whine) out for a little spin. But soon it's time to put it back in the driveway and get down to business. And that means developing AdaptAbility.

In a very real way, what is being asked of us now is no more or less than to become consciously aligned with what life has always required on this planet. In 1956, the father of stress research, Hans Selye, wrote in his seminal work,

*The Stress of Life*, “Life is largely a process of adaptation to the circumstances in which we exist. A perennial give and take has been going on between living matter and its inanimate surroundings, between one living being and another, ever since the dawn of life in the prehistoric oceans. The secret of health and happiness lies in successful adjustment to the ever-changing conditions on this globe; the penalties for failure in this great process of adaptation are disease and unhappiness.”

My goal is to offer you a way to relate to the change you’re facing with the least wear and tear and the greatest potential not merely to survive, but to thrive during the greatest period of transformation humans have ever experienced. We are all being called on to stretch mentally, emotionally, and spiritually into the future. It’s my hope that this book offers you both comfort and practical support as you take on this challenge, and may what you learn here help you become a Change Master.

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## Top Ten Change Sinkholes

1. getting stuck in denial
2. becoming paralyzed by fear and/or shame
3. spending a lot of time and energy on blame and/or regret
4. believing there is nothing you can do

5. focusing on the problem, rather than the solution
6. using only solutions that have worked in the past to solve new problems
7. “Yes, but”ing all options
8. not getting in touch with what gives you meaning and purpose
9. going it alone
10. resisting or refusing to learn new things because it takes extra effort

Don't worry. In this book, you'll learn how to avoid these danger zones and stay positively focused and moving forward.

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## Seven Truths About Change

*Since we live in a changing universe, why do [humans] oppose change? . . . If a rock is in the way, the root of the tree will change its direction. . . . Even a rat will change its tactics to get a piece of cheese.*

—Melvin B. Tolson

HERE YOU LEARN THE fundamentals of AdaptAbility that will hold you in good stead no matter what wave is heading your way. These understandings will allow you to accept the need to adapt and learn how to get your brain on your side (or, more accurately, the two parts of your brain which are involved in change). With these truths in your hip pocket, you are well on your way toward being able to surf the monster waves of change.

### CHANGE TRUTH #1

Change Is the One Thing You Can Count On

Only in growth . . . and change, paradoxically enough, is true security to be found.

—Anne Morrow Lindbergh

Christopher Hildreth owns a business installing high-end wood flooring. During the refinancing boom in this decade,

his business grew to \$4 million. As the economy has slowed, demand for his products has shrunk. Competitors are offering much lower prices and customers have less spare cash to choose the high-end option—if they can afford new floors at all. This development has taken him totally by surprise. In an interview in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, he says, “[I] figured it would just roll along and I would do my estimates and the phone would ring. . . . I would have thought that by now I’d be riding the crest of a wave.”

Contrast that response to my client Al’s. When I asked him, the CEO of a real estate development company in Las Vegas, how he was doing in the downturn, he confided, “I knew the real estate boom couldn’t go on forever. So I created a rainy day fund. I’m not only using it to tide me over, but to buy out troubled developers around town.”

Smart man, Al. He knows intuitively there is only one sure thing in life—that things will change. How and when none of us know. But that everything will is absolutely guaranteed. The Buddha called this awareness the First Noble Truth—the fact that everything in life is impermanent. Fighting against that truth only causes us suffering, he taught, because it’s fighting against reality. Accepting that truth diminishes our suffering because we’re in alignment with the way life is. When we accept that the only thing constant is change, we aren’t so taken by surprise when the change occurs. Night follows day, winter follows summer, the moon waxes and wanes. Change happens.

I empathize with Christopher Hildreth because I, too, learned this lesson the hard way. Riding the wave of a couple of bestsellers as a book publisher, I kept expanding my

company and had just bought a big new house when the largest returns in the industry rolled back through my door, leaving a deficit the company never could recover from. No matter how many predictions of future sales based on past sales we created, they were wrong because the whole industry was going through a game-changing shift. I wish I had planned for the boom not continuing forever. It would have prevented a lot of sleepless nights.

Even though most of us can't know for sure when and how change will hit us, we can at least keep in our awareness the simple fact that it will. And at a more rapid pace than ever before in human history. Our work and personal lives will change—guaranteed—and we need to be ready with the appropriate attitudes and actions so that, like AI, we minimize the negative impacts and capitalize on the opportunities. When we are aware of change, we can see the signs earlier, so we're ahead of the wave. This gives us a distinct advantage in responding.

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## The Adaptability Advantage

“When the company I worked for merged with another,” said Miguel, “we suddenly had a new president. Up until then, ours had been run like a family-owned business—very casual—and people were kept on for years out of loyalty. This new person—who was very, very sharp, both in mind and in style—came in, and suddenly we were faced

with demands of a very different corporate culture. We were held accountable for our quarterly bottom lines, and were expected to start showing up more at industry events to ‘fly the company flag.’ Those who saw the waves of change on the horizon in subtle elements like appearance adapted quickly. No more jeans, no more leggings, no more sneakers. Those that sharpened up were the ones that survived the merger. Those that didn’t, like one guy who scoffed at the idea of having to wear a tie, got lost in the flood.”

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## CHANGE TRUTH #2

### It’s Not Personal

When I hear somebody sigh, “Life is hard,” I am always tempted to ask, “Compared to what?”

—Sydney J. Harris

My phone rang. It was a well-known speaker and author asking to work with me. Let’s call him Sam. “I’ve noticed over the last few years,” he said, “that things are changing. My speaking fees are beginning to go down and my book sales are, too. Fewer people are attending workshops. There are shifts happening, and I need to reposition myself in relationship to them to continue to make a living. Will you help me think that through?”

Instantly I said yes. Because Sam understood something crucial about change which will help him not waste time or precious emotional energy: it’s not personal. He didn’t

blame himself for what was happening. He just observed it and realized he needed to respond in a new way.

What's happening right now to most of us is not because we're bad or wrong or incompetent. It's because the world is transforming at breakneck speed and each and every one of us must adapt to those changes as quickly and efficiently as possible. No one's exempt. Age doesn't get you off the hook (Sam is in his sixties, but you don't hear him complaining that he "should" be able to coast on his laurels until retirement). Nor does how hard you've worked until now, or what your expectations of your life have been. Or what you've sacrificed for or invested in. That's because what's going on has nothing to do with you personally!

Depersonalizing the change challenge you're facing gets you out of a sense of failure and frees up your thinking to be as adaptive as possible, like Sam. I remember the day I learned this. I went to hear Meg Wheatley, author of *Leadership and the New Science*. She's an expert at taking what is understood from the world of quantum physics and ecology and applying it to business. She's no flake—one of her major clients was the U.S. military. She was speaking about the fact that we're still stuck in a mechanistic model of the universe where we think we can make five-year plans for ourselves and our organizations, which is completely out of touch with the way living systems actually work. What I recall her saying was something like, "The way life happens is that things bump up against one another in an information-rich environment and change occurs. Some things thrive and others die out. Think of an aquarium with a bunch of fish. They're all doing fine. Then you put something different in

there and it changes the whole ecosystem. Some fish survive, and others die as a result of the new input.”

At the time, I was struggling with the financial pressures of my book publishing company and sure I was doing something wrong. I probably was—but all my attention was focused on my “failure,” which wasn’t helping me come up with new solutions. What Meg helped me do was see that I was just one of the little fish in a big aquarium whose ecosystem was changing.

Once I started viewing it that way, I was able to relate to the situation from a more objective and adaptive frame of mind. As I considered how to respond, it became clear that I wasn’t interested in making the changes necessary to survive in the aquarium, and so I sold my company. Looking now from the outside at the publishing aquarium, I see even more clearly how what was going on really had nothing to do with me or my efforts.

If the aquarium image doesn’t work for you, here’s another technique for making the situation less personal. It’s called self-distancing. It takes advantage of the brain’s ability to make associated images (as if something’s happening to you right now) and disassociated images (as if it’s happening to someone else). Imagine you are watching a video starring someone else who is going through what you are right now. Give the person in the video a name and see him or her in the situation. Watch what’s happening and ask yourself what could be going on that’s beyond that person’s control or influence. What’s your advice for the person in the movie?

A spiritual teacher was once asked her secret to happiness and peace of mind. She replied, “A wholehearted,

unrestricted cooperation with the unavoidable.” That’s what I’m getting at here. It’s not so easy—I’m still working on it and don’t know many people who do it well. But I do know that the only responsibility we truly have in whatever’s going on lies in developing our response-ability to whatever is occurring. As the surfers say, you’ve got to go with the flow. Otherwise you find yourself under the board faster than you can imagine.

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## You’re Not the Only One

Resiliency experts have discovered that it’s important to see that you’re not the only one going through this change. That will help you feel less alone in your pain, which leads to feeling less stress. According to research, a broader perspective on the situation—“It’s not just me”—also enabled people to come up with more innovative solutions and better plans of action. So take a look around—you’ve got plenty of company!

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### CHANGE TRUTH #3

#### Your Thinking Is Not Always Your Friend

With our thoughts we make the world.

—The Dhammapada

What was the common factor in why people died in Hurricane Katrina? I bet you guessed, as I did and all the media

reported, that the answer is poverty. But an analysis by Knight Ridder afterward and reported by *Time* magazine reporter Amanda Ripley in her book *The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes—and Why* showed something different: the most common factor was age. The older you were, the more likely you were to stay; three-quarters of the dead were over sixty, and half, over seventy-five. They had all lived through a major hurricane, Camille, and therefore didn't heed the warnings to leave because they assumed they would make it again. Said the director of the National Hurricane Center, Max Mayfield, "I think Camille killed more people during Katrina than it did in 1969."

The brain is an amazing organ, with incredible social, emotional, conceptual, and linguistic abilities. It can learn from experiences and grow new cells and pathways until you draw your last breath. Neuroscientists are just beginning to understand a fraction of what it can do and how. But not all of what it does is helpful when it comes to responding well to change, as those who stayed during Katrina found out to their peril. Two things in particular stand out from what I've learned about the brain so far.

First, the brain has a tremendous tendency to habituate, meaning to do the same thing over and over—which is great when you don't want to have to think about how to brush your teeth, but not so good when you need to think creatively about how to cope with a situation you've never been in before. That's why we so often tend to keep doing what we've already done, whether we get good results or not, and are slow to give up some behaviors.

To add to the problem, part of habituation is the brain's tendency to look for patterns, to match current experience with the past—*oh, this is just like that thing that happened before*. I once read that the average brain generalizes from an example of one, which any good scientist would tell you is not a big enough data pool from which to be drawing useful conclusions. That's what was going on with Hurricane Katrina. The folks who stayed were the ones who'd gone through a massive hurricane before. Their brains said, "This is the same as that." But it wasn't. Environmental degradation, global warming, and sheer bad luck combined to make a change. Younger folks, who never had the experience, heeded the warning because their brains didn't have a pattern to habituate to.

There's an adaptive reason for this habituation. The brain is always on and consumes a disproportionate part of the body's energy. It's only 3 percent of the body's weight yet uses around 20 percent of its oxygen and glucose. It takes less work to be on automatic pilot, so it makes sense from an efficiency standpoint.

When the environment is stable, this autopilot serves us well. But during change, we have to fight against our brain's tendency to look at the situation and see the same old thing, when it's actually encountering something new. The patterns just aren't there to fall back on. We don't know what the stock market is going to do, for instance, despite all the past ups and downs, because we're in a situation that has never occurred before.

Nassim Nicholas Taleb, author of *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, says that we previously

lived in a country he calls Mediocristan, where cause and effect were closely connected because life was simpler and the range of possible events was small. Now, the global community has entered a country that he names Extremistan, where we are both more interdependent and at the mercy of “the singular, the accidental, the unseen and the unpredicted.” (One side benefit of living in Extremistan: it also increases the possibility that one person can make a *positive* difference. Think of Nelson Mandela inspiring the end of apartheid in South Africa or Boris Yeltsin facing down the tanks in Red Square, which toppled the Soviet Union.) Unfortunately, our brains haven’t kept up with this new complexity and keep searching for patterns based on the past even when they’re not useful.

The other thing to understand about the brain is that we share many of its structures with all mammals (and even reptiles), and therefore it’s hardwired to act in ways that were useful when we were being chased by animals in the wilderness but that are not well suited to the complex challenges we face today. This part of our brains, called the amygdala, is constantly scanning for danger but often gives you inaccurate information, sounding the alarm unnecessarily.

You’ll be learning about some of the implications of this aspect of our brain structure throughout the book. For now here’s just one, as psychologist Rick Hanson and neurologist Rick Mendius put it in an article in *Inquiring Mind*. Because of the advantage there used to be in perceiving danger quickly, “The brain is hard-wired to scan for the bad, and when it inevitably finds negative things, they get stored immediately and made available for rapid recall.

In contrast, positive experiences (short of million dollar moments) are usually registered through standard memory systems, and thus need to be held in conscious awareness for ten to twenty seconds for them to really sink in. In sum, your brain is like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive ones . . . this built-in bias puts a negative spin on the world and intensifies our stress and reactivity.” In times of change, that’s the last thing we need—to perceive what’s happening to us as a tsunami when it’s only a five-foot wave, to ignore the good and focus solely on the bad. We need to keep perspective so we can be effective in handling the change.

So what are we to do with these tendencies of the brain that don’t serve us well during change? We don’t have to be solely at their mercy. Becoming aware when we’re in one of these habitual thinking ruts is the first step toward making a different choice. Plus, our brain can do much more than these habits, and we can use its amazing other capacities to find the solutions we need.

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## *See As If for the First Time*

To keep from falling into thinking ruts at work, Javier often asks himself, “What if this were a new job in a new company? How would I be behaving? What would I be doing differently? What would I notice that I am now taking for granted? How would I explain this to someone who knows nothing about

it?” These questions have helped him keep a fresh perspective and to question what he would otherwise simply accept. Recently it led him to come up with a new marketing idea. If seeing as if for the first time is hard for you, talk to newcomers in your organization. Or to people who are not in the same situation as you. What are they perceiving because they have a “beginner’s mind”?

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## **CHANGE TRUTH #4**

### **Change Isn't the Enemy, Fear Is**

Now is the time to understand more,  
so that we may fear less.

—Marie Curie

I met a woman recently who told me a story that really concerned me. Jan’s gardening business had dried up, she’d been living on her savings, and she was down to her last \$500. One of her clients had called, letting her know of an opening as a receptionist in her husband’s office that she knew Jan could fill. “He was looking for someone right away,” Jan explained to me, “and I was about to go visit some friends for the holidays. So I told her that I would see if it was still available when I got back next week.”

It took all my willpower not to yell, “Are you insane? Unemployment is sky high, you don’t have a cent to your name, and you’re going to take a vacation rather than a job that’s virtually been handed to you?” Fortunately I controlled myself. She’d already made the call so my comment

would have only made her feel terrible. But I can't stop thinking about it. What on earth was going on in her head and what lesson is in it for us?

When I asked her how she was feeling about her situation, Jan admitted to being terrified. Fear triggers the fight-or-flight response. Or more accurately the fight, flight, or freeze response. Jan was in flight, avoiding dealing with her situation in a constructive manner. All forms of denial are a flight response. But flight isn't the only option. In extreme fear, animals, including humans, have been known to literally become paralyzed. At least one of the survivors of the Virginia Tech shootings, for instance, reported that it happened to him. And traders on Wall Street have been known to freeze on the stock exchange floor while watching their clients' money disappear. It's a kind of stupor that creates an unfortunate self-reinforcing feedback loop. The stress hormones that are triggered in the fear response by the amygdala can sometimes increase the fear, making it ever more difficult for the other parts of the brain to respond. If the fear gets strong enough, the amygdala actually cuts off access to the other parts of our brain, and we lose the capacity to think rationally altogether.

Scientists have discovered that you can snap someone out of the stupor that fear can cause with a loud noise, which is why flight attendants, for instance, are now trained to yell at people to get them to move quickly out of a plane in a crash.

The other response to extreme fear is fight—my personal default setting. If I get afraid enough, my anger rises and I look for someone to attack for “making” me feel the

way I do. Other people, like Jan, flee—either by literally running away or doing everything they can to avoid dealing with the reality of the change.

So how can knowing this help you? Certainly, not everyone is frightened by change. Some folks are downright exhilarated when everything gets topsy-turvy. Bring it on! they cry. The response depends at least in part on whether you tend to do a lot of innovative thinking or not. (See “What Are Your Inner Talents?” page 139.) But for those of us who like predictability and routine, times of great change can bring on intense fear.

That’s why it’s crucially important to recognize what we’re feeling and have coping strategies in place. Fear shrinks our world and limits our ability to think creatively about our choices. It also causes us to isolate ourselves from others who could potentially help and to overgeneralize from this one situation to the feeling that the sky is falling. As we go along, I’ll offer specific techniques to avoid—or at least minimize—the fight, flight, or freeze of fear and to increase our ability to accept the situation, expand our options, and make the necessary adjustments.

I know it’s possible. I’m one of those who has been intimidated, rather than exhilarated, by change. I’m happy to report that over the past decade or so, I have made progress on embracing change, which I’ve come to see is really all about befriending my fear. For my fiftieth birthday, in fact, when former employees of mine at Conari Press wrote a poster called *Fifty Things We Learned from M. J. Ryan*, one of the fifty lessons was “Change is positive.” I was floored.

I'm not sure if I truly taught them that, but it's certainly a lesson I strive to learn.

Let's face it—change isn't always positive. But fear is the true challenge of change. Our response to even difficult change will be easier when we learn to relate effectively to any fear that arises.

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## Remember Your Accomplishments

Whether this is the first time you've ever faced a big change or have encountered challenges before, to help you stay out of fear, list right now the things you've accomplished in your life so far. This will remind you that you're capable of dealing with this challenge as well. Whatever comes to your mind is fine. Here's mine: I built a business from scratch, I lived on \$300 a month when I was in my twenties, I've supported myself and my family for the past fifteen years, I've traveled alone around the world, I've spoken in front of a thousand people. Every time you find yourself becoming afraid, remind yourself of your accomplishments, for example, "I put myself through college, I've raised a great son. I can handle this, too."