

## Other Authors' Praise for Deep Change

“This is an important book at a critical time in the life of our society, providing crucial insights as it deals with the paradoxes of gaining the world but losing its soul.”

—Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western World*

“Susan Plummer’s book is a profound work of discovery. It is scholarly yet lyrical. It combines existential passion with epistemological depth in order to elucidate new stages in the structure of the human ‘journey’; here is where her originality and insight shine through. This book will be a huge consolation and encouragement to our search for light.”

—John O’Donohue, *Anam Cara*

“Dr. Plummer’s model for personal change may be one of the most important contributions toward growth-centered counseling since Abraham Maslow’s work on peak experience. The practical applications she describes make it easy to apply her principles, both for individuals guiding their own personal change and for professionals guiding others through theirs. I believe that this work will be a source of great personal breakthroughs for anyone committed to a path of personal and spiritual development.”

—Hal Zina Bennett, Ph.D., *Lens of Perception*

## **What Readers Are Saying**

“The first chapter described exactly what I had been going through! I had felt so lost and now I know that I am not alone and that there is a known way to move through it.”

—28 Year Old Entertainment Industry Professional

“This book is so very invitational. I could just walk right into it and find myself. I recommend it highly to anyone going through periods of deep change, when life can appear so meaningless and without purpose.”

—College Educator

“Through this larger framework and life vision, I find it easier to encourage my clients to trust and accept where they are, even through the bleakest times.”

—Psychologist

“This is a model of real transformation. The applications are abundant and stunning!”

—Transpersonal Therapist And Author

“So good to have a map and a language for these strange yet vital human experiences! This book was a life-saver for me when I felt my life was literally going down the drain.”

—Engineer

# **Deep Change**



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Befriending the Unknown

Susan P. Plummer, Ph.D.



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Readers are cautioned that this book is not intended to replace advice or treatment for any health condition whatsoever.

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To my son Ben,  
for the pure joy of being his mother.  
And in memory of Frances Crary  
for her wise eldering.  
And to John O'Donohue for his timely  
and robust encouragement



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# Introduction

Do you sometimes have the feeling that your life has become meaningless? Do you find yourself wondering: “Is this it? Is this is all there is to life?” Do you experience a kind of inner emptiness that plagues you from time to time, or perhaps very often? Is there a growing sense that at its core, something is missing in your life? These feelings may have appeared as though out of the blue, or they may have arisen within a life crisis, such as a major loss, illness or other life change.

Whether these feelings are now in the foreground of your daily experience, or they are just beginning to nag at the periphery of your awareness, I want you to know the surprising good news that these feelings are the very signs that something new and wondrous has started in you. A new possibility for you, a new way of being in the world is calling you, one that is your birthright and will fulfill your deeper longings for greater connection, meaning

and belonging.

Right now, the difficult and confusing feelings you are experiencing that are sometimes even hard to put into words, are the very evidence that you are being beckoned into a new depth, a new dimension we could say, one that will deliver you into the fullness you desire but cannot yet necessarily imagine. You are being called by something larger, something other than you that is longing for you even as you are longing for its promise of deeper fulfillment. If any of these statements ring true for you, welcome to the bewildering, challenging, enlivening and treasure-filled adventure I call “Deep Change!” And I want you to know that you are most definitely not alone in this journey. Many people are currently experiencing a loss of meaning, purpose and real connection in their lives. While these challenging times do indeed herald hidden promises, we at first understand only that something is very wrong with our lives. Something is amiss. We may feel flawed in a fundamental way. We may feel depressed, feel that we have little to contribute, that others have little or no place in our lives and that we have little or no place in theirs.

At these times, many people report that their lives are literally going down the drain. They want to feel better. They may reach out, sensing that there must be a way out of this place of meaninglessness and purposelessness. If there is, they certainly don’t understand either the place where they presently stand or how to move beyond it. They may feel lost, helpless, perhaps anxious and afraid, seeking the faith, the tools and the

direction to stay the full course until they arrive at a better place.

Whether you are on the threshold of the journey of Deep Change, or are in the midst of it, this book somehow got your attention or the attention of someone close to you who brought your attention to the book. As many of us are drawn into the journey of Deep Change (and there are indeed many of us), we encounter what I am describing as “the hole in your ocean” when every part of our being cries out that this is all wrong. How could it be that our lives have come to this!

At such times, it is easy to feel that there is no bottom to this emptiness, that this experience could not possibly have a good outcome. How could something that appears to be just the opposite of what we consciously want for our lives possibly bring us to a better place? We’ll be exploring exactly that question in this book and why it is that by moving into our own fears and discomfort we can find the path to the greater depth, meaning and purpose that we are seeking.

Imagine for a moment that you are out on the ocean in a rowboat. Suddenly you realize you are further out than feels comfortable. Something feels awry, you are not sure what. You start to row back towards shore. But you feel the tug of a current carrying you further out to sea, away from the familiar and solid ground where you would feel secure. You feel your safety is threatened. Maybe you even feel panicked. You row hard, but it is of no use. The current is far stronger than you are. Now you hear a low rumble, like the tumbling water of a

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waterfall. As you are drawn closer, you see that it is a hole!

The water is being pulled down into a spiral vortex. It is being pulled down to...where? At this point, there is no way of knowing where this vortex is leading. This is the question before us whenever we are drawn into Deep Change. We will not know the answer to that question until we surrender to the power of the vortex and allow it to carry us to where we know not. This dynamic of letting go into the not-knowing is both the challenge and the promise of Deep Change.

When this first happened to me, in my late 20s, I recall having a mental image of a vast ocean with a hole in it, and the whole thing—my life—was draining out. What was worse, I had no idea how to stop it, to rescue myself, or to bring a sense of meaning and purpose back into my life. I saw no way to stop up the hole, no way to stop my ocean from emptying. The following description is an account of that time:

*I began to experience a pervasive sense of meaninglessness. I had completed graduate school and was working for non-profit organizations doing meaningful and stimulating community projects. I lived in a beautiful rural area, owned my own home and had a good circle of friends. Yet everything seemed pointless. The world grew flat and empty and an oppressive stillness shrouded me, isolating me from any source that nurtured a meaningful*

*relationship to the world and myself. There was no apparent cause or stimulus for my state, no recent loss, failure or crisis. On the contrary, everything in my life had the appearance of going along very well. Yet meaninglessness had entirely saturated my experience of my life, my world, and my self and there was no way out of it whatsoever.*

*Fortunately, I was seeing a gifted therapist who was both experienced and unusually wise in these matters. One day, while I was despairing over my absolute and unalterable sense of meaninglessness, she made a surprising and deceptively simple suggestion: “You’re in meaninglessness now, Susan. So check it out, look around. What is it like? What do you notice?”*

*This was a startling idea for me! I had been so busy despairing over my state and trying to look for a way out, or at least a reason for my experience, it had never occurred to me that what I was calling meaninglessness could be an inhabitable territory worthy of exploration. My therapist had aroused in me a fragile flush of curiosity.*

*The next day, I came home from work feeling weary from the weeks of dread and meaninglessness. It was late afternoon in the middle of summer and my little home, flanked by two protective redwood trees, was invitingly cool and dark. I dropped my things, lay down on the couch and found myself thinking, “Okay, so now I’m in meaninglessness. What’s it like being here?” It was*

*then that I noticed that I could not imagine existing in the next moment. It wasn't that I wished to die, but I certainly felt that if there was a next moment, it wasn't there in any way I could perceive.*

*I could hardly breathe; after all, one needs a next moment to breathe into. But breathe I did, and the moment I took my next breath it was as if I had taken a step into nothingness. I recall the feeling even to this day, stepping forward with no assurance that there was any ground to hold me. But then I found myself getting up to take a walk. I didn't decide to take a walk, I just moved without any forethought. I stepped out on the porch in the summer dusk, and in that step I suddenly found myself in a different world. It was the same world as before, yet I was experiencing it in a totally different way.*

*Everything was shimmering and intensified. Colors and sounds and fragrances had new dimensions, an abundant contrast to the flat and bleak world of a moment ago, a mere breath ago. I was inside this new depth, held by it, belonging intimately to it.*

*Across the street a man was watering his yard. The stream of water coming from the hose was resounding as though coming from inside my ears, refreshing as it spilled through and over me while I walked through the twilight streets, the sights and sounds of children playing, the muffled tones of people on their porches sharing the day's end, the smell of fresh cut lawns and watered gardens, the*

*subtle sweetness of jasmine and honeysuckle.*

*I was held by it all, by a gentle and warm substance that infused the world, a world in which I belonged without question, without the need to question. I was no longer seeking meaning nor was I feeling its absence. Meaning simply was everywhere and I was inside it. I didn't have to find or create it. It was larger than me, holding me.*

What happened to me on that summer's eve? There was a mystery here. It was the first time I had come through the meaninglessness, apparently reaching some other side. I also knew that this progress had something to do with the fact that I had, for a time, fully accepted the meaninglessness I was experiencing. Since then, I have been most curious about the relationship between our experiences of meaninglessness and emptiness, and the arrival of a new and richer sense of connection, belonging and meaning, and this curiosity has guided my personal explorations as well as my academic research.

Many years have passed since that period of my life and what I've seen is that the secret of regaining the passion and meaning of my life wasn't at all in stopping up the hole. On the contrary, it had to do with looking more carefully at the vortex through which my ocean was emptying, for my life was not disappearing so much as being drawn into a new dimension of belonging, meaning and purpose.

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In this book we will see that the truth of how we get to the fulfillment of our deepest longings is by stepping right into the very places we feel most vulnerable. This truth is not common knowledge. Most of us are, instead, taught since infancy to turn away from the places of greatest vulnerability within ourselves. We are encouraged to try to rise above, fix and ignore the threshold experiences of Deep Change such as meaninglessness, a sense of lack, a sense of being flawed or inadequate.

In our world today, there are seemingly infinite numbers of remedies and palliatives promising to interrupt, or even stop forever, the process I'm describing here. These can range from getting a prescription for the newest psychotropic drug, to imbibing intoxicants, to going on a long vacation, or acquiring something new such as a car or home or even a different spouse. Any of these can dull the pain and discomfort we are feeling, or at least take our minds off what we're feeling. Some can literally change our brain chemistry so that whatever we're experiencing ceases to matter to us.

What this means, however, is that you may be blocking important signals for change that your entire being is sending to you. It is impossible to estimate the cost to us in terms of delayed or aborted personal development, or what impact these ill-advised palliatives might have on our society.

If we fully understood the dynamics of Deep Change, we would be more likely to welcome these

challenging feelings and times in our lives. I want to propose to you a vision of what our experience might be like if we were to live in a community that embraced and recognized the significance of Deep Change. This vision illustrates how far we, as a culture, currently are from what I believe is needed.

What if you lived in a world where, when you began to feel lost and empty, your life flooded with a sense of meaninglessness, there were wise elders keeping their eyes out for you, watching you, and they celebrated the appearance of these experiences in you, because it meant that you were being called into new growth, into a new way of being, a coming of age, so to speak, a next phase of maturation. And how would you feel if this next phase was widely understood by those around you, not as pushing you toward your ability to be on your own, competent and independent, but as your evolving ability to join more intimately with the world, to be radically receptive, to be more collaborative, to co-create with new dimensions, and to connect and belong more deeply and authentically with your self and your world.

What would that be like, to be so honored, protected and celebrated because those around you understood that these challenging experiences are signs that you are entering a valuable new phase of development? And what if you knew at the outset that forces around you would gather to help you through this journey? There would be a circle of those elders experienced in the territory of Deep Change who would offer you a conceptual understanding to give you faith

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that this is where you need to go. They would mentor you and offer you tools to support your journey so that you could open safely to the riches that await you! What would it be like to live in that kind of world?

I may have the privilege of being the first person to welcome you into the journey of Deep Change and to congratulate you because these difficult and confusing feelings that you are not able or willing to put aside, mean that the tug in you to grow and become more of who you truly are has become stronger than your desire to stay on familiar ground, and that a deeper dimension in the world is exerting its longing for you. I wish to go a lot further than welcoming you. I wish to provide you with a kind of map to help you negotiate the experience of Deep Change. And I wish to offer you the understanding and tools that I know will prove to be useful guides and footholds.

In writing this book I have hoped to outline the particular challenges and promises of Deep Change so that you and others might have a broader perspective about the nature of such change, its promise, and what's actually involved when you choose to move through it. I believe that the hope for our future, both personal and societal, may well be found in our ability to cooperate with and safely navigate these forces of Deep Change, rather than sidestepping them.

We are all facing a critical juncture in our individual lives as well as in our culture as a whole. You may feel alienated from the world as the forces of Deep Change take hold of your life, but again, please know that you

are most definitely not alone. Many people are feeling the pull of the hole in their respective oceans. Each of us will experience this process in our own way, with varying details, duration and intensity.

## **Seven Shifts of Deep Change**

There are seven major common experiential shifts that we move through in Deep Change, regardless of our individual life circumstances. These are: 1) The Unsettling; 2) The Opening; 3) The Unraveling; 4) The Stilling; 5) The Releasing; 6) The Spreading, and 7) The Holding. These seven shifts of Deep Change, and how they relate to one another, grow out of my own investigation, designed to reveal what we are experiencing as we are living through this phenomenon. This means that the material in this book is describing an organic human experience, as opposed to imposing some kind of theory or model onto our experience. The seven shifts describe what we experience naturally, when we allow ourselves to open to the journey of Deep Change.

Another essential aspect of the material in this book is that it brings the entire experience of Deep Change, *as a whole*, into focus. In other words, it not only describes each individual shift but also shows us how the shifts move into and away from one another. I believe you will find this understanding of the whole dynamic of Deep Change to be both fruitful and reassuring.

## **Notes on Reading This Book**

As you read, it will be helpful to realize that each of the seven shifts describes a progressive degree of letting go of our familiar way of being in the world, allowing ourselves to open up to a different, unfamiliar way of being. Each shift has different characteristics, challenges and promises, and each asks of us a certain kind of cooperation and support. There are many variations as to how and when people experience these seven shifts, such as different life contexts and different degrees of intensity. Also, individuals can go through the cycle of Deep Change many times in their lives and again, to varying degrees.

But keep in mind that the seven shifts provide guidelines for you. You might recognize certain shifts and not others. Also, it is important to know that a person does not necessarily march through these shifts in some very neat and orderly progression. One person might be dwelling in one shift for a very long time, or another person may move through the same shift in a blink of an eye. I encourage you to not be concerned about “doing this right.” Rather, use the material more as a map, one that can help you to orient yourself.

As you find yourself in the book’s material, let yourself be supported by it. Let yourself be comforted, knowing that having a map means that others have gone this way before you, and that through their journey they discovered the fulfillment of their longings for deeper meaning, connection and belonging. As you read, step

back every once in a while and reflect on how these shifts are working in concert with one another. They have a kind of rhythm, a movement where one flows out of and into another. This relationship is perhaps even more important than the individual characteristics of each shift.

To support your understanding of the overall movements of the shifts, I have included, in the appendix, several diagrams that illustrate the flow from one shift into another. You may find them useful. But if this is not the case, just pass over them. The hazard of such illustrations is that they appear, at least in a book, as static constructs. It is very important to keep in mind that the diagrams show the movement throughout the shifts, the movement of our experience and awareness. It may help to think of them as visual metaphors.

This material is breaking some new ground, and while I provide examples and anecdotes for each shift, I also have needed to describe and explain quite a few new ideas and to introduce new phrases. As you read along, don't worry if the ideas I present here are not all clear to you right away, but let yourself keep moving through the material. As you do this you will find that something will start moving in you, evolving a deeper trust in this journey, a dawning recognition of something very deep and natural in you that some part of you already knows.

Through this book my desire is that this organic and dynamic *human-becoming* will come into greater visibility so that we can see it and recognize it together and have a language to talk with one another about it. It

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is also my hope that this book will offer you a sense of companionship as you travel through Deep Change, so that you can feel the presence and wisdom of the fellow travelers who have journeyed along this path before. And finally, I invite you to be part of a continued exploration of the experience of Deep Change by sharing your story, your variations, struggles, and what has helped you along the way. I would be very happy to hear from you.

...what is healthy is usually at first  
unsettling. It becomes necessary not to  
immediately reject the disturbance but to go on  
to see whether a whole world is being revealed.  
—Robert Sardello

## Shift 1: The Unsettling

One of the great contradictions of human life is that we seek change even as we cling to the way things are. When these two impulses are relatively equal, we experience life as coherent and stable; there seem to be few if any disconcerting mysteries, and life's challenges are relatively easy to resolve. We might feel the undercurrent of tensions between the desire to change and the desire to keep things as they are but life generally appears to be quite manageable.

If the tension to change becomes more compelling than the tension to stay the same, however, it is often accompanied by feelings that something is missing from our life, which is best described as a *felt lack*. I use this term to describe the experience because, where Deep Change is involved, we are most often not immediately able to identify the exact nature of what's lacking. We only sense and feel a lack. In the absence of there being any way to explain the felt lack in terms of our familiar self-and-world, our primary experience is one of a *free-*

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*floating longing*, a yearning for something we cannot yet identify.

A pressure building within us now seems to be drawing us out of the familiar into the unknown and into the desire for change. We might be experiencing a strange mixture of feelings at this time—no longer satisfied with the way things are, maybe lacking confidence in our own knowledge or skills, and perhaps seeking answers to questions that we struggle to articulate.

Doubts and anxieties grow as confidence in our familiar way of being begins to slip away from us. Activities and relationships we once enjoyed, sources of pleasure that once brought us deep personal satisfaction, no longer grace our lives. As this pattern continues, the feeling that life has no meaning or purpose intensifies. Nagging questions about meaning and purpose move into the foreground of our awareness. Whereas we might have once been able to deny these nagging feelings, or push them into the background, we no longer can. Something seems to be calling from the outside as well as from within us. Deep down inside we begin to suspect that there is no turning back to the familiar world where we once found relative comfort.

As the pleasures and satisfactions of our familiar world fade away we enter what I call the “Unsettling,” the first shift that will draw us increasingly toward Deep Change. The Unsettling can move in on us gradually and subtly, yet also unrelentingly, so that we may feel as if the whole world is closing in around us. Just as often, we can awaken one morning and, seemingly with no prior

warning, feel as if our entire world has lost its depth. We may find ourselves wondering, “Has my life always been this flat and shallow and colorless?”

One woman, Janice, tells how on her way to her teaching job at the university one morning she had to pull over to the side of the road. “It came upon me so suddenly,” she said. “At first I was terrified. I wasn’t in real pain like doctors describe when you have a heart attack, so I knew it wasn’t something like that. But I sure felt heavy of heart, just leaden...and disconnected. I felt like if I sat there at the side of the road for the rest of my life, with the cars and trucks whizzing past me, it wouldn’t have mattered to me or anyone else at all. What was the point? If you’d asked me the day before if I liked teaching, I’m sure I would have told you I loved it, and would have meant it, as far as I could tell. Even the things I’d once loved to do now seemed pointless and barren, nothing but a big vacuum—and I had been sucked right into it. My whole life was phony and, most important, so was I. Not that even *that* mattered....because it didn’t. Nothing did.”

As the Unsettling deepens, you may begin to experience yourself as *unreal*, moving into a way of being that is strange and difficult to grasp. And yet, you may continue to operate in the world pretty much as you did before. You go to work, do what needs to be done, come home and plod through the routine of your family life, yet you feel as if you have taken on an alien identity and seemingly your life has nothing to do with who you are. Your self-identity is up for question. *Who am I? What am I doing here? What is anyone doing here?*

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*What has happened to my sense of belonging?*<sup>2</sup> As you start asking questions such as these, no answers come back. You come up empty, disconnected, and life as you've known it feels out of control.

As your experience of the Unsettling progresses, you may find it difficult to get out of bed in the morning. You might feel lethargic and weary, uninterested in anything. You might, for a while, pump yourself up, working up the energy to care, to move forward, but these efforts are hollow at best, becoming increasingly impossible to initiate.

Having tried everything you know to make yourself feel better, your sense of helplessness increases and you may begin to panic. And as if things weren't bad enough, the people around you don't want to hear you tell about what you're experiencing. At worst, they avoid you. At best, they make suggestions, diagnosing your *illness* or trying to *fix* you. Friends offer you the names of therapists or tell you about pharmaceuticals which have helped them get over similar discomforts. One person reported: "My best friend just tells me to get over it. She tells me that when she feels like that, she goes shopping." While this may sound flippant, even humorous, it's important to recognize that the symptoms of the Unsettling can be threatening for other people to hear about. The feelings of being without meaning and purpose border on sacrilege in our Western World, where our value to others often centers on being positive, independent, productive, and self-actualizing. For the moment, you are feeling anything but!

While the picture I paint here clearly characterizes the Unsettling, you are not necessarily feeling all of these things at once, or you might be experiencing them to a greater or lesser degree than I describe. In addition, many people learn to adapt to these feelings by developing behaviors to get themselves through. They may continue to go about their everyday lives in a way that seems normal to the people around them. Maybe they appear a bit more moody than usual. Maybe they are a bit distant. Maybe they even seem apathetic or depressed at times. But these behaviors are often passed over as temporary. The explanation that “everyone goes through periods like that,” is an effort to explain away something that isn’t at all that simple.

If you are reading this book the chances are quite good that you or a loved one are in the midst of the Unsettling. Perhaps you’re uncomfortable or even seriously worried or distressed about your friend’s or your own behavior. Any of the efforts that usually work to reduce or move beyond the symptoms either are not working or are not working well. As a result, you are seeking a way to more constructively address the issues and get back to *the way things were*—or at least to a more comfortable place.

To maintain some perspective during this difficult time, you might remind yourself that the source of your discomfort comes from the fact that your familiar self, as well as your familiar world, has already begun moving toward change. Where only a short time ago your old ways of making sense of your life gave your life meaning and purpose, they now feel incomplete or maybe no

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longer even apply. One person described the feeling of this shift as *being in a limbo state*. While you may experience the free-floating yearning that will eventually guide you toward feeling complete again, you have no idea how to proceed. If you can fully grasp the role of the Unsettling in your life—and be assured that there is a way through it—some of the panic you might be feeling will be reduced, freeing your energy for the work that Deep Change demands.

## **Good News About The Unsettling**

As uncomfortable as the Unsettling experience might be, it is good news, providing that you are willing to set aside preconceived ideas about it and develop the courage required to be present with what you're feeling. The kind of courage required is not the heroic roll-up-your-sleeves-and-get-to-work kind but is heroic never the less. It will require a commitment and a lot of heart and patience. What's required is your willingness to acknowledge that you *do not know the answers*, and that you do not, at this point, need to be in charge of the outcome. The fact is, because of the nature of Deep Change itself, you cannot be in charge of the outcome since you cannot know the future toward which you are moving.

*Not knowing* is the key here, much more than *knowing*. Rather than attempting to take charge of the outcome, you will be learning how to become more attentive, in a vulnerable, accepting way, to what presently feels confusing, alien or even forbidding to you.

Like everything else in the Unsettling, what will get you through can often seem like just the opposite. You try to take command of your life, to control what's troubling you, when the only way to find the path ahead is to let go, to have a willingness to be attentive and vulnerable to what's happening right now within you...moment to moment.

It can be helpful to approach this time of the Unsettling as a mystery. What's sometimes difficult to grasp is that the yearning we feel comes from an inner drive to move beyond our habitual ways of being, moving us beyond our present knowing into a new relationship with ourselves and the world.

Ted, who was a civil engineer, at first described his experience of the Unsettling as "hitting the wall." At 43, he had his own thriving business, was married and had two children in middle school. The Unsettling came upon him soon after signing one of the largest contracts of his life. He was happy about getting the business but soon after the first planning sessions with his staff, he said, "It was like the bottom dropped out of my world." Ordinarily, these initial planning meetings excited him. It was a time when he put together the big picture of what had to be done, thus mapping out work schedules and assigning any subcontracts that might be involved. That day, however, he turned the meeting over to his assistant and left. He explained, "I just got into my car and drove, never even thinking about where I was going or why. An hour later I kind of came to and discovered I was in Centerville, fifty miles from home."

Ted made an appointment with his doctor the next day and for two weeks was subjected to nearly every medical test in the world. Nothing, however, was found except that he had slightly elevated blood pressure. In the ensuing months, he did what he'd always done when he was feeling down or at loose ends: he went out looking for new projects. He had always loved signing on new projects, explaining that it made him feel he was "in control of my life." This time around, nothing he tried seemed to work. In fact, he noted, everything he tried "only seemed to deepen my sense of my life being empty and pointless."

Ted had never considered seeking personal help from a psychologist or other personal counselor, so when he came to me he was both nervous and skeptical. His dubiousness faded, however, when he saw how closely his experiences and symptoms matched those of other Deep Change clients. While it was difficult for him to believe that his efforts to take greater control of his life were only intensifying the Unsettling, he eventually accepted this concept and soon moved beyond this first shift. As he worked through the shifts, he came to some deeply personal realizations that allowed him to turn to what he described as "more creative endeavors" in his business, something he'd been wanting to do for several years.

Ted's case illustrates how, if you are willing to embrace the mystery of the Unsettling and enter this territory with an open spirit of discovery, you will, as Thoreau says, "meet with success unexpected." In a very real way, the Unsettling is the start of a journey into the

realization of your true human birthright, into discovering your true identity, beyond what you presently might even be able to imagine. From the perspective of the free-floating longing of this period of the Unsettling, you're having the earliest awareness of there being a new way of relating to the world, one that is beyond the familiar self-and-world identity you now hold.

Above all else, the Unsettling indicates that your yearning for change and growth has moved into a dominant position above your desire to stay the same. While you may still feel resistance to change, you are drawing away from that resistance; as you do this you may feel some increased tension. The more you come to accept that your discomfort indicates positive movement—this book is intended to help with that—the more you will appreciate what your confusion is all about, and the more your fears will diminish. You'll move away from feeling that “something has gone seriously wrong” and develop the perspective that you are safely crossing into a new way of being, following a path that will bring you into living your life more fully and more deeply.

## **Accepting the Unacceptable**

As you contemplate what's going on with you, only one thing seems certain: living in the Unsettling is uncomfortable. It's certainly not the way you're accustomed to feeling, and the longer it goes on the more difficult it is to convince yourself that things are going to turn out okay.

There's a part of us that will indeed insist that something's wrong. It's the same part that alerts you to take action when you are sick or injured. It's the part that tells you to take your hand out of the fire before you get burned, or that tells you to be cautious when crossing busy streets. But for the time being, and in the specific shift that the Unsettling represents, you need to do something that may indeed seem to run counter to your self-protective instincts. Instead of trying to escape the discomfort, you will need to pay more attention to it, to become more fully present with it, as uncomfortable and counter-intuitive as that might seem to be.

If you follow this course, as Ted did, you'll discover that the Unsettling is leading you to another way of experiencing yourself in relation to the world. A new awareness is exerting a pull on you that is both powerful and disruptive. Life-as-usual is no longer enough for you.

How has this happened? What is pulling you into this unsettled and disruptive state of being? You might look outside yourself for an explanation but find nothing, and the more you search the worse things seem to get. That's because the Unsettling comes both from within you and from beyond you—manifesting primarily as a feeling that something is missing even as you may be feeling a beckoning from sources outside you. Some people may, with 20/20 hindsight, say that it started as the result of a particular epiphany, or following a crisis, or as the result of a personal breakthrough. However, this is not always the case. You may or may not be able to point to a particular event in your life and say, *this is it. It started here.*

To clarify why that is so, consider this: Each of us has our own unique way of making sense of the world, of giving order, meaning and a sense of purpose to our daily experiences. We weave patterns of meaning from the fibers of what we've felt, thought, observed and believed. This tapestry of woven meanings is our *self-and-world structure*. What is this structure? It is a complex of personal perceptions about our role in the world, as well as perceptions about how the world *should* work. We constantly measure our experiences against this structure, making choices according to what it tells us is meaningful or meaningless. Through our self-and-world-structure we make sense of our lives—but even as we are making sense of our world we limit what we are capable of experiencing. In a very real way, who we are is contained by this self-and-world structure, holding us within its tensions of interwoven threads, just as a weaving of wool and other fibers is held together by its many strands, determining a particular pattern.

Ted's case is interesting in that, early in his life he had quite deliberately defined his self-and-world-structure consistent with the engineering disciplines that had beckoned to him early in his youth. Those early choices not only helped him to build a very successful engineering company but it would also affect how he functioned in his family and private life. Everything he did was well thought out, rational and deliberate. Yet, as he met the challenge of the Unsettling and moved through the shifts of Deep Change, he opened into a deeper part of himself, one that was playful, insightful, and inventive. Eventually, he recognized that something outside him had beckoned to this more open, creative,

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and flexible part of himself, producing his Unsettling and the yearning that would finally motivate him to seek and change certain aspects of his life.

While our self-and-world-structure has its own integrity, it is also responsive to and affected by the world beyond us. What changes you, bringing you into this place of the Unsettling, often appears to come only from within you. The *felt lack* you experience at the outset triggers your questioning, causing you to seek whatever it might be to fill that felt lack, like seeking the missing piece of a jigsaw puzzle. What Ted and others ultimately found, however, was that the Unsettling is triggered not only from within us but from a source *other than us* and which is *outside us*. As one person put it, “*Something outside me, something out there in the world yearns for me as much as I yearn for it.*”

Here’s an image that might help explain this dual nature of the forces of change: Research has shown that during the early stages of birth, certain hormones are released by the baby while it is still in the womb, signaling the mother’s body to start the birthing process. But I think there’s more to it than that; it is my belief that the birthing process is energized by both the desire of the baby to come into the world and the desire of the world to have this new being come in.

The novelist Graham Greene spoke of the moment “when the door opens and lets the future in.”<sup>1</sup> What we need to see in this process is that the future calls us to

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<sup>1</sup> Greene, Graham. *The Power and The Glory*

open that door, and it is in this calling, and our response to it, that the energy of the Unsettling is kindled.

The awareness of something missing, perhaps awakened by recognizing the world's call, alerts us to a potential for living in a deeper and more expansive way. Our tendency, then, is to look within ourselves, searching for a lack that needs to be filled, or for something “wrong” that needs to be fixed. Search though we might, we cannot find within our present self-and-world structure anything that will satisfy our yearning. If we're to satisfy this yearning, we need to move beyond our current way of relating to life. We need to recognize and answer the call.

## **It's About You**

Whether or not you can identify when or how it began, the Unsettling is all about you. The possibilities you've consciously or unconsciously glimpsed are real, though you may not yet be able to say what they are or bring them into focus enough to experience them. The reason you can't is that—at least for now—you are unable to manifest this new possibility from within your own familiar perceptions of who you are and what your world is about.

Meanwhile, you may find yourself unable to name your yearning, hovering instead in a place of unknowing. *Yearning for what?* Shouldn't you be able to describe and name what you're seeking? The answer is no, you can't yet name or describe it because it does not yet exist within the world you presently know. You know it is

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there only because you experience the felt lack. Whatever it is that creates this felt lack is literally outside yourself. The following verse from “Have You Ever,” by the musical group *Off Spring*, offers an apt description of the felt lack and free-floating longing we experience in the Unsettling:

*Have you ever felt like there was more—  
like someone else was keeping score  
and what could make you whole  
was simply out of reach?*

Why does your present life come up short at this point? It is because some part of you has moved ahead of your self, catching at least a glimpse of the fuller existence that is held in the promise of what calls you from the outside. Meanwhile, the felt lack which you are experiencing comes from the fact that you are still living through the perspectives of your old way of knowing and seeing the world. Whatever glimpse you might have had of the fuller existence clearly signals to you that you are missing something. This sense of missing something is called the “felt lack” because you *feel* it. It is not an abstract idea at all. It is a subjective but unmistakable *feeling*. Like the free-floating longing at the start of the Unsettling, it is difficult to get a handle on and even more difficult to ignore.

While the felt lack works in partnership with the *free-floating longing*, you may initially be aware only of the felt lack. However, it can be extremely important to be able to experience the longing as well. The longing

draws you toward the unknown—which is the only place where you can hope to find what you are seeking.

The energy of your yearning—which we now understand as a combination of the outer calling and the inner sense of lack—exerts a force on your known self-and-world structure, ultimately creating an *opening* in that structure. This opening, Shift 2 of Deep Change, is covered in the next chapter. With the opening you find that your acceptance of what's happening to you in the Unsettling is leading you deeper into yourself, where you now catch glimpses of an expanding self making way for that which will answer your felt lack.

## **Sensing Your Free-Floating Longing**

As you negotiate the journey of Deep Change it is helpful to become aware of your longing. This does not mean that you clearly identify the nature of this longing or even the felt lack toward which it points. Rather, what you want to get in touch with is the *sense of the pull* associated with the yearning, of something outside you yearning for connection. You will feel this in your body rather than intellectually understanding it.

Since the yearning is palpable, it can help you develop your faith that some new possibility really is out there exerting its pull in your life. Detecting the pull of your free-floating longing allows you to move beyond any despair or resignation you're experiencing and let go of any concepts of *lack* or *shortcoming* in yourself. Instead, as you allow yourself to be drawn ahead by the longing,

you'll realize it's signaling new possibilities, not pointing back at a shortcoming.

As you ask yourself the following questions, write down your answers, record them on your computer, or tell them to a friend:

1. What are you experiencing that you are wanting to change? Describe your feelings. (Helps you focus in on your felt lack.)

2. What are you presently doing to try to feel better? (May show you how you are presently trying to fill your felt lack.)

3. Imagine how you might feel if you were able to make the changes in exactly the way you wish. Describe these feelings. (May begin to reveal your longing.)

As you become more aware of how you'd like to feel in your relationship with yourself and your world, sit quietly and gently see if you can feel a tug within you. This longing might feel like a heartache or nostalgia. Just let whatever you are feeling come to the forefront. The point is simply to allow the experience of yearning to be there, without trying to figure it out or determine what to do with it, or to try to make it go away. If you can only let yourself sense your longing for a few seconds, this is a significant step.

You might also experiment with letting your attention drift back to childhood, to a particular time when you experienced yourself as innocent and free. See if you can recall those early dreams for the world and for what your life would become. You might feel sadness as

you get in touch with dreams that never came true for you. Or you might feel bad for other reasons. If this happens, allow yourself to grieve what is past. To do so is to release yourself from the past so that you can move forward.

While opening up to feelings of nostalgia or heartache that might be associated with your early dreams and hopes, allow yourself to open to new possibilities. This may seem painful at first, but what we frequently find is that getting in touch with the feelings of those early dreams connects us with the free-floating longing that is beckoning to us now, urging us toward Deep Change. It may be helpful right now to realize that your present opening to new possibilities is stirring up disappointments and hurts that have dulled your ability to yearn.

The awakening of your yearning for Deep Change is a priceless gift. As you awaken it within yourself, just let it be as it is. Let it live within you, feeling its pull without attempting to control or analyze where it might be leading you. This may not be easy since it can possibly involve letting in experiences of emptiness, sorrow, and grief.

Much of what our health professionals are labeling as *depression* has its origins in our efforts to cover over or dull ourselves to the Unsettling we are experiencing. Such depression can be so successful that it covers over any and all awareness of new possibilities. The energy you might expend trying to bury feelings of potential change can leave you exhausted and lethargic, operating

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as if on automatic pilot and with little or no interest in your life.

In the more common type of depression, we still have a sense of discontent and meaninglessness, with the Unsettling always hovering close at hand.

The experience of anxiety often indicates that you are indeed in the midst of the Unsettling. It may well be the way you first register the beginning awareness of a coming change.

In the pages ahead, we'll be looking at anxiety and depression in ways that are quite different from those of modern Western cultures. We'll examine them not as pathologies, or as experiences we need to block or rectify but within the larger context of Deep Change.

## **A Note on the Cultural Implications of Deep Change**

Depression and anxiety have risen to epidemic proportions in our society. There is tremendous pressure to succeed, fueled by growing economic concerns and a breakdown of support systems such as family and community. All of these contribute to our anxiety and depression, but I would argue that our entire culture is poised on the brink of Deep Change. We are all Unsettled. Crises everywhere are pointing to the fact that we are not who we thought we were. A discussion about how our culture is in the midst of Deep Change is included in the conclusion of this book under "Deep Change of the Collective."

For now, please recognize that when we are experiencing the shifts of Deep Change in our individual lives while in the midst of widespread cultural changes, it can be exceptionally easy to feel that each one of us is alone. Take heart if this is the case for you. Even though you might feel that you are alone and adrift, rest assured that there are a great many others like yourself out there, individuals who are experiencing a profound sense of Unsettling. The intent of this book is to help you, and millions like you the world over, to feel less isolated and to recognize and trust your Unsettling. It is time for us all to recognize and trust the Unsettling for what it really is— a process for developing new ways to cooperate with life's desire to bring us into a deeper experience of personal freedom, meaning, connection, security and belonging.