



Learning the Change

by John Kennedy Saynor

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One of my favorite summer pastimes is sitting on the dock on the small lake where my rustic cabin is located. The city is far away and I am free to dream and to look at life from another perspective. Nature is a great teacher isn't it? On the one side of my lot is a small marshy area. It is a favorite fishing spot for our local blue heron. The top of the water is dotted with white and yellow water lilies. The shoreline is abundant with cattails, water hyacinths and iris flowers.

All of the beauty isn't above water, of course, because one of the first things I look for each year are the fish and frogs – a sure sign of a healthy lake. I have to confess, after all these years, I am still fascinated by the tadpoles. No wonder it was so difficult catching them when I was a kid! The minute I step out onto the rock, they dive for the mud and are gone from my sight. But I notice that later in the summer they become more lethargic. Tiny legs begin to sprout on either side of their tails. Then they appear at the front of their body. Their body begins to change, their tail begins to shrink and they change appearance entirely. Then, of course, you know what happens. One day they leave the family at the bottom of the lake and life is changed for ever.

Life is like that, they say. A cocoon breaks open on the side of the dock and a beautiful dragonfly bursts forth to play in the summer sky. An egg breaks open and a tiny bird struggles to get its first breath and opens its eyes to the world around. Change, change and more change.

When someone in our life dies, change becomes the norm. Changes we don't want. Changes we have never considered. Changes for which we are not prepared. It may be that if we can clarify what some of the changes are, we can cope with them better. What are some of them?

Change to your identity.

A woman said to me recently, "I just realized this week that I'm not a wife anymore. I'm a widow!" When a parent dies, you are no longer a son or daughter to that parent; you may still have one parent, but the unique relationship you had with the one who died has ended. Yes, you have a new identity.

Change to your tasks in life.

When your role changes, your tasks change. While not all bereaved people experience this, many in a family discover they have new responsibilities and new tasks to perform as the family reorganizes itself. Recently I spent some time with four daughters of a man who died suddenly. What was their main concern? It was around their mother and how she would get through the months ahead. After years of thinking mom and dad were immortal, the daughters had new responsibilities and new roles in the family.

Change in your environment.

That may sound like the understatement of the day, but it comes as a surprise to many. If it is a spouse who dies, the survivor, who may be alone, discovers a home that is no longer "our" home. It is "my" home. There have been many people I have spoken with who have been very successful in creating a new home for themselves. Others have had a difficult time.

Change in your social life.

Nothing changes a circle of friends like a death! It is the most dramatic example of the fact that not only family members mourn a death, but friends do as well. So you may find your social group changes after a death in your family. This comes as a surprise to many, but it happens. Because of this, the bereaved often discover that the people they expected to get a lot of support from, aren't there to offer the support.

Change in your values and priorities.

This is especially true when death is sudden. It makes you realize how short and uncertain life is. Sudden death often forces the survivors to take stock of their own life and what it is that is important to them. Death may affect you spiritually as well. Perhaps your faith will be challenged. Perhaps a death will cause you to begin to think about spiritual issues. Yes, there are many ways death can affect those things that give life purpose and meaning. This leads me to my next point.

Change in life's hopes and dreams.

Again, this may seem like a gross understatement, but recognizing it is an important part of the healing process. In a support group I conducted a few years ago, one of the members wrote this in his evaluation: "We have learned to recreate our lives." I have never forgotten that! Recovering from grief is about many things, but recreating life is one of them, and a very important one.

"Change?" you say. "It's upheaval of the worst kind!" Well it is that! But the upheaval doesn't last forever if you have the courage to face what has changed and take steps to gradually recreate your life. Kahlil Gibran once wrote these words. "*A little knowledge that acts is worth infinitely more than much knowledge that is idle.*" The difficulty many grieving people have is that they don't act on the knowledge they have. But then that is a difficulty most people have isn't it?

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