

## Change, In Spite of Myself

Lee Erman – Rosh Hashanah 2016/5777 (3-Oct-2016)

In my personal life, I'm basically conservative, rarely making startling decisions but generally going compliantly along the expected path. Even as a teenager I never rebelled. I am especially loathe to impose my preferences on others, much preferring consensus. So it's difficult, and even painful, for me to change my life, especially if the change impacts others who don't agree.

Yet -- and without any external forcing functions -- I've made several major changes that also impacted the people closest to me. I can see in retrospect that each of these changes was implicitly in response to the question: Am I living my life now in a way that I want to for the long run – which might as well be considered “the next hundred years.” Rabbi Graff and I hope these stories, although personal and in many ways prosaic, might inspire others.

**Change number 1)** By age 49 I had been, for 24 years, in a marriage that had been almost constantly difficult and unhappy. Mostly at my instigation, my wife and I worked on the relationship, including endless therapy sessions. Seeing me continuing to hang in in spite of years of futile efforts, my two most intimate friends assumed I'd never leave the marriage. However, I finally **did** make the unilateral decision to divorce. Moving out of our home on the July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend of 1993, tearing apart the lives of my wife and our children, I felt even more anguish and grief than I had, when as a 15-year-old, I lost my mother – because now **I** was the one responsible for the ensuing pain.

How had I been able to assert this change? Mostly by seeing clearly how dysfunctional the relationship was. I imagined it through the eyes of others – my children, my friends, my therapists, even my wife. **And** I accepted I had done everything possible to repair it. The pain of my decision will always be with me, but also the knowledge it was right. (I'm happy to report that within the following year, I met and fell in love with Esther. For the past twenty-two years we've been building together an ever-deeper and loving relationship.)

**Change number 2)** Earlier, at age 39, I starting taking yoga and other classes that provided rich experiences of physical interaction with others. I discovered fundamental pleasure in these experiences and found that others responded very positively to me. Over the next dozen years I continued with various classes, eventually taking professional massage training. I started volunteering massage at the VA and then accepted a 4-hour Sunday shift of massage therapy for in-patients at Stanford Hospital. All this time continuing my computer-science career, working 60 hours a week in a Palo Alto start-up – all without any thought of making a career of massage. I discovered I could help

patients make immense shifts in their physical and emotional states, even soon after the trauma of a major surgery or while going through the hell of a bone-marrow transplant.

Could I even consider the *mishegoss* of a career shift? Just the financial implications for my family were staggering. And what about status and self-image? How could a computer science PhD from Stanford in the heart of Silicon Valley consider rebranding himself as a “mere” massage therapist?

Very, very gradually – almost insidiously – by the year 2000, at age 56, I had made the full transition. How? With more experience, I realized the depth of my gift for helping patients, and that it was far more worthwhile and gratifying than my computer science work. Also, my perception changed of how much money I required, and as my practice grew, I gained confidence I could earn enough.

What about the image? To assuage my insecurity when first meeting someone, I still sometimes resort to mentioning my Stanford PhD. More positively, I emphasize the type of work I do – with in-patients at Stanford Hospital, Packard Children’s Hospital, and the VA Hospice. But it’s still a nagging struggle that I feel the need to justify what I do.

There was one other major obstacle in making the career shift: giving myself permission to do what feels so delicious. Isn’t a *mensch* required to do work that feels like, well, work? Somehow, I’ve eventually accepted that it is okay to enjoy what I do.

I have never regretted the career change.

**Change number 3)** Growing up in Chicago in the 1950s, I lived in a richly intertwined community of families. All the kids spent many hours together – in school and out. (Coincidentally, one of the boys I was with from age three through college was Lloyd Graff – Rabbi Sarah’s wonderful dad.) And our parents were also closely connected. However, over the years all of us have seen our communities grow much less communal. By the 1980s my kids needed arranged play dates. And by now for most of us, something as simple as dinner with friends often requires synchronizing calendars long in advance. As we grow older, the isolation worsens considerably, often with serious psychological, emotional, and medical consequences.

Looking forward to the last part of my life – the next one hundred years, if you will – I was increasingly concerned about that isolation. Then in 2009, Elliot Lepler posted a message on the Kol Emeth email list about a group forming to build something called a **Co-Housing community**. This project would create an intentional community of neighbors committed to interact with and support each other. We’d each have a wonderful complete condo, but also share common facilities to foster community

activities, such as a kitchen and dining room for several meals per week, and places for gardening, exercise, crafts, and media. And all community decisions would be made by consensus. ... I was hooked!

Esther however, **had**, to put it mildly, reservations. Though we're soul mates, we have very different personalities; some of the community aspects that attracted me, especially the group consensus process, turn her off. So I was again in the painful position of wanting to impose my preference on another. After months of difficult and, mostly loving, discussions and negotiations, she blessedly agreed to give it a try.

In 2015, after six years of intense development efforts, Esther & I, Elliot & Marsha, and seventeen other households of adult couples and singles moved in. The difficult and delicate work of community building continues – including dealing with the inevitable strains and conflicts caused by diverse personalities and backgrounds. Although Esther finds this aspect less appealing than I do, I am pleased, and very relieved, to report that we're both happy in our new home and community.

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So, I have surprised myself by making major, and positive, changes in three basic arenas – family, vocation, community. Although at age 72 I cannot quite get myself to think of another hundred years, our tradition urges me to consider 48 more – to 120. Am I done with change? I hope not, because life is movement and stagnation is a form of living death, and because the task of fulfilling my potential on Earth ends only with my last breath.

So, I continue to have aspirations:

- Though I have no plans to stop working with patients, I want to promulgate techniques and insights I've learned, to help more people than I can touch directly.
- I want to promote our cohousing community to a world in desperate need of examples of healthy community and society.
- I also will continue the fundamental day-to-day soul work that manifests in how I relate to others: my wife, my children and my entire family, my community, and everyone I meet.
- And, importantly, I hope to leave myself open to other possibilities of change.

For each of us I pray:

- For the next hundred years: health, peace, joy, and fulfillment.
- And for this season of reckoning, and for other such seasons in the years to come: positive change-making.

Shanah Tovah Umetukah