# Experiencing Change: A Phenomenological Exploration

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## Abstract

This paper explores the experience of change from a phenomenologically-attuned perspective. It proposes three variants of change experience, of which the third, those change experiences that are reflectively troubling and deemed to be destructive, undesirable, and debilitating, is particularly pertinent to therapeutic practice. Further, the paper explores various paradoxes and polarities associated with the experience of change and considers what factors may be involved that shift our relationship to change from that of being unwanted and dangerous towards that of a reflective willingness 'to meet' change experiences and engage with their existential possibilities.

## Key words

Spontaneously accepted change, reflectively accepted change, reflectively troubling or rejected change, change polarity of disruption/continuity, death anxiety

## Preamble

*Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes*

*Turn and face the strange*

David Bowie

Having been invited by its Editors to contribute a paper in celebration of this Journal's 25th year of existence, I considered various themes and topics that might be of interest to its readers and which I might be able to present in a manner that suggested some degree of 'deep thought' on my part. Several candidates surfaced, but were summarily dismissed either because of time factors or, more often, because I had to concede that my ability to generate 'deep thoughts' appears to be long gone (assuming it was ever present). So, instead, having made the claim for years now that the first task of the existential therapist is to become the most expert of idiots, I decided to follow my advice and see where it led. I began by asking my self the following question: what is one of the most basic, most fundamental, most 'idiotic' statements that one can make about therapy in general and existential therapy in particular? After some rumination, what came to me was this:

Therapy concerns itself with the undesired, unexpected and unwanted disruptive consequences arising either from the experience of change or the inability to bring it about. Even if we, as existential therapists, reject the role of the therapist as that of being a directively-oriented facilitator of change, nonetheless, we cannot deny that the experience of change, or the lack of it, remains a central concern to our clients.

Fine. So far, so idiotic. But to what extent have therapists in general, and existential therapists in particular, addressed the issues and questions surrounding the experience of change? What might we actually mean by the experience of change? And what is it that can make the experience of change become so threatening to us that we enact all manner of evasive strategies to off-set its impact? These are the idiotic questions that my thoughts dredged up. And, in an attempt to pursue them, I have decided to employ a more informal, less impersonal, yet still phenomenologically-attuned means with which to explore them.

It is an indulgence, to be sure. But, I hope, one that is not over-bearing nor demands too much of the reader's patience. After all, we are, let us not forget, in the midst of celebration.

## Experiencing change: the constancy paradox

When I think about it, I realise that I was made aware of change from very early on in my life. My oldest memories are of growing up in Rome, Italy. In my extended family, I was among the first-born in the immediate post-war generation. I was surrounded by adoring parents and grandparents and uncles and aunts as well as numerous family friends, neighbours, maids and nannies. And then, abruptly, all of that attention, all of that constant scrutiny and veneration ceased to be. Suddenly, I was in a strange and distant land where, at first, the only people who paid any attention to me were my parents and, even then, theirs was a somewhat divided focus. Risking everything, my parents had made the difficult decision to leave their homeland and attempt a new life in the New World – Canada. When I re-view my earliest remembrances of Montreal, I am infused with images and feelings of dark basement rooms, kids who couldn't understand what I said, long walks to a favourite park with my mother, and having to be dressed into more clothes than I had ever had to wear in Rome. Nonetheless, I don't recall ever truly pining for the return of my earlier existence. I cannot say that I unreservedly welcomed the change that had befallen me, but nor did I reject it.

I state all this because, in thinking about this paper, it occurred to me that I have tended to have a pretty good relationship with change throughout my life. Most of the time, when some sort of change that I deem to be of significance or interest occurs, I notice it, I might even value or regret it, but I very rarely make serious attempts resist it. Somewhere in the formation

of my thoughts, perhaps as a consequence of my early life experiences, I have – usually – grasped the first great paradox of change: *the experience of change is an unvarying constant in our lives*. One thing that we can be sure about is that we will experience change. Continually. Expectedly and unexpectedly. Willingly and unwillingly.

## Experiencing change: variant change experiences

If the constancy of change is a given, then it needs to be clarified that our concerns about change are not so much with our reflective experience of the vast majority of its perpetual occurrences, but, rather, with particular instances of experienced change. What is it about these instances that they succeed in shifting so drastically our more embracing and typical relationship to change?

I can think of three primary variants related to the experience of change:

*a) Spontaneously Accepted Change*: This variant reflects the great majority of change experiences that occur throughout our lives. Spontaneously accepted change experiences are multiple and constant throughout every moment of our lives. They generate minimal, if any, awareness and elicit responses that 'meet' the change event such that its presence and impact upon our experience of relational being is incorporated without reflective hesitation or attempted deviation or obstruction.

*b) Reflectively Accepted Change*: This variant is comprised of those change experiences that enthuse, excite, shake, move and/or and surprise us whether positively or negatively. Reflectively accepted change experiences may dominate our thoughts, feelings and behaviours for substantial periods of time. They may be experienced as illuminating, enlightening and/or overwhelming. Like spontaneously accepted change, our response to reflectively accepted change experiences remains that of an unhesitant willingness to 'meet' and accept their impact upon our relational being. Unlike spontaneously accepted change experiences, however, we are reflectively attuned to their presence and assess their impact as having anything from minor to 'life-altering' consequences.

*c) Reflectively Troubling Or Rejected Change*: This variant contains those change experiences that are designated as being unwanted, unfair, unacceptable and/or intolerable such that our focus rests upon attempts to reject, prevent, reduce or deny their occurrence. It also subsumes those experiences linked to the perceived incapacity to bring about desired change since these rely upon instances of change that have occurred at an imaginary level but which fail to be enacted at the lived level. Like reflectively accepted change, these experiences may dominate our thoughts, feelings and behaviours for substantial

periods of time and are seen to have a notable impact upon our experience of relational being. Unlike our responses to both spontaneously and reflectively accepted change however, reflectively troubling or rejected change experiences generate levels of unease and disturbance which can range from irritating to life-shattering and which arouse defensive reactions whose intent is to minimise, deflect or refute either their existence or their impact upon our experience of relational being, or both.

It is also important to note the potential plasticity inherent in all three variants of experienced change. Through reflective reconstructions of our relational being, prior instances of spontaneously accepted change might be reconstrued and re-viewed as experiences of either of the remaining two variants. Equally, reflectively accepted change experiences may be reconstrued as instances of reflectively troubling or rejected change, and vice-versa.

What is being proposed here is that 'the problem with change' is not with our experience of change in a general sense, but with specific instances of change events which predominantly (if not exclusively) fall into the parameters set by the third change variant – reflectively troubling or rejected change – as described above. Change experiences identified with this variant stand out for us as being disturbing and unacceptable such that we seek to fend off, diminish or deny their occurrence and impact.

It is this third variant of change experience with which therapy in general, including existential therapy, is principally concerned. What is it about this third variant that makes it so 'problematic' for clients? What are the conditions that lead us to identify certain experiences of change as reflectively troubling or demanding rejection? And what is that existential therapy (perhaps therapy in general) offers, stimulates, removes or provides such that clients' experiences of disturbance, denial and rejection are opened to the possibility of being reconfigured in ways whose direction shifts towards that of the second identified variant – reflectively accepted change?

Let me begin to explore these questions by considering an example of this third change variant as drawn from my own life.

## Experiencing change: a personal example

*I am twenty-five years old and living with my partner, J, in a communal household in Guildford, Surrey. J and I have been living together for around five years. We'd met in Canada as undergraduate students and had decided that it would be both exciting and romantic to 'exile' ourselves to Europe – she as an artist-in-the-making, and me as a Doctoral candidate in psychology. Our relationship has been a stormy one since its beginnings but, nonetheless, there has also always been (at least up to this moment in time) a deeply felt mutual sense of security in its ability to withstand, if not grow from, the challenges presented to it.*

*However... It is the Summer of 1974 and, for various reasons, J and I*

*have been separated for much of the past two months. J has been preparing a portfolio for an Art Diploma Course that she is to begin in September and I have been away in Italy catching up with family and with my parents who are there on an extended holiday. On the day of my return, J is with friends in Ireland, but she has left me a long letter so that I can be made aware of the events in her life as well as those related to the household. The letter is friendly, expressing J's excitement at the possibilities that the future holds, exuding her eagerness and desire that we meet up again as soon as possible. And yet, in the midst of all her writing, one sentence stands out above all others: 'I've decided to become a vegetarian'.*

*Why this sentence should drive me to a frenzy of despair remains as much a mystery to me today as it did forty years ago. Logically, it shouldn't have jolted me at all since, given that most of the people sharing the house we rented were already self-declared vegetarians, the great majority of the meals we cooked and ate communally excluded meat and fish. Further, had I been asked prior to this point in time whether, in principle, I had strong feelings one way or the other regarding anyone – my self included – taking up the option of becoming exclusively vegetarian, I would have supposed that my answer would have been an unhesitant 'no'. Nonetheless, here I was, suddenly overwhelmed by a combination of misery and rage. J's written assertion stabbed at my heart and led me to the painful conclusion that our relationship was suddenly over, that we were no longer a couple, that I would now have to face life as a single man.*

*For reasons unknown, J's decision to become a vegetarian provoked for me a sense of deep disruption. Equally, the disruption aggravated an uneasy anxiety that there would also be other consequences that at this point remained unpredictable: How would I re-define my self and my life as a result of separating from J? Would I be able to do so? And even if I did, who would I become as a result of this? Equally, how would I be re-defined by others in my new life as a single man? How would it affect any number of relations with friends, colleagues, lecturers and students, indeed with anyone? And more, how would this impact on my wider interactions with the world? Would being single require me to leave the double-room I shared with J and move into a smaller single one? How would my income be affected? Would the types and amounts of fresh produce I bought at the weekly market be altered to reflect my new status and identity? And so forth.*

*By now, it is likely to have struck many readers that my reactions to J's declared intent to take up a vegetarian lifestyle were, to put it mildly, 'somewhat over the top'. In order to make sense of this, some would suggest that J's declaration of vegetarianism must have had some previously unacknowledged, but potent, symbolic meaning to me and that it was this that provoked such an overwhelming response. Others, on the other hand, might suppose that J's statement was the proverbial 'final straw that broke*

*the camel's back'. Certainly, both these options are not unreasonable and, as well, each suggests the possibility of some worthwhile explanation for the overwhelming feelings of distress and disruption I was experiencing. There might very well have been a number of previously unreflected factors associated with my explosive reaction that, once exposed, might imbue it with novel meaning and significance. Similarly, a more detailed and honest examination of my relationship with J would have highlighted my divided thoughts and feelings about remaining in it, and, in turn, a persuasive 'final straw' rationale to my extreme response could have emerged. Nonetheless, this focus on possible explanations that invoked the change event, however compelling and worthwhile as it may be, both misses and moves me away from what was a much more pertinent source of disruption and pain to me: if I accepted the consequences of this change, what would be their impact upon my life? Not knowing this, my struggle was far less concerned with the end of my relationship with J than it was in staying with the ever-present tension between:*

*1. embracing a change experience whose impact and consequences were not only currently unknown but unknowable;*

*and 2. insisting that my experience of being remained as it had been, albeit under a different set of conditions.*

*The embodied experience accompanying this tension was one of gut-wrenching pain, of being torn up and ripped apart by the awareness that I was only willing to accept this change if I could be guaranteed beforehand that its acceptance would not have a wider, more general, negative and threatening impact upon the stability and continuity of my relational experience of being. I became aware of how much of my ability to define my self, to know who I was and was not, was linked to my identification of self with J. A large part of who I experienced my self as being was 'Ernesto who is in a relationship with J'. Much more than I had initially suspected or supposed, my maintenance of a relatively stable way of relational being seemed to rely upon that meaningful identification. While it hurt – and also relieved – me to embrace a set of circumstances that would end the actual relationship with J, this had little to do with the impact and consequences upon that way of being which had existed prior to the change event. Prior to the change event, I could define my self - and be defined by others and the world - as 'Ernesto who is in a relationship with J'. Now, this definition was no longer tenable. And because it wasn't, neither was the previously maintained worldview that defined who I was and how I understood and gave meaning to my interactions with others and the world.*

*What made the issue critical was that I could not know in advance who*

*this new 'Ernesto who is no longer in a relationship with J' would be. What values and beliefs and attitudes would define this unknown person? Would he feel any connection or link to the 'Ernesto who is in a relationship with J'? Or any link to those others who had known him as the 'Ernesto who is in a relationship with J'? And what links, if any, would those others who had known him as the 'Ernesto who is in a relationship with J' either want, or be able, to maintain with this new 'Ernesto who is not in a relationship with J'?*

*The only way that such questions could be answered was to become 'Ernesto who is not in a relationship with J'. This required an acceptance of change without knowing what the effect of that change would be and the extent to which it might alter my most foundational experiences of relational being. Further, it required the acknowledgement that, if I took the leap, there was no turning back from it. Regardless of whoever would emerge as the 'Ernesto who is not in a relationship with J', I could not ever go back to being the prior 'Ernesto who is in a relationship with J'. Instead, I would have to embrace any number of unpredictable consequences. These, for all I could know in advance, might be insignificant and insubstantial. But they might also demolish whatever sense of stability and continuity that existed in any and all of my reflective relations with self, others and the world.*

## Experiencing change: a challenge to security, constancy and continuity

As the above example highlights once again, what is often – if inadequately – referred to as 'the problem with change' is not with our experience of change in a general sense, but with specific instances wherein the change event is deemed to be troubling in any number of ways that are felt as being so intolerable that their denial or rejection is demanded. What becomes apparent is that what fuels this disturbance is not only, or even most importantly, concerned with the content or focus of the change events in themselves. Rather, it is with the significant challenges and disruptions to our very sense of our being in all its relations with self, others and the world that the experience of change threatens to evoke.

It is a 'given' of being human to substantiate our reflective experience of being. This reflective ability to 'thing-ify' imposes structures, and makes meaningful, our experience of relational being. As well, it provides much of the basis for our felt sense of existential continuity, security, constancy and predictability. All of us, to some extent, generate reflective sedimentations – fixed patterns of dispositions, feelings and behaviours – that persist over time and which shape and direct both our lived experience towards self, others and the world as well as our responses to what we perceive to be the lived stance of others and the world towards us (Spinelli, 2014).

Considering this with regard to the experience of change in general, it

becomes evident that there exists an inevitable existential tension between our awareness that change is a constant and our insistence, if not outright need, to maintain sedimented constancies that at least appear to limit, repel or exclude change. This tension clarifies the second great paradox of experiencing change: *the reflective experience of change requires the experience of continuity*.

If our experience of relational being held no quality of persistence, structure and continuity, then we would be ever-changing still, but with no reflective experience of it. Without continuity, we could never make statements like: ‘I have changed’ or ‘You are different’ or ‘The world is no longer as interesting as it used to be’. We would just be constantly changing beings with no reflective awareness at any point of who we/others/the world had been or who we/others/the world might become. We would only be experiencing an ‘ever-changing now’ that might well substantially restrict and impair any sort of reflective experiences and, indeed, might erase all possibility of our reflecting upon any ‘thing’ or any ‘one’, much less upon our experience of change.

In order to experience and reflect upon change of any kind, we must have experiential access to those reflective experiences that existed prior to the change experience. If I say ‘I have changed’, I am implicitly invoking a connection between ‘who I was’ and ‘who I am now being or becoming’. But I can only make such a connection if I recognise that change is always about the relationship between disruption and continuity. The experience of change, therefore, must in some ways also contain, access and/or acknowledge those reflective experiences of being that gave shape, substance, meaning and continuity to the being who is no longer being able to be.

All three variants of change discussed above highlight that the experience of change is always an interaction between disruption and continuity. This interaction and its impact may be ‘met’ spontaneously as in those instances expressed via the first variant. Alternatively, with regard to the second and third variants, change is reflectively experienced as a disruption to some aspect or aspects of our construed continuity. The major difference between these two reflectively-attuned variants is that former values those disruptions as ‘opening’ possibilities through which we are willing ‘to meet’ the event and embrace its unknown possibilities and consequences whereas the latter deems the disruptions to be so threatening to the stability or continued existence of our continuity that it is necessary to deflect, reject or deny their unpredictable impact.

## Experiencing change: a movement-towards-death

Unfortunately, the rejecting response that defines this third variant of change experience is fundamentally flawed and will inevitably fail. Why? Because, despite all of our efforts and insistence otherwise, *the threatening*

*change event has already occurred*. Our subsequent defensive responses are the equivalent of attempting to strengthen the dam when the dam has already burst.

Experiences of either the second or third variant of change enkindle a felt sense of a movement-towards-death. This movement-towards-death is much more extensive than the 'death' of that which is the immediate content or focus point of change – be it the end, loss, closing down or re-direction of a relationship or a hope or a dream or a set of possibilities and options. Much more all-encompassing, this movement-towards-death expresses the disruption to the continuity of those reflective stances that maintain, define and identify a being's relations with, and between, self, others and the world.

This idea of change as a movement-towards-death provides us with the means to reconsider and broaden the existential notion of death anxiety. In my view, when it is discussed conceptually, death anxiety is typically presented from an unnecessarily all-too-literal perspective. Of course, an existential understanding of death anxiety addresses both the human being's awareness of the inevitability of death (be it personal, or that of others or of the world) as well as the unpredictability of any temporal being's moment of ceasing to be. But this tension between the certain and the uncertain upon which death anxiety hinges can also be seen to be apparent in the interplay between disruption and continuity in all variants of change. As with death anxiety, change is experienced as provoking *a disruption whose consequences upon our continuity remain both certain (in their inevitability) and uncertain (in their experiential consequences)*. Considered in this way, every moment of change connects us to our death anxiety. Like (or, perhaps, through) change in general, death anxiety permeates our every moment of relational being.

Of course, each potential 'death' also provides the possibility of a 'resurrection' – a new way of reflectively experiencing relational being – as expressed via the emergence of new relationships, dreams, directions and hopes. *But who will this new being be and what will be his or her experience of relational being?* What will happen to one's experience of reflective continuity as a consequence of this novel transformation? Will we feel within our own skin or experience a sense of disconnection? How will we relate to others and the world? And how will others and the world relate to us? These questions cannot be answered in advance. They require us to be open to an uncertainty which, if embraced, must also embrace its irreversible consequences.

In those instances of reflectively accepted change, we embrace the existential death that is inevitable because our focus rests upon the resurrective potential of the event. And, as well, we look forward to the possibilities of the newly-emerging relational being that change brings forth, even if we cannot know what they will be or who we will become or how we – or others, or the world in general – will experience them.

In those instances of reflectively troubling change, however, we seek

to reject or deny the existential death that the change event has already set into play in order that we can claim to have withstood the wider, unpredictable and de-stabilising impact of change upon our continuing experience of relational being. In short, in our attempts to reject change, we seek to elude death. That, in turn, our experience of living is dissociated, diluted and/or despairing must also, alas, be part of the bargain. Such strategies, even at their most successful, deny death through a disconnection with life. They place us in an 'in-between' mode of existing, a sort of zombified or vampiric form of 'living death' or 'deathly living'.

## Experiencing change: in-between (new) life and death

If I consider my own change experience example as recounted above, what can be understood is that my felt sense of being 'pulled and torn apart' expressed the tension between two opposing demands: one that insisted that I resist this uncertain set of consequences and the other that dared me to embrace them.

But why choose such an option? What possible value is there in adopting such divisive stances and attitudes? My proposal, not surprisingly, is that it is precisely because they permit the experience of an 'in-between' experience of being – one that acknowledges that I am no longer the being that existed prior to the focus change event *and* that I am also not yet that unknown being who emerges from the unpredictable consequence of the change event. In other words, these 'in-between' strategies are attempts to remove the threat from continuity-threatening disruptions.

For example, as painful as it was, staying with my felt sense of being pulled apart had its pay-off: As long as I remained 'in-between' disruption and continuity I could claim to be both 'Ernesto who is no longer in a relationship with J' and 'Ernesto who is still the same as he was when he was in a relationship with J'. Everything would be different and yet exactly the same.

The problem with this solution is that its price is the incessant experience of unpleasant, at times overwhelming and unbearable, pressure and tension. Under such conditions, the experience of relational being is that of 'not-quite-being' and 'not-quite-not-being', a lifeless sort of life, a perpetual verging-on-death.

But why turn to this solution when, seemingly, it would be so much the better to shift towards reflectively accepted change? While other models and approaches to therapy view the question from the perspective of exclusively negative, destructively-tinged tendencies such as, for example, 'irrational beliefs', 'unconsciously-derived eradicative instincts' or 'manifestations of false self deviations in living', existential therapy reminds us that as limiting, debilitating and divisive as it may be as a solution, the 'in-between' strategy is, nonetheless, still a solution. And what does it solve? Nothing less than the problem of reflectively troubling change.

How? It offers a means with which to neutralise the impact and effects of change *without* the need to resort to, or embrace, the unknown and unknowable consequences that any fully-committed reflective acceptance of change would impose. By remaining 'in-between' disruption and continuity the most troubling consequences of experienced change can be their denied, diluted, or dissociated.

It works. At a price.

## Experiencing change: evading the polarities of change and continuity

For years, in a semi-jokey fashion, I have been suggesting to trainees that the definition of a client is that of someone who both wants to change and to remain the same and who, as a result, continues to experience all manner of instances of dividedness in his or her relations with self, others and the world.

As with clients in general, the personal account I have been considering clarifies that I would have been far more willing to embrace change were it the case that its consequences were predictable and guaranteed sufficient security and continuity in my subsequent experiences of relational being. Again, like clients, I would have wanted to know beforehand that the option before me would lead to something positive, perhaps make me a better or happier or more fulfilled person. More to the point, like clients, I might have wanted to be reassured beforehand that any experiential embrace of change would only impact upon that part of my experience of relational being that I had deemed to be problematic in some way and that it would leave the rest of my experience of relational being pretty much unaffected.

As an existential psychotherapist, I have come to the conclusion (along with many others) that, because every facet of our experience of relational being is inseparably entwined and inter-connected with every other facet, a change in any particular facet will impact upon, and, therefore, in some way change *the whole* of the being (Spinelli, 2014).

If this were not provocative of unease in itself, it is also the case that, at present, no one, and certainly no model of therapy, has the ability to predict with any degree of accuracy how and to what extent any particular experience of change will affect the whole being. Regardless of how seemingly insignificant or minor is the 'tweaking' of one facet of our experience of being, the change to the whole being can be subtle or hardly noticeable or can be dramatic and wide-ranging. In similar, if opposite fashion, major alterations to a single facet may have either enormous or barely notable effects. My point is that, currently, we have no way of predicting the impact, focus or direction of any instance of experienced change. Our openness to the experience of change reflects an openness to the unknown and uncertain. It risks 'the death' of all that we currently hold as being meaningful, stable, continuous and secure about our experience of relational being. If there is anything truly

surprising about our experience of change, it is the extent to which we seem to be open to it rather than seek to avoid it.

Evasive, rejecting 'in-between' responses to change are dominant within therapeutic encounters. As far as our clients are concerned, those instances of change experience which they present in therapy are deemed to be so threatening to their worldview stability, constancy and continuity that they are experienced as being unwanted, dangerous and/or intolerable. Understanding that, it becomes somewhat obvious to realise that persons who, confronted with what they deem to be undesirable or threatening disruptions to their experiences of continuity, are likely to make attempts to off-set, reject or deny those disruptions, even if those attempts generate a great deal of pain and suffering. Unfortunately, although these strategies can achieve their intended purpose (at least temporarily and to some degree) their existential cost is that of eliciting embodied experiences of dividedness and dissociation. In general, such experiences manifest themselves as a perpetual, lingering tension that threatens to erupt into something far more painful and debilitating. Nonetheless, as awful as this 'in-between' existence can be, viewed from the standpoint of the attempt to off-set the consequences of uncontainable disruption and to maintain stability, security and continuity, it makes a great deal of sense. Just as the therapeutic encouragement to 'go with' change and, hence, risk whatever stability, security and continuity still remains might well make very little, if any, sense at all.

Clients are not initially as idiotic as their (existential) therapists. But what might provoke them to become so?

## Experiencing change: embracing the polarities of change and continuity

In an attempt to respond to the above question, let me return to my personal example. The narrative ends in this way:

*Eventually, in some manner or other, I accepted that the pain and misery required to maintain my in-between position was to some degree worse that that of embracing the uncertain and unknown consequences of change in my experience of relational being. Whatever permitted me to do so required my willingness to risk the loss of any and every constituent of my experience of being that, up to this point, provided a sense of structure, security, meaning, continuity and identity with regard to self, others and the world. What could have possibly convinced me to take such a step? Perhaps a moment of illuminating insight. Perhaps exhaustion. Perhaps my own - or others' - growing irritation or boredom with the stance being maintained. So many 'perhapses'. So many uncertain possibilities that become our means to take the step. What seems clear, however, is that*

*whichever 'perhaps', or combination thereof, served as catalyst, what was required of me was an attitude or stance of acceptance*.

Yes, but acceptance of what?

I would suggest that it is the acceptance of both polarities inherent in change, namely disruption and continuity. Further, it is necessary for this acceptance to occur in a manner that simultaneously bequeaths each polarity with equal value and presence. This reflective embracing of polarity from a 'both/and' rather than 'either/or' stance and, through it, the attempt to balance contradictory demands such that both are held as being equal in value, validity and presence to one another, allows a shift away from the reflective rejection of change and towards that of reflective acceptance.

This turn towards reflective acceptance reveals yet another paradox: Rather than seek to 'erase', resolve or impose hierarchies of validity, meaning and import upon the contradictory demands being expressed through existential polarities such as continuity/disruption, security/uncertainty and identity/alterity our openness to change emerges through the attempt to hold the polarities in balance. Any such attempt will ultimately fail, but, as Samuel Beckett's refrain reminds and entreats us, our enterprise is not one that leads to success but rather to the on-going experience of 'failing better' (Beckett, 1983).

But by what mechanism, or through what step-by-step manualised set of interventions do we, and our clients, find the means to attempt this paradoxical balance? Here, like everyone else, I have no single, satisfactory all-inclusive answer. However, there do exist some 'hints' as to what might some day become an answer.

When, as therapists, we are curious or foolhardy enough to ask our clients: What made you idiotic enough to take that change accepting step? Often, they will answer: You, the therapist, did. Or the effect of your presence upon my presence. Or the relationship we co-created. Or, if Lesley Farber is correct, the step was taken because clients take pity on their therapist who keeps trying so hard to understand/meet/be-with/be-for them, and continually fails in his or her endeavour (Farber, 2000).

Or, if I and numerous other therapists are correct, the client notes and becomes encouraged enough to try out for him or her self that which we, as therapists, are willing to attempt. Which is what, exactly? 'To be idiotic' – or call it 'un-knowing' if you prefer – in that we attempt to remain as open as possible to that which presents itself in the current and on-going encounter; to treat the seemingly familiar, assumed to be understood or understandable, as novel, unfixed in meaning, and, hence, accessible to previously unexamined lived possibilities; to demonstrate our willingness to explore the world of the client in a fashion that not only seeks to remain respectful of the client's unique experience of relational being, but also to be receptive to the challenges

that this unique way of being elicits upon our own narrational biases and assumptions – be they personal or professional or both (Spinelli, 1997).

Or put it another way: that, as therapists – as *existential* therapists – our enterprise is to express and embody that person who attempts to embrace, work-with and work-through the experience of reflectively accepted change in all its relationally-attuned, uncertain and anxiety-provoking ever-presence. This requires a cock-eyed sort of courage, which is in equal measure arrogance and humility, and which asks nothing more – or less – of the therapist than is being asked of the client.

## Experiencing change: a summary

Paradoxically, change is a constant of lived experience. Also paradoxically, the reflective experience of change requires reflective continuity. Our lived experiences of change reveal a polarity of disruption and continuity. Once again paradoxically, we rarely consider that aspect of change that is about 'remaining as one is' or 'retaining what is there already'. Any reflectively accepting experience of change must encompass both the experience of disruption and that of continuity.

The majority of change experiences rest upon either a pre-reflective or reflective existential 'openness' through which we are willing 'to meet' the event and embrace its unknown possibilities and consequences. The dilemma of change is not with such instances of change, but rather with a particular variant of change experience. Namely, those reflective change experiences whose impact is deemed to be too threatening or too dangerous to the maintenance of sufficient existential constancy, stability and continuity. Alternatively, this same dilemma is encountered when a desired change cannot be enacted. In this latter instance, the refusal to accept the changes that accompany unwanted stasis via the strategy of imaginary change maintains the worldview's stability and continuity. Rather than the change events in themselves, the dilemmas faced by change arise from the embodied disruption to the continuity and stability of our experience of relational being and whose consequences remain both certain (in their inevitability) and uncertain (in their experiential impact, focus and magnitude) .

Experiences of reflective change can be understood existentially as movements-towards-death. The movement-towards-death is much more extensive than the 'death' of that which is the immediate content or focus point of change – be it the end, loss, closing down or re-direction of a relationship or a hope or a dream or a set of possibilities and options. The movement-towards-death accompanies the disruption to the stability and continuity of those embodied meanings and values which permit, maintain, define and identify a being's reflective stance toward self, others and the world, while simultaneously reflecting upon the stance of others and the

world upon self. Viewed in this way, there exist significant parallels and points of convergence between the reflective experience of change and the key existential notion of death anxiety.

In those instances of reflectively accepted change, our focus rests upon the novel potential of the event and we look forward to the possibilities of the newly-emerging, if still unknown and unpredictable, relational being. In instances of reflectively troubling change, however, we seek to reject or deny the unpredictable and destabilising impact of change upon our experience of relational being. In turn, our experience of living becomes, at least in part, dissociated, diluted and/or despairing. Nonetheless, this 'in-between' strategy has its value: it permits the neutralisation of the impact of the troublesome aspects of change not by means of their reflective acceptance but via their denial, dilution, or dissociation. By so doing, the strategy retains the continuity, stability and constancy of the being-as-was prior to (the now-neutralised) change event.

Accepting change in any single aspect of a person's experience of relational being will affect the whole of that experience of being in ways that cannot be predicted beforehand. The acceptance of change, therefore, risks not only at least a temporary disruption to any and all aspects of being, the effects of this disruption cannot be predicted in advance. Similarly, the effects might extend beyond the specified content and focus of change. All of which instances threaten our reflective experience of security, stability and continuity.

Change experiences deemed to be disturbing, divisive and dangerous arise through a divided perspective that separates disruption and continuity and treats these as though they were not inter-related. The ability to transform reflectively troubling change experiences to those that adopt a stance of reflective acceptance requires the attempt to hold contradictory existential polarities such as continuity/disruption, security/uncertainty and identity/alterity in balance rather than seek to 'erase', resolve or impose hierarchies of validity, meaning and import upon them.

The courage to embrace threatening and undesired change requires a fundamental willingness to risk everything that we claim to be, know and value about and expect from our selves, others and the world. It is precisely that courage which permits us leap into the uncertain and unknown possibility which is, perhaps surprisingly, already an inevitable actuality.

## End note

I have been working on this paper on change for far longer than I had expected. It has changed – in terms of content, scope, ideas – in ways that make it quite unrecognisable to that which with I started. All of which teases out a smile from me.

Even so, I am left with a quandary. After all this, what has actually been

clarified about the experience of change? Have I not just been stating, and re-stating, the obvious?

With this question, a connection emerges. There exists a wonderful, wise, yet little known and read book entitled *The Art Of The Obvious*. Its authors are Bruno Bettelheim and Alvin A. Rosenfeld. It is, in many ways, Dr Bettelheim's final summation and distillation of all he has learned about therapy.

At its heart, lies this odd little phrase: the art of the obvious. Dr Rosenfeld writes:

> *'By this he [Bettelheim] meant the art of seeing clearly what is there to be seen, rather than imposing on it one's suppositions and prejudices..... "[T]he art of the obvious" implies that for the psychotherapist to see what is there in front of him requires more than empathy and emotional receptivity; it calls for humility, patience, a reflective attitude and long study to master both theory and technique'*
>
> (Bettelheim & Rosenfeld, 1993: 231-232).

As therapists – as *existential* therapists – working, and living, with change this reminder seems to me to be particularly apt. There is, perhaps, nothing more obvious in our lives than the experience of change. Yet, just as obviously, it remains a mystery.

When considering the experience of change (or anything else, for that matter), sometimes, the 'art of the obvious' reveals the mystery that lies at the heart of that which, until that moment, had been seen only as obvious.

Sometimes, the 'art of the obvious' permits a pathway in to the mystery that, only once taken, is seen to have been obvious.

Sometimes, the 'art of the obvious' allows us to remain with its mystery as mystery, and to experience its truthfulness and beauty.

And, sometimes, as well, the 'art of the obvious' allows us to draw out an obviousness in the obvious that, until that moment, had not been recognised as obvious.

Obviously.

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