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All the world is just a narrow bridge. The main thing is not to fear. - R. Nachman



“GUIDED IMAGERY AND NARRATIVE REVISION DURING LIFE TRANSITIONS”

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Guided imagery entered my life in 1994 when I developed a condition that threatened my way of life and sense of self. An inoperable back injury led to three years of disability and uncertainty as to whether I would walk again. During that time, my job ended, my mother died, and my daughter graduated high school and left home. My world collapsed along with my spine. Only in retrospect did I understand that a chapter of my life had ended and that the prolonged transition I was entering would alter my direction and lead me to my truest work. Even more slowly came the realization that the worst kinds of life changes – the ones foisted upon us – can become our greatest opportunities for positive self-development.

Most of us fight uninvited change, and I was no exception. For months I railed against my new reality of chronic pain, dependency and isolation, trying every which way to “go back” to the way things had been and the identity I had known. It didn’t work. Forced to choose between brain death by staring at the television’s flickering lights or possible brain growth by entering introspection’s seeming darkness, I chose the latter and began to develop a side of myself that had been starving for attention. Confined to home or bed, it is still possible to travel vertically – up into spirit life, down into soul life. In between physical therapy and medical appointments, I meditated, attended to dreams, wrote, wept, waited, and read illness narratives to learn how others worse off coped. Without realizing what I was doing, I also conducted a life review that began a process of integrating the past and reclaiming my natural gifts and deepest longings.

And then guided imagery became a central transitional tool. In only one session, a psychotherapist friend taught me how to use imagery to relax, relieve pain and find a safe internal place. Frightened, sick and lost, I found solace in visiting my secret garden, elaborating its furnishings and décor and inhabiting it with friendly animals that became inner guides while easing my loneliness. The desperate quest for pain relief evolved into a daily pilgrimage to my inner depths. I looked forward to opening the gate to my sanctuary, greeting its intriguing cast of characters, and peering into a deep pond ringed by rocks in the garden’s center.

One day a string of words in a language I had thought long forgotten arose in a vaporous mist from the pond’s dark waters. Deciphering these clues initiated an exciting period of self-

discovery. Although my physical recovery would take years, the creative process of soul reclamation had begun. Little by little, following the symbolic breadcrumbs of the imaginal world led to my healing and ability to bring healing to others. As I learned to walk again, I also revised my life and narrative into one far more authentic, vital and deeply rooted in my essential self than any I had known before. The images from the pond ultimately coalesced into a vision that became a template and plan for a nonprofit organization I would direct over the next decade – my next major life chapter.

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We all live through story all of the time. As anthropologist Barbara Meyerhoff wrote in *Number Our Days*, human beings should really be called *homo narrans*, the storytelling animal, because our need to narrate our lives is as basic as the need for food, clothing or shelter. And Joan Didion opened her well-known work, *The White Album*, with this unforgettable sentence: “We tell ourselves stories in order to live.” We do. From childhood on, we weave together parental messages, family stories, and religious and cultural beliefs along with our experiences, perceptions and fantasies to create provisional answers to our questions about life: that is, stories.

Stories are conceptual containers, or perspectives, that tame chaos into coherent patterns and, in so doing, fulfill our deep needs for security, meaning and connection – to others and ourselves, to the past, present and future, to the mystery. The narratives of our life tie us to the past and give us a sense of safety and stability, as well as propel us forward by allowing us to imagine our futures. But just as all life is change, our stories unravel and evolve over time. They are works in progress.

We tend to live in relatively stable periods or structures called chapters, which are punctuated by periods of uncertainty and instability – transitions. Transitions may be the kind we author, like deciding to get married or retire or relocate. Or they may be uninvited, the kind that write upon us: a natural disaster, the loss of a job, a diagnosis of serious illness. Either way, transitions can be stressful because uncertainty and change are uncomfortable. Potentially, they disturb our equilibrium, shake up our narrative and elicit questions of identity, meaning and faith.

Some transitions are easily and mindlessly integrated into a life, but the task of major transitions is, in Rilke’s words, to “live the questions” deeply. We’re asked to reflect on what has happened; to absorb and integrate the changes mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually; and to revise our life and story in accordance with the new reality. The opportunity lies here: Will we simply survive change, disappointment and loss or will we decide to author a new narrative of living more fully, authentically and joyfully than before? Will we *choose life*?

Ongoing change has always been inescapable, but with extended life spans and ever-faster speeds on the information and asphalt highways, many pundits claim that the biggest task of modern life is managing uncertainty and transitions. Used well, they can lead to healing, growth and renewal. Nevertheless, most of us want to rush through transitional times, to avoid the pain of endings, short-circuit grief, and leap over the grey zone of uncertainty into premature answers and reflexive actions. This is a very human response, but an unfortunate one that is supported by the culture at every turn.



During my own period of illness and disability, I surely wanted to circumvent the tough questions: Who was I now that I was disabled, unemployed, motherless, an empty nester? How could I go on in the face of so much change, loss and uncertainty?

Unable to reverse my fate by medical intervention or will power, I eventually surrendered to the call of my inner life, and after a long time shifted my focus outwards. As I lay in bed questioning everything, I began to wonder what it must be like for women with younger children and far more serious diseases like cancer, where not only one's way of life was threatened, but life itself. How do women in the prime of life go on living and loving with broken hearts and shattered illusions? How do they reconstruct and heal their lives after trauma, or while living with continuous trauma?

In 1995, I founded the Mothers' Living Stories Project to explore those questions and offer meaningful service to an underserved, silenced group: women living with cancer while raising children under 18. Trained Volunteer Listeners helped mothers review their lives and audio record their stories and legacies for their children and loved ones. Story became the heart of our work because I was convinced of its healing power. "All suffering is bearable," said Isak Dinesen, "if it is seen as part of a story."

After ten years, the combined effects of the economic downturn, diminished financial and personal resources, and a series of challenging life events signaled that both the project and my own life chapter were coming to an end. In 2005, the nonprofit closed its doors, and shortly thereafter my book based on the mothers' stories was published. Although I tried to keep the work alive in a number of ways, by 2006 I had to acknowledge that what I had believed would be my life's work was changing. I had tumbled into yet another major life passage . . . and a new opportunity.

New questions beckoned. I became interested in understanding the nature of transitional time and how it can be utilized for therapeutic purposes. What do we *do* while standing in the fog, having let go of the past but still unable to see a future? How can we best use that time to make choices for the next chapter based on what is most authentic and alive in ourselves?

Once again, I drew on the tools I had used during the last major transition. But this time I employed them deliberately for personal and professional purposes giving special attention to guided imagery. My own transition thus became a learning lab. Not without confusion, struggle and false starts, the process ultimately took my work in a new and exciting direction, and I was able to reintegrate old interests, skills and experience in an original way. I resurrected my many years in counseling, public health and coaching, combined them with my knowledge of life review and narrative development, and then added additional training experiences, including a certification program in Interactive Guided ImagerySM. The outcome is my current practice as a Life Transitions Coach and Imagery Guide.

Even though human beings shun uncertainty, transitions arise again and again in our lives in ever-repeating cycles of change and renewal. Whether initiated by internal shifts or foisted upon us by external events, they recur, often out of our control. As Pema Chodron has said, "Things

fall apart.” And each time – to greater or lesser degree – we are called to accept an ending, let go of what no longer serves or lives, tolerate confusion and insecurity, explore the darkness, and trust that the true and meaningful answers will rise up and point us forward.

How do we choose life after things fall apart? We visualize a new pattern, select our materials, rearrange the broken fragments, and make something beautiful – a project, a career, a family, a garden, a new way of seeing or behaving, a new story of our life. Engaging the creative process, we make art of our lives and offer it as a gift.

And guided imagery, which illuminates our inner wisdom and creativity, leads the way.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As a life transitions coach and imagery guide, Linda Blachman helps people learn to use times of challenge and change to connect with what is most vital, meaningful and authentic in themselves so they can craft a better life and make contributions to the greater good. Linda brings to her work 30 years in counseling and public health, as well as extensive experience in life review and life planning, personal history and legacy preparation, and contemplative/spiritual practices, including a Choose Life! reflective exercise she developed through her own recent transition. She is a Certified Professional Coach and has also received certification in Interactive Guided ImagerySM from the Academy for Guided Imagery. Linda can work locally or nationally with adults facing most life changes. Areas of specialization include midlife and beyond; infertility, pregnancy and parenting; and mental/physical/spiritual health, including life-altering illness.

Linda is author of Another Morning: Voices of Truth and Hope from Mothers with Cancer (Seal Press, 2006), based on a decade as founder/director of a nonprofit helping mothers living with cancer record life stories and legacies for their children. She trains others in responsibly preparing for death and recording personal histories and legacies, and offers workshops in navigating life transitions and writing ethical wills (legacy letters). Linda has personally navigated the transitions of parenthood, divorce, single motherhood, disability (three years), empty nest, grandparenthood, retirement, “rewirement,” relocation/downsizing, and bereavement without losing her sense of humor or capacity for joy.