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Change and Loss:

**Letting Go of the Past, Staying in the Present,
Opening to the Future**

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In December 1991, on a flight home from Thailand, my husband Jerry and I decided to start planning a 1-3 year trip around the world. That decision put in motion a most phenomenal journey of "change → loss → letting go." I am still experiencing the effects of that decision – physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually – and may continue in various forms for the rest of my life. There is so much to still learn and re-learn from the entire process. The themes that run consistently throughout the journey is "surrender," "letting go," "acceptance" and a whole lot of faith in God. The relationship between God, myself and others deepened and became clearer to me. For me everything has become spiritual, no matter what form it presents itself in.

In my mind, I break the trip into three main components: (1) getting ready for the trip, (2) the trip, and (3) coming home from the trip. During the first component (1991 - 1993) I was the happiest I had ever been. After many years of recovery, psychotherapy and "working on myself," I felt that it had all paid off finally. I had a full, rewarding private psychotherapy practice; a loving, healthy relationship with my husband; my son was doing relatively well; and I lived in a wonderful house on the beach. Life was good!

The long, extended trip that we did take required that I let go of all of the above and more. This journey was the next step in my recovery and spiritual path. I faltered many times about going and did not buy the airplane tickets until three months before the start

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date of August 24, 1993.

Every area of my life was changing. We packed up a two bedroom household and put everything we owned, including two cars, into storage. The only things we had were the clothes we wore plus a 25 pound pack and a small carry-on bag. This was our "household" for the next 2 ½ years. The things that I thought were important to include in the beginning changed as we traveled. It was a constant merry-go-round of changing items, depending on what country we were in and the climate.

The most difficult part in getting ready to leave was telling my clients that I was leaving – letting go of my "well-known therapist" identity – and saying good bye to my son. I had to ask myself "Who am I?" if not trusted therapist, well-known workshop presenter and newspaper columnist. I experienced many periods of deep, deep sadness, crying and some fear as parts of my ego personality structure let go of who my ego believed it was. I discovered that each episode of "letting go" of feelings, thoughts, beliefs and issues eventually created space within me that had a lightness and joy, as I became more available to experience the essence of who I really am in the present moment. Pretty existential stuff, huh?

I have come to know and believe that our personality structure is made up of various "parts" or identities that serve in different functions. This concept is similar to multiple personality disorder or dissociation, but on the opposite end of that continuum for most of us. These parts and what they want is what causes conflict within us when we are undecided or struggling with change. These parts are often resistant to change for various reasons, usually in protection from fear. The intent is the highest perceived good of our whole person so the "parts" should be respected for their job. It is the "perceived" lens that should be worked with. Our inner parts are often "perceiving" from old, out-of-date information from the past, which no longer works for us and what we want in the present. I have worked successfully with these "parts" by recognizing them – letting them have their say and feel the feelings (energies) they hold. Through this "parts" process, there is invariably some change in thoughts and behaviors of the entire person.

By going through this "parts" process, doing meditation and studying different spiritual practices around the world, I have really altered my focus to "staying in the present moment" – not in the past (or the past moment) nor in the future (and that's the hard one for me). We carry thoughts and emotions from the past in our conscious, and more importantly, our subconscious mind, as well as in the cells of our body and our etheric energy system. I discovered I had a strong positive thought → feeling connection to the life I knew before my trip (1991-1993), much like some of us associate the smell or sight of chocolate chip cookies to grandma, or home, or some sort of nurturance. It is also similar, though not as dramatic, to triggers in addicts' lives to use drugs – e.g., settings, music, people. This process actually has a name, "Euphoric recall."

On the more exciting side, I felt great relief from my personal and professional responsibilities when I left on the trip. I felt like the stress and pressures of our American lifestyle had been lifted. I felt like a free bird beginning a flight! I had not taken many breaks from work the last 15 years so I definitely could use an extended period away. Later, on the trip, I was able to get a long period of assessment of my life and work like few people do. The image that comes to my mind when I think of this is of the astronauts circling the earth, viewing it from a distant perspective.

My sense of self and identity shifted as I made new decisions, changed my attitudes about my world and felt the feelings. I became "Sue, the Traveler" instead of "Sue, the Therapist" as my primary ego identity. I was constantly changing on every level. I found this to be a positive process as long as I acknowledged the truth of the change (not stay in denial), was conscious and connected to faith, and did not fall into suppression of my feelings, which I did at times out of sheer survival. On the trip there were many truly dangerous situations as well as a lot of health hazards.

Most people would rather stay in what appears to be a safe and secure world. We definitely have choice about most parts of our life, but we don't in some parts. There are very few situations in which we experienced loss or change that, if we look back upon it, we have not grown personally and/or spiritually. We can choose to stay in a "victim energy" about our loss (which is ok for awhile in grieving) or we can take stock on how the experience puts us out on the "growing edge" of

who we are and how we deal with life. I believe that as we transform our own feelings and do our own emotional work, we are raising the energy of our planet and healing the whole world. As we make room for true peace and joy inside, we are making room for it outside.

I remember a time toward the first part of the trip in Nepal. We were working at a 16 bed inpatient hospital that serves people who have leprosy and had an outpatient clinic serving a large population of the poor. We were forced to make adaptation in our judgments, tolerance levels and the way we did things. It is part of many Eastern cultures that people will often agree to do something but never do it. They also have a much slower paradigm of time. And some of the ways that they approached medicine were as much as forty years behind modern standards. One day I was in our small, primitive bathroom of the one room apartment that the clinic had given us to live in. I had an enormous level of anger and frustration welling up in me. I had come face-to-face with some of my control issues big time! I remember looking into the mirror and hearing an inner voice say, "Sue, you had better deal with and let go of needing to make these people do things your Western way or you will either develop a stomach ulcer, need to go home, or go crazy!" At that moment I chose to "let go" which consisted feeling my feelings and changing my attitude. I could still not like some things, but the emotional charge was diminished and I was not triggered the same way anymore in similar situations.

It is difficult to put into words all the amazing things that happened. We climbed a 16,500 foot snowy mountain pass in the Himalayas. I developed a deep connection with the beauty of Nature. I had a near death experience. I felt sadness and despair seeing how most third world countries treat animals. There was the ever-changing monetary systems, problems with communication (or lack of it), food, dress, morals, customs in the 14 countries that we visited – all of it "grist for the mill" as Stephen Levine or Ram Dass would have said it. Just as we got used to one country, we would leave and drop into another with a different way of doing things. I began to be consciously aware of not assuming anything. After a while I could even feel a different energy when we arrived in a new country. I actually got better and better at dealing with and transforming change and loss. That doesn't mean that it was easier or less painful – I

was just more familiar with it as it became fairly constant.

As of this writing we have been home one year and two months now. Reintegrating back into my Seattle life has been more difficult than getting ready to leave was. One of the most difficult shifts has been to adjust from Eastern to Western time and energy. I had totally forgotten what it was like to use an appointment book and getting lost in voice mail systems. The use of computers has really advanced also. It was wonderful to be and talk with family and friends. I had missed my son so much. One of the most difficult changes to acknowledge, much less to the grief work, to acceptance, was that the energy, literally, had shifted between myself and some of my closer friends. Much had changed for all of us over a three year period. I still have close connections with some of my friends and I have made some new ones. This change happens normally in some relationships over the years, but usually more gradually and not so glaringly obvious as when one is gone for three years and comes home.

I had learned from all my previous training and personal growth process in recovery how to take care of myself. I don't think my "little kid" parts would have let "us" go on the trip unless I could do it in a fairly nurturing manner as much as possible. I constantly built in ways to nurture myself, such as baths or jacuzzies when I could get them, splurging on nice places to stay, spending lots of time in the sun on the beach and play in the water, taking tea breaks often on our long motorcycles touring jogs, buying something special for myself, resting and sleeping well, etc. It is very important when we are in the grieving process to make conscious efforts to nurture ourselves. I believe it also accelerates the acceptance and healing process.

Today I am deeply aware that all there is actually is change. I can be in denial of that, but it is the underlying truth about our world. Even our homes, which often provide security and a form of comfort and nurturing for us, age and crack each day. Look what happened with our January snow storm and the flooding that followed – everything changed in the blink of an eye. We can choose to learn to feel the feelings and adapt to the change or not. We always have choice. My belief is that with the consistent changes in the earth's energy, we will all be changing in one way or another. How we change and deal with the loss is one of the most important process decisions we can make. My

wish for all of us is to be able to live fully alive and in the present moment. It's really all that we have!

It didn't feel right to define Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' "Stages of Grief" within the above text, so I will list them here for you:

(1) Shock – This may or may not be present depending on the situation. Shock often provides an emotional umbrella to temporarily numb ourselves until we can begin to acknowledge the reality of a situation safely. For example, a low level or absence of shock may occur among family members who experience the loss of a loved one to a prolonged illness. A high level of shock occurred among family members who watched on television the explosion of the Challenger rocket.

(2) Denial – (It's more than a river in Egypt. Ha! Ha!) Denial can also serve as an emotional umbrella, like shock. Shock is usually accompanied with more dramatic physical symptoms. It is also more difficult to stay in shock, whereas people can stay in denial longer and in some cases for long periods of time. Outside people and situations must assist in breaking the denial. When we leave denial, we often experience other painful emotions such as anger, fear, sadness and/or despair – feelings that we tried to avoid by staying in denial.

(3) Anger – Shock and denial are usually what we experience first. The rest of the emotions don't come in any particular order and may all occur at the same time. It is still not very socially acceptable to express anger so we tend to "stuff" it. We also project it onto other people and situations. Family members will sometimes project their anger about the death of a loved one onto the medical staff. It is not socially "nice" to be angry at a loss, especially if it is a dying person, so we look for more legitimate excuses to express anger. We can get stuck in anger and not move on in the grieving process, such as in divorce, job loss, illness (i.e., angry at our body instead of loving it and moving into acceptance of what we can do to heal and adapt). We need to remember anger is a normal emotion. It's how we express or don't express it that is within our power of choice. We seldom have good role models so we learn unhealthy ways to express anger, but it is possible to learn healthy ways.

(4) Depression – It is my experience that below anger is sadness and below sadness is fear. My definition of depres-

sion is "anger turned inward." My definition of resentment is "anger with mold on it." We can get stuck in depression, which is what a lot of Americans do. The depression covers multiple layers of unacknowledged and unmet sadness. We need professional help if we keep going into or stay in depression.

(5) Bargaining – This is the "only if" stage. It is often attached to guilt. "If you will do this, God, I will do that." It usually doesn't work but I believe real faith can intervene at times if it's for the higher good of all concerned.

(6) The end stage of the process is Acceptance or Reconciliation. If we have not gotten stuck in the previous stages and/or not worked through the feelings, we will arrive here. It may come gradually, as we move back and forth through all the stages like waves in the ocean.

One of the best books I have read and recommend to clients is *How to Survive the Loss of a Love* by Melba Colgrove, Harold Bloomfield and Peter McWilliams. Here is a list of symptoms of loss taken from this book:

(1) feeling helpless, fearful, empty, despairing, pessimistic, irritable, angry, guilty, restless, depressed, sad

(2) experiencing a loss of concentration, hope, motivation, energy

(3) any changes in appetite, sleep patterns, or sexual drive

(4) a tendency to be more fatigued, error-prone and slower in speech and movement

Any and all of these are to be expected during and after the experience of loss. It's part of the body's natural healing process. Be with these changes; don't fight them, it's OK.

As Healing continues you will find...

(1) your thinking is sharper

(2) your judgment more reliable

(3) your concentration is improved

(4) your view of the world is less self-preoccupied

(5) your feelings are more alive

(6) you feel stronger and more independent

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