

## PERSPECTIVE



Pamela Freundl Kirst, Ph.D.

# The Life of a Psychologist: The Process of Change

Pamela Freundl Kirst, Ph.D.

Returning from a holiday trip this year, I experienced a jarring transition back to regular life. Of course, I reassured myself, this was for me a transition within a transition. My regular life has, as background noise, gasping sounds of a dying long-term marriage and a messy divorce. Helping my son return to the intense demands of 5th grade—homework, book reports, and mandatory cursive—intensified the experience.

I began reflecting upon the process of change: internal change, its hallmarks, triumphs, and painful confusion; and outer change, the ever-shifting realities of life. I pondered the births, developments, and deaths that life, like it or not, insists upon. Daily I am reminded of the inevitability of growth and change, watching my son race to the school yard in pants that have become too quickly too short.

My own life is filled these days with dramatic change. Some changes feel thrust upon me by necessity (my divorce and all the change that flows from it) and some I have chosen to embrace (entering an analytic training program). While astounded at the change I am surviving in my life and the excitement and fear that accompany it, I am bemused to recognize that change defines the work we do as practicing clinicians. Change and transformation are part and parcel of what we encourage, recognize, and support in our patients. It is the center of our work.

Studying the changes I am celebrating and enduring in myself and observing change as it moves and stalls in my patients, I have noticed how steps forward are often accompanied by an upsurge in the dark forces that restrict and resist forward movement. I once had a therapist who aptly termed this latter phenomenon "backlash." Jung identified two opposing forces in the unconscious, a progressive one which urges us forward toward individuation, and its opposite which seduce us back into undifferentiated oneness. While the depths

of the unconscious proffer renewal, too, this is no place to be drawn down into and stuck! The process of bursts of growth and backward drag is a powerful one. The psyche fights change as well as supporting new development and individuation.

I think, too, about how with change we enter "uncharted territory." We don't know our way around. A new sense of strength and power can feel dangerous and unsettling, as well as wonderful. Stepping outside our comfort zone can be a delicious risk and simultaneously an invitation to the demons of doubt. We could call this "resistance," and I suppose it is, but this term seems to capture just one side of the dynamic process. It takes moving forward to generate the opposing force. Both pieces are part of what I am sensing and discovering all around me. How to embrace the one while remaining aware of the other is the paradox we face.

Dreams image change in many ways and reflect the multiple aspects and demands genuine change requires (Whitmont & Perera, 1989). Many of these images allude to how precious, delightful, and fragile new development can be, and how much effort it takes to bring the seeds of change to fruition. New babies are born, and the dreamer is a careful tender of the infant, sometimes amazingly tiny. Perhaps the dreamer, though, is a careless parent who misplaces or forgets the baby. Deaths occur, most startling when the dreamer is shown as dying in the dream. Profound change is a death of an old way of being. Feelings of sadness, regret, and fear may be a natural response to a shift away from a deeply held yet outmoded way of being. However much we may desire this loss, it is painful nonetheless. The dreamer may be engaged in packing up and moving, always a process in outer life that's fraught with effort and requires adaptation to new activities, places, and ways of doing things. Moving isn't easy or straightforward internally, either. Or maybe the dream depicts tilled fields, ready to be sown, and later, green sprouts rich with hope and promise. Previously unknown rooms may be discovered in the dreamer's house, heralding space for new possibilities. The dreamer may need to explore these images and find ways to realize the possibilities of the sprouted field, the empty rooms. Dreams offer support and guide the dreamer and the attentive therapist during these times of transition. They reveal what is happening deep inside the dreamer, present images of new potential and the struggle with the old, and suggest what the dreamer may need to do.

Observing my own reactions to change has served to expand my respect and empathy for the patients in my consulting room. I am humbled by the courage and fortitude people bring as they enter into therapeutic work and step forward into new ways of being. The pattern of the archetypal forces within us is seen in the steps forward and shuffling steps back. This is just part of how it goes.

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Growth carries challenge in its wake. Patients are blind at times to the profound changes they have made because it seems to them they have just as many problems as before. A woman patient lamented recently, as precious as her growing sense of self was to her, it was also a big pain. Now she not only has the needs of her husband, children, and job demands to juggle, but those of this noisy, newly emergent sense of self as well.

As therapists we promote, identify, and nourish growth, striving to cooperate with the psyche as it engages with this process. We may cradle and protect the new, reassure and normalize the "push and pull" of change, bear witness to the transformation that is happening before our eyes, or simply sit in the darkness together with the patient waiting for a glimmer of light to appear, trusting, mostly, that it will.

One gift psychology offers is a glimpse into what it means to be human; a glance into the soul. We carry this gift on our life journey, and our lives are enriched by it. Our work stimulates our growth and benefits from it. These two processes interweave. As we grow and change and examine our lives and those of our patients through the eyeglasses (with multiple lenses) our field offers us, our self-discovery and growth enliven and deepen our work. This is a great gift indeed. ▲

Reference: Whitmont, E.C., & Perera, S.B. (1989). *Dreams, a portal to the source*. London: Routledge.

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