

Every Day a Little Death...

October 19, 2006 by [lifeshifting](#)

In the parlor...in the bedroom...OK so I like Stephen Sondheim! As many of you will know, this is a line from a famous song in one of his musicals. Perhaps not the most upbeat note with which to kick off a post, but what the hell. Death is on my mind today. In a good way. You see, after dialoguing a bit with my writing partner, Judy, about how we approach the themes of my recent post on labels and identities, we came to the conclusion that one of the most difficult aspects of “Life-Shifting” is *letting go of an identity* to which we have become accustomed, even attached. It feels like death. Not the real thing, perhaps, but in the moment, pretty darned close.

Truth is, we like to KNOW who we are at any given moment; we like to be comfortable with the role we are playing, and especially as adults, we loathe having to be the beginner. Surely, this is true for many reasons (and I’ll probably write about more of them as I go along with this blog), but one of the main ones, I think, is that making room for a new identity requires us to let go of an old one. And letting go in many ways resembles the experience of death. Even if it is just a little death, as Stephen Sondheim sings, it is death nonetheless. Painful. Sad. Hard.

But very necessary. How else can we welcome in the sense of possibility, the energy of creativity and spontaneity, if we don’t step off the comfortable plateaus of identity that we build for ourselves? Sure, in moments when life suddenly shifts and doors open to new possibilities, it can feel exhilarating and fresh. But it can also feel terrifying and frightening, as we step out of our known frames of reference and dangle precariously in the unknown.

Yesterday, I spoke with a client who sees himself as hanging on the edge of a precipice in his corporate job: things in the company have shifted dramatically around him and now he is frustrated and unhappy and feeling like a victim of circumstances—bad bosses, bad economics, bad timing, bad colleagues...you name it. His star in the company, however, has been on the rise. So he has choices: 1. he can quit (but he doesn’t have a job yet; 2. he can go demand what he wants—a new role, a promotion, a new organization structure; 3. or he can sit back, do nothing, and let the frustration build until he gets sick...or worse, fired for having a bad attitude. Sound familiar? I have seen this kind of situation many times in my career as an executive coach...and...I have been in this situation myself a few times.

Looking back, I wish I had been less stuck in fear, more willing to hang over the edge...more willing to trust myself...and life. Why? Because every time I finally got myself over that edge, out into the open sky of possibility and out of the muck of victimhood, amazing things would happen. Whole new vistas of possibility would appear that I had NEVER SEEN BEFORE. But I had to shed that part of my identity that was holding me back: it had to die, to be buried up there on the cliff, in order for the birth of a new me to occur. Now, I am not advocating that you leap before you look, nor have I told my

client to jump willy-nilly into the unknown. BUT I have told him that after learning all he can about the landscape before him, he should go ahead and MAKE A DECISION. TAKE THE LEAP. Let go. Let that small, used-up, no-longer useful identity that he claims is his...die.

So strange as it sounds, I'm asking that you think about death today. Is it a good day to die? What in your life needs to be killed off? Think of all the different labels that you wear, the ways you supposedly "know" yourself to be: "worker-bee", "boss", "professional", "adult", "parent", "over-weight", "out-of-shape", "non-spiritual", "hard-worker", "always tired", "oppressed", "underpaid", etc... Is there one you'd be willing to part with? Even a small one? For example, I'm contemplating the possibility of letting my identity as a "coffee addict" die. Even as I write these words, I stand on the precipice: could I actually walk by a Starbucks and not go in? (Stay tuned). Birth requires death.

In closing, just in case you happen to think after reading this not-so-happy-go-lucky post that Judy and I are just sadists in disguise as healers and transformers, let me share with you a bit of wisdom from a modern day philosopher/spiritual teacher whom many admire. [Eckhart Tolle](#) in his book "Stillness Speaks" says of death the following:

"People tend to be uncomfortable with endings, because every ending is a little death. ..Whenever an experience comes to an end—a gathering of friends, a vacation, your children leaving home—you die a little death...Often this leaves behind a feeling of emptiness that most people try hard not to feel, not to face. If you can learn to accept and even welcome the endings in your life, you may find that the feeling of emptiness that initially felt uncomfortable turns into a sense of inner spaciousness that is deeply peaceful. By learning to die daily in this way, you open yourself to Life." (p.106)

So it seems that Judy and I are not the only advocates of a little dose of death now and then. In fact, we believe that one of the crucial principles of "Life-Shifting" in practice, is taking the leap into that "emptiness" of which Tolle speaks. It is in that space, that spaciousness, as he puts it, that the new you is born, every day.

Tomorrow, my client will walk into his bosses office and make a decision, take a stand, and become a different person. He sees himself as a leader of others...now, just maybe, by stepping off that cliff of the known, he will become different kind of leader—a leader of self.

Peace...gotta run to Starbucks...Dr J