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THE LANDSCAPE OF QUANTUM CHANGE

The mathematics underlying three hundred years of science, though powerful and successful, have encouraged a one-sided view of change. These mathematical principles are ideally suited to analyze—because they were created to analyze—smooth, continuous, quantitative change: the smoothly curving paths of planets around the sun, the continuously varying pressure of a gas as it is heated and cooled, the quantitative increase of a hormone level in the bloodstream. But there is another kind of change, too, change that is less suited to mathematical analysis: the abrupt bursting of a bubble, the discontinuous transition from ice at its melting point to water at its freezing point, the qualitative shift in our minds when we “get” a pun or a play on words.

—ALEXANDER WOODCOCK AND MONTE DAVIS, *Catastrophe Theory*⁸

TWO TYPES OF CHANGE

Change happens. It is one of the few constants of life. Like a canoe on a river, the question is not how to start to move but rather where your current course of movement is taking you.

Usually change is gradual, cumulative, like drifting slowly down-

stream. Call it Type 1 change, or the “educational” variety, as William James termed it in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. You shift or drift a little bit at a time and, as with growing children, the changes may be most apparent to those who haven’t seen you for a while.

Yet sometimes change also comes in big waves. Type 2 change is more like hitting the rapids. You are drifting along, and all of a sudden, before you know what has happened, you’re moving fast and find yourself in a very different place. Every day some people’s lives are thus changed forever in a matter of moments.

In many cases, Type 2 change results from the acts of humans toward one another or from the twists of fate sometimes referred to as acts of God. The results may be for good or for ill. In a popular early television series called *The Millionaire*, a mysterious and fabulously wealthy philanthropist chose ordinary people, not randomly but by some knowing and discerning process, to receive a gift of one million dollars tax-free. A cashier’s check from the anonymous donor was delivered by a messenger, with absolutely no strings attached. The fascination in this dramatic series was what each new millionaire would do with the sudden and unearned gift and how it would change his or her life. The outcomes were sometimes uplifting, sometimes disastrous. Accidents, heart attacks, inheritances, storms, lotteries, fires, diagnoses, chance meetings, and bullets all permanently change lives each day. Sometimes it is a matter of just being in the right place at the right time or the wrong place at the wrong time. We try to insure ourselves against adverse intrusions and to place ourselves in the path of windfalls, but we remain subject to many external forces beyond our control.

CHARACTERISTICS OF QUANTUM CHANGE

Quantum change is a particular kind of Type 2 change. It may occur in conjunction with a significant external event, but in no sense can it be understood as a normal and ordinary consequence of such an event (at least not within current conceptions of change). It may be just as dramatic as natural responses to traumas or windfalls, but the drama tends to unfold within the person. People standing near an individual in the midst of a quantum change may have no inkling that anything important is happening. On the inside of that person, however, there is no doubt about it.

Vividness

It is absolutely clear to quantum changers that something out of the ordinary is occurring and that life will never be the same again. Through some identifiable, often dramatic, and usually quite memorable event, the person is transformed. It is utterly obvious to the individual that *something has happened*, something extraordinary.

Typically quantum changers can point to a particularly salient moment in which something happened to them. It may happen over the course of a few hours or days, but often it is a matter of minutes—“instantaneously,” some say. The experience has a distinct beginning, though often a less marked ending, if it ends at all. There may be strongly ingrained sensory memories of the event: several people remembered a sense of brightness in everything around them; some remembered feeling cold or chills; others the feeling of incredible warmth. One woman found that “suddenly even the desert was pretty. I’m not trying to be poetic about it in any way. It was just like being given rose-colored glasses.” Another described a specific feeling in her chest of “pain, suffocation, death” that was at the same time both agonizing and joyous. Yet another said that “the coffee tasted better. My vision had been widened considerably. I’m trying, but words . . . I have trouble here. It was sort of like instead of walking on the ground I was walking several inches above where I had been before.”

A majority of quantum changers still recall the date, time, and vivid details of their experience many years later.

I just know that this experience made a difference in my life; it saved my life. It's one of the very few experiences that I truly remember; I mean in great detail, totally: everything I felt, everything around me, almost everything that was said and done, and the light. Everything. It's one of the few times I really remember.

Of course, many people speak of how their lives have been greatly enhanced over time by things like sustained involvement in psychotherapy, twelve-step meetings, or religion. Their stories, too, are a testament to the human capacity for change. Yet such stories differ qualitatively from the accounts of quantum changers, who trace their transformation to a particular unforgettable experience.

Another form of vividness is that quantum changes are often ac-

accompanied by profound emotion. They do not have the subjective quality of reaching a rational decision or finding by personal effort the solution to a problem. They are often deeply moving. A very common experience during and after quantum change is a profound sense of peace and release from chronic negative emotions. There is frequently a sense of a great burden having been lifted. One woman, whose story is elaborated in Chapter 10, awoke one morning with the experience of being unable to initiate speech. For three days she had what she described as an out-of-body experience: "I could still see . . . myself. . . . I was kind of standing over on the side, and I couldn't talk. . . . [E]verything that came out of my mouth wasn't what was like me." Not surprisingly, this was quite an emotional experience, but she also found it soothing rather than frightening, "like when a mother holds a baby."

After that experience I just felt really peaceful and happy and glad to be alive, and every day since then it's just progressed more. The anger that was eating away inside me was gone. I've gained more confidence and I'm not afraid anymore, and I know what I can do with myself now. Whatever happens, I'm just at peace.

Following his classic quantum change experience, Bill Wilson, cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous, wrote this:

Slowly the ecstasy subsided. I lay on the bed, but now for a time I was in another world, a new world of consciousness. All about me and through me there was a wonderful feeling of Presence. A great peace stole over me and I thought, "No matter how wrong things seem to be, they are all right."⁹

Surprise

Quantum changes are rarely remembered as willful or volitional events, like changing your mind or making a resolution. They are more like waking up one morning to suddenly discover that your skin is a different color.

More than four out of five people who told us their stories said that the experience took them completely by surprise. It was nothing they had expected, imagined, or even sought. It came unannounced and, as often as not, uninvited. If we had been able to ask them, on the day before it happened, whether they were in need of a

personality overhaul, many quantum changers, like Scrooge, would probably have humbugged the idea. Many were not striving for or expecting a transformation. They didn't "do" it. It just happened. They had no map, and if they heard the rapids coming at all, it was only moments before they were swept up in the current. To this sense of unpreparedness and surprise, Abraham H. Maslow¹⁰ added the observation that it also has the quality of newness, of having such an experience for the *first time*.

Benevolence

Almost always, the quantum changers we interviewed saw the experience as profoundly positive and beneficial, if not always pleasant. It is what Scrooge would likely have said, had we been able to interview him on December 26. The emotions experienced are quite positive, such as the intense joy and relief one woman in her forties felt when she saw a newspaper ad for Neurotics Anonymous and went to a meeting:

I was so happy. So . . . not just thrilled, so elated. I felt like I wanted to tell the whole world. I just wanted to burst into millions of pieces and go all over the world, and let a little piece drop on everybody and say, "Look what I've been given! Look at the joy, the wonder we can have in life!"

To be sure, there are sometimes elements of sadness as well, perhaps of being sadder but wiser. A number of quantum changes told us they found that both joy and emotional pain were intensified for them. The contrasts were greater: "In many ways the experience intensified my pain also. Things seemed brighter and more beautiful. It was also a bleaker way of looking at things." Yet there was no question among the people we interviewed that the net effect was very positive. Sometimes there is a newly experienced sadness and compassion for the amount of suffering in the world, and a positive desire to take part in alleviating it. Less often in quantum change experiences there can be a new strong sense of responsibility and remorse for what one has done:

It was at that point that I began feeling extremely guilty about living with my boyfriend, who is now my husband. I didn't have that guilt before. I felt very ashamed of many things I had done in my

past.—I started feeling the presence of what I interpreted as evil, where I had never felt that before.—I always thought that good and evil were just perceptions of an individual, that you created your own identity and your own reality.—I thought you could turn something that other people perceived as negative into something positive for yourself, and therefore there was no such thing as absolute evil.—But from that point, I have had a definite perception of evil versus good or whatever you want to call it, the Divine. I felt real sad from that point, and that lasted, maybe even to this point.—I just feel sad that I had wasted all that time and misled all those other people.—I wish I could go back and tell them.

Yet even such remorse tends to be accompanied by a sense of ultimate acceptance and forgiveness.

Many quantum changers voiced a deep sense of gratitude for what they had been given. When one hears of people who are “gifted,” the first association may be of someone born with particular talents or aptitudes. The people we interviewed felt a different kind of giftedness. Each had received, in her or his own way, a unique and life-changing gift. Often it came as an unexpected flood of hope in a time of great darkness. Many voiced the clear sense of being in the presence of and gifted by a power beyond the self. The recipients typically felt they had no special qualities that made them deserve such a gift, but they were deeply grateful for it. Rather than opining that “I earned this,” quantum changers are more likely to wonder, “Why me?” A woman who had been sexually abused by her father for years and who had experienced a deeply healing quantum change puzzled:

What I don't understand is why I came to all of this, to terms, to grips, when so many others who have been through the same thing as I have are not faring as well. They're devastated and broken and crushed. They have no hope. Nothing. They're broken, and they'll carry the scars forever. I don't understand why I've been saved or changed. Something's happened to me that they didn't get.

Another woman with a relatively recent experience told us:

When I heard the voice say, “You don't have to do that anymore; I will be with you always,” I knew I could quit drinking. How can I tell anyone that I was able to stop that day and never have the de-

sire to drink again? Who would believe me? My mother is also an alcoholic and abuses prescription drugs, and she has been in numerous treatment centers over the years without success. I would love for her to have the same awakening that I have had. I wonder why this happened to me?

The stories of how quantum changers have dealt with their gift are quite varied. Some were embarrassed by the gift and sought to keep it secret even though some of its effects were clearly evident to those around them. Some puzzled long over what they were to do with it. Some simply accepted it graciously and rejoiced. Some felt a sense of responsibility, or at least a longing, to share with others what they had been given. Yet whatever they felt about it, almost all shared this sense of having been graciously gifted. "I was given something free," one person observed. "No strings attached. Ever had anybody do that to you, just give you something like that?"

Permanence

Besides vividness, surprise, and benevolence, quantum changers convey the sense of having passed through a one-way door. There is no going back. When you have just shot through a canyon in class five rapids, there is no way you are going to turn around and paddle back upstream. You are changed forever. Many of the people we interviewed in preparing this book still remembered the exact date and time when their experience began and had vivid recall of their surroundings and circumstances, even though the events had occurred, on average, eleven years earlier. It is plain to such people that they were markedly and permanently altered by the event. They were confident that what had happened would remain. Their understanding, their perception, had shifted markedly. Sea captain John Newton, author of the well-known hymn *Amazing Grace*, wrote of his experience, "I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see." Having seen, quantum changers cannot go back to unknowing, nor would they care to.

When we asked people how their quantum change experience had ended, many said that it had not ended at all but was still continuing, still flowing. Their experience was not of a completed change but the opening of an evolution, a new capacity for seeing and understanding, a new link to the universe.

Vividness, surprise, benevolence, and permanence—together these words begin to describe the nature of quantum change. These are qualities that drew our attention precisely because these experiences are so different from the ways in which people ordinarily change. Normally, change happens a little at a time. It is hard to say exactly when someone became more wise or cynical, more intelligent or confident, more optimistic or selfish. Personal qualities wax and wane, one small step at a time, for better or worse. Having worked primarily with people who struggle with alcohol and other drug problems, both of us are well aware that change is rarely once and for all, a one-way door. This is one reason why quantum change is so fascinating and why the story of Scrooge has such enduring appeal. There is hope and capacity for change beyond our normal understanding.

TWO KINDS OF QUANTUM CHANGE

As we studied dozens of quantum change experiences over the years, they seemed to us to fall into two groups. The two kinds have much in common, including the attributes described above. Yet they also seem to differ in important ways.

The Insightful Type

Some quantum changes are best characterized as insights, such as one might imagine to occur in psychotherapy. Suddenly the person comes to a new realization, a new way of thinking or understanding. This new conception may pertain to certain life problems or circumstances, or to self-perceptions, or to life and reality more broadly. These quantum changes break upon the person's consciousness with particular clarity and forcefulness. The "aha" is deep and often of such magnitude as to leave the person stunned or breathless. From the moment of realization, the person is confident of its truth.

Toward the end of the time, a really great sense of peace and well-being enveloped me. And I knew—I mean I knew, not believed, not thought, I knew, as in one has truth or knowledge of—that I had made probably the most important step I would ever take in my life.

Insightful quantum changes have a quality of growing out of life experiences. Although they occur in salient, identifiable, memorable moments, they tend to follow from the person's development rather than being an intrusion into it. There is a sense of continuity. When we asked people what is still the same, here are some of the answers they gave:

My compassion for other people is still the same. I was a nurse before, and I'm still a nurse.

I'm still hyper. I'm still real talkative. I still have some trouble with my temper. It's much better, though. That's something I've been praying, working on, getting some results with. I still like my home and my family.

The physical world was the same; nothing seemed different. From that point on it just seemed like I had a different attitude. I had just had hope that maybe things would be OK.

I'm totally different than I was. I am not the person I used to be, in any shape or form. Well, now, I take that back. Maybe there is one thing. I have strength. I've always been strong, a strong person. That strength has always been there.

Subjectively, insightful quantum changes are distinctly different from ordinary reasoning processes, from "coming to the conclusion that" or deciding. Yet they are not so far out of the range of normal experience. People may talk of these insights "as though" they had come to a conclusion or decision, yet the experience is distinctively different from ordinary conscious thinking and reasoning. There may be no immediate sense of being acted upon or in the grip of something beyond the self, as is usually the case with epiphanies, but the insights arrive suddenly, vividly, and with a sense of benevolent permanence. A man whose insight came as a dramatic and transforming surprise told us, "Instantly, I mean *instantly*, I saw things totally differently." Like several other quantum changers, he likened the instantaneous force to a lightning bolt. One woman described her curative insight as "an instant thought, a split second," and compared it to the sudden opening of floodgates: "It seems like it happened in a flash, and then that was it. There was no turning back."

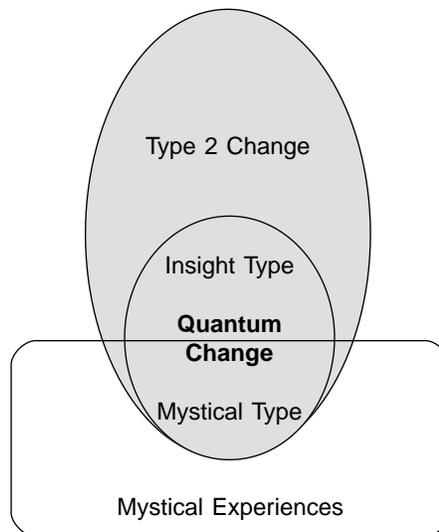
The Mystical Type

Mystical transformations, or *epiphanies*, are experienced as quite out of the ordinary, qualitatively different from insightful turning points. In many respects they resemble classic descriptions of mystical experiences. Just as not all quantum changes are mystical, however, so not all mystical experiences lead to quantum changes. More commonly a mystical experience arrives, by invitation or surprise, and then passes on, leaving distinctive traces that fade within a few hours or days. It may fill the person with awe at the moment, but there is no sense of a turning point, of passing through a one-way door. The routine life that ensues is all too familiar. One man observed:

My procrastination hasn't changed. And I think, also, I take my family for granted a lot. In some ways that hasn't changed. I went through an incredible experience but still tend to dump on my wife and kids—to not treat her with the same sort of interest, conversation, or enthusiasm that I'd give to a stranger.

With the mystical type of quantum change, however, the person knows immediately that something major has happened and that life will never be the same again. There is no question about it, and some would say there was even no choice about it.

It was tempting for us to say that the mystical type constitutes “real” quantum change. It is more dramatic, and in some ways a better and clearer example. The stories of Scrooge and of George Bailey are epiphanies. The stunning revelation of Saul/Paul on the road to Damascus is unambiguously out of the realm of ordinary experience. The insightful type of quantum change seems to have more continuity with ordinary reality (and for that reason, is easier to write off as “nothing but . . .”). Yet as we listened to personal accounts, we found that insightful quantum changes, while less startling and dramatic than the uninvited epiphany, seemed no less profound or lasting in its impact. As will become apparent, there are far too many similarities to arbitrarily designate one or the other type as definitive. Both tend to impart a mysterious and enduring sense of peacefulness. Both mark the beginning of lasting and often pervasive changes in the person's life. Both usually involve a significant alter-



ation in how one perceives other people, the world, oneself, and the relationships among them.

What epitomizes the mystical type is the noetic sense of being acted upon by something outside and greater than oneself. Vivid recall for time, place, and details is more common with this type. Although sometimes coming at the invitation of prayer or a cry for help, mystical transformations are often unexpected and uninvited guests whose appearance, like Scrooge's spirits, can be most unsettling. Epiphanies also tend to be accompanied by the classic markers of mystical experiences more generally (such as temporary alteration of sensation and perception), which we will discuss in Chapter 10.

Are the Two Types Distinct?

Classifications of behavior and experience are always imperfect. Although we have distinguished two types of quantum change—the insightful and the mystical—there are experiences that seem to lie in the border region and are difficult to categorize. Many elements, as you will see in the stories, overlap both types, and their differences are small in comparison to their similarities. Our research thus far suggests that the two types are not completely separate but rather lie

along what a statistician would call a bimodal distribution. The two types represent ends of a continuum. Cases seem to pile up at each end, but there are also some in the gray area in the middle.

The two types are meant to be a starting point. We found it useful and enlightening to describe quantum changes as occurring in at least these two common forms. There may be other types, or other classification systems may prove to be helpful. This is to say that one ought not to place too much importance on classifying every experience, or to be troubled if one falls in the middle and seems difficult to fit into our typology.

We have used the two kinds of quantum change as a way of organizing the middle section (Parts II and III) of this book. We will say more about each of the two types, conveying stories that show their similarities and differences. Before we look more closely at the insightful type, however, it is worth considering what was happening in the lives of the storytellers just before their experience occurred. It will give you some sense of the diversity of quantum changers before the change happened, the many starting points from which their lives began to converge.