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Learning how to let go and manage change

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For most of us, transitions are tough.

Even the predictable rhythmic changes of the calendar and the seasons, of the sun and the moon, have an impact. Many religions and cultures recognize this, formally observing the diurnal passage between light and darkness, between days of work and days of rest, between waxing and waning nights.

And the syndrome of Sunday evening blues is so recognized that an upcoming CTV documentary, *Sunday Night*, looks at that regularly unsettling passage between weekend and workplace.

Autumn is a particularly difficult transition. The ease of summer is replaced by the stress of school, cottages and boats are dismantled, vacation time is spent (with credit card statements bearing the damages) and, in this part of the world, nature starts to turn wanton and withdraw her grace, warning us to seek indoor comforts before her icy grasp.

Am I being overly dramatic? Blame it on my post-vacation melancholia, the transition to reality after three weeks in the fabled forests and fortresses of Transylvania, the luxe cafes of Budapest and Bucharest, and the pleasure of potent, homemade, twice-distilled plum or pear spirits (palinca) also known as "peasants' antibiotic."

Fortunately, this week, I was invited to a mental health conference, Making Gains 2004, sponsored by the Canadian Mental Health Association.

Naturally, I chose a session titled "Managing the Big Fat Changes in Life."

Presenter and "change coach" Peggy Grall, smart and funny and a tonic for the transition-challenged, said straight away that "change is messy and difficult for most people." And that, she said, goes for all change — small change, big change and "big fat" change.

Of course, it's those big fat changes that stymie people most. Grall was presenting to mental health care workers and so dealt mostly with professional change and organizational change.

But her new book, *Just Change It — The Fast Track Guide To Personal & Professional Renewal*, is a helpful, inspiring and insightful guide to deciding when and how to make changes in your personal life, too, and how to effect those changes. (The book is available at Grall's website, <http://www.justchangeit.com>, and at amazon.com; it will soon be available at Chapters.)

The changes thrust upon us, whether back-to-school or autumnal equinox or even changes in the workplace, we can usually manage, more or less. But it's choosing change that often leaves us paralyzed. "Fear is the hugest block," says Grall. "Fear that you won't be capable, fear that maybe this is the wrong choice, not the right thing, or maybe too much work."

Grall says that change itself is usually not the problem. You can move to a new place just by packing up your stuff and transporting it. You can leave a relationship just by moving out or hiring a lawyer to serve divorce papers. You can switch jobs if you find a new one.

The problem, Grall acknowledges, is the transition.

"Transition involves letting go," she observes. "It involves saying goodbye and loss and grief." Grall explains that her daughter got married last weekend and was elated about the marriage — "but it was an ending of her single life and whenever there's an ending, there's some grief.

"That's part of the difficulty of transition, and often we don't stop to honour that grief and loss and ending. Certainly, in organizations that doesn't happen."

In her book, divided into three sections titled "On Your Mark," "Get Set" and "Go," Grall offers techniques for deciding whether to choose change and how to make it happen.

She suggests asking yourself, "Do I want this or need this? If I both want and need something, then I'm going to go for it."

Grall herself went through great changes in her life. Born and raised in California, she accompanied her husband to Yellowknife where he left her with three young children and no support. She managed to go back to school, become a psychotherapist, remarry and create a successful business as a coach, speaker and author.

"There's built in, for a lot of us, this underlying message of 'Don't be too happy,'" she says. "There's a fear of happiness, and it's almost comforting to have problems to chew on. We may have learned that from our families of origin.

"And if we were not taught to make choices and to live with the consequences, then we can be very choice avoidant. We may have learned to abdicate choices, or let other people choose for us so we don't have to take on the responsibility for choosing."

The good news is that it's possible to learn how to choose change and to manage transitions — even when the days are getting shorter and another summer is as far away as, well, Transylvania.