

# Crisis as a Turning Point

by Charlyne Gelt, Ph.D.

*I was one of those physically and emotionally abused wives that just kept coming back because I had to prove to myself that I could do it. The straw that finally broke that camel's back was when he came home one night and he and I started arguing and he ripped the phone off the wall. That was it. That was when I knew, 'I'm done;' it was all it took. It was a build-up to that point. I had to make sure that I had done everything I could to save my marriage. So, to save myself, I had to walk away.*

Crisis can be an ongoing way of life, a perpetual state of confusion and fear, or an event. Ideally, it is a turning point, a path of awakening, self-reflection, and an opportunity for growth and individuation. As such, turning points can lead us to create change so that our lives become more joyful, more meaningful, and more worthwhile.

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Psychologists have spent a lot of time researching what motivates change in human behavior. I see change as two-fold: external and internal. Turning lead into gold is trivial by comparison! External life crises provide opportunities that can lead to turning points but, in themselves, are not turning points. On the one hand, accepting a perpetual crisis may replicate the non-communication, the rage, the trauma or frustration one witnessed growing up. So, it is familiar; it becomes a real comfortable shoe. Accepting crisis as "my lot in life" is a learned behavioral reaction but it need not be a way of life. It is an unconscious choice. On the other hand, life crises do have the potential to push us against the wall, or out of the comfort zone. In which case, there's no turning back. In the Wizard of Oz, a tornado knocks Dorothy unconscious. Dorothy and Toto travel the yellow brick road, a

metaphorical search for awareness and "home." Dorothy is not the only heroine traveling on an identity-forging series of adventures in search of the lost or unknown parts of the self. She, like others, who get hit over the head by external crisis, or uprooted by inner turmoil, search for a cure-all, a magical wizard to make things right. In this case those life crises become turning points. The magical wizard, however, lies buried within. Now, begins an inner journey, a struggle to 'know thyself.' Each of us experiences life crises though we may not be aware of them as opportunities for growth and change.

There comes a time in our lives when we need to make some really hard decisions for ourselves. Understanding the emotional bond, the invisible ribbons, and the internalized messages we have digested that connect to unhealthy relationship choices is one step in breaking free from emotional slavery. If we are listening, there comes a time when we also have to be able to stand up and say: 'I don't deserve to be treated like this.' It's empowering to be in touch with that kind of inner strength, to think one's own thoughts, to say what needs to be said, and take action in behalf of the self. When we can do that, the result is an internal paradigm shift in our way of thinking. It's a clean sweep that affects all aspects of our lives: work, friends, family, and intimate relationships. The end result is more than a

behavioral change, more than learning another way of doing the same thing; it is a true, *second-order* change, clarity of mind-set, a change in the way one sees the self, identity. There is no turning back.

In simpler words: change your thinking, change your life! All of us experience crises in our lives and for the most part, it leads us nowhere but back to status quo. The impetus for life change, the kick in the pants, often comes with external life-cycle events: divorce, illness, death of a spouse, etc. To move away from the comfort zone, to move away from fear, shut down, and emotional withdrawal to a deeper, second order change means looking in the mirror and suffering painful states of self-reflection, questioning one's beliefs, and facing ourselves in the mirror of our soul. There are times when this state is self-propelled, but for most of us it is created by external, unwelcome events that upset our status quo.

Do you fold or are you challenged to stretch, to learn from experience, to grow?

Crisis opens a doorway, is an opportunity to address short-term goals or issues that swim across the surface. Direct, honest, open

communication is a huge step out of stuck. Long-term therapy, however, shines the light on deeply embedded, destructive beliefs that keep one stuck in the muddy waters of resentment, fear, or a victim position. Walking that "yellow brick road," "leaving home," leaving a "comfortable shoe" of toxic emotional environments turns continual life crisis from a life style into an event.

What we are being asked to do is reverse the wheel of history, change our inner story, our perceptions, and transform deeply embedded belief systems, there-by radically transforming ourselves, and our relationship dynamics. From a psychological perspective, crisis, then becomes an opportunity for a transformative journey. Welcome to the journey!

In my private practice, I work with individuals, couples and groups to evaluate those beliefs, and tease out the weeds of shame and blame that block us from achieving our full potential. Regardless of the mode of treatment, I recognize this work takes courage, consistency, and support. I offer new tools in a caring, supportive environment to work through individual, couple, and family issues while developing healthier coping skills.

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