
Navigating Transition

with a winning attitude



Realistic Optimism

BY MALCOLM

There is nothing quite as effective as change, when it comes to unearthing what we really believe, and how deeply embedded those beliefs are. If we really are the sum of our decisions to this moment, then we also need to accept that we have made decisions which as far as possible are in line with our beliefs, world view, values, temperament and deficits (yes those are highly influential although we would rather not talk about that).

I define transition as the art of taking charge of how change affects us, and not just being passengers or victims of it. Many changes are imposed upon us, some of which are unavoidable such as ageing or organisational restructuring of our work place. While the raw facts of what is happening to us may be out of our control, our response to and management of them is certainly not.

Basically, attitude is everything. As the old song says 'I've looked at life from both sides now', and let me say again that attitude is everything. I've done it both well and poorly. I've resisted the inevitable, delayed the optional but necessary, and have the scars to prove it. That said, I have also learned to manage myself much better over the years and do life pretty much on the front foot these days.

So what attitudes allow us to make positive transitions, rather than being mere victims of change?

What follows is a selection of attributes which will help us to make the most of each situation life presents us with. However, while each of these involves some level of flexibility or agility of attitude, let's remember that there are some core things which ought not to be up for negotiation.

Our core values, faith and principles are not negotiable, which does not mean that these things should not mature as we grow, or should not be open to analysis to ensure that they stand up to inspection. As a follower of Christ, there are core beliefs which I will never deny, but many of which have developed greater breadth and strength over the years. As a child of my particular family I have been given certain values, which I have considered carefully, in most cases have embraced, in some cases modified and a few I have entirely rejected.

I was probably born a naive optimist, then life got hold of me and I became a cynic, and I've now moved on to being an optimistic realist. This works for me. As an innocent/naive young person I held high expectations of how the world should be, how people (myself included) would behave, and had little understanding of how the world really worked. When this default position failed me so badly, I was too young to properly analyse and understand, so instead simply threw it away and became cynical; one poor choice followed by another. Of course we are not all born the same, thank goodness, but at some point we all need to develop a healthy realistic optimism.

Optimism opens the windows of our mind and heart, pessimism closes them. It is as simple as that. Optimism keeps looking for the bus, pessimism says it has already gone or will not come. The realistic optimist says "I'm at the right bus stop, and even if the bus is late I will still catch it". This is not being gullible or over idealistic, it's simply knowing our ground and believing that we will recognise opportunity when it comes. I've always been haunted by the thought of quitting just a moment before the answer comes.



This approach takes faith, confidence and tenacity, and if you have employed this approach for anything significant, you will be aware that the waiting period is full of challenges, including second guessing yourself, having your values and principles tested and so on, and there always seems to be someone around to offer a cheaper but inferior option.

So what does Realistic Optimism allow us to do?

- View the full menu of possibilities.
- Allows us to have fun on the way, and transform uncertainties into adventures.
- Realise that there is 'more than one way to skin a cat' as the old saying goes, and with due apology to cat lovers.
- Be confident that somewhere in the changed situation there is something beneficial if I just look at it correctly.
- Many of the best things in life have happened to people when their plans were rudely interrupted and they went on to discover new possibilities.



I once worked with a primary school principal who had this well thought out. When faced with class structure his preference was for single grade classes, but often numbers and resourcing meant that composite classes were necessary. He would have to sell this non-ideal option to anxious parents and concerned teachers.

I asked him how he navigated this. His reply has stayed with me. He said, "If I can have single grade classes then I tell them all the advantages of that. If we have to have composite classes then I outline the advantages of that". Both things were true, and his attitude kept a very happy staff and parent body. No lies or spin involved, just a real and optimistic approach.

How can you make change work for good in your situation?