

COPING WITH CHANGE AT MID-LIFE: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE STORY OF OZ

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We have been hearing a lot about change. Change is all around us in our external environment. How is it impacting you? As I work with mid-life generations poised to enter what we often call the third act, many of them are experiencing fear, anxiety, inertia or listlessness. They have already retired; they are approaching retirement or want to work fewer hours to enjoy more personal pursuits. But now external events have immobilized them. With their retirement nest eggs depleted, they now believe they need to work a few more years. Some they fear losing their current job? Or they may already have a pink slip. Change caused by external events or anticipated through our own actions generates fear. Bob Waterman in "The Renewal Factor" suggests, "Even when our minds say change is normal, our stomachs quiver at the prospect." Those of us who have been through many changes in our lives still find our stomachs quivering.

So how do we find the courage to face the fear, determine what road to take, and turn our dreams into reality? There are many metaphors for coping with change. One of my favorites is Dorothy's experience in Oz. As Dorothy tells her dog Toto, "We are not in Kansas anymore." We know that in 2009, so much has changed for us collectively that we are not living in the metaphorical "Kansas" anymore either. Our individual lives have either changed or are threatened with change. Some of us are hunkering down with anxiety and confusion waiting...waiting for something or someone...The Wizard perhaps... to help us return to "Kansas". Some of us want things to remain the same and we hang onto our current life style, maintaining the familiar habits, patterns and beliefs, hoping to ride out the storm in the cellar and come out when it has moved on. Others of us are following our own "yellow brick road" and taking the initiative to create the life we want to lead in the next few years, although it may be with fewer resources than we had hoped. The story of the Wizard of Oz offers us some wisdom to help us cope

with the turbulent storms swirling around us and encourage us to launch a brave start on the yellow brick road.

Dorothy's story begins on the farm in Kansas, a gray drab place where she is unhappy and afraid that crabby Almira Gulch will come and take Toto away. No one seems to care and she feels stuck believing that her only alternative is to run away. Just as many of us become stuck and unhappy in jobs, work and organizations that no longer provide opportunities for growth and challenge or for reward and recognition. We may want to run away too; or be so filled with fear and anxiety that we are stuck and can't move. In times like these, the blustery winds of our economic recession may also carry us unexpectedly to an unknown place like Oz?

Dorothy, like many of us, when she lands in Oz, is not an explorer or much of an adventurer. She doesn't really know how things work in this strange and unfamiliar land. But she knows what she wants ...she has a clear goal...to go back home. As Dorothy begins her trip down the yellow brick road to find the Wizard to help her get back home, she meets three important characters who are also stuck in their beliefs...the scarecrow, the tin man and the lion. What they learn by the time they have traveled the road, eliminated the wicked witch and discovered the Wizard is a mere mortal, is that when they believe in themselves, they have what they want...a brain, a heart, courage. These new friends provide Dorothy a support group that rescues her from spells and capture by the wicked witch. She also discovers she has her own resources to take her home....the ruby slippers.

What is the message for us stuck in our fear and inertia at midlife, wanting more from our lives, desiring clear goals, a purpose, and an opportunity to turn our dreams into reality or make a significant contribution to our community? If we take the plunge to leave the ease and familiarity of our farms in Kansas or we get blown away by the tornadoes churning through our economic environment, the characters walking the yellow brick road can give us insight for our survival. They can help us land on

our feet, become adventurous explorers and discover our calling. The insights from Dorothy's story suggest:

- 1) Create a clear picture, a vision, of what you want. Hold onto that vision through adversity and encounters with the wicked witch.
- 2) Get started, venture out on the yellow brick road, even if you only begin with small steps.
- 3) Explore the new terrain looking for new resources and contacts.
- 4) Develop your support system with fellow travelers. Support their visions as they also support yours.
- 5) Use resources you possess ...your familiar skills and abilities, your own ruby slippers, to empower yourself to accomplish needed tasks in the unfamiliar setting.
- 6) Remember that you have a brain to help you learn and meet new challenges.
- 7) Use your heart...appreciate what you have. There is "no place like home". Figure out what or where "home" is for you and express your gratitude.
- 8) Be courageous. This is the opportunity to discover your calling, rekindle purpose and meaning and turn your dreams into reality.
- 9) And finally, believe in yourself. You can transform "Kansas", find your own yellow brick road, overcome the wicked witch and with passion and purpose create a vital and energizing script for the third act of your life.