

Why Wishes Are Like Butterfly's Wings

Sometimes when I contemplate the disparity between the way I am and the way I would wish to be it seems as if there lays before me a Herculean task. Will I ever learn to file things away so that I can find them? When will I learn that keeping a regular track of my finances is so much easier than panicking at year end? How can I be more playful and relaxed in the face of life's challenges?

On superficial examination I am hugely changed from the person I was, say, twenty years ago. True there is also a strong sense of continuity, but huge changes too. In the intervening times I have acquired many new skills and had many more experiences. I am changed in circumstances, action and appearance. So much change, and yet, in some ways, so very little. Take the time to get to know me properly, to look through my eyes and into my soul, and you will meet the same person you would have met had you shaken my hand as my new colleague on the day of my first job, or even on my first day at school.

People do not change very much very often. We are perhaps too invested in how we are, too loyal to our existing way of being, to be prepared to make more than the smallest of changes to how we think and act. Incremental change wins over transformational change more often than not.

Many of us spend much of our lives hoping that others will change. We wish our partners would act differently: "If only he would talk about his feelings!"; "If only she would give me space!". We wish our children would be different: "Why does he have to be so noisy?" "Can't she do what she is told, just for once?" and we freely advise our friends on how to lead their lives without quite understanding why they do not share the insights to which we are privy. Yet we find it all but impossible to effect significant changes in ourselves.

Human change is glacial. For those of us engaged in the change business: psychotherapists, educators, community workers, this fact might seem cause for despair were it not for an interesting quirk of complex systems. With simple systems, as for example when one hammers down a nail, the result is pretty much proportionate to the effort. However with complicated systems such as the human psyche, or a social network such as a family or work team, one's impact can be disproportionate to one's effort. This is what Bertalanffy wrote about when he developed Systems Theory in the 1950s. It was he that described how the flapping of a butterfly's wings on one side of the globe might lead to a hurricane on the other. The trick in effecting change is not pushing hard anywhere, but pushing gently in the right place.

The family therapist Virginia Satir observed that when people become discouraged they stop wishing. In their despair, they believe that when reality is so removed from the reality they wish for there is nothing to be gained in wishing. They fail to appreciate that if one can just find the right place, then sometimes the slightest effort, maybe even a wish, can create the change they want.

What is it you wish for?

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