

Metamorphosis



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How and Why We Change

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For H,
who changed everything

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Omnia mutantur, nihil interit
Everything changes, but nothing is lost.

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XV

A NOTE ON SOURCES

In the interests of readability, ellipses have not been used within quotations from the interviews that appear throughout this book, but great care has been taken throughout to remain true to the speaker's meaning. A few names have been changed to protect privacy. Each contributor's testimony has been reported in good faith and while facts have been checked wherever possible, the text relies chiefly upon their accounts of dates, times and events.

INTRODUCTION

This book is an experiment in a way. And you, the reader, are invited to join in. No lab coat will be required or protective goggles. There will be no need for Bunsen burners or test-tubes, no computer programs capable of crunching large bodies of data, no microscopes, telescopes or horoscopes – although the future will be very much on our minds. Instead, this will be an intimate, personal affair, and all you need bring along by way of equipment is your imagination. So please, turn it loose from beneath the bell jar of your mind, let it flutter about the room and we can begin.

The experiment, in the loosest sense of the word, is about change: why we want it, whether it is possible, how we achieve it and what follows afterwards. To that extent, it is about the central story of our lives and how our imagination shapes what we hope for, what we fear. For which of us would not change something about our lives if we could? We labour daily under an astonishing range of cravings for transformations large and small. We yearn to go from fat to thin or sad to happy, bored to fulfilled, angry to peaceful, lonely to loved, steering our days from confusion to clarity, disillusionment to new meaning, fear to safety or failure to success.

Our culture is one in which, more than ever before, we feel entitled to change our experiences and ourselves to fit with our dreams and aspirations. That option to change, to be the author of one's own life, matters. It defines the extent of our freedom, entwining our most cherished ideas about equality, democracy, autonomy. Yet all too often we are flummoxed as to how to go about it – so much so that we become sitting ducks for a volley of quick-fix change solutions, from self-help books to diet plans, tranquil retreats to motivational mobile apps.

But this book is not about the quick fix. It is not about step plans or silver bullets or proscriptive methodologies. There is no desire here to add to that heap. Instead, we shall ask four central questions about change and answer them through real people who have changed and are changing. The experiment is about the power of their stories to open our minds, to show us new ways of thinking about change for ourselves.

Of course, the flip side of our frequent bewilderment about how to change is that everything – and everyone – changes all the time. Our spinning world is never still. Our rivers, as the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus observed more than two and a half millennia ago, they flow. We grow up. We grow old. We learn. We evolve, devolve, revolve. We get new jobs. We move house. We fall in love. And out of love. We make decisions. We change our minds. We become parents. People dear to us die. We are sad and then we are happy again. Old friends depart or fall from favour. New friends appear and make us smile. The sun sets. The sun rises. And tomorrow is a new day, every day, for everyone.

Heraclitus' famous point about the river was made obliquely in a fragment of manuscript that is frequently misinterpreted. It was not, as is often quoted, that because the waters change, you can never step into the same river twice.

Rather, it was that some things are what they are *because* they change. It is only a river *because* it flows. We are only human beings, not in spite of change, but *because* we change.

The truth is that we are better at this than we think. Indeed, we are masters of the change that drives life. We are endlessly adaptive and inventive, far less tractable than we assume or often feel. This is the *sine qua non* built into our life cycle and our very biology. The lingering childhood that is exclusive to the human animal is inextricably linked to the unique capacity of our brains for learning and for imaginative flight. This is what powers our ability to change, both individually and collectively, while remaining at some fundamental level the same thing, the same river, the same person. Change – as an unfolding process rather than a sovereign remedy – is *who we are*.

That is why the metamorphosis in this book is not that of the Roman poet Ovid's dreamscape, where people are turned (involuntarily) into animals, trees, birds, flowers, whirlpools in the ocean, constellations of stars in the sky. Indeed, you need a strong stomach for Ovid's classical catalogue of rape, suicide, incest, cannibalism and mutilation, in which sundry unrequited or unwholesome desires are met with violent punishment and fantastical transformation. Nor is the metamorphosis in this book that of Kafka's alienated salesman Gregor Samsa, as he scrabbles about as a beetle, or some say a cockroach, in his family's apartment. No, instead, one could do worse than turn to Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. Because the world that concerns us here is the one in which myriad small miracles of change and continuity take place every day. This is the world where caterpillars become beautiful butterflies and where people can and do change in extraordinary ways.

For metamorphosis is all around us, although within human beings it often takes longer than a few days. In

exploring why we *want* to change, we will see how the natural forces of external flux meet the spark of human agency in the desire to be master of our own lives. In examining the extent to which we *can* change in body and mind, we will discover the importance of choosing which changes to make, which doors to open. In unfolding *how* we change, we will find that we can make it happen not by scuttling the mystery of the process but by harnessing that mystery with pragmatism. And in asking what it is to *be changed*, what follows and sustains transformation, we will learn how resilient and yet how flexible our identity is, even to the most profound metamorphosis.

Most important of all, we shall meet a handful of remarkable people, whose stories contain some powerful change medicine. And this is the crux. There are countless blueprints for change out there: some of them daft, some of them the fruit of many years of sober empirical research. Yet not one of the people in the pages that follow – and this was not the objective but the key surprise of the research process – *not one of them* pursued change or found it through a single paradigm, a particular self-help book or step plan or therapeutic intervention. Yes, they read, they took advice, they explored established wisdoms and talking cures, but, above all, each was inspired in one way or another and each built their own change process. It came from within and *they did it*, no one else. Sometimes they struggled. Often they made mistakes. Frequently they avoided change, doubted it was even possible, but in the end, one day, one week, one year, they proved themselves wrong. They did it. It was about agency powered by imagination, by tenacity and often by courage.

So if you are in search of a handy manual on how to Change Your Life in Seven Days, you had better look elsewhere. But if you would like to understand what change is,

how and why it really happens – if you would care to experiment with whether these stories can move you to think afresh about metamorphosis in your own life – then please read on. And by all means, start building, start imagining. Yes, even start changing, like the nineteen fluttering butterflies that follow here.



PART I

WHY DO WE WANT TO CHANGE?

ON GROWING UP

Overlooking a quiet street of suburban houses, with neat front lawns and heathery hillside beyond, Police Sergeant Coxon sits in a tidy, plain living-room. He is not in uniform today, but his bearing is straight and a little formal, almost as though he were. On the floor there are two large baskets overflowing with soft toys, plastic trucks and those fabric picture books designed to withstand chewing by their readership. Over the hours that follow, these baskets periodically emit an incongruous coda of melody, a bleat or a moo, a tinny siren.

Sergeant Coxon has just come off night shift and his baby son is teething. He apologises for being 'a bit exhausted' and smiles, making a little circle on the closed lids of both eyes with surprisingly delicate, tapering fingertips.

Recently promoted to sergeant after a decade as a front-line constable, Coxon's beat is the southern hub of the Edinburgh urban area. There he and another sergeant run one of five emergency response teams, serving 120,000 people, from both affluent and deprived communities. His

conversation is punctuated with glimpses of what he calls the 'gritty' side of his work. Suicides, murder, sweeping brain matter off the tarmac after car crashes, the knock on an unsuspecting door with terrible news.

'Appalling things happen to people on a daily basis,' he says, the decorous precision of his Edinburgh accent taming the chaos for a moment, 'but you learn to deal with it and it's made me a better person, being a police officer. My mind has been broadened immeasurably, my insight into what really goes on out in the world.' He glances to the street outside, where a man is whistling as he washes his car. 'It's actually given me great faith in human nature and it's essential work.'

Everyone is changed in some way, small or large, by the job they do, the particular window on the world it affords, but that is only in part what Edmund Coxon's story is about. For insofar as any of us is *meant* to be one thing or the other, Ed, as people call him, was not *meant* to be a police officer. Indeed, the journey that brought him here to his black uniform and highly polished shoes is an immaculate example of why so many of us want to change: that confluence of organic, natural change process – call it growing up, if you will – with the sharp kick of individual agency that underpins all deliberate acts of transformation. It is a tale of how the reasons why we want to change, myriad as they are, all stem from a desire to be the author of our own lives and of how that can sometimes lead us to take on the most unexpected new forms.



On the subject of growing up, biologists have long argued that what happens to us during the transition from juvenility into adulthood is a change of body and mind more

profound than any other we experience. A few have even maintained that the hormonally controlled differentiation that takes the human animal through adolescence could reasonably be considered a variation of the biological ‘miracle’ of metamorphosis. It is a hypothesis that strikes an intuitive chord: we all know that the process of growing up, even well beyond our teens, changes who we are at some level. Indeed achieving our adult selves, learning to take control of our lives, often entails something akin to a metamorphosis, a profound transformation of our mode of being in the world.

The only visible trace today of Ed’s big change, his metamorphosis, is propped up in a far corner of his dining-room – the cocoon of a black violin case. The instrument inside, as Ed mentions with pride, once belonged to the legendary violinist and conductor Sir Neville Marriner, founder of the Academy of St Martin in the Fields. For, strange to tell, before Ed Coxon became a police constable, he was a classical violinist with a career that saw him play in some of the finest orchestras in the world. Moreover, it was a life carved out for him and by him from his earliest childhood. A violinist was what Ed Coxon was always meant to be.

The son of a university classics professor and a singing teacher, Ed grew up in a house where music dominated. His little bedroom was next door to the room where his mother taught, with its grand piano, shelves of scores and gramophone records of operas, symphonies, quartets.

‘I was just enveloped in music’, he says. ‘It was’ – he thinks for a moment – ‘a pre-existing condition. It never occurred to me I would do anything other than be a musician.’

A chorister from the age of six in a specialist music school, Ed took up the violin at nine and had an immediate, dazzling aptitude for it. ‘Even when I didn’t have the instrument in my hands, I would play tunes on my fingers. I just had music going on in my head all the time.’

He describes with almost religious reverence going to a concert a few years later by the Chamber Orchestra of Europe in the vast domed bulk of the Usher Hall, just below Edinburgh Castle. Looking down from his seat high above, Ed had thought, he now recollects with teenage intensity, ‘God, I want to do that. I’ve got to play in that orchestra. *That is all I want to do.*’

The ease with which the police sergeant switches from talking about murder and car smashes to re-inhabiting the musical passions of his youthful self seems to show how unconditional that love once was. Yet it would be the tough realities of the real, grown-up world, both in and outside the music profession, which would begin to erode the young violinist’s idealism and his vocation.

At just seventeen Ed went to music college in London and sure enough, by the age of twenty he was playing with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, whom he had heard in Edinburgh that decisive day. A promising career now unfolded. He toured the concert halls of the world, played for legendary conductors. Ed names them still with hushed reverence – Abbado, Bernstein, Doráti – like so many holy men. Meanwhile, he was growing up in other ways too. He offers a photograph of himself from the late 1980s, a moodily handsome young man dressed in concert black, his violin propped on one wrist, the very image of talent and confidence. ‘The only crises I suffered in those days were with girls’ and Ed laughs a little mirthlessly. Without offering much more in the way of detail – his wife is in the room next door – he mentions that at twenty-two his girlfriend at the time fell pregnant. The couple hastily married and the baby was born.

‘I was too young, really’, he says with a barely perceptible shake of his head. ‘And this was the point at which I realised life wasn’t quite so rosy, because I now was going to have

to do things for other people' – he taps his knee with a fingertip as though bringing himself to account – 'a child, a wife, bills, taxation. I've got to get through these auditions, because I'm responsible for this. I've got bills to pay.'

On cue, a toy buried in one of the baskets pipes up with a few bars of *Pop Goes the Weasel* and, giving it a little kick, Ed explains that this is when the doubt began. 'Well, maybe it wasn't a doubt so much as a desire,' he says. 'I didn't doubt that I wanted to continue in music, but I had the first seeds of desire to learn other things in life and that these were things that I possibly had a duty to understand.'

The marriage lasted just eighteen months, but the subtle shift of outlook that had accompanied Ed's transition to fatherhood refused to go away. Instead, the questioning spiralled.

'I felt like there was this disconnect between me and the outside world,' he says, 'inhabiting, as I had for many years, this wonderful parallel universe of music and now I wanted rid of that insularity and to actually have a look, see what's going on out in the real world. Because how connected to the real world is all this?' Ed holds an imaginary violin in the air for a moment, which then evaporates in his hands as he shrugs and says, 'I began to feel that it's not.'

So one day, unbeknownst to his colleagues in the orchestra, Ed sat down in his Brixton lodgings and wrote the opening words of a new story for himself. Inked into blank boxes, the words filled an application form to become a Special Constable with the Metropolitan Police, the Constabulary's part-time, unpaid volunteer force. And here came Revelation Number One: a reply came by return, inviting Ed for an interview.

'It'd just been a kind of experiment, like dipping my elbow into the bathwater, you know? But now I thought, *Oh my God.*' Ed beams for the first time all morning.