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How I learnt to embrace change and conquer fear

Change can feel scary, but it is a sure path towards growth and self-discovery.

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As we look back on the past year and take stock of our experiences, we are wont to mentally prepare for the incoming one. PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: PEXELS

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When do the 12 days of Christmas start and end? The lyrics to the popular carol don't say. For Christians, Christmastide – nearly 20 days spanning Dec 24 until early January – is the season to commemorate Jesus' Nativity.

Yet, time and tide wait for no man, not even Christmastide, in a bustling, multicultural city like Singapore. As a Catholic Singaporean, I am used to the abrupt shift in gears once Dec 25 has come and gone.

In the short few days leading up to Jan 1, change is in the air: Wintry carols disappear from the PA system, clearance sales reach fever pitch, Orchard Road lighting starts to come down, and the buzz turns to preparations for Chinese New Year.

With the spirit of change afoot, the mood also gets reflective. As we look back on the past year and take stock of our experiences, we are wont to mentally prepare for the incoming one. This hopeful desire commonly translates to New Year's resolutions we hear people around us making, or read about in their Instagram captions.

According to a US-based survey published in November by the Statista Research Department, living healthier (23 per cent), personal improvement and happiness (21 per cent), and losing weight (20 per cent) ranked highest on 2022's list of New Year's resolutions.

On the other hand, despite the best of intentions, "Many resolutions are made on Dec 31, and go down the drain on Jan 2", claims Dr Bas Verplanken, professor of social psychology at the University of Bath. His 2016 paper published in the Journal Of Environmental Psychology underlined the gulf between expressing a commitment to change and putting the words into practice; in short, change can occur only after entrenched habits are dismantled.

On this score, fear is a key stumbling block to any kind of transformation. A 2017 article published on Inc.com claimed that people are averse to the sense of uncertainty associated with change, and what they stand to lose if they veer from their usual patterns. Thus, many consider it more bearable to remain in a familiar but unhappy situation than to wade into murky new waters.

I can attest to this. Since graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree two decades ago, I had wanted to embark on postgraduate studies. At face value, the tired cliché of "life getting in the way" applies. In reality, however, the route to my midlife master's degree was paved with the comforting structure of routine and the habits built around a full-time job and motherhood. It had basically taken a shock to the system – worsening mental and physical health amid a series of personal and professional setbacks – for me to determine that a complete pivot was in order.

Deciding I was ready for change was the easy part, however, as it was no harder than making a New Year's resolution. The crippling anxiety that came after was the most challenging bit. Once I received my acceptance letter from Nanyang Technological University, I agonised over the opportunity cost of making this change.

For instance, I worried about family finances; needing a career break to study did not alter the fact that my husband and I had two children to raise and a mortgage to service. And how would I fare as a mature student? The last time I had written an academic essay, we still saved them on floppy disks.

Out of the educational system for so long, could I hold my own against younger classmates and keep up with the rigours of academic life? The most terrifying scenario yet was putting myself through all the trouble and failing. What, then? There was no backup plan.

Wired against danger

Apparently, it was natural for me to have felt that way. A Harvard Business Review article cites findings from a study to suggest that humans instinctively fear change because our brains are wired to protect us against danger. This reticence towards relinquishing control is thus what keeps us from making choices that lead to unknown outcomes.

Social conditioning has a part to play as well: If we grow up in an environment where family and people around us treat change as something to be avoided, we are less likely to see it as an opportunity for personal growth.

To this end, a strategic mindset might help us view change through a more empowering lens. According to research by the National University of Singapore's psychology department, this involves an openness to trying out new approaches to tackle challenges. Its 2020 paper published in the Proceedings Of The National Academy Of Sciences stated that anyone can cultivate a strategic mindset by asking themselves some basic questions: "What are things I can do to help myself (and others)?" "Is there a way to do this even better?" "How might I go about this differently?" and "Is there another approach I can try to help this go better?" Making the strategic changes would thus facilitate greater progress towards achieving educational, professional and life goals.

"You have not grown old, and it is not too late/to dive into your increasing depths/where life calmly gives out its own secret," wrote Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke in *You See, I Want A Lot*. Resolving to more fully embrace change, I carried these words close to my heart throughout the 1½ years of my Master of Arts candidacy. Although the fear never went away, learning to make peace with its nagging presence was a way to manage it.

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Fast forward to today, I have completed my programme and submitted my dissertation. I've also had the good fortune of resuming full-time employment while awaiting official graduation.

I cannot take credit alone: a supportive family, an encouraging supervisor and helpful classmates deserve my gratitude. To some degree, I also have fear to thank, for helping me navigate change so mindfully.

One final thing about change – it never ends. Each new change births several others. This Christmastide, as I enter a new season of my professional life, I fear, just a little, what changes lie in store.

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