

# THE OBSESSION WITH CHANGE

by **Susie Orbach**



Jim is fifty eight. He's started to dye his hair. Not discreetly as did men of yesteryear with pomade. But the full monty. Peroxide and L'Oréal. Because you're worth it. He's considering having more hair sewn in. He's already had derma fillers and botox. His mantra is self-improvement. Updating his body is just part of it. He takes classes in sirocco and mandarin. A makeover of his flat is on the agenda. He cooks, has a wide circle of friends and dates like a metrosexual. Spiritually, he goes for the modern pick and mix - Gurdjieff, meditation and mindfulness. His work as a surgeon puts him in a secure financial position and keeps him at the edge of new developments in medical science.

Today a new narrative of choice and constant updating provides the context for Jim's activities. There is a sense that change,

personal enhancement and being on trend are especially valuable. Knowing the right restaurants, the must-see opera, the contemporary take on cut flowers, the place to holiday, is not just an accompaniment to life but the expression of what a contemporary globalized life is. Transformation, upgrading, revamping have become valued categories of late. But for whom? What does a diet of constant change offer the individual and the collective? What's driving the imperative? Whom does it serve? How does it affect us individually and socially? And what are the downsides?

I recently visited China. They say if you leave town for a month, you no longer recognize your neighbourhood. Building is everywhere. My luxury hotel room in Beijing overlooked a 16 lane highway one way with a ten-laner under it. It was considered a fine view. Hyper-Modernity is relished.

Displaced people replaced by Porsches, Toyotas, Hermès, Estée Lauder and Gucci in mall upon mall upon mall - though no-one I met could afford what was in the mall. New buildings and superfast subways emblazon a society on speed. Meanwhile we are encouraged to embrace the pace of change that mimics the behaviours of orders put into the Chinese factories. New clothes not every season but every few weeks - even if there is no money for it. To accommodate this we can now all have multiple personalities.

Like the pop videos that have their stars performing as sex kittens, bosses, mamas, chatelaines, motor bike enthusiasts, acrobats all in the space of 2.47 minutes, we too can consume the vast range of goods produced by donning hunting garb on a Saturday morning, no matter that we don't hunt, and then a demure afternoon tea outfit later in the day. As six o'clock

approaches a cocktail dress will suit, and later at night there'll be sexually teasing lingerie for the bedroom. Changing outfits has been democratized and extended well outside the haute bourgeoisie and Celebrity culture. It nourishes the engine of late capitalism. As we spin into constant motion, fitting ourselves to the latest must-have, we feed the beast that is the market. Those on lower incomes do not escape these imperatives. Indeed they are encouraged to buy into the idea - as are the upper and middle classes - that belonging, being a someone, means wearing the clothes, having the car, showing one's stuff. Class is allegedly replaced by aspiration. If you can look the part, you can be the part. The realities of massive social inequality - the greatest we have seen in the postwar period - are effaced by the carapace of individual self-invention. Change is the cruel poultice offered to soothe the horrors of injustice.

The notion of self-invention is worth mentioning here too. It's an appealing idea. It seems to open up the world for the individual, enabling her or him to think through different options and possibilities. It says we needn't be trapped by our circumstances. Wherever we come from, whatever we've done, whatever mistakes we've made, whatever direction we've gone in so far, we can think, we can evaluate and we can change. We don't need to be stuck in emotional, economic or social prisons. We can become the person we want to be.

Who could fault such desire or the endeavor that it implies? Why would one criticize the sentiment? Self-invention sounds purposeful and serious. Rethinking, evaluating and developing self-knowledge is an essential food for the human spirit. But let's slow down a bit. If we fold in the other ideas that go with it - it is as though one can discard one's

past like an unwanted dress or suit. But we can't. People aren't a fashion. They have history, they come from somewhere and they have attachments to where they come from. The most abused, the most ignored, the most hurt - all those who might wish to flee and reinvent themselves know they can only move forward with the acknowledgment of their past and what they have come from. Otherwise self-invention means dislocation from the history one has lived and a deep dislocation from oneself. In striving to be 'the person you want to be' there may be enormous losses, fracturing and alienation.

Of late I've seen a rather disturbing number of younger people who've been on the self-invention path and for whom this hasn't worked out so well. Their forms of self-invention have gone like this: get into the best universities, get a perfect body; get a relationship with someone who is the sort of person that someone I am striving to be like would be with; get a high-paying job; live somewhere glamorous. The women and men I have seen have come from the UK and from abroad. From working-class to upper middle-class backgrounds. Class is always a feature they are trying to escape and reinvent even though it might not be articulated thus. Money is always an important measure of the self-invention. Exterior is always valorized, so that what is shown on the outside - be it degrees, jobs, houses, pets, friends with status, whatever can be exhibited - is at a premium. But confusion reigns, which is why they end up at the psychoanalyst's office. Who am I?, they say. What do people see? Why am I not feeling good given I've achieved the things I've gone after?

Things don't work because the propulsion to self-invent and change has been driven by the renunciation of unmet emotional

needs. Reinvention tries to say: I don't need what I didn't get, I will get it elsewhere, I will get for myself, I will be my own creation and my own object of admiration. But the sad fact is, we do need to understand the impact of not getting what one needed. It can't be replaced by degrees or clothes or hairstyles or money. We would do better to ask, what is the problem for which re-invention is the answer? If we can't address that question, then consuming markers of status and inventing new lifestyles will be an endless treadmill benefiting few - least of all those on a quest to feel safe and to find a place of belonging and mattering. Not getting what one needed hurts. It is through accepting the reality of that, and grieving for what one has lost, that a new kind of inner belonging can take root.

As we know, solutions to things going wrong can start very early. A recent UNICEF report examining why children in the UK were ranked lowest of the developed nations for well-being found that it came from the relentless consumerism offered to time-poor families. Parents are under pressure and consumerism stepped into the space. What kind of horror are we visiting on children by implying that having things, more things, new things, is *the* prescription for life?

Unlike Sweden, which has legislation banning selling to the under-twelves on TV, the hard sell is targeted at our children. They are unprotected. Children, from the richest to the poorest abodes in the land, are primed to update their possessions and glean a sense of value through the acquisition of the newest toy. They are being prepared for a life where value will be deemed to come through the rapid change of goods and purchases. Consumerism is the ugly sister of change. Its pleas for the latest toy and gadget ring out from every household.

Choice and change have become onerous rather than fun. Change purely for profit means that the cultural moment lasts a few months instead of a few years. The designs and aspirations mutate rapidly. It will be hard for people to look back on these times and see the aesthetic imprint of a decade in the way that we readily identify the 1920s, the 1930s, the 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s. Perhaps that doesn't matter. But I am not so sure. We don't live for the historical record but neither are we ahistorical beings. The idea that we will pass on something, make the world a better place, leave something to be remembered, has been our custom and cultural contract; but how realistic is this contract today? The voraciousness of change is affecting us badly: socially, environmentally and individually.

Therapy is often characterized as a change technology. Some might argue that the whole point of therapy is to change. But there is change and there is change. Where the public discourse is about re-invention and the mantra that 'you can be anyone', therapy can be co-opted or even developed to be the crucial change agent that provides levers to propel wanted transformation. Certainly therapies are sold that way and no-one enters therapy looking for stasis. Indeed I am not arguing against change itself in this article. That would be ludicrous. Change is part of the human condition. It is what makes us and defines us as humans. We develop, we do things differently; we aren't moles building the same kind of hills over and over and over again.

Human consciousness and existence is predicated on the capacity to change and develop. There are few things more delightful than watching babies take their first steps, or discovering one can actually communicate in a foreign tongue after the huge

efforts of learning the grammar and vocabulary and stumbling inarticulately for ages. Nor is emotional change to be sniffed at. We get great solace from knowing that behaviours coming from feelings that have customarily riled us can modify. Knowing that we can develop from our habitual responses and enter into ourselves in a new way is magical and marvellous - part of what makes life worth living. So it's not change itself I am contesting, but the commercial harnessing of the idea of change which brings in so much destructiveness.

Therapy is more concerned with exploring the problems and impediments to change as one is in the process of change. People come to therapy because they are in difficulty with themselves. Something, some things or indeed many things about their experience are not working. They have exhausted their personal emotional resources. They are frustrated. A crisis, often precipitated by loss, propels them to seek the reflective space that therapy offers. As they try to find the words and the feelings for what so hurts, the experience mutates. It doesn't disappear, but it sits inside them differently. Words and feelings give shape to experience that up till then has lain leaden and unformulated. Once engaged with, it has the possibility to be part of oneself in a different way. The experience isn't split off, disowned or repressed in a manner that is undermining. It becomes instead known and thus integrated.

That ownership is transformative. It constitutes change. Not the kind of change that is about a dismissal or rejection of self, but a change that occurs as a result of an acceptance. This is a paradox but one known well by theologians as well as psychotherapists. What we cannot acknowledge hangs about, repeating on us. It cannot be

digested. If we can move some inches towards acceptance then we have created a new emotional situation with different possibilities. I am not talking about the simple mea culpa of fessing up to wrongdoing. That is important, of course, but it doesn't in itself open up other avenues. It simply re-exports something that has been exported.

The kind of acceptance that psychotherapy can offer situates personal anguish within the nexus of actual as well as imagined motivations. Therapy endeavors to help us understand why one interprets a particular situation in the way that one does and to see our own participation in our distress. It asks the individual to consider the fullest possible circumstances which have caused the upset.

Let's take a felt sense of abandonment. Therapy asks: why do I feel abandoned? What in the situation is causing me to have the experience of abandonment? Have I actually been abandoned? Was that what the other was doing? Did they mean to abandon me? Was their behavior careless or something entirely different? Am I misinterpreting or being especially sensitive to abandonment because of my own emotional story?

As all these sorts of thoughts are engaged with, the individual has initiated a form of reflection which means that victimization and the blame that inevitably goes with it, dissolve as categories. A deeper, more layered and complex understanding of what was going on emerges, changing the experience inside of oneself. It is in this sense that the therapy process is dialectical rather than being a crude change agent.

Therapy challenges how far we can go with rationality as a concept. We live with ideas of the subjective and objective realms, often disparaging

the former and elevating the latter as though they were two entirely different modes of being, thinking and feeling. In truth, this division is unsustainable. Subjective and objective thoughts and feelings are the outcome of different kinds of knowledges that are related. The subjective, which is often seen as personal, idiosyncratic and intuitive, sits on and is entwined with structures of thinking which are designated as logical, deductive and analytic. If we pause and consider how we use this unreflected division, it becomes apparent that the way an individual, be they a barrister, a cook, a plumber, a parent, a dancer, makes a logical, analytic argument is always with reference to their own lived experience. The rational, sealed off from experience has no salience. It can wreak havoc. Let's not forget an important part of the current economic meltdown. The reliance on the mathematical physicists - known as the quants - from the Long Term Capital Management Fund, led to the loss of nearly two billion dollars, while owing over 100 billion, in the space of just three weeks in September 1998. This was rationalism at its maddest and most manic. And so too is the notion that the subjective is a deeper more authentic truth, spurious. The subjective is always structured by the cultural rules and practices we have imbibed. It is not a better truth, or a more valid truth. It is an aspect of a personal truth.


For change to have meaning rather than being just a phenomenon of rapidity we could do well to make it a more complex idea. There are many different kinds of change, but today we hear the refrain that change is good. Change isn't good or bad. Change isn't one thing. Change, in my book, requires something of us. Change that's worth embracing picks you up and offers a challenge. It is an impingement, stimulated either internally or from the environment.

It demands a response which is active, thoughtful and which, as we engage it, grows us.

Perhaps the rate of change that I grew up with following the post World War II settlement, which seemed to be about an evolution and was about progressive change until about 1976, is what alarms me about the imperative of change today. That period gave people a chance to engage with change. You could roll it around your mouth and taste it. This constituted a form of engagement. You saw what the change was made of and you could find your way in it. You might say this is a nostalgic or Luddite argument. I hope not. I hope you will join me in the attempt to deepen our ideas about change.

The interesting thing about the Occupy Movement has been the very different way in which participants are going about thinking through political protest and how to bring about change. The daily General Assembly and the work groups are characterized by an attempt to include multiple voices and not close down discussion into a narrow list of rhetorical demands. If we start with the movement in the USA we can see that having lived through the assault on Obama's promise of *Change We Need*, they are going about change very differently. As one participant said - in answer to the criticism that their action is idealist, too broad and

needs to focus to achieve incremental reforms - the belief in reform could be said to be the definition of an idealist. Working on the problem of how to bring about change is being a realist. Occupy is a political intervention. It is a political process. That is its political product. This is its original contribution to much needed political change. Learning how to talk and think, strategize and organize, include and define, is the challenge to our inert political arrangements.

This seems to me what has been occurring in the Arab Spring, in Tel Aviv and now on the streets of America, Spain, Greece and the UK. It is a messy change to be sure. The kind of change that challenges us. As Naomi Colvin and Kai Wargalla, supporters of Occupy LSX - the London Stock Exchange action - write: *Our response to systematic failure is not to propose a new system, but to start making one. We're in the business of defining process..... We ask people to stop seeing themselves as consumers and start seeing themselves as participants.* (Guardian 24/10/11) And so I conclude: this kind of challenge isn't easy. But in its demand it magnificently embodies a complexity which is the antidote to the synthetic and commercially driven change all around us today. 

*This is a shortened version of a BBC Radio 3 lecture given in November 2011.*



Photo: Charlie Hopkinson

Susie Orbach is a psychoanalyst and writer whose interests have centred around feminism & psychoanalysis, the construction of femininity and gender, globalization & body image, emotional literacy and psychoanalysis & the public sphere. She co-founded The Women's Therapy Centre in London in 1976 and The Women's Therapy Centre Institute, New York in 1981. Her numerous publications include the classic *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, along with other such influential texts as *Hunger Strike*, *What Do Women Want* (with Luise Eichenbaum), *The Impossibility of Sex* and her latest book *Bodies*. Susie has been a consultant to the World Bank, the NHS and Unilever. She is a founder member of ANTIDOTE, (working for emotional literacy) and Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility and is convener of Anybody ([www.any-body.org](http://www.any-body.org)), an organisation campaigning for body diversity, with whom she has organised the Endangered Species International Summits ([www.endangeredspecieswomen.org.uk](http://www.endangeredspecieswomen.org.uk)), which aim to challenge the commercial practices that teach women and girls to hate their own bodies. She is currently chair of the Relational School in the UK and has a clinical practise seeing individuals and couples.