

Chapter 1: Get Ready to Change Your Life

*“There came a time when the risk to
remain tight in the bud was more
painful than the risk it took to blossom.”
~ Anais Nin*

Have you ever heard the phrase living *unconsciously*? In essence, it means going through your day — your life — on autopilot...getting through, coasting, going through the motions, sleepwalking. Sound familiar? It should. Most of us dance the robot boogie at one time or another. For some, it’s a way of life.

Why do we do this? Pick a reason: apathy, disinterest, weariness, laziness, hopelessness. Mostly, we do it because it’s easier and requires less effort — no thinking involved. Get up, get on with it, go to bed, start all over again the next day.

“I don’t necessarily love my life,” admits Suzanne, 44, “but I’m not sure I can change it...and to what? I guess my philosophy these days is: I don’t have to like it, I just have to do it. What other choice do I have?”

The Big Blank

If getting through works for you and doesn’t bother you, then great. Keep on keepin’ on. This book then is probably not for you. But for many of us, at some point in our lives, we yearn for something different or feel that something is missing. It’s as if our spirits have flown the coop. What we’re doing no longer has the meaning it once did. This feeling of emptiness, dissatisfaction, or boredom — we call it “The Big Blank” — can happen any time in our lives, certainly, but it most often occurs between our late 30s and late-50s.

The Big Blank happens for a variety of reasons and is often provoked by a major life change such as the death or illness of a parent or spouse, early retire-

ment, a divorce, an empty nest, or a loss of job. But many times the Big Blank sneaks up gradually, for seemingly no reason, and grabs us by the throat, slowly squeezing the joy out of life.

“I’m just tired of the corporate b.s.,” says investment banker Linda, 49. “It’s really wearing at me and driving me nuts. My tolerance level for that type of time-wasting drama has hit an all-time low. It’s strange but it used to never bother me a bit.”

Dana, 47, a former grade school teacher, needs to find a new career now that her youngest is off to college but wants to find something that she can get excited about. “I was a full-time mom for 20 years. I’m substitute teaching now but it’s just not what I want to do anymore. It’s what I know, but it doesn’t ring my bell the way it used to.”

Lynn, 42, a former corporate executive, was for 10 years solely focused on becoming pregnant. She and her husband were unable to conceive naturally and had to resort to high-tech methods, which were emotionally and physically draining. “I had to earn and save thousands of dollars as we tried to have our two children,” she said. “It didn’t matter what was happening at work. I was driven and consumed by the desire to get pregnant and become a mother. My life, in general, just kind of took a back seat.”

After Lynn had her second baby and finally was able to relax, she hit the Big Blank. The “down time” magnified the real issue that lay in front of her. She finally had time to think. “I was nursing my daughter and vaguely aware that I did not want

to go back to work,” she said. “But even that vague feeling of discontent wasn’t enough to stop me long enough to make a change.”

After maternity leave was over, Lynn found it was easier to focus on the joy her children brought her rather than confront her discontent about her go-nowhere career. Her solution to coping with a go-nowhere job was to simply sink into apathy, come home every day, and play with her kids.

“I actually found a way to create this kind of boundary around myself,” she said. “I just ignored the big problem and when I got home I kind of turned it all off and focused on my babies. I did this for a long, long time.”

Is Your Heart Gaining Weight?

Like many women, Lana spent her 20s and 30s pursuing professional and financial success. At 42, and at the top of her game, Lana is co-owner of a thriving business, well-known and thought of in the business community, has a wonderful family, and is utterly miserable.

For the past year, Lana has felt herself changing and doesn’t know why. She doesn’t have the energy or patience for day-to-day business issues and conflicts. She and her business partner no longer have the same ideals or goals. The cosmic questions of mid-life swirl through her mind constantly causing her emotions to flip between depression and panic at a distressing rate.

Each day her discontent, along with a feeling of hopelessness, grows a little more. Lana knows she needs to move on but fear paralyzes her into inaction. “My thoughts and emotions are so jumbled in my mind that it feels like an immense brain fog is preventing me from finding a solution,” says Lana. “How can I leave? This business is who I am and how I define myself. What would I do? Who would I be? How do I make it happen?” Lana feels trapped. No way out.

At some point, Lana checked her spirit at the door and switched into cruise control. “I’m a drone,” Lana admits, “My life is a series of uninteresting, duty-driven moments accented with occasional smatterings of anger and sadness. Every day, I feel my heart getting heavier and heavier.”

Would You Like Some Cheese with That Whine?

Helena, 48, doesn’t like her job. Every day after work when her husband, Nick, asks how her day went she complains about something: her boss, her gossipy co-workers, the project she’s assigned to, the ancient computer she’s forced to use, the impossible deadline, the intolerable office politics, the work that’s beneath her abilities. “Well, why don’t you find something else, then?” Nick asks periodically. “If you don’t like it, move on.” Helena ignores Nick and continues to complain. The complaints become more frequent and Nick gives Helena suggestions. Helena ignores Nick and continues to complain. You can guess what happens next. Eventually, Nick tunes Helena out. Helena, of course, becomes angry with Nick for not supporting her.

We’ve all been around someone like Helena. Perhaps it’s your spouse or some other relative, maybe it’s a neighbor or co-worker, and possibly it’s even...you.

Whatever the issue — job, marriage, lack of direction, business — it’s time to stop talking (or whining) about whatever it is and start doing something about it.

Maya Angelou said, “If you don’t like something, change it. If you can’t change it, change your attitude. Don’t complain.”

When you find yourself or others around you complaining, a great way to recognize and stomp out this worthless activity is to make light fun of it. A favorite method that Dana’s family uses was originated by her son, Declan.

One day at school Amanda, a classmate of Declan's, brought her pet rat, Rex, for Show-and-Tell day. After displaying and discussing Rex, she picked up the cage to take it back to her desk. Unfortunately, the bottom of the cage dropped out and Rex scampered away. Chaos ensued. Amanda cried and whined while others ran around looking for the errant rodent. Declan, after observing Amanda and the entire scene, put his hands on his hips, shook his head, and said calmly, "That's what you get for bringing a rat to school."

From that day on, whenever anyone in Dana's house starts to whine excessively someone else says, "That's what you get for bringing a rat to school." The intention is to knock the whiner out of complaint mode and make him or her think instead of just spewing negative "stuff" into the atmosphere — a great attitude adjuster.

How much complaining are you willing to bear by the way? If you are chronically complaining you are in pain. If you had an arm or gut that hurt that bad you'd get it taken care of. Get a diagnosis. Prescribe something for yourself.

Ultimately, when you blame others instead of looking to yourself for the solution, you surrender your power to resolve the problem and move forward. Many of you reading this right now are coming up with dozens of reasons as to why you can't move forward. I can't start my own business because I don't have enough money; I can't change directions because it's too complicated; I can't change my relationship because I'm too afraid.

We all know the excuses and can recite them ad infinitum. It's time to stop coming up with reasons why not and ask instead: "Why not?"

Reviving Your Spirit

Oprah Winfrey said, "You are built not to shrink down to less but to blossom into more." A delightful example of this is the story of a woman named Tess. Jan, 59, met Tess, a woman she will never for-

get, in the early 1970s. At the time, Jan was in her 20s, armed with a master's degree, just starting her first job and on her first business trip.

"I was so full of myself. Look at me...I'm a trail-blazer, a maverick, a model for the contemporary woman. I was a successful businesswoman in times when not many women had 'real' careers."

As Jan boarded the plane for her trip, she groaned inwardly when she realized she was going to be seated next to what at the time she thought was an old-as-an-iceberg woman. "Lord, I thought, she must be at least 100. She's going to talk my ear off about her 63 grandchildren and latest crocheting project. Swell."

At first, Jan ignored her. Eventually, though, they began to chat politely. Jan learned that the woman, Tess, was in her mid-80s, lived in a nursing home and had many children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Before long, Tess told Jan her life story.

Tess started her life traditionally, typical for the 1920s: Marriage very young, children, a home maker. Then her husband began to abuse her both verbally and physically. She put up with it for a while but then said, "No more."

Tess divorced him, a scandal in those days. "You didn't divorce back then," Tess said, "you lived with it. But no way was I going to do that."

Now on her own and with small children, Tess got a job and supported herself and them. In the 1930s, once her children were a little older, she went back to school, earned a college degree, and started a successful career in business — nearly unheard of at that time.

"I was humbled," says Jan. "What an amazing, inspiring lady."

Then Tess said something that Jan has always remembered, especially at those points in her life

when she needed it most. Tess said, “Don’t let anybody break your spirit...not your husband, not your boss, not your children, not yourself.”

As they were getting ready to land, it occurred to Jan to ask Tess why, if she lived in a nursing home, she was on a plane. Tess looked at Jan with the loveliest smile and said, “Because I’m in love.” When Jan looked at Tess curiously, Tess said, “I met a man at the nursing home and we fell in love. We’re going to get married. I’m flying down to meet his children.”

Don’t let *anybody* break your spirit.

Cultivating Change

Whenever and for whatever reason the Big Blank occurs, it should serve as a massive clue to you that something needs to change. By the way, just the fact that you can use the words “big” and “blank” to describe what you’re feeling should alarm you. Why? No one should live in a void where they merely subsist passively and without joy.

Wouldn’t you rather live your life with passion and happiness? Wouldn’t you love to renew your zest for life and be in a place where you bounce out of bed (and off the walls and the ceiling) looking forward to every single day? If you said yes to both questions, congratulations, consider yourself ready for change.

Author and futurist Alvin Toffler said, “Change is not merely necessary to life, it is life.” To stagnate is to admit defeat, to change is to grow. Within all of us — within you — is the power to do things you never dreamed possible. How exciting and empowering it would be to cultivate a new life with a clear, daring vision for the remainder of your future.

Cultivate: To plant, grow, tend, nurture, develop. As a woman, this is one of the things you do best for others. Why can’t you do it for yourself? The fact is you can. All you need is the desire and will to do it

— yeah, that’s all — and the time, and the money, and the knowledge of just what in the world you want and how to get it...and the guts.

Change is Scary

“You will either step forward into growth or you will step back into safety,” psychologist Abraham Maslow said. The greatest hurdle to any change is the fear of change itself.

In fact, fear alone prevents many people from shedding the old and trying something new. Fear of change can be downright toxic and is without doubt a spirit killer. Fear is also a monumental waste of time. Allow fear to direct your life and one day, before long, you’ll look in the mirror and see a tired, old person who lived a “safe” but empty life — that in and of itself should scare you.

It’s interesting but not surprising what great lengths many people go to avoid change. Like Helena, they grumble and carry on about how awful their lives are but don’t do anything to change it.

That’s because change is frightening. Change means risk — moving from the known to the unknown. Change and growth take us out of our comfort zones. It’s akin to stepping into the abyss. What’s on the other side? What if I crash and burn?

Cathy stayed in a marriage for over 20 years with an abusive, controlling husband because of fear. “Even though I made more money than he did and I carried all the health benefits, I listened to my older, wiser spouse and stuck around accepting the emotional abuse he heaped on me because I was too scared to do anything else.”

Jan, the woman who told the story about Tess, spent a large part of her career working for the same high-tech company. In the 21 years she was there she worked her way up from newbie to division vice president. As her responsibilities grew, the workload became oppressive. “I was regularly working

60- and 70-hour weeks. My life was no longer my own. I missed a lot of my son's activities. My husband and I had become massive schedule jugglers and had little time for just being with each other." A company merger forced Jan, 52 at the time, to confront what she already knew. "I was miserable and had been for several years but I didn't know how to get off of the treadmill. I feared the loss of my retirement benefits, which I had worked hard to earn, and the prestige that comes with working for a Fortune 50 company."

But Jan took a big gulp, got her financial affairs in order, and made the plunge — she resigned. "Some moments I felt sheer panic. What did I just do? Other times, I felt pure, exhilarating freedom."

But, says Jan, it was worth every panic attack and heart palpitation. "The number one thing I value about my decision is that I took control of my own life. I chose not to let retirement benefits or image or anyone else determine my future. I took a big risk to change my life for the better, but that made the transition that much more sweet when I landed on my feet in a new job that I love."

Joan, 62, wanted to leave her high-level position and start her own consulting business but was afraid of losing a stable income. That fear kept her frozen in place for a long time until she made herself physically ill. "It's like I had to push myself so that my pain was acute before I did anything about it." So Joan, 53 at the time, made a monumental decision with her husband to quit their jobs and travel around Europe. "I think, in some ways, it was necessary for me to do something really dramatic and completely different," explains Joan. "If I could trust living for a year as a vagabond without an income then I felt that I could do anything including start my own business." And it worked. Joan spent the entire year traveling Europe in a 1982 VW van with a peanut butter jar as her bathroom. When she returned, she felt fearless and moved full steam ahead with her business venture.

If you're not willing to take a risk, how can you explore where or how far you can go? Avoiding risk means you avoid living life to its fullest and fulfilling your potential.

"Living at risk is jumping off the cliff and building your wings on the way down," said author Ray Bradbury.

So, why not go out on a limb?

Identity Crisis

A showstopper for many women as they contemplate making a transition is the issue of identity. Lana, the business owner, asked, "Who would I be?" Our answer is, you'd be Lana, of course. But we know what Lana means. She has been in the role of "company president" for 10 years so that's how she defines herself and that's how others define her. Says Lana, "I can't imagine myself as anything else but I'm not happy being what I do, either." That dilemma froze Lana into inaction and consequently, she stayed far too long in an unsatisfying and unhappy situation.

Dana has thought of herself as a mother for the past 20 years. Facing an empty nest, she struggles to find a new identity. "I knew exactly what I was for a long time. It was comfortable and comforting being 'mom.' But now as I'm contemplating the next phase of my life I don't know what else I can be. I know I need to come up with something. I've got a lot of years left."

Joan ran into the same issue. "I had been at my company for over 20 years working my way up to an executive level position." She was proud of her accomplishments and the thought of not being able to introduce herself as "Director of HR" stopped her in her tracks. "So even though I was making myself emotionally and physically ill, I stayed."

How do so many of us get to the point that we only look at ourselves one-dimensionally? Why do we define ourselves as what we do? One answer is

that society puts definitions around our titles and assigns status to them. Another answer involves the status quo, which feels safe. Of course it may not be a truly happy status quo, but we may be a lot less happy if we tried something different. Why rock the boat?

Plan to Change

Knowing that you want and need to change is great, but for most of us, it's not enough. The type of change we are talking about needs and deserves a well-thought-out plan — a strategy — to ensure that your transition is successful.

The remainder of this book guides you through a step-by-step process for creating a transition plan that will help move you from your current life to a new life. Follow each step and, by the end, you should have a clear vision of what you want and an action plan that moves your vision from wish and hope and dream to reality.