

STAGE



get some
closure

Angst

Chaos

“No, Sam. We’ve already had dinner, and you had ice cream at home for dessert.” I didn’t like the feeling of saying no to Sam’s treat requests at the grocery store, but he really didn’t need any more sugar. I tried to explain it to him and remind myself at the same time. “Remember, we’re only buying what’s on Mommy’s list. In fact, those boxes of mac ‘n cheese are the last things. Let’s pay for this, go home and get ready for bed. Your brother is tired and cranky, and you know we are asking for trouble if we push him when he gets too tired.”

God, I hated grocery shopping now. It used to be so fun, wandering the aisles, planning for dinner parties in the grocery store. Especially since President’s Choice made me and everyone else feel that whipping up samosas and authentic brie and cranberry (Memories of Lapland?) in phyllo dough seem so easy. But these days I felt lucky to get out with bread and milk, two kids, and my sanity intact. (Yep, the stork had landed again a while back and baby Ben had arrived.)

As we approached the checkout, I deftly steered my cart clear of the display containing the flyers detailing the grocery specials I really should have checked. But there was no time for that when shopping with my two bundles of joy. In the line in front of us was a lady who was apparently going to be feeding the army in the next week. So I figured I had a couple of minutes to get my infotainment/gossip fix by flipping through the junker with Madonna and her kids on the cover.

As if! There’s no way Madonna’s boobs and stomach really look that good after two kids. Didn’t she have a C – section? She’s gotta be airbrushed. Otherwise I’ve really got to look into that Eastern stuff she’s doing. Oh man this is depressing. My “fun bags” as Gavin used to call them, are now deflated and more like the half empty bean bags we used to toss in gym class.

“Excuse me, Ma’am. Your son is ...” The army-feeding lady’s voice trailed off as I looked around and saw Ben throwing the flyers I thought I had avoided. What was that statement about someone’s reach extending beyond his grasp? It seemed as true

of grocery cart captives as it did of some banana republic dictators.

“Thanks. Sorry about that,” I said to no one in particular as I began to pick up the crumpled flyers. “Ben, no, no, no honey, we don’t grab things and throw them.”

Ben’s fussing gained momentum and turned into a full blown screaming fit. I grabbed his soother and popped it into his mouth hoping the oral fixation would calm him down. No luck. He flung it to the floor in frustration. I bent down to pick it up.

Oh shit! It can’t be. He doesn’t live around here. No, way. Oh, God, what if it is? I can’t let him see me.

As I was retrieving Ben’s soother, I saw Robert, my boss from the company where I started my career. I hadn’t seen him for ten years, since I was a young twenty-something, fresh out of university, naïve and determined to fulfill my destiny of getting the corner office. He’d always said I was a winner, his best hire, but my fatal flaw was that I tried to do too many things at once. I still remember his mantra: “your not-to-do list is more important than your to-do list.”

Much as I wished it wasn’t true, Robert really was pushing his cart down the cereal aisle, and looking to pick a checkout line.

Oh thank God! He’s only got a few things. Surely he’ll chose the 1-8 line, and I’ll get through this relatively unscathed. No! No! Don’t come this way! We’ve got screaming kids and army feeders. Don’t do it!

Of course Robert was heading in my direction. Fortunately he was still scanning the lines, but something – the universal human attraction to drama; the desire to chuckle at another’s misfortune; the same picture of Madonna’s boobs that had caught my eye; (who knew?) seemed to be pushing him toward me.

I had to act quickly. Since I was already crouching on the floor, I scurried behind the display which Ben was single-handedly dismantling with a combination of glee and baby fury. I hoped being on the floor with my back to Robert would prevent him from recognizing me, although he had once caught me in a similar position. It was when I had gotten stuck trying to bend over the security turnstile to retrieve my access pass after hurriedly leaving the office one night. Hopefully that particular memory wasn’t as clear for him as it was for me.

But even if I had a chance of hiding from Robert, Sam wasn’t about to be forgotten. His barrage of “Mommy, can I get this?” had morphed into “Mommy why are you on the floor? Are you hiding from Ben? Are you mad at Ben?” and so on.

“Shhh. Sam, Mommy’s just playing with Ben,” I whispered, hoping my answer wouldn’t seem as lame to him as it did to me.

“Mommy, why are you whispering?” Sam asked, with a confused look on his face.

I was in so deep at this point, I decided to just keep digging myself deeper. “Ah-hem, Mommy has a sore throat. Just wait quietly. It’ll be our turn to pay soon. If you can just stay quiet Sam, Mommy might get you a treat when we get home.”

“Look Mommy, Ben’s not throwing anything. He’s smiling at that man.” Sam’s innocent and enthusiastic statement signaled to me that I was not going to get out of this one. And Sam was right. As I peeked out from behind the display (which was miraculously still standing), I could see that Ben and Robert were smiling and playing peek-a-boo together.

I’m gonna have to stand up and pay for the groceries sooner or later, and I’m not going to be able to avoid seeing Robert. Better to catch him off guard than vice-versa anyway. Great – could I look any worse? I’ve got two-days-with-no-shower-hair barely covered by a baseball cap, and post-baby-hormone-surged-chin hairs I keep meaning to pluck. Track pants! Omigod, Gavin warned me that wearing track pants outside shows the world you’ve given up on life. Shit! I’m wearing the track pants with a hole in the ass – which I’m sure he’s just seen since I’ve been bent over in front of him. Murphy’s Law – I always look brutal when I see someone I know!

Rising slowly to my feet, and purposefully returning the rag-mag to the rack in an attempt to convey control amidst this disaster, I made sure I turned enough to see Robert and feign surprise. “Robert?? Robert Sullivan?”

“Monique! Is that you? What’s it been, 10 years? What are you doing now?” Robert inquired with a combination of wonder and pride at his little project, all grown up.

“Yes, Robert, it’s me. These are my kids. This is Sam. And my youngest here is Ben.” I introduced them right away, hoping that their cuteness factor would deflect his question about my career status.

“Yes, Ben and I got acquainted while you were picking up the flyers on the ground. He seems like his mom – full of energy, and determined to get what he wants.”

I nodded in agreement while I began unloading my cart onto the conveyor belt, and asked pleasantly, “So what are you doing in this neck of the woods?”

God, this is more embarrassing than my holey track pants. Tampons? How am I gonna hide them on here? Where’s the Romaine lettuce and Jumbo size chick peas when you need them? I guess I’ll have to stash them behind the Captain Crunch cereal box. Better to have him think of me wound up on sugar than PMS-ing. Mind you, at least hyper is short lived. I feel like I’ve been PMS-ing for the last 3½ years.

“Actually Monique, I’m just visiting my daughter Amy who’s in her first year of business here. To be honest, I wanted her to live at home to go to school, but her mother said, ‘Robert, she wants to move away. You’ve got to let her decide, and support her decision.’ So here I am stocking her fridge.”

Then he shifted the focus back to me. *Clever bastard. He always knew how to turn the tables.* “Wow Monique. Two kids. You are still working, aren’t you? Not that there’s anything wrong with being a stay at home mom, but you’re such a go getter. My wife stayed home full-time, of course, but I can’t imagine you doing that. You’d have the kids trained to be project managers in no time,” he chuckled.

Can’t imagine me being a mom, eh? What an idiot. I love my kids. I love being with my kids. Sure, I can’t be with them 24-7. It wouldn’t be good for me, and it wouldn’t be good for them, but that doesn’t make me a bad person. Like he knows anything about parenting. His poor wife probably had to do everything at home while he increased shareholder value and negotiated his rise in the corporate world. No wonder his daughter wanted to move away from home. Why don’t I just tell him that I love being with my kids, I love the stimulation of the corporate world, and I’m working on figuring out a way to do both, maybe with a reduced role at work to allow for more time with my kids. But he’ll never understand that. He’d be disappointed in me. Ahh, who cares...

“Excuse me, Ma’am. Your total is \$126.54. Do you have Air Miles?” The cashier broke through my thoughts and Ben’s intensifying pleas for freedom. As I began to rifle through my wallet in search of my cards, it became clear that Ben had had enough of being confined to the shopping cart. He was entering full blown meltdown, crying, thrashing, and attracting what I felt must have been disdainful looks from other shoppers. I finally found my Visa and Collector cards, handed them to the cashier, and then chickened out. Slipping into business jargon, I lied outright to Robert, in front of my two innocent children.

“Actually Robert, I took an extended maternity leave, but I can’t wait to get back at it. The break’s been good for me in that way. I’ve been thinking about my organization’s business model, and I’ve got lots of ideas for re-engineering some of our key business processes.”

I’m such a schmuck! What’s my problem? Who am I trying to kid? Why didn’t I just tell him I don’t know what I want anymore? Lying in front of my kids? Maybe he’s right. Maybe I am cut out for corporate life and not motherhood. I’ve gotta get out of here.

I signed the Visa stub, and shoved the cards back in my wallet. “Well, it was really

nice to run into you, Robert.” I crammed the shopping bags into the shopping cart, and summoned the strength to make eye contact with Robert one more time. “I hope all goes well for your daughter. She’s got the genes for a great business career. See you later.” I just wanted to grab Sam, Ben, and my overstuffed shopping cart, and get the hell out of there.

I noticed that Sam had been uncharacteristically quiet during my encounter with Robert as I picked him up and tried to seat him beside his wailing brother in the cart. Something was sticking out of Sam’s pants pocket. He tried to hide it, but in an instant it became all too clear: He had taken the Kinder-Egg from the candy counter, and tried to unwrap it right there in the checkout line without me seeing.

“SAM! Where did you get this?” I barked as I reached to grab the candy from my little Kinder-Egg klepto.

Oh God! Of all the times to do this. Not now...

Sam was holding on to his contraband like a life raft. “Let go!” I ordered him, trying to pry it from his little clenched fist.

“I need it! No Mommy! It’s mine! I need it!”

“Sam! Let go now!”

I pulled at the egg, and my frightened child did the same. We went back and forth, in a ridiculous tug-of-war, creating a scene that had I witnessed prior to becoming a mom, would have made me label the mother as pathetic, and out of control. I had become “that” mom, and the harshness and immediacy of my prior judgments sickened me.

What the hell am I doing? Monique, he’s only three.

Gaining my composure, I bent down to look him in the eye, cupped his little hand in mine, and calmly explained that we never take anything without paying for it. “Sam,” I began, “you need to let go. Give the egg to Mommy, honey. This won’t be over until you let go.”

“I’m s-s-orry Mommy. I took it.” Sam could barely get the words out before he erupted into guilt-laden howls.

Fighting back my own tears, I had to continue. “Come on Sam. We have to go see the grocery store lady, and we have to tell her what happened.”

We went back to the cashier, oblivious to whether Robert was still there, or what he’d think. Sam was sobbing so hard he couldn’t really speak, and his brother’s wailing didn’t make the communication any clearer, but the kind cashier managed to understand. I paid her the \$1.15 and left the egg on the counter.

We arrived home disheveled, embarrassed, and exhausted. Gav heard us come in, and met us in the living room. We must have been quite a sight to behold: Ben worn out and asleep in my arms, Sam's face red and blotchy from crying about his first criminal experience, and me looking about the same from the unsavory combination of shock and guilt at our actions.

At the sight of Gavin, my eyes welled up and my shoulders began to heave. Gav could tell that he'd missed something major on our shopping excursion, so he wisely took Sam from me while I lay Ben down in his crib. After Gav had Sam set up happily with his Thomas the Train set in the family room, he came back to find me sobbing in the living room.

I blubbered my way through the events in the store. Cleverly, Gav listened, only speaking up to disagree with me when I said what a terrible mother I was. Taking a deep breath, I got up to see how Sam was doing in the other room, expecting to find him wallowing in remorse like his mother.

But he wasn't. Children really are miraculous creatures. Just as quickly as the crisis arose, he seemed to get over the pain and move on. He was happily pushing the train cars around the track, laughing as the magnetized ends attached to each other. It wouldn't be long before he wouldn't remember this day at all: his fear, his guilt, or his grip. I, on the other hand, would remember this forever.

A-ha!

Reality Check

After Sam was born, I enjoyed my maternity leave, and innocently looked forward to going back to work. I expected to slide comfortably back into my work routines, with the added bonus of a beautiful baby at home. Of course, once I got back to work, it became apparent very quickly how difficult it was to manage everything. Once I got pregnant with Ben, I decided I wouldn't make any decisions about how to resolve my struggle to juggle yet. My plan was to solve that problem while I was on my second maternity leave.

The funny thing was, even though this time I'd taken an extended leave, by the end of it I still wasn't any closer to solving my problem. I was stuck. I knew I wanted and needed to change but I just couldn't seem to make the break. Even though I had taken the time to articulate what was seemingly holding me back I was still scared, apprehensive and paralyzed by 'what ifs'. On the one hand my attempts to balance my life were driving me around the bend, but on the other hand I knew I wasn't crazy to be legitimately worried about giving up my stable, secure, and well paying full-time job.

Fleeting visions would come to me about ways to improve my situation. These included: going part-time; starting my own business; or moving to a closer company to reduce my commute. I also dreamed of being on and winning a reality show or cashing in on a lottery (since I never was interested in that whole "vow of poverty" thing). But unfortunately, these were all vague thoughts. I really hadn't investigated ways to make any of them happen, or considered the real consequences if I did. (I mean, you have to at least audition for the reality show if you have any chance of winning. And who really wants to have 20 million people watch you pick coconut out of your teeth with a splinter of driftwood?) But there was a more important reason why these fleeting ideas weren't the solution.

What I needed to do first was to get some closure. That included giving up a major identifying feature of who I was – my title at work. And it meant refusing to deluge myself with work tasks for the purpose of doing well in performance reviews. It included letting go of my image of my naked silhouette; perky's gone, droopy's in. (Thanks to

the push-up bra only my husband really knows.) It included letting go of the need for task accomplishment – this became clear to me when my toddler (rhymes with dawdler for a reason) and I routinely took 45 minutes to walk half a block to the mailbox. It included letting go of my ability to sneeze without pissing myself. And it all boiled down to letting go of needing to feel recognition based on how competent I was in all areas of my life.

Of course, this wasn't easy. Why wouldn't I have difficulty letting go of the enjoyment I felt when my job title and success afforded me recognition and respect at cocktail parties? After all, I had been raised in the post-feminist era. As a child, I'd worn my "I can do anything boys can do...only better" T-shirt with pride. Ever since the seventh grade I'd worked my ass off (not literally – who's that lucky?) to achieve the kind of academic and professional success I'd been enjoying until I'd had children. It wasn't immature, or petty, or inappropriate for me to gain a sense of self from my professional accomplishments. It was what I had been raised and trained to do. Paradoxically, I had also been genetically programmed to be supremely satisfied by being a mother. And I adored my husband. If I wanted to be happy, I needed to accept that my life had changed, and changed for the better. If I wanted to enjoy it, I had to change too. In order to change, I needed to get some closure with my old reality, and my old identity.

Change did not have to mean giving up my work altogether and becoming a full-time mom. I enjoyed work, I was good at it, and it was good for me. But without letting go of the exactness of my old plan, and the assumptions it was based on, I couldn't properly investigate what other options might be out there for me. I wasn't completely rigid, though. I had learned to be a flexible mom for my kids – the outfit I put them in at 9:00 A.M. would inevitably get barfed on before the person who had given it as a present had a chance to see it at 10:00 A.M. – so I just kept another one in the diaper bag. In preparation for a fun-filled visit to the circus free of meltdowns, I could make umpteen contingency plans. But if Sam developed an irrational fear of elephants within five minutes of entering the Greatest Show on Earth, it was game over. My boy couldn't care less if we had just waited in line for two hours and spent a small fortune getting him there, we'd just have to find something else to do. Yep, flexibility was the key.

I started to talk to a number of people I respected and trusted about the turmoil I was in. The more I talked and asked for help, the more I found I was listening, and surprisingly, I just wasn't listening to others, I was also listening to myself...really, really listening. What became resoundingly clear, was that before I could move on, I

needed to get rid of some baggage – in particular what I had convinced myself defined me: my old reality, expectations and identity. It wasn't that it was wrong. It was just no longer applicable to my current reality. I needed to extend my newly learned ability to be flexible with my kids and apply it to myself. If I could respond to and accept the changes/growth that were occurring in their lives almost on a daily basis, why couldn't I grant myself the same privilege? I was growing too. I needed to let go of my old reality, and accept my new one. Then having achieved some closure, I would be prepared to ride the flux to a new and rewarding version of success.

ACTION

Stage TWO

How to Get Some Closure

“...it’s time to let go.
Everything’s going to
be alright.”

- Dory to Nemo’s Dad (Marlin) in *Finding Nemo*

Having nailed your problem down, and committed to the process of seeing what other work options are out there in Stage One, you are now ready to get some closure on what’s been holding you back. Sure, you might not have closure on that ex-boyfriend (mind you, his six-pack has probably become an entire keg by now, so that might help curb the cravings) but at least you can get some on this stage in your life.

Design a mommy proofing strategy

In the last couple of years at work I had to design and develop change management strategies whenever the “higher-ups” came up with ideas for how our company was going to work differently. One thing that always struck me was that no matter how well we planned it, the bottom line was that most people didn’t change. And I came to accept that people would rather undergo a root canal without anesthetic than participate in organizational change.

I once had the opportunity to work with Sharon, a senior executive who showed me the importance of human psychology as a factor in the process of change. With her 15+ years leadership experience, she had done and seen it all. Her guiding principle was that all beginnings need

previous endings. Sounds simple enough, but most people don't properly let go of the past before they embark on a new course, and as a result, the new course often fails. Sharon referred often to the works of William Bridges, a leading consultant on organizational and individual transitions, and author of the best selling guide *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*.

Thinking about Sharon's message and my current situation, I re-read Bridges work and found it hit home. He writes that the majority of us have difficulty with change because we aren't adequately managing our transition, and transition is different than change. Bridges states: "In my thinking change is situational. ...transition has to do with the psychological reorientation, psychological transit from one to the other. Whereas change involve(s) finding the new, doing the new thing, transition involve(s) letting go of the old."¹ In other words, change was about me figuring out where I wanted to be, which work option fit best. **Transition was about getting closure** – letting go of the old, including assumptions, identity, routines, expectations, even income that I had attached to my old work and personal life. Bridges states that part and parcel of successful transition is saying goodbye, bringing up the folk-wisdom that "You can't steal second base with your foot on first." Bridges furthers this metaphor saying, "You have to leave where you are, and many people have spent their whole lives standing on first base. It isn't just a personal preference you are asking them to give up. You are asking them to let go of the way of engaging or accomplishing tasks that made them successful in the past."²

Sounds good conceptually, but how many people do you really know who can just *will* themselves to let go?

In the end it was Gavin who came up with the big 'a-ha!'. He likened my situation to a baby trying to let go to take its first steps. He pointed out that we child proof our homes to convince our babies and ourselves they can let go, and take their first steps. Similarly, he suggested that maybe I needed to identify and address possible dangers and pitfalls in my life so I could let go too, so I could get some closure and move on. Brilliant – he was right. I needed a mommy proofing strategy.

The following four steps outline the process I used to design my mommy proofing strategy:

STEP ①

define what's really gone

STEP ②

understand and face your fears

STEP ③

create a support network; find snug harbors; & set short term goals

STEP ④

manage your feelings, don't let your feelings manage you

STEP 1

So
what's
gone
for
you?

define what's really gone

In his books, articles, workshops and speeches, Bridges argues that without first letting go, a person cannot embark on a new beginning.³ Using Bridges' work as a place to start I began to ask myself: "What do I need to let go of? Now that I have children, what is really gone? What isn't? And for that matter, what's new since the arrival of Sam and Ben?"

I found that acknowledging, and specifically naming what was gone, and what wasn't, was an important first step toward getting some closure. It surfaced that indeed it wasn't just lack of sleep, quality time with Gavin and friends, or for that matter any time for myself that was gone. (So long, self-indulgent spa time. So long pleasant afternoon antique shopping. Ah, who am I kidding, even bye-bye uninterrupted bathroom time.) But also, the time to focus unrelentingly on work, my old opportunities for advancement, and the "sense of self" determined by my job title and career success were gone.

What wasn't gone was my competence. What had been gained was the joy, the utter satisfaction, and the sense of fulfillment gained by raising kids and growing a family.

EXERCISE

WHAT'S REALLY GONE & WHAT'S BEEN GAINED?

INSTRUCTIONS:

Clearly define what's gone, what isn't, and what's been gained.

what's really gone:	what isn't:	what's been gained:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">(e.g. the freedom to work long hours without feeling guilt)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">(e.g. how good I am at what I do)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">(e.g. sense of fulfillment when I spend time with the kids)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">	<ul style="list-style-type: none">	<ul style="list-style-type: none">
<ul style="list-style-type: none">	<ul style="list-style-type: none">	<ul style="list-style-type: none">
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<ul style="list-style-type: none">	<ul style="list-style-type: none">	<ul style="list-style-type: none">
<ul style="list-style-type: none">	<ul style="list-style-type: none">	<ul style="list-style-type: none">

What you get out of completing this chart is a tangible list (rather than just fleeting thoughts in your head) of what you have given up and what you have gained since having children. Recognizing these advantages and disadvantages of post-baby life will prepare you for Step 2.

STEP 2

girlfriend gab

It's just that I've worked so hard to get here. I don't want to throw that away.

- Ann, Police Officer

understand and face your fears

By listing what I felt was over or gone from my pre-baby work and personal life, I could begin to get a more grounded understanding of what I needed to end, where I needed to get some closure, and what fears I needed to face before I could successfully move on to my post-baby life. These fears were really underlying the “buts” as identified in Stage One. They had “reared” their ugly heads and had prevented me from acting before.

I got a lot of help in this area from reading Barbara Sher's book *I Could Do Anything If I Only Knew What It Was*. Sher, a world renowned author, columnist, therapist and career counselor believes the key to letting go is **unmasking your fears**, because once you know what's stopping you, you can design a strategy to overcome it. In her book she states that: “Positive thinking alone will never take you past this buried obstacle; pretending nothing is wrong won't get you anywhere either.”⁴ In the end what is needed is “...to find that resistance so you can figure out how to melt it.”⁵

Think of your child screaming “Mommy!” at 3:00 A.M. After you shake the cobwebs from your mind and disentangle the sheets from your ankles, when you go to comfort your child the first thing you ask is, “What is it honey, what's bothering you?” You do this in order to identify their fear so you can help them face it. Then you can put it, and your child, to bed.

It's no different when we are putting our own fears to bed. In order to get some closure I needed to unmask my hidden fears. For me I wasn't just afraid of making less money by changing my work situation. It was more a fear of losing my place in the professional world. Once I identified this fear, I could begin thinking more about what I could do in the present, as opposed to how I had been paralyzing myself by worrying about what might happen in the future.

Sounds simple enough, but I realize it's easier said than done. Facing our fears is incredibly difficult to do. (Even though we're not talking about swimming in a vat of maggots to retrieve flags for a cash prize.) Still, you'll be a winner when “fear is not a factor for you”, and you can understand, face, and conquer your fears.

EXERCISE

WHAT'S THE WORST THING THAT CAN HAPPEN?

INSTRUCTIONS:

To better understand and manage your fears, think about the "buts" you listed in Stage One on page 19 and then answer the following seven questions:

So
what are you
really afraid
of?

question:	answer:
1 If I were positive I wasn't going to fail, what kind of work arrangement would I make?	
2 What am I really afraid might happen?	
3 What is the worst thing that can happen if I take a risk? The best thing? The most realistic?	Worst: Best: Realistic:
4 Am I jumping to conclusions? Have I bounced this off anybody whose opinion I trust?	
5 What can I do to minimize the above risk?	
6 What do I need to let go of? Where do I need closure?	
7 Who or what can help me?	