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Introduction

I remember lying in bed on my tenth birthday when, having reached the inexorable heights of double digits, adulthood seemed tantalizingly close. I imagined that my life would be exactly as my mother's: I would meet a man, fall in love, marry, have children and instantly be grown up. It seemed straightforward. It would just happen. On the face of it, that is how my life has unfolded. I have been unusually lucky. But it doesn't account for the losses, the living losses that forced me to change internally to adapt to them, the consequent transitions I have made: the five different marriages I've had (all with the same man), the multiple relationships I have had with each of my children, the distress and powerlessness in the face of ill-health, for me and those I love, all the endings and beginnings, my unsuccessful enterprises with their striving and failing. Even the wins were never quite what I imagined and required adjustment. There is no perfect way to live a life. Life is change. We know this in theory, but the experience of it is often more complex than we expect, and we are left fearful, even paralysed. Then we assume we must be doing it wrong.

Change is an active process that demands commitment and endurance, and requires us to look at uncomfortable truths. We underestimate how *much* we will change over even the next ten years, let alone our lifetime. If we truly thought about the impact of some of the choices we made, would we still make them? Probably not. Unfortunately, change is for the bad as well as the good. When life sucks, we say, 'This too shall pass,' and hopefully it does – but here's the hitch: when life is good, it, too, inevitably, will pass. The difficult truth we must face is that only death stops life changing.

One thing is certain: we need to adapt in order to grow through

that change. The research is robust: those who try to remain rigidly the same are more likely to suffer when change is forced on them; it will limit their capacity for joy in life and even success. This calls for courage. Everybody wants to avoid discomfort and nobody welcomes the heartache change can bring. Time and again, I have witnessed the limitless creative ways in which we anaesthetize pain, but trying to avoid unhappiness means it will last longer. Pain is the agent of change: if we build walls around it, it remains untouched and alive inside us, slowly contaminating our other feelings. It is in the movement between the poles of the past and the future that we adapt. Our innate drive to get on is profoundly powerful, yet we need to slow down, to give ourselves space between our old and new selves. In therapy, we call this a 'fertile void', a time of not knowing, a neutral zone of uncertainty that is uncomfortable or even crazy-making. When we block it, the same problems may reoccur in every phase of life. If we accept the pain of change, and learn how to adapt, we will have the energy and confidence to take the next step.

Since Darwin developed his theory of natural selection, we have understood that we are wired to adapt. At its most extreme this means we change or we die. I have written this book to examine that process of change for people through the course of a life. The phases of life that we usually find most difficult are those that bring with them fear and uncertainty: emerging into adulthood from university, settling down and having children, entering the menopause in middle age, retiring and facing old age with its accompanying health issues. I have explored the particular experiences of individuals who are going through those transitions while in therapy with me. The stories of my clients show that even the most robust people can find change difficult. The thread that connects them, whatever their age or circumstance, is that each person had to work on themselves actively to understand their unique response to change, and develop the necessary coping mechanisms. But if change is part of the natural order of things, why do so many of us feel ill-equipped to deal with it?

I would like *This Too Shall Pass* to help answer that question and give you an insight into your own experience. I believe we learn best through understanding each other, and the unvarnished stories of those in therapy are a particularly powerful resource. Perhaps a young person who is struggling to find a job will be inspired by how Caz, aged twenty-four, overcame his self-doubt, even crisis, when he left university. Wande's tale of becoming the mother she wanted to be shows how small steps can have transformational outcomes. These are not tidy stories of perfectly curated lives. I want to tell the truth of how difficult life is, to highlight the distress and sadness as well as the glorious moments of joy, and for you to see how different people found ways of navigating the tough times, surviving and even thriving through the simple act of talking and being heard.

Societal changes have had profound implications for our own experience. In the last fifty years there have been seismic shifts in the West in every aspect of life, and now people have to cope with more change than ever before. The past is no longer a reliable predictor of the future, and the twenty-first century is more fluid: all of the old certainties – age, gender, sexuality – are being questioned and boundaries broken. It seems we live in a culture of limitless choice. Most of these changes may be positive, but life is now infinitely more complex. These factors, and the overwhelming number of choices we face, have heightened the possibility of more existential crises.

Among other things, social change means the institutions of religion and marriage are not fixed norms. This raises big questions about fidelity. We may still believe in marriage as an ideal, but the prospect of a hundred-year life raises fundamental questions about how a single relationship can last many decades. Marriage was, after all, an institution created when the average life span was forty years. Medicine has extended our life expectancy, which is positive if we remain healthy, but a longer life costs more and, with technology, this has wrought huge changes in the work environment.

The predictable three-stage life – education, career, retirement – has been dismantled. Our career is likely to have many stages and phases, which bring both thrilling possibilities and opportunities – but also potentially frightening uncertainties.

In this book I have chosen five different themes, Family, Love, Work, Health and Identity, because they represent to me the five central aspects that make up our lives. We cannot dismiss or let one aspect fail long term without it being detrimental to the whole. Happiness comes when there is harmony overall. There are overlapping themes within every section (for example, KT's main focus was identity, but their first-love relationship was central to our work together). But the most important theme throughout the whole book is Relationships.

'A good life is built with good relationships.'* How we construct them is the foundation of everything else. Again and again, through my research and work with my clients, I see we cannot do it alone, whatever life stage we have reached. People need people, and the quality of those relationships is what matters most to us when we look back at our lives. Ultimately our wellbeing and health are predicated on being connected and close to the people we love most, and that they stay healthy and alive for as long as possible – which includes ourselves.

I hope this book will help inform and normalize what is often frightening about the different phases of life. If we have the courage to face our difficulties with self-compassion, learn to know ourselves rather than distract ourselves, then change will bring growth. With it comes the liberating humility of being grateful in the present while having hope for a positive future. We keep growing throughout our lives. We are in a process of becoming: it is not a place at which we arrive, although if we know the direction in which we are headed, we are more likely to thrive. To live a life that has meaning, a reason for being and a sense of belonging. A life in which we love and are loved.

* Waldinger, R. (2017), *75-year Harvard Study of Happiness*, https://harvard.edu

The Process of Change in Life

> 'Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes. Don't resist them – that only creates sorrow. Let reality be reality. Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like.'
>
> Lao Tzu

In popular culture, change we choose has a positive reputation. It brings with it the sheen of newness and excitement. Big life events, such as the birth of a child, usually conjure picture-perfect images and gasps of delight. Even retirement is seen as freedom: a permanent holiday. Ageing, on the other hand, has a bad reputation. Every other phase of life is seen as a development but ageing comes with the image of the slippery slope to death. Naturally we do what we can to avoid it, anti-ageing being the operative word. The truth is that change on all fronts requires work. We need to work at actively adapting, which can be straightforward but also challenging. Although we want it to be quick, it can take time to catch up emotionally with an external event: we cannot force our feelings to go at the same speed as our removal van, new job, new role, new status.

We are brought up thinking life is an upward journey, a stairway to a better place, each step higher than the last. But the reality is far less certain: there are ups and downs, and the only certainty that exists is that there will be change.

Life is a set of alternating phases, a period of change followed by a period of stability, then another change. Research shows we tend to take stock and think about change every seven to ten years (yes, the seven-year itch is a thing), and the process of change can take up to a year to be integrated into our life. Sometimes the changes feel like success, at others failure, but the key is to learn

from them. It is well researched that the more we allow ourselves to learn and expand in response to life changes the more likely we are to thrive. It is worth noting that, as much as the change we face may be unknown, we will carry all of the important aspects of the past with us. As my client Maria said, 'I've folded a lot of my past pain into my heart.' We never lose where or who we've been, which can be a source of potency and growth.

Change isn't linear, and we all carry invisible baggage, but we also go through a cycle when we make the decision for change.

Thinking about Change

Any change begins with an assessment. We start with thinking about it: we have a vision of what it might be like, then seek out information to help us evaluate how it will affect us. This can be a quick process or it can take a long time. It can halt before the cycle is complete because the next step requires action. We need to make the decision, which in itself requires a level of trust and self-belief.

Even change we choose, like committing to a partner, requires an emotional adjustment. We may know we want to marry the person we love, but our commitment to them inevitably means saying no to other fabulous imagined partners, which can feel difficult. Sometimes this process will happen without disturbing us, but change rarely sneaks through that easily. Anxiety often accompanies new beginnings: the not-knowing can scare us. Anxiety is a form of energy that forces us to adjust, informing us we have to shift our role, behaviour or view. We need to shed the old way of being, like reptiles shed their skin, for a new way of being to grow.

Resisting Change

Inevitably change we don't want is harder to deal with, such as divorce or losing our job. Dramatic external events can trigger a

psychological crisis, but a breakdown can ultimately be a breakthrough. Humans crave safety, and we are reluctant to give up the familiarity of the past: it feels less scary than the unknown. When a new experience happens, such as losing a job, it can reignite old – but powerful – feelings. One of my clients, Cindy, lost her job and found that she had never examined her beliefs about herself, such as 'I'm a loser', which might have led her to sabotage the change that was needed. The most common ways we resist change are by being too busy or too terrified to engage.

Change tests our beliefs and forces us to question what we once took for granted. It is important to allow these beliefs to evolve while holding on to our core beliefs, to let ourselves learn from our new experience. And sometimes we have to fail so that we can move forward. Some of us will choose unhappiness over the pain of uncertainty. But when facing disruption, it can also be liberating to remind ourselves that we have no control over the key things in life that matter most to us: birth and death, the behaviour and feelings of the people around us. We can influence them, but mentally fighting to have absolute control is futile.

What Disruption Feels Like

The external event that may have prompted the change is often easy to describe, but it may be harder to make sense of how it feels. Our initial reaction may be a sensation, but over time we tend to become aware that the sensation transforms into distinct thoughts. Sometimes they remain unclear, but as we come to understand our thoughts, it can feel like growth.

We all have a natural coping mechanism when change hits us, which we learn in childhood. It is a habitual response – perhaps we switch off, become overwhelmed or, if we're among the fortunate few, immediately absorb and deal with change. We need to understand what our response is so that we can learn to be more flexible.

In most of my clients I see, as Carl Rogers observed, who was an American psychologist and one of the founders of the humanistic approach, a paradoxical facet to change: the more we can accept the aspects of change we find unacceptable, the more likely it is that the change will occur. So, when we stop fighting against it, the more likely it is that we can embrace it.

Accepting change takes time, often much longer than anyone wants or allows. In the movement between where we were and where we're heading, we need to allow space, time to just be, a time for not knowing: the 'fertile void'. As human beings, not machines, we can't switch ourselves off and on. We need time to withdraw, reflect and restore before we jump in again. We move forward with trepidation, exploring and testing, perhaps taking action, doing things differently, and then a natural stepping back and evaluating. Over time, the new landscape becomes familiar and is less scary.

Often we adapt to change by making tiny adjustments. As in all psychological theories, nothing is certain, in some cases a sudden shift can liberate and transform someone. The different types of change will have different degrees of impact, depending on how big the change is. Aspects that support a successful change vary, and will depend on economic security, emotional resilience and health. Our relationship with family, friends and colleagues, allowing them to support us, is fundamental to how we manage the discomfort of this process. The love of family and friends can help hold us steady when we're shaken.

Hope

A key factor in how we manage change. If we have no hope of light at the end of this tunnel, it is extremely difficult to bear the pain and distress of the process. We are more likely to have hope if, in our experience, our hopes have been realized. If, however, our hopes have been regularly dashed, it is likely the story we tell ourselves is negative, often using absolutes like 'never' and 'always'.

Then we will find it hard to trust that this time we will get through it. We need hope to sustain us, and without it we are unlikely even to attempt the change.

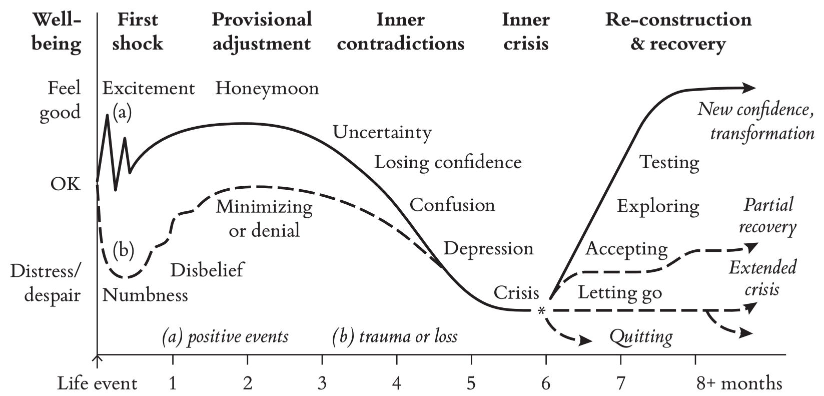
We would like to give ourselves the amount of hope that will be matched by the outcome of our dream. Unfortunately we can't control hope, and we can't protect ourselves from the pain of loss, should our dreams fail by having less hope in the beginning.

From the research of the American psychologist Charles Snyder in understanding how hope operates, it is helpful to recognize it is not just an emotion, although emotions support it. Hope is about how we think. It has three parts: the capacity to set realistic goals, the ability to work out how to achieve them, including the adaptability for a backup plan, and finally self-belief.

Integration and Meaning

The final phase of the process of change is tentative acceptance, which comes with a greater sense of calm. Over time we may realize, often with a start, that we are no longer thinking about the change: it doesn't preoccupy us as it did. This augurs true acceptance – our new normal. An important addendum is to explore what this change means to us, learning from the experience and making sense of our life now. Through discussion and reflection the final piece of the puzzle, integration into our post-transition world, falls into place. Now we start to let go of the past, without forgetting it remains part of us but remembering that it no longer holds such power. It is an ending that marks a beginning: the moment at which we confront the true nature of change. It brings with it a new energy, at times even a sense of being reborn, as we step into our renewed life.

The image for the transition cycle on the next page shows the shift in our feelings in the process of change. The initial excitement is often followed by confusion and depression. It takes time to explore and understand this change to build up to new confidence and recovery.



The transition cycle – a template for human responses to change (Williams, 1999)

Reflections

In the reflections at the end of each theme, I have given relevant statistics and research. Statistics give a broader perspective, letting us know that, as abnormal as we may feel, we are by no means alone. I have focused the research and guidance in response to my particular clients' experiences to expand our knowledge from the personal to the universal. Shelves of books have been written on each topic, but I have chosen to show the wisdom of specialists in the field who reflect my view of the world. Inevitably it is a subjective and limited view, which has been shaped by my experiences as an imperfect woman, wife, mother and daughter. For further exploration it might be useful to go to Sources, pages 303–21.

Family Relationships

'What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others.'

Pericles

Leena

Mother of the Bride

Leena was angry. She knew she should be happy that her daughter, Anita, was engaged to be married. She liked her prospective son-in-law well enough, but she was fighting with her daughter. As she spoke she twisted her watch distractedly, anger written on her face. Her eyes looked as if they were searching for a target; I suspected it would be me. I guessed beneath her anger was a pulsating hurt, which I would need to understand, and keep in mind now, to maintain my empathy for her.

I acknowledged the differences between us, particularly with regard to our contrasting attitude to family. I was a white, non-practising Christian, who held Western beliefs – we tend to be more individualistic, valuing self-reliance and independence. An Indian Hindu, Leena had a collectivistic view, valuing community dependence and authority. I'd understood duty was her abiding attitude. It wasn't for her to question; it was her duty as a daughter, wife and mother to follow the code set by generations. Naturally I was biased: she might at times have to set me right. From the authoritarian manner in which Leena spoke to me, I was left in no doubt that she was used to getting her own way and was not interested in a different viewpoint.

She would happily put me right. I asked her to tell me a little about herself.

She had come to England from India thirty-five years ago to marry Devang, a member of a wealthy, property-owning family. As it was an arranged marriage, Leena had not met him prior to her engagement, which she stated with weight, as if it demonstrated her obedience at that age, tipping her chin forward as she spoke, her perfectly coiffed hair bouncing in agreement. Leena had built a good life in the UK: she was proud of her family, and happily married, with one son and two daughters. Anita was their younger daughter, a solicitor, and their last child to marry. Leena now worked in the family business, in charge of the interiors, and oversaw their philanthropic work.

Devang had suggested she see me because he didn't know how to resolve her dispute with Anita. As Leena spoke, the heat of her anger reverberated in her body, a shield of rage that pushed everyone away: the filter through which each thought was processed and influenced. I felt it was burning her inside, shutting down every other feeling, blocking tenderness and warmth. As she described her conflict with Anita, it was as if she was obsessively building the case against her in her mind to knock her out. Like building a battalion with which to attack her. Her rage sought action, which she couldn't take: it was stuck in her body. I needed to let her express it fully.

I didn't want to stoke her anger by colluding with her and adding outrage I didn't feel to hers. I wanted to let her know I had heard her feelings, reflecting her view and her fury, as accurately as I could, and that I could see how distressed she was. Anger cannot be argued away: that increases it. It needs to be listened to, and understood, to reduce its force.

At the heart of Leena and Anita's argument was love, separation and power. It played out over the kind of wedding they each envisaged. Leena wanted a full-length traditional Hindu wedding, with all their family and friends present. Anita wanted a simpler wedding, with fewer ornate ceremonies, and only the friends and family she knew. The further question as to whether they have a

ceremony in India, too, as was traditional, hadn't been addressed by either woman: they knew it would cause further conflict.

Over a number of weeks, in many different ways, Leena said the same thing. She believed her daughter's selfishness, arrogance and single-mindedness were abhorrent. Leena felt she had learned to adapt to a more Western culture, but she held core beliefs that were central to her, particularly in line with the more traditional idea of the Indian mother. I questioned Leena: did she feel guilty that at some level her daughter was diluting their Indian heritage or being disloyal to their Indian identity?

I caught a glimpse of the scared child doing wrong as she nodded and spoke of her own mother's pride and trust in her, which she did not want to betray. Anita's fight for her wishes, against the family view, not only felt wrong but disturbed her. It threatened her sense of unity as a family. For Leena, criticizing her daughter, telling her what was right and wrong, was a way of loving her: 'Who else is going to care?' Leena added. 'In India there is no sense of personal space, personal decisions, personal views. We hold close together to survive. Everybody knows what everybody is doing, and their opinion is included. We don't have separate views, or closed doors.' I could see the disturbance in her eyes as she described the look of contempt Anita had given her at their last meeting, following Leena's vehement argument for a traditional wedding. It had stung. How dare her daughter disrespect her in that way? Leena had woken up ruminating and, throughout the day, she had fights and confrontations with her daughter in her mind. When I commented gently that it must be isolating and exhausting, she nodded.

I felt warmth towards Leena as I stepped inside her world, feeling that her love for Anita was matched by the pain of Anita's rejection. I began to wonder whether Leena's forcefulness covered up earlier versions of herself that were more vulnerable. I described to her the different sources of her rage that were informed by her experiences, and how they were profoundly challenged by Anita. There was the memory of herself as a child, having been dominated by a strong mother and grandmother, whom she had loved deeply but had been

afraid of, receiving sharp slaps if she wasn't totally obedient. Leena came from a long line of strong women, but those women had for centuries been subservient to men and the requirements of duty. There was herself as the fearful young woman coming to a strange country, entering the life of a family she'd never met, and remembering her respect for their rules. Neither of her other two children had brought up these feelings in her. Their weddings had been as she wanted – uncomplicated. Two families joining together was everyone's business, not only the couple's choice.

I could see she felt shocked that Anita, who had been the child she was closest to, given a life of privilege, was adamantly refusing to do as she was asked. It felt such a small request in comparison to her own upbringing. Anita's stubbornness baffled her. Leena believed that as Anita's mother she had earned her daughter's compliance, from a position of absolute authority. But vulnerability, too, lay beneath this, the question of her own failure as a mother: what had she done, what had she missed, that meant she had such a daughter?

Leena's relationship with Anita was deteriorating. They'd had a fight in the kitchen, when Leena had commented on her new haircut. I could tell by the tone she used when repeating the incident that her seemingly innocuous words – 'I see you have a new haircut' – had been loaded with criticism. Anita had banged down her mug, looked at her with cold disgust, said, 'How dare you?' and stormed out. Leena felt that look had conveyed many unspoken words: 'Who are you? I don't even know you. I certainly don't like you.'

Anita had refused to speak to her mother since, not replying to texts or calls. This had shaken Leena. As she told me, I could see more of the wound that lay beneath her anger and confusion. I felt the hit of Anita's verbal punch in my stomach. Over the next weeks of therapy sessions it felt as if a battle was taking place inside Leena – she woke in tears most mornings, but then would attack the day, keeping frantically busy with endless meetings and site visits, numbing her pain with activity.

I sensed, although Leena didn't voice it, the longing she felt to

be close to her daughter. Yet the pain she felt, which was expressed as righteous fury, came from the fear that she might have lost Anita. I could feel her worrying about the future and worked hard to find out what she imagined. I came up against subtle resistance: whatever I said, there was a nod but no emotional movement. I realized she didn't want to feel the pain of the void left by the loss of her youngest child: she wanted to skip to the 'next' thing, where she was right and happy again. But she had no emotional energy to do that, because she was invested in holding on tight.

I wondered whether the more Western approach, with the child becoming an adult, finally leaving home and being independent, would help her understand. As I spoke, Leena turned away. I wished I could reach her – I felt for her as a woman and a mother, and wanted to show I knew how hard it is to let go of our children. A new beginning cannot start without an ending: we have to go through the phase between, to experience the chaos and turbulence of not knowing. My strongly held Western perspective is that, as parents, we must learn to shift our position, take a back seat, let our children make their decisions for their lives, let them actively leave us, which frees them to choose to come back. If only she could change how she looked at Anita, it would enable Anita to change. The relationships would recalibrate, yes, but remain loving.

Over the next weeks, I felt we needed to bring into focus the broader relationship Leena had with Anita. It had been lost in the polarization of their wedding battle. I suggested Leena show me photographs of Anita as a child. She lit up at the idea – she loved those photographs. When she brought them in, I could see Anita tucked into her shoulder as a newborn baby, that new-mother bliss in Leena's face, luxuriating in loving her last child, pouring time and attention into her, enjoying her in a way she hadn't been able to with her first two children. As she spoke, slowly sifting through the photos, I could almost smell the deep bond of a mother and her newborn, her skin pressed to soft baby skin. Other photographs of holidays and birthdays showed a happy child, funny and outgoing, who looked very like her mother – making faces, dancing. Even

her adolescence had been relatively calm. This meant, to me, that they had not worked through many of the conflicts that allow the necessary separation between adult child and parent. I also wondered how much Anita had hidden from her mother to be, as Leena had voiced, 'the traditional perfect daughter' of her mother's dreams, while living life as a Westernized young woman.

I looked up from the photographs and clarified what I saw: Leena's intense love for Anita. I found a way to say that love was interchangeable in Leena's mind with control. Anita had opposed her, not to hurt her but with the intention of being an adult, soon-to-be wife. Anita's identity as a wife and adult was as much shaped by her Western upbringing as her Indian roots. She wanted to hold both. It seemed to me that, unconsciously, Leena viewed Anita's marriage as a threat to their bond, and was trying to regain control of their close connection through taking charge of the wedding. She had conflated love with obedience: if Anita didn't obey her, she didn't love her.

As I spoke, Leena froze. She looked very young and stricken. I described to her what I could see, and commented that she wasn't breathing. Leena took a big breath, then short shallow ones, as she held tight. She couldn't quite bear to let herself know her greatest fear. Her silence conveyed her uncertainty, a shift away from her position of being right. She moved around in her chair, crossing and uncrossing her legs, as if part of her could take in the push and pull of holding on and letting go, and another part couldn't . . . quite. I told her that I wasn't trying to force her in a particular direction: I understood the complexity of her dilemma. I hoped that, by bringing their whole relationship into her awareness, perhaps Leena had a clearer insight into what was going on. Leena nodded. The process of change, as uncomfortable as it was, had begun.

At a family dinner to celebrate Leena's son's birthday, Anita had not said a word to her but had been affectionate and warm with the rest of the family, in particular her father. Their closeness versus Leena's distance from Anita had created an atmosphere that pervaded the room. I felt Leena's jealousy and her rage. I asked

Leena what she felt in her body. She put a hand to her chest: it felt tight. As she breathed into it, she made a sound, animal-like, quiet but distressed. I asked her to stay with it. Tears came down her face, tears that signalled a loosening of her rigid grip.

Over the next weeks Leena's body was in revolt. She had headaches and tummy aches, and her back hurt. I talked to her about listening to her body, asking her what she thought it might be telling her. I suggested she take up exercise to release the tension, and develop habits to help calm herself. This was not natural to Leena, who knew how to overcome difficulty with grit and determination but had no idea about self-care. Duty was her abiding rule, not meeting or even knowing her own needs. Reluctantly she began to go to a yoga class, and significantly she started to write, which became an outlet for her whirring furious mind. She surprised herself with what came out of her pen, quoting her journal: 'I was never asked what I needed, felt, thought or wanted. I never argued or made demands on my mother.'

This led us to explore her silence as a child and a young woman. It had been passed down for perhaps twenty generations from mother to daughter, and to a great extent from her to Anita. It might have gone unchallenged if she hadn't come to the UK, but now Anita had different expectations. It was at the heart of their difficulty: Leena had no way to understand the emotional cost to herself of that silence. Yet again she was not being listened to, or being allowed to make a decision. Even when it was her time as a mother to influence her daughter, she was not being heard. She felt as if she had been oppressed and now she was still being oppressed, but by the younger generation. Our work was to help her develop a fuller picture of the different emotions, often conflicting, that were going on inside her.

I asked her to tell me what her husband and other family members thought. She sighed, twisted her watch. They wanted the disagreement to end. Her husband looked at her as if she was a mad woman. She felt alienated from them all. Being 'right', I said, could be lonely and make you angry. Finally, I felt I could tell her

that I suspected a primitive physical yowling lay beneath her anger. It overrode her thinking. She didn't want to let her daughter go – her last child. Her baby. It was as if she was mourning the ideal daughter she wanted and couldn't quite come to terms with the daughter she had, who wanted to be allowed to shift the centre of her world from her mother to her husband. I empathized with the strength of her feelings and how they must scare her. How she wanted to punish, almost crush, the child she had loved and protected most in the world through the hurt of losing her. Yet acting out her anger was harming them both.

Leena pulled her tailored jacket across her chest, as if armouring herself against my words, but she was silent, taking them in. Or at least some of them.

After a long five minutes, she asked me quietly what she should do. I responded equally quietly. It wasn't so much what she should do but what she could allow in herself. Could she allow herself to want to hold on to her daughter, and allow her daughter some independence? Could she let Anita be the child she was rather than the child Leena had imagined she should be? I acknowledged how confusing it was, since Anita was bi-cultural, and was, in her own way, negotiating how she could live an Indian and a British life.

Leena stamped her foot, with childlike frustration. She pressed her hands against her ears, as if her head was about to burst. I asked her to close her eyes, and breathe, then to hold her body very tight, squeezing every muscle for a few minutes, then release and let go. I followed with a relaxation exercise and could see the calm wash through her body. Now wasn't the time for words: it was time to let her system unwind. She left silently, allowing me to give her a hug, her large frame shaky as I held her.

I learned the following week that Leena had gone from our session and called Devang out of a meeting. She had asked him to come home early to her. A first. She needed him to hold her. She breathed in the scent of his peppery hair, felt the warmth of his arms. The pressure in her chest eased and she felt safety running through her veins. He listened as her tirade of loss and sadness,

rage and hurt flowed out of her into his increasingly damp shoulder. She'd cried for a long time, sobbing noisily. He had been kind, and he had held her. He had made her a cup of tea. She was surprised by how much calmer she felt. They agreed they needed to see Anita together: they needed to find a way forward.

Leena looked at me with a pride and warmth in her eyes that I hadn't seen before. The process between one phase of life and another can be achingly long, and sometimes it is wonderfully simple. In this case there was a real shift in Leena: her husband's support and love enabled her to picture a future where they were a close family, but she didn't have to maintain such a tight grip. They had met with Anita and agreed a compromise for the wedding. Anita was still wary of her mother, there was tension between them, but they had leaped the largest hurdle and had a plan to go forward. Leena loved a plan.

I felt the release of tension in my body. I told Leena that the power parents have to influence the wellbeing of their adult children is often underestimated. The relationship needs to be reconfigured, for sure, and the power balance recalibrated, but fundamentally the child is always a child with their parents. I wanted Leena to know that she could use her power collaboratively with Anita. She didn't have to have power over her. I talked about the importance of argument, which, when voiced, can be better than simmering disagreements. There are ways to have arguments that do battle over views but don't attack those engaged in them. Closeness can follow an honest disagreement, maybe allowing time for each party to feel less raw. It is never the argument that truly matters but the capacity to repair.

I touched on the symbolic meaning of her daughter's marriage. It was psychologically for Leena the symbol of her own physical decline, when she had to relinquish her unconscious youthful dream of immortality – her repair came through recognizing the healing power of generational continuity, perhaps even her future grandchildren, in whom the youth and beauty would reside.

Leena didn't need to see me any more: she had allowed herself

to change and felt our work was done. I very much hoped it was and wished her well.

Lucas

Newborn, New Dad

Lucas contacted me through an online search, asking me if I would see him to help him adjust to the birth, six months previously, of his son Lee. He told me in the email that life was calming down after the initial stress of a newborn. He wanted to take time to focus on how he felt, and on his central question: 'What kind of father am I?'

A few weeks later, when he walked into my room, he grinned broadly, his green eyes twinkling as he sat down. He was small but strong. He looked around the room, checked it out and nodded, not necessarily approvingly but getting his bearings as to where he was. I could feel him centring himself. On hearing his accent, I made the infuriating mistake of assuming he was American, and was told firmly that, no, he was Canadian, from Toronto.

Lucas lived in London as a freelance artist working for media campaigns, but that wasn't his choice. His voice dropped, he frowned and pushed his hand up against his jaw, against the discomfort of his words. He was selling his creative soul to the commercial sector because he hadn't as yet (the 'as yet' was very important) been able to establish himself securely as an artist to earn a decent living. His wife, Heather, a Chinese Canadian, was seven years older than Lucas. Aged forty-six, she worked as an executive in the pharmaceutical industry. It meant long hours and a lot of travel. She earned considerably more than her husband.

I soon realized how different this process would be from my usual therapy work. Lucas had high energy and a curiosity that drove the sessions. In adapting to being a father, he wanted to raise his awareness of all aspects of himself; he was distressed, maybe 'shaken' is a better word, but he wasn't in pain. Pain isn't the only

agent of change. Lucas seemed confident. This was going to be a robust exchange, which was interesting for me.

Lucas told me his story to give me context. He had already had therapy, and he wanted to use his childhood as the reverse map of how he'd bring up Lee but didn't want to delve too deeply – he'd done that. His starting position was, and this was said with emphatic certainty, that life was a constant flux of change. 'Change happens, but rarely in a straight line.' He said he was quoting Barack Obama, perhaps not the exact words the President spoke. I nodded vigorously.

Lucas had been brought up with what he felt was a deluded view, that the world worked by a fixed set of rules, and if they were followed – doing the prescribed job, dressing in a particular way, going to the right school – success would follow. As a child he'd been confused by this narrative, but now saw it as an attitude that had brought him real unhappiness. When he told me, 'It was gas-lighting,' I sat up. That is a strong term: I understood it to mean that because his parents hadn't told him the truth, he felt as if they had been psychologically manipulating him, which was crazy-making.

I could see humour was his default response, but beneath it I sensed the embers of anger, which had been slowly scorching him for years. The biggest lie was more significant: his mother was a lesbian. She had known it for a long time, but it terrified her, and she'd sublimated her sexuality until Lucas was nineteen, when she finally came out and divorced his father. As he spoke his voice faltered. He had some sympathy for her difficulty – to be a lesbian had been unacceptable then – but he was hurt: he hadn't been able to trust the people he loved and needed most. The lies he'd been told, the mask his parents had put on, to paint a picture of a 'happy family' had caused it to collapse in on itself. In the process it robbed Lucas of his childhood story, and left a void in him: he couldn't be sure of what was real and what was fake.

Understandably, Lucas felt enormously protective of his son and this pulsated through him. He feared his story or, even worse, his pain would unconsciously transfer to Lee. He knew they were

separate beings, but he had seen history repeat itself too often. I felt touched by his energy to be the parent he hadn't had and warmed by thinking how fortunate Lee was to have a dad like him. I also felt a little old: I knew that as part of the process he would have to forgive himself when he failed to be the perfect parent, as he inevitably would. We need to be, as Donald Winnicott, the British pioneer of child development, said, 'a good enough parent'. But at least he would fail differently from his parents.

Lucas had described his wife as 'clever, beautiful and really, really fun'. Heather came from a family of business people who had moved to Toronto from Hong Kong in the early 1990s. A mutual friend had often talked about her, and tried to introduce them, but Heather's work had got in the way. When he had finally met her, briefly at a gallery, he had felt a spark – 'She was kind of wonderful.' He rang her the next day and left a voice message saying how much he liked her, how incredibly pretty and smart she was, and he wanted to take her out. He smiled at the memory of how uncool he'd been. She'd rung her best friend for advice as to whether or not she should accept Lucas's invitation, and her friend had been all for it, confident he was 'the one'.

They'd had a terrible first date. Lucas had taken her to what he thought was a cool bar, but it was crowded and noisy, which made him anxious and awkward. Heather had been relaxed and, on their many subsequent dates, they fell in love. She was defiantly independent. She wanted his love, their intimacy and sex, but she also wanted the freedom her career brought. He adored her brilliance, her earthiness, their shared humour, their lovemaking and her laugh, and wanted their lives to be more entwined. They had fought this battle through their courtship. Money was also a flashpoint: she believed in his work as an artist but wanted him to earn more money.

They married two years later. He wanted me to know how bad the fights had been, for I had responded to his happy ending and not the turmoil. I thought perhaps fighting and still loving each other at the beginning of a relationship was an interesting foundation

from which to marry, rather than fairy-tale blissful love. They had seen each other's worst sides, found ways to repair after a fight, and many of the key questions – sex, money, power and communication – had been examined, cross-examined, and they'd come to terms, or not, with them, but knew the difficulties.

It had taken them five years to conceive Lee, with four rounds of IVF, which Heather, as the major breadwinner, had paid for. I acknowledged how stressful and difficult for the relationship the years of trying for a baby must have been, and Lucas agreed it had been awful – the endless terrible waiting, for treatment, for results, to get past risky dates. They'd both had massive meltdowns through the turmoil of the treatment, the psychological rollercoaster of needing to have hope, and those hopes being shattered when it failed, picking themselves up for each new attempt, plotting dates on their calendar for sex (just in case they could bypass IVF) and possible due dates, wrangling to gain control over nature.

We laughed at the having to have sex. He agreed it was a little mechanical at times but 'For men it's less mechanical when you're with someone you love, and is there such a thing as bad sex?' I countered that there certainly was, but I was glad he hadn't known it. I realized I only saw couples who were in despair while infertile, and perhaps Heather had found it more extreme, but in Lucas I sensed a quiet pragmatism. Or perhaps his coping mechanism was denial. I suggested to him that the awfulness of the procedures hadn't stayed with him, influencing his view of the future. Now they had Lee, Lucas's distress had fallen away, and he was left with both the happiness of being a dad and the added strength of having survived and succeeded. His sharp response, reiterating how the painful memory of it remained with him, startled me.

On reflection, I should have known, better than most, that a positive experience rarely wipes out painful ones. Even if, over time, there is a sense of growth. Old psychological injuries can lie hidden in the back of one's mind and spring to the front, with surprising force, when triggered by a new painful experience or an echo of the old. This led me to discuss with my supervisor the

disconcerting truth that I had consistently missed Lucas's suffering, and had leaped to the hopeful. We explored together that perhaps Lucas's clean-cut look and his positive energy had blinded me to the reality that his appearance did not necessarily match his internal battles. His shiny green eyes did not express a shiny happy heart. How could they? He had done the therapeutic work in adjusting to his 'gaslit' childhood, but nothing would erase it. I wondered if there was also a surface Canadian sensibility of optimism, which further obfuscated my seeing his truth.

As thrilled as Heather was at becoming a mother, she had been thrown by it emotionally. The initial physical discomfort of stitches and sore nipples, combined with panic that she didn't know what to do, or how to do it, meant she felt permanently anxious. Heather needed her sleep to function, and its sporadic unpredictability had led to her obsessive preoccupation with it – to the extent that she couldn't sleep even when Lee was asleep for fear that he was about to wake up. The negative spiral ratcheted up, evidenced by a written log tracking the dismally few hours she'd slept. More sensitized by my supervision, I stopped myself telling Lucas that everything Heather felt was normal. It can be diminishing to have one's unique experience cast as 'everyday'.

Lucas had been on a high initially, holding Lee in his arms, crying with joy and relief. It had felt surreal, hard to believe that what he'd dreamed of and longed for, had feared would never happen, was a reality. But a few weeks later, he had felt overwhelmed. He was someone who resolved difficulty with actions, and although he could help by soothing Lee, changing his nappy and looking after Heather, he felt a restless vigilance, as if he was looking for danger. We agreed that we know we are actually in the process of adapting to change when we feel that edginess. Learning new ways of living is always uncomfortable to begin with. The necessity for Lucas and Heather to sublimate their own needs to meet Lee's wasn't something any antenatal class could have prepared them for. It was shocking on every level, and he realized as he spoke that he had by no means adjusted to this. He vehemently wanted me to

know how much he loved Lee, how being with him was an absolute joy. He shook his head, trying to hold the love he felt for his child and the fear that his responsibility for that little being engendered in him. How hopeless he felt at times. He felt like the child.

I wondered who had been able to support them, in those first months, with that cocktail of intense emotions. Both sets of parents had come for a week each. Their presence had eased the isolation, and Heather's mum had helped with the nights, but that had come with its own demands: Lucas had had to see his parents separately, and his mum had needed looking after more than she was able to care for them. There was rivalry between both sets of parents: they had totted up who had spent most time with Lee. It seemed to come more from their insecurity than love of the baby. Lucas wanted to take back his words, worried he'd been mean: he knew the grandparents had suffered during his and Heather's period of infertility, too, and were thrilled at Lee's birth.

Lucas and Heather had been aware for the first time of the price they paid by living far from home, missing the old bonds of college friends and other family. Heather's National Childbirth Trust class was her closest network, but its WhatsApp group was a mixed blessing, sometimes giving helpful information and tips, but other messages were competitive – 'Who has the most perfect baby/is the most perfect parent?' – which triggered toxic feelings of inadequacy. Heather had told Lucas that finding the mother in her was a similar process to an actor using a prop, like a pair of red shoes, to step into a new role. She had to consciously work on and develop herself as a mother, try out ways of being, practise until it became second nature.

I saw Lucas looking out of the window. When he turned back, he said quite forcefully that he didn't want to use up the session looking back. It had been helpful to describe the beginning but he wanted to look at their present. Heather was about to start work again. It raised complex issues.

Over the next few sessions, Lucas discussed Heather going back to work and how it brought up the matter of money and the division