

LOCAL NEWS

What Makes Us Make Lasting Life Changes?



In a way, Jarrod and Kris Anderson have Barnes & Noble Bookstore in Silverdale to thank for saving their marriage. A chance meeting there began a journey of healing for the two, who were on the verge of divorce. (MEEGAN M. REID | KITSAP SUN)

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By Steven Gardner

Kris Anderson drove alone and prayed to God for a sign.

She had made one of the most difficult of life decisions and was settled on it, despite the pain she was feeling that night — and probably would feel for months.

“I didn’t know where I was going. I just wanted to get away to think,” she said.

She got an urge to take the next exit and drove into the Kitsap Mall parking lot outside Barnes & Noble. There, she continued to sit in her car and cry.

Within minutes she heard a knock at the window. Looking out, she saw the unlikely answer to her prayer.

“It wasn’t a coincidence,” she said. “It just wasn’t.”

That singular moment led her to change the painful plans she had made. A few nights later, behind more tears, her life changed for good. She was converted.

MORE THAN A RESOLUTION

A conversion like Anderson’s, one that seems to come in an instant, is what we often want when we resolve to lose weight, change careers or find completion in our relationships.

While we might pay lip service to doing the work, we’d probably prefer the flash of lightning that turns us into different people.

It may have been what we were hoping for when we made New Year’s resolutions just a little over a month ago. For most of us, key ingredients in real transformation were missing, which is why those vows and goals we set fell long before the filibuster proof Senate did.

Take comfort. A dramatic change in an instant is “not really the way the brain works,” said Andrew Newberg, an associate professor in radiology and psychiatry and director of the Center for Spirituality and the Mind at the University of Pennsylvania.

Newberg, who has studied brain activity during meditation and prayer, said conversion is something that usually happens over time, often the result of repetition.

Repeat “one plus two equals three” enough times and the neurons in your brain that support that solidify. The ones that don’t begin to fade away, Newberg said.

But for many, the key factor that creates real change is elusive, as is figuring out what the key factor is. Mark Markuly, dean of the School of Theology at Seattle University and a Bainbridge Island resident, said much about conversion remains unknown.

Scientists do have their theories. “One of the things that can happen neurologically when there’s one of these major transformations is the brain can substantially rewire itself and do it in a very, very short time,” Markuly said. It can happen for the better, but is also essentially what happens, he said, when someone experiences Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Newberg said he plans to study what’s going on in the brain before and after specific experiences cause transformation. They probably still won’t know why the change happened, but they’ll have a good “before” and “after” picture.

According to Markuly those sudden changes, while certainly a highlight, are more likely part of a lifetime of preparation for that moment.

“It’s almost like we’re set up for it,” he said.

THE JOURNEY THERE

BJ Young, a talkative 61-year-old former office manager and mother of two who lives in South Kitsap, can tell you step by step how she arrived to 400 pounds.

Young had grown up in Tennessee and took on some rigid beliefs about what good girls do, she said. After she moved to the Northwest those beliefs stayed with her and influenced her to marry a man because she had slept with him. It was that or doom herself to hell.

Not long after the wedding, however, Young's husband began to beat her, she said. She decided it was partly her own fault.

Young turned to food. When she had children she gained weight, most of which didn't go away once the baby was delivered. Being fat, she said, brought with it a tremendous payoff.

"I loved what it did for me," she said. "I was safe. He stopped hitting. I felt big. I felt strong. I felt protected."

What it created for Young was something she calls a "safe place."

Years later she found the strength to leave that husband, but she continued to gain weight through a second marriage and into a third.

When Young approached 400 pounds she had to give up work, because she could barely make it around her South Kitsap home.

"I couldn't hardly walk. This house, you wouldn't believe what it was like, I couldn't keep it clean. It was just piled up," she said. "I was just weak and all I could do was just walk from place to place and sit."

Young had given up on doctors because they would tell her the weight was the cause of every problem. When she lost about half the blood in her body through an illness, she had little choice.

Doctors removed a tumor, built her blood back up, then told Young she had become diabetic and delivered a familiar message. She had to lose the weight.

It would mean taking away the safe place she thought she created during her first marriage decades ago. She knew she wasn't healthy, but her heart held on to the fat.

KyMBERly Oliver, 43, a medical insurance biller from Brownsville, had no such attachment to her illness. But for three years no doctor could figure out why she had flu-like symptoms. She stayed in bed and became a recluse. She lost her friends. "People don't like to be around sick people," she said.

One year she counted 57 trips to the emergency room. "I pretty much wrote my own death sentence," she said.

Life started changing a bit for Oliver when she read a story in *People Magazine* about a woman whose son had similar symptoms. She asked doctors to test for celiac disease, an allergy to wheat, barley, rye and sometimes oats.

The first test came back negative, a bit of a heartbreak for Oliver. She went to the University of Washington and received a more thorough test that confirmed her *People Magazine* diagnosis.

While it was good to diagnose the problem and therefore get a recipe to combat the disease, it wasn't the information that inspired Oliver to get out of bed every morning.

For Bernie Fleming, 63, life change is a familiar companion.

Fleming, who lives in a cabinlike setting not far from Kitsap Lake, was born in Yokohama, Japan. His parents divorced and he went with his mother to Seattle.

His family's economic situation forced him to begin working at age 8, selling door-to-door and working for his mother. He moved out of his house at 14, completing high school in Idaho.

He didn't finish college, instead taking a job as a factory representative on the East Coast during a contentious strike that influenced him to be anti-union. It was there he experienced his first marriage, which ended quickly in divorce.

A few years later Fleming and his second wife moved back to the Puget Sound region, buying a house in Granite Falls. In the early 1980s, upset with how city infrastructure was being handled, he got himself appointed to the city council, then elected mayor.

He considered himself successful, but that didn't mean he was happy.

THE FLASH

In 1982 Fleming was among thousands who watched from land as the fish processing ship Al-Ind-Esk-A-Sea burned about a mile off the shores of the Port of Everett. That sight became a symbol.

When he resigned as mayor and lost his job, Fleming recalled that sinking ship and told himself, "There goes my life."

Fleming said he had spent years meeting expectations set by others. “I’ve done all this stuff. I’m not happy,” he said.

So he made a decision that at 34 probably made no sense to anyone but himself. He joined the Air Force.

Young’s turning point happened on her front porch. She agreed with doctors who again told her she needed to lose weight, but it would mean giving up protection she had relied on for years.

“This,” she said, pointing to her body, “was my safe place. I’m a dot living inside this. . . . That’s how I saw myself, a little girl living in her safe place.”

Her husband, Larry Morris, saw Young struggling and knelt down beside her asking her what was wrong.

Young answered, “I have no safe place.”

Morris put his arms around her, rocked her and told her, “I’m your safe place.”

Oliver’s moment arrived via television. Watching the A&E program “Rollergirls,” Oliver became a believer.

“It was the first thing in a long time that gave me hope, that actually put some passion and drive in me and made me want to live,” she said.

Even though her skating abilities were limited to what she’d picked up on skate nights growing up, and even though she was just overcoming a significant illness, Oliver’s sudden dream of roller derby became a passion she’d take risks for.

“I wanted to be a roller derby girl. I wanted to skate. I wanted to hear the crowd,” she said. “I wanted to hit girls on skates.”

THE NEW JOURNEY

Kris Anderson, parked and crying in her car near Barnes & Noble, asked God for a sign. She heard the knock on her window, looked out and saw her husband, Jarrod. The Andersons, parents of three and living in a quiet neighborhood near the fairgrounds, were planning to divorce. Kris, now 36, had learned that Jarrod, now 38, had been unfaithful again. She got a lawyer. She said she was done.

That night, though, Jarrod himself had ended up in what for him was an unlikely place: the Barnes & Noble parking lot.

“Something told me to pull in there and there she was. It was a gut feeling,” he said. “I was in awe, really. I mean there she was. It was the first place my gut told me to turn and there she was.”

Both Andersons saw the encounter as a sign from God, an answer to Kris’ prayers. With little more than faith that there was a reason they had both ended up in an unlikely place, they decided to give their marriage another shot.

That decision wasn’t all it took for the couple to stay together, just as the single moment wasn’t all it took for Young to lose weight, for Fleming to live a new life or for Oliver to restore her health and optimism.

All of them needed a new direction. They needed actions that turned bright moments into life changes.

Senior Pastor Barry Bandara of the Silverdale Baptist Church might say their directions would determine their destinations.

Speaking to congregants at a Saturday evening service in January, Bandara said that if you want to get to California from here and you head north on I-5, you won't get there.

“Even if you prayed about it,” he said.

THE NEW SELF

Markuly, the Seattle University theology dean, sees common ingredients at work in lasting change, and he can speak from personal experience.

Before he settled on an academic career, Markuly had worked construction, studied to be a journalist, went back to construction then decided on the ministry. Along his curved path to college faculty, he became fascinated with how people embrace ideas that don't seem to coincide with their earlier beliefs or plans.

“They end up seeing themselves differently,” he said. “It's almost like your self image, your self perception, undergoes a major shift.”

Georgann Falotico, a licensed mental health counselor in Poulsbo, explains change in much the same way. Falotico specializes in eating disorders, and said with anorexics, bulimics and others who exhibit compulsions, the disorder “becomes who they are.”

“They can't draw out what truly has meaning in their lives,” she said.

Falotico said for people with addictions or eating disorders, wanting to change is a requirement.

The toughest group to get to that point are teenagers with eating disorders, she said, because the pressure they get from their peers is to remain thin, even too thin.

Once they do decide they want to change, the path isn't easy.

“After that it's generally a very rocky ride,” Falotico said. “It's a slow process.”

Young, who weighed almost 400 pounds when she decided to get healthy, embraced the slow process of shedding weight.

She began exercising by pushing back and forth with her feet on a front yard swing. She graduated to walking in the yard and then pulling weeds. Once she trimmed down to 355 she joined Curves, the exercise facility for women. She remembers being “the fattest person there” during her first few visits, struggling to use and sometimes to get on the exercise machines.

Today, at about 260 pounds, she still has a way to go before she hits her first goal of 199. She's content to be on the path she's on, though, making new realizations about her own strength.

SUSTAINING THE CHANGE

Falotico said those who want to make major changes more often than not need someone or a group of people around them to help them. Someone being there is often critical in helping someone see “the person they can be,” she said.

That can include institutional sources.

For Bryan and Diane Garrett of Bremerton, enrolling in national talk-show host Dave Ramsey's financial management courses helped them learn to budget, to spend less and save more. Despite the sour economy that cost Bryan Garrett his job, the couple resisted spending on credit. They even saved money and had enough to take a vacation last year.

Anita Prator, 59, of Port Orchard said when her husband became so ill he needed to quit his job, she had to give up her cleaning business to work somewhere that paid better and offered benefits. Through Olympic College's Keys program, she learned to negotiate computers. She will graduate in the spring with a degree in integrated multimedia and design.

Help can come from those who live in the house, as in Young's case.

Oliver, who had been nearly bedridden for three years, had to rely on the strength of women who could be her competitors. The inspiration she felt when she saw the rollergirls on television didn't mean she would be embraced by the skaters here.

"It was tough the first time. I didn't have any confidence. I hadn't been around people, she said. What she found was the other women wanted her there.

"It's really a great sisterhood. I know when I go out to battle," Oliver said, "I've got 14 girls who've got my back and are going to be there for me."

Now that Oliver is racing and smacking into other women in the fast-action pace that is roller derby, she is a far cry from the woman who once seldom wanted to get out of bed. She traded in the disease for another condition.

“It gets in your blood and it’s like a virus,” Oliver said of roller derby. “It saved my life.”

RESISTING OUR TRIBES

Oliver’s decision to enter the skating rink the first night, a move she said was tough, meant getting away from what she was used to. Putting on the skates and getting on the floor meant mixing it up with people she had never known.

Markuly said our temptation to stick with people we know, to be tribal, is what will often get in the way of our own ability to improve. To grow, or to change, means expanding our circles to include more people who can influence us.

Change also takes humility, Markuly said, citing common tales from business giants.

“Many of them will often say that the most impactful and learning-rich experience they had was having a failed experience,” Markuly said. “Anybody who does well within their careers, if you listen to them tell the trajectory of their story, it’s filled with mountains and valleys.”

When Bernie Fleming shed his own need to meet what he believed to be other people’s expectations, he was humble enough to change his beliefs about what would make him happy.

Remembering the Al-Ind-Esk-A-Sea burning in the sea, he said, “I ended up with no job, no politics, no nothing. That to me was . . . the end of my first life.”

At 34, he joined the Air Force reserves. For more than 20 years he was also a reservist in the Army, the Navy and finally again with the Air Force. He divorced again and remarried. In 1991 he joined the crew at Washington State Ferries, shedding his former anti-union stance.

The result? He's happy.

Newberg, who has studied and written about beliefs and their impact on the brain, said transforming ourselves means challenging our beliefs about ourselves.

“All too often most of us are guilty of sort of taking something at face value, of judging something just because it coincides with our beliefs,” he said. “When we challenge ourselves and we look at our beliefs and we challenge who we are, that becomes very, very valuable and important.”

MORE THAN OUR MINDS

Transformation is more than a mere intellectual exercise. Newberg said one of the reasons New Year's resolutions often don't work is because they're cognitive only. Real change usually requires an emotional or spiritual element as well.

The changes described by Young, the Andersons, Fleming, Oliver and Miles all went beyond the thinking part of the brain.

In the book “How We Decide,” Jonah Lehrer describes how thoughts and emotions both play a role in making key decisions.

Feelings can actually demonstrate knowledge that goes beyond what we can consciously explain.

There's a down side to relying on feelings, though. Lehrer's book also points out how different emotional triggers convince us to break out credit cards for things our brains are telling us we don't need.

One of the ways we can balance our intellect and our emotions is by creating routines or rituals that help support the transformation we seek.

Roller derby, just like more traditional sports or other skills, takes practice if someone wants to be good. In the book "Outliers" by Malcolm Gladwell, several portraits of successful people, such as Bill Gates and The Beatles, are painted in which the key ingredient is the absurd amount of hours the successful people had to practice their work.

Newberg said that successful weight losers often set up rituals in preparing food so that they don't get blindsided by things that would upend their progress.

THE ROAD SOUTH

Lasting rituals that help cement conversion, such as those employed by Oliver and Young, don't need to involve religion. But the effectiveness of rituals, Newberg said, is why religions use them so much.

In the Andersons' case the rituals they adopted did come within a religious context.

Jarrold Anderson's mother invited them to attend the Silverdale Baptist Church. Neither Jarrod or Kris had grown up in any religious tradition, but after what they saw as a sign from God they decided to go to church together on a Saturday night.

Kris Anderson said that during the first meeting — and several thereafter — it felt to her like Senior Pastor Barry Bandara was speaking directly to them.

The first sermon was about how sheep have to be broken to need the shepherd.

“It was pretty much, ‘You have to be broken to need something,’ and how we were broken and we needed God,” Kris Anderson said.

Over the next several weeks, the Andersons felt like the sermons were meant for them.

The rituals have led the Andersons to stop some of the spending habits that created divisions between them. They quit partaking in “gossip media.” The computers in the home include software that will report to Kris and to Bandara if Jarrod goes to the kind of Web site that in the past led to infidelity.

Jarrold and Kris say where before, they lived highly separate lives, there’s little now besides work and some church activities that they don’t do together.

“Before we just did stuff together,” she said. “But now we spend time together.”

That includes getting to church every Saturday night. It’s tempting to do otherwise sometimes, they said, like when they’re out on their boat during the long summer Saturdays. Over the past three years, however, they’ve seldom missed a service.

Their lives are different, in large part because they do different things than they did before.

The Andersons renewed their wedding vows and talk openly about their past failings and their current testimony, in hopes that it might help other struggling couples.

The proof of their conversion, though, is and will continue to be demonstrated by their willingness to stay on the metaphorical path their pastor presented. To get to California, they drive south.