



Waves of Change

Lessons from the tsunami disaster

by Luis A. Hernandez

What can a disaster teach us about facing change in our lives?

Many of us are fortunate never to have experienced the abrupt and devastating change a natural disaster can deliver, whether it be an earthquake, a tornado, or a wildfire. And hopefully we will never have to live through the horror of a man-made disaster: a terrorist attack or an airplane accident.

But we do experience similar hurt, pain, and loss in the waves of change that affect our personal lives — small ones and those that are life-altering — such



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as the death of a loved one, losing a job, moving to a new city, going through a divorce, or facing a prolonged illness.

In a New York Times article on March 24, 2011, Martin Fackler describes how a powerful earthquake and tsunami in March destroyed scores of small villages on the east coast of Japan. The article, "Severed from the World, Villagers Survive on Tight Bonds and To-Do Lists," provides lessons and inspiration on how to move forward, in small and large ways, when unexpected disaster strikes. While much of the inspiration may be particular to Japanese culture, the story of how an isolated village learns to cope with disaster carries universal lessons for us all.

Whatever the scope of change, humans yearn to continue and survive. Unexpected and anticipated forces of change provide reasons to struggle and move forward. This is done with a sense of dignity and patience in the face of adversity.

A primary reason for continuity is the pull in the bonds of relationships: family, friends, colleagues, and

community. It calls for a spirit of grace and selflessness to think of others first, then of oneself.

As difficult as change can be, it also offers an opportunity to recreate or adapt what has been normal and stable up to that point. It can be a time for refreshment and decluttering, and redirection of what was then and what can be or will be in the future.

Change is a spark to do things differently, to reawaken old skills, to sharpen new abilities, and to recognize strengths and potential contributions. These forward steps are inner sources of leadership qualities that provide motivation to face challenges in positive ways.

Change awakens inner fortitude. It brings a renewed sense of empathy for the suffering and personal tragedies of others. Our own burden is lifted when we can help others; one can find inner tenderness in the strong caring for the weak.

Change can best be embraced when a sense of community exists; being

with others with common social and emotional bonds leads to chains of assistance and contribution and to the acceptance of help.

Reluctance and denial to either dramatic or small changes delays our taking responsibility for action. Forward steps can range from taking care of oneself to assisting others. Acts of personal and community action begin to create a sense of order, transition, and continuity.

Stay busy and connected: there's much to be done. No matter the degree of change, seek support. Work and play with loved ones. Be together to offer and receive support and comfort.

Our Japanese friends in an isolated village across the globe can teach us lessons about how to cope with change. Their reality is still painful

and uncertain, but their struggle to survive provides inspiration and hope.

The lessons from this tragedy for those of us in early childhood education are foundational in our work. Build strong relationships with the children, their families, and each other. Recognize that factors of change impact a crying infant, a struggling single parent, or a sick co-worker. Know and recognize that we do create real communities in each classroom, in each home, in each program. And that we are there for each other.

Change can be difficult — even overwhelming — but the relationships we nurture in the best of times with friends and family, neighbors and colleagues, become a lifeline in the worst of times. Those relationships — and the sense of community they foster — help us to survive and move forward when confronting change.