



Learning from 2011 — Chaos is the New Constant

Donna Zajonc
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Throughout 2011 chaos and uncertainty seemed to have increased throughout the world everywhere. Did your ability to grow, and even thrive, during chaos expand as well? I am not talking about more multi-tasking or working harder. Those strategies will eventually kill you, literally. I am referring to your ability to work with and thrive in spite of the chaos.

Chaos is worse than uncertainty. It means utter confusion in the systems that surround us. 2011 began with the Egyptian uprising and month by month I felt the utter confusion spreading in almost all aspects of life. Now, as 2011 draws to a close, it is essential we return to the basic questions about our own life and what matters most to us. This is the only way I know to survive and thrive in chaos.

Thriving during chaos demands a clearer sense of purpose and direction. That means learning when to say “yes” and when to say “no”. As I reflect on how well I developed these skills during the last year, I would say it is a mixed report card. It’s not that I really want to be more skilled at thriving in chaos---the fact is we don’t have a choice. Chaos and uncertainty are the new constant.

A recent book written by Jim Collins helps pinpoint what we can do to manage the noise and overload of information and still make creative choices. Collins is the business leadership guru who wrote “Built to Last” and “Good to Great” and is considered by some to be the rare mix of research and hands-on experience. His newly released book “Great by Choice” focuses on how to lead even in the face of feeling unpredictable, unsafe and less certain. He suggests very practical ways to see the opportunities in the uncertainty.

Collins says we must learn to see chaos as something that will be present in life and work for decades, maybe the rest of our lives. In getting use to chaos and learning to live with it, he compares chaos to gravity---something that we live with everyday but don’t think about because we have incorporated the force of gravity into all that we do.

I love his quote: “I don’t have any more emotion about uncertainty that I do about gravity. Gravity just is. I don’t wake up in the morning afraid of gravity. You’ve got to learn how to live with gravity. You’ve got to learn how to live with uncertainty. The beauty of it is, you can succeed in very practical ways.”

This is an attitudinal change about how we “hold” chaos. If we can make this shift away from seeing chaos and uncertainty as bad, it seems to me, we are half way home toward living a fulfilling and successful life. However, giving up our resistance and need to control the chaos may sound simple but it isn’t easy. It requires a new way of thinking and leading.

After ten years as a coach and leadership development consultant, here are a few suggestions I have to live your life with uncertainty. Work with these ideas. Apply them in your life and find your new normal.

- (1) You must first have a very clear vision for the business or organization (or your life). This vision is built upon passion that you deeply care about. If you don't deeply care about what you are doing and being each day, ***then tell yourself the truth*** and in 2012 commit to a new direction that will get you closer to and clearer about what you want.
- (2) A leader who thrives in chaos has the ability to inspire and enroll others in the vision. They constantly remind themselves and their team of their purpose of their work and how their job fits into the whole of the group. I did not say nag or be critical. I said inspire others. If you personally are passionate about the vision, then allow your passion to inspire others.
- (3) Third, those who successfully thrive in chaos are able to "hold the tension of not knowing." This is a challenge because we think we are supposed to have the answers before we take any action. If we can stay in the tension of not knowing exactly what the outcome will be, surprising new ideas and options will surface.
- (4) Throw out the need to have a grand plan. Instead, take one "baby step" that will build forward action. Stay focused on what you want and delight in the revelation of how it all will turn out. Manage the chaos by moving forward one baby step at a time.

I sense most people are wondering if the world will ever feel normal again. I also believe there is collective agreement that Collins is right---chaos and uncertainty are here to stay and will probably increase.

We can't control the external forces that saturate our existence. All we can control is our response to the chaos. As you begin to reflect on what you want in 2012, try on the idea that chaos is like the gravity we don't think about. It just is. See if this new fact of life allows you to have a calmer and more relaxed attitude in the New Year.

I enjoy writing these essays and sharing my reflections and hope they bring value to you. May the New Year create a world that works for the many rather than the few.
Blessings!

Donna Zajonc