

Masters of Change

Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas

At the April 23 informational meeting we heard **Julie Browne, MPH, LCSW**, present on her book [*Masters of Change: Why Today's Most Successful Individuals Learn to Harness Life's Most Challenging Moments to Become Who They Want to Be.*](#)¹ For those of us in the daunting process of harnessing persistent and pervasive challenges, this was an opportunity to hear from a life coach about how to deal with a loved one's situation.

Browne herself has faced several family medical challenges. Her brother had a life-threatening illness when she was a child. She was athletic as a teenager and had to give up that identity due to a medical condition in her early twenties. And she had a career as a social worker until she lost the use of her right hand and could no longer record her notes, forcing another change in her life-work identity.

The ensuing feelings of bewilderment and hopelessness made her want to teach others on the topic of identity loss. She studied to be a life coach for parents facing the stresses of having children with a catastrophic medical diagnosis. She did podcast interviews on this topic and turned them into *Masters of Change*. She also created the Courage-Ignite Breakthrough Institute (courage-ignite.com) to further this work.

“When a family's world turns upside down,” she said, “everything is different. Your vision for the family is gone, and you need a new vision. Even when you have no vision, you need to keep going.” Other people can give you advice, she said, and some can even give you an “internal GPS.” They can help you strengthen your resources, and as a social worker Browne helped people cope in their new world. She now teaches people in their “new normal” to mitigate damage and learn to survive and thrive.

She likened the experience of losing their former world view to having a windshield fogged by ice that nothing can remove. But still a person has to get in and drive blind.

How complicated is change? she asked. To meet it, you must let go of your resistance to change and become “comfortable with the feeling of discomfort.” You need to shift your perspective and understanding, becoming comfortable with uncertainty.

Sudden change, such as receiving a catastrophic medical diagnosis for your child, will create difficult feelings. You will feel confused, anxious, overwhelmed, stupid because you don't know what's going on, stressed, hopeless, and angry. The result can be a “forced identity transition,” where you face the destruction of your old identity and your sense of a persistent self. You need to internalize new skills, competencies, and performances because you are no longer being and doing as you were before. You enter a place called “liminality,” where you feel ambiguous and disoriented, betwixt and between.

¹ For a free copy of the book, go to <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/5ov9t5axh5>.

A forced identity transition can come with a change in your own or a family member's health, loss of a close relationship, a career loss, and an unhealthy childhood environment. The gift that can come with liminality is a "fertile emptiness," where you can transform and thrive instead of surviving and settling. You can regain your sense of self, but first you must realize that this is a process and let go of your resistance to change.

The eight principles of mastering change, she said, are: courage, purpose, grief, clarity, self-care, mindset, productivity, and support.

The first step is to **treat reality as reality**. Considering how things used to be different won't change the reality that's in front of you. You need to deal with that new reality. It's appropriate to be sad, but accepting your grief is not the same as saying that what happened to you is okay. You need to work for positive change.

You should lower your expectations around what your loved one and you yourself can do in the new reality. This means responding in the moment while keeping hope alive and working to make things better.

You need to create new ways to measure productivity. You make a new list of what counts as being productive and create new values for your daily activities.

And you need to tend to your own grief. This means putting it at the top of your productivity list and acknowledging all the ways your life has changed.

The second step is to **explore and test new options**. One-size-fits-all solutions do not exist. You need to focus on what's happening and available today rather than worrying about what may happen in the future. Celebrate what went well today. Get organized and get things done—the new prescription, the phone call, the email—as soon as they arise.

Use your intuition, which often goes against logic and even against professional advice. You know your family better than anyone. So, trust what you know and trust your intuition.

Finally, hold conversations with those close to you and sometimes with outsiders. This is the best way to discover new options. And through conversation you can discover your own inner voice and intuition about your situation. Sometimes you can get better insights from people not so close to you.

And the third step is to **remember your self-care**. This is a requirement, not an option, because your loved ones depend on you.

Relabel what you count as productive and put self-care at the top of the list. With that, you can evaluate your other priorities.

Get support. You need to ask for what you need until you get it. Dealing with your changed reality is not a one-person job. Stop trying to control your life and let other people help.

And finally, explore the contours of your own grief. The more you do this, the less you will suffer. And then your pain will change.

The world is still a beautiful place despite all the challenges you face.

And your life is a work in progress.