March 28, 2023 Epilogue

The passage from career to retirement was longer than anticipated. I expected to walk out of the conference room, close the door, and become a different person. Instead, I found myself on a yearlong journey of daily revelations. I envisioned an emotional rollercoaster that would rattle my identity and upset my self-esteem. What I felt during the actual transition was a sense of liberation, experimentation, and transformation. I feared that I would be considered unproductive and that I may become unproductive. I learned during my odyssey that productivity could be redefined and that my definition was the only one that mattered.

We mere mortals are very bad at predicting the future. My worst fears didn’t materialize, but expectation and worry and anxiety are frequent hobgoblins of change. They cloud our imagination and limit our choices. The objects of their desire live only in our minds. It helps to keep a keen eye on the present to avoid falling under their spell. It helps to allow for the possibility that there is an outcome that you have not even dreamed of. It helps to stay physically healthy and surround yourself with people who love and support you. What rattled me about retirement was what could have happened. I could have spiraled into a depression or floundered in the discomfort of the unfamiliar. Or I could have flourished. This time, I flourished. Another time I may have foundered if I had been less healthy, less loved, less supported. We don’t know how we will feel tomorrow, what our circumstances will be, and who will accompany us on our ways. Our lives unfold in a constantly changing world.

I had no idea that the entire world’s landscape would be forever transformed by an aggressive novel coronavirus three months into my own personal transition. Lockdowns, quarantines, virtual meetings and Zoom holiday gatherings colored my individual metamorphosis and the lives of everyone living on the planet. We were all trying to hold on to our own personal rollercoasters—aren’t we always—while trying to literally survive a seismic shift in the world we knew. The workplace was transformed. I wasn’t the only one getting used to a new metric for productivity. As more of us found ourselves confined to our living spaces, the old standards of hours worked and dollars paid no longer sufficed as a gauge for feeling useful.

Because I chose change before Covid appeared, I had already started to take satisfaction from what had previously felt like chores. With more time, I enjoyed cooking, gardening, and writing and viewed them as legitimate productivity. I even came to perceive the mere pursuit of enjoyment as productive. Doing errands for others and spending time with elderly relatives, reading a book, all proved surprisingly productive. Better than productive—gratifying. My self-esteem remained intact and was finally measured by me alone.

When Covid hit, everyone started posting their breadmaking, knitting, and home improvement prowess. While I was in a self-imposed period of exploration, many were simply trying to maintain their sanity. It’s not that Covid didn’t affect me; I was just already in the process of figuring out how to navigate change.

Of course, there’s change and there’s change. There’s retirement and there’s Covid. There’s chosen change and inflicted change. It took a year for me to stop seeing my alter egos as separate and retirement as an ending or a beginning. Now I see it as an action that required a period of transition. The professional, the wife, the mother, the daughter, sister, friend—one woman living one little life, one precious little life going through change after change. I’ve experienced ten thousand hours of change over the years, so I should be an expert at by now. I’m not.

Two years after Covid struck, at the beginning of his own retirement, my husband died suddenly. I was nearing the end of the first draft of my memoir about change, as illustrated by my retirement. There are no words to describe the scope of that loss. It put all other transitions into perspective. I’ve only just begun that passage.