

# CHANGING HABITS – WHY NUNS ARE FASTER THAN US (Part 1)

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To be more effective and fulfilled leaders who make a significant difference in business and society, this is what you need to do. Discard some habitual ways of thinking, acting and being that don't work so well and develop new habits that work much better. We give this advice to managers at the end of each of our senior leadership programs. It doesn't sound very complicated does it, so why is it so hard?

Let me quote four distinguished experts, all who are actually quite optimistic about the possibility of change or the possibility of leadership to bring about beneficial change, and yet who stress the stickiness and stubbornness of old habits.

Robert Kegan from Harvard University has written a whole book *Immunity to Change* on the topic. He argues that individuals and collectives have an inbuilt resistance to certain changes because we see them as threatening to our very existence and survival. We can achieve apparent change in the face of these lifetime habits but the change often doesn't last. He reports research which has found that many people who survive a genuine threat to their lives, such as a heart attack, subsequently will make changes to their diet and their exercise regime. But within six months most of these folks will be slouched again on the couch in front of the television and tucking into the same hamburgers and fries that contributed to the problem in the first place. If a real threat to our real lives can't lead to sustained change of habits, what could?

Mathieu Ricard in *The Art of Happiness* (p135) argues: “We have to understand that we are enormously resistant to change. I am talking not about the alacrity with which our society embraces superficial novelty trends, but about a profound inertia with respect to any genuine transformation of our way of being. Most of the time we don’t even want to hear about the possibility of change .... Nobody really wants to be angry, jealous, or swollen with pride, but every time we give in to those emotions, our excuse is that it’s perfectly normal, just a part of life’s ups and downs ..... but don’t touch the essence because that calls for real work.”

Martin Seligman has been a leading figure in the development of the “positive psychology” movement and a strong advocate for the possibility of learning optimism and developing more positive attitudes and habits. Indeed the opening line to his recent book *Flourish* boasts: “This book will help you flourish.” He favourably quotes Nietzsche’s teacher Walter Kaufmann from Cambridge who claimed that “the point of philosophy is to change your life”. And yet on page 52 of the same book Seligman confides: “It is likely that depression, anxiety and anger are heritable personality traits that can only be ameliorated, not wholly eliminated. This means that as a born pessimist, even though I know and use every therapeutic trick in the book about arguing against my automatic catastrophic thoughts, I still hear the voices frequently that tell me ‘I am a failure’ and ‘Life is not worth living’. I can usually turn down their volume by disputing them, but they will always be there lurking in the background, ready to seize on any setback.”

And here are some of the views on the elusiveness of change from the famous Stanford Professor of Psychiatry Irvin Yalom in his book *Love’s Executioner* (p9): “Freedom not only requires us to bear responsibility for our life choices but also posits that change requires an act of will. Though will is a concept therapists seldom use explicitly, we nonetheless devote much effort to influencing a patient’s will. We endlessly clarify and interpret, assuming (and it is a secular leap of faith, lacking convincing empirical support) that understanding will invariably beget change. When years of interpretation have

failed to generate change, we may begin to make direct appeals to the will: 'Effort is needed. You have to try you know. There's a time for thinking and analysing but there's also a time for action.' And when direct exhortation fails .... I may advise, argue, badger, cajole, goad, implore or simply endure, hoping that the patient's neurotic world view will crumble away from sheer fatigue."

Wow! If these are optimists, I wonder what the pessimists are saying about our ability to change old habits that don't work so well? In the forthcoming Part 2 of this article I will go in search of silver linings, Hollywood endings and some practical advice.