

Opportunity out of Obligation



By Shelley Roy

One principal source of difficult experiences in adult life is that we launch our daily activities without taking time to prepare and reflect. This single issue lies at the heart of much of the unpleasantness we experience in life. We charge headlong into potentially stressful situations without sufficient mental and emotional preparation or forethought. It's all about our expectations, when we come right down to it. Somehow we are stuck with wanting life to be 'perfect.' We want our actions to be 'perfect;' we want to be the 'perfect' parent, partner, employee, boss, son or daughter. For the most part, as a culture, we have forgotten how to appreciate the opportunities we are offered each day to be who we really want to be. Instead of thinking 'opportunity,' we think 'ritual obligation,' and if we do not perform the obligation 'correctly,' we manufacture feelings of shame and guilt. We can ill afford these emotions which lead to stress, violence and a sense of disconnection from those we love.

It's not easy to transform a sense of obligation into a sense of opportunity. It requires skills that may be in short supply these days. First, the task requires reflection, the ability to go deep down below the surface to identify the sentiments we genuinely want to experience during our life journey. The question we need to ask is, "***Who do I want to be?***" not, "What do I have to do." Second, this transformation requires releasing: letting go of some of our old thoughts and actions by asking, "***Does it really matter?***" Many of the actions and tasks that we view as obligations become opportunities when we recognize that they are important to us, not our parents, our children, our partners or our bosses. If asking this question doesn't facilitate a shift, we can ask ourselves, "***What if I don't?***" This question kicks creativity into high gear; creating a vision of what disasters will befall us if we don't. Asking, "What if I don't make a four course dinner each and every night," and imagining the worst brings humor and release to that obligation. Imagining the worst can help us see the opportunities that any situation presents, and the humor we create floods the system with endorphins, the feel good chemicals that relieve stress. Third and last, transforming requires us to shift to a higher level. We need to look at a task and ask, "***How can this be an opportunity to be the person I really want to be?***" When we think, 'I want to,' rather than, 'I have to,' we suddenly create a sense of well being in our systems.

Many of the 'obligations' that we strive to live up to are self-imposed. When I was young, I learned to make my bed each morning, to dust and vacuum each week, to clean one cupboard a week, to hang laundry out to dry. I learned that cooking a well-balanced meal was the mother's responsibility, and that families sat down at the dinner table to share their meal each night. I believed that no matter who my teacher was, earning good grades was a matter of hard work and commitment. When I was in the midst of working on my master's degree, commuting forty-five minutes each way to work, and going through a divorce while raising two sons, I discovered that asking and answering the three transforming questions sharpened my focus. When I identified who I wanted to be as a student, a mother and an employee, the massive list of obligations

became doable. Looking at what really mattered helped me find a way to spend quality time with my children during a difficult time in my life and to be the employee and student I really wanted to be. Creating vivid images of the disasters that would befall my sons and me if I didn't manage to clean one cupboard a week brought humor and perspective to this period in my life in which I could have manufactured stress, guilt and shame. These questions:

- *Who do I want to be?*
- *Does it really matter?*
- *What will happen if I don't?* and
- *How can this be an opportunity to be the person I really want to be?*

shift us from living 24-7 in the Land of Obligation to living 24-7 in the Land of Opportunity.