



COMFORT ZONES

BY SHARON EAKES



“In the long-term we would be more happy with lives just outside of our comfort zone.”

—Brandon A. Trean

It’s a good thing we have comfort zones, those ways of acting and thinking that do not cause us stress or require much thought. Comfort zones are those things we’ve learned to do that allow us to move through our days without constantly asking, “What next?” We gravitate toward what has become comfortable or familiar. When I worked in drug and alcohol treatment, one of the things patients often said was that as lousy as their lives had become, it was familiar. Getting sober, living in greater light sounded good, but was so unfamiliar it was scary. Out of their comfort zones.

This essay was inspired by a chapter on comfort zones in a book, *The Bigger Game*, by Laura Whitworth and Rick Tamblyn, with Caroline MacNeill Hall (Outskirts Press, 2009). My attention was grabbed by this sentence: “*All comfort zones have some kind of benefit and some kind of cost attached to them.*” The essential point is that if we want to play a bigger game in life, if we want to grow, we’re going to have to identify our comfort zones and leave those that don’t serve us behind.

Kinds of Comfort Zones

Whitworth and Tamblyn identify two types of comfort zones: *habits of action* and *habits of thinking*. Habits of action could include never missing a particular TV show, eating certain foods, always brushing your teeth, reacting by yelling when something doesn’t go your way. Habits of thinking might be things like noticing what’s going well, feeling grateful for small things, focusing on what’s going wrong, finding fault with others, feeling inadequate to many tasks. Habits that include both action and thinking include the roles we gravitate toward in our lives. We may find ourselves repeatedly playing the caretaker, the expert, the general, the free spirit, the martyr, or some other role.

The Irony

The irony is that *we develop comfort zones to keep ourselves safe and happy, yet over time, these habits actually devolve us to a state of boredom and complacency.* So if we’re interested in growing,

having more meaning in our lives, or succeeding at a new level, we need to:

- identify our comfort zones, and
- ask whether or not they’re serving us.

The trouble is that we are usually blind to our comfort zones because they’re so familiar to us we think they ARE us. All the more reason this is important. Whitworth and Tamblyn say, “The fact is that unexamined comfort zones run our lives.”

The Good News

The good news is that when we actually do identify and step outside a comfort zone, we build a new comfort zone with greater capacity. The more we do this, the more we grow, the more we’re able to accomplish, and the better we feel about ourselves.

Cost/Benefit Analysis

Part of the examination of our comfort zones needs to be identifying what the benefit is and what the cost is. So one comfort zone my friend Stephanie has developed is cooking healthy, homemade meals. The cost is that it takes more time and some thinking ahead. The benefit is that she stays amazingly healthy. Sometimes this analysis is tricky. I have a comfort zone of doing yoga and chi kung every morning. I’ve been doing this for a long time. Because I do almost the same thing every day, it’s become really easy. I realize now I need to do some different or more difficult moves.

A Reason to Change

This whole idea of looking at your comfort zones may be interesting but not make any difference in your life, unless there is a vision or a dream big enough to pull you out of that space. For me, the goal of staying healthy to enjoy my children and grandchildren keeps me walking outside even when the weather is cold. My friend Krishna is leaving a good job he’s had for years because he’s written a book that is changing people’s lives. He wants to share that message broadly through workshops and webinars (see *Beyond The Pig and the Ape* by Krishna Pendyala).

So what is your reason to move out of a comfort zone? Where might the benefit be greater than the cost? I love the “final note” in Whitworth and



Tamblyn's chapter on comfort zones:

If this chapter makes it seem that leaving comfort zones in the service of your Bigger Game is a grim slog, let us correct that impression here and now. Leaving comfort zones—and learning all the new ways you can step up to what matters most—is seriously delightful. The pleasure of channel surfing doesn't come remotely close to the fulfill-

ment of discovering what you're made of and seeing what you're capable of doing. ■

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