

The True Livelihood Series



Reflections from...

Denise Bissonnette



Denise Bissonnette is an internationally renowned writer, trainer and keynote speaker. For over two decades, she has inspired people and organizations throughout North America to look beyond traditional concepts of career development and to craft livelihoods rooted in the individual "genius" of each person. Her work is a rich tapestry of her talents as a poet, writer, storyteller, teacher and career developer.

The Magic of Commitment: The Power to Pilot Conscious Change

As I sit down to write, the trees outside my window herald the arrival of autumn as she returns with gold in her pockets, ready to set the world aflame. What a marvelous time of year as we prepare for the changing of seasons – from long to shorter days, from hot to cooler temperatures, from the vibrant palette of endless greens to the golden hues of yellows, reds and browns. As we accept the inevitability of change in nature, can we as readily embrace the phenomenon of change that is implicit in human life? For as surely as we witness this dramatic and glorious change of season, this same wondrous and colorful process is happening within us just as predictably as it is to the trees in the forest. With or without our approval, we are part of the never-ending cycle of transition and change - whether or not we evolve through the process, however, is optional. We can simply react to change and circumstance, or we can make conscious choices by which we learn and grow in each new season of our lives. This harkens to the spirit of a question that was recently posed to me:

"Denise, I appreciate the connection you make in some of your writings between simple daily choices, the cultivation of habits, and the ways in which we are erecting our destiny choice by choice, habit by habit. The way that you present these ideas made the idea of personal transformation seem less daunting, more doable, and easily attainable. As a career coach, here is my question: How do we assist people to make the necessary changes in their daily habits which will help them grow in new ways and create the lives they say they want? How do we help people see that they often sabotage themselves by acting in ways that move them further rather than closer to their goals? What additional questions, prompts or suggestions do you have to inspire change in a person's daily habits?"

This person's wonderful query reminds us that while awareness of the daily choices and habits shaping our lives may open the door to personal transformation, consciousness alone does not carry us over the threshold of real change. All the ruminating, dreaming,

The True Livelihood Series: The Magic of Commitment

and planning in the world does not, in fact, create change. Only moving creates movement – only acting creates action. In the end, we cannot “think” ourselves into a new growing season of life – we must actually do some growing. From where does that final inspiration come that inspires growth and change? In response to the reader’s question above, I would like to pick up where I left off in the last issue, on the subject of the vital, make or break point we call “commitment” – that power of spirit which propels out of the dreamy realm of ideas, longings and wishes, and into the physical realm of decisive choice and action where real change is possible.

Not only is commitment a primary ingredient in the recipe for change, it is the spice and substance that most flavors the stew! We have all experienced the power of commitment and the rewards it brings. We have witnessed how everything changes, how nothing is the same, once we have made a decision and committed to a value, a belief or to a course of action. We know the difference between being in a “casual relationship” and being in a “committed” one. We know the difference between “trying on” a belief or a viewpoint and actually committing to the tenets or doctrine of a religion, a political affiliation or a social movement. It’s the difference we felt as students when after sampling classes from a variety of disciplines we finally committed to a major, setting out on a steady (if not sensible) course of study. It’s the difference between entertaining the idea of becoming employed, and knocking on an employer’s door, or wanting to contribute to a world hunger project and actually putting a check in the mail. Whether committing to the starting of a business, the ending of a relationship, or the resolve to express one’s creative talents, standing on the solid ground of commitment we experience firsthand the truth of this celebrated passage from the great Johann Wolfgang Goethe:

“Until one is committed there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation) there is one elementary truth the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision raising in one’s favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance which no man could have dreamt would have come his way.”

With the likes of such a powerful vision, I offer the following suggestions as we consider our own commitments and encourage individuals in their own:

1. Consider the focusing power that comes with commitment.

One of the most difficult aspects of human life is the unlimited choices we face at every turn. The rewards of having committed to something include the stabilizing power of decision, the focusing power of direction, and the staying power of stamina and perseverance. Once committed, we no longer waiver in the face of choices because our commitment points the way. Once committed, we harness the combined powers of our will and our willingness to get off the fence, to pick a lane, and to leave blasé indifference in the dust. In the same way you wouldn’t offer a vegetarian a steak or a recovering alcoholic a drink, commitment sets clear

The True Livelihood Series: The Magic of Commitment

boundaries and lines of compromise for ourselves and those around us. Truly committed to a diet, for example, the question of whether or not to partake in the chocolate cake is a moot point in the same way that a plane leaving from San Francisco to Boston does not question whether or not it will head east. The pilot doesn't waiver about which direction to steer the plane once she knows her destination.

So it is with the focusing power of commitment – with the destination clear, we become sure-footed on the journey to whatever it is we have committed to. Even in this world of chaos and never-ending change, the ability to make a wholehearted commitment brings a sense of constancy, consistency and certainty we could not find in any other way. Our ability to make and keep commitments may constitute the solidest ground we will ever have to walk upon as human beings.

2. Rethink the “costs” of making or not making a commitment.

The whole notion of commitment has gotten a bad rap in modern culture. It is interesting that few words carry the same level of emotional impact – particularly in the realm of relationships. Part of our resistance, perhaps, comes from the knowing that in order to commit to one thing, you have to make a choice and “give up” something else. Making a commitment almost always requires that we make tradeoffs, even when we would prefer to keep our options open. The common view of commitment is succinctly expressed in the popular maxim: “In commitment, you dash the hopes of a thousand potential selves.”

I don't think this message could be further from the truth. In reality, what more powerful way do we have of defining ourselves than by the commitments we are willing to make and not make? By avoiding commitments, we put ourselves at arm's length from the true experience of life, relationships and growth. Through the commitments we are willing to make, we model and communicate to ourselves and to the world that which we value, what we find most important, and what we want our lives to stand for. Think about the people in your life who you most admire and I am willing to bet that without a moment's hesitation you could identify the values, principles and tenets to which they are/were most committed. How do you think the people who matter most in your life would respond to that question in relation to you?

3. Identify your current commitments and beware of the “default mode”.

It is not difficult to assess our current commitments because they are reflected in our current life circumstances. We only need to look at how we use our time, focus our attention, and spend our money and energy to know what we are most committed to at this point in our lives. We are always acting out of commitment to something – consciously or unconsciously. We may choose to take one job out of a commitment to “play it safe” or choose the other job out of a commitment to “continuously stretch and grow.” Either way, through our choices we are always casting a vote towards something that we are deeply committed to, whether it is working for or against our highest purposes and deepest values.

The True Livelihood Series: The Magic of Commitment

The danger is when we lose sight of our commitments or when we are at cross-purposes with ourselves and what is driving our actions. In any given area of our lives (e.g., physical, vocational, relational, financial), when we are not acting out of a conscious sense of commitment, it is easy to fall into a “default mode” in which we choose what is easiest, safest, most convenient, pleasurable or enticing in the moment. In other words, without really knowing it, we can live out of a commitment to comfort and surrender without a second thought to the impulse of immediate gratification. It is life on “default mode” that derails us from our desired destination, where we find ourselves prey to the symptoms of self-sabotage.

Think of areas or aspects of your life where you feel the most content and/or the most fulfilled and consider the underlying commitment you live by which has led to that level of satisfaction. I am willing to bet that your current level of contentment came at the high price of willingness, stamina, and perseverance. On the other hand, consider the underlying commitments that have driven your choices and actions in those areas or aspects of your life with which you feel least content? How could a change in commitment revitalize or renew that part of your life?

4. In relation to any desired change, assess where you stand on the “ladder of commitment”.

Any enduring and meaningful change, whether it is of a daily habit, a lifestyle, or a career move, must be rooted in a deep, soulful and authentic commitment. Short of that, we are more likely to experience some short-lived behavior modification that leaves us wanting. One key to commitment is to check your motives behind the desired change as reflected by our language. While you are probably familiar with some version of this classic progression of goal-oriented language, read it again with the idea of climbing a “ladder of commitment”. For example, for someone who is considering a job change:

A. Obligation – I should, I have to, I need to ...victims at the mercy of circumstances: “I need to get out of this job – it is sucking the life out of me!”

B. Prospect – I might, I could consider... taking a small but significant step out of obligation and into the realm of possibility: “I suppose I could consider looking for a new job.”

C. Preference – I’d like to, I want to, I hope to ...movement from looking at options to actually declaring a desire for doing it: “It would be really nice have a different job that challenged and excited me more than this one.”

D. Passion – I can’t wait to, I’d love to, I am really excited about ... unleashing actual enthusiasm and spirit in relation to the goal: “I am excited about the idea of creating a new opportunity for myself to really express and bring my gifts!

The True Livelihood Series: The Magic of Commitment

E. Plan – I think I will, I intend to, I plan to ... lending focus and direction to passion: "I plan to look into possible opportunities soon."

F. Promise – I am committed to, I have promised to, I have begun to ... providing the power of stamina, intentionality and perseverance through commitment: "I am committed to leaving this job for a new opportunity before the end of the year!"

In relation to various goals, dreams, and desired changes in your own life, identify where you are on the ladder of commitment.

5. Commit first, and let courage catch up.

When attempting any change, to move one step closer to our goals, we need to do something. We need not waste time and energy worrying about doing the right thing or the best thing; we most likely need to just do something. It is strange how when we are not moving, we are clueless to what our next step should be. But as soon as you take one step, the next step seems a little more logical, and at times, even obvious.

There is truth in the Native American adage, "We do not walk on our legs, but on our will". Unfortunately we are often too self-conscious about how we come across, to simply move out on the wild wave of sheer will. We would rather wait until we can ride the surer wave of our talents – tried and true. But in the waiting, we move no closer to our talents, and time continues to roll in on life's shores. The wise sage, Yoda, from the movie "Star Wars" put it succinctly, "There is no try...there is only do." Show up and do what you can do, in the manner in which you can do it. That is where we find the magic of momentum. Where there is true commitment, courage is not far behind!

Living in a conscious and wholehearted manner requires that we make, keep, and even renew our commitments - saying "Yes" to the impulse within us that wants to grow, to expand, to embrace the largest possible self, and to make our greatest possible contribution to the world. We are all working hard and in so many capacities, it is easy to lose sight of the core commitments and values in which those efforts are rooted. Recommitting to what is most important is a profound way of bringing fresh vitality to whatever our involvements are, not unlike the couple who renew their wedding vows after decades of married life. Remembering that we are "human beings" as opposed to "human doings", perhaps we can begin by simply renewing vows to ourselves about who and what we are most deeply committed to at the very core of our being. The promises we make and keep to ourselves color and flavor our every action in the world. Moving anew from that place of deep commitment, perhaps we will find that "Providence will move too..."

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POETIC REFLECTION 

Variation on a Theme by Rilke

(the Book of Hours, Book 1, Poem 1. Stanza 1)

By Denise Levertov

A certain day became a presence to me;
there it was, confronting me- a sky, air, light:
a being. And before it started to descend
from the height of noon, it leaned over
and struck my shoulder as if with
the flat of a sword, granting me
honor and a task. The day's blow
rang out, metallic – or it was I, a bell awakened,
and what I heard was my whole self
saying and singing what it knew: *I must, I can, I will.*

Excerpt from "Sands of the Well" by Denise Levertov, copyright
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THOUGHTS TO CONSIDER



“Great things are done when men and mountains meet.”

- William Blake

“The great danger for most of us
is not that our aim is too high and we miss it,
but that it is too low and we reach it.”

- Michelangelo

“To change your life: start immediately,
do it flamboyantly; no exceptions.”

- William James

“She who arrives at an appointed and committed end,
must follow that single road,
and not wander along alternate paths.

- Eleanor Roosevelt

“Let him that would move the world, first move himself.”

– Socrates

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Use the following questions as prompts for engineering a change in your own life or for use with individuals as you coach and assist them in making changes in their lives:

1. Make a list of commitments you have made in the past, including those you made to yourself and/or in relation to school, family, education, work, or an affiliation to a church, a social cause or a political group.
2. In relation to each example listed above, consider the costs and benefits reaped from having made those commitments. How would your life have been different had you not made those commitments?
3. Consider some of the commitments you have resisted making in your life and the potential costs and benefits that resulted from not committing.
4. Identify a few areas of your life in which you may be on "default mode" and a few areas of your life in which you are truly piloting your journey.
5. Given the season of your life that you are in now, identify three changes that you feel ready and ripe to make. Assess where on the "ladder of commitment" you find yourself in relation to each of those goals.
6. What are ready and willing to commit to at this point in your life?