

Mud Snails to the Rescue!

Written by Vivian Bikulege



Continuity gives us roots; change gives us branches, letting us stretch and grow and reach new heights.

– Pauline R. Kezer

I had a pretty rough phone call the other day. Actually, every work day has been a bit rocky. This past January, the business unit I have worked in for the past two and a half years was acquired. In other words, I was sold. Fortunately, I still have a job and I can continue to work from my home office in the Lowcountry. All good.

At the other end of the telephone call was the global business manager for the product line I have been selling since August 2008. She used to be my sales manager, and she (let's call her Phyllis) is a hardworking and driven woman with lots of smarts, and enough concealed energy to power the photon accelerator in Illinois where she lives. Phyllis merited a notable promotion in the acquisition, and ranks two levels above me in my role as an account manager. In fact, I am lower in the corporate food chain than before the sale. Generally, I am okay with all of my job changes, but for the time being, I do not have an assigned sales territory. When your

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annual take-home pay is based on the growth in revenue and profits of a territory, and paid as a percentage of those dollars through commissions, the “not knowing” is a bit uncomfortable, and try as I may, I forget to take life one day at a time.

In any acquisition, there is a great deal of uncertainty and change. Just recently, a fellow pointed out to me that I exist in the fellowship of people who do not like change. Phyllis says that I have to go after what I want in the new organization, that our new owner needs me, and that every email and phone call that I write or make provides answers to the question of what responsibilities, and what territory “they” will assign to me. She told me I need to set my priorities and build relationships, and she emphasized that my greatest strength lies in my ability to establish and cultivate relationships. Everyone loves you, she said. She loves me, and in a tone teetering on frustration, Phyllis’ voice diminished, explaining that I am the only person that does not recognize who I am.

At the end of the phone call, I walked out of the front door of my house, across the front lawn, and onto the street, and looked back at Toby watching me through the glass door. I just kept walking to an empty lot across the street. I needed fresh air. Going through an unsolicited job change is difficult, and this is just the beginning. I left the conversation confused by what I was told, and tried to assimilate what I hoped to be constructive criticism of my inability to prioritize what is best for my company or for me. I had responded that I try to treat all of my customers with the attention they deserve as human beings but what is true in corporate life, and maybe in most situations, is that deeper pockets get attention first. It’s the old 80/20 rule – 80% of a company’s profits come from 20% of its customers – and those guys are the *big* ones.

Prioritization is an important tactical skill and something I can work on to meet the annual objectives of a performance review. The bigger challenge is the perception by a business manager that I do not know myself. Is she right? Is the not knowing a bad thing? Do I have to know myself in order to successfully manage change? Will change bring me closer to who I am? And as I become who I am meant to be, will this current career path matter?

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At the back of the empty lot is a dock. I walked to the end where the pilings meet Broomfield Creek. The sound of my footsteps caused a Great Blue heron to rise from the plough mud and fly down the length of the creek toward the Coosaw River. Watching the heron disappear in the distance, I thought back seven years ago to when I first drove to Beaufort to assess whether this could be home for Mac and me. Two months later, as I crossed the county line on Highway 21 in a white Ford Taurus, packed with a few of the things I hold dear in this world, a Great Blue preceded me at the finale of my trek from Illinois until I pulled into the driveway of our house on Lady's Island. He flew away, disappearing over pine trees and live oaks, and I knew I was home.

Now, I looked down at brown silt sifting through cord grass and carried by narrow rivulets of tidewater flowing into the greater creek, and for the first time, I really saw them. Mud snails. They were always there, but I was never fully present to notice or consider them. I had to be on the verge of tears, ready to scream over my frustration to reconcile the Vivian I think I know with the Vivian who is and has yet to be, before I could really see the small crowd of dark, hard-shelled animals.

I knew the snails were alive and moving, but their progress was too slow for me to detect any changes. I later learned that the role of the snail in the life cycle of the marsh is to digest detritus – the dead and decaying rubbish of the wetlands – and return nutrients back to the environment. Therein lies the lesson. Change does not always happen at the pace or rate that I expect, but it is constant, and I may have to eat some crap along the way. I cannot control other people's perceptions or the acquisitions of cash rich corporations, but I can grow, albeit slowly, into and through the new directions life has in store for me. Being good at relationship building is a gift. Continuing to adjust my priorities to successfully integrate into the new challenges of my working life is nothing new. Once again, I am asked to recalibrate so that my focus is sharp and accept that my tasks will not always be palatable. I am a big girl. I can do that.

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I considered the outgoing tide, the mud, and the snails for a few minutes longer before walking back home. I know that very few people can take a fifteen minute break from work to walk across the street to a tidal creek to gather their thoughts and themselves. I am blessed to be able to find lessons in even the smallest things that surround me, and luckier yet to come home and see my beagle still waiting at the front door for me.

On my drive back from Atlanta this week, after more meetings of introduction, review and goal setting for 2011, my mom advised me to give things time as we concluded a cell phone conversation. Next week, I head to Cleveland to visit corporate headquarters and begin to cultivate new relationships in my workplace. I plan on heeding the advice of the past few days. Change is slow and even tedious, so give it time. Build on what you are good at and focus on the most important things first. And remember what brought you to the places you love; a change at work, a blue heron, and the promise of new life and hidden discoveries in this Lowcountry. March is the month of the mud snail for me.

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