



THE
OTHER SIDE
OF
CHAOS



BREAKING THROUGH
WHEN LIFE
IS BREAKING DOWN

MARGARET SILF

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LOYOLA PRESS.
A JESUIT MINISTRY

Chicago

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3441 N. Ashland Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60657
(800) 621-1008
www.loyolapress.com

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Cover image © 2009 realeoni/Flickr/Getty Images

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Silf, Margaret.

The other side of chaos : breaking through when life is breaking down
/ Margaret Silf.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8294-3308-1

ISBN-10: 0-8294-3308-2

1. Consolation. 2. Suffering--Religious aspects--Christianity. I. Title.

II. Title: Breaking through when life is breaking down.

BV4905.3.S575 2011

248.8'6--dc22

2011014937

Printed in the United States of America

10 11 12 13 14 15 16 Bang 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For us the world happened
Between a mountain and a sea.
Somehow we were dislodged
Then we began to set ourselves free . . .
—RUSHDY SIERS, in *Words in the House of Sound*, 1999

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Dislodged

The South African poet Rushdy Siers, author of the poem quoted in the epigraph to this book, knows about the chaotic world of change and transition. Born in 1952 in District Six, a neighborhood of central Cape Town, he grew up in the vibrant community of people for whom District Six was “home,” a community comprising all kinds of folk who didn’t quite fit the pattern that the then government of South Africa wanted to impose.

His neighbors might have been former slaves, immigrants, workers, and merchants. They would have been mainly “coloured”—South Africans who were neither black nor white, including many Muslims, and the Cape Malays, who had been brought there by the Dutch East India Company—as well as a few black Xhosa residents, some Indians, and a few white Afrikaners. Perhaps they had one thing in common: they didn’t fit into the

official boxes, and maybe that in itself was one of the reasons the community was so lively and close-knit.

When Siers was a teenager, the apartheid government suddenly decided to “clear” District Six. The residents were evicted and forcibly removed to a bleak area some fifteen miles away, called Cape Flats. Their homes were bulldozed, a living community demolished. And, as Siers expresses so succinctly in his poem, their world, which was lived out “between a mountain and a sea”—in the shadow of the mighty Table Mountain, and on the shore where the Atlantic and Indian oceans meet and sometimes collide—was destroyed.

The transition that he describes, with such ironic understatement, as “somehow we were dislodged,” they would see in hindsight as the very point at which they began to set themselves free. And this freedom would eventually bring them back together in a new kind of community and transform the story itself into a lesson for all of us about the power of change.

As we make the journey through this book, we will explore what it is like for us, too, to go through upheaval, which often brings unwanted change in its wake and forces us through the narrow gateways of transition. I hope that most of our upheavals won't be as painful

or as brutal as the one described in Siers's poem. Yet my own experiences of change encourage me to believe that it is often precisely those times when we are "dislodged" and forced to leave our accustomed comfort zones to embrace (or resist!) a new phase of our lives that we really do receive an invitation to "begin to set ourselves free."

What lies on the other side of chaos? Can an apparently negative experience of change be, for us, too, the catalyst for a new beginning, calling us forward into deeper freedom? No one knows, and none can predict. We will discover what new growth may be sprouting in our lives only if we risk the journey that takes us, like reluctant time travelers, hurtling through the uncharted universe of change.

Transitions are never comfortable.

They Make Your Feet Ache

You find yourself dragging crates and boxes around a new home, and what is supposed to be a familiar, cozy living space now looks like it would qualify for UN disaster relief.

You used to settle into your corner of the office in the morning, and now you are running a marathon before breakfast, trying to satisfy the unrelenting demands of a new baby.

You are trudging the unfamiliar streets of a town you hardly know, trying to locate a supermarket, a dentist, a post office. After the third time of circling the place, your feet won't tolerate a single further step—but where did you park the car?

They Make Your Head Ache

It's a great new house, but how do you get the telephone, broadband, even electricity and water installed? Where did you leave that long list of people to tell of your new address? How are you going to get your furniture up those stairs? How will you ever fit the contents of all those boxes onto so few shelves?

You thought you really wanted this new job. But now that you're here, do you really think you can handle it? You were so sure you loved this person. But now that you've made vows for life, you realize that life is a very long time indeed, and you may not even make it through to lunch without a falling-out.

You had your life together financially. Then you lost your job. What now? Where do you begin? Unpaid and unpayable bills? Anxieties about health care? Too old to start over? Too late to teach the old dog new tricks?

Worst of All, They Make Your Heart Ache

The last child has flown the nest, and you realize just how much you love her, miss her. You long for your son to come back to visit, yet fear that he might not.

You were someone in your job, a respected colleague. Now you are stuck at home with a screaming child, and you feel that you don't have a place in the "real world" any more. You are recently retired, and suddenly you have become invisible. No one asks your opinion any more. You feel unvalued, unwanted, unnecessary.

You wake up in the small hours and wonder whether, after all, you should have stayed in that crumbling relationship, hung on to your independence, remained childless and pursued your career instead, let the career go and had a child instead. Or you never even fall asleep, because your heart is churning and yearning for the partner who has died, for the home that the bankers repossessed, for the place where you knew the neighbors and spoke the same language.

Transitions Make You Ache Everywhere

They make you ache, in every joint and muscle and in every brain cell, and in every fiber of your heart.

Some of these transitions we freely choose. Some are thrust upon us against our will. Some just creep up quietly while we're not looking and take us unawares. But they all have this in common: they change us, whether we like it or not, and they usually don't give us the option of going back. Things will never be quite the same again, whatever course we choose going ahead. The flight path of time's arrow is irreversible. It moves only in one direction: forward.

So what does *forward* mean for us? Where are the meaning and the hope in all the disruption? Where are the petals of promise among the fallen leaves of our losses and regrets? Are times of transition simply chaotic periods that we have to survive as best we can, or might they mean more—much more—than that? Might they actually be times when something radically new is gestating within us and painfully coming to birth?

We all experience personal transitions as life unfolds. But today, the whole human family is also, collectively, living through times of unprecedented and accelerating change. We may feel as though all our old certainties are being stripped away. Our lives may feel dislocated and frighteningly insecure. We may find ourselves wondering,

“Where is God in all of this? Where is there any solid ground? How can we navigate these rapids?”

When my daughter was born, I had already been married and had worked in the corporate world for many years. But then I was—to my dismay—classified by the obstetricians as an “elderly primagravida.” (Whatever happened to “Margaret”?) I turned, almost overnight, from a competent team leader in a responsible position at work into a helpless new arrival in the prenatal clinic. From being well informed about most aspects of my job, I was pitched into a situation where I knew nothing (I remember trawling the medical books to find out what “NAD” scribbled on my notes might signify and discovering, to my great relief, that it meant “nothing abnormal detected”). In fact, I was traveling at high speed in the fast lane, from confidence to bewilderment. I was out of control of my own life. My state of ignorance, and impotence, would only increase, I was to find out, after my child had actually been delivered, and with the additional weight of responsibility I didn’t dare contemplate. No one can prepare you for the total life upheaval that a newborn brings, and the same can be said for most of our life transitions.

Why would I ever have chosen to put myself in the path of that kind of physical and emotional tsunami?

And I *did* choose it. She was a much-wanted child. Well, now, thirty years later, I could give you a thousand reasons why it was a good choice—probably the best choice I ever made. Her arrival brought new life not just for her but for everyone in the family, and for many more people whose lives she would touch. Ironically, she is an obstetrician herself now, delivering new explosions of change and growth into the world on a daily basis.

What if the other transitions in our lives were also births? What if all that pain and grief, that loss of control, that questioning and doubting, that fear and anxious anticipation, were also the labor pains through which something new and special might be breaking through?

Is there any meaning in all the madness?

In the pages that follow, I invite you to risk a journey into, and through, the crazy universe of change, both in your own life and in the life of the world. We will explore something of what change means for us and how we might live our transitions constructively and creatively. The journey will ask us to risk walking this shifting landscape of change and transition without trying to pin our life—or our faith—down into neat securities. It will challenge us to acknowledge that the state of change

and flux is the reality that underpins all existence, and that if God is real, then God is right there in the flux.

We will take the journey lightly, knowing that the subject is far from light. We will do this because, as physicians have told us often enough, “It will hurt less if you try to relax”!

But we will also take the journey in faith—not the kind of faith that knows all the answers and has mapped out the right and proper paths, but the faith that says simply, “I don’t know, but I *trust*.” It doesn’t matter what name you give to the power in whom you place your trust. It matters that you are willing to open your heart to a wider, fuller reality, one in which over time, or perhaps beyond time, you will know that ultimately every painful harrowing of your life’s field, and every anxious tending of new and tender growth, are leading to a harvest that you can’t begin to imagine.

2

Crisis: Danger or Opportunity?

I arrived back late at the nearest railway station one night and took a taxi to my home. The driver was from Iraq and had settled in England with his young family several years earlier. He started to tell me about his experiences of life in the West, many of them negative, and, rightly gauging my age to be a little more than his own, he asked me whether life in England had always been the way he and his family were experiencing it. My answer was immediate and definitive. “I grew up in a completely different world,” I told him. “I hardly recognize life here today as the same planet, let alone the same country I grew up in.” What a difference a few decades make! And the past few decades have made, surely, a quite unprecedented difference. Life seems to be moving faster than any of us can react. There appears to be no chance of keeping up with

the rate of change, and our teenagers inhabit a youth culture that is completely alien to anything we ever knew ourselves. The only consolation is that in another few years, they will be the ones who can't handle the technology and will have to rely on their own three-year-olds to set up whatever device supersedes the DVD player.

My conversation with the taxi driver reminded me of some notes from a course I once attended on listening skills. The British Jesuit Gerard Hughes offered us the notes, which were titled "On Being Completely Baffled." We all laughed at the title, but the laughter was an expression of relief. Here was a proven master in the skill of spiritual accompaniment telling us frankly not only that was it normal to feel baffled in light of what we might hear but also that bafflement was "a good place to be." I have had plenty of cause to remember that wisdom as the years have moved on, and never more so than in the present situation in which the human family finds itself.

Surely the Chinese curse is upon us: "May you live in interesting times!" And the Chinese ideogram for *crisis* also comes to mind, with its combination of the symbols representing "danger" and "opportunity"—a combination we might see reflected all around us in our world today, to say nothing of in our own personal situations.

Everywhere we turn we see the immediacy of the danger. Across the street a house stands empty, repossessed by the bank because the people who called it home defaulted on their mortgage repayments. The elderly man who walks his dog in the park has lost his savings and worries how he will live on his diminished pension. The newlyweds down the road are caught in a spiraling debt trap, along with so many of their generation, seduced into living on expensive credit that seemed as easy as pushing a piece of plastic into a machine. Families in the flatlands are mopping up the debris after yet another unseasonal flood, in spite of their best personal efforts to stem the tide of global warming. And there are neighbors you just don't see anymore. Perhaps they have curled up in despair.

Danger! We see the possibility of catastrophic climate change; the threat of worldwide economic meltdown and the disappearance of all our financial securities; the constant and increasing danger of famine, flood, drought, and wide-scale starvation; the breakdown of trust in many of our institutions, including our religious institutions. Can humankind survive and deal with this level of breakdown?

The danger is obvious. But where is the “opportunity”? What if opportunity really is the flip side of danger in every crisis? Let’s look at a few of the possible opportunities that may be concealed beneath these dangers:

- ↪ The opportunity to pool all our human intellectual resources to reverse the effects of global warming and rediscover ourselves as responsible living beings in a living planetary system
- ↪ The opportunity to embrace the fact that we are all interdependent and that the needs of any of us are the responsibility of all of us
- ↪ The opportunity to confront the greed and exploitation inherent in our current financial systems, to sit down together and work out a revisioning of how we conduct our economies
- ↪ The opportunity to face questions about what faith really means, how we will express it, and whether it really needs complex and corruptible organizations to make it work

If you are doubtful about whether there really is this connection between apparent breakdown and possible breakthrough, go back to the heart of the Christian

story. There you will find a moment of total breakdown: the execution of Jesus of Nazareth. For his friends, this must have been a totally devastating day. They had staked their lives on this man and believed he would set in motion a whole new era of freedom. And now he had been executed as a common criminal, and they themselves were heavily implicated in the life and teaching of this “threat to national security.” But this same ignominious death, this horrific breakdown, as we know, would become the gateway to an unimaginable *breakthrough*.

That breakthrough is the paschal mystery of death transcended by resurrection. But are we willing to live true to the full implications of the faith in it that we profess and then let it play itself out? Are we willing to accept that things do break down in our personal lives and in the life of the world, and trust that this might really be the beginning of a breakthrough? Or will we try desperately to hold everything together, or put it back together, to how it was before it fell apart? In terms of our Christian story, we might ask whether we are willing to allow the death to happen, trusting in the resurrection. Or will we abort the paschal mystery by trying in vain to maintain the status quo, to hold on desperately to what is no longer leading to life, and thereby block the way to resurrection?

This is a question that will keep presenting itself as we move on in our journey through and beyond the chaos of change and transition. Are we hoping that God, or faith, will rescue us from the breakdown and repair the damage, or dare we trust that God is inviting us to engage in the coming to birth of something new, in and through the labor pains of loss and disintegration?

But let's enjoy a bit of light relief. Let's go back to the nursery and recall a rhyme we all once knew:

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again.

Humpty has been particularly accident-prone recently. He has fallen off the wall of climate stability. He has fallen off the wall of religious institutions. He has even fallen off Wall Street itself! And yes, it's true that neither the king's horses nor the king's men—nor indeed the world's financiers, politicians, lawyers, or clerics—have had much success in putting the pieces together again and restoring the system to its old state.

The truth is that once you have broken an egg, all you can do is make an omelet . . . unless the egg hasn't just broken but has *hatched!*

This is our story, in our lives, in our world, and in this book. It is the story of how something new may be hatching out of our own eggshells. The secret is to trust that this may be so and then engage with the task of helping birth the new out of the shards of the old.



As you look around you at the world we live in,
and inside yourself at your own world, notice where
you feel that there are crisis points.

In those situations, where do you see the danger?

Where might there be opportunity?

Do you think it is a curse to “live in interesting
times,” or can it be a blessing?

Have you experienced a Humpty Dumpty
event? How do you feel about it? Did it lead—or
is it leading—to nothing more than a rather messy
omelet? Or is it a chick trying to hatch?

3

Mind the Gap

If you have ever traveled on the London Underground, you will have heard this warning: “Mind the gap!” It warns passengers that there is a gap between the step down from the train and the edge of the platform, in the hope that they will not fall down into it as they embark and disembark.

Gaps are usually considered hazards to be avoided. Children in times past played hopscotch—a street game that involved hopping from one paving stone to another in a certain order and not touching the gaps.

Gaps, it seems, are a bit taboo. They are bad news that might cause us to twist our ankle or be expelled from the game. A certain order, however, is to be greatly desired, whether in our behavior as we get on and off subway trains or in our adherence to the rules of the game, whatever the game may be, including the game of life.

Transitions are gaps.

They mark the gap between the no longer and the not yet. They are the space where we are neither in one place nor another, the hiatus between everything we thought we knew and all that lies ahead in the unknowable future. They mark the place where a certain order breaks down and chaos arises.

Some of the gaps between these spaces are well known to us:

- ↪ Having a house full of children and experiencing an empty nest
- ↪ Living prime-of-life action and living stay-at-home retirement
- ↪ Being self-sufficient and being dependent
- ↪ Being single and independent and being married or in partnership or community
- ↪ Feeling great and having to live with accident, illness, or physical diminishment
- ↪ Being married and being alone again because of bereavement or divorce
- ↪ Climbing the career ladder and focusing on the nursery
- ↪ Being a leader and being the new kid on the block

- ↪ Having financial security and struggling to make ends meet
- ↪ Leaving school and finding employment
- ↪ Pursuing dreams and experiencing disillusionment



Take a moment to reflect on whether you find yourself in any of these gaps. Don't try to fix anything, and don't make any judgments about yourself or others. Just notice where you are and how you are feeling.

Every kind of gap is a space between certainty and bewilderment. We thought we had it all together, and now we are not sure where to go or what to do next. We are on the edge of a strange new land, and we don't know its ways or its language. We are often alone on that edge and think we have no friends there, and that sense of isolation can be one of the most crippling aspects of transition.

Henri Nouwen, inspired by his encounter with the trapeze artists the Flying Rodleighs, captures this tension perfectly in the image of the trapeze artist, who has to let go of one bar and risk the flight through the air before coming within reach of the other bar. But the point of

the exercise is really about how the trapezist handles the gap. What takes the crowd's breath away is the grace and confidence with which he flies through the air and that open question, every time: once he has let go of one bar, will he really reach the second bar safely?

A lesson to be learned from this image, to help us in our life transitions, is this: the space between the no longer and the not yet is an uncomfortable and risky space. We might not reach that second bar safely, especially since we feel as though we don't even know where it is and how stable it will prove to be.

But there is no shortcut to the not yet. We can arrive there only via the now. The "now" is the flight between the two bars. The now is where we really are, with all our doubts and fears. It is the only place in which we can experience and actualize the growth that is inherent in all transition and waiting for us to embrace it. It is our now that is shaping our future, whether personal or global. The now is the only place where we are really empowered to choose our path. It is like the pregnancy that both separates and connects the conception and the birth. If we try to take a shortcut around the gap, we will abort the new life that is asking to be birthed from within us.

There are two ways of avoiding the gap. We can refuse to cross it and cling rigidly to the no longer. That won't work for long, though, for the simple reason that the no longer is no longer there to cling to. The old job has gone. The old home has been vacated, and new people are living there. Our former health and strength have left us. The children have flown from the nest.

The other way is to try to reach the not yet too quickly, by leaping across the abyss rather than finding the right kind of bridge. We do this when, for example, we berate ourselves for not instantly being the perfect parent of the newborn, the recognized expert in the new job situation, the confident and independent single person when our hearts are still aching with loneliness. The fear of the gap can easily lead us into rebound reactions, such as when we take the wrong job too soon or enter prematurely into a new relationship after the breakdown of the old one.

Transition is the bridge that leads from the no longer to the not yet. Nobody can predict what that bridge is going to look like. It may be obvious and sturdy, and we may find it easily through the fogs of our bewilderment. Or it may be rickety and clearly unsafe, and we hardly dare entrust our weight to it. We will explore some of

the shapes our bridges can take in the next chapter. The point is, however, that we have to cross the bridge, and as we risk that crossing, we will discover that the bridge itself is our guide and mentor, and it has everything to teach us about the path that lies ahead, beyond the transition. In fact, we will learn much more on that bridge, about ourselves, about life, and about God, in our transitions than on all the smoother pathways that we journey.

It turns out, in fact, that the gap is not to be avoided at all but is to be *minded*, in the best sense of the word. We are to pay attention to it, not because it is waiting to swallow us up into danger but because it is our personal, God-given tutor to prepare us for the next stage of our life.



How would you describe any gap that you feel
you are in right now?

How do you feel about it? Be absolutely
honest with yourself.

How might you “mind” the gap—give it your
attention and help it bring something new to birth
in your life?

It's Time to Say "Yes" to the Mess

From satisfying work to sudden unemployment. From a happy marriage to a hurtful divorce. From caring for the kids to caring for an aging parent. These are just a few of the countless ways that life hurls us into the chaos of change, where our certainties are shaken and our faith may even begin to falter. But what if we saw the chaos—the “mess”—of our lives not as something to fear or eschew, but as something to be embraced?

In *The Other Side of Chaos*, best-selling author Margaret Silf looks closely at the subject of chaos—and the intrinsic transition it brings—through the lens of Christian spirituality. Through Scripture stories and verses, personal accounts, and other anecdotes, Silf helps us develop an authentic “spirituality of transition” that leads us to live out life’s inevitable changes constructively, creatively, and confidently.

Ultimately, *The Other Side of Chaos* gives us the courage to trust God when life is breaking down and to see our messes not as something to be rescued from, but as something that will help us break through to a place where God makes all things new.



MARGARET SILF is a popular retreat director and the author of numerous books, including *Compass Points* and *Inner Compass*. She lives in Scotland.

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ISBN-13: 978-0-8294-3308-1
ISBN-10: 0-8294-3308-2

