

7 DAYS WANDERING, WONDERING AND SQUANDERING: STRANDED* BY THE ASH CLOUD APRIL 15TH – 21ST 2010

or

A CRASH COURSE IN 101 PSYCHOLOGY

So it's Saturday, two days since the wonderfully named volcano, Eyjafjallajokull, erupted in Iceland. And here we are stranded in Boston. Well, originally stranded in Chicago and now, after a joyful (we were on route home for around 5 hours) yet failed (we had to turn around!) flight to Dublin, we have all been re-routed to Boston. And so we adapt, we adjust and just accept that things aren't that bad really....'Sure it could be worse', 'Thank goodness for the credit card', 'Aren't we lucky we have a hotel room', 'At least we are safe'. Perspective is everything – we survive because we apply that wonderful psychological principle of gratitude. We stay optimistic and we see the bright side, as one clever text replied when hearing of my first night in a boutique hotel in downtown Chicago 'sure every cloud has a silver lining' (boom boom!). But this is one big persistent ash cloud.

Gratitude.... 'Cultivating gratitude is a powerful way to overcome adversity and depression. By choosing to focus on your blessings, rather than ruminating on your disappointments and deficits, you nourish positive feelings about yourself, your life, and others. As an ongoing attitude, gratitude will help you cultivate happiness throughout your life'. **Jeffrey Rossman, PhD**

And so, I decide to write my first ever blog type article, in an act of gratitude to my psychological background and my desire to stay focused and happy in this the strangest of journeys. To be honest I have avoided blogs until now – insistent that it just wasn't my thing. But here in adversity it seems like the best thing to do - why is that? Probably something to do with the fact that I find myself self analysing and second guessing at an exaggerated rate and a lot to do with the fact that I am a Psychologist with too much time on my hands!

And so we, the 'Stranded Ones', get to know each other, we banter in the lift, we mind each other by paying attention to whether we have all found a new home/hotel, we wonder about each other, speculating about where the absent ones have gone, we gee each other along, we share information and contacts and generally we become an 'in group' – our common predicament and goal negating all previous prejudices or formalities. We need each other. Even the most extreme introvert is now reaching out and connecting to fellow 'Strandees'. I wonder whether this experience will have an impact on our emotional intelligence, will we learn from this and connect more readily and

Collaboration... = Latin "colaborare" - "to labor together."

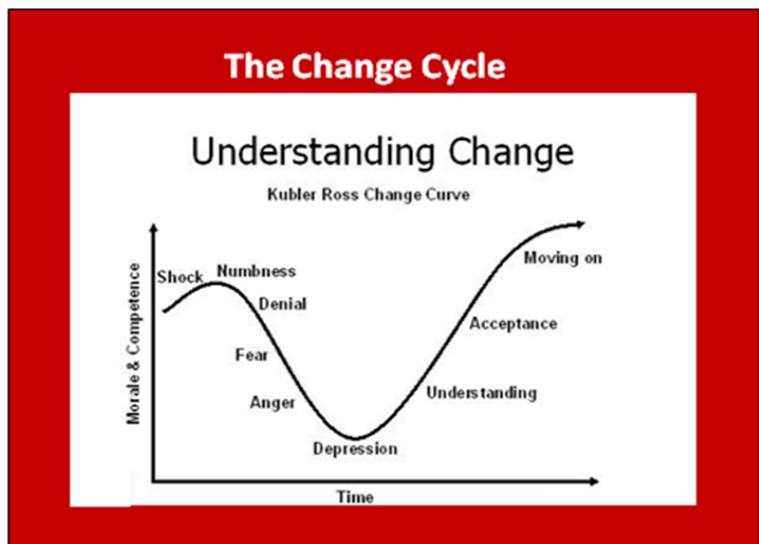
A process by which entities (people, organizations, and organisms) work together to achieve a common goal.

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freely with others? I know that I am now using the 'Are you stranded too?' question to good effect.

By the way it is now Day 4 – I told you I was new to this blog business. Below I have my daily status check – I started using this to chart my own feelings and to see how this compared to the typical 'change cycles' we psychologists use to help others weather life and organisational transitions. Interesting – there is a rhythm to it, but you really have to experience this to fully appreciate the complete rollercoaster of emotions you experience. Especially at breakfast – I have found this the most intense part of the 'Strandee's day'.

For it is at breakfast that your daily strategising begins – you are armed with the most up to date data, thanks to numerous texts and emails that have awoken you during the night and, of course, the obligatory morning scan of the Aer Lingus and NATS websites. At breakfast it is all about collaborating with Co-Strandees to cut through the ambiguity, to chart your course, to articulate a compelling long term vision for the day (!) and to rally and engage the World, the Universe and Aer Lingus to deliver on it.



Exhausting! Especially when these strategy meetings contemplate (and dismiss, I have to add) a flight to Spain via Mexico followed by a Navy boat ride home! I suppose I should admit here to have already checked out the sailings of the Queen Mary 2 – she's full and there's a waiting list (so no more text jokes please about getting on the QM2).

I also have a lovely friend calling on the Hindu Deity, Ganesh, to bring us home.....just to balance out all this logic and lateral thinking.

I notice that above all we, The Strandees, remain calm and understanding even if inside we are sad and low. Personally Day 3 was my bad day – my big fearful and emotional day, but with all that gratitude cursing through my veins I just couldn't bring myself to anger, but sadness definitely moved in. And it rained and it poured and it was freezing - pathetic fallacy is alive and well and living in Boston. And so, I say very little, I spend too much time in my room and self-coach like mad to get me out of this 'phase'. I miss my life, my family (oh my family) and the familiar day to day joys and hassles of living. I find this new found freedom stifling, though it could be liberating. I watch one movie too many and become anesthetized to the pleasures of 'relaxing' and having 'nothing to do'. And that's the curious thing - I have lots to do, typically 'too much to do' – my laptop is brimming over with tasks that could be completed but I just can't get started. Olivia, my amazing assistant and co-strategist has become my Mrs Motivator – she tells me not to worry about not being able to work as it's the weekend! The weekend – sure it might as well be 3 o'clock on a foggy Wednesday to me. But I must say I did stop fretting about my mental block.

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Ok now, it's Day 4 and I actually slept well and I am raring to go. In fact this morning I decided to:

1. Visit my relatives
2. Schedule client meetings in NY
3. Catch up all my 'to dos'
4. Train for the Women's mini-marathon
5. Get fit
6. Learn to dance
7. Start that book
8. Go on a road trip
9. See Woodstock and the Catskill Mountains
10. And run the Boston Marathon on Monday.....well... maybe not.

I realise I have entered the acceptance stage which for me is all about 'Action and Purpose'. I have become the 'Super Type A Stranded' – who can just about do anything. Best for me to avoid other Strandedes who are in the 'Denial', 'Anger' or 'Depression' stages. I might get shot.

The greatest thing that emerged from that phase was a trip to visit my really lovely Uncle and Aunt on the outskirts of Boston. This was just wonderful, warm and life affirming. I feel connected again to reality and the warmth of family is flowing through my veins.

Days 5 and 6 are all about the strategy and delivery – it is amazing how many hours I have spent on the internet, on phones and Skype just trying to figure out a way home. I realise that you need to ensure your name is on a flight home every day – this means maxing all your credit cards to the limit and scaring your accountant. I am determined to ensure I am on a flight the day this all ends – so strategy and tactics are everything. This applies to hotels and laundry too – but I'll not go into that!

Day 6 also involved a trip to NY to meet a client – I am alive and working again. I love it - the sense of purpose and accomplishment. It also enables a break from Boston. Change is good and for the first time in ages I feel 'pep' in my step.

I leave my client feeling great and then the text comes through from Aer Lingus to say....

Aer Lingus flight EI132 departing Boston for Wed. April 21st has been cancelled due to continued closure of Irish and UK airspace caused by volcanic ash emanating from Iceland.....etc. etc.

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I am devastated. I leave the warm sun of a New York City Spring evening and spend more hours in my hotel room surfing to find out what is happening. Meanwhile I start receiving texts and calls from my husband and my sister and my co-strandee saying that all is well in the air and that we are going home! I am confused, tired and impatient. Eventually my calm, collected and amazingly patient husband rings with the news that I am also booked onto the flight that **is** scheduled to leave Boston tomorrow night. I am ecstatic, exhausted and eternally grateful for Olivia and the Day 5 & 6 strategising that has me on so many flights that I can't keep track of them all ☺. I feel like I did run that Boston Marathon and find myself sound asleep at 9pm on my one night in Downtown Manhattan!

It is day 7 and as I type I am on the train to Boston and Olivia has just sent me the most magical of emails "Your flight still appears to be on time!" – notice the language 'still appears' – Olivia too is in this with me, tempered optimism is where it is at – blind optimism has disappointed too often over the past week! Her next email said 'Everything still looks positive and Happy Birthday to SEVEN' – today is our birthday, and I had momentarily forgot, which is not like me. I am a firm believer in marking moments and celebrating positive change so yet again Olivia brings me back to my senses. This is also a special day for a very special person I love, so I am convinced they have intervened to send me home.

There is also something about me ending my Stranded Experience on Day 7. Could this be an omen? I wonder will my next sentence be typed in Dublin.....?

No it isn't, but as good as. I am sitting on the runway awaiting lift off, ironically from gate 7(b) at 7pm. Inwardly I am so happy I didn't name our new company 365!

The airport check-in and boarding have been the most lovely, heart-warming and uplifting experiences I have had in all my years of travel. I don't like airports – I dislike them so much I reckon that I will have an airport job in the next life if I am not good and kind-hearted in this one. But despite this very long held and deep seated aversion I have had a wonderful time departing Logan International Airport. The departure lounge has been like a reunion – familiar faces with intriguing and entertaining stories of their time 'Stranded in Boston'. We are like a self-help group even though the 'stranded journey' has come to an end – RTE has emerged as the best website for updates (now they tell me!), apparently all our 'absent Strandeers' were taken care of by Aer Lingus (I told you Aer Lingus were great – or did I?) and it also appears that lots of people have 'friends' in Aer Lingus who mentored them through the lost days. As for my co-Strandee and me, we love Aer Lingus – and it was epitomised in the greeting we got at the lounge in Boston - we were welcomed with open arms and the most amazing kindness. Different from the previous lounge we visited (emm, still in gratitude, so no names).

We, 'The Strandeers' also begin to share our stories of coping, the themes of camaraderie (or collaboration), perspective (gratitude) and the acknowledgement of the emotional rollercoaster (the change cycle) emerge. This is reassuring given what I have already written about my own personal journey. Though I hear too of nights on the town and lots of saunas and outrageous shopping – yep we have wandered, wondered and squandered our way through this experience.

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Oh, I also learn of investigations to get home by freight ship in the captain's cabin – all of a sudden I don't feel so bad about my Queen Mary investigations.

And so to a final test of resilience – we have now been on the ground for almost 1 and a ½ hours and we haven't moved an inch. The cabin is quite quiet now, but an hour ago it was full of chat, good cheer and bonhomie. The rhythms of 'hope and let downs' are being felt again...we are getting nervous but no one dares say a word. It could hex it. And no one wants that on their conscience.

Table 1: 7 days wandering, wondering and squandering: What it feels like.....my very own personal day to day 'Strandometer':

Day 1	Go with the flow, this looks like the acceptance phase but it's probably shock.	☺☺
Day 2	Keeping my happy head on, sure what can you do, it'll be all cleared in the morning... definitely the denial phase.	☺
Day 3	Stranded and sad, definitely my own personal combination of the fear, anger and depression phases.	☹☹☹
Day 4	Action and purpose, finally true acceptance! It's all about making the best of a bad situation and having a list with 10 things on it.	: - I : - I
Day 5	Strategic and sad, still trucking on but it just might be just more acceptance with a hint of understanding.	: - I ☹
Day 6	Super strategic and doing what I do and I'm definitely feeling part of the moving on phase	: - I : - I
Day 7	Tempered optimism, will we - won't we? Is there a joy phase?	☺☺☺

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