



THE CHALLENGE IN CHANGE:

A CONVERSATION WITH DR. JOAN BORYSENKO

Article and Interview by: Karen M. Rider, M.A.

Two symbols represent the Chinese character for change: danger and opportunity. It is a fitting image for our fast-paced lives. “The challenge,” says Dr. Joan Borysenko, distinguished pioneer in integrative medicine, “lies in how we cope. We can choose to helplessly shrink from change or we can choose to grow through it, thriving in the opportunities it presents.”

From the back porch at her home in the Colorado mountains, with her new puppy nibbling geraniums at her feet, Dr. Borysenko shared the wisdom she has culled over the course of her career. After earning her graduate degree in medical sciences at Harvard Medical School, she completed post-doctoral training in cancer cell biology. Soon after her father died of cancer, Dr. Borysenko became more interested in the person with the illness than with the disease, itself. She completed a second fellowship in behavioral medicine under the tutelage of Dr. Herbert Benson. Dr. Borysenko went on to a fellowship in psychoneuroimmunology, the study of the relationship between the mind, the body and the immune system.

In this spirited and informative interview, Dr. Borysenko teaches that just because “the world is in crisis, we don’t have to be. You can bounce back from adversity and create your best life.”

Karen: What dangers and opportunities do you envision for the world as we navigate through chaotic times?

Dr. Borysenko: As I travel around the world during these times of great uncertainty, I see people acting hastily, becoming polarized and giving up hope.

The danger in this is that we allow fear to drive our behavior; our coping responses become more primitive. Fear gives rise to a child-like way of dealing with the world. People take sides and different points of view. It happens within families and social organizations and between political and religious institutions. [When people] don’t look for common ground, fear escalates and protective instincts go haywire.

When we let fear drive our choices another danger surfaces-- unclear thinking. We develop ‘ready, fire, aim’ mentality. We do things just to get them done, without considering if the timing is right or what might be the consequences of our actions.

We would do better to allow ourselves to match the heart with the mind to find inner knowing. In this way, we aren’t reactive. Instead, we are responsive to our circumstances. When we are grounded, mentally and emotionally, we can revive hope.

Karen: You believe opportunity hides behind the chaos in our lives. Please explain.

Dr. Borysenko: What’s hiding is the opportunity for growth on a personal and global level. At these tipping-point times, the best that can happen is that people and organizations make a jump in consciousness. Sometimes it takes an enormous event—crisis—before we can make this shift to a higher order and create a world *all* of us can not only live with but *thrive in*. Sure, we can say war shouldn’t happen, oil shouldn’t be covering the ocean. But these things happened. What shifts will we make, personally and globally, to move beyond

all that led up to those events [and to rise above them]?

Karen: Why do some people soar through adversity while others crash?

Dr. Borysenko: A great question. Fifty percent of resilience is genetic, as is happiness. Some people are born with sunnier temperaments and others cloudier. However—and people need to understand this—you are **not** limited by genetics; shaped but not limited. You can learn to be more resilient and happier, too.

Most people know, or have heard a story, about resilient children; those who were born into, but made it out of dire circumstances and had success in life. The key that unlocked the potential in these children is some source of inspiration, like a mentor. When we look at resilient adults, we tend to call this social support. So, where people can experience the shelter of one another and have examples of others [who have] shined through tough situations, then we find resilience.

Another key to resilience for adults is being realistic. There is a distinction between realistic optimism and ‘cheap optimism,’ a term coined by Cornell West, from Princeton University. The latter does not help anyone. Cheap optimism describes people who ‘put [what they want] out to the universe’, a job for example, then they sit in their chair

waiting for it [to be delivered to them]. A person with realistic optimism is one who puts their intention into action. I call it optimizing realism when someone looks at the fact that they lost their job and they use that event to take a careful look at the talents and skills they have and come up with new ways to apply these in the world.

Karen: How does a resilient, stress-hardy person think and act?

Dr. Borysenko: In the research on resilience, we also see that these individuals still want to connect with and give to other [people]. Staying connected makes people feel better and feel empowered. This is what the Dalai Lama calls wise selfishness: You do something for someone else and it helps you just as much as [it helps] them. Resilient people are also able to tap into creativity. When your world crashes on you, narcissism sets in. You worry about your life, your family, what you will do next. You cannot tap

into creative solutions. Once you get out of the orbit of ‘I-me-mine’ you can see possibilities. The key is for people to sense meaning or learning or growth in what they are experiencing.

Karen: How are improvisation and resilience are related?

Dr. Borysenko: Consider, politics aside, John McCain who was a POW for five years. He is a splendid example of resilience. I don’t know him, but he has a



deep faith and a sense of humor. Resilient people have a very good sense of humor.

Laretta LaRoache, humorist and positive psychologist, has some wonderful books on the subject. When we do a lecture together, we sing the blues—like an old honky-tonk song. Literally, we teach people to complain in a creative fashion and it gives them some distance [from their troubles]. Most often, they realize just how absurd their thinking is. As Loretta says, “You recognize life is a joke and you’re it.”

Karen: Most of us don’t do anything about stress until the full-force is upon us. Why don’t we do what we know is good for us?

Dr. Borysenko: In my view, the cutting-edge of integrative medicine deals with exactly these questions. I think part of the answer has to do with the Western mindset. We are really good at alienating ourselves from other people, burying ourselves in work and the pursuit of material possessions, while starving ourselves of time for what really matters in life. When we lose the material goods, then what? We have time and nothing meaningful with which to fill that time. We have the kind of social crisis we are experiencing, now.

Karen: What can people do?

Dr. Borysenko: Step out of the past and pull back from thinking and worrying about the future. Be in present moment awareness. Enough cannot be said about the value of mindfulness as a way of walking through life, paying attention and being in deep relationship with the world around you. We truly need this. Of course,

it is best to have these practices before stress hits. Even in the midst of crisis, some form of physical exercise, time for solitude or meditation, social support, and giving back to the world around you are vital to a person’s ability to think more clearly and create solutions to the stressors they’ve experienced.

Karen: What is your favorite way to banish burnout?

Dr. Borysenko: I spend a lot of time in my yard and garden. There are many children in my family and I spend time with them whenever I can.

Our pets are a big part of our life. In addition, I encourage anyone to go back to the places and activities that have brought them joy and filled them with energy. Play. Life is too short.

Dr. Joan Borysenko is author or co-author of more than 13 books, including the *New York Times* best seller, *Minding the Body*, *Mending the Mind* and her most recent titles, *It’s Not the End of the World* and *Your Soul’s Compass*. For more information about her books and lecture tour, please visit <http://drjoanborysenko.com>

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