



A change of heart

Author, public speaker and change optimist Ariane de Bonvoisin chats to us about leaving behind her high-flying corporate job and finding the courage to listen to her gut.

I've had several lives, it feels. I've been an athlete. I've been a management consultant. I've worked in the music business, in the internet world. I've been a venture capitalist. I've worked for a non-profit. I've worked on TV, and I've taken a long sabbatical to figure things out!

Ariane de Bonvoisin was born in New York to a French journalist mom and a Belgian banker dad. Her upbringing was diverse: she grew up in six countries, living in Paris, Shanghai, England, Brussels and Hong Kong as a child and attending seven schools in total.

Her family life was difficult. 'My parents were not happy,' she says, 'and that definitely made me withdraw into myself quite early on – just to try to make some sense out of it: why they were unhappy, why there

were so many fights, how I didn't want to end up like either one of them. It was such a wound for me, growing up – seeing these two people that I loved not love each other.'

From age 12, Ariane started encouraging her parents to separate. 'Once I understood what divorce was, it was the only thing I wanted for my parents. To me, the whole need to stay together for us just didn't make sense. They were married for 33 years before they accepted what everyone had always known,' she says.

She still believes their divorce was a change for the better. 'My mom had given up on her dreams and goals to be a mother, and seeing her flourish again was giant for me, as a woman. She moved to France, lost a lot of weight and really came into her own. She and I even did the New York Marathon together when she was 59. My father was better off too – he got into a relationship quite soon after that, one that made him happy.'

At boarding school in the UK, Ariane was miserable and threw herself into her studies. 'For my father, all that mattered was working and education, so I ended up trying to please him – I graduated when I was 16, top of my class.' When it came to choosing a career path, she chose the safe, conventional route: an accounting and finance degree. 'It's so far from who I am, but it was what I thought I should do, where the money was going to be and where the jobs were going to be.' After a year, she changed to economics and international relations, 'which was a bit more *me*.' Ariane graduated at 19 and later did her MBA at Stanford University.

She started to climb the corporate ladder, working for media companies Bertelsmann and Sony, for Time/Warner as the MD of a US\$500 million digital-media venture fund, for

AOL, and with US TV talk show host Charlie Rose.

But after 10 years at the top of her game, Ariane started to realise she was off-track – personally and professionally. 'I was engaged to the wrong guy. But your mind goes: "You're never going to meet anyone else. You should hold onto this one – he's not that bad! He's nice, he's good-looking, he treats you well!" But the heart's going: "Uh-uh." You just can't fool the heart. And the same thing with the job. I had climbed the wrong ladder. But I was really high

a hard time with it – he thinks I'm not living up to my potential.'

Ariane decided to go to Italy for a few months, despite the fact that she didn't know anyone there and couldn't speak Italian. 'Sometimes a change of environment allows you to change who and what you are,' she says. 'I had some money saved and my only plan was to leave that "motivated woman" behind and see what showed up. I was pretty burnt out – I had been working 90-hour weeks for 10 years. I knew Italy would be a warm, soft place for me to land.'

'Change is waiting for you right around the corner, so you might as well embrace it. Ariane de Bonvoisin shows you how.'

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, *HUFFINGTON POST*

up on it, and it's hard to get off. The world tells you: "It's great! You're a woman, and you're in media! You're making a lot of money!" But actually I'm pretty unhappy – and it's not what I want to be doing.'

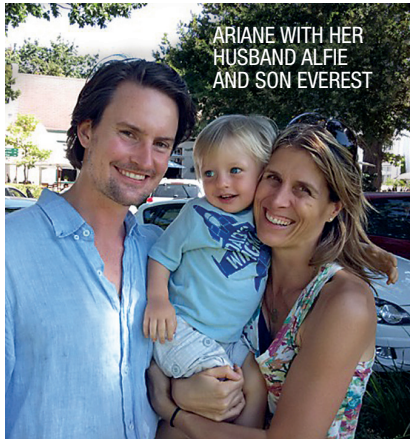
'As a child, I'd never been given permission to figure out what I love. These days, I do a lot of talks for parents: protecting your kids from change doesn't help them. Let them be what they want to be, as opposed to trying to fit them into a safe job because it makes *you* feel better.'

Within a six-month period, Ariane did a 180-degree turn. 'The hardest decision I ever made was to follow my intuition: break off my engagement and leave the safe, reputable corporate life I had set up for myself.' Not everyone was on board with her plan. 'It was hard, and it's a lonely decision. Your parents aren't up for it, your friends think you're crazy... People expect you to have figured things out in your 30s. It took a while for my mom and dad to get with the concept – their perfect straight-A child had decided to go in another direction. My father still has

Ariane spent her time reading, exploring and journalling. She also shed 20 kilos. 'In Italy, of all places!' she says. 'I think the big switch for me was seeing it as emotional weight, not physical weight. When I started seeing it as anger and guilt and lack of forgiveness, it started dropping.'

Her breakthrough moment arrived a few months later: after working on a charity project with a writer, Ariane was inspired. 'We raised 3–4 million dollars for an Aids charity, and working with an author helped me find my courage to do some writing of my own. Often, the biggest challenge is changing how you see yourself and how you describe yourself.'

Inspired by all the changes and challenges she'd had to face in her own life and people she had met along the way, Ariane started writing a book of her own. 'It's about real people getting through real changes,' she says. *The First 30 Days: Your Guide to Making Any Change Easier* reached the bestseller list on Amazon and has since been translated into several languages. It was recently released in South Africa.



ARIANE WITH HER HUSBAND ALFIE AND SON EVEREST

Ariane also started to speak about her experiences, and has since spoken at various illustrious events, including Maria Shriver’s The Women’s Conference and the Oprah YOU conference. She has also keynoted several company functions, from Nestlé to the World Bank.

Despite her achievements (among them summiting Kilimanjaro and travelling through the Himalayas on a motorcycle), Ariane thinks a list of her failures would be much more telling. Navigating change and following her intuition have led her along a difficult road at times – but it is this road of self-discovery that has made her a bestselling author and a fierce advocate for self-knowledge.

Ariane and her husband Alfie now live in Cape Town. The two met in Cambodia, at the base of a temple. ‘It was funny – I always had a sense I would end up with a South African man and that I would come and live here. He lived in Joburg and I lived in New York City – not exactly ideal for a relationship! But we knew early on that this was it.’

At 37, Ariane was also more than ready to start a family. ‘From my late 20s I felt a calling to be a mother. I think the hardest part was waiting 10 years. I was so clear on what I wanted, but it’s one of the things I had no control over – when you meet someone, when you fall in love. No book and no website and no business and no fame can ever replace meeting someone that you want to spend your life with.’

Her son Everest is now almost two. ‘Alfie and I were out one night and I saw a poster for an event featuring the first South Africa woman to climb Everest. And the event was on my due date. I looked at the name and thought, “That’s a cool boy’s name.”’ Alfie was not convinced, but Ariane says she couldn’t shake the feeling that that was what his name should be – not because of the climbing and prestige aspect of the name ‘but because of the pursuing-your-dreams aspect, which is so important to me’.

Everest is, of course, a big climber. ‘He’s a robust little guy and very strong-willed,’ says Ariane. ‘The hardest thing about him is that he doesn’t sleep. I say to him: “Your name is Everest, not Neverest!”’

Becoming a parent has inspired Ariane’s next project. ‘I want to raise a boy with an open heart – who is kind, who has compassion. My next book is all about spiritual motherhood: how to infuse a bit of mindfulness and spirituality into the process, alternative ways of parenting, dealing with the emotions, and also grieving your old life. A lot of people struggle with it, but no one talks about it. I’ve had no sleep for 22 months; I miss the freedom of lying in. I miss my old relationship with my husband; we never get to do anything spontaneous any more! You should grieve your old life. It will never, ever come back. I’m also a big believer in making sure you don’t forget yourself. As a mother, you have to put yourself back on the list, as opposed to just doing things for your child.’

For this book, Ariane interviewed a couple of hundred women – moms, midwives, doulas, gynaes – and a few men. ‘It’s been amazing. I’m so excited about it. I’m hoping to have it done by the end of the year.’

Ariane is also launching a new app, Mindful365, and working on a book called *A Foot in Both Worlds*. ‘It’s the book that defines my life,’ she says.

Book extract

The First 30 Days: Your Guide to Making any Change Easier

by Ariane de Bonvoisin
(Jonathan Ball)

Take action

Write down the areas of your life that feel out of control, where things are piling up and need to get done – work, finances, home, health, friends, family and hobbies. You don’t have to tackle all these areas and their tasks now. Just get them all out of your head and onto a piece of paper; this action alone will make you feel lighter, less overwhelmed, and free.

Now take a look at your list. What are the essentials? Be practical. What actions do you need to take sooner rather than later? What definitely needs to get done and what can wait? Who can help?

When change comes, time seems to disappear. You get so busy that you don’t have a second to focus on “all the other things.”

That’s why it’s so important to stay on top of them. For me it was things like clearing clutter, paying bills, giving away old clothes, getting organised, returning phone calls, clearing e-mails and updating my address book – small stuff really, but stuff that gives me a sense of control over my life. When the little things are handled, the bigger ones don’t seem so difficult to tackle. When you build your muscle with the small stuff first, your self-esteem rises and you are able to take on a little bit more.

Cut down what needs to be done into small pieces and stages.

Don’t put unrealistic timelines on things or take on too much too soon. Be gentle. Today, do one small thing or, if you can handle it, two things.

Make a decision

In the first 30 days of change, you are confronted with chaos, lack of clarity and too many choices. It is during this time that you may feel compelled to make decisions, to move on with your life. This starts the circle of doubt, where you ask, “What if I don’t make the right decision?” This is completely natural. But first you need to accept that there is no perfect decision, no clear-cut right or wrong. Often, you have to use your intuition to sense what feels right.

Chunk the decision into its smallest possible elements. For example, recently I was talking to a friend of mine who was considering a career change. He got stuck on the question, ‘What am I going to do with the rest of my life?’ I encouraged him to see his big career decision in terms of a smaller chunk of time. He could,

for example, ask himself, ‘What do I want to do for the next couple of years?’ Careers change, jobs change; maybe an element or a person not yet in your life will impact your next professional move in a few years. It’s futile to make these types of all-encompassing decisions. Often, that is the very reason they feel so heavy and difficult to make – because we are asking ourselves the wrong question and trying to make the wrong decision, or because the decision is just not yet ready to be made and we are forcing ourselves to come up with an answer.

It’s normal to feel some sense of trepidation around a decision, positive or difficult. Even if you feel some fear about your decision, your body and emotions will find a way to support you through it, which will make the process a lot easier.

For example, if you think you want to move to a new town, make the decision to do so – even if you are still slightly unsure – and be open to what shows up to help you make it happen. If you want to be in a loving intimate relationship, make a decision that this will happen and then align your focus, thoughts and beliefs with this vision. Focus on what you want, not what you don’t want.

Remember that the space and time before a decision are often much harder than what happens after the decision has been made. Announcing the decision to friends or colleagues will help keep you on track. Ask yourself, Whom must I tell? And decisions take focus. Keep this new decision at the forefront of your mind – and heart – with notes, symbols, pictures or anything else that places it front and centre in your life.

My friend Brooks has an analogy he refers to as the butcher knife versus the butter knife. It goes something like this: When change comes and you have to make a decision, are you going to approach it with a butcher knife or a butter knife? The butter knife approach is to take things slowly, test the waters and make sure not to hurt anyone’s feelings. With this approach, we don’t deal with the change sharply, clearly or precisely. The butcher knife approach is to face a change head-on, with clarity, power and precision. Ask yourself: Which knife am I using right now? Am I committed to changing something? Or am I still on the fence?

Read and write

Most people I have met can name a favourite book that helped them move through change. This is usually a book that has come to signify a personal victory over a particular moment in life. It can range from a novel to a short story, a self-help book, a memoir or a religious text. Books help give us courage, strength and perspective. The books we are touched by often show people overcoming adversity and despair despite their circumstances.

They show different paths, solutions and new roads to travel. Go to a bookstore and browse through any book that you are drawn to, in any section. There is a great book waiting for you right now.

Writing is also a great tool when you feel alone. Writing things down has been proven to help healing and to get you through change quicker. Research has shown that when you write something down, the likelihood of your making that thing happen is much higher. I write every night.

Journalling helps me to capture the best of what the day was about, and when I get it down on paper, it gives closure to the day. Things don’t drag on till the next morning.

I also love the freedom that writing

gives me. I can express anything I am feeling without fear of judgment or criticism. And the simple action of getting it out of my head creates more space in my mind for other things.

When my thoughts are on paper, it’s like they are not mine any more.

My head is no longer filled with the problem I’ve been holding on to and now there is room for solutions to manifest themselves. Often, ideas and solutions pop out of the page – things I wouldn’t have seen without getting my thoughts on paper. Even when we seek out help, going through change can often be a very private journey. It can be hard to relate to others and difficult to articulate our feelings. That’s why writing can be such a helpful tool during change: it’s intimate, anonymous and liberating. You don’t need to explain anything to anyone, and no one will give you an opinion. This is your space to write what you need to write. A time to grieve, a time to dream, a time to vent and a time to focus.

Do something for someone else

Taking time to put your situation to the side and to focus on somebody else is a powerful way to get back in touch with who you are and what you can give. When you stop obsessing about your own issues and problems, and instead direct your energy to helping somebody else, you will find that you also have the strength to move through your own challenging change.

I know a woman who recently became a single mother. During this period she decided to help an elderly woman who lived across the street in her neighbourhood with grocery shopping, meals and general organising. Even though her whole life required major reorganisation now that her husband had walked out and she had very little free time, she found that the most calming action she could take was to help someone

else. She felt important and needed. If she didn’t show up, this older woman would be stuck. She got back in touch with what really matters – being kind, being loving and helping someone out during the day.

You don’t have to help a stranger. Make a list of your friends and loved ones, even your colleagues, and ask yourself: What can I do for this person that would help them? What does he or she need?

Your help can be as simple as sending a card, making a phone call, mailing a clipping of an interesting magazine article or finally taking the time to share a meal.

When her brother committed suicide, Rachel found that helping others was the best way to move through her own pain.

During the first, and hardest, day after her brother’s death, she nurtured her family in the most basic yet essential way. ‘I remember the first day after his death, I focused on feeding my family.

‘They hadn’t eaten all day, and I started to feed them. It was the only thing I knew how to do,’ she says. ‘Being there for others has always helped me get out of my own way.’

To move through change, it’s essential to bust through the illusion that you are the only one experiencing pain or suffering. It is the gift of perspective. Yes, your job, health or finances may be changing, but you also have a responsibility to show up in the world for your friends, family and community. Be bigger than just your change. Someone else needs you.

I love this Chinese parable about action:

If you want happiness for an hour, take a nap.

If you want happiness for a day, go fishing.

If you want happiness for a month, get married.

If you want happiness for a year, inherit money.

If you want happiness for a lifetime, help others.

PHOTOGRAPH: ANËL VAN DER MERWE, SUPPLIED. HAIR & MAKEUP: KELLU PAITAKI FROM GLOSS

Get quiet

When we are meditating, planning, visualising, grieving or dreaming, it may seem like we’re not doing much of anything, but, as with a seed that’s been planted, there is a lot going on under the ground. The concept of meditation – or any form of getting quiet and looking within – is one of action, not inaction. You are very much doing something when you work to quiet your mind: you are putting your mind in the gym, training it to let go of the change demons and to become calm and quiet. For me, meditation is an action I try to engage in every day. You can move into a quiet place in numerous ways. You can take a walk, have a nice meal, sit in candlelight or watch kids playing. There are endless ways to access the peaceful part that we all have inside of us.

As I mentioned in chapter 7, there

is no right or wrong way to meditate; it’s not about how to sit, what to wear or what to chant.

Meditation is simply a decision to be still, to breathe deeply, to allow your thoughts and emotions to come up naturally, to allow everything to be as it is without changing or resisting anything.

We get quiet to observe what’s going on inside of us as opposed to all that’s happening outside of us – where we usually spend all of our time. Meditation brings clarity, answers and inner peace. We realise we are still whole, complete and unbroken despite the change. It’s a way of getting your inner strength back. Meditation can last five minutes or fifty-five. The act is what counts, not its length or intensity.

If you are unsure about what to do next, get quiet and wait until the decision becomes clear. If a decision

feels extremely difficult or confusing, take that as a sign that’s it’s not yet ready to be made; just like cake batter in the oven, it’s not yet baked. It’s important to become comfortable and familiar with the time in between a change and the next stage of life. We are all continually rushing to get back to a place that feels safe and certain. The period between can be torture for most of us. So we rush, jump to conclusions, make decisions based on limited information and often fear, and overrule our intuition. Finding the ability to just be and to do nothing takes enormous courage. ♣

