Who Moved My Cheese By Spencer Johnson

Posted on October 31, 2018

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I was completely delighted with Spencer Johnson's *Who Moved My Cheese?* because the book simplifies the complicated process of change through four memorable characters. Johnson uses two mice, Sniff and Scurry, and two "Littlepeople," Hem and Haw, to show how differently individuals respond when something familiar and valuable disappears. The mice deal with change in a direct and practical manner. They notice that the cheese is gone, accept the situation, and begin searching again. Hem and Haw, by contrast, attach emotion, expectation, and identity to the cheese. Their intelligence gives them the ability to reflect, but it also allows them to delay action through fear, complaint, and overanalysis. This difference between the characters was the idea that first attracted me to the story. The book did not feel like a distant lesson about business or management; it reminded me of a personal period in which I remained emotionally attached to something that had already changed. The story helped me recognize that I had been waiting at my own empty cheese station.

Why Johnson Uses Mice and Littlepeople

I believe Johnson deliberately chose two mice and two humanlike characters because the contrast makes the emotional difficulty of change easier to understand. Sniff and Scurry respond instinctively. They keep their running shoes ready, do not waste time demanding an explanation, and immediately look for a new source of cheese. Their behavior is simple, but that simplicity protects them from becoming trapped by pride. The Littlepeople are physically small, yet they possess the emotional and intellectual habits of ordinary adults. Hem responds to the loss with anger and fear. He believes the cheese should still be where it has always been, and he treats the disappearance as an injustice that somebody else must correct. Haw also hesitates, but he eventually realizes that waiting will not restore the old situation. The four characters therefore represent more than separate personalities. They represent four reactions that can exist within one person: noticing, acting, resisting, and learning. In my own experience, I could recognize all four responses, although Hem and Haw were the strongest.

My Own Empty Cheese Station

I enjoyed being where I was and hesitated to look closely at the changes taking place around me. Then, one day, I understood that my cheese had gone. I was not prepared for that realization. I felt that I did not deserve the loss because I had not knowingly caused it. Like Hem and Haw, I wanted the

situation to return to the way it had been. The cheese station was empty, but emotionally I continued to behave as though somebody might place everything back in its proper position for me. I became disappointed with the world and repeatedly imagined that what I had lost might still return. Sometimes the hope felt so convincing that I mistook it for reality. When that illusion broke, I felt broken with it. My closest friends wanted me to become more like Sniff and Scurry. They encouraged me to accept the change and move forward. I told them I was trying, yet inwardly I remained unwilling. That unwillingness kept me sitting at the same empty station.

The Hem Within Me

The part of me that resembled Hem believed that remaining still was a form of loyalty. Leaving the old station felt like admitting that the cheese was permanently gone, and I was not ready to make that admission. I also believed that fairness required restoration. Since I had not chosen the loss, I felt that I should not be responsible for adapting to it. This way of thinking gave me temporary emotional protection because it allowed me to postpone the pain of acceptance. However, it also made me powerless. The longer I waited for somebody else to repair the situation, the more dependent I became on an outcome I could not control. Hem's behavior in the book helped me see that resistance is not always expressed through loud rebellion. Sometimes it appears as stillness, repeated memories, or the refusal to imagine a different future. Research on resistance to change similarly shows that fear, attachment to routine, and rigid expectations can make change feel threatening even when remaining unchanged is no longer realistic (Oreg, 2003).

The Haw Within Me

Eventually, the Haw within me began to speak more clearly. That part of me recognized that I was the person who had to adjust and continue moving. No hidden arrangement in the world would require someone else to surrender their cheese so that I could feel secure again. This realization was practical, but it was not emotionally easy. I started to understand that progress would not mean disrespecting what I had lost. It would mean refusing to let the loss control every future decision. Haw's journey appealed to me because he does not become fearless before he moves. He remains uncertain, remembers the old station, and worries about what might happen in the maze. Nevertheless, he takes a step. That first movement is more important than complete confidence. Johnson's question, "What would you do if you weren't afraid?" does not require a person to deny fear. It asks what action fear is preventing. In my case, the answer was simple: fear was preventing me from accepting reality and rebuilding my independence.

Learning to Put On the Running Shoes

I gradually learned to put on my running shoes and continue the journey. At first, movement felt

unnatural because the old cheese had been deeply important to me. I expected progress to remove the sadness immediately, but that did not happen. Instead, the journey taught me that growth and grief can exist together. I could miss what had been lost while still choosing not to remain trapped by it. Some days I felt independent and capable; on other days, the illusion of recovering the old cheese returned. Occasionally that illusion lasted long enough to feel like truth. Then I would become aware of the tears at the edges of my eyes, feel a cool and gentle breeze, and remind myself that life was still moving. I needed more of that refreshing air, so I adjusted my shoes and continued walking. This part of my experience closely reflects Haw's development. He does not move in a straight emotional line. He advances, doubts, remembers, and then advances again. His progress is realistic because adaptation rarely happens in one moment.

Why I Failed to Notice the Change Earlier

When I considered why I remained calm until my cheese had disappeared completely, I realized that attachment had blinded me to the changes occurring around me. I had become so certain of the cheese that I stopped examining the condition of the station. Every hope that someone would restore it, or that I could return to the same place and find everything unchanged, became another mistake. Johnson's parable shows that comfort can reduce attention. Sniff notices small changes because he continues observing the environment. Scurry remains ready to act because he does not assume that one successful routine will last forever. Hem and Haw become vulnerable because they confuse familiarity with permanence. My own experience followed the same pattern. I saw certain signs but interpreted them according to what I wanted to believe. Looking back, I do not blame myself for caring deeply; attachment is natural. However, I now understand that love for something should not prevent honest observation. Gratitude for the present must be accompanied by awareness that circumstances, relationships, and opportunities can change.

Moving Forward Without Forgetting

Moving forward did not require me to erase the value of the old cheese. The book is sometimes interpreted as if people should immediately replace whatever they lose and feel no sadness. My experience was different. What was lost remained meaningful, and the memories did not disappear simply because I decided to continue. The more useful lesson was that remembering and moving are not opposites. I could honor the past without treating it as the only place where happiness was possible. This distinction helped me become more self-regulating. Instead of allowing every feeling to dictate my behavior, I learned to observe the feeling and decide whether it was guiding me or imprisoning me. Psychological research on coping flexibility supports the importance of adjusting one's response to the actual situation rather than using the same strategy repeatedly (Cheng et al., 2014). Sometimes reflection is necessary; at other times, continued reflection becomes avoidance. The challenge is recognizing when thought has stopped producing understanding and started preventing action.

What Sniff and Scurry Taught Me

Although I relate most strongly to Hem and Haw, Sniff and Scurry also taught me an important lesson about preparedness. They do not assume that the cheese station owes them permanence. Their running shoes remain nearby because they understand that searching is part of life. I once viewed that attitude as emotionally cold, but I now see it as practical awareness. Being prepared for change does not mean refusing commitment or expecting every good situation to fail. It means preserving enough independence to respond when circumstances no longer support the old routine. In personal life, that may involve maintaining supportive relationships, continuing to learn, protecting physical and emotional health, or developing interests that do not depend entirely on one person or outcome. In professional life, it may involve updating skills and observing changes in one's field. Sniff and Scurry remind me that security should not depend on pretending that change cannot occur. A person can appreciate present cheese while still remembering how to navigate the maze.

The Limits of the Cheese Metaphor

The parable is powerful because it is simple, but its simplicity also has limits. Not every loss can be solved merely by changing one's attitude. People may face illness, grief, discrimination, financial hardship, or decisions imposed by institutions with greater power. In those cases, telling someone to "find new cheese" may sound dismissive. Hem's anger may sometimes represent more than irrational resistance; it may express a legitimate sense that a situation is unfair. My reading of the book therefore does not require passive acceptance of every circumstance. A person can challenge injustice while also recognizing what must be done to survive and grow. The lesson I take from Johnson is not that all change is good or that pain should be ignored. It is that denial cannot protect us indefinitely. Even when we seek explanation, accountability, or repair, we still need to decide how we will live in the present. Adaptation becomes meaningful when it is joined with judgment, self-respect, and an honest understanding of available choices.

How the Book Changed My Understanding of Progress

Before reading the parable, I often imagined progress as the recovery of what had been lost. I believed that healing would be complete only if the old cheese returned or if a new situation felt exactly the same. Haw's journey changed that expectation. Progress can involve becoming a different person rather than recreating an earlier life. The maze teaches awareness, patience, courage, and the ability to tolerate uncertainty. By the time Haw discovers new cheese, the greatest change has already occurred within him. He has learned that he can move, search, make mistakes, and continue. That lesson became central to my own reflection. I did not need to wait until I felt entirely ready. Readiness developed through action. Each step reduced the power of the empty station and

increased my confidence that meaning could exist elsewhere. The process did not make me forget the past, but it prevented the past from deciding the whole shape of my future.

Conclusion

Who Moved My Cheese? helped me understand my response to personal change by giving recognizable forms to fear, observation, action, and learning. I saw Hem in my refusal to accept that the cheese was gone, Haw in my gradual decision to move, Sniff in the awareness I wished I had developed earlier, and Scurry in the action I needed to practice. The book's main value for me was not its promise that new cheese would automatically be better. Its value was the realization that remaining beside an empty station could not restore what had been lost. I could continue loving the old cheese, grieving its absence, and remembering what it had meant while still choosing movement. I am more independent today because I learned to follow my feelings without allowing them to control every step. The maze remains uncertain, but uncertainty no longer means that I must remain still. I can put on my running shoes, carry the lessons of the past, and continue searching with greater awareness.

References

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