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LEADERSHIP AND THE VALUE OF UNCERTAINTY

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Leadership and the Value of Uncertainty

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How Learning To Be Vulnerable Can Make Life Safer

Angus Chen, *NPR Invisibilia*, June 17, 2016

Men who worked on oil rigs lived by certain rules. They were tough. They worked under any conditions. They didn't ask questions. It was this way as far back as Tommy Chreene, 60, who started working on rigs in the Gulf of Mexico back when he was 15, can remember.

Back then, it wasn't unusual to see someone die on an oil rig.

Chreene remembers the death of one man who had just finished a shift. He was standing before an enormous pipe that the workers twisted into the ground and held in place with a handle. The man kicked the handle, and the tension on the pipe released. It caught the man's ankle as it whipped around. "In about three seconds, it spun him around about 80 times," Chreene says. A few feet from the man was a post, and "his head was hitting that post like a rotten tomato."

They got 15 minutes to mourn after watching their friend and colleague die, but that was it. "I mean, that hole cost a lot of money," he says. "We got to go to work."

Even though the men faced the risk of death every day, Chreene says they never showed any vulnerability. This made the work even more perilous, because the men didn't ask for help, didn't admit if they weren't up to a certain job.

But in the 1990s, the oil companies started exploring in much deeper water — more than 3,000 feet below the surface of the Gulf. That meant whole new challenges, logistically and technologically.

In 1997, Shell began building a deepwater platform, **Ursa** — a \$1.45 billion behemoth that would stand 48 stories tall and, when completed, would become the world's deepest offshore well. Rick Fox, the asset leader for Ursa, says executing something this vast was a struggle, beyond the scale of anything they'd ever attempted. Something needed to change, he says, if Ursa was going to be built and operated safely. Then Fox got a call from a woman named **Claire Nuer**. She was a leadership consultant, a Holocaust survivor and a devotee of California New Age circles. She had heard about the seemingly insurmountable project, and she said she could help. When Fox started talking about technical problems like drilling schedules, she stopped him. She said he wasn't dealing with his real problem: his fear. The change Fox needed, she said, to make Ursa work, was in how the men dealt with their feelings...

Over the next year and a half, while Ursa was under construction, Fox had more than a hundred oil rig workers come to Shell's headquarters in New Orleans. Nuer's company and other groups came and put the men through a series of exercises designed to open them up...

The men were learning about each other and about themselves. Later, they learned about running an oil platform safely. Robin Ely, a Harvard business school professor, and Debra Meyerson, a professor at Stanford, began studying Fox and Nuer's experiment.

In an article in the **Harvard Business Review**, Ely and Meyerson write that the men had changed. By allowing themselves to become vulnerable to one another, they had altered "their sense of who they were and could be as men."

Ely says that as the men became more open with their feelings, other communication was starting to flow more freely. "Part of safety in an environment like that is being able to admit mistakes and being open to learning — to say, 'I need help, I can't lift this thing by myself, I'm not sure how to read this meter,' " she says. "That alone is about being vulnerable."

That helped contribute to an **84 percent decline** in Shell's accident rate companywide, Ely says. "In that same period, the company's level of productivity in terms of numbers of barrels and efficiency and reliability exceeded the industry's previous benchmark."



Reflect personally and/or professionally on the following popular quotes:

“The power of the lawyer is in the uncertainty of the law.”

- *Jeremy Bentham, 18th c. English jurist*

“Uncertainty is an uncomfortable position. But certainty is an absurd one.”

- *Voltaire, 18th c. French philosopher*

“Exploring the unknown requires tolerating uncertainty.”

- *Brian Greene, physicist*

“The fastest way to break the cycle of perfectionism and become a fearless mother is to give up the idea of doing it perfectly - indeed to embrace uncertainty and imperfection.”

- *Arianna Huffington, journalist*

“The quest for certainty blocks the search for meaning. Uncertainty is the very condition to impel man to unfold his powers.”

- *Erich Fromm, psychologist/author*

“I spent a lot of years trying to outrun or outsmart vulnerability by making things certain and definite, black and white, good and bad. My inability to lean into the discomfort of vulnerability limited the fullness of those important experiences that are wrought with uncertainty: Love, belonging, trust, joy, and creativity to name a few.”

- *Brené Brown, author/professor*



Text Study:

The following text is taken from the ancient Book of Kings, describing another chapter in the prophet Eliyahu's futile struggle to convince the Jewish nation to abandon their service of foreign gods, such as the "Baal," and return to their worship of the One God of Israel. It is interesting to note here God's response to Eliyahu's leadership style.



1. I Kings Chapter 19:9-13

[Eliyahu] entered a cave, and lodged there; and, behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and He said to him: "Why are you here, Eliyahu?" And he said: "I have been very jealous for the LORD; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, thrown down Your altars, and slain Your prophets with the sword; and I am the only one left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

And He said: "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD." And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind ripped through the mountains, and broke the rock into pieces; but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire there was just a still, small voice. And when Eliyahu heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entrance of the cave. And, behold, a voice came to him, and said to him: "Why are you here, Eliyahu?"

וַיֵּבֶא-שָׁם אֶל-הַמַּעְרָה, וַיְלֵן שָׁם; וַהֲנִה דְבַר-יְהוָה, אֵלָיו, וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ, מִה-לָּךְ פֹּה אַלֶּיָּהּ. וַיֹּאמֶר קָנָא קָנָאתִי לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵי-צְבָאוֹת, כִּי-עָזְבוּ בְרִיתְךָ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל--אֶת-מִזְבְּחֹתֶיךָ הִרְסוּ, וְאֶת-נְבִיאֶיךָ הִרְגוּ בַחֶרֶב; וְאֶנְתֵּר אֲנִי לְבַדִּי, וַיִּבְקְשׂוּ אֶת-נַפְשִׁי לְקַחְתָּהּ. וַיֹּאמֶר, צֵא וְעַמְדָתָ בְּהַר לְפָנַי יְהוָה, וַהֲנִה יְהוָה עֹבֵר וְרוּחַ גְּדוּלָה וְחֶזֶק מְפָרֵק הָרִים וּמִשְׁבֵּר סְלָעִים לְפָנַי יְהוָה, לֹא בְרוּחַ יְהוָה; וְאַחַר הָרוּחַ רֵעַשׁ, לֹא בְרֵעַשׁ יְהוָה. וְאַחַר הָרֵעַשׁ אֵשׁ, לֹא בְאֵשׁ יְהוָה; וְאַחַר הָאֵשׁ, קוֹל דְּמָמָה דְקָה. וַיְהִי כִשְׁמַע אֱלֹהֵיו, וַיִּלְט פָּנָיו בְּאֲדָרְתּוֹ, וַיֵּצֵא, וַיַּעֲמֵד פְּתַח הַמַּעְרָה; וַהֲנִה אֵלָיו, קוֹל, וַיֹּאמֶר, מִה-לָּךְ פֹּה אַלֶּיָּהּ.

> Consider the ways in which prophecy and uncertainty coexist in the ancient world.

> What leadership technique is Eliyahu meant to learn from this Divine encounter?

2. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Bava Metzia 59b

And this was the oven of Aknai. Why [the oven of] Aknai? — Said Rav Yehuda in Shmuel's name: [It means] that they encompassed it with arguments as a snake [Aramaic - "Aknai"], and proved it ritually impure.

It has been taught: On that day Rebbe Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but they did not accept them. Said he to them: 'If the *halakhah* agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!' Thereupon the carob-tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place — others affirm, even four hundred cubits! 'No proof can be brought from a carob-tree,' they retorted.

Again he said to them: 'If the *halakhah* agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!' Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards — 'No proof can be brought from a stream of water,' they rejoined.

Again he urged: 'If the *halakhah* agrees with me, let the walls of the schoolhouse prove it,' whereupon the walls inclined to fall. But Rebbe Yehoshua rebuked them, saying: 'When scholars are engaged in a halachic dispute, what right do you have to interfere?' Hence they did not fall, in honor of Rebbe Yehoshua, nor did they resume the upright, in honor of Rebbe Eliezer; and they are still standing thus inclined.

Again he said to them: 'If the *halakhah* agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!' Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: 'Why do you dispute with Rebbe Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the *halakhah* agrees with him!' But Rebbe Yehoshua arose and exclaimed: '[The Torah] is not in heaven.' What did he mean by this? — Said Rebbe Yirmiah: The Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because You have long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, 'After the majority must one incline.'

Rabbi Natan encountered Eliyahu the prophet and said to him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do at that time? Eliyahu said to him: The Holy One, Blessed be He, smiled and said: My children have triumphed over Me; My children have triumphed over Me.

זזה הוא תנור של עכנאי מאי עכנאי אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל שהקיפו דברים כעכנאי זו וטמאוהו תנא באותו היום השיב רבי אליעזר כל תשובות שבעולם ולא קיבלו הימנו אמר להם אם הלכה כמותי חרוב זה יוכיח נעקר חרוב ממקומו מאה אמה ואמרי לה ארבע מאות אמה אמרו לו אין מביאין ראייה מן החרוב חזר ואמר להם אם הלכה כמותי אמת המים יוכיחו חזרו אמת המים לאחוריהם אמרו לו אין מביאין ראייה מאמת המים חזר ואמר להם אם הלכה כמותי כותלי בית המדרש יוכיחו הטו כותלי בית המדרש ליפול גער בהם רבי יהושע אמר להם אם תלמידי חכמים מנצחים זה את זה בהלכה אתם מה טיבכם לא נפלו מפני כבודו של רבי יהושע ולא זקפו מפני כבודו של ר"א ועדיין מטין ועומדין חזר ואמר להם אם הלכה כמותי מן השמים יוכיחו יצאתה בת קול ואמרה מה לכם אצל ר"א שהלכה כמותו בכ"מ עמד רבי יהושע על רגליו ואמר לא בשמים היא מאי לא בשמים היא אמר רבי ירמיה שכבר נתנה תורה מהר סיני אין אנו משגיחין בבת קול שכבר כתבת בהר סיני בתורה אחרי רבים להטות. אשכחיה רבי נתן לאליהו א"ל מאי עביד קוב"ב בהיא שעתא א"ל קא חייך ואמר נצחוני בני נצחוני בני!

> *What is wrong with Rebbe Eliezer's approach?*

> *How does uncertainty play a central role in Halakha - Jewish Law?*

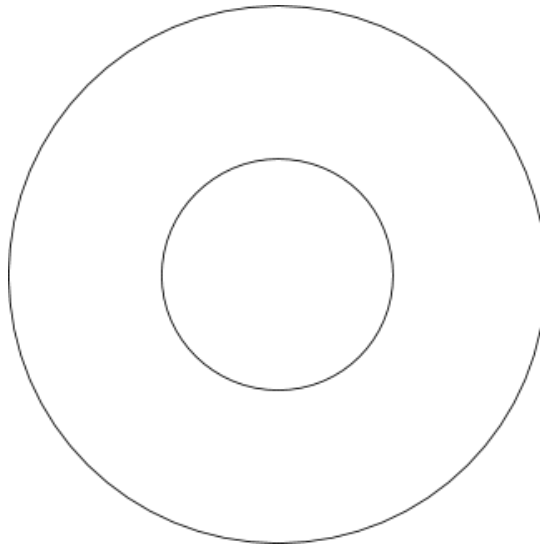
Clock System or Cloud System?

Hillary S. Webb, Journal of Anthropological Approaches to the Paranormal, Vol. 3 No. 4, 2012.

Dr. Karl Popper (20th c., England), the great philosopher of science, once divided the world into two categories: clocks and clouds. Clock systems, he explained, are orderly, predictable, reducible, and mechanistic. They rely on the linear, causal aspects of existence in order to function properly. Clock systems keep the trains running on time. They give us confidence that on our drive to work each morning a red light will always mean "stop" and not randomly change to signify "go." Clock systems keep us all organized and on the same page.

In contrast, "cloud systems" are non-linear, non-orderly. They are unpredictable, naturalistic, and open to interpretation. Imagine lying on your back in the grass looking up at the sky. What shapes do you see in the clouds? A duck? A seahorse? The profile of your high school chemistry teacher? Where does your mind go as a result of the shapes that you see? What memories? Emotions? Physiological sensations? Cloud systems are free flowing. They are time and space independent. They adapt to the changing environment and changing circumstances.

According to Popper, the mistake of modern science is to pretend that everything can be addressed as a clock system; that everything can be reduced to mechanistic principles and processes that make everything neat and tidy.



Theology After the Shoah: The Transformation of the Core Paradigm

Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg, Modern Judaism, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 223.

The discovery of brokenness and the affirmation of inadequacy are important steps toward health in any system. The group/faith/culture/system that feels fully adequate does not know its own limitations. Therefore, any such entity carries the seeds of totalitarianism and idolatry and is a potential threat to others... By contrast, the group/faith/culture/system that recognizes its inadequacy thereby becomes more adequate to function constructively in human society. It becomes more likely to make room for the dignity and values of others. *(Note that if, in this process, any entity totally self abnegates or yields all truth/validity claims, such as overreaction tempts others to make absolute claims. This type of abdication of claims is destructive.)* In the clash and coexistence of serious - even absolute, but limited claims, the balance of culture is found. This polycentered competition in the free marketplace of ideas, truths, and systems is pluralism in action; such a cultural political condition offers the best promise of assuring "never again."