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Fostering personal resiliency during uncertainty'

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Most of us, beneath the surface at least, have a strong need for structure and order. We want to hold the world still. Yet the world is not a still photograph—it is a motion picture. The world we live in today requires that we be comfortable with change, incongruence, opposites and discontinuities.

Even an elementary understanding of physics can help us grapple with this need we have for order in an unpredictable world. Chaos theory, for example, demonstrates that the dance of chaos and order are two complementary aspects of the same growth process. The caterpillar and the butterfly are two temporarily stabilized structures, or stages, in the

evolution of the same system. The disequilibrium or uncertainty occurring between these stages is also an evolutionary stage and, like everything in the universe, is temporary.

An awareness that comes when one takes up meditation is that there is only one certainty in the world: things arise and things pass away. It is true of the leaves on the trees that bud each spring and die in the fall, it is true of our lives, and it is true of our thoughts and feelings. Everything is temporary. Intellectually this is very easy to understand, but actually living without reacting to inevitable changes in our day-to-day life is challenging!

UNCERTAINTY LEADS TO GROWTH

When we look back and really examine periods of chaos in our lives we see that the phases of uncertainty were also the phases of growth that led us to our current state. Nobel Prize-winning physicist Ira Prigogine, in his theory of dissipative structures, demonstrates that disorder can be a source of order and that growth is found in disequilibrium—not in balance. Looking at so-called “chaos” in our work world as a challenge to grow can be very instructive. We can redefine our relationship to change, see it as a personal challenge and make a commitment to grow.

I spent over a year working under the tutelage of Kazimer Dabrowski. His theory of moral and emotional growth was called the Theory of Positive Disintegration. It is “positive” because if a person possesses the will to move toward higher development, then out of the disintegration grows even higher levels of awareness and growth.

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STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Now we don't have to face uncertainty all by ourselves. Relationships play a key role in the life of a person and a particle! Margaret Wheatley points out that relationships and connections are inherent to all living systems, even the smallest. In her book *Leadership and the New Science* she says,

“Particles come into being and are observed only in relation to something else.” We too only come into being in relationship to others. We often have

the illusion that we have a choice around whether or not we are connected to others . . . but it is an illusion; we are all connected. Calling upon that connection in times of chaos serves us well.

Support seeking is a very critical skill in times of change. When we are between trapezes—say, in middle of a transition or facing change—a safety net is of real value. One aspect of our safety net is our ability to connect with others who are dealing well with the same chaotic changes as we are and ask them for help, support, advice, or whatever it is they can contribute based on their life experience. It is a liability today to not be capable of asking for help or to discuss with others their ideas for moving through chaotic times. Many a person has floundered or drowned with a “lifesaver” but a call away.

INNER STRENGTH

Another asset in dealing with chaotic changes is personal power. We need to know that we have the inner capacity to give and get what we need. We need to know that we have the ability to meet the challenges, make things happen and make a difference in our world. Feeling in control is the best stress manager when uncertainty is all around us. We need to be able to “make sense” to ourselves even if we can’t make sense out of what is happening in this moment.

In truth the only control you really have is over yourself; all else is uncertain. Being the one constant in all you face, in all your situations gives you a lot of control. You can rely on yourself—only the unknown is scary. Therefore, get to know yourself inside out, especially under pressure. Self-knowledge increases your resilience.

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None of this is to suggest that you need to go it alone, however. If you believe your strength lies in doing it all yourself, think again.

I’m sure some of you remember or have experienced the simulation game Gold of the Desert Kings, which deals with the issue of adapting to uncertainty in a survival situation. Consistently, those people who tried to rely on their independent “strength” of will and drive died in the game. Inner drive and competitiveness can be a wonderful strength and take you very far. But like any strength, when taken to an extreme, or used when not required, it becomes a liability.

Many years ago Alan Watts wrote a very profound book called The Wisdom of Insecurity. His key tenets are that “the highest happiness is found only in our awareness that impermanence and insecurity are inescapable and inseparable from life” and that “the only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance.” And because it is a dance, as we suggested earlier, we will need to consult with other dancers in the troupe when the music gets a bit frantic to find out how they are keeping up with the tempo.

LESSONS FROM THE YOUNG

We need only watch today’s younger generation to see how quickly they embrace the rapid changes in our world and then move on, not needing to hold things still, but rather, accept, learn and adapt. In the process of embracing continuously emerging technology they have become more connected to one another and to broader and broader circles of people around the world than at any other time in our history.

Let’s applaud and learn from their alacrity. They may just be moving in the right direction.

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