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Grounding in Knowing/Not Knowing

Here's a story that is considered a classic Buddhist teaching:

There once was a poor farmer who had an only son. The farmer and his son owned a horse. One day, the gate was left open and the horse ran away.

"What a terrible misfortune has befallen you!" the people of the village exclaimed. "How does anyone know whether a thing is fortunate or unfortunate?" replied the farmer.

A short time later, a herd of several dozen strong and beautiful wild horses came galloping through the gate and into the farmer's field. The wild horses had been led there by the farmer's horse who had returned home, the herd following.

"What wonderful fortune has befallen you!" the people of the village exclaimed. "How does anyone know whether a thing is fortunate or unfortunate?" replied the farmer.

A short time later, the farmer's son was working with the wild horses and he was riding one of them, trying to train it. Suddenly, something spooked the wild horse and it began jumping and threw the farmer's son off its back. The farmer's son landed awkwardly on the ground, breaking his leg.

"What a terrible misfortune has befallen you!" the people of the village exclaimed. "How does anyone know whether a thing is fortunate or unfortunate?" replied the farmer.

A short time later, the son was sitting on the ground leaning his back against a tree. His leg was still bandaged with a splint. That day, a general of the king's army was going through the village conscripting young men to serve in the army. When the general came to the farmer's land, he saw the farmer's son sitting against the tree. He went off without the farmer's son to the war that was in the northwest of the country. The king's army was severely beaten in the war and many young men did not survive.

We are all facing increasing complexity in these times and are attempting to cope as best we can with shifting conditions on every level, on a daily basis. This includes the recent coronavirus and the many disruptions that are cascading from it around the globe. There is much that we can't know in any situation. This uncertainty, this unfamiliarity, this nakedness in the face of the unknown is inevitable and challenging. When we are immersed in the unknown, we can feel ungrounded and unsure, anxious or even panic-stricken. We notice our reactive narratives engage. For example, telling ourselves and others this situation is out of control, we are a victim in need of a rescuer, we are alone, helpless. We notice in our teams and organizations (and in ourselves) these strong, sometimes irresistible movements back to these known, familiar and practiced reactive patterns. We can find ourselves hunkering down to work harder, in denial, contracting under the stress, or collapsing into an inability to take any action.

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How do we cope with these and other feelings when it seems our very survival is threatened? The comfort of the known seems to be better than the discomfort of the unknown. This moving back into seemingly “safe” habits also holds true for us as leaders, as we reach for something new or are in the process of trying to build a new competency, habit or way of being that can better navigate the changing seas on which we are all currently surfing. All of these experiences make it easier to revert to the known, to the practiced, to the old stasis, even though we know on some level that it no longer works for us.

It is therefore very helpful to find ways to build our own ground, and to support ourselves as leaders and with our teams in doing so. The first place to seek ground is to identify, in the midst of the uncertainty and this new territory, what we know. The second place to seek ground is in our acceptance of not knowing.

Discovering What We Know

The mind is always clinging, always wanting to make meaning, to make things known and therefore comprehensible. In the absence of certainty and clarity, the mind can feel a bit desperate, a bit in need of something to hang on to. So, throw the mind a bone!

We can ask our colleagues and teams, in the midst of this ambiguity and lack of ground, what they know for sure. The answers we are seeking, and that could provide great comfort and a place to orient from, could include things like:

- “I know that I have enough (fill in the blank) to be able to withstand this.”
- “I know there are people I can rely on.”
- “I know my (ex, boss, teenager, partner, etc.) is a human, as I am, and underneath the stress of the moment, means me no harm.”
- “I know that I have, or can build, the skills to navigate these choppy waters.”

Any of these knowings are testable; there is evidence into which we can ground, allowing our nervous system to relax. There are other knowings that might not be testable, and that fall more into the category of faith, e.g. “I know that God loves me” or “I know in my gut that I will be OK” are faith-based statements that are enormously reassuring if they are not just words, but a felt experience within the body and heart that can be accessed through inquiry or through our own practices.

So, a useful line of questioning for us as leaders can be “What do you know for sure?” Asking a team member to ground themselves and center in their bodily sensations before you ask the question, or to respond to the question from ground and the body, is likely to produce richer and more palpably supportive responses.



Accepting What We Don't Know

Surprisingly, the other place that we can ground is in the not knowing itself. Like the farmer in the story, we can't know whether a particular event, decision or course of action will in the long run be "fortunate or unfortunate." Everything that happens is connected to and can create results in the many complex systems we are embedded in; and it is not possible for us to know where any action might lead.

Not knowing does not quench our mind's thirst to know everything will be OK. However, the acceptance of our not knowing, in fact, can come as a tremendous relief.

A good portion of our suffering can come from fears about where a particular situation will end up. If we can accept that we simply do not and cannot know what the trajectory of what the coronavirus will be, we can do our part to use common sense practices like hand-washing and social distancing, while looking for opportunities to help others as best we are able. As we let go into acceptance of what we cannot know, we can simply be present with ourselves, connected to each other (even if virtually), and rest in this moment. And, that is worth a lot.

As leaders, we can ask our team members: "What do you know? What can't you know?" Pay attention to how these questions, and their answers, shift your internal state and sense of resiliency, both for yourself, your colleagues and for those you serve.