

LETTING THE GREY IN

Written in August 2017. On being asked to try again to define the paradox of loving 'the don't know' and learning of the death of Glen Campbell.

What place do yes or no have in a world full of maybes? What happens when leadership embraces ambiguity?

A cunning, manipulative, political schemer dies suddenly. "I wonder what he meant by that?" says an adversary...

As a response (it's a true story by the way, if a distantly historical one) you could cite it as a world-leading demonstration of office paranoia turned up to eleven. But I think it's better viewed as an illustration of how much we crave certainty and clarity. How ambiguity unnerves us, as individuals and as organisations trying to make sense of the cryptic clues the world tosses us.

We instinctively seek explanations for what's happening and what it means. Perhaps this is because, as a species, we are all too well aware of our mortality... but there I go, seeking the meaning of seeking for meaning.

In a simple world of binary, either-or opposites—a world where leadership would be a lot simpler—we would have easy judgments of right and wrong, insider versus outsider, someone to blame or a hero to worship. But we can't have those black or white narcotics for the soul because they're an invention. So instead we pretend to have them and those pretences materialise themselves as Jumping to Conclusions—or Convenience Thinking as I like to term it. Rather than endlessly weighing up everything we do, and grinding to a halt as a result, this convenience thinking serves us well when we just need to get stuff done.

The era of the Twittercision

But as the scale of social, political, economic, organisational and ecological challenges increases, the flip side of convenience thinking is that momentous decisions are reduced to Twitter-sized sound byte arguments and taken in haste. Whether or not Brexit was to your taste, it surely can't be denied that the basis for choosing between two unimaginably complex alternatives was reduced to absurdity by both sides.

Somewhere there is a happy medium between rushing to judgment and spinning your wheels. When it comes to healthy human relationships, that happy medium is characterised by getting comfortable with the shades of grey between the poles of black and white.

How then can we get past the caricatures and the slogans and thrive in all the richness that ambiguity has to offer? Because immersing ourselves in ambiguity and resisting the urge for instant gratification, is what grasping our opportunities really means.

Ambiguity has always been with us and rejoicing in it has long been regarded as an admirable trait. One of the qualities that form a “person of achievement” is when one is capable of “being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after facts and reason.” (Keats wrote that in 1817. A bang-up day for the poet as he coined the term ‘Negative Capability’ in the same letter.)

When leadership meets ambiguity

So what are the traits of organisations that cope well with ambiguity and are wonderful places to work as a result? I’d say they involve time to think, time to speak, time to be heard, time to explore the possibilities that emerge from dialectics, time to experiment and assess the results, time to enquire rather than tell, time to indulge in curiosity. The new shorthand for such havens is ‘a coaching culture’ and they are fertile soil for agility, vigour and engagement.

To create and sustain such places is paradoxically simple but not easy. They are built on having the courage to be humble and confessing that seniority and experience do not equate to knowing the answers. Our real value lies in posing questions and the skill that abides in listening to answers.

This is the crucial shift needed in organisations that intend to prosper. Loving the don’t know also means learning to love the grey.

Finally, BTW, that political schemer was Talleyrand, Napoleon’s famously cunning diplomat, and the adversary was Austrian statesman Metternich, proving that the art of the arch riposte was alive and well in 1838.

And while we’re contemplating lives past, I was reminded of the sheer beauty of ambiguity and its power to make us

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reflect upon our relationships when I learned of the death of Glen Campbell. *Wichita Lineman* is a hauntingly beautiful yet lonely song that I have loved since I first heard it in the sixties. And I did not feel any irritable reaching after facts and reason as I immersed myself again in the ambiguous wonder of the lines: “and I need you more than want you, and I want you for all time”. They just make me feel good to be alive. What did Jimmy Webb, the writer, mean?

I don't know, and I love that.