THE ANXIOUS POP

# PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE AS NATURE DOES

*Jean Gardner*

Have you found a theory that can help you second-guess tomorrow's weather? Anticipate when the next nine-day, sixty-two-mile traffic jam on China's Beijing-Tibet expressway will happen?

Nor was there a theory that predicted the sighting of a black swan.

Likewise, no theory about climbing a tree ever helped me climb a tree. Only after climbing many trees, and falling out of several did I learn to climb a tree. No theory about riding a horse ever helped me to ride a horse. Only after riding many horses and being thrown off several did I learn to ride a horse, which is very different than predicting or controlling his behavior.

Likewise, no theory about rescuing someone from a subway track as a train enters the station ever saved a life. "We're OK down here," shouted Wesley Autrey, a fifty-year-old construction worker and Navy veteran, from under a New York subway train, after he had jumped onto the tracks to rescue a stranger. How did he do it? Autrey pushed the twenty-year-old film student into a space that was about a foot deep between the tracks and laid on top of him as the train passed over them.

Autrey, in a split second, was able to judge whether he and the student could fit in the space between the tracks because "In construction, we work in confined spaces a lot…. So I looked, and my judgment was pretty right. The train did have enough room for me." Apparently, just barely enough room: Autrey's hat was greased by the passing cars.

Likewise, no theory about landing a plane on water helped Sully Sullenberger when he successfully ditched US Airways Flight 1549 in the Hudson River off Manhattan on January 15, 2009, saving the lives of all 155 people on the aircraft. Shortly after take-off from LaGuardia Airport, a flock of Canadian geese was sucked into the airplane's engines, disabling them. The moments before the crash were "the worst sickening, pit-of-your-stomach, falling-through-the-floor feeling" that Sullenberger had ever experienced. Afterwards he observed, "One way of looking at this might be that for forty-two years, I've been making small, regular deposits in this bank of experience: education and training. And on January 15 the balance was sufficient so that I could make a very large withdrawal."

You could dismiss these two extraordinary events by saying: "Right person in the right place." But they are examples of the resilience we find in ourselves and in nature all the time. The 1988 forest fire in Yellowstone National Park burned 793,880 acres but vegetation almost immediately started to grow back. Some trees like the pitch pine actually need a fire to germinate. James Lovelock, the atmospheric chemist who convinced many that the biosphere is a self-regulating organism, argues that the Earth will calibrate a new homeostasis if we overstress it. Of course, the human species is not likely to survive such an adjustment.

The ten principles of Nassim Nicholas Taleb cannot save the Black Swan or us when the improbable unpredictably happens. For us humans, as for the rest of nature, only our own resilience can do that. Resilience is an internal dynamic, developed through the trial and error of repeated practices, especially of skills that integrate mind and body in relation to adaptability and flexibility, such as yoga, tai chi, and other somatic body practices. These can help shape us to respond to Earth rhythms in appropriate ways, no matter how unimaginable both the rhythms and our responses may be. But if we sit back, become couch-theorists, we won't make the day-by-day adjustments to our behavior needed to align ourselves with the essentials of the Earth homeostasis that birthed us.

According to Bjarke Ingels, founder of the Copenhagen-based architectural group BIG, adaptability, flexibility, and open-focus—seeing what is—ground his practice. "The true creative moment is when a big idea interacts with these uncontrollable but at times navigable forces of society."Navigating the forces of nature takes the same kind of skills as navigating the forces of society because society and nature form one entwined dynamic.

Practice the skills of navigating what is, and we might be ready to integrate what it means that the Black Swan exists!


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