

Moving Towards Safe Uncertainty: The Development of Resilience and Excitement in the Future.

On the shoulders of giants:

I see this paper as a living, breathing journey rather than a final outcome. This version is one I am sharing now and I hope to develop and extend it as I continue my exploration and learning in this topic. I hope it is useful.

None of the material in here is mine although I might have brought a particular way of thinking to it. Feel free to use it as you like, without reference to me, although I would appreciate it if you gave due respect to my sources. I was first introduced to the concept of safe uncertainty in 1998/9 by Dr Linda Hoyle, then of the Tavistock Consulting Service, when she and I co-created their Managing Continuous Change developmental workshop. Linda has a number of very useful and interesting concepts related to our often unconscious responses to change some of which are covered in her contribution to the book *Working Below The Surface* (1). Since then I have developed a real interest in the whole topic of resilience and self-sufficiency. Khurshed Dehnugara and Claire Breeze of Relume introduced me to the work of Viktor Frankl (2) in the context of getting under the skin of our habitual limiting thinking and it has really helped me developing my own thinking about uncertainty and how we deal with it. Darren Rudkin introduced me to the similar concept of “Trigger, Filter, State” and the idea that life is our greatest teacher. Dr Brian Marien has helped me considerably in understanding the impact of my cognition on my emotions – and introduced me to the seminal work of Joseph LeDoux (9). Annika Ratcliffe of Human Insight has, for years, helped me grow my understanding of business ecology and emergent change, particularly with the work of Dr Peter Robertson (3) around S curves and attachment. Clare Southall, also of Relume, encouraged me to dust off the books I had by Meg Wheatley (4) around emergent change and how we as humans try to control change inappropriately rather than harnessing the natural order of things. Dr Josie Gregory, senior lecturer in Management at Surrey University and co-founder of the Foundation for Workplace Spirituality reinforced for me the power of Byron Katie’s work (5) and more recently Cathy Reilly introduced me to the work of Barry Mason (6) and the concept of “authoritative doubt” which I have found very useful. I am grateful for the catalyst that Alexandra Smith of SWAN consulting has provided in encouraging me to bring together all of this thinking for some work she and I have been doing together using Alexandra’s very powerful COMPASS developmental process.

Introduction:

For many years the study of change management and leadership revolved around the provision of control and certainty to those who were impacted by the changes so as to alleviate a very natural cause of resistance to change – that being lack of control, uncertainty of the future and fear that we will be unable to cope. Good practice change leadership therefore often includes the active involvement of impacted people and the co-creation of ideal outcomes so as to harness their resources and give them some sense of control over the future.

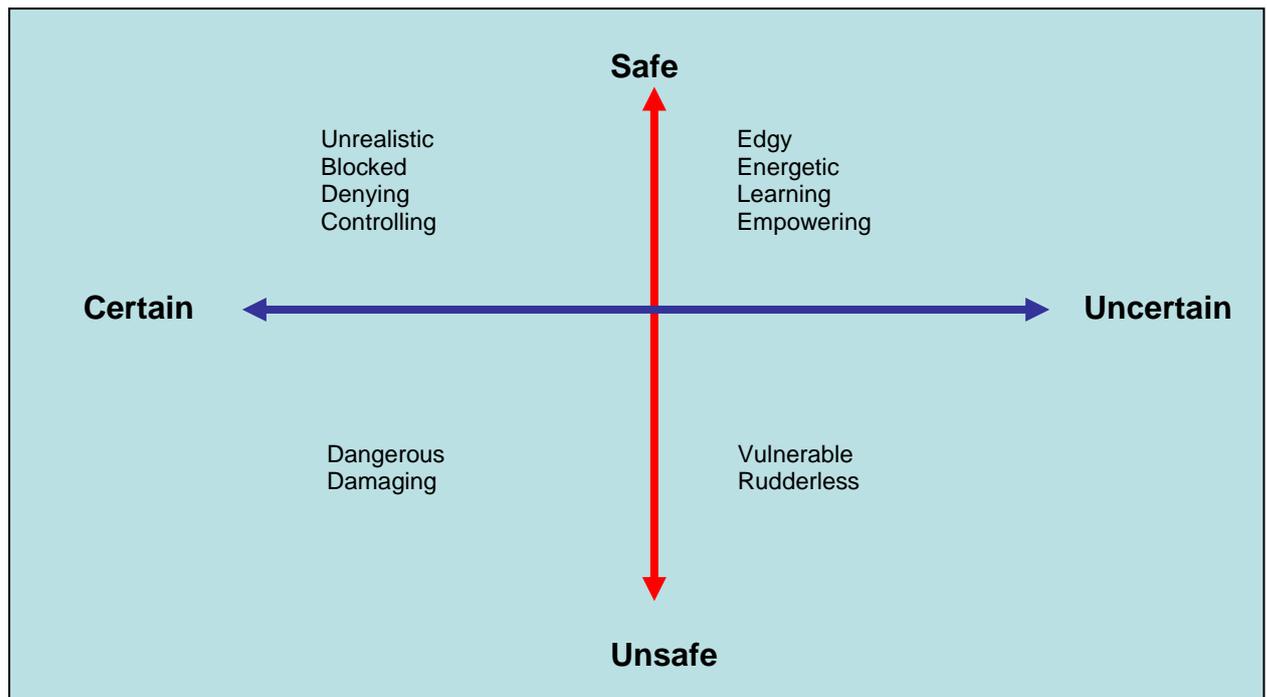
“The only certainty is that life is uncertain” Susan Jeffers (7).

Whilst not denying the powerful impact of this involvement in reducing and harnessing resistance as well as in enhancing the quality of the change outcome, this approach is also limited (and sometimes disingenuous) in that *control* is not available to be provided and not within the remit of those leading the change or doing the involvement and empowering. Recent headlines have included lines such as “the only certainty is uncertainty” and indicate the realistic nature of life – all of life shows up as impermanent and the only certainty is that one day we will die.

“Doubt, it seems to me, is the central condition of a human being in the 20th Century. One of the things that have happened to us in the 20th Century as a human race is to learn how certainty crumbles in your hand. We cannot any longer have a fixed view of anything – the table we’re sitting next to, the ground beneath our feet, the laws of science, are full of doubt now.” Salmon Rushdie (6).

Latest thinking in change leadership has therefore evolved whereby a powerful element of a change leader’s work is in building the resilience of their people and enabling them to live more comfortably with impermanence, uncertainty, ambiguity and *lack* of control.

Underpinning work in this area is the hypothesis that, as humans, when we are asleep to our reactions, we confuse *safety* with *certainty*. We assume they are the same thing and we therefore unconsciously (and sometimes consciously) move towards safe certainty. Because this is an unrealistic space, we therefore find ourselves blocking, defending, denying and controlling. As we become awake to our unconscious intention, we might allow ourselves to distinguish more clearly between that which keeps us *safe* (physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually) and our unconscious drive for certainty – allowing ourselves to work towards safe uncertainty – a space which by its nature is open to exploration, possibility, learning and energy – a much more realistic space, in which of course, we might also experience the very natural exploratory discomfort.



The key essence of the work of moving towards safe uncertainty is enabling individuals to:

- Find their own purpose in the world, a “true north” which guides them - regardless of circumstance, regardless of what life throws at them – together with real clarity on their values, positive human qualities and core strengths which will support them in their endeavours;
- See life not as a source of problems but as a key source of learning;
- Understand and distinguish between their real and genuine need for *safety* and their apparent and false need for *certainty*, enabling them to really focus on safety whilst thriving in uncertainty and allowing the possibilities to emerge.

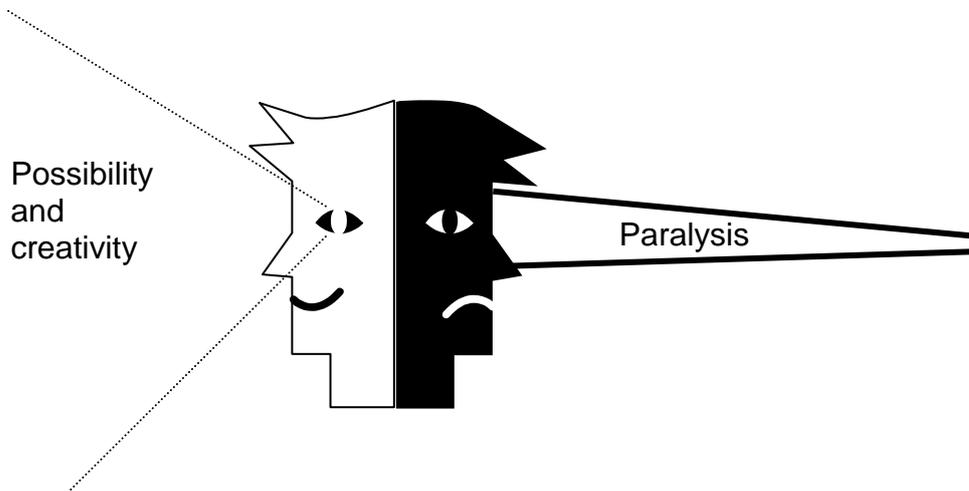
Key principles:

“When the forms of an old culture are dying, the new culture is created by a few people who are not afraid to be insecure.” (Rudolf Bahro as quoted by Meg Wheatley (4)).

The key principles underpinning the idea of moving towards safe uncertainty are:

- Uncertainty could be seen as a path to creativity through possibility or as a path to paralysis – our own mindset determines which path we take;
- When our concept of being safe is wedded to being certain, we almost certainly make ourselves *unsafe* because we are constantly trying to control things that eventually will not be controlled, and we are usually disappointed because life will show up differently from the expectations we have become attached to;

- There is a release and relief in opening up to what life offers – that then allows a real presence, an appreciation of life and the opportunity to really learn about ourselves and others.



“The prime cause of our suffering is our wanting things to be different than they are!” Susan Jeffers (7)

Key components of safe uncertainty:

The position of moving towards safe uncertainty, according to Barry Mason (6), is characterised by the following elements:

- We hold our beliefs and knowledge with *“authoritative doubt”* – a balance of our expertise *and* our uncertainty;
- We see nothing as fixed – we see everything as always in *a state of flow* (*“this too will pass..”*);
- The narrative of our life is respectful, collaborative and *evolving* – we are in a *constant* state of *impermanence* (no joke intended);
- We allow a context to emerge whereby new explanations can be placed *alongside* (rather than instead of) existing explanations and viewed curiously;
- When unexpected things happen we are more likely to move towards *enquiry* than towards *definition*;
- In our enquiry and exploration of life, we are more likely to explore *meaning* than we are to argue about *facts*;
- In our lives we accept the reality that we will continuously be faced with dilemmas (having to choose between good and good, or bad and bad). We see solutions as dilemmas that are simply less of a dilemma than the dilemma we had before the solution – a problem often does not have one simple resolution and *solutions do not have to solve everything*.

Moving towards safe uncertainty is an ongoing journey – a path rather than a destination (hence the way I precursor “safe uncertainty” with “moving towards” in

this paper). There is a rich vein of work to be done here and this paper is only scratching at the surface of it. However, as a start point, key ways (inextricably linked with each other) in which we can consider moving towards safe uncertainty include:

- Being *curiously* awake to ourselves – noticing without judgement what we are thinking and feeling and how we are behaving – and, crucially, what we are attached to
- Connecting with where and how we are genuinely safe and *consciously creating the circumstances in which we can build that safety*;
- *Embracing* uncertainty actively, deliberately, curiously and joyfully;
- Letting life be life, living life in the *present* and dealing with life's occurrences as *gifts* – with deep gratitude and an openness to what we can learn about both ourselves, others and the world;
- Operating with a *wider purpose* and a longer term view.

Key practical tools that one might use in moving towards safe uncertainty are:

- Develop your own living, breathing *statement of purpose* – what are you going for in the world, what values do you want to bring to that, what mindset would support you, how would you like to be experienced, what shadow would you like to create, and what strengths have you got that would help you (Relume call this their “signature” process).
- Practice *mindfulness* – becoming curiously aware of what drives you. Meditation, focusing, yoga, prayer and other similar mechanisms are useful here.
- Read *inspiring stories* and develop ideas of the *heroes* in your life that operate to a wider purpose in an uncertain world.
- Use a *journal* regularly to capture your learning and your appreciation of yourself and of others around you and of what life has brought you.
- Write “*morning pages*” – give yourself a bounded amount of time each morning and simply write for that time whatever comes into your head. After a few months read over and review what you noticed, how you felt and what you were attached to. Curiously!
- Practice *friendly curiosity* with yourself and those around you. Listen with compassion and loving kindness and pay attention to the healing nature of that, especially with others.
- Practice ***choosing active gratitude*** – giving appreciation to as much as you can in a period of time. This practice could be extended into a conscious realisation and noticing of what is helping you to be safer across the dimensions: physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually.

I recently worked with a specialist in comedy improvisation, John Cremer. He has an underpinning philosophy for improvisation that seemed to me to be a really useful way of coming at life. John's three key steps in improvisation are: 1) *Listen* – really well. (2) *Say “yes”* to whatever is given to you. (3) *Commit*. This has huge resonances for me to (a) moving towards safe uncertainty and (b) non-violent communication through the honouring of the other.

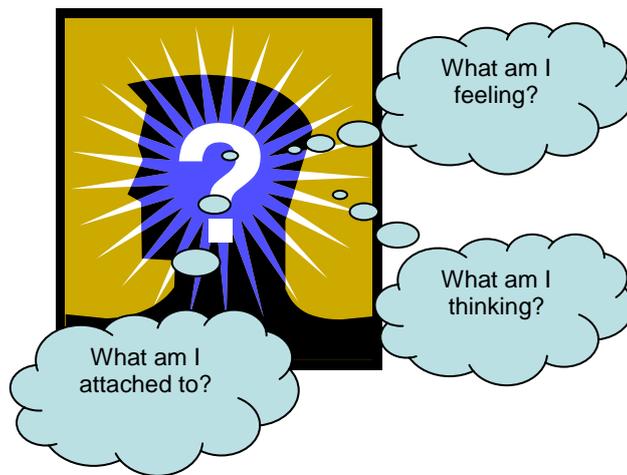
Being curiously awake to ourselves

“We cannot observe something without changing it” Zukav (6).

“What we observe is not nature itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning” Heisenberg (6)

“Don’t just do something, stand there!” Marshal Rosenberg (8)

Curiously awake! to myself



Observing ourselves with friendly curiosity allows us to make explicit those thinking processes that were previously subliminal. In his book *“The Emotional Brain”* Joseph LeDoux (9) talks about the considerable evidence that is available that indicates that when something has an influence on us, its influence is significantly greater if it is subliminal –i.e. when we are not aware of it. The moment the influence becomes explicit to us, its impact on us is reduced substantially. In other words – just *noticing* makes a difference. My dear Darren Rudkin often says *“If you are not noticing, you are not in the game.”*

Judgement of our thinking and feeling (“I should be clear about this” ; “It is wrong to be confused” ; “I should not be angry...” for instance) has the impact of creating a defendedness within us which is most likely to have the impact of us becoming even less aware of what we are actually thinking and feeling. Pema Chodron (10): *“We can be where we are and at the same time leave wide open the possibility of being able to expand far beyond where we are now in the course of our lifetime.”*

Becoming awake to what is happening within ourselves therefore allows us to notice curiously that which we are attached to and that which we hold as certain, and being awake to it, reduces its influence over what drives us.

“The more clearly you understand yourself and your emotions, the more you become a lover of what is” Baruch Spinoza (5)

Actively creating the circumstances in which we can be genuinely safer.

When I let go of needing to be certain about what is going to happen next, or tomorrow, or next week or next month, I can start to pay attention to how I might want to make myself *safer*, regardless of what happens. I believe each person has their own sense of what keeps them safe and that an individual's work in this area is a personal journey of gradual realisation.

In general though, if I can become aware of the anxiety that is created by my being *uncertain*, acknowledge it and then put it aside with compassion and curiosity, this allows me to be much sharper about where I am actually *unsafe* – which then increases the likelihood that I will take effective action to grow my safety.

Right now, as I sit and write this in my office, I cannot be certain what will happen in an hour's time. I cannot be certain about what will happen tomorrow. Anything might happen. The possibilities are endless. That uncertainty makes me no less safe as I sit here – physically warm, emotionally excited about what I am doing now, psychologically stimulated, spiritually grounded. Safe now, regardless of what tomorrow might bring. Indeed safer than I would be if I was sitting here closed to the possibilities, attempting to control the outcomes, defending a position to which I might be strongly attached.

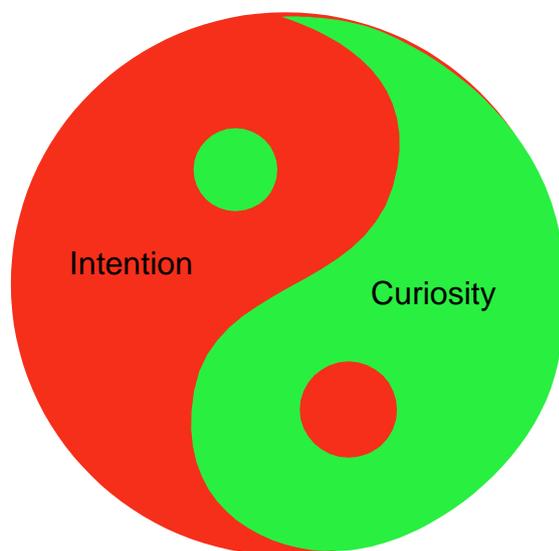
Very rarely do I actually feel *physically* unsafe as I am fortunate enough to live in a relatively stable environment – but I do notice that I will be quite quick to avoid situations where I am likely to be in physical danger. Of course I am physically safer when I eat a healthy diet and exercise sensibly – and I am less safe when I don't.

My personal *emotional* safety has grown as I have developed deeper and richer relationships with those I love. Those relationships have grown as I have become clearer about who I am, more confident in myself and more consistent and authentic in my behaviour – and they have been diminished by the times when I have not. The relationships have also grown when I have been able to be more loving, more compassionate and better able to listen – skills and attitudes I have been able to develop over time as I have realised their importance. My emotional safety has also grown as I have learned to accept life for what it *is* rather than what I expect it to be. I am safer when I hold fewer “shoulds” and “musts” about events, about others and about myself – and I am less safe when I hold that I *deserve* something or someone to be different from what it is or who they are.

I am also fortunate enough as I write this paper that I am mentally healthy. Both my *psychological* and my emotional safety have grown as I have taken active steps to understand myself better and become more aware of my unconscious drivers and patterns. As this awareness has grown, so I have been able to be more *choosing* of my actual behaviours and also of my patterns of thinking and, as a result, I have learned to channel the energy of my emotions better. I also take active steps to refresh my mind – through continuous learning and through activities such as Sudoku. I am less safe when I allow my mind to atrophy, when I get lazy about my personal development or when I don't pay compassionate and curious attention to my careless patterns of thinking and reacting.

My spiritual safety has developed as I have become more balanced between being curious/ exploratory and purposeful. It seems to me that there is a yin and yang here – an optimal balance between firm good intention and open exploration. I am safer when I can call on my wider purpose to support me, when I can pay curious attention to a wider system beyond myself and my own immediate selfish need in a much longer term view of life. I enhance my safety as I become clearer about my wider purpose and as I give myself space to connect with what might be happening in a wider context. I am less safe when I make what is happening to me right now the be-all-and-end-all.

“The Dalai Lama told a group of my colleagues not to be anxious. ‘The work we are doing now’ he said, ‘will bear fruit in seven hundred years’” Meg Wheatley (4).



As I write this I notice that in overall terms my personal sense of safety is fundamentally rooted in my having been authentic or true to myself and, in my reflection now, I feel most unsafe when I have not been who I wanted to be and when I have lost my integrity.

What keeps you safe? How might you genuinely grow the likelihood of you being safer?

Embracing uncertainty

“There is a great adventure in the unknown that propels us to discover powerful parts of us that we didn’t know were there...making a choice to live a life filled with uncertainty is the first step” Susan Jeffers (7).

Possibility only exists when things are not certain. We can only learn something new, when we let go of what we already know. When we control things, we are controlling them based on what we already know – which constrains us from really learning about that which we previously did not. If we can develop a mindset whereby we

actively look for and joyously embrace uncertainty, we are more likely to see the insights, possibilities and opportunities in new and uncertain situations.

This mindset also requires a willingness to be disturbed, confused, hopeless and unknowing. We can embrace uncertainty more when we let go of needing to know it or understand it or control it.

Letting life be life

“Destiny is a mysterious thing, sometimes unfolding a miracle in a leaky basket of catastrophe” Francisco Goldman (7)

Pema Chodron (10) tells the following story: *“A woman is running from tigers. She runs and she runs and the tigers are getting closer and closer. She comes to the edge of a cliff. She sees a vine there and so she climbs down and holds on to it. Then she looks down and sees that there are tigers below her as well. At the same time she notices a little mouse gnawing at the vine to which she is clinging. She also sees a beautiful little bunch of strawberries emerging from a nearby clump of grass. She looks up, she looks down and she looks at the mouse. Then she picks a strawberry, pops it in her mouth and enjoys it thoroughly.”*



As life occurs we can, if we are not awake, invest significant energy in wishing it were different and in allowing what is happening to distract us from our underpinning core purpose. We might get angry about the rain, for instance, because we perceive that it is stopping us doing what we had hoped to do. This has the impact of depleting our energy, growing our sense of being “victim” to the situation. As this happens, we encourage the impulse within us that wants to control the situation and this has the impact of increasing our urge to move towards certainty. It also, of course, stops us from enjoying the rain – that moment, that day, that month when we could have spent our time experiencing joy we probably spent it angry, hurt, disappointed.

We could, on the other hand, look at the situation as a gift....



Here is an opportunity firstly to understand myself better – what are my needs, my values and my hopes that are being allowed to surface in my reaction to this situation? What am I attached to which, by letting go of that attachment, I would have a richer, more joyful experience of life?



And then, here is an opportunity to create something either for myself or for others. What are the possibilities that are now being presented instead? What is there to learn here? What might be needed from me right now that could contribute the greater good? What is there to really enjoy right now? What am I going to do now that this has happened?



And then, here is an opportunity to practice the gift of gratitude. What is there to be grateful for right now? There is so much research into the healing properties of genuine, heartfelt gratitude, that any opportunity to practice it is a gift in itself.

In her book, “Loving What Is”, Byron Katie talks about noticing when your thoughts argue with reality. *“I am a lover of what is, not because I am a spiritual person, but because it hurts when I argue with reality. We can know that reality is good just as it is, because when we argue with it we experience tension and frustration. We don’t feel natural or balanced. When we stop opposing reality, action becomes simple, fluid, kind and fearless.”*

Operating with a wider purpose

One of the ways in which we can move towards safe uncertainty is to hold for ourselves a purpose which is beyond the immediate. Viktor Frankl (2) is an example of someone who had a wider purpose: in going into a concentration camp during the second world war, he did not know where his wife was or whether she was alive. He created a purpose for himself of surviving. More importantly, he was determined to use his experience to study the psychology of survival and to help others to survive too. In his work he discovered that the common mindset of the people that survived was they would survive, that they embraced uncertainty and that they had a meaning and purpose to their lives beyond surviving.

“I respect the man who knows distinctly what he wishes. The greater part of all mischief in the world arises from the fact that men do not sufficiently understand their own aims. They have undertaken to build a tower, and spend no more labour on the foundation than would be necessary to erect a hut”- Goethe (brought to my attention by coach and author Michael Neill).

Having a wider purpose – a purpose which supports the greater good and which is not constrained by what is happening now, nor by not knowing what will happen, allows one to connect what is happening and what might happen with that purpose in a way that creates enquiry, learning and meaning. It is raining – and now what? It might rain – so then what? What is there to learn? What is there that can be done to contribute to the wider purpose? What might be the purpose of the rain? What is there that is contributing that can be celebrated and enjoyed? Where can I bring

loving kindness, compassion, joy, equanimity to this moment and to this uncertainty?
What are the wider possibilities open to me here in going for my purpose?

“It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us.” Viktor Frankl (2).

Key sources:

1. Working Below the Surface: The Emotional Life of Contemporary Organisations: The Tavistock Clinic Clare Huffington and David Armstrong: Karnac
2. Man’s Search for Meaning: Viktor Frankl: Pocket Books
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4. Finding Our Way: Margaret J Wheatley: Berrett-Koehler Publishers
5. Loving What Is: Byron Katie: Rider
6. Towards Positions of Safe Uncertainty: Barry Mason: Human Systems: The Journal of Systemic Consultation and Management. Vol 4. 1993 189-200
7. Embracing Uncertainty: Susan Jeffers Ph.D.: Hodder Mobius
8. Non-Violent Communication: A Language of Compassion: Marshal Rosenberg: Puddledancer Press
9. The Emotional Brain: Joseph LeDoux: Pheonix
10. Comfortable with Uncertainty: Pema Chodron: Shambala