

Initiators of change: How to produce growth in the chaos of disaster (#109)

Jean 0:10

Hello, everybody. Most of us have experienced or witnessed some disruption in our lives. We know someone who's gotten fired, or lost their home, or have been in a tremendous accident. Now up the ante and think about what happens when entire communities face disasters. Think of what people in Ukraine or Syria or the Congo or Venezuela go through. Think of places where there have been floods and hurricanes and out-of-control wildfires.

Angela Blanchard is here again to talk about how communities pull together after a natural disaster has happened. She's been to many parts of the globe after the unthinkable happens. Angela is a senior fellow at Brown University and a nationally recognized expert on disaster recovery. Here's Angela.

Jean

Hello, everybody. It is with sheer delight that I bring back to you Angela Blanchard. You'll see – in the show notes – her accomplishments. She's a senior fellow with Brown University and has a list of other affiliations I'll read to you. She's a board member of the Business Innovation Factory advisory board and other advisory boards and all of that. You can read about it in the show notes.

Last time, Angela was here to talk about how to foster innovations in nonprofits. I don't think that's what we called it. But essentially, that's what it was. And if you're interested, you can find it on the blog [[#61: How to build a solid foundation for doing good](#)].

She's back now for her true passion on how people recover from disasters. So welcome, Angela.

Angela 2:25

Thanks, Jean. It's great to be back. And it's great to be here to talk about the thing that is driving me now and has been driving me for quite a while.

Jean 2:35

Okay.

Angela 2:36

Where would you like to start?

Jean 2:38

Well, I want to start with why disasters? You have a motto that you put on Facebook, among other places – I think it's on your website – "Born for storms" and notes on your LinkedIn profile, "Born for storms." What's the background to that?

Angela 3:09

Well, I think some of us actually function really well when everything's spinning out of control. And when things are truly chaotic and there's a sense of sometimes threat, but also sometimes just unpredictability, some of us function really well.

And there are a lot of us, a lot of the people in my family actually function really, really well when the environment is chaotic and confusing. We see opportunity when a lot of other people are pretty scared.

I actually got some extremely, extremely valuable coaching at one point in my career because I took the Birkman, and on the change score and the challenge score, I was near 100. And I thought that was such a good grade. And it's fine to be for change and challenge. But as the coach told me, I'm really engaged and fired up and focused when other people are scared to death.

Jean 4:22

Wow, wait a minute, hang on, let's listen. I want you to say that again. I'm really...

Angela 4:29

Engaged, fired up, and focused when a lot of other people are just really scared. So, it taught me that when I would think, "Oh, this is going to be an incredible opportunity, we can do some great work here," that that sensation for me quite often wasn't shared by everyone in the arena, other people were going...

Jean 4:58

People were saying, "Oh, oh, no!"

Angela 5:02

"What are you thinking?" Yeah.

Jean 5:05

And you're looking up and saying, "Oh, joy and delight," that is...

Angela 5:08

Well, maybe not joy, because often the situations are quite painful.

Jean 5:13

Okay.

Angela 5:14

But I am saying yes, this is workable.

Jean 5:17

This is something we can ride and get to a better place.

Angela 5:21

This is workable, we can craft something out of this chaos that can reduce suffering and make way for healing. So, yeah.

Jean 5:36

Okay. You mentioned the Birkman assessment, for those who are not familiar with it, would you just give a very, very brief synopsis, and explain what your score on that one dimension meant?

Angela 5:48

Well, I'm not...I really want to be careful what I say there, because I don't know a great deal about it. And I just was taking it, essentially. But it measures a lot of the ways we work and how we show up at work and sort of what our muscles are for conducting ourselves in a professional environment. And it's scored so that if you're getting a 50, you're with everybody else, or with the majority of people. But if you have a score on either end, you are definitely to the extreme.

So, "born for storms" means, for me, able to function really, really well in chaos. Not that it doesn't affect me, but that storms are something I expect in life. And that I've spent most of my life around people who at some point in their lives had the rug pulled out from under them. And that knowledge and wisdom about how we go on after the unthinkable is what I'm most deeply interested in.

Jean 7:10

What do you do in your brain, Angela? People are... I mean, I'm thinking of firefighters going in a building, you know, they're trained to do that, they're trained to change their minds about what's happening. What goes in on your mind?

Angela 7:31

Well, I think it starts with how I grew up, to be honest, and that we had no sense of entitlement to anything, nor any sense of predictability. And we were living always a little on the edge. So throughout my family are people who really don't perceive... whereas others think, oh, my gosh, that's so risky, we think, well, you don't have something, you try. See if you can make something work. If you succeed, then you have something, this is good.

So, we don't experience this kind of fear of trying something really big or difficult, because it's like all the campaigns I did. We didn't have the money, we sought the money if we got...

Jean 8:16

You mean when you were at BakerRipley?

Angela 8:18

Yeah, we had the money. So, you know, you're wired to give it a try. I want to say, though, we in this, in our society, we focus when we think of disasters, or we think of extreme emergencies. In the U.S. in particular, we're very, very focused on first responders and the emergency phase and the dramatic phase in the run forth to the fire.

But, you know, that's the first minutes, the first hours, perhaps the first days. There's a whole story that follows that. And I think there's a lot more to be said about all the people who are able to craft some wholeness and healing out of that in that long tail after the unthinkable has occurred. And that doesn't look quite like this high-water rescue dangling from the helicopter moment that we like to get for the news. There's a whole other kind of work.

And for the first time, one of the things that was really interesting about covid was that that was a long tail disaster. So, we were not able to get that emergency rescue shot and then roll on. And then we could see, which brings me to this really important point about disasters, the revelatory aspect of disasters.

But in covid, we could actually see all the people that are normally not on our screen, that are stitching it up, that are making it better, that are tending and caring and holding the hands and being with people as they struggle or suffer. So that was a very, that was a very... it was an important moment in which we got a lot of learning about who actually manages recovery.

Jean 10:38

Ah, so before the people who were managing the after care, after the disaster, they fade away and new news pops on the screen. But with covid, we kept seeing what happens after?

Angela 10:58

In the U.S. we're almost toxically individualistic, right?

Jean 11:06

Yes.

Angela 11:06

So, this is an issue we have. And we love individual heroic stories, we love this story of the individual and look at them do this great thing. And that narrative is the narrative that we promote, whether it's the individual or the institution, the single institution, we're promoting a heroic narrative that's very narrow and very immediate and very emergent.

So, we shifted in covid, to see... it forced us to, didn't it? To actually look at the whole context, where people were getting sick, and who was caring, who was rescuing them, who was taking them to the hospital, who was caring for them at the hospital, who had to care for them when they could go home, if they could go home, and then how we all had to care for one another in the arena. So, it was an instance in which the whole disaster story got very slow. So suddenly, we could see all the actors.

Jean 12:12

Right. Beyond the six o'clock news.

Angela 12:16

And I have to point out in the interest of being a good feminist still, that I have often suspected that the reason the emergency phase gets so much attention is you see far more men active in that stage. And then if you look at the remaking of lives and the rebuilding of communities and attending and mending and

healing work, that it tends to be more women doing that work. So you get the sense that perhaps there might be a little sexism at play as well. That keeps our attention on the people we think of as real heroes, as opposed to those who perform heroically in a more protracted and more persevering way.

Jean 13:08

Okay. So, you have laid the background of why you can handle disasters, and your approach to it as an opportunity.

Angela 13:24

Yeah.

Jean 13:25

Why did this become a professional focus? What happened so that you invested... decided to invest your life's work into this area?

Angela 13:39

Well, like so many of us, Jean, we've witnessed the narrative of climate change, right?

Jean 13:47

Right.

Angela 13:48

We've actually in Texas, especially, heard all the variations about what's going to happen, whose fault is it, is it really happening, it's not really happening, it looks like it's happening, but it's just weather, we've heard it all. But anyone paying attention can see that the events that are unfolding, have unprecedented – the most overworked word – unprecedented scale and impact.

Katrina was the awakening for me, having grown up on the Gulf Coast and being Cajun, meaning all my relatives, you know, live – virtually everybody I love – live right in the path of hurricanes. So, you know, we grew up with hurricanes coming, make a big pot of gumbo. The relatives all come because even

Beaumont, as low as it is, was higher than where they were from. And you know, the water comes in, the water goes out.

Jean 14:54

So that's before Katrina.

Angela 14:56

Yeah.

Jean 14:57

Normally, that's what you're used to. So, you're used to a hurricane and a pot of gumbo.

Angela 15:01

Exactly. You know, and we all come together. That's the key.

Jean 15:07

And we all come together. Okay.

Angela 15:11

We speak of Katrina as the hurricane. But really it was the failure of the levees.

Jean 15:18

The failure of?

Angela 15:19

The levees.

Jean 15:20

Yes, yes.

Angela 15:22

Let's be clear that we wouldn't, we would be struggling to remember the name of the hurricane that happened in 2005 had the levees not failed. But the

multiple failures of the levees and the fact that New Orleans filled up like a bowl, and water sat in people's homes and businesses and places of worship and schools and churches, all of it. And it sat there for weeks.

And, as a person who's focused a lot on systems, and particularly complex systems, that interplay of natural disaster that was drastically compounded by manmade failure, catastrophic failure, to maintain the levees created this devastating, devastating wound for the nation that was New Orleans and Katrina.

And now I find that such a profound... such a profound image that we carry from Katrina, few of us were unaffected. I mean, it was almost impossible not to be moved, not to be shocked, not to revise our understanding of how things work.

And again, I point to the revelatory nature of disasters, that are often really unseen when it comes to the structure of things. So, I think about in a really literal way, the Grenfell tower that burned in UK, we couldn't see the structure of that building until all the cladding fell away. And then you saw how it was built, how it was made.

The disasters have that effect. And that whatever is flooded or burned or washed away or threatened or destroyed also exposes how things were built, now we see the structure. And that's really a reckoning isn't?

We saw people's economic and social and political vulnerability and powerlessness. We saw a history of disinvestment in neighborhoods and communities, we saw a failure on the part of the country, which is persistent, persistent failure on the part of the country, to value the Gulf Coast, and to protect the resources, assets, and people on the Gulf Coast, in a measure that's commensurate with the contribution we make to the country.

So, this is one of the features that is most important about disasters, one of the opportunities, if we're willing and we have the courage, is to look at what's exposed. And then rather than scurry quickly, to recreate what we had, it's a chance if we take it to rethink and do something different.

Jean 18:46

Okay. What you're saying is, disasters give us an opportunity not to go back to where we were, but to look at where we could be, and to rethink how we want to shape things to make it better, and to prevent what happened before from happening again.

Angela 19:11

We see a lot of... when you think back to covid. How much did we learn about the actual healthcare system? Who had access? Or to whom was it available, whether it was the actual care that people needed if they were sick or the vaccine? What were the structures? How were people able to receive information/help/support/treatment? We learned a lot about how things did and did not work and for whom.

Jean 19:45

Right, and we learned about government, city government, all that, health department and the mayor, we learned about government too.

Angela 19:56

Yes, we did. So, we get to see how we've structured our systems, how the systems were built and for whom, and then we can choose whether we rush back to recreate that. Or we say, "Hmm, that didn't work for a lot of the people." And some of the harm that this virus or this hurricane caused had to do with the structure, and not the virus or the hurricane.

Jean 20:28

Okay, so I can apply that to post George Floyd, where the country was awakened to what people, Black people have been saying, since I was born, that there's a disproportionate impact on us of law enforcement that police don't necessarily take our word for it.

So, post George Floyd, and what many organizations started doing after that, is saying, "How can we restructure what we're doing inside our organizations to be

more diverse, to be more inclusive, to be more equitable?" And so, a whole wave of rethinking came in as a result.

Angela 21:13

Yes. Exactly. I think the beauty of that, for me, in the aftermath was, I point to what you say, some organizations – instead of issuing their dressed-up-for-public-consumption, PR version of righting the wrongs – actually undertook this kind of deep reflection.

And I was working with one set of business leaders and one of the bankers that I was working with around the response to George Floyd's murder. He was saying, "Well, should we be doing this? Should we be doing that?" I said, first, you should change the way you bank people. You know, we don't need you to become a social justice warrior. Because you're way too far away from that to do it well, we need you to bank differently.

Jean 22:17

Thank you.

Angela 22:19

All these systems that you have in place, everything from credit scores, all those structures that deed and support who gets hired, who gets a loan, who gets an investment, who even gets the information about a deal that could be beneficial, all of that. That's your work, redo that. Because if that's not representative of the world around you, then your system is flawed.

And I think that this is what I've been striving my whole life to get across. If you look at the pool of people, whether it's the pool of people in the shelter, or the pool of people in a line for a vaccine, or if it's the pool of people that get a business loan, and they don't look like the population, the system's broken, not the people. And that, I will never move on that. I love the spiritual, "like a tree planted by the water, I shall not be moved" on that, I'm immovable, immovable. The system's broken, not the people.

Jean 23:42

Yes. Look at it, look at the system first and see what predisposes...

Angela 23:49

And third, and fourth, yes. Sorry.

Jean 23:52

And see what predisposes what you got, what's up the chain of events? Has the system structure solved the way people are acting? It gets reinforced.

Angela 24:03

So, who gets in is preselected way down the line, and there is a precedent that is stored. There's precedent that's current, there's precedent... you're maintaining essentially the system that selects those folks to be included and the people who are to be left out.

Jean 24:29

Yes.

Angela 24:30

We made it. We got to unmake it.

Jean 24:33

Okay. Let's go back to Katrina. Katrina happened. And what change did it bring in you specifically?

Angela 24:43

Well, I was going back and forth between New Orleans and Houston. Almost every other week, I would be back in New Orleans. I had quickly, we had the response that...

Jean 24:59

Hang on, for those who don't know, you live in Houston.

Angela 25:01

Yeah.

Jean 25:03

New Orleans is a six-hour drive away, right?

Angela 25:08

Yeah.

Jean 25:08

So, when you say you're going back and forth, you're driving back and forth between Houston and New Orleans. Okay.

Angela 25:15

Driving until you could fly again. And I think the first time I was there was right about a month after, really when you could, you know, I really was the only person walking down Canal Street to go pick up a battery for something. And I was the only person that I saw that, really, I didn't see any other women and I didn't see anybody in a uniform the first time I went.

Just by way of background also, I think, I had 11 relatives that lived in New Orleans before Katrina. And, of course, you know, a number of them moved. And I have relatives in virtually every small town on either side of I-10, from Houston to New Orleans. So there has not been a hurricane that hit the Gulf Coast in the last 20 years that didn't impact someone in my family. I've a large Cajun family and I have relatives in Lake Charles and relatives in Cameron, Louisiana, and Eunice.

So, I went to New Orleans because I understood something about New Orleans that not everyone did. And that if you say you live in Houston, you can mean you live anywhere from Clear Lake to Katy. And you live actually in your house, the way most people live in Houston, it's not the way I do. But most people live in Houston in a triangle. My house, my work, my place of worship, that's a triangle

they live in. There's a handful of people that live in a neighborhood and identify with that neighborhood in some deep-rooted way.

But since about 70% of the people in the region were not born here, we are not largely rooted in neighborhoods, which was exactly the inverse of how people lived in New Orleans. The 400,000 people that lived in New Orleans prior to Katrina overwhelmingly had roots that went back generations, they were exact opposite. It was something like 70% of New Orleanians actually were born there. And their parents were born there. And they were from St. Rock or Tremé or Central City or Lower Ninth, that's who they were.

So, people weren't choosing and weren't making up their minds about returning from Houston to New Orleans, they were making up their minds about whether or not they were going back to Tremé or Central City or Lakeview or a host of other neighborhoods where they had roots and family and the corner grocery store. And then all of the rituals that were a part of the way people lived in that city.

So, I knew for us to do a good job here of helping people navigate the systems and choices that they had to deal with in terms of, were they going back? or were they going to remake their lives here or elsewhere? We had to know what was going on in the neighborhoods. So, I began working to make individual connections with community center leaders in New Orleans in those neighborhoods, and so that we had clear and up to date information about conditions.

Jean 28:54

Who's the "we"?

Angela 28:54

Well, actually, at that time, I was part of a very large group of people that had been assembled by the mayor and the county judge. We were leaders of multiple organizations in Houston that had taken on the job of welcoming and resettling our neighbors from New Orleans. Also, it should be mentioned, not

just New Orleans: the Mississippi Gulf Coast and all places between.

So, you know, I think... I don't think I was the only person in Houston that really grasped the difference between the way people lived in New Orleans versus the way we live in Houston. But I think I was at the table with a lot more of that knowledge than most people had.

I had a lot of relationships, frankly in Louisiana. And, you know, there's all kinds of ways to offer people like... you know, Houstonians, we were at our best truly, in many ways during Katrina. But at the end of the day, as someone said, you know, there is no soul in Houston. If you're from New Orleans, we like soul, they're like there's a lot of heart here, love, soul. Yeah. And I understood that. I mean we live, you know in Houston here's the equation, you get a job, a house, and car. Go to work, live well. New Orleans, it was history and music and food and family and ritual and celebration, New Orleans was built for life. And we were built to work.

Jean 30:47

I'm trying to figure out, how did Katrina impact you personally, so that you chose disasters as a focus?

Angela 30:59

Well, I don't think I was the only one that observed that we were...

Jean 31:04

Yes, but I'm talking to you. So, I want you to...

Angela 31:06

I know, I'm trying to say that it was an utter... the response was a catastrophic failure. The levees failed catastrophically which were, it was a reflection of disinvestment and a failure, as I said previously, a failure to understand the value of Gulf Coast assets and people. But the response was another order of magnitude, terrifying to watch, because it was so completely lacking in understanding, and in compassion, and in empathy.

What is clear to me, what was clear to me then, it's clear to me now, we've moved into an era of upheaval, war, or weather, loss of health or wealth, those are the things that are driving us to push us out of our homes, our communities, disrupting our lives, sending us scrambling for unfamiliar shores.

So, I did not think that Katrina was going to be this unique event. Because it was so apparent, the failure, the catastrophe, and all of its contributing factors existed in every community. My shorthand version of that, there's a levee in every community, a crack in every system.

So, this is why I began to turn my attention entirely to how we respond to those sets of conditions and failures of systems, and then also the careful attention to the structures that emerge, in the aftermath, their responses, the way we instinctively go about helping, and then the way we go about reconstituting lives and communities, these patterns, this should matter.

You know, of course, I think that this matters most, pay attention. But also, I find there's such profound meaning in it. Because if we zoom out slightly, and just pause and fully understand who we are as a species, these are the conditions all of the time, we exist as vulnerable creatures on this shared journey.

Most of us have made some sort of unconscious bargain with the universe. I'll do all these things: I'll have insurance, I'll pay my bills, I'll work hard, I'll be close to family, I'll do a good job, whatever, and all will go well. But there is no bargain. That's not the deal. And we are vulnerable creatures on this shared journey. And this is the way we have to, this is where we must make our way, and often many of us – many of us – reach a point in life when things fall apart. And then a whole new story begins.

Jean 34:38

Okay, wait. Now I want to pause right here because what you're saying is critical. Many people... you're saying that most people say if I do what I'm supposed to do, follow the rules, hold down a job, take care of my family, whatever.... If I follow the rules, all will go well, and then when things don't go well, we wonder what happened. This is not supposed to happen. You're saying

the opposite, you're saying you can follow the rules and disaster in some form will surely come?

Angela 35:18

Well, you may be one of those rare folks that live your whole life in this sort of unbroken, predictable fashion. This, you know, safety, security, predictability routine, some of us worship those gods. I'm not one of those people.

Jean 35:38

You've made that clear.

Angela 35:39

Yeah, and some people live that way. I don't really like those people that much, to be honest. I find that my sense of things is we come to know ourselves and others, we come to understand the same way, disasters are revelatory about systems, they also reveal to us who we are, what we believe about the way the world works.

And you see why Katrina was a breaking point for so many of us, was that some of us could not understand when told how the world worked or didn't, until we could see that it was not working, until the evidence was overwhelming. And this is also true of us as individuals, you know, we may think we're patient people, until it's 102 degrees, and we're thirsty, and there's no water, and there's no air conditioning, and you can't cook, and you can't go to work, and the kids are crying. And we're not that patient person we imagined ourselves to be.

Jean 36:45

Right.

Angela 36:45

And so, disasters reveal a great deal about us as individuals, and they also reveal systems. And then we have a chance to actually reconsider all of the things that we've based our lives upon. Most people aren't excited about that prospect, you know?

Jean 37:04

Right.

Angela 37:04

We'd like to go on thinking the world works the way we thought it did. Because then everything we've done till this point makes sense, right?

Jean 37:14

Right. I hear so many people say that's not fair. It's not fair that such and such happened. And I'm thinking, um, yeah. So how did fairness enter into the equation?

Angela 37:28

Right. So, this revelation that people have, if we will bring some grace to it, we actually go, oh, we have a chance to understand ourselves better. When I think of some things that have occurred in my life that fall into that catastrophic category. What did I believe about people? What did I believe about how people would behave in really, really trying situations? What did I believe about power? What did I believe about how our systems work?

So, when I find that my beliefs are incorrect, we've witnessed a lot of people getting the information that the way they see the world is not quite correct. And then we see them acting out in all kinds of crazy ways being thrown off planes, because the mere wearing of a mask is so... so some of us just can't handle it, being told that how we think the world works is not the way it works. But, upheaval embraces the learning opportunity.

Jean 38:44

Right.

Angela 38:44

One of the things about upheaval that happens is you see people expressing some kind of outrage or astonishment that this could happen in their lives. But then there are large numbers of people, people of color, people in other

countries for which safety, security, predictability, systems working for them has never been a part of their story. So, they experienced these upheavals in very different ways.

We saw that in every disaster that's befallen this country in the last 10 years, we saw people expressing, "Oh, I see you're upset now, because now you see how it doesn't work. But we tried to tell you, it wasn't working for us. And now it's real because it's not working for you."

And I think we have to be very... when we're hurt, when we're brokenhearted, when things fail for us, it's a part of my practice and one I encourage in others, to be mindful that there are people for whom it has never worked, they have never known.

You know, I often think about winter storm Uri, no power. Once a day in Lebanon, people have the electricity shut down, and they work around it, and they go on, because in their world, many of the things that we expect and take for granted have never been predictably available.

Jean 40:19

Absolutely, I am so glad you made that point. And I encountered that again and again, as a matter of fact, in the early blog posts, White friends would post, "I never knew, and I thought I knew."

Angela 40:36

Yeah, yeah. I have to confess to being quite sometimes impatient. How could you not know? We told you and we told you and we told you, you know, then I go, okay. Loving detachment, loving detachment, because it is frustrating to see that people avail themselves of the not knowing. And they retreat into the not knowing until the water is lapping at their door, and then they know. But with some grace, we can then embrace the awakening, and say, now you're on the team.

Jean 41:25

Okay, so in other words, Katrina happened. And that led you to look at how people, the assumptions people made about their lives about what was fair, and how the world was organized, and how all of that got disrupted in the face of disaster. And based on that, you decided you wanted to do that work?

Let me just say, I want you to say all the disaster places you've been to, because I want to show your "Wisdom from Disasters." But to set the stage, I just want you to rattle off the parts of the globe where you have been, where you've talked with people who've been in the midst of a disaster.

Angela 42:15

As I began doing the work of articulating the response that really matters, as well as the stages that people move through, I began getting invitations around the world, to work with others who had faced... communities that had faced disasters that were similar in scale, or disruptions that were similar in scale to what we saw in Katrina.

So, I went eight years in a row, I used every vacation and spare day, hour, moment for this. And so eight years in a row, I went to Australia to work with communities there, to learn from and also share what I was learning here.

I went to Australia, I went to Germany to work with German officials, as they were resettling Syrians. I went to Lebanon to one of the oldest refugee camps in Lebanon to look at the way stateless people in a confined space organized community in response.

I went to Amman to look at how... at the largest refugee reception center there, as they were welcoming about 400,000 Syrians, and then to a refugee camp in the desert in Jordan, to see the way they were responding, how they stood up, really a city of 80,000 people in the desert, and then back to Australia, as they were responding to a catastrophic flooding in Brisbane.

And so, this went on for a while. And then, you know, also in Ferguson, after the

Michael Brown shooting. Just following... as my son says, I'm not a disaster responder, I'm more of a disaster trailer. But what interested me most is the process that people underwent in trying to reconstitute lives and community in the aftermath of the unthinkable. I probably left out a couple of places, but yeah.

Jean 44:32

It was more but that's a good start. And after this is over, if you want to compile the list, we'll put it in the notes.

Angela 44:40

Okay.

Jean 44:41

I want to show now what caused you to develop this draft "Wisdom from Disasters." I'm going to share the screen. You look at it and then we'll just talk from there. Just pick anyone, tell us the number first.

Angela 45:00

Well, number one is I think your favorite Jean, which is, no one is coming. I think in addition to this craving for safety and security, this desire to have what cannot really be secured is, in addition to that, is the idea that if situations become completely overwhelming and way beyond our capacity, that someone bigger, better, stronger, faster will show up and resolve it for us, or at least bring some meaningful help to the arena.

And it was clear, I think, New Orleans, if you failed to grasp it, then it was willful on your part, because it was very obvious that every system we had created that was designed to respond failed to do so, catastrophically failed to respond.

Jean 46:09

I remember seeing a guy on TV saying he was there with some older people who were trapped in the attic. And he said, I kept telling them hang on, the cavalry is coming. The cavalry is coming. He said, and the cavalry never came, and they died.

Angela 46:27

Yeah, yeah. The wound from that is probably the deepest, and when I think of people that I've worked with, the moments and days and hours, as the days and hours added up, when people, no one came, people in the Astrodome would tell us that they actually imagined that something catastrophic had happened to the whole country.

Because they couldn't imagine there had... the only explanation for why they weren't being rescued was that there was something so enormous that prevented people from showing up, and it prevented rescue. And I think recently *Five Days at Memorial* is showing now and in which it is so clear what "no one is coming" is. If you're still in doubt, then watch it.

So, I've probably watched that in a very different way than other people. One of the things that I emphasize, the reason that no one's coming is not a message of hopelessness, eventually, someone always comes in some fashion with something, perhaps you need it, perhaps you don't, when they finally get there, the real message here is start.

And I think in Australia, for example, I witnessed a lot more intelligence around this idea of we being our own first responders, of communities being the real first, first responders, such that, you know, as I was working with Queensland Fire and Emergency, they began talking about uniforms and T shirts, the real first responders are wearing T shirts.

So, it's incredibly important, and the people that tend to recover best are those that start soonest and sometimes there's... this is quite practical, Jean. We all know that if you start mucking out quickly, you might save your house. Whereas if you're not able to or you're forced to wait, you can't get back in your city, for example, then there's a good chance you'll lose your house, because it'll advance to the point where you can't resolve it.

Jean 49:05

Oh, that makes so much sense, Angela, because if you wait, and no one comes and no one comes, you're now coping with betrayal.

Angela 49:14

Yeah, I have a very painful chapter on betrayal. I've really struggled to write about it. Not that it was difficult because there are so many examples and there's so much heartbreak. But it was hard to write it because it hurts so much. It hurts so much. And I think that it's generally the event is most squarely in our rearview mirror, before we can understand, put it in perspective, and understand what was really happening.

Jean 50:00

Okay, let's go to another one.

Angela 50:03

Yeah.

Jean 50:07

Number two [You may not be at fault, but you are responsible] is exactly following what you're saying now.

Angela 50:12

Well, I was astonished and not in a very positive way. When Ike hit, you know, Houston, it was rough. I mean, I definitely said, yes, we had this massive hurricane and massive flood. And then when the electricity came back on, we learned we were broke in 2008. You know, so it was really, really rough. And there were a number of leaders of various nonprofits and some for-profits, of course, who just said, well, we don't do disasters. I'm like, if you're here, you do, surely.

Jean 50:57

They said, we don't do disasters?

Angela 51:00

We don't do disasters. And I've also seen, you know, this is my argument with climate change. I don't care who caused it, the world has changed. And it

continues and it's accelerating, and the evidence is here and we must respond. So, this hyper responsibility, you know, it has a downside, I can tell you firsthand, because I literally think I'm responsible for the whole city at times.

Jean 51:28

Yes, sure.

Angela 51:29

When I'm not, when I'm not. Because I want the best for everyone and all of them at the same time in the arena, all of us. But I do think there's... I really encourage and support and insist that people move beyond the sense of... have a larger sense of responsibility, than the narrow definitions that go with positions and titles: this is your city, this is your community. We are in this together, and we own it. And I think that stance allows us and really will make the difference between a successful response and an inadequate one.

Jean 52:17

Okay, let's do a couple of more. And this time you choose.

Angela 52:27

Oh, gosh, that's hard. I think the practicing of loving detachment.

Jean 52:37

Number?

Angela 52:38

Number nine. Practicing a loving detachment is quite powerful, people will not act as you would hope. And then other people will act in ways that will astonish you and generosity will blow you away. And you will find, you will discover strengths in others you never imagined existed. And you will find the true heart of the city, for example, in the middle of a storm.

But the loving detachment part, we tend to put ourselves in a position of

judging what others should do. Throughout the pandemic, there was just outpouring of rage that people didn't behave the way we thought. Here we were: unprecedented event, global pandemic, not one of us ever led through anything like this before. And yet, we were furious that everyone didn't get it right, the way we thought.

So, this is not constructive. I mean, really effective leaders in the arena are constantly scanning for what people can contribute, affirming what they are, what they are contributing, and what they're doing that's working. And then, this not being overly reactive to everything, it's really what grown up mature – spiritually and professionally mature – people can do that really changes the texture, the beat, the rhythm of response.

Jean 54:10

Right. So, stop projecting our notions of the way things should be on other people, and particularly when we're dealing with an unprecedented event that none of us were prepared for.

Angela 54:23

Yeah, I think when we zoom out, we think about all of us as a species, you know. We're a brilliant, clumsy, knuckleheaded, extraordinary, genius, loving, amazing hot mess, and I love us like that. I love us like that.

Jean 54:48

Okay, so let's talk about five [There is nothing more powerful than a family, company, community in touch with its own aspirations and principles.]

Angela 54:52

Ah, so this is the whole... I saw, I really have witnessed such a range of impacts, and such a range of recovery stories. So when you see a business where people in that organization are very clear about why they exist, we exist to do this, we've committed to it, we've brought our time, energy, and attention to that mission, that clarity, that knowledge that people have in that organization about one another, that's the most important asset that gets them through disaster. If

you know who you are going in, you're going to have a better shot at knowing who you are coming out.

Jean 55:46

Right.

Angela 55:46

So, this being very in touch with what... I also, in my consulting work with a number of organizations, as we saw covid rolling toward us, I said, now's the time to understand what is most precious, what you want to make sure is preserved, because remember, the economic threat was terrifying. I mean, businesses knew, many of them knew they weren't going to make it, they thought it was a very good chance they may go bankrupt.

Jean 56:25

Right.

Angela 56:25

So, you know, a lot of our conversations centered around what is absolutely worth preserving? And how are you going to commit to that and preserve it so that when you come out on the other side, you rebuild from the heart of what makes you different and special and worthy?

Jean 56:45

Okay. What you're saying is five, and I'm going to read it because it occurs to me that some people might be listening and not watching. Five basically is saying revisit the principles that will guide your decision making as you move through this unprecedented period. And what you're saying is being in touch with those principles and having them as a reference will help you figure out how you're going to move forward.

Angela 57:13

Yeah.

Jean 57:14

Okay. Let's end with number 13. Well, before you talk about it, for those who are listening, I'm already curious because you're laughing.

Angela 57:32

“Leaders practice when I know it, you know it, people can handle the truth. We unravel when we are forced to play detective in a disaster. If you want people to follow you, you don't have to be certain, but you must be transparent.”

Jean 57:48

And read that last sentence again.

Angela 57:51

If you want people to follow you, you don't have to be certain, but you must be transparent.

Jean 57:57

Okay, explain that one.

Angela 58:01

Well, because we're really talking on the fifth anniversary of Harvey, and the 17th anniversary of Katrina, and the one-year anniversary of covid, I mean, this is very fresh in my mind, because as my... all the memories are popping up in my social media feeds. I'm reading my words, as I'm trying to rally people to meet the challenge of sheltering and responding.

And I think there's an old model of leadership that says, "Let me protect you from these terrible circumstances. And I'll bite off a piece of it that I think you're capable of handling, and then just feed that to you." But, that isn't how good leaders operate. So good leaders say this is the full picture.

Here's the part we're going to act on, here's where I think you can uniquely contribute, I need your help here. So that kind of transparency, with focus.

We're not needing a leader to stand up at a mic and tell us how terrible, awful, and tragic it is. We are needing them to paint a picture of the larger we. That's the "we" in this arena that have to act together in some form of concert, some coherent way, if we're going to make our way through this.

And that transparency about here's what we know, and this is what we can act on, is really the jumping off place to really get some kind of constructive response. And we saw how, we saw also during covid and we see it during every time in the aftermath of storms, the way rumors spread, the way bad information gets passed on, the way that triggers more anxiety, more panic, more dysfunction. All of that destroys the energy that people have for recovery, and it uses up resources.

So, one of the most powerful and most important roles leaders have is to construct and repeat and share that narrative again and again and again, about where are we? What do we need to do now? What must you uniquely, what can you uniquely contribute at this point?

Jean 1:00:38

Okay. Let's dissect this. Leaders practice "when I know it, you know it."

Angela 1:00:44

Yeah.

Jean 1:00:45

And we unravel when we're forced to play detective.

Angela 1:00:49

Yeah.

Jean 1:00:49

So, what you're saying is, if the leader says, I will tell you what I know, I will lay out, I'll be fully transparent, then people are not forced to play detective, rumors don't have to spread, and people can devote their energies to moving forward.

Angela 1:01:08

Yeah. There's a lot more in the actual arena, Jean. There's a lot more to this, like, in a very practical way that I spell out for people, you create a predictable and reliable and routine, make routine what you can make routine. So, if I know, every Wednesday, there's going to be a briefing and an update, then I'm only ever six days away from additional information. And I know that the person in charge with the most responsibilities told me this is going to be the conduit through which you get this update, then I know it's coming.

So, leaders, really, watching people who've mastered this, I mean, it's really, there is an entire world of difference between me trying to do my part when there's a leader doing that, versus when there's a leader either creating more chaos, spinning more fear, misleading, all of that just destroys every bit of the effort down here. Because people have to rethink constantly. What am I doing? How am I doing? Where is the information? Where shall I get it? What can I rely on? Who should I trust?

It's a heartbreaking thing to witness because we're already taxed, we're already stressed. And now we have the additional work of trying to sort out how to view the world. So, leaders or, you know, leadership, deeply matters. And I remember when I didn't think it did, because I thought, ah, you know, you get a leader, great. If you don't have one, well get the work done anyway. But I began to see over and over again how much damage and wasted effort and what a drain it is to have really, really poor leaders walk to the mic.

Jean 1:03:18

In personal relationships and with work relationships, sometimes one person wants to press another person to talk and that person isn't ready. So, the person says, I'm not ready to talk, which then creates havoc with the person willing to talk. And what I tell people is if you can't talk about it, say, I will get back to you on Wednesday.

I need to take a 15-minute break and get my head together then I can talk. Don't just up and say I can't talk about it and walk off and think that's okay.

Angela 1:03:49

Yeah. Wow.

Jean 1:03:51

It's the same principle. Tell the people what to expect. Give them... I love this. Give people as much certainty as you can give them.

Angela 1:04:02

And I think we're grownups enough not to... we don't want a fairy tale. We're not children. We don't need – and I doubt sometimes whether even children need it – but we really don't need people to spin the situation for us.

Jean 1:04:02

Right. And we don't want them to hold us hostage, waiting on them to get to decide they're going to share something with us either.

Angela 1:04:33

Right. That's always a misuse of power. When people do that, they're placing themselves in a position on a pedestal saying, I, in some more godlike fashion, can decide whether you need to know this or not. And, yeah, we don't like those people very much.

Jean 1:04:57

It gives me the shivers. I'm just getting through the terms I've heard and somebody said that to me, it just gives me the shivers. I can take, "I'll share with you what I can in December." I can take that quicker than, "I can't say anything."

Angela 1:05:17

Yeah, typical business situation is I know that this contract is ending. I've just learned this contract's ending, and you're not going to have a job in three months, but I need you for three months. But I don't want to tell you, because then you might leave now.

So, those are ethical test for leaders. And that one is fairly mild. I mean, you should be able to pass that one. I mean, really, yeah. But there are other ethical tests also about who gets served, who gets support, who gets resources, who gets treatment. And those are much harder ethical tests.

A colleague of mine at Brown, and I will be doing a session with students there in a few weeks on ethical decision making, because, as people contemplate policy and practice, we've taken ethics out of the equation as if crafting great policy was just ultimately the goal, and that there's not going to be anybody favored in this versus somebody who isn't, or, our choices now won't negatively impact anybody, so we don't have to weigh that in.

And I think that most of us make routine decisions that have negative consequences for people, in fact, that's part of the job of being a CEO, or an administrator, or a leader, you're choosing this not that to serve here and not there, to go first to Beaumont instead of Anahuac, you know, these are all the things that people are doing. And these are ethical, moral decisions.

But, you know, so what's the foundation for that? And I think the communication, the honest communication about we weighed these things, and we did this, must really, really struggle with that. Because we know someone's going to want to call us to account for the people we left out.

Jean 1:07:31

You know, I'm listening to you just as I listened to you before and with the previous blog posts, and I said, oh, I want you back for the disasters at some point. In a year, I'd love to have you talk about ethical decision making. That would be cool.

Angela 1:07:48

Ah, well, I'd love for us to have a conversation about it. Because I think you and I, and maybe years, decades ago, some of our earliest conversations were about sort of the weight of organizational decision making, if you genuinely want to understand the impact of what you're doing. I mean, some of us want to step

away and pretend it didn't really affect anybody. But I think we had a lot of conversations about...

Jean 1:08:22

Yes.

Angela 1:08:23

How we invest, who we invest in, at what point, how much? Who do we fight for? All of that.

Jean 1:08:32

Okay, Angela, I can't believe this time has flown by. It's been a delightful conversation. You know, I'm a fan of what you do, and of you personally, and I thank you for being here. Do you have any last-minute thoughts or points you want to make sure get reinforced?

Angela 1:08:57

Well, first, I want to say it's friendships like ours that actually sustain people. And as Elizabeth Dole famously said, "The time to make a good close friend is not 3:00 AM with a hurricane in the Gulf." If we want to prepare and we can't think of any other ways to prepare for catastrophic upheaval, one of the most important things we can do is invest in relationships and connections.

Because we are sustained by what we know of and about one another. And that's certainly been true of our friendship, and I'm really grateful for it. Thank you for letting me talk about what I literally think about night and day. So, I appreciate it and appreciate you, Jean.

Jean 1:09:50

Well, thank you. Tell people how they can find you.

Angela 1:09:53

I'm so findable, Facebook, Twitter, email, website, and I try to respond to all of those.

Jean 1:10:05

Okay, and what's the name of your website?

Angela 1:10:09

Angelablanchard.com. Super easy. And we're working on it all the time. And so, I blog there. And also, if people want to work with me, they can go there or they can just email me at Cajunangela@gmail.com.

Jean 1:10:32

All right, thank you kindly.

Angela 1:10:34

Thank you, Jean.

Jean 1:10:35

The depth of Angela's knowledge always blows me away. So many takeaways from this conversation. Here are my top three. And I had a hard time narrowing it down to just these three.

First, disaster is an opportunity for something new. I see so many people stuck in regrets because this or that bad thing happened. And they wanted things to go this way. And it went that way. And they lost everything, or they didn't get what they wanted, or it was terrible. Yet, as Angela is saying, when a disaster happens that's an opportunity to think how do we want to rebuild, not replace the old but rebuild with something that serves us better.

As she was talking, I was reminded of what happened to a relative of mine who had a kitchen that was old and needed repairs. Well, disaster struck, the kitchen in the unit above her flooded, and so it poured down on her kitchen. And everything in her kitchen and some of her dining room had to be replaced. It was awful.

She had to move out for several months for the repairs to be made. Building insurance covered her, fortunately. So, she had some out of pocket costs, but not

a lot. It was extremely disruptive. And she did not like having to move out. But she ended up with a brand-new kitchen with more modern appliances. And she agreed that the pain had given her something new.

So, let's magnify that. And what can happen if community decides to rebuild and build anew in a way that brings that community together.

Point two, no one is coming. No one is coming. I was struck when she said that the people who had waited for someone to come were those who had the hardest time with their grief. I can imagine the disappointment and the feeling of betrayal of waiting and waiting and waiting to be rescued, for people to show up and they don't come.

What Angela is saying is, get started, do what you can. Get started with what can be done, what you yourself can do, what the people around you can do while you're waiting for the leaders or whoever to get themselves together to come and help.

Third, I loved her comments about leaders and how they handle truth-telling after a disaster. It's maddening, at any time, to believe someone is withholding information from you that they could tell you if they wanted to. As she explains, that's how rumors start. Better to say what you know, tell people what they can do now, and keep the information flowing as new information unfolds.

Hope you got as much out of this as I did. Thanks for listening. And if you want to discuss this or any of the other blog posts, consider joining Pathfinders. You can find information about our online membership course on our website.

Thanks for listening.



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Angela is a globally recognized expert practitioner in community development. From long-term disaster recovery to effective integration of immigrants and refugees, Blanchard's evolutionary strategies have helped to successfully revitalize neighborhoods while providing a powerful roadmap for cities around the world.

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