

5

No ground, no guarantees, just now

TO BE AWAKE at work is not a fixed or tidy state of mind that we achieve at some point, a point at which we have finally made it and are once and for all awake. There is no final accomplishment we can look to, no state of mind that we can give a bonus to or promote to CEO. Rather, being awake at work is engaging our work precisely, genuinely, and directly as it constantly unfolds, moment by moment, without bias or pretense. One moment the phone is silent, the next it is ringing. Today we have a job; our routines and responsibilities are laid out before us. The next day our job is gone—no routines, no responsibilities. Now we make the sale, now we lose the sale. To be awake at work is to engage each circumstance now, on its own vivid, fluid, and uncertain terms.

When we wakefully engage each moment for what it is, we notice that who we are is put into question all the time. Just as our work circumstances change and shift, so do we. Who we are and who we would like to become are as uncertain as the circumstances we face. Try as we may, we cannot find a solid identity at work. Today we are a supportive and helpful

colleague; tomorrow someone considers us problematic. Our new title of Vice President is one moment exhilarating, the next burdensome, and other times irrelevant. Today we may be a successful executive, a team leader, or a deal maker. Tomorrow we are jobless, no longer established but undefined and searching. To be awake at work is to acknowledge that the entire situation—our job and our version of ourselves at work—is fluid and constantly changing. In short: no ground, no guarantees, just *now*.

Of course, we could consider such a viewpoint ridiculous. Our jobs are not *that* uncertain and groundless. We know who we are and we know what our jobs are—no question, no real doubt. Circumstances may change and difficulties may arise, but we adapt—we “soldier on,” as the British say. And to a great degree, most of us do just that, doing the best we can. Being awake at work does not entirely question such conviction. We work hard to have some predictability in our lives, which is a decent and worthy aim. But by being awake at work, we also permit work’s uncertainties to manifest as fully and vividly as they naturally occur, moment by moment. We are willing to feel all the textures of work’s risks and difficulties without the painful defenses of resentment or arrogance or fear. We do not need to water down the fact that there are no guarantees. Nor do we need to sugarcoat hard business facts, dress up results to make them more than they are, or pretend that the “emperor has new clothes” when we know otherwise. To be awake at work is to be thoroughly aware that anything can and does happen at work and to have no need to pretend otherwise.

Typically, business treats groundlessness or uncertainty as a liability or inconvenience, a temporary mirage on our way to perfect and lasting control. It’s as if work perfectly executed

would eliminate uncertainty, guaranteeing success with no surprises, no mistakes, no risks misjudged. To be awake at work is to take exactly the opposite viewpoint. Rather than being a liability to be eliminated, groundlessness is acknowledged as the foundation or essential nature of all that we experience—the basic and unavoidable fact of life. The reality that everything is constantly changing provokes and tickles our attention because we never really know what's going to happen next. We are awake at work precisely because everything is in question. Everything we are, everything we do, everything we want and desire, is basically in question each and every moment. This powerful and sharp reality demands that we *wake up*.

Some of us may say: "Since there is no ground and there are no guarantees, and I don't know what's about to happen, I can relax, kick back, have another cup of coffee, and wait and see." The French saying "*C'est la vie!*" becomes our slogan: "That's life. Sometimes things work out, other times things don't go so well. No need to get too involved. *C'est la vie!*" Such an approach treats our experience of uncertainty as an excuse to abandon the penetrating vividness of our immediate experience. The demanding reality of "No ground, no guarantees, just *now*" becomes our reason to take another nap. We shrug our shoulders and give in to a kind of depression because we can't control our world. We light up another cigarette, put on dark glasses, and watch the immediate moment unfold through a smoky haze.

But groundlessness is not an excuse for taking a nap or hand-wringing. It is instead a sharp invitation to "Wake up—pay attention—appreciate the world around you!" Groundlessness becomes the landscape that informs, unsettles, and awakens who we are and everything we do. Whoever we are,

a world-famous doctor or the local car mechanic, we know our status is fleeting. Whether we are repairing a broken heart valve or a worn transmission, we know that fundamentally we do not know what will happen next.

When we acknowledge that there is no ground, no guarantee, just *now*, we become pioneers: this very moment, right here and now, becomes unfamiliar territory to be explored. Our routines may be familiar and what is expected of us may be distinct and concrete, but there is always—*always*—something new and unknown happening. “No ground, no guarantees, just *now*” reminds us to become pioneers of the immediate moment in everything we do at work. As pioneers we do not need to weigh ourselves down with a collection of fixed views and habits; we can travel light, retaining what is useful and letting go of whatever becomes ineffective. As pioneers we become seasoned travelers who are well aware that anything can and does happen. A storm could blow in any moment or our company could be bought by a competitor. Just around the corner we may find a mountain spring where we can refresh ourselves or a new product idea that could reinvigorate our marketing strategy. As pioneers we are alert and prepared because there is always, *always* something new and surprising.

Most important, “No ground, no guarantees, just *now*” reminds us that we are free. By acknowledging that who we are and what we do at work is never fixed, we discover a basic freedom, because anything can happen next. Remaining open to a world that is so vastly unpredictable requires us to be exceedingly brave and to trust that we are fully equipped to engage such events. To be that free is to be utterly available to our lives—to trust that we have the ingenuity, good humor, and curiosity to adapt and thrive, no matter what the circumstances.