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## VOICES FROM THE ICE

On the first day of life there is nothing to remember  
and everything to hope.

—Aristotle

Flashes of color raced by my car window. During the skid, I grew to appreciate why most tourists end their journey at the visitors' center. In the wintry wilderness outside Anchorage, cars are magnetically attracted to everything but the road. And so, like long-lost friends, my fearless front bumper and a petrified snowbank had no other choice than to meet again. And when they did, the car shook to an abrupt stop. "It's a good thing I didn't buy that snow globe," I thought. "What a mess that would have been."

Driving conditions were worse than I had anticipated. The road was nothing more than a permafrost-reinforced ice rink navigated only by those with vehicles or egos larger than the last frontier itself. As for me, my transportation of choice was of the subcompact sort. A quick glance over my shoulder confirmed that no one had witnessed my roadside gymnastics. Fortunately, although my coffee had spilled, my ego was intact. While staring at the reason for my premature exit, I thought, "Is this what the park rangers meant by hearing voices from the ice?" followed quickly by "I shouldn't be here." However, given the fortuitous nature of what I was about to encounter, I couldn't leave. After all, this unexpected "voice from the ice" was touting the virtues of this book. Unlike others at the visitors' center, it seems I was meant to be there—on that road, in that place, at that time. Here's why.

## A Chance Encounter

Alaska. It is arguably the most beautiful place on earth. Its native people and sourdoughs still wave at passing trains, live off the land, and—at the Wal-Mart in Wasilla—buy more duct tape than anyone on the planet. Although densely populated with wildlife, Alaska is sparsely populated with the human variety. With over 650,000 square miles, every Alaskan man, woman, and child can stretch out over his or her very own square mile. With over three million lakes and three thousand rivers, William Seward was certainly no fool. Seward's Folly, negotiating this land from the Russians for 2 cents an acre, would make even Donald Trump blush with envy. So spectacular is Alaska's majesty that Henry Gannett, the director of the U.S. Geological Survey and traveling companion of John Muir, wrote in a 1901 essay for *National Geographic*, "If you are old, go by all means. If you are young, stay away until you are older. The scenery of Alaska is so much grander than anything else of the kind in the world that, once beheld, all other scenery becomes flat and insipid." Unfortunately, although I would like to think of myself as relatively young, I couldn't stay away. I had a job to do.

In March 2005, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Alaska Governor's Conference on Safety, Health, and the Environment, the governor's office invited me to deliver a keynote speech on leadership. Although I had come to speak, I also learned a few things, including how to wear a gas mask properly, why caribou and the oil pipeline love each other, and how not to dress a moose (take it out of your neighbor's driveway before you gut it). The conference itself was enlightening, but it was the beauty of a chance encounter that left the most memorable impression on me. Then again, aren't most of life's lessons unplanned?

Alaska is thirty minutes from Anchorage—or so I was told. You need to leave it to see it. Therefore, as soon as I arrived, I left. If you have never felt alone—I mean really alone, as if you are the last living being on earth—take a trip into the bush of Alaska during the spring thaw. In today's world of wireless connectivity and therefore perpet-

ual responsibility, I secretly wanted to get lost in the vast emptiness of the last frontier. However, after witnessing the true meaning of wildlife, I opted for the scenic drive along the Turnagain Arm, an open road with dramatic views of Cook Inlet, beluga whales, Dall sheep, and bald eagles. The obligatory tourist stop along the Arm—and therefore my planned destination—was Portage Glacier, fifty miles south of Anchorage. Although breathtaking in its beauty, the glacier was all but lost on this urban dweller as the wind, rain, and overcast skies suggested that I seek refuge among the park rangers in the Begich-Boggs Visitors' Center. They pour a great cup of coffee.

Once inside, I was accosted by that bastion of all visitors' centers, tchotchkes. I must admit that the idea of an Alaskan malamute snow globe did pique my interest. However, I was neither browsing nor buying. Nor did I have the patience to watch the award-winning film about receding glaciers titled *Voices from the Ice*. A map of the area therefore became my de facto excuse for seeking shelter from the storm. While studying the map, and in some sort of cosmic coincidence, my eyes were immediately drawn to a very small dot: a town called Hope. Although it appeared to be about thirty miles farther into the wilderness and despite the inclement weather, as one writing a book on hope, I had to go there. Like *Seinfeld's* Kramer testing his wits by driving as far as possible on an empty tank, I couldn't resist the urge to keep going. And so I did. Diversion became adventure.

Nestled warmly inside the world's smallest rental car, I eagerly navigated the increasingly less drivable road through the Kenai Mountains. And then it happened. On the road to Hope, I encountered a sign that begat a skid that begat a stop in the middle of the wilderness. It was a sign—not a figurative sign, a road sign—a voice from the ice. It read: AVALANCHE AREA. NEXT 1.5 MILES. DO NOT STOP. As a flatlander and urban dweller, the last thought that enters my mind when I see the word *avalanche* is “do not stop.” And so I stopped, got out of my car, and took a photo. “Stupid tourist,” I later thought. “But what a great photo!”

With my digital image in tow, I proudly reinserted myself into my four-wheeled rental shelter like a hunter packing out a fallen

deer. I then laughed out loud as I envisioned the inevitable expression on my wife's face. I would surely share this act of bravery with her—certain to be embellished. Fortunately, the snow held; I was spared, and forty-five minutes later, I arrived in Hope, Alaska's first Gold Rush town.

### **An Accidental Lesson**

What was once home to more than three thousand people is now inhabited by a couple of hundred hangers-on and one unassuming diner with the best barbecued chicken sandwich on the planet. Over lunch and while reflecting on the gravity of the situation I had just put myself in, it hit me—an epiphany, a metaphor that only nature and man's attempt to coexist with it could yield. Here, in the heart of God's country, stands a poetically coincidental lesson in leadership. Along a weather-beaten road to a forgotten yet once celebrated town called Hope is an encouraging message for all those who make the journey: Drive beyond fear. Do not stop. Hope is just around the corner.

This chance encounter—this accidental lesson—raised a question in my mind: In moments of uncertainty, when hope is on the line, why do some leaders succeed and others fail? How do they think, feel, and act in those moments when the future is up for grabs? What do they believe? Could it be that they have a different relationship with hope? Could it be that triumphant leaders follow an unarticulated methodology of sorts for translating hope, the virtue, into hope, the plan? If so, can it be learned? It appears the answer is yes. As it turns out, there is more to this ancient virtue than we have historically known, scientifically and practically. Hope works; however, like sunscreen, it works only if applied correctly.

### **Shedding New Light on an Ancient Virtue**

Nobel laureate Bertrand Russell said it best in *New Hopes for a Changing World*, “a way of life cannot be successful so long as it is mere intellectual conviction. It must be deeply felt, deeply believed, dominant

even in dreams.” Intellect is overrated. Don’t get me wrong, intelligence is important; however, in moments of ambiguity, intuition, creativity, and beliefs are as important as reason, analysis, and proof. However, since history has not been kind to theoretical mixed marriages—keep your spirituality away from my biology and your emotions out of my intellect—we’ve stood in isolated admiration of the dogma that we find most convincing. Enter cognitive and behavioral psychology, philosophy, physics, and theology. Therefore, although exploring the power of hope in the context of leadership was not necessarily frowned on, it has simply fallen through the cracks.

However, with the introduction of magnetic resonance imaging and other advanced technologies for studying the “softer side of humans,” physics has lost its monopoly on tangible evidence. The soft sciences have become harder, thereby making the study of all things intangible more meaningful, if not more convincing. With similar tools at their disposal, neuroscientists, like chemists in ages past, are just now able to witness the mysterious workings of the mind versus simply taking a person’s word for it. This has profound implications for the study of human behavior, not the least of which is leadership.

### **Hope’s New Agent**

Human resources—like marketing’s ongoing transformation from art to science—is about to undergo the greatest cultural and academic revolution in its history. And you thought Myers-Briggs was invading your space! Try taking your next performance review with your head locked squarely inside a thirty-ton magnet. The 7-Tesla MRI machine holds 250 miles of superconducting wire, making it 140,000 times stronger than the earth’s magnetic field. Hope’s got a new agent. Next stop: your brain.

