Obstacles to Brave Change

Inspired by Brene Brown's "What Stands in the Way Becomes the Way" in *Dare to Lead*.

Leaf Polishing

- **Symptom Focus:** Instead of an hour spent actively addressing challenging fears and feelings during change, we spend twelve responding to problematic behaviors that crop up because we did not. Change is hard when consequences catch our attention but their causes do not.

- **Finger Pointing:** When a symptom of fear does get noticed, it can be attributed to particular folks even if they are not the real root cause of the dynamics which allow the problem to occur. It is not out of the ordinary for people to use shame and blame to get things done, and there is little emphasis on long-term accountability and learning.

- **Panicked Rushing:** When problems crop up and fingers are pointed, there is a rush to unsustainable solutions rather than staying with root cause investigation and response. The rapid motion means that sometimes the wrong thing is focused on for the wrong reason. People involved may feel the issue is urgent in the moment, but similar problems continue to surface down the road. It is satisfying in the short term and feels like good work (and may indeed reduce harm) but it is costly and demoralizing in the long-run.

Rearview Mirror Driving

- **Explore-phobia:** People become so fixated on what came before and the errors and successes of the past that they rarely have energy to look to the future. Things are easier to see and understand in hindsight, so we develop unhealthy patterns of fear and perfectionism, acting as if we'll ever be able to see the road ahead like we can the road behind. Our patterns make it harder for folks to learn and grow.

- **Mockery of the New:** When an individual does try to turn the eyes towards what is as-yet-unknown, they find themselves being put down or ridiculed for trying something and failing. When folks fear mockery or exploratory wondering, "new ideas" tend to vary little from the status quo.

- **Past-Present Whiplash:** In spite of it all, if folk *do* manage to find a way to turn their attention toward what is in front of them, they are often-times asked to rapidly justify things in terms of old systems or "the way things are done." The need to rapidly and regularly shift back and forth means folks sometimes get tired and end up feeling unsure or wrong even if they were on to something. When systems make people question their own worth and the importance of their contributions, leaders end up spending unneeded time reassuring colleagues -- in ways that can feel dissonant with their experience -- that their service is important. We spend money sending folks to chiropractors instead of asking why their neck hurts.

Using the Scales of Success-and-Failure

- **Fear of the Buzzer:** Folks resist having important conversations about change -- especially issues of equity and diversity -- because they fear they will make a mistake, upset others, or unintentionally set off a social land mine that they didn't even know was there. When people are nervous about swift and un-nuanced external judgement, anxiety becomes a way of life. Anxiety unaddressed can spin out into worse problems.

- **Conflict Avoidance:** We avoid tough conversations, including giving honest, productive feedback. Maybe because of a fear of the buzzer, or because of a lack of courage/skills, but sometimes also because cultural norms related to being "nice and polite" allow us excuses to avoid engaging with tension. Trust can be eroded, especially when an issue is well-known as a problem and leaders regularly evade the topic.

- **The Safety of Abstraction:** When we do rise to the occasion and step into a conflict, hoping to help it healthfully transform, we can do so in ways that make us feel like issues have been addressed when they haven't really. We often see this when organizational values are gauzy and framed in terms of intention rather than actions that can be taught, observed, and assessed.

Marks of Brave Change

Root Care and Pruning

- **Symptoms as Signs:** Symptoms are noted and addressed as needed and folks regularly ask the question "What are the dynamics at play which might have allowed this to happen?" Attention must be broader than just the presenting problem.

- **Permacultural Patience:** Instead of routinely rushing to unsustainable solutions when a problem presents, we allow ourselves to wonder if the problem itself might have -- tucked inside -- clues as to what to do. Insightful observation becomes valued similar to action.

- **Recognition of Context:** Folks begin to ask how they are also part of system and the ways in which their actions might be part of what is being noticed. Rather than shift to shame and blame, emphasis is given to demonstrating accountability and learning. Soil and containers change the things growing in them.

Wide-Angle Shots

- **New Sights Celebrated:** Not only do folks shift more of their attention to what is in front them, but they sometimes expand their view to take in a broader perspective. Not every experiment will be successful and some attempts will end in painful failure, and… much can be gained from affirmation and celebration of new practices and discoveries that seem like they might be a part of what comes next, even if they are small.

- **Portfolios of Failure:** If an organization is trying to be innovative or embrace change they will almost certainly have a significant list of things they've tried that have not worked out. If folks can't point to the list of things that didn't turn out the way they had hoped, they are either profoundly lucky or haven't yet been stepping out into the unknown. Failure is not by itself a measure of likely future success, but if a collection of missteps -- and their accompanying lessons! -- can't be found, reflect on why this might be the case.

- **Dynamic Stretching:** Studies show that high-performance athletes can benefit from "ballistic stretching," an intense stretching method that pushes the body beyond its normal range of motion. For folks not in peak form, the abruptness of the motion can cause harm and muscle tearing. If we know that major shifts in thinking or action are on their way, we will have less injury and doubt if we can bring people into the stretch in a way that isn't as sudden or far beyond their norm. What's more, if folks get used to stretching in small ways, it not only gets easier to do that, but the degree of possible healthy stretch increases too.

An Invitation to Walk

- **Good Hosting:** In *The Art of Gathering* Priya Parker writes that "there as so many good reasons for coming together that often we don't know precisely why we're doing so." Her suggestion? Commit to a bold sharp purpose that lets people know what the point of being together is. That doesn't mean other things won't happen as well, but letting folks know what kind of party you're throwing will help them decide whether or not it is where they want to be. In this sense, good hosting means you may find that some people decide not to come to things they've had a habit of coming to. Invite people with clarity as to expectations and help to make sure the space you provide is used for that. Consider inviting them to "Toddler Steps" sessions.

- **Toddler Steps:** When a child begins to learn to walk, missteps and falls are assumed to be part of the process. The focus is on the child's growing skills, not the necessary failures that are a part of this growth. The feeling of being called to and invited into change and learning is quite different than being tested and scored. What larger goal (walking) are you working towards and what trip ups are simply a natural part of getting to there from where you are now?

- **Clear Arrival and Departure Times:** We can feel caught in a bind if (1) we try to be more inviting to failure and yet (2) are also trying to have more concrete and less abstract conversations and assessment. It is important to remember that more acceptance of experimentation and failure doesn't have to feel loosey-goosey and vague. Similarly, concreteness doesn't mean that every moment of every day is scrutinized (that is how we get the Scales of Success-and-Failure). Be clear about when new growth should start, when you want to check in with folks about development, and allow for the time in-between to be hosted well.