

Hello everyone, and welcome back to *This is Berthoud*. This is the last episode of 2020 in which I get to talk about all of the things that you are talking about so that we all have something new to think about, and I have to tell you, that feels like a tall order right now. How do we talk about 2020?

First let me say that I completely agree with the people who say that 2020 is going to become a slang term. “How was the meeting?” “Oh, it was a total 2020.” I think Merriam-Webster is going to have to add that to the dictionary. “2020: noun, an event in which everything that could go wrong, whether anticipated or not, does.”

But then, I also think that some good things did come out of this year. And some things that we may not know how we feel about yet, but we’re fairly certain they’re going to have some kind of impact on our future. And that makes it really difficult to do some kind of year-end wrap-up in any meaningful way. Normally by this time of year we’re seeing loads of “greatest innovations of 2020” or “trends to watch in 2021” type of lists, but I’m not seeing many this year, and I would argue it’s because most of us don’t know how to process all the changes and ideas that we’ve encountered this year.

Maybe you’ve had a conversation recently with someone about Covid-19 restrictions, and while the person you’re talking to has shared very definitive views, you’re over here thinking that the restrictions are necessary except when they’re silly, and they’re logical except when they make no sense, and they’re fair except when they target the wrong industries, and you suddenly find yourself wondering if you’ve lost the ability to think and you’re doing it all wrong.

You’re not. I’ll show you.

Here’s my year-end gift for you, the single greatest thing I’ve learned this year that has helped me make sense of all the changes going on around me and how they can impact me and my family and the library and this wonderful community. Are you ready? I’m gifting you an acronym: VUCA.

Some of you may know this acronym already, but now I get to explain it to you. I heard the acronym first during my Applied Foresight Accelerator Training Course taken through Kedge and the Futures School—say that ten times fast—but they learned the acronym from the United States military. And the military created the acronym to describe the environment in war zones or areas recovering from war.

Now I know, I promised you a gift, and I just gave you a war zone acronym. Even for me that’s a little depressing, but it’s going to get a bit worse before it gets better, so hang in there.

So VUCA is an acronym; what does it stand for? It’s Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous. Scared yet? Don’t be.

Volatile, or volatility, is the concept that changes are occurring more and more with shorter times before their impacts are felt. Volatility explains how 500 years ago you’d work the same job, usually in the same spot, for your entire life, whereas now people are averaging something like 7 different careers in their lifetimes. (I’m still on my first, so maybe it’s time for a career change.) Anyway, volatility explains why waiting three years to buy a cell phone puts you two models behind. More and more changes, faster impacts.

Next is uncertain. Things are uncertain when you know what the variables are but not what the results will be. Like rolling a pair of dice, where you know you’ll see two numbers between one and six but not which numbers. For a 2020 example of uncertainty, think of the November presidential election. We

knew many candidates would run, we knew it would ultimately be a race between Donald Trump and the Democratic Party candidate, but we didn't know earlier this year who would win. It was uncertain.

Volatile, uncertain, now complex. Things are complex when a change in one area affects many other areas, some of them seemingly unrelated. Developments in Artificial Intelligence or AI change the conversations in philosophy classrooms, social media interactions change national politics, and stay-at-home orders affect everything from traffic patterns to school test scores and business models to diagnoses of depression and anxiety. No person, business, or discipline operates in a vacuum, so any small change can snowball into an avalanche. Combine this with the volatility we talked about a moment ago, with changes occurring more often, and I can guarantee that anyone longing for a simpler time won't get it.

Last but not least in VUCA is ambiguous. Some people think that uncertain and ambiguous mean the same thing, but they really don't. A situation is uncertain if you don't know what the results will be, but a situation is ambiguous if you don't even know what the variables are. Enter Covid-19 as our 2020 example. If you'd asked people in March of 2019 what the world's greatest concern would be in March of 2020, no one would have said "the Covid-19 virus" because, as far as we know, no human had been infected with it yet. Covid-19 was a new, mostly unexpected variable in an ambiguous environment that, due to complexity, had major impacts felt worldwide.

Okay, that was the hard part, people. If you've made it this far, we get to move past the "2020 as war zone" and see if we can make things a little better. While volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous all have somewhat negative connotations, there is an upside, yes an upside, to each of these properties as well.

Let's start with volatility again. More changes happening, faster impacts. While that may be scary if you're not expecting the changes, what if you're working toward changes instead? We've got groups right here in town working on securing better mental health care for the students in our schools, or working to end animal abuse in puppy mills. Ask any member of those groups if they'd rather be working in an environment where changes are difficult to make and the effects a long time in coming, or in an environment where changes come faster and their impacts are felt more quickly—I think we all know which they would answer. When you legitimately need a change, a volatile environment is an asset.

Or uncertainty. If you live in a country where every election is rigged, or there are no elections at all, you may have a great deal of certainty about who is in charge, but the trade-off for your certainty may be your freedom. The same thing applies to career choices, parenting decisions, even where to live. A lot of personal choices, personal agency comes as a result of increasing uncertainty. You may not know what the future holds for you, but that means no one has decided it for you either, so you can work toward what you want or need.

How about complexity? The good thing about things becoming more complex is that someone has likely figured out the answer to your big problem, it's just that the answer may not be where you're looking for it. I certainly didn't expect to learn about how to weather a pandemic from the restaurant industry, but our curbside service is a direct derivative of restaurant take-out. So feel free to explore organizations and disciplines and trends outside your normal scope, because you may just find all the information you need. And one of the great things we've found about operating in Berthoud is that

almost everyone here is willing to lend an ear, lend a hand, or give advice, so we can create a complex network to help us adapt in a complex environment.

And ambiguity? It's definitely harder for me to talk about variables we don't even know about yet, but in many ways this leaves the most room for hope and optimism. Maybe one of our Berthoud High students will finish a very strange high school year and go on to invent a new kind of economy that will solve all the problems with capitalism and with socialism. Or a Berthoud mom's group will figure out how to reduce U.S. prison populations, or..... I don't know people, use your imaginations. The great thing about living in an ambiguous environment is that we can pull forward everything great in our community's history while reinventing ourselves to head in a spectacularly new direction.

So that's VUCA folks. It describes our 2020, and if we do things well, it'll describe our 2021 also. Let's enjoy living together in our volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous community.

As always, if you want to talk more about this, or really anything, you can email me at podcast.bclld@gmail.com or call me, at the library, at 970-532-2757. It'll be a bit yet before we can get a group together in person, but stay tuned for exciting conversations yet to come. Also as always, the information in this episode is not meant to be taken as legal or medical or financial or any other kind of advice. It's just info for you. Enjoy whichever holidays you celebrate, and even in 2020, or especially in 2020, I'm proud to say this is Berthoud.