

Pluralities of Uncertainty

The Second Movement of An Open Dialogue

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In dialogue: Nicola Robins, Joan Lurie and Steven Segal

This second conversation on the Pluralities of Uncertainty and the containers that hold it carried forward the thread opened a month earlier. Drawing together three voices, an Indigenous-Knowledge and sustainability practitioner (Nicola Robins), a systemic and organisational practitioner (Joan Lurie), and a philosopher and therapist working in the phenomenological tradition (Steven Segal), the conversation moved from divination in Ngoma traditions, through the leadership of Nelson Mandela in the volatile transition years, to the practical question that ran underneath the whole exchange: *what does it take to build containing conditions for being in uncertainty, rather than reaching for false certainty?*

1. The Opening Frame: Against Flattening

Nicola Robins opened with a story about reaching out to a well-known author on navigating uncertainty, who declined to read her book on how Ngoma traditions navigated uncertainty. Beneath his honest refusal she sensed a quieter doubt: that a knowledge system foregrounding divination could have anything to teach about uncertainty at all. She traced Ngoma knowledge back some four thousand years to Central and East Africa, migrating slowly southward with farming communities, and argued that divination was never the superstitious, transactional prediction it is often caricatured as in the Western imagination.

Divination was a social act, not a transactional one done by an expert for a payment. It is something people did together ... a process of collective intelligence, which is how people make sense of things together to know what to do next.

— Nicola Robins

Her central caution was against **flattening**, the well-intentioned move that declares modern complexity science and ancient indigenous science to be “the same.” That equivalence, she argued, erases what is most meaningful and most different. Distributed agency in complexity is not identical to the saying that “the ancestors are everywhere like water”; the deep cosmology of ancestors, identity, fluidity and land may be precisely what gets lost in the flattening.

Even when our maps and models are working, we need to be open to difference, because they are not going to work in rupture, in deep uncertainty... the models and maps we are using are already out of date; we are just trying to keep them functional.

— Nicola Robins

2. The Uncertainty of Certainty

Joan Lurie picked up the thread by distinguishing two forms of uncertainty: the uncertainty *out there* in the world and organisations, and the uncertainty *inside us*, the not-knowing we must learn to hold.

The pattern she observes among the leaders she works with is a tendency to look outward and to grasp for a toolkit of certainty rather than sit in the discomfort of their own not-knowing.

The biggest risk we face, maybe, is in the grasping for the certainty ... the collapse and the reduction into 'we have to have the answer.' It is this paradoxical idea about how to learn to be in the uncertainty for yourself, which we really do not have a muscle for.

— Joan Lurie

Crucially, she argued this muscle cannot be left to individuals alone. It must become a **systemic practice**, an architecture built into organisational systems. She introduced the term that would anchor much of the conversation, “uncertainty infrastructure,” and offered the story of a seasoned CEO during the transition out of apartheid who saw his role as creating containing conditions for very frightened people on the cusp of war.

Steven Segal connected this to the dominant Western discourse: the urge to control uncertainty in the belief that control eliminates it.

Controlling uncertainty can also create bigger forms of uncertainty ... the nationalisms that tend to ward off uncertainty actually create more uncertainty for themselves and for others. The very search for certainty is actually a destructive way of working with things.

— Steven Segal

He pressed the point further: however rational we believe ourselves to be, when uncertainty unsettles us our rationality is conscripted into the service of our fear. There are writers, he noted, who hold that the hidden discourse of the West is precisely this need for certainty and fear of uncertainty, a need that gets in the way of our own development.

3. Mandela: Walking Into the Breakdown

Steven introduced the way Nelson Mandela conducted himself at the time of the assassination of Chris Hani on 10 April 1993 and the days that followed, when South Africa stood on the edge of civil war. Far from the controlled, rational master of legend, Mandela in this account was deeply affected, in grief, anger and acute anxiety, and yet able to hold a nation.

Mandela was not this controlled rational master that we think he is ... Most of us run away. Mandela walked into the breakdowns of perspective, and he lived, and he thought from within the breakdown.

— Steven Segal

Three days after the assassination he delivered an address that came from his heart, simultaneously acknowledging the anguish, pain and grief of the moment while challenging the nation to be attuned to the greater good of a democratic future. Segal named this a therapeutic act of leadership and, tentatively, an act of Ubuntu.

He created this 'we' space for South Africa, black and white, black anger, white fear ... I want to call this, at the risk of being totally wrong, an Ubuntu space that Mandela created for South Africa on that night.

— Steven Segal

Nicola Robins extended the story with a second dimension. Mandela, a herd boy in the Transkei, was deeply entrained in Ngoma culture and in the architecture of ritual. His speech, she suggested, functioned as a **ritual container**, a vessel able to hold what no single person could hold alone.

Ritual is a natural architecture ... when you really understand ritual structure, you create the possibility of anything almost becoming the container. He was using his speech as a ritual container.

— Nicola Robins

She recalled too his earlier ritual declaration from the dock, the shift from being prepared to die for freedom to being prepared to kill for it, as another instance of speech used as a profound and memorable ritual moment.

4. Ritual, Not-Knowing and the Body

Robins spoke candidly about how hard it is to enter the space of trusting whatever comes next. Learning to divine with twenty-five bones, each meaning something different and capable of falling in near-infinite patterns, her overriding bodily response was nausea and the urge to flee. Ritual, she argued, is what creates the architecture that makes such not-knowing bearable. She offered the example of a constellations facilitator who would kneel into the centre of a problem and openly declare her own cluelessness as a deliberate ritual act.

If we can really ask that question ‘what do we do now?’ from the depths of our being, that for me is the space that working with uncertainty requires of us ... Socrates said the one thing I know is that I do not know, and the world opened up to him.

— Steven Segal

5. The Paradox of Boundary Conditions

Joan Lurie introduced the central paradox of the session. To hold open the space of not-knowing, one must simultaneously establish firm boundary conditions and non-negotiables. The transition-era CEO did not know the answer, but he held certain things as absolute: the way forward had to be in non-racial terms, and senior managers were required, against real terror, to cross the border to meet the then-banned ANC.

When you are creating containing spaces, you have to put in boundary conditions and some non-negotiables, which become the riverbeds that the flow can happen through. It is not a chaotic fallout either.

— Joan Lurie

Drawing on the structured stages of a Jewish grieving practice, she described rituals that hold people through liminal and transitional spaces, “rivers without banks,” as she put it, would not hold at all. A note in the chat from Ilze Olckers added a striking etymological gift, picked up gratefully by the group:

The original Latin root of certainty means to sift or to separate ... so there is a discernment that comes along with these things. Certainty, uncertainty and discernment seem to be linked.

— Ilze Olckers, in the chat

6. Therapeutic Leadership, and Its Limits

A substantial and productive disagreement opened around the idea of the “therapist leader.” Godelieve Van Heteren reframed the whole conversation as being as much about certainty as uncertainty, noting the material certainty most participants enjoy, none sitting beside a dustbin on the street, and the moral certainty implied in any embracing of uncertainty.

What certainties are somehow still assumed or needed in order to embrace the uncertainties we are talking about here? ... The containment space is actually creating a sort of certainty that there are collectives that can do this together.

— Godelieve Van Heteren

Samantha Waki, joining from her father's rural community in Kenya, spoke of a heritage in which her grandfather was a diviner and her uncles became chiefs, leaders in exactly the therapeutic mode under discussion. She drew out how, without boundaries, emergent ideas simply re-innovate within the same paradigm, and located basic uncertainty in the daily question of her community: “Has it rained?”

Joan Lurie then sharpened a distinction that several speakers returned to: between asking leaders to *be therapists* and asking them to build *systemic containing conditions*.

It is a very different question to think about what the containing structures are that we can help leaders put in place, as opposed to how do we help leaders take on a more therapeutic role.

— Joan Lurie

Robins added that Western therapeutic traditions tend to assume an expert and a non-expert, whereas the diviner is trained in a deep, deliberately uncomfortable humility, precisely because the old ways have stopped working and no one can be the expert. Steven Segal resisted any reduction of one paradigm to another.

I don't think it is a matter of either therapy or systems. They speak out of different worlds, and it is productive to work with the different worlds rather than reduce one to the other. How do we work with difference here rather than eliminate it?

— Steven Segal

Alexis Niki offered the clarifying move that resolved much of the tension: the therapeutic dimension is not about doing therapy to others but about doing one's own work so as to metabolise anxiety rather than pass it on.

I am not talking about doing therapy to other people. I am talking about staying with myself ... so that instead of passing off anxiety to somebody else, I metabolise it here, and then I interact. It is not therapy, but it is therapeutic. It is self-work.

— Alexis Niki

Segal held firm that Mandela's speech was therapeutic without being psychotherapy, a national therapy that worked through collective grief and anger. He located the source of that capacity not in technique but in being.

This wasn't a technique Mandela learned ... he had not just the skill of being a leader, he had the being of a leader. When your being is transformed, you are leading from a completely different space.

— Steven Segal

Not everyone accepted the framing of Mandela's leadership as therapeutic. In the chat, Samantha Waki entered an important dissent on the call to violence and on the celebration of African ritual without distinguishing its life-affirming from its destructive forms; that thread is captured in full under Voices from the Chat below.

7. Decolonising the Work: Context and Positionality

Emily Bunce, a marine social scientist doing community engagement in the UK and the Caribbean, asked the ethical question directly: if she carries an "uncertainty mindset" into communities marked by colonial history and material difficulty, what are the risks? Robins responded that the work begins with one's own history and positionality.

If I walk into a situation without my history there ... it has agency in and of itself, and it interferes. I am a descendant of colonial settlers, and that means it is almost impossible for me to have a non-dual approach to what I am doing. If I am not aware of that, I am going to be imposing it.

— Nicola Robins

She warned that a particular healing tradition can unintentionally erase another, not through malice but through its focus on the individual, which can displace a more collectivist indigenous tradition. Joan Lurie tied this back to the title of the series.

We have to think about the plurality of uncertainty in contextual terms ... This is how individuals navigate it, this is how organisations navigate it, families, communities, religions. We have to embrace all those distinctive uncertainties and not pluck things from different places and just put them in.

— Joan Lurie

8. Rituals of Connection, Coherence and Care

Comparing containers across contexts, Joan Lurie described the concrete practices woven in during the 1990s transition: bringing people from very different levels and walks of life together to share stories and confront their own assumptions; sending white managers to sleep in the township and travel hours to work, not in their Mercedes. These she named rituals of connection, coherence and care.

These are rituals of connection, rituals of coherence building, rituals of care ... we are not leaving it to individuals, but constructing these practices and contextual opportunities for sense-making, for putting people in difference and being able to be in connection.

— Joan Lurie

Her contemporary experiments follow the same logic: sense-making containers in which participants may not give opinions or answers but must share a hypothesis and invite others, generative spaces designed to pull people out of their own certainty at individual, subsystem and whole-system levels. She named the persistent obstacle plainly: even those with the capacity get pulled back by systemic patterning into the expert and the certain.

How do we paradoxically contradict that need for certainty by pulling people into uncertainty in safe, containing practices that are scaffolds? ... These are not individual uncertainties and fears alone; these are systemic existential things we have to navigate together.

— Joan Lurie

9. The TRC, Rwanda and the Problem of Continuity

Nicola Robins offered the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a further example of holding provocation and care together. She noted that Archbishop Tutu, who understood Ubuntu deeply but interpreted it through a Western theological lens of turning the other cheek, created a process that was ritually effective and kept the country from war, yet left enduring anger about the absence of restorative justice. She contrasted this with the gacaca courts of post-genocide Rwanda: distributed, non-procedural, embodied and situational.

Ubuntu includes justice, and what we are seeing here is not justice ... No one knows the perfect solution, but we are holding very different tensions in different ways, and we can certainly learn from all those processes.

— Nicola Robins

Alexis Niki raised the hardest practical challenge, the problem of continuity. The work of story and narrative is wonderful in the room, but organisations are not designed to make time for it day to day, and old habits reclaim people the moment they walk out.

You walk out of that room, you are back in the old habit ... It really is work. It requires leaders to take it seriously, to fail at it, to get their asses kicked and come back and try again. I don't see it extending beyond the room we were just in.

— Alexis Niki

Lurie held the counter-position: some organisations are building these as their own habits and rituals, and the imperative is to keep asking how to make it more possible, to normalise these not as one-off interventions but as how organisations function now. Robins closed the substantive discussion with the insight that almost anything, even a tick-box climate-disclosure task, can become a container if worked with humanly.

Almost anything can be a container; it depends on how you work with it ... I am not the container, the container is the task, because otherwise I become too inclined to be the expert who can hold this. But the fact is I cannot be an expert in this transition, because no one has done before what we need to do now.

— Nicola Robins

Voices from the Chat

Alongside the spoken dialogue, a rich parallel conversation unfolded in the chat. The contributions below were written rather than spoken; they are grouped to echo the themes of the session, and they extend and at points productively challenge what was said aloud. Participants joined from Austin, Cape Town, Barcelona, Johannesburg, Plymouth, Muizenberg, Emsworth, Edinburgh, Budapest, Nairobi and beyond.

On the uncertainty of certainty

Walter Wehrmeyer set out a two-part diagnosis of why our present moment is so hard to make sense of: there is simply more uncertainty than before, and that very uncertainty erodes the usefulness of the models we rely on to interpret the world.

Uncertainty is not a residual thing left over once we have predicted everything else, but it is part of the complexity of all our lives.

Craving certainty is essentially human. Uncertainty makes food production more difficult, makes social organisation less reliable, makes planning less helpful. But the more basic an uncertain system becomes, the less understandable the world around us is.

— Walter Wehrmeyer

He offered Brecht as a caution against mistaking our models for the thing itself:

What do you do when you love someone? Mr K. was asked. I make an image and make sure it resembles him. The image of your loved one? No, the loved one.

— Walter Wehrmeyer, citing Bertolt Brecht

Anupam Saraph pressed the paradox to its edge, while Alexis Niki held the human reality of the craving in view:

Isn't certainty almost certainly a sign of the absence of life?

— Anupam Saraph

Uncertainty IS frightening, AND we need it. Certainty IS reassuring, AND we need it. Managing the paradox so that we don't run away requires accepting that.

— Alexis Niki

The difference that makes a difference.

— Nicola Robins, citing Gregory Bateson

Can we live without certainty?

Godelieve Van Heteren's spoken question continued to develop in the chat, drawing out the kinds of certainty that may be vital rather than merely defensive, the certainty of future hopes, of the greater good, of better options than the status quo.

Can we live without certainties of kinds? What certainty may also be vital?

— Godelieve Van Heteren

We must have change. Life is a verb. But we also need to find ways to accept and live with stuff that we cannot predict or know.

— Walter Wehrmeyer

Isn't feedback the wisdom of navigating uncertainty? Even homeostasis, the stable state, is a dance to navigate the uncertainty of change.

— Anupam Saraph

Boardrooms, power and leadership

Several participants turned the lens onto where leadership actually fails. Kameshnee Naidoo named the concentration of corporate power, and Hanna Asipovich linked the craving for certainty to prediction and algorithm.

Power in corporate boardrooms has increased exponentially since the 90s, and a large amount of behaviour is modelled on CEOs of companies. How do you take these soft skills into the boardrooms to make better leaders, because they're failing society at the moment?

— Kameshnee Naidoo

The boardrooms have been maximising profit based on prediction and algorithm. The crave for certainty is so embedded there.

— Hanna Asipovich

On Mandela and holding plurality

The Mandela thread drew strong responses. Alexis Niki connected his capacity to hold others to his contact with his own inner plurality, and Walter Wehrmeyer underscored that Mandela did not merely manage uncertainty but introduced it.

I would imagine that Mandela was able to stay in contact with his own plurality, otherwise I don't know how he could have held it for others.

— Alexis Niki

Thank you for shedding light on Mandela and his view of uncertainty. He was a master of huge change and of introducing massive uncertainty himself.

— Walter Wehrmeyer

A dissent on ritual, violence and therapy

Samantha Waki, drawing on her own heritage, entered the sharpest challenge of the session. She resisted naming a call to violence as therapy and cautioned against celebrating African ritual without distinguishing its purposes. Godelieve Van Heteren and Nicola Robins engaged the point directly rather than smoothing it over.

Killing and a call to violence is a security consideration. I find it odd to call that therapy. And this is the difference in how we view divination: there are two schools with two distinct aims, life-affirming and destructive.

— Samantha Waki

I get concerned when African ritual is celebrated without this distinction.

— Samantha Waki

It is a time-old deep dilemma, also for the life-affirming people: under what circumstances do all other means to affirm life fail. I felt that was what was being addressed, not a simple call to violence.

— Godelieve Van Heteren

I agree, Samantha. I think every culture has this distinction and works with it in different ways.

— Nicola Robins

Therapeutic, not therapist

The chat is where Alexis Niki's position crystallised, and where she pressed Joan Lurie on who builds the containers. The exchange sharpened the distinction the room was reaching for.

It's the attitude one holds that is therapeutic. It doesn't require people to BE therapists. We have to equip ourselves.

— Alexis Niki

Who is designing those systemic and organisational containers? If those individuals haven't grappled in individual spaces, what are they bringing to the collective?

— Alexis Niki

Therapeutic spaces are individual spaces. The work is to think about what the systemic and organisational containments are.

— Joan Lurie

What if our therapy worked in an Ubuntu way: through the other, defining who we are in an existentialist way where I am becoming through you?

— Astrid von Kotze

Ritual, discernment and the Sangha

Ilze Olckers seeded several of the session's most-quoted lines, including the etymology of certainty drawn into the spoken dialogue above. The chat added further texture on ritual and collective practice.

Whatever we do to make things more certain seems to increase uncertainty at the same time. This is a very old paradox.

— Nicola Robins

According to Thich Nhat Hanh, the next Buddha will be the Sangha.

— Ilze Olckers

Anupam Saraph closed several of his threads by turning the whole inquiry toward Ubuntu and healing.

Does the idea and practice of Ubuntu embody the acceptance of uncertainty? Does healing, then, need us to let go of our desire for certainty?

— Anupam Saraph

Closing reflections

As the session drew to a close, participants offered syntheses of their own. Graham Wood, a statistician, distilled five key points; Emmanuel Mongon brought three decades of architectural practice to bear; and Godelieve Van Heteren found the session's unofficial motto.

We are all eager for quick fixes. There is a single insight process that takes time, from divination using bones to the way we discover mathematics: wallow, drop it and relax, then insight arrives. Unless we change our leadership structure, we will founder.

Mandela had the Being of a leader; we need that as well as the Doing of a leader.

— **Graham Wood**

Over thirty years of experience I found that when I introduce uncertainty into a place I design, people are much happier. It is about a degree of both, uncertainty and certainty.

— **Emmanuel Mongon**

Summary: what are we going to do? For nobody has a clue. Thanks a lot!

— **Godelieve Van Heteren**

Threads to Carry Forward

- The **uncertainty of certainty**: treating the grasp for certainty, not uncertainty itself, as the deeper risk.
 - **Against flattening**: holding indigenous and complexity traditions as convergent yet meaningfully different, never as the same.
 - **Uncertainty infrastructure**: building containing conditions as systemic architecture, not leaving the work to individuals.
 - **The boundary paradox**: firm non-negotiables as the river beds through which open emergence can safely flow.
 - **Therapeutic versus therapist**: distinguishing self-work and systemic containment from putting individual therapy onto leaders.
 - **Positionality and plurality**: carrying one's history consciously, and holding uncertainty as contextually plural rather than portable.
 - **The continuity problem**: how containing rituals survive beyond the room and become how organisations actually function.
-