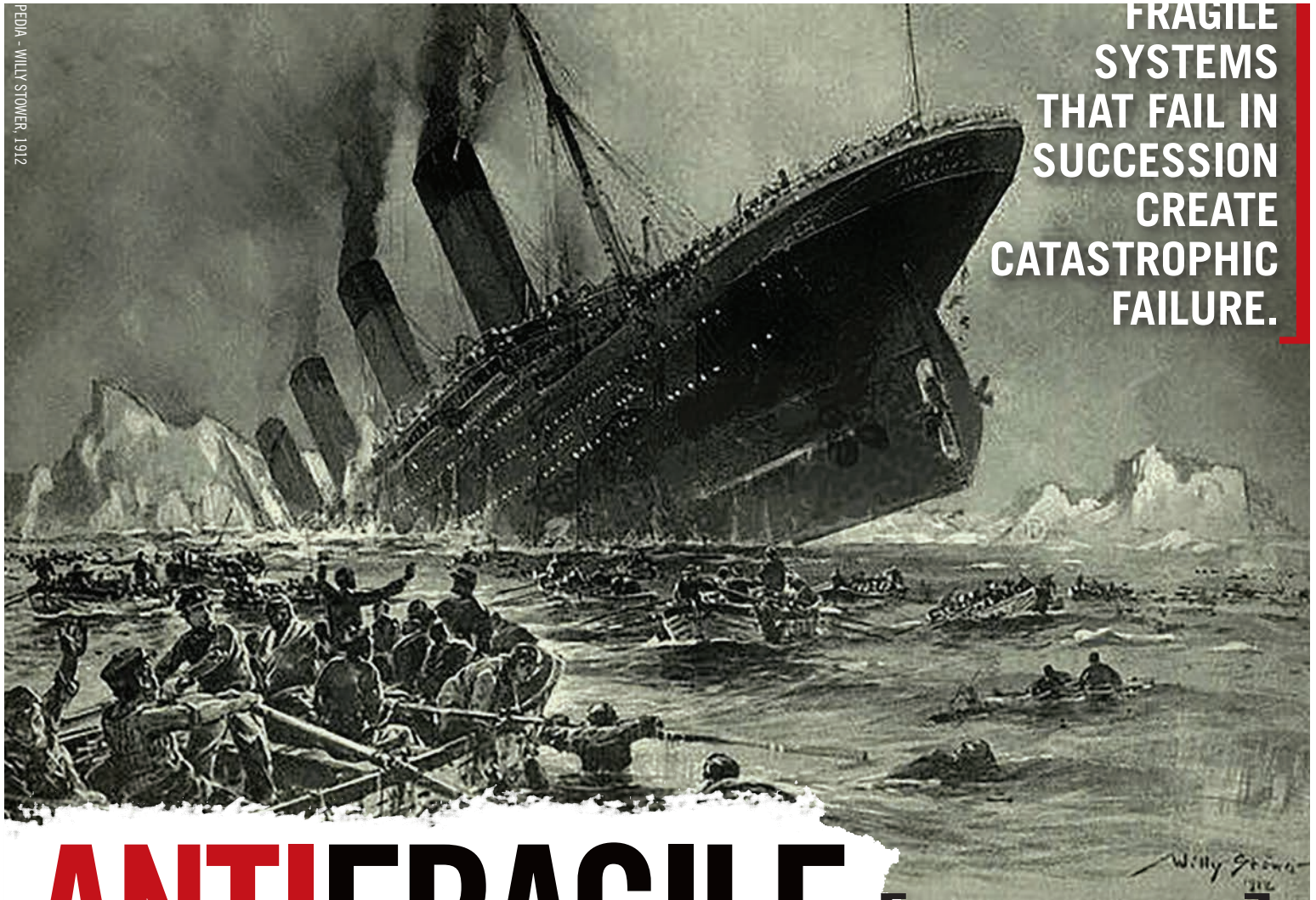


FRAGILE
SYSTEMS
THAT FAIL IN
SUCCESSION
CREATE
CATASTROPHIC
FAILURE.



ANTI FRAGILE

NASSIM TALEB'S IDEAS AND
YOUR PREPAREDNESS

BY: KEVIN REEVE

Nassim Taleb's book, *Antifragile* is not a new book.

It was written in 2012, but it is new to me. Like his previous book, *The Black Swan*, it has had a profound effect on me and my thought processes including skill focus related to survival. The book asserts that an event being a Black Swan depends on the observer. Using a simple example, what may be a Black Swan surprise for a turkey is not a Black Swan surprise for its' butcher, hence the objective should be to avoid being the turkey by identifying areas of vulnerability in order to "turn the Black Swans white." Taleb's Black Swan event has a central and unique attribute: high impact. His claim is that almost all consequential events in history come from the unexpected (not a linear progression), yet humans later convince themselves in hindsight that

these events are predictable (cognitive bias.)

Fragility is endemic in complex systems like the stock market, which tends to be very sensitive to small disruptors causing large variations, potentially even causing the system to experience a meltdown. For example, the sinking of the *Titanic* was a result of fragile systems that failed in succession creating a catastrophic failure. When Taleb describes things which dislike variation and stress, I think of modern people in air-conditioned cars, driving to safe, well-lit suburban neighborhoods, coming home to a refrigerator stocked with convenience foods, sitting down in memory-foam infused recliners, to watch Netflix on flat screen TVs. Like a dog with a bone, many people will resist variation to their routines, especially comforts. If

circumstances force it upon them, I expect they will come undone. I believe they fit Taleb's term: "fragilistas."

We tend to think of the opposite of fragile as robust or resilient. When a computer drive fails, we have a backup from the day before and can restore the data to where it was right before the failure. Resilience refers to a return to the status quo. But what if there was an even better goal that could improve our decision making processes?

Taleb coins a new term: *antifragility*; things that *gain* from disorder. He says, "Antifragility is beyond resilience or robustness. The resilient resists shocks and stays the same; the antifragile gets better." He explains, "Some things benefit from shocks; they thrive and grow when exposed to vola-

tility, randomness, disorder, and stressors and love adventure, risk, and uncertainty” and adds, “The antifragile loves randomness and uncertainty, which crucially means love of errors; a certain class of errors. Antifragility has the singular property of allowing us to deal with the unknown, to do things without understanding them – and do them well.”

I consider myself as having a bias for action. I do not feel the need to try to control all the elements of a system or to over plan. I just wade in and try to make sense of things as I go. For example, I am restoring a Jeep. I looked at a complex upgrade, read a bit about it, watched a YouTube video and then just started taking things apart. When my wife sees dozens of car parts scattered around in apparent disarray. She shakes her head and says, “I hope you know what you’re doing.” Well, not exactly. When I start reassembling, I will make mistakes and have to do it several times. But, when I finally get it all working, with some unique modifications and adjustments, I have a much better understanding of how the system works than if I just followed a set of instructions. Which means I can service it better in the field in the event of a breakdown. Every breakdown or problem makes me more proficient as an amateur mechanic.

Humans seek predictability. We want to know that systems will function as planned and designed. We have “experts” whose job is creating business plans that try to create a predictable path toward a goal. Ironically, removing randomness and volatility typically creates fragility. We make things fragile by trying to control the uncontrollable.

Almost a century ago, wolves (apex predators and a major stressor) were eliminated from Yellowstone National Park to control the undesirable predation on local cattle and sheep herds. This attempt to control weakened the ecology of Yellowstone with deer breeding to a degree that caused overgrazing of the vegetation. After a 70-year hiatus, wolves were reintroduced to the park. While the wolves were a significant detriment to the health and well-being of individual deer, they had an invigorating effect on the rest of the park. Since the wolves hunted most efficiently in the valley’s and gorges, the deer herds radically changed their behavior by moving up to the higher elevations, which allowed the vegetation to regenerate. The trees grew larger (in some cases up to four times larger), encouraging birds to move in.

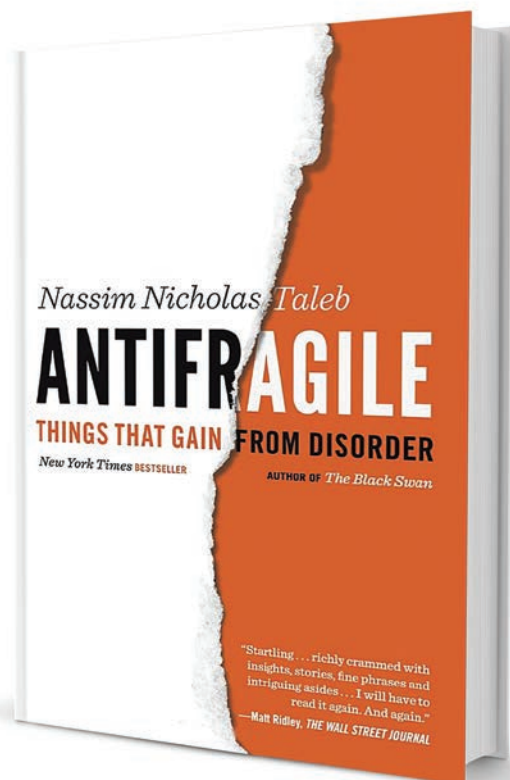
Beavers appeared to take advantage of the trees and built dams, providing new habitats for otters, muskrats, ducks, fish and reptiles. Wolves killed coyotes which allowed an increase in the number of rabbits and mice, which in turn created more food for hawks, weasels, foxes, badgers, ravens and bald eagles. More berries grew on the shrubs and attracted bears, which also preyed on deer calves. The abundance of vegetation stabilized the soil, allowing for less erosion at the edges of rivers and streams, stabilizing their flow. Wolves, a major stressor to the eco-system, strengthened and diversified it because nature is antifragile: it gains from disorder (up to a point.)

Douglas Adams wrote, “The major difference between a thing that might go wrong and a thing that cannot possibly go wrong is that when a thing that cannot possibly go wrong goes wrong it usually turns out to be impossible to get at or repair.” There is a common saying in the military: “No plan survives first contact.” In other words, the chaos of a battlefield makes control a very difficult proposition. We want to eliminate as many variables as possible, but no matter the degree of planning, random acts (Mr. Murphy) always create instability and unpredictability. Gen. Patton is quoted as once saying, “A plan is a wish in a party dress.”

Considering Taleb’s definition of antifragile, should we abandon planning for disasters? I say, “Not entirely.” To compensate for fragility, we train and prepare and put less faith in anyone’s ability to predict. The motto of my company OnPoint Tactical, is “training trumps gear!” This recognizes that having gear and a plan are important, but because of randomness, it is the training and capabilities of individuals that keeps one alive.

How does antifragility apply to preparedness? I hear many people talking about specific emergency scenarios: the imposition of martial law, an economic collapse disrupting the delivery of goods and services, an EMP destroying the electric grid, a terrorist attack, nuclear war, a solar flare and so on.

The problem is, we have no idea what the black swans are that will disrupt society or even what the disruption will mean, so does that mean I should not have Potassium Io-



THE ANTIFRAGILE PERSON ACQUIRES TRAINING IN AS MANY USEFUL SUBJECTS AS POSSIBLE.

dide pills to protect my thyroid after a nuke? No. More importantly, I should focus on a broad range of skills that may include dealing with radiation, but should involve many other types of training that should be way more than only gun and survival training.

Consider this quote: “People who build their strength using ... modern expensive gym machines can lift extremely large weights, show great numbers and develop impressive-looking muscles, but fail to lift a stone; they get completely hammered in a street fight by someone trained in more disorderly settings. Their strength is extremely domain-specific and their domain doesn’t exist outside of ludic—extremely organized—constructs. In fact their strength, as with over-specialized athletes, is the result of a deformity.”

This suggests the upside of being a jack of all trades and master of a couple. I am not a master lock picker capable of opening every lock on the market, but I can pick most locks and I can get into a car using fifteen methods. I keep finding new ones. If I only know how to jiggle a lock and the lock doesn’t jiggle, I am fragile. I know dozens of ways to start a fire; knowing just one is less useful. I

teach antifragility by teaching a wide range of skills so that when things go sideways, students have many potential responses and the ability to use the training as a springboard for future study of differing subjects.

Where can I look to gain an array of antifragile skills? From those who live in "extremistan." I talk to the homeless as well as the highly trained security forces who have experienced the most extreme conditions. The homeless have a wealth of information from living on the streets successfully for years. Those who have survived have adapted themselves to hazardous, uncertain, random events by exposing themselves to the elements, including the human elements. The hardcore survivors are savvy beyond belief. It's not a lifestyle I recommend, but I use what I've gleaned (and practiced) in my Advanced Urban Escape & Evasion class. At the end of every class, we debrief the students by having them tell us stories of their adventures. All of us learn from each other's failures and achievements grappling with the stressors of living primitively or being hunted (by our team) in an urban environment.

An antifragile student of preparedness is not prepared for just one scenario. The very nature of the black swan is that it is impossible to calculate the risk of it occurring. There are too many variables, including things we don't know that we don't know: unknown unknowns. So the black swan that causes a huge systemic disruption may not be something we've read about in prepper fiction. It may even be something completely unexpected. Taleb says: "What makes life simple is the robust and antifragile don't have to have as accurate a comprehension of the world as the fragile— and they do not need forecasting." To see how redundancy (e.g. extra food, extra money, extra skills) is a non-predictive or rather a less predictive mode of action, let us consider the following scenario: if you have extra cash in the bank (in addition to stockpiles of tradable goods such as cans of Spam and hummus and gold bars in the basement), you don't need to know with precision which event will cause potential difficulties. It could be a war, a revolution, an earthquake, a recession, an epidemic, a terrorist attack, the secession of the state of New Jersey, anything you do not need to predict much. Unlike those who are in the opposite situation, namely in debt (or wholly dependent on the stores, banks, police or

doctors) because of their fragility, they need to predict with a lot more accuracy.

So, the antifragile wise person acquires training in as many useful subjects and methods as is possible, from running a solar still to manufacturing gunpowder. If manufacturing breaks down, it will be only a matter of time before survivors run out of drugs. Chronic pain in particular will be difficult to treat without opiates, so the resilient may store hundreds of Norals and maybe some Percocets. But the antifragile person stores poppy seeds so that if the grid does down, he can grow opium flowers and produce Laudanum and actually prosper when the manufactured narcotics are no longer available.

A friend has been developing the ability to press his own brass, cast his own bullets and mix his own powders. So while some people run out of ammo; some will continue to reload from used brass. When they run out of brass, bullets or powder, though, he will be able to prosper. So those who reload may be resilient, but they have nothing on my friend who has become antifragile.

Antifragility is an acceptance of uncertainty, randomness and even time. It has been said that we are only nine meals away from anarchy. Antifragility recognizes the vulnerabilities in complex systems and flourishes when they break down. It is not just being resilient. It is understanding that there is more upside to downside to becoming trained and prepared, moving beyond resilience to thriving in hard times, by allowing "difficulties to unleash genius" and take advantage of evolving opportunities. When the next Black Swan occurs, the multi-skilled, perpetually curious person will be a king in the era of the softened, complacent, grocery store dependent, suburbanite. Accepting that reality is the first step to becoming antifragile. ✓

BIO

Kevin Reeve is the founder and Director of OnPoint Tactical Tracking School (www.onpointtactical.com). Kevin has provided training to law enforcement, SAR teams and the U.S. military in the arts of tracking, survival, escape and evasion and urban operations. Kevin also worked at Apple Computer for five years doing organizational development and executive coaching, as well as platform training and curriculum development.

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