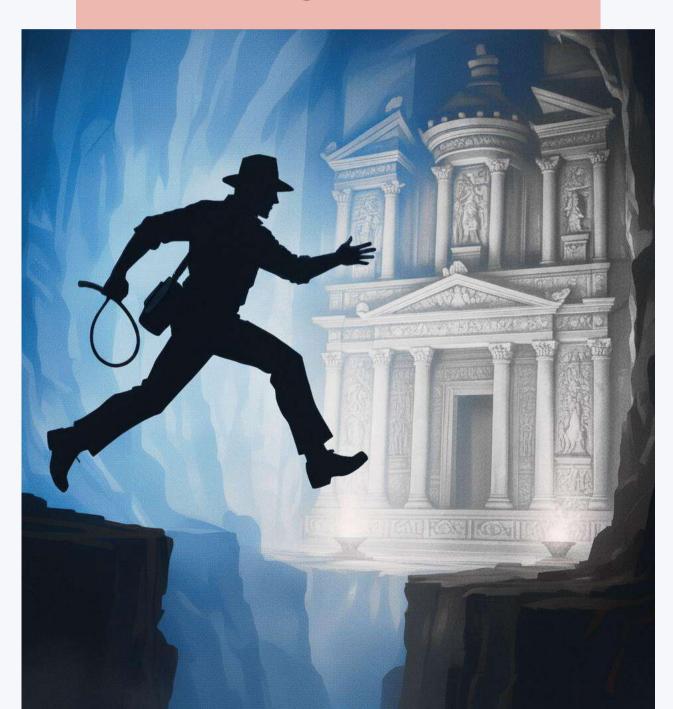


# Q4-2025 EDITION

## **Embracing Uncertainty**



## **PREFACE**



Diary: The Path of God – Only in the leap from the lion's head will he prove his worth.

Indy: Impossible... nobody can jump this!

Indiana Jones & the Last Crusade (1989)

## A LETTER FROM JONATHAN

The path of God - Only in the leap from the lion's head will he prove his worth.

I have been haunted by that line (and the whole scene as depicted in the previous page) for most of my life.

Even now, I can still see it: Indiana Jones, his father bleeding to death, standing at the edge of a chasm that seems impossibly wide. No bridge, no rope, just a sheer drop into what looks like certain oblivion. His only guide is this cryptic instruction from his father's diary. He has to take a "leap of faith."

As a teenager, watching him take that step, I remember feeling a knot in my stomach: "What if there was NOTHING there?"

How can someone willingly throw themselves into emptiness?

Unlike the first two challenges, this one seems pretty simple, right? No clever knowledge, no body movements – all it requires is complete belief and submission.

And yet, it's not so easy at all – because it taps into humanity's deepest, most primal fear: **the fear of the unknown**. The fear of nothingness, of losing control, of stepping off the solid ground of "what is" into the void of "what might be."

Since the time I first watched the movie, that scene has followed me, replaying in my mind at every major crossroad of my life. In fact, it never felt more real than the day I decided to quit my full time job two years ago.

## A LETTER FROM JONATHAN

On paper, I had a good, stable career as an SEO manager at an international digital agency. And yet, I felt a growing disconnect at that time.

The digital world (and the business world as a whole), as I figured, is built on a craving for certainty. We were constantly making exaggerated claims, promising clients/ business owners guaranteed results that we knew were subject to a thousand variables, all to appease this collective fear of the unknown.

The moment I decided to leave that world and embark on my self-discovery quest – to build this blog, to live without the "certainty" of a monthly paycheck – felt exactly like stepping up to that lion's head. The chasm was right in front of me. Every instinct screamed, "What if there is nothing there? What if you fail?"

And still, I took the step.

What I've slowly come to realize – through stumbling, reflecting, and exploring everything from existential philosophy to my own spiritual path – is that our whole perspective is backward. We're taught to fear the chasm, but the chasm is just... life.

Uncertainty isn't a bug in the system; it IS the system.

Embracing uncertainty isn't a blind leap into oblivion; it's the first step toward an authentic existence.

We live in an age that loves to throw around buzzwords like "VUCA" (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity), but

## A LETTER FROM JONATHAN

the truth behind the acronym is real. Nothing in this world is guaranteed. The skill of facing the unknown is, therefore, no longer optional.

To live is to "join the dance" instead of standing frozen at the edge. As the brilliant Gilda Radner once put it:

Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next. <u>Delicious Ambiguity</u>.

Now, let us explore that delicious ambiguity together, shall we?

All the best!

Jonathan M. Pham

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# THE INESCAP ABLE FOG



## Absurdity of absurdities.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* 

# Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get.

**Forrest Gump** 

#### Uncertainty as a principle of life

It's funny, isn't it? We spend so much time making plans. We design 5-year plans for our careers, plan the next vacation down to the hour, and map out our children's futures before they're even in school.

We do this because, deep down, we assume that life is a predictable, linear path – a problem to be solved or a project to be managed.

But the truth is, life isn't a project. It's a process. Its default setting isn't order; it's chaos.

Uncertainty isn't a poetic idea; it's the very nature of reality, something that we experience in numerous domains of life.

#### • 🍍 Health & longevity

Nobody knows the exact timeline or quality of their future health. Today, one may be engaging in conversations with a friend – and tomorrow, a random accident may take that friend's life.

#### Selationships

The dynamics and endurance of interpersonal connections are never guaranteed. One may form an intimate bond with another person; yet, a few years later, when the conditions have changed (e.g. each of

them takes a different career path), they may find themselves no longer staying in contact with each other.

#### • **e** Economic stability

Job security, market fluctuations, and financial outcomes are always in a state of volatility. Think about how tools like ChatGPT have been completely reshaping the business landscape and labor market. How could one have envisioned such a thing 2-3 years ago?

#### Cognitive function

Our brains are constantly making decisions under conditions of partial information. We are forced to calculate probabilities, manage risk, and devise flexible strategies rather than relying on fixed outcomes.

#### • 🔬 Science & knowledge

Even empirical claims and scientific theories are potentially mistaken and subject to revision by further observation. Back in the day, the Geocentric Model (Earth-centered) was the prevailing view for centuries, until it was challenged by the Heliocentric Model (Sun-centered). And now, it has been found that even the Sun is not the universe's center. It is just one of hundreds of billions of stars in our galaxy, the Milky Way – which is a supermassive black hole. And the Milky Way itself is just one of billions of galaxies in the observable universe.

Current cosmological models, based on Einstein's theory of General Relativity and observations like the Cosmic Microwave Background (CMB), suggest that the universe is expanding uniformly in all directions. In this model, every point in space can be considered the "center" of its own observable region, but there is no single, fixed point from which everything else is expanding.



Throughout history, various schools of thought have reflected on the uncertainty of existence. A core pillar of Eastern thought, for instance, is **impermanence** – the understanding that everything is in a constant state of flux. Our thoughts, feelings, bodies, relationships, the world around us... nothing is fixed. The person you are today is not the one you were yesterday, nor the one you will be tomorrow.

Science has its own versions of this too.

#### • 🔯 Probabilistic nature of reality

As concluded by modern physics, reality is not entirely deterministic; it's not a pre-programmed, clockwork universe. Quantum mechanics, with principles like the <u>Heisenberg uncertainty principle</u>, shows that even at the level of atoms and particles, there is an irreducible level of randomness. This is not a matter of our limited knowledge – but a fundamental property of the universe.

#### • 🔢 Statistical mechanics

The world we experience is made up of a staggering number of particles. The behavior of a single gas molecule, for example, is unpredictable, but we can predict the overall behavior of a gas (its pressure and temperature) with statistical certainty. However, the exact state of any individual molecule is always not guaranteed.

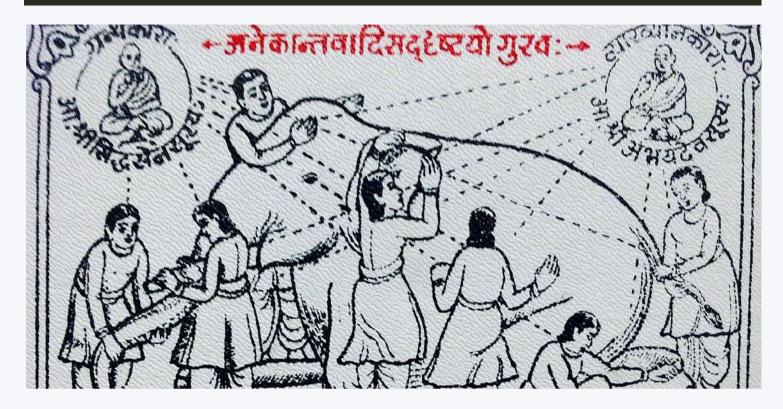
#### • **%** Chaos theory

I suppose some of you may have heard of the "<u>butterfly effect</u>" – the idea that a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil could, through a million tiny, cascading interactions, cause a tornado in Texas.

Our lives are just like that: infinitely complex and interconnected systems. A tiny, seemingly random decision – taking a different route to work, striking up a conversation with a stranger, or for me, deciding to learn Japanese for apparently no logical reason at all – can set in motion a chain of events that changes your entire life course.

The interplay of billions of variables (psychological states, environmental factors, economic trends, other people's actions – to name a few) makes one's life trajectory fundamentally unpredictable. Even if we could know all the initial conditions perfectly (which we can't), the sheer number of interacting factors makes long-term prediction virtually impossible.

In this light, it's not surprising that life feels so uncertain. We're all, as the <u>famous Indian parable describes</u>, like the blind men touching an elephant. One touches the tusk and says it's a spear. One touches the leg and says it's a tree. One touches the tail and says it's a rope. Each one is convinced that their tiny "truth" is the whole, only truth.



We are just like those men, grasping our one small piece of reality and mistaking it for the whole picture. Is it any wonder we can't predict what the "elephant" will do next?

Like a feather floating on the breeze, humanity is always subject to the whims of a wind we can't see or control.

Difficult to see. Always in motion is the future.

Yoda, 'Star Wars'

#### **Death is the only certainty**

Nothing, they say is more certain than death, and nothing more uncertain than the time of dying.

**Thomas Paine** 

This brings us to a grim paradox. We live in a swirling, chaotic sea of impermanence, where everything is in motion, everything is a "maybe"... except for one, single, unchangeable fact.

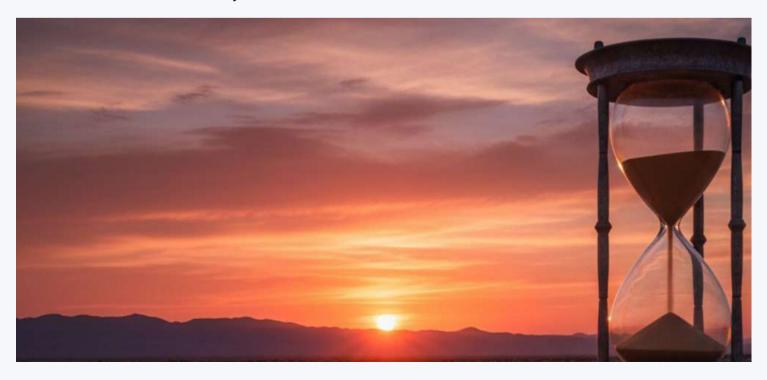
#### The only certainty in life is that it ends.

One day, for each of us, we will have to leave everything behind and embark on a journey into the ultimate "unknown". As soon as that occurs, there is no turning back. (at least from what is observable)

No matter what happens, one cannot "negotiate" their way out of it. While we can – for sure – delay death with medicine and a healthy lifestyle, the end is inevitable.

It's the one great truth that anchors all the others. As the Buddha has put it:





On the surface, it might sound morbid. Yet I've come to believe it is the most liberating and life-affirming realization we can ever have.

If our time here is the only thing that is finite and guaranteed to run out, how can we possibly afford to stand frozen at the edge of the chasm, paralyzed by the fear of "what if"?

The certainty of death isn't a curse; it's a blessing – an alarm bell. It's the universe shouting in our ear, "Don't wait! The time is NOW."

It's this truth that gives urgency and <u>meaning to our seemingly chaotic existence</u>. And it's the final push we need to take the leap.

No one knows when their hour will come. As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so people are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them.





# Uncertainty is an uncomfortable position. But certainty is an absurd one.

#### **Voltaire**

#### A major theme in philosophy

When we're faced with the kind of existential ambiguity we just talked about, it's natural to go searching for a clue.

Our society, after all, rewards answers. We're taught from a young age that "I don't know" is a sign of failure. We want experts to give us the "right" answer, leaders to show us the "right" path, and a clear set of rules to follow.

This craving is deeply human and completely understandable. And yet, I've found that clinging to it too tightly tends to do more harm than good.

When we need the map, the one right answer, we become rigid. We treat "I don't know" as a threat to be eliminated, not an invitation to learn.

We start looking for information that simply confirms what we already believe, and we shut ourselves off from anything, or anyone, that challenges our pre-drawn world.

We end up with a fragile "certainty", and it makes us terrified of the very complexity we claim to have solved.

This, for me, is where the value of philosophy comes in. Philosophy's greatest gift isn't that it gives us a better "map". Rather, it gives us the courage to ask better questions – and to live without needing a map at all. It is, in its purest form, the practice of **being comfortable with "I don't know."** 

To teach how to live without certainty, and yet without being paralyzed by hesitation, is perhaps the chief thing that philosophy, in our age, can still do for those who study it.

#### **Bertrand Russell**



This tradition of intellectual humility dates back centuries. It began with the philosopher Socrates, who, after a lifetime of questioning the wisest men in Athens, came to a famous conclusion:

All I know is that I know nothing.

True wisdom, as Socrates realized, isn't about having a head full of facts. It's about having the humility to recognize the staggering, infinite-ocean-vastness of one's own ignorance.

Thousands of years later, the idea found a new voice within the existentialists – who all shared a focus on the individual, grappling with freedom, responsibility, and the anxiety of the unknown. Thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre argued that we are "condemned to be free." With no preordained destiny or divine script, we are completely responsible for creating our own meaning through <u>our choices</u>.

This emphasis on the individual's uncertain path wasn't just for the secular-minded. The Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard argued that true faith wasn't found in the comfortable, objective "certainty" of state-run church dogma. For him, it started from a passionate "leap of faith" – a subjective decision made not with objective proof, but in the face of uncertainty.

What unites these thinkers is the conclusion that life's meaning isn't found "out there" in a universal map, but "in here" – in the choices we must make for ourselves.

At the point where the road swings off (and where that is cannot be stated objectively, since it is precisely subjectivity), objective knowledge is suspended. Objectively he then has only uncertainty, but this is precisely what intensifies the infinite passion of inwardness, and truth is precisely the daring venture of choosing the objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite.

Søren Kierkegaard



Religion vs philosophy's stance on uncertainty

It is the search for the truth, not possession of the truth which is the way of philosophy. Its questions are more relevant than its answers, and every answer becomes a new question.

Karl Jaspers

The promotion of personal experience over rigid doctrine is where I've often felt a tension between philosophy and some forms of organized religion. From my own perspective, religion tends to – understandably – appeal to a general audience by providing a fixed framework. It offers comfort and answers to our biggest fears (i.e. "What is my purpose? What happens when I die?", etc.) through sacred texts, parables, moral rules, and the promise of salvation/liberation.

As someone with a Christian background who also resonates with Eastern thought (like Buddhism and Taoism), I truly value the commu-

nity and moral compass that religion provides. At the same time, I'm also wary of how, in an attempt to appeal to the masses, its message is, many times, oversimplified. That it sometimes promotes a "fake certainty" that feels incompatible with the world's complex reality.

Of course, this isn't the whole story. To be fair, many religious thinkers – think of Christian mystics like Thomas Merton or Francis of Assisi, or Sufi poets like Rumi – have always argued that the deepest faith is found precisely in this 'cloud of unknowing,' in a direct, personal experience of the divine that transcends any human-made rule.

Still, the mainstream approach often contrasts with philosophy, which is the very practice of questioning those 'absolute truths' – and being willing to sit in the discomfort of the unknown.

Nothing so tends to mask the face of God as religion; it can be a substitute for God himself.

**Martin Buber** 



Speaking of which, I remember once coming across this story about the Dalai Lama. The skeptic Carl Sagan asked him what he would do if science definitively disproved reincarnation, a core tenet of his faith.

#### And you know what?

The Dalai Lama replied – without hesitation – that if science could disprove reincarnation, "Tibetan Buddhism would abandon reincarnation." (He did add, with a smile, "...but it's going to be mighty hard to disprove reincarnation.")

I have always found it amusing for the Dalai Lama to say something like that about an essential tenet of his belief. If it is true (that reincarnation is not real at all), then not only will the foundation of Buddhism be shaken to its core – but also his status as the worthy successor of the previous Lama will be destroyed.

At the same time, I cannot help but feel that there is something much deeper behind his answer.

Just think for a moment. That isn't the voice of blind dogma. It's the voice of intellectual courage – of a commitment to truth, wherever it may lead, over the comfort of any single, pre-existing belief.

What the Dalai Lama demonstrated through his response is that the goal of any great spiritual or philosophical path isn't to blindly protect the path itself (the 'ism,' the dogma). It is something far more worthwhile: the cultivation of wisdom and the practice of compassion.

These are the real 'destinations.' Whether our vehicle is Buddhism,

Christianity, or secular humanism, the point is not to worship the vehicle, but to arrive at a place of enlightenment.

In the end, we have to choose. We can decide to live in a small, walled garden of comforting 'facts,' or we can choose to be the kind of person who is courageous enough to explore the wilderness of reality.

I am a finger pointing to the moon. Don't look at me; look at the moon.

#### Buddha



The obscurity of the external world is a function of my own obscurity to myself; the world has no intrinsic obscurity.

#### **Gabriel Marcel**

It's a beautiful idea, isn't it? To be courageous, to explore the wilderness of reality, to seek truth over dogma.

But let's be honest: it's incredibly hard.

If embracing uncertainty is a wise decision, why does it feel so viscerally bad? Why do we instinctively run toward the comfort of a walled garden, even when we know it can become a cage that traps us from moving forward?

#### **Biological mechanism**

I believe the answer isn't that we're weak or foolish. It's that we're human, and we are hardwired for survival.

Our brains, after all, didn't evolve to seek cosmic truth; they evolved to keep us alive. For our ancestors roaming the savanna, uncertainty was lethal.

A rustle in the bushes wasn't a philosophical mystery; it was a potential predator.

An unfamiliar berry wasn't an "opportunity for growth"; it could be poison.

Our minds became "prediction machines," brilliant at spotting patterns and creating order from chaos. When a situation is clear and predictable ("this berry is safe"), our brain gives us a little reward. But when things are uncertain ("I don't know what's in those bushes"), it slams the biological alarm bell.

That feeling of anxiety in the pit of your stomach? That's not a personal failure; it's an inherent survival mechanism. It's your body screaming, "Danger! Do something! Find a certain answer, now!"

This ancient wiring gets amplified by our modern psychology. We all have a deep-seated need for what psychologists call "cognitive closure" – that click in the brain when a question is finally answered, and the "distress of the unknown" goes away.

We are just not comfortable sitting in the gray areas of life. That's why we look for patterns, set up rules, demand promises, and resort to mechanisms like commitments/ KPIs to create a feeling of agency – which, as scientific and psychological discoveries have found out, is essential for our well-being and motivation.





#### Fear of failure

And there's more. Not just the unknown, we're terrified of failing. We are afraid of wasting our time – that one, single, finite resource we talked about earlier.

We want a guarantee. We want to know that if we pour our heart, money, and years into a project, a relationship, or a new career, it will work out. The idea that we could give it our all and end up with nothing to show for it feels... well, unfair.

We are willing to pay the price when there's a high probability that our efforts will achieve success, far less eager when the probability is low. We want certainty that our effort and sacrifice will not be in vain. We are terrorized by the prospect of putting everything we have into achieving a goal and ending up with nothing to show for it. Total commitment shouldn't be a futile gesture, we think. It's not fair. So we avoid paying that price.

Marshall Goldsmith, 'The Earned Life'



#### **Modern culture**

Our entire culture is a giant machine designed to sell us certainty. We are taught to have a "5-year plan." We're sold what Dr. Goldsmith refers to as the "Great Western Disease": the pervasive, toxic belief of "I'll be happy when..."

- "...when I get the promotion."
- "...when I buy the house."
- "...when I find the one."

It's a life built on the fantasy of a linear, predictable path to a "happily ever after" that, as we all know, never quite arrives.

Our society rewards people who have answers, not those who have questions. We've been conditioned to equate "knowing" with success and "not knowing" with incompetence.

So we pretend to be more certain than we really are. We nod along in meetings, we give firm answers when we're just guessing, and we scroll through social media looking at everyone else's curated, "certain" lives, all while feeling our own private anxiety grow.

We end up trying to grip our lives, desperate to steer everything in the "right" direction, which only makes us more anxious.

Our anxiety does not come from thinking about the future, but from wanting to control it.

Kahlil Gibran



To wrap it up, it's a combination of **our biology**, **psychology**, and **modern society** that makes us fear the thing we need to embrace. More than a personal failing, it's the default human condition.

Being able to acknowledge that – to see the fear for what it is – is the first step to moving through it.

# THE ALCHEMY OF THE UNKNOWN



One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.

Carl Jung

## If life were predictable it would cease to be life, and be without flavor.

#### **Eleanor Roosevelt**

Given that uncertainty is an unavoidable part of existence (as we have discussed so far), it's obvious that we have no choice but to confront it. Not with disgust or contempt, but with acceptance.

Why? Because such an attitude is the key to abundance.

#### It cultivates resilience & growth

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.

Martin Luther King Jr.

A life built on the expectation of certainty is fragile. It's like a "house built on sand" – looking solid and secure, but the moment an unexpected storm hits (e.g. a job loss, a health crisis, a relationship ending, etc.), the entire structure collapses. On the other hand, a life that accepts uncertainty as the norm is a resilient one, like a "house built on the rock."

Just think back to any period of profound <u>personal growth</u> in your life. I can guarantee it wasn't a time when everything was easy and going according to plan.

When I took my own leap from a stable career, those first months were terrifying. But that period forced me to improvise, to <u>learn new skills</u>, to adopt <u>new habits</u> (e.g. cooking instead of eating out too much; practicing mindful spending instead of just buying a coffee/snack out of impulse), and to discover a strength I never knew I had.

We don't grow when we're comfortable. It is when the map we're holding becomes useless that we are forced to be creative and adaptable. And from then, real growth may begin.

As <u>psychological studies have shown</u>, "uncertainty tolerance" isn't just a nice-to-have; it's a powerful protective factor for our mental health. On the other hand, the more we try to control every variable, the more stressed and exhausted we become.

The quality of your life is directly related to how much uncertainty you can comfortably handle.





#### It opens the door to opportunity

If you could see your whole life from start to finish, would you change things?

Louise Banks, 'Arrival' (2016)

A fascinating question, isn't it? At first, knowing the whole script may sound like a relief. But after a while... wouldn't it just become boring?

This makes me think back about playing video games as a kid. Long before the Internet and Google, I'd get hopelessly stuck at certain points in a game, unable to move forward. I had no choice but to figure it out myself – wandering the same corridors, trying every item, mashing every button.

It was tiring, and yet, it was exciting.

Then the Internet became popular. Suddenly, I could search for guides, read the whole storyline before I even began, and even use "cheat codes." At first, this felt incredible, like I'd become a mini-god. I could solve any riddle instantly and beat any opponent as if they were a joke.

But after a while... the games just became plain boring. The magic was gone. I was no longer an adventurer on a journey; I was just an accumulator of achievements, a robot checking off a list.

This is the very trap of craving certainty in life. We trade the thrill of the adventure for the boredom of the outcome.

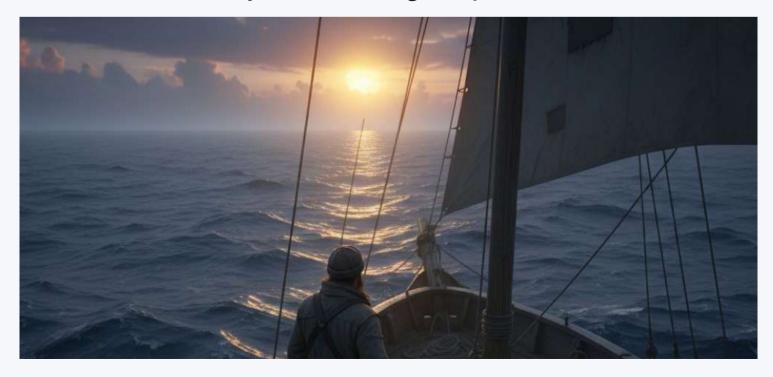
We think we want the cheat codes, but what we really crave is the quest itself.

It's the possibility of having a dream come true that makes life interesting.

Paulo Coelho

And the more we <u>focus on one specific outcome or path</u>, the more we close off other possibilities. For instance, if you dedicate your life to a highly specialized career, you might achieve great success in that field. At the same time, you lose the chance to explore other passions and cultivate different skills.

When we rigidly stick to a plan, we deny the random encounters or lucky breaks that, many times, lead to new friendships, job opportunities, or growth. In this sense, the pursuit of "certainty" only gives rise to an "uncertainty" in discovering new possibilities.



#### It fosters learning & connection

Usually when we hear or read something new, we just compare it to our own ideas. If it is the same, we accept it... If it is not, we say it is incorrect. In either case, we learn nothing.

Thich Nhat Hanh

Clinging to certainty doesn't just make our lives smaller; it makes our minds smaller. When we're convinced we already have the "right" answers, we <u>stop listening</u>. We seal ourselves off in an echo chamber, where the only validation we get is from our own pre-approved ideas.

It's a deeply stagnant and lonely place, and it makes genuine connection impossible.

Embracing uncertainty is the antidote to this. It's the humility of Socrates ("I know nothing") that makes us genuinely curious.

We stop comparing and start listening. We lean in. We ask questions. This allows for what's known as "good conflict." The goal is no longer to <u>win the argument</u>, but to <u>understand</u>. We can explore the gray area together.

Think of a tense political chat with a family member. The "certain" approach is to list all the reasons they're wrong. The "uncertain" approach, on the other hand, is to humbly ask, "Please help me understand why you feel so strongly about this."

That one simple shift, as I'm sure many of us have experienced, may

be just the difference between a shouting match and a moment of truth and intimacy.

Certainty is the great enemy of unity. Certainty is the deadly enemy of tolerance.

Robert Harris, 'Conclave'



It fuels creativity & progress

If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?

Albert Einstein

Creativity, by its very definition, is a journey into the unknown. It's the act of bringing something new into existence, and "new" implies "not yet known."

Certainty, on the other hand, is the realm of repetition. It's following a known recipe, filling in a template, or executing a proven plan. While useful for efficiency, it can never produce something truly original.

Think of it this way: a "paint-by-numbers" kit offers complete certainty. You know exactly what the outcome will be, and you are guaranteed a "correct" result. But you are not creating; you are copying.

An artist facing a blank canvas operates in pure uncertainty. They don't know if the final piece will "work." They have to experiment, take risks, follow a vague intuition, and be willing to fail – to paint over their own mistakes. Only then may true art be born.



The same principle applies to all human progress. Breakthroughs don't come from following a guaranteed, step-by-step manual. They happen when someone is <u>bold enough</u> to ask, "What if...?" and step off the map, away from the "right" answers.

When early scientists asked, "What is light?" they didn't have a guaranteed answer or a clear use for the knowledge. They were driven by pure curiosity.

The alchemists' quest to turn lead into gold, while "wrong" in its premise, was what laid the foundations for modern chemistry.

Explorers like Columbus and Magellan sailed off the known map, not with a guarantee of arrival, but with a hypothesis and a profound tolerance for ambiguity.

These leaps – in art, science, exploration – are all leaps of faith. They are fueled by an acceptance that the outcome is not guaranteed. Without it, innovation would be impossible.

While most of us may never find ourselves in the same situation as Columbus or Magellan, we do have to make a lot of big decisions in life. Should I take this career path? Should I move to a new country? Should I get married?

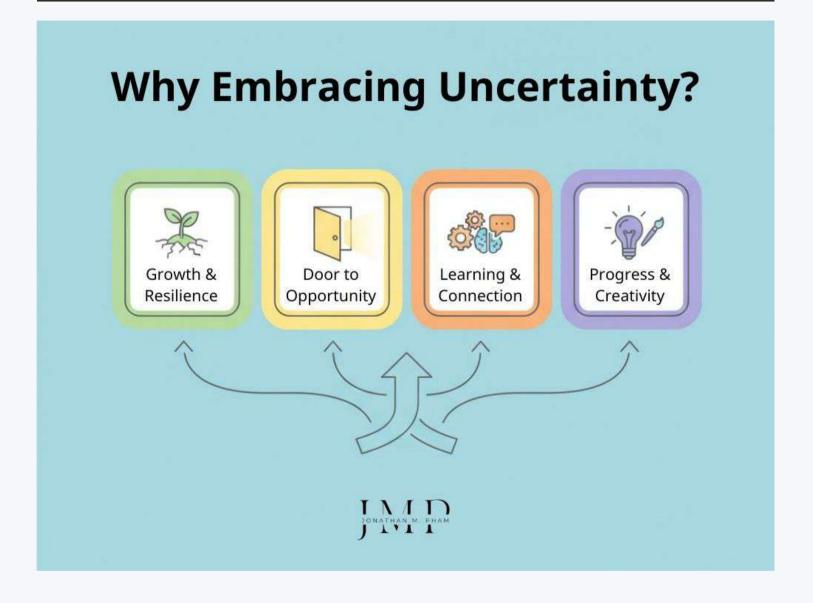
No amount of data can give you a certain answer. No spreadsheet can calculate who you will become after you make the choice.

You just have to let go of the "facts" and take a leap based on your values, intuition, and belief in your ability to handle what comes next.

The future is uncertain... but this uncertainty is at the very heart of human creativity.

Ilya Prigogine

## 2.1. FROM LEAD TO GOLD



Those who begin with certainty end up in uncertainty. Those who begin with uncertainty, questioning, asking, doubting, probing, those end up with absolute certainty, not relative certainty.

#### Jiddu Krishnamurti

Is embracing uncertainty nihilistic? I suppose this is what some of you might be thinking at this point.

All of our discussions so far seem very nice, but if we let go of all certainty, where does it end?

If there's no fixed map, no guaranteed "right" way, doesn't that just lead to chaos?

If there's no ultimate, objective meaning, doesn't that mean nothing matters?

It's the deep, gnawing fear captured in Dostoevsky's famous line:

If God does not exist, everything would be permitted.

It's the fear of the ultimate slippery slope, the one that ends in nihilism – the belief that life is completely meaningless.

I have wrestled with this troubling idea a lot on my own journey. And eventually, I've come to believe that this line of thinking gets it exactly backward.

Embracing uncertainty isn't a sign of nihilism; it's the ultimate act of

**humility**. Clinging to a rigid, unproven certainty that you and your group have the one and only truth... that is the real arrogance.



It's the mindset of the "frog in the well," who mistakes his tiny circle of water for the entire ocean. When we're so certain of our own little map, we become intellectually and spiritually blind.

Speaking of which, I'm reminded of something I experienced as a kid. One day during Sunday mass, the priest decided to "disprove" evolution and reincarnation. His arguments were, essentially:

- On evolution: "If it's true, just bring an ape home and domesticate it. It will eventually become human."
- On reincarnation: "If it's true, how can the human population keep rising?"

Even as a kid, knowing little about either topic, I felt a deep discomfort. It felt... too simple.

And I realized later, it's because these are classic rhetorical tricks. They're designed to shut down inquiry, not invite it.

They are perfect examples of creating "fake certainty". Of simplifying things to something like "Four legs good, two legs bad".

The first argument ridiculously misunderstands the scale of time (millions of years, not a single lifetime) as proposed by evolutionists. And the second one falsely assumes that rebirth is a closed human system, ignoring the vast, multi-realm cosmology of Eastern thought.

In both cases, a massive, complex, and non-intuitive truth was replaced with a simple "common-sense" straw man that could be easily knocked down.

This is what intellectual cowardice looks like. It's the "frog" willfully limiting the scale of the universe – be it the scale of time or of existence – to what is immediately comfortable. It's choosing the comfort of a simple lie over the challenge of a complex truth.



The philosopher Immanuel Kant once proposed a name for this human limit. He argued that we can only ever know the *phenomena* – **the world as it appears to us through our senses**. We can never grasp the *noumena* – **the 'thing-in-itself,'** or the **Ultimate Reality**.

Embracing uncertainty, then, is being honest enough to accept this limit. It's knowing that reality is often non-intuitive – that the truth is rarely simple. It's the willingness to hold two opposing ideas in your mind at the same time without needing to destroy one of them.

The opposite of a true statement is a false statement, but the opposite of a profound truth is usually another profound truth.

Niels Bohr

I suppose we can solidify our discussions so far by reflecting on the Buddha's <u>Parable of the Poisoned Arrow</u>. The story goes like this: A man is shot with a poisoned arrow. The doctor rushes to help, but the man refuses treatment. He won't let the doctor pull the arrow out until he knows the archer's name, his caste, the type of bow used, and what kind of feathers were on the arrow.

What happens?

The man dies, of course. He dies while demanding certainty.

The Buddha's point is this: **We are all that man**. We are all walking around, wounded by the "arrow" of <a href="https://example.com/human.com/hum

What matters is to admit that we don't know the archer's name, and that's okay. Our urgent and practical task is to simply pull out the arrow – to end our own miseries and help those around us end theirs.

In other words, it's about embracing uncertainty – and acting even when we do not fully know everything yet.

This isn't nihilism. Quite the opposite. It's a call to action. It's a philosophy that grounds us in the here and now, in the service of others. And its spirit – prioritizing compassionate action over rigid, abstract "correctness" – is reflected in other spiritual traditions as well.

If you had known what these words mean, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice," you would not have condemned the innocent... Which of you, if his sheep falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a person than a sheep!

Matthew 12:7-12



In life (not just theology), we can also apply the same principle. For instance, think of the current climate crisis. As a planet, we are "shot" with the arrow of environmental change. Yet, how much time have we wasted on "unproductive speculation"? How many times have we argued over the precise percentages of its cause ("Is it natural cycles or human activity?") or whether we should wait for a "technological magic bullet" to fix everything?

These are the man's questions to the doctor. Embracing uncertainty means doing what we can right now – reducing emissions, investing in what works, and (on a personal level) adopting a greener lifestyle (e.g. stop using plastic bags, eating out instead of ordering food, etc.)

It's the same with our personal health. When we get a shocking diagnosis, it's easy to get lost in the paralyzing "Why?" ("Why me? Is it my genes? My past lifestyle? My karma?"). But these are the unanswerable questions.

The priority – the "constructive action" – is to stick to the treatment plan, change our diet, and focus on the next, practical step toward well-being.

It doesn't matter if there is an ultimate meaning behind everything we do. Whether left wing or right wing/ capitalism or socialism/ religion or atheism is correct. Whether there is a God or not – and if there is one, what kind of nature God has.

After all, would God really care if we are right about God or not? Would God be appeased by us boasting about our own self righteousness – or by us admitting our own limits and trying to live virtuously?

I suppose one should be able to come up with an answer on their own. My take is simple: "Who exalts himself will be humbled, and who humbles himself will be exalted".

Live a good life. If there are gods and they are just, then they will not care how devout you have been, but will welcome you based on the virtues you have lived by. If there are gods, but unjust, then you should not want to worship them. If there are no gods, then you will be gone, but will have lived a noble life that will live on in the memories of your loved ones.

Anonymous (sometimes attributed to Marcus Aurelius)



Life is full of surprises. When your day is wonderful, cherish it.
When it becomes difficult, stay strong.

#### Roger Lee

It's easy to talk about "leaps of faith" and "pulling out arrows," but how does the idea of embracing uncertainty change the way we make decisions on a Tuesday morning?

I'm not saying that you should be reckless or suddenly have no plan at all. For me, what's important is to undergo a series of quiet, internal shifts in perspective.

#### From outcome to process

I'm sure many of you know this exchange from Alice in Wonderland. Alice, lost, asks the Cheshire Cat:

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to."

"I don't much care where—" said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.

I've seen this scene used in so many self-help books to scold people for not having a specific 5-year plan. "See!" they say, "If you don't have a goal, you'll end up nowhere!"

But I think that interpretation misses the real wisdom. The conversation doesn't end there. Alice clarifies, "so long as I get SOMEWHERE,"

and the Cat replies,

"Oh, you're sure to do that, if only you walk long enough."



That, for me, is the whole secret.

Embracing uncertainty means shifting your focus from the destination to **the journey**. To finding satisfaction in the effort itself – in the process of learning, striving, and showing up each day.

It's the writer who stops obsessing over getting published and instead finds satisfaction in the daily act of just writing.

It's the person cultivating a new skill – like me with Japanese – who lets go of "when will I be fluent?" and instead learns to love the clumsy, yet joyful process of forming a new sentence.

It's focusing on the effort, not the guaranteed result. It's trusting that if you "walk long enough", you will get somewhere meaningful – even if it's not the destination you originally had on the map.

If you can make the process of making the effort your primary source of happiness, then you have succeeded in the most important challenge of your life.

#### Ken Mogi



#### From control to influence

I don't know why one person gets sick, and another does not, but I can only assume that some natural laws which we don't understand are at work.

**Harold Kushner** 

I remember back in the day watching the movie *Kungfu Panda*. The story centers on Master Shifu, a rigid, disciplined teacher, and Oogway, the ancient, wise tortoise. Shifu's former student, the evil Tai Lung, is prophesied to escape prison one day. As such, Shifu panics and desperately searches for the "Dragon Warrior," a hero he believes must be a perfect, traditional warrior.

And yet, what he discovers is... Po, a bumbling panda.

Shifu becomes so disillusioned that he treats Po with utter disgust and contempt. He does everything in his power to make Po quit, stubbornly clinging to his idea of what the Dragon Warrior must be – and refusing to see Po for what he is.

Then one day, the prophecy does come true: Tai Lung escapes. As soon as he knows that, Shifu, in a panic, rushes to Oogway:

Shifu: Master! I have... it's very bad news!

Oogway: Ah, Shifu. There is just news. There is no good or bad.

Shifu: Master, your vision. Your vision was right! Tai Lung has

broken out of prison! He's on his way!

Oogway: That IS bad news.



Back in the day, I found Oogway's response quite absurd – like, he contradicts what he has just said! And yet, now that I have known more, I realize that one should not take the conversation that lightly.

If we interpret it based on <u>the teachings of traditions like Taoism and Buddhism</u>, we will see that Oogway first speaks from the **Absolute perspective** (events are just events; there is no 'good' or 'bad'). But when seeing that his friend is terrified, he immediately shifts to the **Conventional, human one**. (an evil leopard coming? OK, for us, that's bad news)

What does that mean?

It means this: wisdom isn't about floating in the clouds, detached from reality. It's about acknowledging the problem right in front of you WITHOUT losing your inner calm.

That is the essence of what it means to embrace uncertainty.

And the exchange does not stop there. Shifu then falls into despair – given that evil has been unleashed, and yet what they are given is Po, a clumsy, food-obsessed panda. He believes this "mistake" will doom them all.

Oogway: Look at this tree, Shifu. I cannot make it blossom when it suits me, nor make it bear fruit before it's time.

Shifu: But there are things we CAN control. I can control when the fruit falls. And I can control where to plant the seed. That, is no, illusion, Master!

Oogway: Ah, yes. But no matter what you do, that seed will grow to be a peach tree. You may wish for an apple or an orange, but you will get a peach.

Shifu: But a peach cannot defeat Tai Lung!

Oogway: Maybe it can, if you're willing to guide it, nurture it.



This is the very heart of the matter. Embracing uncertainty means you stop wasting energy trying to force reality to be something it's not. You stop trying to turn your "peach" of a life into an "apple". (Po is a panda, not a lean warrior – so Shifu cannot train him in the traditional way or expect him to conform to conventional standards)

You can't control the seed you were given. You can't control the economy, what your boss ultimately decides, or how people will behave.

What you can do is to shift from control to influence. You accept the "peach" that is right in front of you – your current job, your unique (even weird) set of skills, your actual life – and start asking, "How can I guide this? How can I move on from where I am now?"

Trust only movement. Life happens at the level of events, not of words. Trust movement.

Alfred Adler

#### From "right" to authentic

The quest for certainty blocks the search for meaning. Uncertainty is the very condition to impel man to unfold his powers.

**Erich Fromm** 

We all get stuck many times, right? What's the "right" career? What if I choose the "wrong" city? What if this isn't the "right" partner?

We're so terrified of making a mistake that many times, we end up doing nothing at all. Yet, does that "right-ness" really matter at all?

Why are we so obsessed with it, anyway?

I think it's because we're taught from a young age that being "right" (getting the A+, following the rules, meeting expectations) is how we earn love and avoid being disliked or "excommunicated." Our parents, teachers, and bosses often (with good intentions) teach us to be **liked** rather than to be **authentic**. To value recognition over efforts. To seek

validation rather than just **being ourselves**. To be "right" in the eyes of others – rather than in the eyes of ourselves.

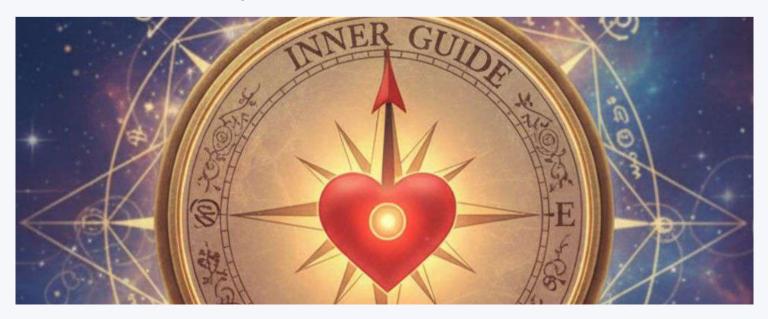
Even for those who seem 'rebellious' (e.g. the teenagers who always post provocative things online), they are, deep down, just chasing attention in a different way. Their actions are, after all, driven by the fear of being unseen or irrelevant – a subtle form of self-obsession.

Whether we decide to conform for validation or rebel for attention, the root is the same: we're measuring our worth by external metrics instead of our own internal compass.

We become terrified of any choice that might lead to disapproval or irrelevance – terrified, in short, of making a "wrong" turn.

Yet, a life built on avoiding mistakes is one half-lived. Meaning isn't hidden in one "correct" choice; it's in what we bring to the choice.

It's about picking a path and walking it with your whole heart, even if it looks weird to everyone else.



To quit one's "safe" corporate job and become a struggling artist isn't wrong.

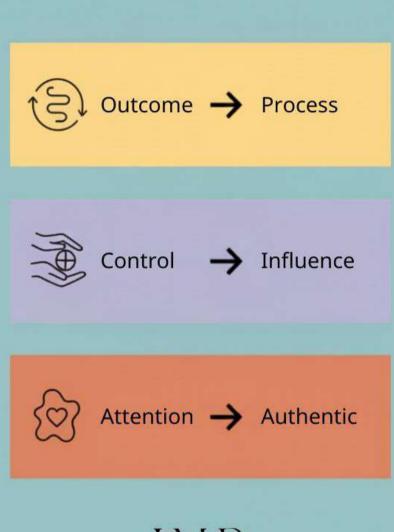
To prioritize a quiet, simple life over a high-status career isn't wrong.

As long as a decision feels authentic to you – as long as you **make it** with intention – then it is the right one.

There is no absolute formula for <a href="happiness">happiness</a>; each unique condition of life can serve as the foundation for happiness in its own unique way. You can be happy when married with children, or when married without children. You can be happy when you are single, without a college degree, or with one. You can be happy when you are overweight. You can be happy when living in a warm climate as in California, you can be happy when living in Montana, where you have severe winter conditions. As a sumo wrestler, you can be happy when you make it to yokozuna, or you can be happy while remaining one of the underdogs all your career, doing small chores, never giving up.

Ken Mogi

# **From Certainty to Uncertainty**



# THE SIRENS OF CERTAINTY



Mundus vult decipi: the world wants to be deceived. The truth is too complex and frightening.

**Martin Buber** 

The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people so full of doubts.

#### **Bertrand Russell**

If it were as simple as just deciding to be more like Oogway, we'd all be enlightened masters by now, sipping tea under a peach tree.

But it's not. The moment we genuinely try to let go, to live in this new way, we run head-on into a wall of resistance - not only from within, but from without too.

#### The prevalence of false promises

Because we're so desperate for a map, we are incredibly vulnerable to anyone who claims to have one. And the unfortunate truth is that the world is full of people willing to sell us simple, confident lies to calm our anxiety – and to get our money, our vote, or our compliance.

We see it everywhere.

We see it in politicians making vague, grand promises they can't possibly keep.

We see it in bosses demanding impossible KPIs, as if hitting a number on a spreadsheet can magically erase real-world complexities.

I myself saw it every single day in my previous SEO job. Clients, out of ignorance or stubbornness (or both), would demand a "guarantee" of

a #1 Google ranking (or something similar), a promise that, in the ever changing world of search algorithms, is a complete illusion.

What's more? Agencies know that, so they intentionally "trick" the client into agreeing with a set of keywords/ maintenance tasks that do not guarantee any real impact on the business. (this may sound nihilistic, but I have to admit it based on my own personal experience)

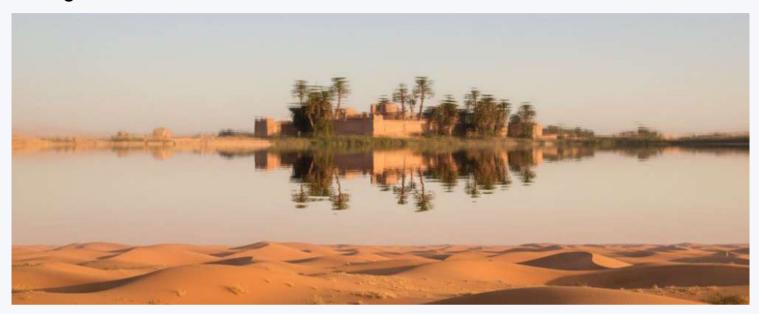
Some business owners/ managers intentionally take advantage of them being the "buyer" – the one in power – to push agencies or specialists to work harder than possible, or to commit to an aggressive timeline/ unrealistic sales goal. By framing the demand as "simple commitment" or "accountability," they make it seem like the only reason the target might not be met is a lack of effort or willpower. Even when they are fully aware, either consciously or unconsciously, of the impact of numerous factors beyond one's control (market conditions, competitor actions, supply chain issues, etc.). No wonder many end up succumbing to inflated expectations, burnout, depression – and worse, death from overwork.

Many people out there sell links, claiming that they own high-quality sites with tons of traffic that will boost a website's performance in no time. But the thing is, many of these "high-quality sites" are actually scams, utilizing shady techniques to look as if they are authoritative. (I'm not going too deep here; hope that you can – kind of – get the idea, especially those who already have first-hand experience like me)

We know these are oversimplifications, but we buy in anyway. Why?

Because the lie, for a moment, feels better than the truth.

Because most of us care about *looking successful/ powerful* more than being real.



And the great danger is that if you live on a diet of these comfortable lies for too long, you eventually lose the ability to distinguish truth from fiction at all. Just like those in the tale of "The Emperor's New Clothes" – too ignorant, too self-centered, too fearful to face reality and speak up.

Many managers force a commitment they know is unrealistic, setting their team up for failure just to <u>cover themselves</u>.

In relationships, the demand for absolute emotional certainty ("Promise you'll never leave!") becomes a tool of control for abusive/insecure people to exploit the partner's fear of abandonment.

And it's not just others selling us lies; we <u>sell them to ourselves constantly</u>. For example, I remember once excusing myself for not having a girlfriend by telling myself (and others) that I needed 'financial stability first.'

On the surface, it sounded responsible, socially acceptable. However, the real truth was that I just hadn't found someone who resonated yet. And I was completely unaware of it – until a friend pointed out a flaw in my 'rational' excuse (e.g. 'Are you sure it's about money, or are you just waiting for the 'perfect' person?').

Only then did I realize the unconscious self-deception I'd wrapped myself in.

How about you? How often do these little 'rationalizations' become the unquestioned 'truth' of your life?

We take refuge in pride, because we are afraid to tell the truth to ourselves.

#### Okakura Kakuzo



There is no such thing in the world as absolute evil or absolute good. There is good to be found within evil, and plenty of evil to be found within the good.

#### Shusaku Endo

#### The dark side of identity

This is a form of social pressure, and it's one we, many times, inflict on ourselves.

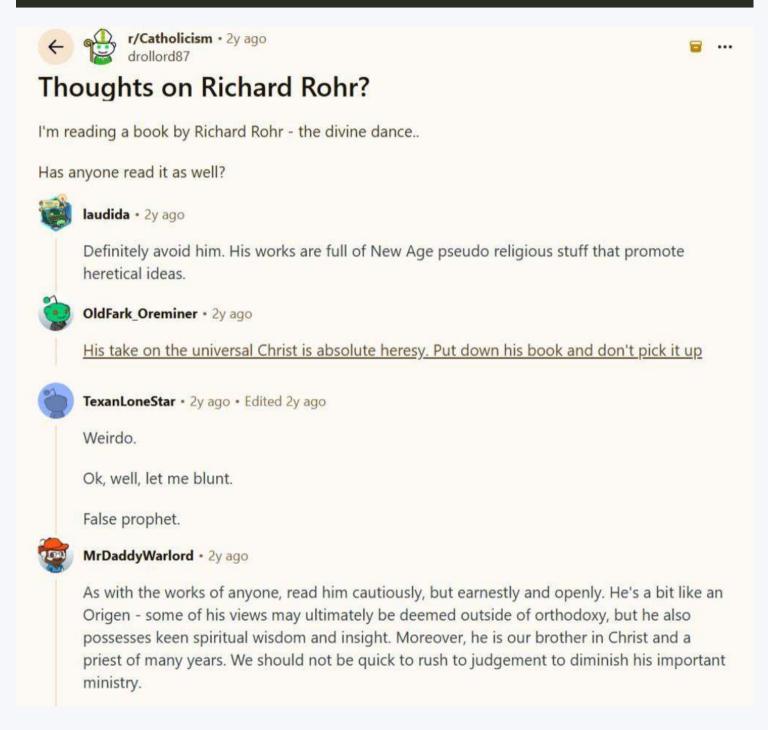
To feel safe and "right" in an uncertain world, we grab onto solid labels: "Christian," "atheist," "conservative," "liberal," "intellectual," "artist." These <u>identities</u> give us a tribe, a script, and a set of pre approved "certain" answers.

Many times, the pressure to conform comes not just from abstract belief, but from the fear of gossip, ridicule, or being ostracized by the community if we step out of line.

The problem is, our identity can quickly become a fortress. We stop protecting the truth and start protecting the "label".

I saw a perfect example of this <u>on a Catholic Reddit thread</u> I recently came across. Someone asked about the theologian Richard Rohr. The responses were, overwhelmingly, dismissals. Not by critically analyzing or engaging with his ideas, but by labeling him:

- "He's a New Age thinker"
- "He uses Eastern mysticism"
- "Don't read him."



If there's one thing I can see from these answers, it's this: the people on the thread attacked Rohr not because his ideas were wrong – but because they posed a threat to their identity.

This is just the "four legs good, two legs bad" mentality we discussed above. It's a thought-stopping slogan, not a thought. And it's every-

where – in politics (my party is right, yours is evil), in academics, and even in our personal lives.

That 'Don't read him' response feels so familiar. To me, it seems very much like how my conservative, or perhaps I should say "ignorant," Catholic neighbors tend to dismiss 'outsiders' – anyone who doesn't fit their mold (if you are interested, feel free to read more about it here)

It's an example of how identity, when we cling too rigidly to it, causes us to succumb to division and hatred. Not really out of ideological disagreement, but out of FEAR – fear of what is not familiar, of the 'Eastern' idea that truth might be 'both/and' rather than a simple 'either/or.'

This 'us vs. them' thinking is, perhaps, the single greatest barrier to learning from one another, and it's fueled entirely by a fear of the uncertainty that lies outside our own tribe's walls.

When you call yourself an Indian or a Muslim or a Christian or a European, or anything else, you are being violent. Do you see why it is violent? Because you are separating yourself from the rest of mankind. When you separate yourself by belief, by nationality, by tradition, it breeds violence.

Jiddu Krishnamurti

(As a side note, I'm an East Asian myself – an East Asian Christian who loves Buddhism and finds deep wisdom in Taoism and Zen. So, when I see my fellow Catholics dismiss Rohr's ideas as 'too Eastern,' I can't help but feel... well, 'proud,' in an unusual way.

Perhaps part of the reason why I find it easier to question rigid doctrines, and not cling to any identity, has to do with the fact that I used to feel like a bit of an 'outsider' myself – as a kid who grew up in a very conservative Catholic community back in the day, and who was bullied a lot by other kids.

When you don't fit neatly into the box, you're more inclined to look outside it)



#### The paralysis of overthinking

Overthinking is when our rational mind, the tool we've been taught to trust, goes into overdrive. It hates an open question. It runs endless, exhausting "what-if" scenarios, trying to calculate and control an outcome that is, by its nature, uncontrollable.

I'm sure you've been there. A friend suddenly goes quiet, stops replying to texts. Your "rational" mind doesn't just sit with the uncertainty. It creates a dozen painful, elaborate theories:

"What did I say?"

"Are they angry?"

"Did something terrible happen?"

In other words, you get trapped in a cycle of assumptions about things not within your ability to know at all. What good will it do?

Or, how about this? Have you ever spent many weeks researching the 'perfect' laptop or camera, reading hundreds of reviews – until you're so overwhelmed by 'what-ifs' that you just give up?

Or, have you written the same email a dozen times, trying to account for every possible way the recipient might misinterpret it?



Too often, we get so stuck in this 'analysis paralysis,' terrified of making a mistake, that we do nothing at all.

This paralysis is the mind's last-ditch attempt to avoid uncertainty. It's the illusion that if we just think hard enough, we can find a single 'perfect,' risk-free path.

But as we know, no such path exists at all.

These challenges are all forms of the same thing: a desperate clinging to conviction. We think a strong belief is a virtue, but when it's just a shield against fear, it becomes a prison.

The belief that 'I must never fail' is what keeps you from ever trying.

The belief that 'I must find the perfect partner' blinds you to the good, imperfect people right in front of you.

The belief that 'my way is the only right way' isolates you from the very people you crave connection with.



#### Convictions are more dangerous foes of truth than lies.

#### Friedrich Nietzsche

#### The trap of emotions

It's the moment our own minds, in a desperate attempt to protect us, become our own prisons. We refuse to confront uncertainty – not out of logic, but out of the sheer force of our own overwhelming emotions (grief, anger, desire, etc. to name a few).

In his book *No Death No Fear*, the late Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh tells a parable that, I think, is a perfect example of this:

A young tradesman came home and saw that his house had been robbed and burned by bandits. Right outside what was left of the house, there was a small, charred body. He thought the body belonged to his little boy. He did not know that his child was still alive. He did not know that after having burned the house, the bandits had taken the little boy away with them. In his state of confusion, the tradesman believed the body he saw was his son.

So he cried, he beat his chest and pulled out his hair in grief. Then he began the cremation ceremony.

This man loved his little boy so much. His son was the raison d'e tre of his life. He longed for his little boy so much that he could not abandon the little boy's ashes even for one moment. He made a velvet bag and put the ashes inside. He carried the bag with him day and night, and

whether he was working or resting, he was never separated from the bag of ashes.

One night his son escaped from the robbers. He came to the new house built by his father. He knocked excitedly on the door at 2 o'clock in the morning. His father called out as he wept, still holding the bag of ashes.

"Who is there?"

"It's me, your son!" the boy answered through the door.

"You naughty person, you are not my boy. My child died three months ago. I have his ashes with me right here."

The little boy continued to beat on the door and cried and cried. He begged over and over again to come in, but his father continued to refuse him entry. The man held firm to the notion that his little boy was already dead – and that this other child was some heartless person who had come to torment him.

Finally, the boy left – and the father lost his son forever.



Even now, I still find the story haunting. The father's grief, a profound emotion, solidified into an idea so real that nothing else could enter his mind. He clung to his miserable "fact" (the ashes) rather than just being brave enough to open the door – and let reality come in.

He got caught in one idea, and as Thich Nhat Hanh said, "Even if the truth comes in person and knocks at your door, you will refuse to open your mind."

We see this many times in life, right? When someone cuts us off in traffic, our rage instantly creates a "certain" story that they are a selfish, horrible person. It blinds us to the uncertain (but possible) reality that they are in an emergency, rushing a loved one to the hospital.

Another example. For some of us, that desperate need for a relationship drives us to believe that a toxic partner is "the one". We end up ignoring all the real, knocking-on-the-door evidence – from our family, our friends, our own gut – that the relationship is not healthy at all.

In each case, our own feeling creates a "fact" that makes us blind to the truth right in front of us.

The desire for security and the feeling of insecurity are the same thing. To hold your breath is to lose your breath.

**Alan Watts** 

#### The seduction of "fake certainty"

I remember once reading a story about an atheist scholar and an old

woman that goes like this (which, as I later found out, speaks to a philosophical argument called "Pascal's wager"):

In a crowded public square, a renowned Scholar – a man celebrated for his philosophical arguments against religion – had just finished a dazzling lecture on the non-existence of God. His audience was enthralled, their applause resounding as he gathered his notes.

Just as he was about to depart, an old woman, humble and dressed in simple clothes, made her way to the front and addressed him in a gentle voice.

"Sir Scholar, your words were truly magnificent," she said. "I am a plain woman with no learning, and I cannot match wits with you. I have only one question for you."

The Scholar paused and gave her his assent.

"Consider first: If you choose to believe in God and live your life accordingly, and then you discover in death that God does not exist. What, truly, have you lost?"

The Scholar considered this. "I would have lost some earthly freedom, perhaps some pleasures, and some time spent in prayer."

"A finite loss, then," the woman confirmed. "A few brief, worldly things."

"Now, consider this: If you choose to believe in God and live your life accordingly, and then you discover in death that God does exist. What have you gained?"

"I would have gained entry into the presence of an Almighty Creator," the Scholar conceded.

"An infinite gain," the woman concluded. "An eternity of happiness."

"But finally, Sir Scholar, consider this: If you choose not to believe, and yet when you draw your last breath, you discover that God does exist. What have you lost then?"

The Scholar stood silent, his brilliant mind momentarily frozen.



As a kid, I found this "solution" to be totally convincing. But now... I have to admit, it feels "childish."

Why? Because it's an argument that encourages a "faith" born NOT out of love, authenticity, or a genuine search for truth, but out of a self-interested fear of punishment and a greed for reward.

It's something utilitarian, not spiritual at all.

A faith, a love, or a commitment born of fear and reward will crumble at the first sign of real suffering. Think about how many people decide to leave their company as soon as their benefits are threatened, or as soon as another company offers higher pay. If the organization does not foster any real sense of meaning in the job at all (whether through an inspiring, resonating vision/ investment in training & skill development/ supportive relationships/ psychological safety, etc.) aside from the paycheck, that is going to happen – for sure!

It is the very definition of a "house built on sand."

Nowadays, we see this pattern of seeking easy certainty everywhere, often dressed up as 'rational' solutions or quick fixes. For example:

- The various get-rich-quick schemes or "guaranteed" investment returns that prey on our financial anxieties.
- The fad diets that promise effortless, permanent transformation.
- The strong, loud voices that claim to have easy answers to complex political or societal problems.

In each case, a complex reality is replaced by a seductive promise.



## 3.3. THE CAGES OF CONVICTION

I remember back in the day, I came across Mark Manson's website, on which he introduced himself as "*life advice that does not suck*". To be honest, I was a little appalled by that slogan at that time.

But now thinking about it, I suppose there's a reason why Mark chose that motto. It's because there's truth behind it. That a lot of life advice DOES suck. Especially the one many self-help experts tend to share.

It's not necessarily that it's wrong; I do believe that series like *Chicken Soup for the Soul* have offered comfort and value to many. But what I find is that many times, the advice falls flat – because **it promises certainty where there is none**.

It offers simple formulas, quick fixes, or fairy-tale endings that ignore the messy reality of life.

It tends to point us toward a guru or an external "answer," rather than empowering us to become the authors of our own journey.

It's like a painkiller that masks the symptom without addressing the root cause, keeping us stuck in the very patterns we want to escape.

In our efforts to embrace uncertainty, we are – in reality – just clinging even more rigidly to certainty. And I believe such a line of thinking will get us nowhere at all.

A mind that is truly uncertain has no fear. It is only the mind that is afraid, that follows, that demands authority.

Jiddu Krishnamurti

## 3.3. THE CAGES OF CONVICTION

## **Challenges of Uncertainty**



False promises everywhere



Identity's dark side



Overthinking paralysis



The emotional trap



Seductive "fake certainty"



# BUILDING A HOUSE ON THE ROCK



A wise man built his house on a rock. The rain came down; and it didn't fall, for it was founded on the rock.

Matthew 7:24-25

# Do everything in your human power, and then wait for the decree of heaven.

#### Japanese Proverb

We've talked about the why. We've seen the challenges. Now, we get to the most important part: the how.

How do we confront the unknown without simply becoming reckless?

It's tempting, especially in our culture, to equate "embracing uncertainty" with a kind of YOLO ("You Only Live Once") impulsivity: jumping off cliffs, consequences be damned.

But that's not what we're talking about here.

The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, famous for his concept of the "leap of faith," once stressed that **this leap comes only after reflection**. Rather than a blind jump into the void, it's a conscious choice made after grappling honestly with the uncertainty.

It's stepping forward **because you've reflected**, NOT because you haven't.

Instead of throwing caution to the wind, it's about cultivating the inner strength and courage needed to act wisely when the path ahead is foggy. And it is something that can be achieved through daily efforts.

Below are a few practices that, as I figure, have helped me the most.

#### **Anchor in your values**

When in doubt tell the truth. It will confound your enemies and astound your friends.

Mark Twain

When everything seems so uncertain – when the path ahead looks so daunting, you need an internal compass: your set of **core values**.

These are what provide the foundational "why" - the answer to the question, "What truly matters to me, regardless of the outcome?"

Your "Way" might be different from mine. Perhaps you're drawn to the <u>Stoic principles</u> of virtue and self-control. Maybe it's the Buddhist path of compassion. The key is to know what your anchor is.

For me, I've found my anchor <u>in two core ideas</u> (among others too): a kind of anti-materialism and a deep commitment to social harmony (what the Japanese call <u>wa or nagomi</u> – 和).

My anti-materialism isn't about rejecting money; it's about rejecting the idea that my worth is tied to it. It's a belief that true wealth is intrinsic – honor, dignity, learning, and service.

Thanks to it, I have been able to, somehow, brace the uncertainty of following my passion (and sacrificing my full-time profession) until now. And also thanks to it, I have found myself not easily moved by the exaggerated claims of many so-called "influencers"/ "celebrities"/ "experts" on social media.

At the same time, my commitment to harmony allows me to focus less on personal gain – but on **service to the community**.



Speaking of which, I remember I had a mental crisis during the first few months after starting this blog. At that time, I was obsessed with "vanity metrics" like website traffic and revenue. The uncertainty of those numbers was making me miserable.

I had to, eventually, re-anchor by <u>asking myself</u>, "Why am I really doing this?"

The answer was clear: to serve, to share, to connect.

As soon as I realized (and accepted) that, my goal shifted from "How many clicks can I get?" (an unknown outcome) to "Did I create something honest and helpful today?" (a controllable process).

This mindset shift – from an obsession with results to a conviction in one's values – is what allows us to stand firm in the wind.

Somehow, it reminds me of the time I watched the movie *Bridge of Spies*, where the lawyer James Donovan (played by Tom Hanks) is tasked with defending a Soviet spy, Rudolf Abel, at the height of the Cold War. He faces immense public hatred (as people are under the impression that he works for the "enemy"), and the outcome of what he does is dangerously uncertain.



But Donovan does not base his decisions on public opinion. Nor does he think too much about winning the case. He is driven solely by his values: **the Constitution**, **due process**, and **his own integrity**. It does not matter what others think; he knows he is acting honorably – and that alone is enough.

Abel later describes Donovan as a "Stoikiy Muzhik" ("Standing Man"), referencing a man from his childhood who, no matter how many times he was beaten down, simply got back up. Like that man, Donovan could "stand" because his feet were planted firmly on the rock of his principles.

I was at the age of your son, our house was overrun by partisan border guards. My father was beaten, my mother was beaten, and this man, my father's friend, he was beaten. And I watched this man. Every time they hit him, he stood back up again. So they hit him harder. Still he got back to his feet. I think because of this they stopped the beating.



That moral clarity, as demonstrated in one of the film's taglines, is just "the difference between war and peace." It's the proof that among the midst of uncertainty, the only hope one has is to be an "honest man/ woman". To be anchored in one's values.

When you know what your "treasures" are, you become a "Standing Man" or "Standing Woman" in your own life. Decision-making in the fog becomes infinitely simpler. You just ask: "Which path, no matter how scary, aligns with my deepest 'why'?"

Will my first step change the world? Maybe it will change, and maybe it will not. But one does not need to think now about what the results will be, or anything like that.

Ichiro Kishimi, 'The Courage to Be Happy'



#### **Develop mindfulness**

The greatest obstacle to living is expectancy, which hangs upon tomorrow and loses today. You are arranging what is in Fortune's control and abandoning what lies in yours.

Seneca

Our anxiety doesn't live in the present moment. It lies in the future. It's a "what-if" machine.

"What if I fail?"

"What if they leave me?"

"What if I get sick?"

Uncertainty is a problem of the future. The one place where it cannot exist is this exact moment.

Right now, you are reading this sentence. That is all.

In this second, you are okay.

The practice of mindfulness, or meditation, is simply the training of returning your mind to the "now." It's not quite about "emptying your mind" or achieving some mystical state (well, at least for the ordinary person like you and me).

It's just about noticing.

When you feel that familiar spiral of anxiety, just observe it. "Ah, I am overthinking again." Then, bring your attention back to your senses.

What can you feel? The chair under you? The air on your skin?

What can you hear? The hum of a fan? The sound of your breathing?

You are bringing yourself back to the only thing you can ever truly control: your response to this moment.

The idea behind mindfulness (and other <u>spiritual practices</u>) is not to escape discomfort, or to succumb to "<u>spiritual bypassing</u>". Quite the opposite actually. What it does is train us to <u>stay present with reality</u>, rather than running away into worry or denial.

Over time, it will give rise to what the poet John Keats referred to as 'Negative Capability' – the strength to simply be with mysteries and doubts, without that need to immediately solve/ explain them away.

I suppose by now, some might wonder: how is it possible that one can just sit with reality – and not panic at all?

I believe we can revisit the story of *Bridge of Spies* to understand this. After being captured by FBI agents, the Soviet spy Rudolf Abel faces his trial and a potential death sentence. When his lawyer, Donovan, asks him if he isn't worried about being executed, Abel simply replies:

#### "Would it help?"

And he repeats this mantra throughout the whole storyline.



To me, Abel's question is a profound mindfulness tool. It's not about being cold or superhuman; it's a perfectly rational assessment.

It forces you to see anxiety for what it is: an unproductive expenditure of energy on an uncertain future you cannot control.

Asking "Would it help?" is a way of calling your own bluff, allowing you to let go of the unproductive spiral, and return to the present moment.

Let go of certainty. The opposite isn't uncertainty. It's openness, curiosity and a willingness to embrace paradox, rather than choose up sides.

#### **Tony Schwartz**

#### **Cultivate curiosity**

What if uncertainty wasn't a threat to be managed, but an invitation to be curious?

Have you ever thought about it that way before?

It's not easy to adopt such a line of thinking, but I dare to say that it's a liberating one that will facilitate a powerful mindset shift.

Back in the day, I came across <u>a wonderful TED Talk</u> that addressed the theme of embracing uncertainty using 2 very inspiring metaphors.

The first is to be a "mudlark" – i.e. someone who combs the shores of a river, looking for historical fragments. They don't expect to find a perfect, whole Roman vase. They are thrilled to find a single, interesting "shard" – a piece of a cup, a broken tile.

This is how we should approach life. Stop looking for the "perfect, whole answer." Just be a mudlark. Collect shards of experience – an interesting article, a new recipe, a conversation with a stranger, a weird idea.

Just see the incomplete as fascinating, not as a failure.



The second metaphor is <u>Kintsugi</u> (金継ぎ) – the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with lacquer mixed with gold. Instead of hiding the cracks, the idea is to highlight them, believing the piece is more beautiful because it was broken and mended.

Your "breaks" – failures, heartbreaks, mistakes – are not things to hide. They are your own story.

When you mend them with <u>self-compassion</u> and what you've learned, they become the strongest, most valuable parts of who you are.

Far too often, we treat our perceived flaws/ lack of certain "competencies" as something to be ashamed of. Maybe you're told you're "too sensitive" in a tough work environment. Or perhaps you're "too quiet" in a culture that rewards the loudest voice.

Maybe, like me, you're not driven by financial metrics, which is often seen as a lack of "ambition." Many of us view these as fixed failures.

But what happens if we get curious about them?

Curiosity invites uncertainty in the best possible way. It takes that certain label ("I am a failure at X") and shatters it into a thousand new questions.

It asks: "What if this isn't a flaw, but a feature? What if my 'sensitivity' is actually a superpower for empathy and connection? What if being 'quiet' means I'm a world-class listener and observer? What if my 'lack of ambition' is a different, more sustainable anchor of wisdom?"



Curiosity is what turns a "flaw" (a fake certainty) into a "shard" (a fascinating uncertainty to explore). It allows us to embrace the truth of who we are, rather than clinging to the "fact" that we're not good enough.

It is by adopting a humble, open, and curious mind, free from the arrogance of "knowing-it-all," that we may finally be ready to learn and grow.

Sometimes, the train you took by mistake takes you to your destination.

Japanese Proverb

#### Have a sense of humor

If I had no sense of humor, I would long ago have committed suicide.

Mahatma Gandhi

Life is often chaotic, unpredictable, and sometimes downright ridiculous. When our grand plans inevitably go sideways, when we make mistakes, or when things just don't make sense, having the ability to step back and find the humor in the situation is incredibly helpful.

Humor's power against uncertainty lies in its ability to **instantly re- frame our perspective**. It allows us to step outside of our own heads
and see our anxieties/ setbacks not as life-ending crises, but as part of
the human condition.

Have you ever been meticulously prepared for something important – a job interview, a big presentation, or a difficult conversation – only for something to go wrong in the critical moment? For instance, your laptop died, you spilled coffee on your shirt, or you completely blanked on your opening line.

For the ordinary person, they are very likely to treat it as a disaster:

"I've ruined everything."

"They think I'm an idiot."

"My career is over."

On the other hand, a humorous mind, after the initial jolt of panic, would find the absurdity.

"Okay, deep breath. That was... clumsy. What can I do now?"

That small shift is everything. It's not about dismissing real pain or denying that the situation is difficult. Rather, you refuse to let the weight of the situation crush your spirit entirely.

It's a powerful way to reclaim balance and bounce back from the unexpected.

The past is dead. The future is uncertain; the present is all you have. So eat, drink, and live merrily.

Albert Einstein



Practice "sufficient" asceticism (minimalism)

Take nothing for the journey except a staff – no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra shirt.

Mark 6:8-9

How do you cultivate resilience for the involuntary uncertainty of life (like a health crisis or a job loss)? One way to do it, as I figured, is to practice voluntary uncertainty.

This ties directly back to my value of anti-materialism. Back in the day, some ancient philosophers, like Diogenes, took the idea to an extreme, living in a barrel and renouncing everything.

For my part, I don't believe we need to go that far. Rather, one should learn to tread some kind of *Middle Path*.

The most practical way to do this is through minimalism.

When you declutter your home, you're not just organizing your closet. You're practicing detachment. For every item, you ask, "Can I live without this? Does this really make me happy?" You are proving to yourself that your identity is not tied to your possessions.

Another way is to practice small, voluntary discomforts. For example, many times, in the late evening, I'll get that familiar pang of hunger. The "common sense" script, the certainty, immediately kicks in: "You are hungry. You must eat."

But over time, I've learned to get curious. Instead of just reacting, I'll often decide not to eat and just... sit with the discomfort. I'll observe it. Is it really hunger? Or is it boredom? Or just a habit?

That powerful feeling of "hunger," which my mind registers as an objective fact, is often just a guess. And almost always, after a few minutes of just watching it, the "crisis" passes. The feeling fades.

I've just challenged a small, bodily "certainty" and realized I have the power to change my reality by simply not reacting.

I've embraced a moment of discomfort and proven to myself, once again, that I am not a slave to my impulses.

Every time you fast from a meal, take a cold shower, or sell something you don't need, you are sending a message to your nervous system: "I can be uncomfortable, and I will be okay."

You are building an inner fortress of resilience, one small, voluntary act at a time. This makes you far less afraid of the involuntary discom-

forts life will inevitably send your way.

Look well into thyself; there is a source of strength which will always spring up if thou wilt always look.

**Marcus Aurelius** 



**Adopt an action-oriented mindset** 

This is the precept by which I have lived: Prepare for the worst; expect the best; and take what comes.

Hannah Arendt

You cannot think your way out of uncertainty. You must act your way through it.

#### Be flexible

As mentioned, our innate desire for certainty does serve a practical function. We need tools like KPIs, project deadlines, and personal commitments to <u>organize our lives</u> and collaborate.

The key is to see them as guides, not chains. A KPI is a tool to guide action, not a rigid, unbreakable law. Acknowledge that it's based on a snapshot in time. When new information emerges, you have the flexibility to adapt.

"But what if my boss/ client demands a clear commitment?" Some may be thinking that by now. In that case, instead of saying "I can't" immediately, I believe we can reframe it by asking <u>questions like</u>:

"What are the most significant risks we need to account for?"

"What are the factors that could prevent us from meeting this goal?"

"Based on the information we have, what is the most likely outcome, and what is our plan if that changes?"

And if necessary, don't be afraid to set boundaries – between what is realistically possible (your efforts to follow a plan) and what is not (an outcome that is subject to so many external variables).

#### • Embrace the "probable" over the "certain"

This is a very important mindset shift, especially at work. Instead of demanding absolute certainty (a fallacy), it's better to focus on what is probable.

You can't guarantee a project will be done by May 1st. But you can define a high-probability outcome based on the data you have today.

#### Focus on process, not outcomes

We've touched on this, but it's the core of action. You can't control if you get the job. Yet you can send five well-researched applications today – that is totally within your ability.

You can't control whether your blog post goes viral. But you can control writing and publishing it. Value the effort.



#### Devise alternatives

Never put all your emotional eggs in one basket. If your entire sense of self-worth is riding on one uncertain outcome ("I must get this promotion"), the fear will be paralyzing. A wise person would, instead, cultivate options.

"I'm applying for that promotion, but I'm also updating my portfolio for freelance work and setting up a coffee chat with an old colleague."

This way, you reduce your dependence on any single outcome.

#### Take small, low-stakes leaps

"Leap of faith" doesn't have to mean quitting your job. You can practice every single day.

My friend who asks to borrow money? That's a perfect small leap. I apply a simple rule: I only lend an amount I am fully prepared to consider a "gift."

By accepting the worst-case scenario, I free myself to act out of generosity, not fear.

Try a new restaurant without reading 100 reviews. Take a different route home from work. These are the small reps that build the "faith" muscle.

#### Act with informed conviction

This brings us back to the question I posed in the beginning – the one that haunted me when I first watched *Indiana Jones*: How could he possibly take that step? Was it just blind faith?

Looking back, I realize Indy's leap wasn't blind at all. **He had reflected on the clues** – his father's diary, the pattern in the trials. His terror was real precisely because he acknowledged the risk.

His courage wasn't in not being afraid; it was in taking the step **des**-**pite that fear**, based on an informed conviction that went beyond
what his eyes could see.

Most of our leaps aren't life-or-death like Indy's. But the principle is the same. We gather what information we can, we reflect, we acknowledge the risk, and then we choose to act.

You don't have to see the whole path. You just need to be willing to take the next step.

Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase.

Martin Luther King Jr.



That being said, sometimes life does present us with truly agonizing dilemmas – where even after reflection, every path seems to lead to loss or violates a deeply held value.

For example, have you heard about the "Trolley Problem" thought experiment? A runaway trolley is heading down a track where 5 people are working and will be killed if nothing is done. You are a bystander next to a lever that can divert the trolley onto a different track. The second track has only one person working on it, who will be killed if you pull the lever. The question is: Do you pull the lever, sacrificing one person to save five?

No matter what you do, someone will die, and your action (or inaction) determines who it is.

Or, have you heard about the story of <u>Uruguayan Air Force Flight 571</u> – where survivors stranded in the Andes were, due to starvation, forced to resort to cannibalism (eating the deceased) just to stay alive?

In these moments, there is no clean, "right" answer guaranteed. And that is when "informed conviction" takes on a much deeper meaning.

It means acknowledging the tragic nature of the choice, acting in alignment with your most fundamental values (even if imperfectly), and crucially, finding the inner resources – be it acceptance, faith, or self-compassion – to carry the unavoidable weight of that decision.

It requires us to act without the comfort of knowing that we did the "perfect" thing, only that we did the best we could in an impossible situation.

It's not easy, I know. In those moments, we must find a different kind of conviction – not faith in a guaranteed outcome, but **in the principle** of the action itself.

It's the trust that acting with honesty, integrity, and compassion is, in itself, the only meaningful response, regardless of the consequences. In other words, "what you did" matters more than what people think.

It's the conviction to be a "Standing Man" or "Standing Woman", no matter how painful the choice is.

Morality resides in the painfulness of an indefinite questioning.

Simone de Beauvoir, 'The Ethics of Ambiguity'



I tore myself away from the safe comfort of certainties through my love for truth – and truth rewarded me.

Simone de Beauvoir

#### Think like a philosopher

Embracing uncertainty is more than just coming up with a list of coping mechanisms; it requires a specific mindset: **that of a philosopher**. Not an academic professor, but a "lover of wisdom" in one's daily life.

It starts, as Socrates and Confucius taught, with **intellectual humility** – the courageous admission that our understanding is always incomplete. That there is a gap in our ability to comprehend *phenomena* vs that of the *noumena* itself.

When we think we "know" who we are, fixed and unchangeable, we shut the door to further growth.

When we admit "I don't know," then the possibility of truly knowing opens up.

Being a philosopher of your life means actively engaging with the world and yourself – by trying new things, regularly examining your inner world, and above all, always questioning. Questioning everything – including things typically regarded as "common sense" (e.g. 'Why is the sky blue?', 'Why do we have to work?') and even those that may seem ridiculous to the ordinary person (e.g. 'What is right, and what is wrong?').

Speaking of which, I remember once coming across a parable by the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi:

Once upon a time, I dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of my happiness as a butterfly, unaware that I was myself. Soon I awaked, and there I was, veritably myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man.



I suppose most would dismiss such an idea as utterly nonsense. And yet for me, I somehow felt really captivated the first time I read it.

To me, such a mindset – daring to question the very certainty of reality itself – is exactly the foundation of philosophy. Of knowledge itself.

Remember the priest I mentioned above, who dismissed ideas like reincarnation with oversimplistic arguments? While my Christian background doesn't align with reincarnation, simply holding it as a possibility – as a philosophical question rather than a threat – has made me arrive at profound reflections.

If there are no previous lives, where was I before I was conceived?

If there wasn't a 'me,' was it just... void? Or what? What was there?

Assuming that there's an afterlife – either in heaven, hell or purgatory, as it is taught in mainstream Christianity – then why is my "lifespan" (including this life and the afterlife) much shorter compared to the ones who were born thousands/ millions of years ago?

There are no easy answers. But living with these questions – letting them sit there without demanding resolution – has been incredibly fruitful. Specifically, it fuels my humility, curiosity to keep searching, and empathy for others grappling with their own worries/ crises.

It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.

Attributed to Aristotle in Lowell L. Bennion, 'Religion and the Pursuit of Truth'



Now, some might be wondering: **Doesn't this deep philosophical questioning contradict the pragmatism of the Parable of the Poisoned Arrow we discussed earlier**? Should we be pulling out the arrow of suffering, or getting lost in butterfly dreams?

I believe the answer is both. The key is context and balance.

The Poisoned Arrow teaches us crucial triage: when faced with urgent issues (our own or others'), endless speculation is just a dangerous distraction. We must act.

But the "philosopher" mindset isn't meant for moments of crisis. It's for the quieter moments of reflection and seeking deeper insight.

It's the practice that cultivates the wisdom, humility, and resilience needed to act effectively when the next arrow inevitably strikes.

Philosophical inquiry fuels our humility and expands our perspective, making us better at dealing with suffering when it arises.

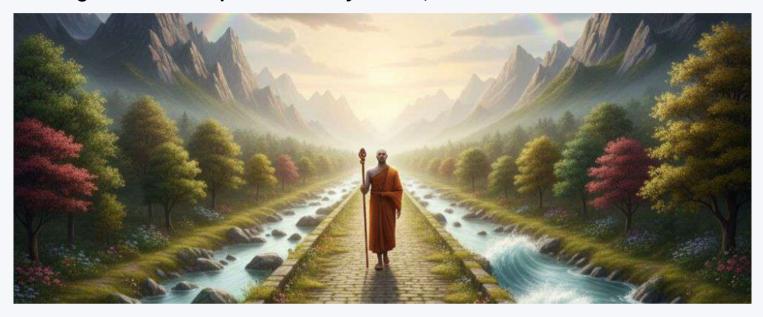
It's not about choosing one over the other; it's about **knowing when** each is needed. As the Buddha has taught – treading the *Middle Path*.

There's a time for daring and there's a time for caution, and a wise man understands which is called for.

John Keating, 'Dead Poets Society' (1989)

(As a side note, I would like to say – as I have <u>pointed out in another article</u> – that I DO have enough life experiences to, at least, believe in the

validity of teachings like reincarnation, even though I have not embraced it wholly as a truth yet. It remains, for me, a thought-provoking lens through which to explore life's mysteries)



**Reflect on your mortality** 

Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life.

Steve Jobs

Death, as discussed, is the only absolute certainty in life – though its timing is shrouded in mystery. While talking about death is naturally uncomfortable for most of us, contemplating it ('Memento Mori,' as the ancient Romans called it) is the key to finding peace with all the uncertainty life throws at us.

Think about it. The fear of asking for that raise, the anxiety over whether a new project will succeed, the worry about what others think of us – how significant do these really feel when placed against the backdrop of our limited time here?

Contemplating mortality isn't about being morbid; it's about **perspective**. It's a filter that helps us distinguish the truly important from the merely urgent or trivial. It clarifies our values like nothing else.

After all, we can be submerged by death **at any moment**. There's no guarantee that tomorrow will come.

When we truly let that sink in – not just intellectually, but **feel it** – the need to cling tightly to anything (possessions, status, knowledge, etc) starts to dissolve. It forces an awakening, sharpening our senses, cutting through the noise of abstract debates and daily anxieties. It becomes the ultimate motivation to stop sleepwalking and **truly live**.

Contemplating death doesn't require us to do anything special at all. Just take a few brief moments each day and ask yourself:

"Knowing my time isn't infinite, does this worry really matter?"

"What would I regret not doing if my time were shorter than I expect?"

While the practice doesn't eliminate uncertainty, it DOES change our relationship to it. By accepting the ultimate unknown – the when and how of our end – we will find the courage to live more fully and authentically today, despite all of the messy things.

Ardently do today what must be done. Who knows? Tomorrow, death comes.

Buddha



#### Learn to love & trust

You must understand that seeing is believing, but also know that believing is seeing.

**Denis Waitley** 

By now, we have been talking about embracing uncertainty mostly as an internal practice. Now it's time to turn it outward – to face the randomness often encountered in our relationships with other people.

We can't control them. We can't predict them. We can't "solve" them. After all, as Dostoevsky once commented, "Man is a mystery."

For many of us, our "default" mode, driven by fear, is to adopt a transactional approach:

"I will trust you if you prove you're trustworthy."

"I will love you if you meet my conditions."

In other words, we demand guarantees before we're willing to commit.

That is not love nor friendship at all. That is a calculation. And as discussed previously, a reward-based relationship will never last.

To love means to commit oneself without guarantee, to give oneself completely. Love is an act of faith, and whoever is of little faith is also of little love.

**Erich Fromm** 

This, I've come to believe, is the ultimate practice for embracing uncertainty. It's an active, passionate choice to show confidence – without condition.

It's the decision to **start first**. To <u>offer your trust</u> without a guarantee of it being returned. To listen deeply to someone without knowing for sure that they will listen to you.

Why is it so vital? Isn't it pure naivety? I myself don't think so.

In fact, it's the only way for relationships to work.

PHILOSOPHER: In what way can I get someone to receive and listen deeply to my words? I cannot force them and say, 'Believe in me.' That person is free to believe or not. The only thing I can do is believe in the other party to whom I am speaking. That is all. I want you to believe in me. So, I will believe in you first, even if you yourself are trying not to believe. I believe in you, whether

you believe in me or not. I keep on believing. That is the meaning of <u>unconditional</u>.

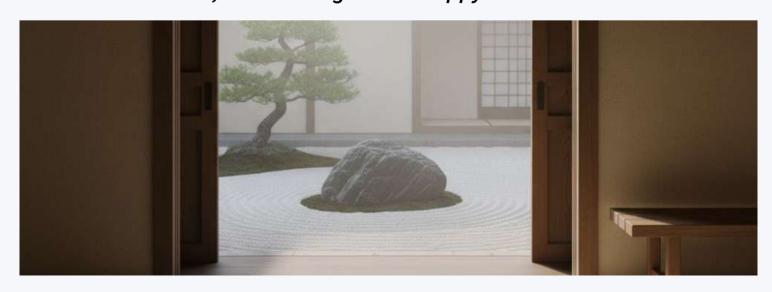
Take, for example, when parents who do not have confidence in their children are worrying about various things. Even if their arguments are quite reasonable ones, they do not reach the children. Actually, the more reasonable the arguments are, the more the children want to oppose them. Why do they oppose them?

Because their parents aren't actually seeing them at all, and even as the parents are in the midst of distrusting themselves, the children are getting all the standard lectures.

YOUTH: But... Even if I believe in someone, there's no way to know if that person will have confidence in me – or if that person will embark on a friend relationship with me!

PHILOSOPHER: This is the separation of tasks. How does that other person feel about you and what sort of attitude do they take towards you? Those are the other person's tasks and are not something you have any control over.

Ichiro Kishimi, 'The Courage to Be Happy'



After all, human beings are not static creatures. They are always capable of changing. The workaholic husband who never spends time with his family now – there's no guarantee that he cannot become a better husband in the future.

In the book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl mentions a story as follows:

Let me cite the case of Dr. J. He was the only man I ever encountered in my whole life whom I would dare to call a Mephistophelean being, a satanic figure. At that time he was generally called "the mass murderer of Steinhof" (the large mental hospital in Vienna). When the Nazis started their euthanasia program, he held all the strings in his hands and was so fanatic in the job assigned to him that he tried not to let one single psychotic individual escape the gas chamber.

After the war, when I came back to Vienna, I asked what had happened to Dr. J. "He had been imprisoned by the Russians in one of the isolation cells of Steinhof," they told me. "The next day, however, the door of his cell stood open and Dr. J. was never seen again." Later I was convinced that, like others, he had, with the help of his comrades, made his way to South America.

More recently, however, I was consulted by a former Austrian diplomat who had been imprisoned behind the Iron Curtain for many years, first in Siberia and then in the famous Lubianka prison in Moscow. While I was examining him neurologically, he suddenly asked me whether I happened to know Dr. J. After my affirmative reply, he continued:

"I made his acquaintance in Lubianka. There he died, at about the age

of forty, from cancer of the urinary bladder. Before he died, however, he showed himself to be the best comrade you can imagine! He gave consolation to everybody. He lived up to the highest conceivable moral standard. He was the best friend I ever met during my long years in prison!"

This is the story of Dr. J., "the mass murderer of Steinhof." **How can we** dare to predict the behavior of man? We may predict the movements of a machine, of an automaton; more than this, we may even try to predict the mechanisms or "dynamisms" of the human psyche as well. **But man** is more than psyche.

If a man like Dr. J. can hold the potential for such a profound transformation, then anyone can. In other words, no person is a fixed "fact." Everyone is an unfolding mystery.



We know that – intuitively and empirically – yet too often, we refuse to accept it. Just like the father with the bag of ashes, our tendency is to be obsessed with a "certainty" about others (e.g. "that person is toxic," "my boss is a jerk," "that family member will never change"). Especially when it comes to those in our inner circles – to our most intimate relationships every single day.

The renowned executive <u>coach</u> Marshall Goldsmith once shared a story about this in his bestseller *The Earned Life*.

10 years ago, I began coaching an executive. Let's call him Mike. His natural leadership skills set him apart from the standard C-suite issue of smart, motivated, underpromise-and-overdeliver types. But he had some rough edges that needed smoothing.

Insensitive, rarely wrong, and entitled. These were issues that came up in my 360-degree reviews with his colleagues and direct reports, which I shared with him. He accepted the criticism with grace, and in less than two years changed his behavior to his own satisfaction and, more important, in the opinion of his peers.

We remained friends after he became CEO, talking at least once a month. He and his wife – college sweethearts – had 4 grown kids, all out of the house and on their own. The marriage was solid after years of tension when Mike was focused on his career while his wife, Sherry, raised the kids and built up a seemingly unshakable resentment of Mike's self-absorption and insensitivity.

"Is Sherry wrong?" I asked, pointing out that if he had been perceived as insensitive and entitled at work, he probably was the same at home.

"But I've changed," he said. "She's even admitted it. And we're much happier. Why won't she let it go?"

I explained the <u>Every Breath Paradigm</u> to him, stressing how hard it was for Westerners to conceive that we are not a unitary mass of flesh and bone and emotions and memories, but rather a steadily expanding multitude of individuals, each one time-stamped in the moment of our most recent breath – and reborn with every breath.

"When your wife thinks about her marriage, <u>she can't separate the</u> <u>previous Mike from the man who is her husband today</u>. They're one character to her, a permanent persona. It's how we all think."

Mike struggled with the concept. He couldn't think of himself as a running series of many Mikes, a new one nearly eight million times a year (the estimated number of breaths we take annually). It collided with his fixed self-image of the impressive, successful Mike that he projected to the world.

We still talk regularly and he's still a CEO. But in the summer of 2019 he called me out of the blue, excitedly announcing, "I got it!"

He described a conversation he'd had the day before with Sherry. They were driving back from a Fourth of July reunion at their weekend home with the kids and their partners and friends. It was a crowded but joyous weekend, and Mike and Sherry were reliving the high points on the two-hour drive, pleased at how the children turned out, how engaging and helpful their friends were, how the kids did most of the cooking and cleaning up. Basically, they were congratulating themselves on their good fortune and their successful parenting.

Then Sherry threw a wet blanket on their reverie.

"I just wish you had contributed more when they were growing up," she said. "I was so alone most of the time."

"I wasn't hurt by her words, or angry," Mike told me. "I turned to her and very calmly said,

'You're right about that guy ten years ago. He was clueless about many things. **But that's not the guy in this car right now**. He's a better man now. Tomorrow he's going to be someone else trying to be a little better. Another thing – that woman who suffered back then is not the same woman today. You're faulting me for the actions of someone who doesn't exist anymore. It's not right."

The car was silent for a long ten seconds. Then Sherry apologized, adding, "You're right. I have to work on that."

Think about it. How often do we, like Sherry, cling to our past understanding of someone – a partner, a parent, a friend – based on their old mistakes?

How many times do we hold onto the "ashes" of who they were, blinding ourselves to the living person who is breathing in front of us?

Embracing uncertainty – especially in the context of relationships – means granting others (and ourselves!) **the grace to evolve**. It means being willing to let go of our fixed stories about them – and engage with who they are in this moment. To love, to trust, to see the potential in everyone.

This, I believe, is the final, most transformative leap. It is the ultimate acceptance of life's "delicious ambiguity."

Man is always something more than what he knows of himself. He is not what he is simply once and for all, but is a process; he is not merely an extant life, but is, within that life, endowed with possibilities through the freedom he possesses to make of himself what he will by the activities on which he decides.

Karl Jaspers

## **How to Embrace Uncertainty**



Core values



Action-oriented



Mindfulness



Think philosophy



Be curious



Contemplate death



Sense of humor



Love & trust



Minimalism



# **VOICES OF INSIGHT**



Psychological & philosophical perspectives on how to embrace life's uncertainty.





Originally published at <u>Psychology Today</u> Credit: Maja Wrzesien Ph.D.

As we move through life, we're not only encouraged to learn but also rewarded for knowing. Knowledge is closely tied to growth and progress. Over the centuries, reasoning, scientific data collection, and experimentation have helped us develop increasingly accurate models of the world.

There's no doubt that our society is built around the value of know-ledge. As a scientist I contribute to this model of reality every day. But as someone recently told me that "I don't really know what I want," I began to wonder: Why is uncertainty so often viewed so negatively? Is not knowing merely a sign of immaturity or indecision, or could it actually offer something valuable to our lives?

#### **Uncertainty can be stressful**

As much as we love knowing, we have great difficulties with tolerating uncertainty. A <u>study</u> from University College London found that uncertainty can cause more stress than a painful stimulus. The researchers showed that knowing there's a chance of receiving an electric shock causes significantly more stress than knowing for sure that you'll receive the same shock.

According to the authors, this seems to apply to many life situations. Just think about how you felt the last time your train was delayed or when you started dating someone new and weren't sure how they felt about you.

This is why embracing uncertainty, especially in a society like ours, where progress and productivity matter more than ever, can seem, if not terrifying, at least useless. Still, what if I told you that not knowing could actually be a good thing?

#### **Exploring beyond the known: A sweaty exercise**

In his recent book, economist Russ Roberts offers a compelling account of how avoiding uncertainty can actually mislead us. One might be tempted to collect the data on what we know, which might seem an acceptable choice, given the circumstances and the lack of better alternatives. However, surprisingly enough for an economist, Roberts argues that our major life decisions (what he calls *wild problems*) are exactly where data and analytical techniques may not be as helpful. So if you are asking yourself if it is the right moment to become a parent, or to make a radical career change, a cost-benefit analysis on an

Excel spreadsheet is probably not the right tool.

According to Roberts, the decision we make about the wild problem will change who we are, as well as the trajectory of our life. As <u>Jess Linz and Anna Secor</u> put it in their commentary, the ambivalence of not knowing might thus give us a glimpse of different realities that opens new possibilities:

"To be left with ambivalence (...) is to be left feeling multiplicities about it, where everything is possible, and ontologically indeterminate."

It is therefore up to us to stretch this rather rigid mind muscle beyond the data and what we already know and cope with the distress that naturally arises. But it is not an easy task. We have been taught to describe our lives as flawlessly clean, without revealing the struggle we have in getting somewhere. But life is, in essence, a sweaty exercise, in which we **rise and fall while growing and discovering** who we are and whom we want to become along the way.

#### The cloud of unknowing

So what can we do once we step into the darkness of unknowing and start to sweat?

An anonymous English monk wrote a piece entitled *The Cloud of Unknowing* which might give us some answers. The monk states that the best thing we can do with unknowing is **to experience it**. He recommended approaching it **as if we were walking in the cloud**. This, in turn, might get us as close as we possibly can to God.

I don't know how about you, but I've never walked in the cloud. I can, however, remember my last walk in the countryside on a foggy morning. My steps were slow and careful, and I could do nothing but **trust that at some point the air would become clearer** and I could start walking again with more confidence.

Ironically, I find that the level of trust I effortlessly apply while walking through the fog is significantly more challenging to find when making important life decisions. My way of dealing with wild problems feels like trying to estimate the saturation of water droplets in the air to decide whether to take the next step. It's only when I reach the point of mental exhaustion that I finally allow myself to let go of the need to understand and know.

A day might come when I will simply accept that I cannot model everything, especially the wild problems, avoiding the unnecessary pain of my self-inflected mental bondage. As Rogers says, recognizing that we are not in control does not necessarily mean that there is no control at all. Instead, he **invites us to trust**. He invites us to stay attentive to novel information that emerges as we pass through life, as an opportunity to amend the previous draft of our life plan.

"Unknowing isn't ignorance; it's recognizing a world flush with wonderment and puzzle and mystery." - Tom Lutz

#### A different approach to progress

Perhaps, as Linz and Secor suggest, we should stop expecting that remaining in the ambivalence of unknowing is likely to foster any progress. Instead, it offers us a different kind of tool, one that holds us in

an intimate relationship with the problem itself.

Not knowing is therefore like staying in the fog; a moment of being forced to stay with and experience, instead of racing around, moving beyond, or progressing toward, a certain goal. As if by giving up the mastery of knowledge, we receive a much more precious gift: that of **connecting with something greater than ourselves**, the "disconcerting irresolvability of complexity."

So, yes: I am guilty of not knowing for sure what I want in life. But growing and flourishing as a human being means exploring who we are and learning from our experiences, right? And with a pinch of trust this could be a very interesting journey.

By giving up the mastery of knowledge, we receive a much more precious gift: that of connecting with something greater than ourselves, the "disconcerting irresolvability of complexity."

Maja Wrzesien Ph.D.



Originally published at <u>The Philosophers' Magazine</u> Credit: Ross Jensen

What could it mean to think of philosophy as a way of life?

I must admit that, to my ears, the idea smacks of obsession: I imagine someone who devotes most of her waking hours to stereotypically philosophical pursuits — accosting hapless passers-by with impassioned harangues about "the ideally just society", scouring the latest issues of *Mind* and *Noûs*, getting preoccupied with obscure 19th century debates about the nature of essential properties even during her off-hours — and leaves little room in her schedule for other sorts of activities. She's the sort of person I can imagine saying, with perfect sincerity, "Philosophy isn't just my hobby or even my job — it's my life, man!"

Such an obsession with philosophy is, at least for most of us, incompatible with living well, so we should look elsewhere for a proper understanding of philosophy as a way of life. To begin with, we need to focus on how philosophy can contribute to good lives.

#### Philosophy beyond the academy

Perhaps, then, we should think of philosophy as a way of life in vocational terms, leaving it to the *professionals*, the academics employed in philosophy departments at our colleges and universities. This conception of philosophy as a way of life makes more sense than the first does, since for at least some people, surely, being a professional philosopher partially constitutes living well.

Still, the conception has a big flaw: it's implausibly exclusionary. As Socrates teaches us, it's natural to think of philosophy as a way of life as democratic, open, in principle, to anyone capable of thinking hard in a mode characterised by considerable generality. In other words, philosophy as a way of life is not just for the professionals but also for those of us that Alasdair MacIntyre calls "plain people".

#### **Coping with unresolved problems**

So here's my proposal: philosophy tends to feature in good lives because it enables us to **cope with theoretical problems** that our own (finite and imperfect) intellectual traditions leave unresolved.

Philosophy as a way of life therefore involves giving philosophical reflection a prominent place in one's life: when inherited wisdom runs out, in steps philosophy.

Okay, so far, so good. Now let's see what can be said in favour of this proposal.

#### When traditions fall short

We humans are confronted with various sorts of problems. Of course, the most pressing of these are practical problems. We hope to lead good lives in a world frequently inhospitable to us, so we must adopt strategies for coping with the many obstacles to our flourishing that we encounter on a regular basis.

Examples abound: we need nourishment in order to survive, and we don't get it automatically, so we have to develop various techniques (e.g., farming, animal husbandry, the culinary arts) in order reliably to feed ourselves; intemperate weather phenomena — heavy rain, snow, strong winds, scorching heat — can stymie our projects and even kill us, so we have to clothe and shelter ourselves; and so on.

Some of the problems that confront us aren't practical, though. Instead, **they're theoretical**. Mostly, we don't worry too much about these problems because we accept the stock resolutions to them that we inherit from our intellectual traditions.

Consider Sarah, a (fictional) member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Ordinarily, Sarah simply doesn't think about whether to develop a morning coffee habit, since her religious tradition — a tradition that she has thoroughly internalised — unequivocally forbids the practice. Commenting on traditions with this sort of moral import in particular, the philosopher and historian Michael Oakeshott puts the point this way (in his essay "The Tower of Babel"):

"[T]he moral life . . . does not spring from the consciousness of possible alternative ways of behaving and a choice, determined by an opinion, a rule or an ideal, from among these alternatives; conduct is as nearly as possible without reflection. And consequently, most of the current situations of life do not appear as occasions calling for judgment, or as problems requiring solutions; there is no weighing up of alternatives or reflection on consequences, no uncertainty, no battle of scruples. There is, on the occasion, nothing more than the unreflective following of a tradition of conduct in which we have been brought up."

Here Oakeshott describes well the sort of pre-reflective moral responsiveness that characterises our everyday lives. In such contexts, we don't wonder how we should conduct ourselves, because we've already taken up ways of life that provide extensive moral guidance.

Far from agonising over whether to listen to very loud music in the middle of the night while my roommate is sleeping, it in fact never occurs to me to do so. Of course, to do so would be inconsiderate in the extreme — something I instinctively recognise when I consider the possibility — but I don't have to make that judgment anew each day in order to conduct myself properly.

However, we sometimes discover — often to our dismay — that our intellectual traditions have **NOT equipped us to deal with some theoretical problem that thrusts itself upon us**. In such moments, we may turn to philosophy.

After all, philosophy involves thinking hard about how to resolve theoretical problems of a rather general sort. To resolve these problems,

we often appeal to general explanations of a distinctively philosophical kind — though we often don't think of them in that way.

#### Case study: The soda-drinker's dilemma

So, to return to Sarah: suppose she wonders whether it would be okay for her to become a soda-drinker. Her intellectual traditions don't give her an answer — not a clear one, anyway — but she has heard from some respected authorities in the LDS Church that the prohibition on drinking coffee has something to do with the fact that coffee is (normally) caffeinated.

So she wonders: Is that (part of) the correct explanation of the prohibition? If so, **should she refrain from drinking caffeinated soda as well**, or is there something about soda that might ground an exception to a generally operative "no caffeine" rule?

#### The power of reasoning vs. Rigid rules

Answering these questions will require Sarah to do some philosophical reasoning, since she'll have to compare and critically examine explanations of a rather general sort — **explanations purporting to ground significant social norms**, no less — in order to make an informed judgement about whether to become a soda-drinker. For instance, she'll have to consider what sorts of reasons might support a prohibition on the consumption of caffeine, and such reasons will presumably "bottom out" at a fairly high level of generality, ranging over concerns having to do with bodily health, the relation between bodily health and human flourishing, appropriate strategies for making reasonable trade-offs between bodily health and the pleasures to be

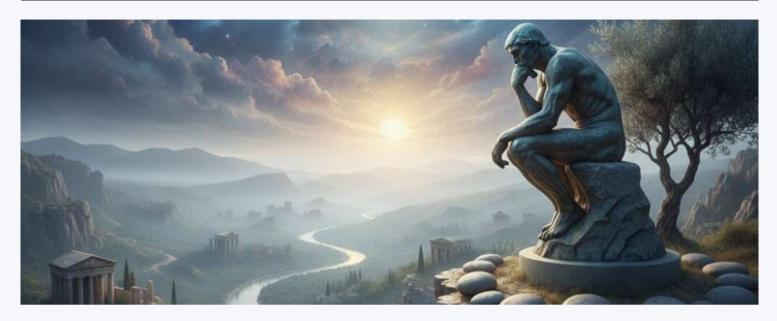
gained from certain unhealthy activities (e.g. drinking caffeinated beverages, perhaps), and so forth.

Engaging in such philosophical reflection may even lead Sarah to reevaluate some of the norms that she accepts. However, it would be a
mistake to assume that taking up philosophy as a way of life will inevitably lead one to accept some sort of revisionary worldview. Taking
up philosophy as a way of life needn't lead Sarah to abandon her own
intellectual traditions wholesale, nor need it lead her to abandon any
particular aspect of her own intellectual traditions. On the contrary,
taking up philosophy as a way of life may lead Sarah to reaffirm her
familiar worldview in light of her newfound understanding of the
reasons on which parts of that worldview are based.

You might object that in simply reflecting on her own prior commitments Sarah doesn't thereby engage in philosophical activity. Doing philosophy is just doing what philosophers do, and philosophers do things like construct comprehensive theories of very general phenomena — from time and modality to the right and the good — while trotting out scores of logically pristine and intellectually imposing arguments along the way. Such activities bear little resemblance to what Sarah does when she considers becoming a soda-drinker.

It's true that professional philosophers have undertaken training that enables them to engage in highly abstract and general theoretical reasoning with a high degree of precision and robustness.

Still, at bottom, they're doing the same sort of thing as Sarah: attempting to resolve theoretical problems left unresolved by their own intellectual traditions.



Justification as dialogue

Or in any case, it's true that many philosophers do that sort of thing. Admittedly, philosophers of a more Cartesian persuasion may attempt to do philosophy by "starting from scratch", so to speak, and relying on "pure reason" in order to piece together a sort of idealised worldview. In her wonderful book *Value in Ethics and Economics*, Elizabeth Anderson has some choice words for such projects:

"Justification [of the sort that features in philosophical theorising] is a response to criticism, complaint, and conflicting views. It arises in the context of conversation among people who aim to reach some common point of view, and it is addressed to those who disagree. It is pointless to engage in justification when the parties have no interest in reaching agreement, when there is no concrete complaint, or when there is no common ground from which to begin a dialogue."

I couldn't agree more. But even if Anderson's claims don't move you, still you must admit that the Cartesian approach to philosophical

theorising is only one among many.

In the absence of a powerful argument for preferring it to alternative approaches, the conception of philosophy as a way of life that I've sketched here remains a natural and viable, even if not exhaustive, way of doing philosophy that is fit for plain people.

Philosophy as a way of life therefore involves giving philosophical reflection a prominent place in one's life: when inherited wisdom runs out, in steps philosophy.

Ross Jensen

# A LITTLE DOSE OF INSPIRATION



Stories & inspirational words to illuminate the path & spark a light in the darkness!

#### 6.1. THE STORY OF THE ZEN FARMER



A Zen parable about how to confront life's chaotic nature

There once was an old Zen farmer. Every day, the farmer used his horse to help work his fields and keep his farm healthy.

But one day, the horse ran away. All the villagers came by and said, "We're so sorry to hear this. This is such bad luck."

But the farmer responded, "Bad luck. Good luck. Who knows?"

The villagers were confused, but decided to ignore him. A few weeks went by and then one afternoon, while the farmer was working outside, he looked up and saw his horse running toward him. But the horse was not alone. The horse was returning to him with a whole

#### 6.1. THE STORY OF THE ZEN FARMER

herd of horses. Now he had 10 horses to help work his fields.

All the villagers came by to congratulate the farmer and said, "Wow! This is such good luck!"

But the farmer responded, "Good luck. Bad luck. Who knows?"

A few weeks later, the farmer's son came over to visit and help his father work on the farm. While trying to tame one of the horses, the farmer's son fell and broke his leg.

The villagers came by to commiserate and said, "How awful. This is such bad luck."

The farmer responded, "Bad luck. Good luck. Who knows?"

A month later, the farmer's son was still recovering. He wasn't able to walk or do any manual labor to help his father around the farm.

A regiment of the army came marching through town conscripting every able-bodied young man to join them. When the regiment came to the farmer's house and saw the young boy's broken leg, they marched past and left him where he lay.

Of course, all the villagers came by and said, "Amazing! This is such good luck. You're so fortunate."

And you know the farmer's response by now...

"Bad luck. Good luck. Who knows?"

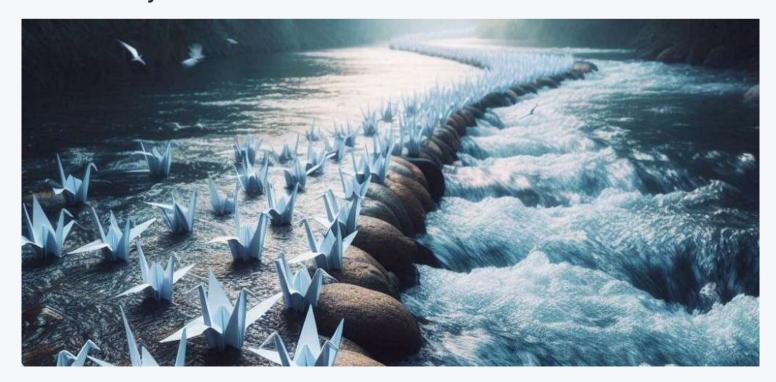
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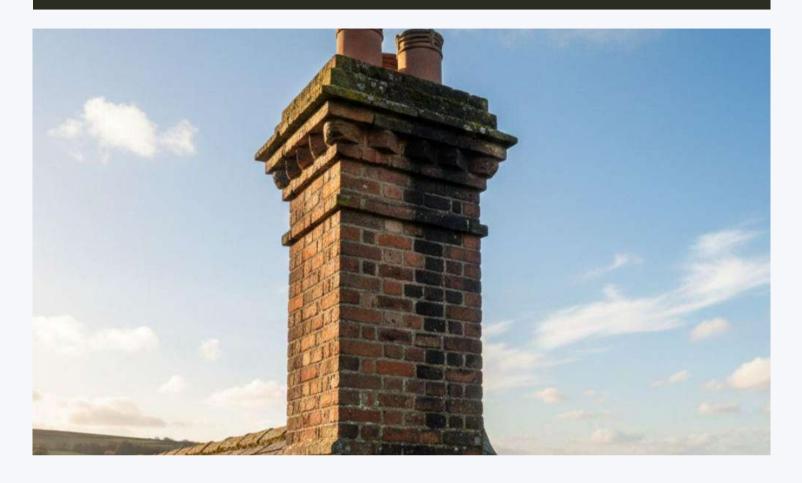
#### COMMENTS COMMENTS

Many times, we exhaust ourselves trying to control the narrative of our lives, aggressively labeling every event as "good" or "bad" the moment it happens. But as this parable illustrates, **our perspective is always limited**. We are reading one page of a book and thinking we know the ending.

Embracing uncertainty doesn't mean becoming numb to hardship. It means recognizing that we simply don't know the ultimate trajectory of an event. A "disaster" (like a layoff) might be the necessary door to a new path; a "triumph" might bring unforeseen complications.

The farmer's mantra - "Bad luck. Good luck. Who knows?" - is not an expression of ignorance, but of profound wisdom. By loosening our grip on these labels, we find a sense of equanimity. We stop fighting the flow of life and start riding it, open to the possibilities hidden within every twist and turn.





<u>A Jewish parable</u> about the need to be humble and embrace uncertainty in life

A young man, freshly graduated from college, went to see the wisest rabbi in the city. When the rabbi answered his knock, the young man said, "Rabbi, I want you to teach me. I want to learn the wisdom of our people."

The rabbi smiled and said, "You're much too young for that. Come back in ten years and maybe then we can begin."

But the young man was not about to wait. "Give me a chance. I've studied hermeneutics and semiotics, deconstructionism, and symbolic logic. I can do this. Test me."

"All right, all right," said the rabbi, who grudgingly admired the youth's determination. "Come in and sit down, and I'll ask you a question." The young man did, and this is the question he was asked:

"Two men climb down a chimney. At the bottom one man has soot on his face, the other doesn't; one man washes his face, the other doesn't. Tell me, which man washes his face?"

The young man's face brightened, and he said at once, "The man with the soot on his face!"

The rabbi shook his head. "No, no. It was the man without the soot on his face. He saw the soot on his friend's face, assumed that he must be dirty also, so he went and washed. Now run along and come back in ten years."

"You can't send me away after just one question," said the young man. "I was just warming up. Ask me another."

"Very well," said the rabbi, and this is the second question he asked the youth:

"Two men climb down a chimney. At the bottom one man has soot on his face, the other doesn't; one man washes his face, the other doesn't. Tell me, which man washes his face?"

The young man paused for a moment, then said, "The man without the soot on his face."

The rabbi frowned a bit. "Don't try to be clever. No, it was the man

with the soot on his face. He could taste it on his lips, and feel it in his eyes, so he went and washed."

"Okay, okay," said the young man, putting up a brave front, "I got the hang of this now. Just one more question, please."

The rabbi sighed. "As you wish. Here's your third question:

Two men climb down a chimney. At the bottom one man has soot on his face, the other doesn't; one man washes his face, the other doesn't. Tell me, which man washes his face?"

There was a long pause, while the youth furrowed his brow and made inarticulate sounds of frustration. Finally, in a voice robbed of all its former confidence, he said, "The man without the soot on his face... but for some other reason...?"

The rabbi strode to the door and opened it. "Go away, go away, will you? No, they both washed their faces. How can you climb down a chimney and not get soot on your face?"

#### **COMMENTS**

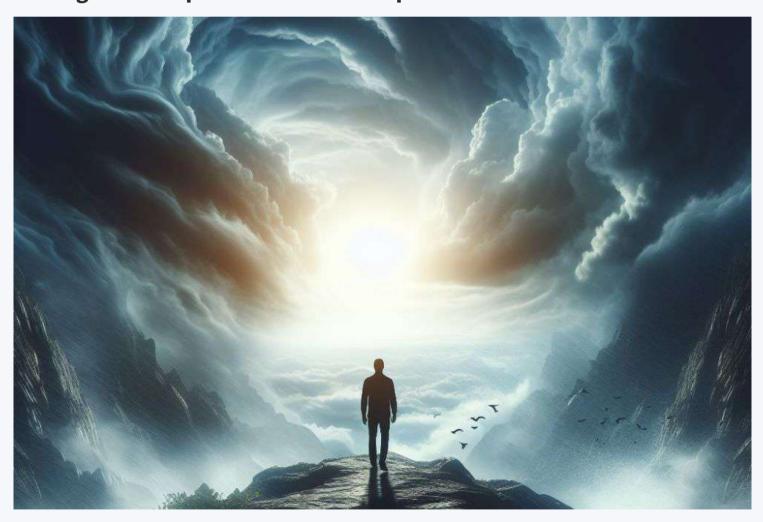
This story is a humorous but sharp reminder of the limitations of "pure reason." The young student tries to use logic, theory, and intellect to solve the puzzle, yet he gets it wrong every single time.

Why? Because he is treating the world as an abstract concept, not a messy reality.

In our own lives, we often do the same. We overthink, we analyze, and

we build complex mental models to try and predict the future or "solve" our uncertainty. We become so obsessed with being clever that we miss what is obvious.

Embracing uncertainty requires us to step out of our heads and into the chimney - into the real world. After all, truth isn't always found in a sophisticated argument or a perfect plan. Sometimes, the answer is simple, messy, and right in front of us, visible only if we are humble enough to look past our own assumptions.





What it really was like to write Harry Potter (spoiler: it was messy!)

Rowling has said that Harry Potter "simply fell into [her] head" and "all of the details bubbled up in [her] brain." She "[had] never felt such a huge rush of excitement and [she] knew immediately that it was going to be such fun to write."

Sounds like a fairy tale beginning to a fairy tale ending, right? And perhaps that's all ordinary readers need to know about Rowling's path to literary fame, but writers need to know more.

Writers need to know the not-so-glamorous version of what it was like to write Harry Potter. We need to appreciate how disciplined Rowling had to be to develop her little idea into seven hefty books. We have to

know that she wasn't lazily sipping mochas for two decades while jotting down a continuous stream of words like a literary Fountain of Youth.

All too often writers convince themselves that they would write more if only they were more well known, or had more money, or had more time. But in the end, none of that is what defines a writer. A writer is simply someone who writes.

Below is the non-fairy-tale version of the story behind the Harry Potter series.

#### **Book #1:** Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone

Even though Harry Potter strolled into Rowling's head fully formed, she still spent several years outlining the seven books, and then she spent another year writing the first one, *Harry Potter and Philosopher's Stone*.

Rowling rewrote chapter one of *Philosopher's Stone* so many times (upwards of 15 discarded drafts) that her first attempts "bear no resemblance to anything in the finished book." This was especially frustrating for Rowling because she was a single parent and her writing time was both limited and sporadic - entirely contingent on her infant daughter, Jessica.

Whenever Jessica fell asleep in her [stroller], I would dash to the nearest café and write like mad. I wrote nearly every evening. Then I had to type the whole thing out myself. Sometimes I actually hated the book, even while I loved it.

Rowling had to deal with many other time-wasting nuisances, like retyping an entire chapter because she had changed one paragraph, and then re-typing the entire manuscript because she hadn't double spaced it.

Rowling also struggled with personal problems while writing the first book:

- the death of her mother,
- estrangement from her father,
- a volatile and short-lived marriage,
- a newborn child,
- life on welfare,
- and a battle with clinical depression.

To top it off, Rowling's support system was pretty much nonexistent. She struggled with suicidal thoughts and eventually turned to therapy for help. Rowling once told a friend about her book idea and her friend's response was cynical. Rowling said:

I think she thought I was deluding myself, that I was in a nasty situation and had sat down one day and thought, I know, I'll write a novel. She probably thought it was a get-rich-quick scheme.

Once the manuscript was finally finished, Rowling went on to collect a dozen rejection letters over the span of a year before Bloomsbury Publishing agreed to pick it up.

Even with publication now on the horizon, though, Rowling was warned by her literary agent to find a job because her story was not com-

mercial enough to be successful ("You do realize, you will never make a fortune out of writing children's books?"). In fact, Bloomsbury's expectations of the first Potter book were so low that its initial print was only 500 copies - 300 of which were donated to public libraries. Rowling's first royalty check was 600 pounds.

A year later, she was a millionaire.

#### **Book #2:** Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets

Both Rowling's agent and Bloomsbury Publishing had to eat their words - *Philosopher's Stone* was so popular in the UK that Scholastica paid an unprecedented \$105,000 for the American rights to the series.

Rowling, however, still faced major frustrations.

For one, she did not believe her writing success was permanent, so while writing *Chamber of Secrets*, she worked as a full-time French teacher (and cared for her now-toddler daughter). It was during this time that she suffered from her first and only debilitating bout of writer's block:

I had my first burst of publicity about the first book and it paralysed me. I was scared the second book wouldn't measure up...

Despite Rowling's personal skepticism, other lucrative contracts rolled in after Scholastica. The resulting money pulled her out of poverty, but it also put incredible pressure on her "to fulfill expectations," and furthermore, her sudden financial success resulted in a "tsunami of requests." Everyone was asking Rowling for a leg up:

I was completely overwhelmed. I suddenly felt responsible in many different ways... I was downright paranoid that I would do something stupid...

#### **Book #3: Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban**

The second Potter book was even more successful than the first, and Rowling finally dove into writing full time with *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*.

Prisoner of Azkaban was one of Rowling's most enjoyable Potter books to write, but she still had to work very hard. Rowling said in a letter to her editor:

I've read [Prisoner of Azkaban] so much I'm sick of it. I never read either of the others over and over again when editing them, but I really had to this time.

#### Rowling added in a later letter:

The hard work, the significant rewrites I wanted to do, are over, so if it needs more cuts after this, I'm ready to make them, speedily...

But if Rowling thought these rewrites for book three were difficult, she had no idea what she was heading into with book four.

#### **Book #4:** Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

Again Rowling churned out a book in a year; again it was a massive bestseller, but she celebrated her success in a rather unexpected way:

The first thing that I did when I finished Prisoner of Azkaban was discuss repaying the advance for the [fourth] book. Yes, you can imagine. People were a little bit shaken... I said: I want to give the money back and then I will be free to finish in my own time rather than have to produce it for next year.

Rowling has been open about her struggle to write book four, which nearly caused her to have "a nervous breakdown":

That was the period where I was chewing Nicorette. And then I started smoking again, but I didn't stop the Nicorette. And I swear on my children's lives, I was going to bed at night and having palpitations and having to get up and drink some wine to put myself into a sufficient stupor.

Rowling attributed her stress to the staggering pressure she felt to produce another Harry Potter book worthy of global adoration:

I'm sure that I'll never have another success like Harry Potter for the rest of my life, no matter how many books I write, and no matter whether they're good or bad. I remember very clearly that I was thinking the same thing when the excitement over the fourth Harry Potter volume literally exploded. The thought was unsettling to me at the time, and I still feel that way today.

Rowling also struggled with her plot for the first time since starting the series:

The first three books, my plan never failed me. But I should have put [this] plot under a microscope. I wrote what I thought was half

the book, and "Ack!"—huge gaping hole in the middle of the plot. I missed my deadline by two months. And the whole profile of the books got so much higher since the third book; there was an edge of external pressure.

Rowling faced "some of [her] blackest moments" with book four:

At Christmas I sank to the depths: "Can I do this?" I asked myself. In the end it was just persistence, sheer bloody mindedness. It took months. I had to unpick lots of what I'd written and take a different route to the ending.

The worst rewrite for Rowling was one particular chapter in Goblet:

I hated that chapter so much; at one point, I thought of missing it out altogether and just putting in a page saying, "Chapter Nine was too difficult," and going straight to Chapter Ten.

Not surprisingly, Rowling also struggled with burnout:

Goblet of Fire was an absolute nightmare. I literally lost the plot halfway through. My own deadline was totally unrealistic. That was my fault because I didn't tell anyone. I just ploughed on, as I tend to do in life, and then I realised I had really got myself into hot water. I had to write like fury to make the deadline and it half killed me and I really was, oh, burnt out at the end of it. Really burnt out. And the idea of going straight into another Harry Potter book filled me with dread and horror. That was the first time I had ever felt like that. I had been writing Harry for 10 years come 2000; that was the first time I ever thought, Oh God, I don't want to keep going.

#### **Book #5:** Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

Rowling stayed true to her word and went on vacation - kind of. She stepped away from the Harry Potter series to work on a completely unrelated book (which hasn't been published). After a yearlong sabbatical, Rowling started on the fifth book, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*.

Rowling had written the first four books in a blisteringly fast 5 years, but she told her publishers she didn't want a deadline with book five, especially after dealing with the plot problems in *Goblet of Fire*. Her publishers had no other choice but to agree.

Even then, though, Rowling still struggled to keep up.

She has said numerous times that she wished she had better edited Order of the Phoenix:

I think [it] could have been shorter. I knew that, and I ran out of time and energy toward the end.

And it's no wonder. During the two years Rowling wrote the 870-page *Phoenix*, she also:

- got married,
- had another baby,
- fought a bogus plagiarism lawsuit,
- started several charity organizations,
- consulted for the new Potter films,
- and ran around fulfilling her endless PR obligations.

Worst of all, Rowling was drowning in a never-ending deluge of paparazzi.

Rowling's fame had grown to such bewildering heights that the attention had become relentless. This was quite a shock for her, especially since she had thought that her Harry Potter story would only appeal to "a handful of people":

Everything changed so rapidly, so strangely. I knew no one who'd ever been in the public eye. I didn't know anyone - anyone - to whom I could turn and say, "What do you do?" So it was incredibly disorientating.

The paparazzi were digging through her garbage, hiding in her hedges, and camping out in front of her house. One reporter even slipped a note into her daughter's backpack at school.

It's very difficult to say... how angry I felt that my 5-year-old daughter's school was no longer a place of... complete security from journalists.

Rowling was "racing to catch up with the situation" and "couldn't cope" with the loss of her private life:

I couldn't grasp what had happened. And I don't think many people could have done.

**Book #6: Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince** 

Again Rowling exceeded all expectations, smashing publishing re-

cords left and right, but no time to celebrate - it was on to book six.

Rowling was pregnant with her third child while writing *Half-Blood Prince*, but she wasn't nearly as stressed as she had been with book five. In fact, she was so laissez-faire about it:

I'm in a very lovely position. Contractually, I don't even have to write any more books at all. So no one can possibly write that I have missed a deadline, because I actually don't have a contractual deadline for Six and Seven.

Of course Rowling did write book six, which was "an enjoyable experience from start to finish." Rowling's critics, however, were now growing as vocal as her fans:

I found death threats to myself on the net... I found, well, people being advised to shoot me, basically.

The paparazzi problem was also spinning out of control. After the birth of two more children, Rowling couldn't even step out of her house without being stalked by photographers - she was "completely trapped" and felt like she was "under siege or like a hostage."

Rowling went so far as to sell her house and move her family, and again she had to turn to therapy, as she had years ago when her Harry Potter idea was in its infancy:

Sometimes I think I'm temperamentally suited to being a moderately successful writer, with the focus of attention on the books rather than on me.

#### **Book #7: Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows**

Even with enormously high expectations, book six was a success, and Rowling immediately began working on the seventh.

Deathly Hallows was the series finale, but Rowling had many other responsibilities to fulfill besides writing: being a mother to three children, giving interviews, overseeing the Harry Potter movies, and running her charities, to name only a few.

Ironically, Rowling's notoriety and wealth had cut her writing time in half - from five days a week to two and a half:

There are times - and I don't want to sound ungrateful - when I would gladly give back some of the money in exchange for time and peace to write.

The media marathon hadn't slowed down either, which was exceptionally draining for her:

Fame is a very odd and very isolating experience. And I know some people crave it. A lot of people crave it. I find that very hard to understand. Really. It is incredibly isolating and it puts a great strain on your relationships.

One of the media's criticisms of Rowling was her appearance:

I found it very difficult, when I first became well known, to read criticism about how I look, how messy my hair was, and how generally unkempt I look.

Rowling worried about how such criticisms might affect her children:

Is "fat" really the worst thing a human being can be? Is "fat" worse than "vindictive," "jealous," "shallow," "vain," "boring" or "cruel'"? Not to me.

I've got two daughters who will have to make their way in this skinny-obsessed world, and it worries me, because I don't want them to be empty-headed, self-obsessed, emaciated clones; I'd rather they were independent, interesting, idealistic, kind, opinionated, original, funny - a thousand things, before "thin."

Somehow, in the middle of all this cacophony, Rowling finished her seven-book Harry Potter series. After nearly two decades, it was over.

I cried as I've only ever cried once before in my life, and that was when my mother died. It was uncontrollable...

#### COMMENTS COMMENTS

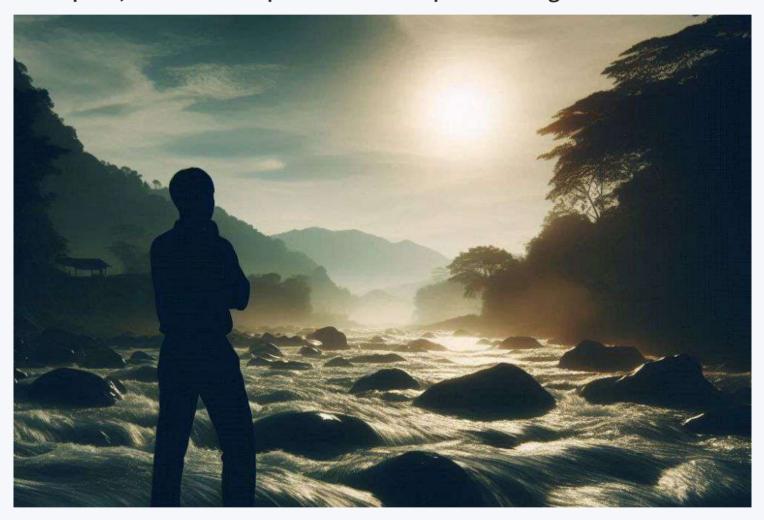
It is tempting to look at Rowling's story and see only the fairy-tale ending: the billions of dollars and the global fame. But the true inspiration lies in the middle - in the years of grinding poverty, depression, rejection, and doubt.

Rowling didn't write Harry Potter because she had a guarantee of success. She wrote it while her life was falling apart, driven only by an internal compulsion to tell the story. She embraced the uncertainty of her creative path not because it was safe, but because it was HERS.

It's easy to think the grass is greener elsewhere - that we would pur-

sue our dreams if only we had more money, more time, or more certainty. But life doesn't wait for perfect conditions. The "right time" never arrives.

The only time we have is NOW. We must commit to the work, to our own path, without a map and without a promise of gold at the end.



The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty; not knowing what comes next.

Ursula K. Le Guin

The problem with making decisions is that we are often making them under conditions of uncertainty.

Daniel J. Levitin

All life is an experiment.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

In times of uncertainty, your habits can ground you.

**James Clear** 

People need not fear the unknown if they are capable of achieving what they need and want.

Paulo Coelho

The fear will never go away as long as I continue to grow. The only way to get rid of the fear of doing something is to go out and do it.

Susan Jeffers

Take a leap of faith. You will either land somewhere new or learn to fly.

Kandyse McClure

To see the world, things dangerous to come to, to see behind walls, draw closer, to find each other and to feel. That is the purpose of life.

James Thurber, 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty'

Amor fati. (Love your fate)

Friedrich Nietzsche

What are you looking at? To what goal are you straining? The whole future lies in uncertainty: live immediately.

Seneca

I am incapable of conceiving infinity, and yet I do not accept finity. I want this adventure that is the context of my life to go on without end.

Simone de Beauvoir

Truth is a pathless land.

Jiddu Krishnamurti

In order to arrive at what I cannot understand, I must go by the way I cannot understand.

**Thomas Merton** 

Faith does not need to push the river because faith is able to trust that there is a river. The river is flowing. We are in it.

Richard Rohr

When you become comfortable with uncertainty, infinite possibilities open up in your life. It means fear is no longer a dominant factor in what you do.

**Eckhart Tolle** 

If you call 'religious' a man who believes in a Supermeaning, a meaning so comprehensive you can no longer grasp it, get hold of it in rational intellectual terminology, feel free to call me religious.

Viktor Frankl

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

1 Corinthians 13:8-12





#### Let it Be - by the Beatles

Image source: YouTube

When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me Speaking words of wisdom, **let it be** And in my hour of darkness she is standing right in front of me Speaking words of wisdom, **let it be** 

And when the broken hearted people living in the world agree
There will be an answer, let it be
For though they may be parted, there is still a chance that they will see
There will be an answer, let it be

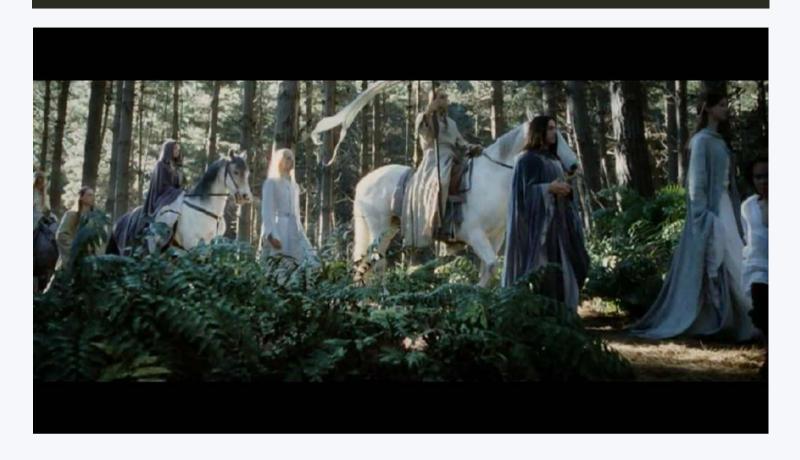
Let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be

When the night is cloudy there is still a light that shines on me Shinin' until tomorrow, **let it be** I wake up to the sound of music, Mother Mary comes to me Speaking words of wisdom, **let it be** 

> And let it be, let it be, let it be Whisper words of wisdom, let it be

> And let it be, let it be, let it be Whisper words of wisdom, let it be





#### **Into the West – by Annie Lennox**

Image source: YouTube

Lay down
Your sweet and weary head
The night is falling
You have come to journey's end
Sleep now
And dream of the ones who came
before
They are calling
From across the distant shore

Why do you weep?
What are these tears upon your face?
Soon you will see
All of your fears will pass away
Safe in my arms
You're only sleeping

What can you see
On the horizon?
Why do the white gulls call?
Across the sea
A pale moon rises
The ships have come to carry you home

And all will turn
To silver glass
A light on the water
All Souls pass

Hope fades
Into the world of night

Through shadows falling
Out of memory and time
Don't say
We have come now to the end
White shores are calling
You and I will meet again
And you'll be here in my arms
Just sleeping

And all will turn
To silver glass
A light on the water
Grey ships pass
Into the West



## EMBARKING ON THE JOURNEY



And here we are – the end. Thanks for having stayed with me until now!

It's been over two years since I stood at the edge of my chasm and quit my full-time job. I leaped.

As of now, I can tell you that the "nothingness" I was so afraid of wasn't an empty void at all. It was just an open space, waiting to be filled.

When I look back, so many of the choices that have brought me the most peace made no "rational" sense. For example, there was no spreadsheet that could justify my decision to learn Japanese, a language for which I had no immediate career goal.

#### EMBARKING ON THE JOURNEY

I had to rationalize it to others, but deep down, I just felt a pull – an intuition, a "mystical" feeling that this was my path.

After all this stumbling, reflecting, and "walking," I can't point to a massive bank account or a linear, "certain" path to success. The fog hasn't magically disappeared.

But I can say this: I feel happy. I feel content. I feel authentic.

That feeling has been enough to justify the entire leap.

This is the real "house on the rock." Not wealth, status, or what society often treasures – but the inner peace built by anchoring yourself in your values, rather than your expectations.

It's the shift from a life built on a wager of fear to one built on a **commitment of love** – love for the process, love for the truth, and love for being you yourself.

Embracing uncertainty isn't a sign of recklessness. It's when one learns to let go of the illusion of control. To accept that we're all just "peaches" – doing our best to guide and nurture our lives, rather than trying to force them to be "apples."

In the end, we're all standing at that chasm. We all have to live in an unpredictable world. The only absolute certainty we have is that **our time here is finite**.

We can spend that precious, limited time frozen at the edge. Or we can look out at the unknown, smile, and take the step.

# EMBARKING ON THE JOURNEY

We can choose to truly live while we're still here.

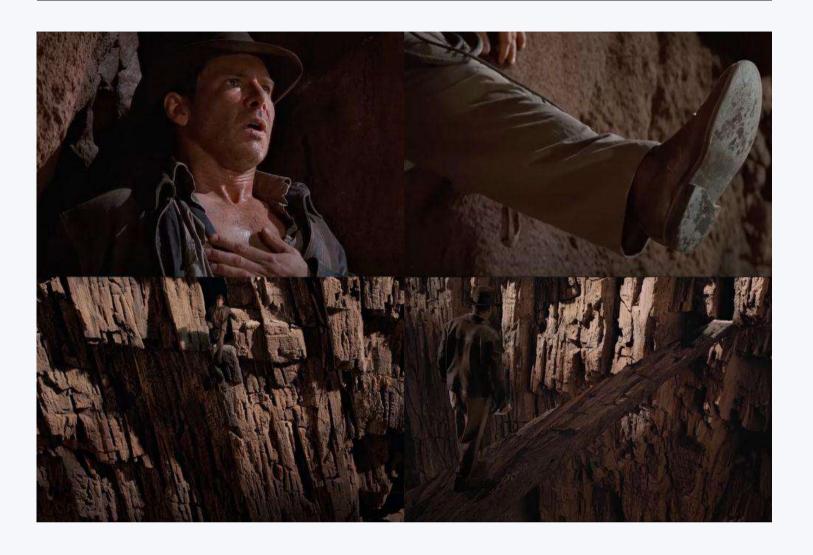
I don't know if we each have a destiny, or if we're all just floating around accidental-like on a breeze, but I, I think maybe it's both. Maybe both is happening at the same time. - Forrest Gump (1994)

Until next time,

Jonathan M. Pham



# **EPILOGUE**



Indy: It's a leap of faith.

Henry (Indy's father): You must believe boy...
You must believe!

Indiana Jones & the Last Crusade (1989)

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There are two ways of spreading light: to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it.

**Edith Warton** 



I'm Jonathan M. Pham, and I'm delighted to welcome you to my self-discovery blog!

Life, to me, is an endless expedition, and through this blog, I invite you to join me on the exhilarating journey of self-exploration and personal growth.



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