

Unexpected Detours: 5 Lessons On How To Stay Calm When Facing Uncertainty

Perhaps one of the most memorable and widely quoted lines from any movie in the past twenty years comes from Forrest Gump, where the title character says to the person on the park bench next to him, “life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you are going to get.” Many have heard this quote and quickly dismissed its meaning. Few have actually taken these words to heart and incorporated them into their lives. You see, in just a few words, Forrest alludes to the relationship between uncertainty and life. Ironically, uncertainty is the only thing that we can expect to experience in our lives every single day with absolute certainty.

Sure, we will all grow old and die, eventually. However we don’t know if it will be tomorrow, next year, twenty years from now or even fifty. Yes, we all must pay taxes, but only if we work and earn an income and even then how we earn it and what we do with it will determine when and how much tax we must pay. Even in these and other seemingly certain events, a great deal of uncertainty exists. Unfortunately, for many of us, uncertainty equals stress, worry, and tension.

You see, we humans have what is called the “ego”, or as we call it at The 2% Factor, the “me-go” (because everything happens to “me”). Our ego despises uncertainty and needs, at an almost primal level, to always know what to expect and anticipate. The ego hates surprises. Our ego believes that if we know what to expect, we can adjust our actions and thoughts to minimize any potential threat or pain we may face - in other words, our ego is just trying to protect us.

Unfortunately, it does too good a job at this and we learn to avoid risk and even avoid *the potential* for “pain”, at all costs. We do this by attempting to control our environment and all facets of that environment including the other people in it. Consider the micro-managing boss that feels a need (because of his or her ego) to have a high degree of control over what his or her workers are doing because he or she is afraid one of those workers **may** make a mistake. If that happens, that manager **may** experience possible pain as their boss **may** hold them accountable for that mistake.

Similarly, in our personal life we have relationships with partners, spouses, family members, and friends. To avoid “pain” in these relationships, we sometimes attempt to control the behaviour of others either actively or tacitly. This isn’t necessarily because we want to control them - often we don’t even realize we are doing this - but because our ego tricks us into believing that “we know best”.

However, in life, there will always be things that we simply can't expect or anticipate. Try as we may, our minds are simply not capable of calculating every single possible incident or event that could occur at any moment. We further complicate things for our ego when we engage in activities that will invariably introduce an element of uncertainty such as starting a new job or traveling to a new destination we have never been to before. For many of us, the uncertainty that is introduced will cause such a degree of stress, fear, and worry that we forgo the experience altogether. For the rest of us, we do it anyway recognizing that if things don't go according to plan, and "pain" is the result, we will learn a valuable lesson that will benefit us in the long run. The story you are about to read describes one such event and the lessons learned along the way.

What makes this story so amazing is that it is true. Yes, the names of those involved have been changed but the circumstances are being represented as they occurred. I know this because I was there.

5 Lessons On How To Stay Calm When Facing Uncertainty

I was sitting at the breakfast table one recent August morning speaking with my wife. We were away on holidays, visiting my wife's parents on their farm in northeastern New Brunswick, Canada. This annual event is something I look forward to each year. The one hundred acre farm is located about a kilometer from the shoreline of the Bay of Chaleur providing incredible sea vistas and, on a clear day, views of the mountains of eastern Quebec in the distance. The old farmhouse, being in my father-in-law's family for over a century, lies down a narrow gravel road, around a corner and to the right, hidden behind a forest of evergreens, oak, and birch trees.

Needless to say, if you weren't intentionally looking for the house, you would never know it was there. I have, in fact, accidentally driven right by the gravel road many a time despite having visited every year for eight years now. The property, while still used by a neighbour to grow hay for cattle, has largely been converted to forest providing a real "return to nature" every time my family and I visit. Our annual pilgrimage to Canada's east coast is a welcome departure from the cramped, busy life we lead living in a typical suburban home on the outskirts of a large city.

Life on the farm is slow - a good slow - and relaxed. The type of place where it is easy to forget what day of the week it is which is fine because on holidays time really doesn't matter anyway. It is quite peaceful as well. The only sounds you hear are the rustling of leaves as the breeze blows in off the bay. Being so far from the main highway and down a non-descript gravel road, doors remain unlocked as the only uninvited guests that may drop in are the friends and family who know there is actually a house hidden back there. That is why, on this warm summer morning, the conversation I was having with

my wife regarding what to do that day came to an abrupt stop as we noticed two people walking down the road towards the house.

The first thing my wife noticed was how they were dressed. “They look like they are European” was her exact comment. I looked more closely and instead of their clothing, what caught my attention was the look of weariness the two wore on their faces. It was a look I recognized all too well having two young children. They simply looked worn out.

As they approached the house, my mother-in-law greeted them in the front yard where she was playing with my children. Still viewing them through the window, my mother-in-law motioned my father-in-law to join the conversation. After a few moments, my father-in-law disappeared into the barn only to re-emerge moments later in his rarely used yet immaculately kept tractor. I watched as the couple began to walk alongside the tractor back down the road from the direction from which they came.

As my mother-in-law brought the kids back into the house, I curiously asked her what was going on. She explained that the couple was from France (I guess my wife has a good eye for European fashion!) They are visiting Canada on a camping holiday with their three children and, after taking a wrong turn in the middle of the night, had gotten their camper van stuck in a boggy area of the field down the road. It seems that they were searching for an out-of-the-way place they could pull off the highway and safely park their camper for a few hours of sleep when they turned on to the quiet gravel road leading to my in-law’s farm in the wee hours of the morning. Upon seeing that the road led to a home, they attempted to turn the vehicle around on the narrow road by driving into an opening in the adjacent field only to get stuck.

My mother-in-law had managed to convince the couple to come back down the road to the house after their van had been freed to enjoy some breakfast and Canadian hospitality. A short while later we saw the van drive up to the house and the couple re-emerge with their three sons. Although French, the couple’s English was flawless and they introduced themselves as Henri and Margaux. While their sons struggled a bit with their English pronunciations, they too introduced themselves in English.

So, breaking things down to this point, here was a couple in a strange land with their three children. They had managed to get their vehicle stuck in the middle of the night in what appeared to be unfamiliar wilderness and yet not wake their children through the entire ordeal. (The children remained asleep until they were woken up by the rumblings of my father-in-law’s tractor.) Not knowing if or how they would get their vehicle out of the bog, they went in search of help despite not sleeping for an entire night. Also, despite the misfortune they faced, they did not allow their unpleasant circumstances to ruin their demeanor. The couple had accepted their situation as it was rather than adopting the mentality of a “victim”.

You know this mentality, you likely see it daily when you hear such comments from friends, family, and coworkers such as “why do things always happen to me?” or “what’s the point...it’s not going to work out anyway.” Victims relinquish their power to decide

what to do next and instead choose to give up. Yet, speaking to this couple over breakfast, it was clear that they had not, in any way through the night, thrown in the towel and given up. They had remained calm and trusted that somehow things would work out.

I complimented the couple on how level-headed they had remained in the face of such great uncertainty. I also expressed my surprise at hearing how, when first they discovered they were stuck, followed by their discussion on how to deal with it, and then setting out to execute their plan for dealing with being stuck, the children never woke. Many in this situation would have over-reacted, yelled, screamed, banged things around in frustration...anything but remain quiet. This couple did not. There were no signs of worry, fear, or uncertainty on the faces of the three children either, which was equally surprising. In fact, at this point during breakfast, the three children seemed so unaffected by their unexpected circumstances that they were in the front yard engaged with my two sons in the international language of “play”.

I asked the couple how they had managed stay to calm in front of their children. They responded with this:

Lesson #1:

Our reactions are contagious, especially between adults to children. As adults, we react or respond to what life throws at us in different ways. If we choose to stay calm, accept what has happened, and take comfort in the knowledge that we will, somehow, find a solution to our problems, those around us will adopt a similar calm energy and reassured outlook.

I understood well what the couple was saying. Whether we are speaking of parents and children or managers and employees, people always look to those that lead them for signs of whether events and circumstances are cause for alarm. When those that have accepted the role of leader consistently approach challenges with a calmness and a confidence that the solution will be found (even if it is not known yet), those they lead will adopt a similar attitude.

This is the nature of the relationship between leader and follower. When uncertainty exists and followers (employees, teammates, children, students) are unsure of how to interpret what is happening, they look to their leaders (managers, coaches, parents, teachers) for indications of whether the circumstances are positive or negative. If, when they do this, they see their leader calm, level-headed, and confident, they will judge the situation to be positive. When this occurs, followers will adopt the positive attitude of their leader which affects their behaviour. If, on the other hand, the follower sees the leader worried, upset, uncertain, or afraid, they will judge the situation to be negative and quickly adopt a similar unfavourable attitude as their leader which can have disastrous results.

Breakfast continued, as did our conversation. Henri and Margaux went on to speak about what they did for a living. What I learned surprised me yet again. Henri said that he was a scientist, a particle physicist at a university. This surprised me because scientists eat, sleep, and breath “control”. When a scientist in any discipline conducts an experiment, they carefully plan out every imaginable detail of the experiment to control for this possibility or that possibility. This is why most scientists conduct experiments in a lab. They can control the environment, the conditions, and the inputs to determine a “pure” result. Scientists, to do their job well, must be experts at controlling everything little detail around them.

Yet the situation Henri had just encountered was completely out of his control and it didn’t seem to bother him. He had no control over the effectiveness of the van to drive out of the mud. He had no control over whether those he may come across to ask for help would offer it. He was completely at the mercy of others whether he liked it or not. For many people that accept professional roles requiring a great deal of control, (such as CEO’s, managers, doctors, teachers, and police officers), willingly giving up that control and accepting life’s little situations as they happen can be maddening. But not Henri. Henri had somehow managed to let go.

This prompted me to ask my next question of him: How was he able to stay so calm when facing a situation that was completely beyond and outside of his control. This was the answer he gave:

Lesson #2:

Humans are goal oriented people - we have an intrinsic need to achieve some predefined “end” or result. However, we also have an ego that fills us with a need to control HOW we achieve that end result. This sets us up for disappointment and even failure because there is no way we can anticipate all of life’s little twists and turns that disrupt our carefully contrived plans. Life doesn’t happen in a lab. There is no way that we can control for every possible scenario, every possible obstacle or hurdle we may encounter ahead of time. Too often, when something unanticipated happens, we feel lost because we don’t know what to do next...how to recover. We are so involved and absorbed with the plan we created that we lose our ability to be flexible and “go with the flow”. To achieve all of our goals, we must focus on what we want to achieve and draft a plan to achieve it, fully realizing that our plan is just that...a draft, and is likely to change. This helps us to put our ego behind us and accept what actually happens as real instead of constantly comparing what happens to some imaginary plan we created before hand.

It was quickly becoming apparent that Henri was a very thoughtful person and what he was saying really resonated with me. It occurred to me how much people in business, especially management, could benefit from adopting a similar outlook to life as Henri. By learning how to be in control without being controlling, managers would never feel

the need to micro-manage - which is a leading source of conflict between manager and worker.

The misplaced belief that “if I want it done right, I have to do it myself” (or “...it has to be done my way”) becomes meaningless as we give up the idea that there is one, and only one, right way to do things. If managers successfully focused on their desired outcomes and accept they will have to continuously make course corrections on the path to those outcomes, the need to carefully control the actions of staff disappears. Rather than wasting time doing staffs’ job for them, managers could spend their time developing the problem-solving skills of their employees to ensure that when something unexpected arises, a well thought out course correction is made.

Regardless of what industry our expertise is in - human resources, information technology, finance, sales, distribution, etc., - we all have customers. Our customers may be the employees of another department in the same company or someone entirely external to our organization. Someone, however, directly and indirectly benefits from what we do. Now, can you imagine if everyone applied Henri’s philosophy to how they deal with their customers? Customer service quality would skyrocket because employees would be empowered to make their customers happy however they could (within reason, of course).

While I liked what Henri was saying, I did have to question him a bit. In my experience in dealing with people, I can think of a number of situations where if I had taken a step back and simply allowed those working under me to handle the situation their own way, my desired goal or end result would never have happened. This led Henri to expand upon his previous comment further:

Lesson #3:

We must be flexible to receive the greatest experience in our present. Too often, we get angry, frustrated, and lash out at others because we are stuck in a “present” that never happened, an ideal that we developed in our imagination and that we hoped for or expected which never came to pass. When this happens, we close ourselves off from seeing the wonder of the present we are living because we can only see what didn’t happen rather than what did. We focus on the events we wanted to occur but didn’t instead of seeing the unexpected gifts and moments we are receiving. We lament about “losing” something we never had in the first place which prevents us from enjoying the things we actually have in front of us.

I’ll admit, what Henri was describing was a bit scary for me. He was saying that it wasn’t enough to let go and avoid trying to control every detail relating to how we reach our goals, he was also saying that we had to quiet down our ego so that we didn’t get too attached to our original goal in the first place. This was hard for me because, as a former executive, controlling what was accomplished and how my employees went about it was par for the course. I believed it was necessary. If I hadn’t been in control of

both process and result, how would my employees ever have known where they were going and how to get there?

However, I soon realized that what Henri was saying was that, while we need to have goals (or desired outcomes and objectives) and plans to achieve those goals (processes and procedures), it is necessary to be open and accepting of the fact that things often don't go exactly as we hope they will...and that's ok.

Perhaps one of the most famous people in history which exemplifies this concept is Thomas Edison. Thomas Edison invented things such as the incandescent light bulb. Edison had a goal, to invent the first working light bulb powered by electricity. It is important to note his goal wasn't to create the first 100 watt bulb that could shine for three months without burning out. Instead, he left his goal sufficiently vague to avoid setting himself up for failure. Edison also had a plan drafted as to how he would build his bulb. Thomas Edison failed. He then made a slight course correction, adjusting how he would go about reaching his goal. He failed again. He then continued to try and fail thousands more times. He failed so many times that when interviewed about his failure by a reporter for a science journal of the day, he responded, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

Many of us would have given up after ten to twenty failed attempts. Edison, however, was able to detach his ego from how he went about achieving his goal and even adjusted his goal as he discovered through his failed attempts that certain types of building materials could not be used. Only by letting go of the need to achieve his goal exactly as he had planned and by letting go of achieving the exact goal he had first developed in his imagination did he finally succeed many thousands of attempts later with a successfully working light bulb.

As the boys continued to play in the front yard, we began to clean up the remnants of breakfast. The day was cool but sunny and everyone agreed that after a breakfast of my mother-in-law's baking, some fresh air was in order. With Margaux's help I worked at clearing the table, which provided me a bit more time to think about the insights that Henri was sharing with me.

Once the dishes were cleared, the adults joined the children in the front yard. It was then that I had my first real opportunity to speak with Margaux, who had spent breakfast chatting with my wife and mother-in-law while I spoke with Henri. I complimented Margaux, as I did Henri, on how composed she had remained throughout the entire morning. It was then that I learned just how well suited Henri and Margaux were for each other. Margaux gave me a thoughtful smile and replied...

Lesson #4:

Life's most rewarding experiences don't happen when we get to our destination but in the little moments we live while getting there. Achieving our goals lasts only a moment in time, about as long as it takes to say "I did it!" but we live so

many moments on the path to getting there that these rewarding instances are easy to over look. Getting to the destination is great but often the moments of the journey we remember years later are the unexpected little stops we made along the way...the small towns we visited...the cafes we stopped at for lunch...the people we met. Over time, any worry and frustration we may have felt will be forgotten and the only things that will remain will be memories of the wonderful surprises we encountered and the kindness and compassion that has been shown to us. If we dwell upon anything, we should dwell upon that.

Margaux's words were somewhat bitter sweet for me, as I suspect they will be for many. They made me think about all of the incredible experiences I have had and events I have lived through, in both my professional and personal lives, but that I have forgotten because I was so focused on my goal. I thought about the friendships I had let slip away because I was too busy or too focused on getting ahead in life. I have been so focused on my various destinations that when I reach one, I can't even remember how I got there. Perhaps even more disconcerting for me was that when I did reach a destination, I was already so intent on reaching the next one that I didn't even take the time to enjoy the success I had just achieved.

My thoughts went to some of the biggest achievements of my life and I realized that what Margaux had said rang true. I couldn't, with any level of clarity, remember the stress, worry, and tension I had felt as I was working towards those achievements. I know I had experienced stress and worry, I often did, but I couldn't remember exactly what had caused it or how intense it had felt. It was almost like a dream - I had a vague recollection that something was felt but couldn't remember the details. The fact that I couldn't remember specific details about the stress, worry, or frustration I felt led me to one simple conclusion, that these sensations were not real.

Instances of stress, worry, and frustration, no matter how real they feel at the time, are imagined events. They only seem real because they can be very intense and all consuming. When this occurs, the brief yet intense feeling of stress or worry remains with us and what is only a 2% incident steals 98% of our attention and energy. This is why it is so easy to let these sensations (and the fear or uncertainty that often causes them) trick us into believing they are real. However, like the boogy-man in the closet, they are still a creation of our own minds. They are, for lack of a better way to put it, like a waking dream. After the moment is over and time passes our mind stops holding on to the negative emotions because it knows (even if we don't) that it was all a part of our imagination.

This is why, when we experience moments of intense stress or worry or frustration, we must see these moments as what they are and not allow them to adversely affect us or those around us. If we see these negative feelings as temporary and imagined, they lose their power over us and we can remain in control of our behaviour.

As I watched Henri and Margaux gather their children back into their van, bid us all farewell, and drive off with a few new friends and many new memories, I reflected on

the morning's events. What had started as just another August morning had quickly become an experience I will carry with me for many years to come. I sat under the large walnut tree in the front yard for a few hours after they had departed to allow my mind an opportunity to make sense of the lessons I had learned and the realizations I had gained that morning.

I have since made sincere attempts in both my professional and personal lives to incorporate these lessons. I truly believe I have become a more effective leader, problem-solver, communicator, husband, and father as the result. I still have moments where I forget about these lessons and revert to my previous behaviours - old habits die hard, as the saying goes - but when I do, I pull out from my wallet a small piece of paper on which I wrote down the fifth and final lesson I gained from my experience with Henri and Margaux, a lesson I came up with under that walnut tree:

Lesson #5:

Events are neither good nor bad until we judge them to be. An event or incident that on the surface first appears to be bad, negative, or inconvenient can - if we wait and reflect upon it - lead to an important lesson or positive experience that would not otherwise have occurred. Rather than become angry, worried, depressed, or frustrated at the perceived "bad" event, accept what happened and look for the silver lining, the good that will inevitably result.

Let this lesson serve as a reminder to all of us that in life there will always be ups and downs. When things don't go according to plan, as they often won't, it is how we react and respond that will ultimately define us. It is natural to experience fear, worry, and frustration but as long as we recognize what these feelings are and aren't we can quickly and easily move past them and deal with our circumstances in a calm, effective manner. By doing so, we regain control of ourself and our situation, regain perspective on how we are truly being affected by the situation, and are able to turn the situation into an opportunity to gain something valuable, whether that be knowledge, an experience, or a relationship.

To encourage you to keep this final lesson close, as I have, it has been included at the bottom of this page once again so that you may cut or tear it off and keep it in your pocket for that needed reminder when the odds seem against you and you feel your temperature rising.

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