

Uncertainty and the Paths We Take

Dr. Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

Last month I described the uncertainties and unknowns faced by my father David when he immigrated to America in early 1921 at the age of 16. I wondered what he thought and felt as he crossed the ocean without any family or friends. I know from several conversations I had with him—I wish there had been many more—that any uncertainties and anxieties he harbored were tempered by the promise of a better life. He lost his father during World War I and left a small town in Europe where he faced pogroms and economic hardship. In coming to New York City, his immediate goals were to secure a job and bring over his mother and three siblings; these goals were realized when they joined him a few years later.

Before proceeding with this article, I want to mention that I received a number of very poignant accounts from readers about their parents or grandparents' journey to and early experiences in America. I am very appreciative of people sharing these stories with me, stories filled with courage, hope, and resilience.

In my January column I observed that in many of my writings and webinars since last March I've used the word "uncertain" to describe the events of the past year. I know that it's difficult to compare levels of anxiety and uncertainty that occurred 100 years apart and under different circumstances. However, I find myself wondering whether the uncertainties we've experienced this past year were any greater than those faced by my father and many other immigrants 100 years ago. He was a 16-year-old arriving in a new country with no savings and unable to speak the dominant language. However, as I've reported, he was filled with hope.

A Fantasy Scene

Recently, in viewing photos I'd never seen before of my father as a young man, I've imagined a scenario that some may suggest was taken in part from the movie "Field of Dreams." In the closing scene Ray Kinsella, played by Kevin Costner, "meets" his father John. John is portrayed as a young man and we then understand to whom "he" referred to in the famous line "if you build it, he will come." In my fantasy scenario I'm serving in 1921 as an "official greeter" for immigrants disembarking from the ship that

brought them from Europe. My father is one of those I greet. What would I have said to him? What words of encouragement might I have expressed? What questions might I have asked? What questions might he have asked me?

I also think about my mother's experience coming to North America. I believe her journey was filled with less uncertainty than that of my father's. Not only was she accompanied by her parents, but several of her brothers and sisters had already settled in the United States and Canada and were there to welcome their younger sister and parents. In contrast, my father was alone during his journey. If I recall correctly, he had one cousin in New York when he arrived but not nearly the same family support my mother had. Given the circumstances I would surmise he felt pressure to adapt quickly to his new country while earning enough money to bring his mother and siblings from Europe.

Two Paths, Two Outcomes

I have spent much of my career focusing on the concept of resilience and the ways in which people of all ages cope with a wide spectrum of challenges. Whether in 1921 or 2021, I believe we can identify distinct ways that individuals attempt to manage the unknown. Without wishing to oversimplify things, I envision two main paths that we can take in response to uncertainty, one representing an effective, constructive way of coping, the other self-defeating and counterproductive. Let's look at each.

The path of counterproductive behavior is dominated by unrealistic expectations, which interestingly can be housed within either an optimistic or pessimistic outlook. In my October, 2020 column I described the Stockdale Paradox, which is predicated on the experiences of Admiral James Stockdale as a prisoner of war in Vietnam for more than seven years. The paradox involved the observation that unrealistic optimism in the face of hardship and uncertainty resulted in unfulfilled hope, despair, and heartbreak.

Stockdale noted, "You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."

The same negative outcome produced by unrealistic optimism and false hope is also found in a pessimistic perspective, one that entertains little if any possibility that struggles can be overcome. This situation is often fueled by what has been labeled a "victim mentality," the belief that when one is confronted with uncertainties and

challenges, there is little probability that the situation will improve. Faced with this sense of helplessness and hopelessness, it is of little surprise that a paralysis of positive action is the result.

The alternative path, exemplified by the presence of effective coping strategies, is not free of uncertainties. However, people who choose this trail are guided by the following kinds of questions: “What positive consequences can emerge from encountering unknown, disruptive factors?” or “How can I maintain a realistic, optimistic perspective in the face of seemingly overwhelming challenges?” To even pose such questions suggests the existence of a hopeful, resilient mindset.

These and similar questions should not be interpreted as minimizing or dismissing the impact of negative events. To attempt to do so would not only prove futile but ensure that the problems would continue unabated since they are not being addressed. In this regard I have frequently discussed the concept of “personal control” as one of the foundations for resilience. This concept embodies the message that while there are situations over which we have little, if any, influence, what we have more control over than we may realize is our attitude and response to these situations.

Uncertainties and Personal Control

Several recent publications have highlighted the benefits of personal control and the importance of managing and learning to deal with uncertainty. Psychologist Christine Carter, in an article titled “Seven Ways to Cope with Uncertainty” published by The Greater Good Science Center at the University of California-Berkeley, observed, “Living with so much uncertainty is hard. Human beings crave information about the future in the same way we crave food, sex, and other primary rewards. Our brains perceive ambiguity as a threat.” As one example of this phenomenon, Carter reported research that found that participants who were told that they had a 50% chance of receiving a painful electric shock became far more anxious and agitated than participants who believed they were definitely going to receive the shock.

Carter suggested, “But sometimes—maybe always—it’s more effective *not* to attempt to create certainty. Though evolution might have rigged our brains to resist uncertainty, we can never really know what the future will bring. And in improbable

situations like the pandemic, which has massively disrupted our routines and utterly destroyed our best-laid plans, we need to learn to live with ambiguity.”

How best to live with ambiguity? Carter recommended seven strategies. I believe all can be helpful. I have selected three to spotlight in this article that especially resonate with my thoughts about uncertainty and resilience and also help me to understand the ways in which my father coped 100 years ago. Please refer to her entire article for a summary of the seven strategies.

<https://www.christinecarter.com/2020/08/seven-ways-to-cope-with-uncertainty/>

Don't resist uncertainty; practice acceptance. Acknowledge we are going through a difficult time and that it may not end soon. “Acceptance allows us to see the reality of the situation in the present moment and frees us to move forward, rather than remaining paralyzed by uncertainty.” Carter cautioned that acceptance should not be interpreted to mean that we would no longer experience frustration, disappointment, or sadness. Nor should it be identified as a sign of resignation. In Carter’s view, acceptance involves our being realistic without falling prey to defeatism and pessimism. In applying the notion of acceptance to my father’s experience, I believe he was well aware that he would face some formidable struggles when he disembarked in America. I also believe that he faced them without “losing faith that he would prevail in the end.”

Don't believe everything you think. This is closely aligned with the first point. As Carter noted, “It can be helpful for us to consider worst-case scenarios so that we can weigh risks and actively prevent disaster. But when we *believe* these stressful thoughts, we tend to react emotionally as though the worst case is *already happening* in real life, rather than just in our heads. . . . Our negativity bias can also set us up for failure. Expectations can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. When we expect the worst, we often feel too afraid or close-minded to seize opportunities or respond to challenges with creativity and grit.” Carter recommended that one course of action to combat negativity bias is to “actively imagine the best possible scenario” occurring.

As I have noted in this and last month’s articles, I wish I had asked my father many of the questions that have become more important for me. In knowing what he accomplished, especially in saving most of his earnings to bring his entire immediate family to New York City, I can only assume that he was guided and motivated by a

vision that included greeting the rest of his family as they stepped off their ship. What must the reunion have been like to see their faces after being apart for several years? And to know that you were largely responsible for their arrival.

Find meaning in the chaos. This suggestion ties directly to a strategy I have advocated for years, namely, resilience is strengthened when we engage in “contributory” or “charitable activities.” Enriching the lives of others bolsters a sense of meaning and purpose in our own lives. There are numerous research findings that indicate that people are much better equipped to confront stressful situations when they are also involved in contributory or charitable activities. (I always caution that time spent in these activities should not be overdone, lest we experience more stress, burnout, or compassion fatigue.)

Carter emphasized, “We humans are best motivated by our *significance to other people*. When the world feels scary or uncertain, knowing what meaning we have for others and feeling a sense of purpose can ground us better than anything else.” I know that my father’s efforts to earn enough money to bring his family to America and enrich their lives was a central goal and purpose for him. Beyond that goal, I also know from observing my father in countless situations over many years that he was a very kind, compassionate, empathic man. His lifelong ability to uplift those with whom he interacted served him well in dealing with the uncertainties in his life.

In ending, I want to cite an article published in *The Boston Globe* by journalist and technology critic Maggie Jackson titled “The Gift of Being Unsure of What to Do.” <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/01/17/opinion/gift-being-unsure-what-do/> Jackson reported that there is an increased interest among psychologists to assess the degree to which individuals perceive uncertainty as a challenge or as a threat. Supporting the notion of the two major paths I proposed earlier in this column, Jackson asserted, “Those who shy from the indefinite tend to engage in rigid thinking, leap to conclusions, and yearn for life to be clear and predictable; they see knowledge as a rock to hold and defend. At the opposite end of the spectrum are flexible, curious thinkers who are more likely to cope well with and even seek out diversity, complexity, and change. The implications are clear: Tolerance for uncertainty is the stepping-stone for cognitive flourishing.”

I am cognizant that for many people a tolerance for uncertainty may not be easy to adopt, especially as the level of uncertainty has intensified in the past year. However, I also believe there are small steps we can initiate, several described in this article, to assist us to move in a more positive direction. Also, for those of us who are parents, teachers, or caregivers, our ability to embrace and accept uncertainty can serve as wonderful models for our children to do the same. And those of us who have responsibilities as supervisors or mentors in various businesses, schools, and organizations have an opportunity to convey important lessons about uncertainties to those we are teaching.

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com/>