

## Chapter 7

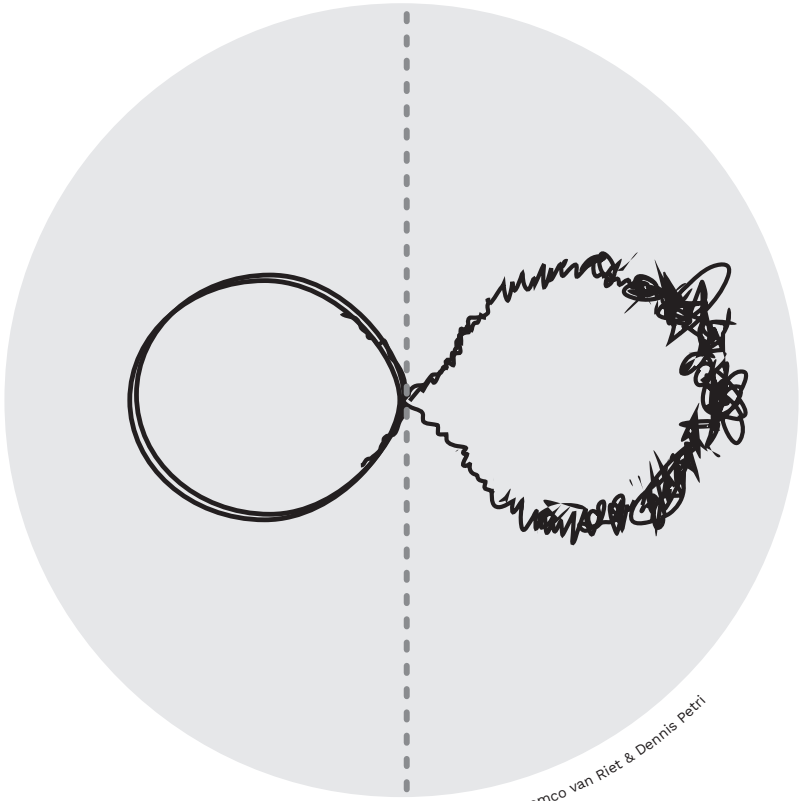
# How to navigate life's randomness

We like to believe we are in full control of our lives. And to some extent we are. We decide how and where we travel towards. But as much as we self-reflect, work hard, change and improve our habits, there is also a lot of randomness involved. Many random and external events can have a profound impact on our lives. They can alter the course of our journey.

And navigating what is outside of our control is a big challenge. When we are taken by surprise the course of our journey can be altered. Getting back on track takes time, because life has its obstacles. In order to deal with them, we have to start somewhere, so we will come to understand that:

1. There are two types of randomness. The first one relates more to spontaneity, and the second one is real randomness we have zero control over.
2. Randomness can make us feel lucky or very unlucky. We feel the world has presented us with tons of opportunities, or we feel that we need that single opportunity to get going.
3. No matter how random life can be, a lot is beyond our control. The only thing we can control is how to deal with it. We will see that there are roughly four ways to do this.
4. For every book that closes, another one opens up.
5. We continue to keep going no matter what happens.

Only when we can accept we can not be in full control, will we have some control of our journey. Only then we can truly navigate life.



## **Our flight was delayed!**

Everyone loves holidays whether it is a small city trip, a week at the beach, a road trip or a longer tour. We already enjoy the trip before we go there, which is wonderful and gives you value already before you actually go. Then how come when we tell our friends about the holiday afterward, we quickly start telling the story about a crazy or negative thing that happened?

- ‘The hotel room was not yet cleaned when we arrived, so we could not check-in yet!’
- ‘The taxi driver ripped us off!’
- ‘It was raining heavily on the last day!’

Unfortunately, we are wired to tell risks and unexpected events instead of all the things that went well. As humans we have a need for drama. Most of our thoughts are negative due to evolutionary advantages. If we are on the lookout for danger, we can safely continue to make babies for the next generation. A specific part of the brain, the amygdala, warns us of danger. We can also see a snake, when it is only a rope. But overall the meaning of the word danger has changed.

During a holiday we love the change of scenery and encountering new situations. We have new energy, new excitements, but maybe limited motivation when we return. It is almost like you have shortly lived someone else’s life outside of your own. You have experienced yourself whole again. All your senses were opened up to fully take in everything that a new location and culture can offer you. But also in modern times, we still have to deal with surprises or things that do not go our way.

Still when there are objectively no problems there are always new problems. Notorious B.I.G. used to rap *Mo Money, Mo Problems*. Yes, I quoted another rapper to make a point. This will be my last one, I promise. But there is some truth in the statement. We think when we go on holiday that our problems will be behind us, but heavy rain on the first day immediately troubles our plans.

We like to be in full control of our plans. When it comes to our career we believe we can stick to a plan to make a promotion.

If the promotion does not come through, we can become agitated. But imagine again the situation where barely anyone makes a promotion as compared to where almost everyone gets promoted. As we have seen in the beginning of the book, where I added Malcolm Gladwell's finding in his book *David & Goliath* that we as humans tend to favor the first scenario over the latter one.

When everyone gets promotion there is no pride in it, insinuating that we do like the grit and grind. We do want to have the feeling of being in control and responsible for our results.

Life could be seen as games and puzzles, which we are continuously trying to solve. Solving problems and challenges brings us happiness, although navigating life is a constant work-in-progress. Some problems are not our fault, but still we are responsible for how to deal with them. But just like after rain there is sunshine, problems come and go. So even after sunshine at some point in time it is going to rain again. Just like we need to determine which decisions to make are more important, we also need to determine whether all problems we encounter are worth actively solving.

Solving problems is not as easy when we are not feeling well. Other people tell us to look on the bright side, at the things in our life that are going well. We unfortunately can not always look on the bright side. We can be tough on ourselves and blame ourselves for feeling this way. In other situations we might blame others.

Blaming others gives a short term feeling of satisfaction. Whether we blame society, colleagues or friends or our upbringing, we inevitably are starting to feel that we are also at least partially responsible. Responsible for dealing with the situation you are in, not how you got into it is an important lesson. But when we feel we can not control anything at all, this results in helplessness and anxiety.

On the other hand when we feel we are doing great, we feel like we have more control. We do not see life full of risk and danger. We also seem better equipped to handle negativity. Still the news reminds you of all the dangers and negativity in the world. And dying by a terrorist attack seems more likely than dying in a traffic incident.

The way we look at the world resembles what we can expect. For example, the more we look for threats, the more likely it is we will see them. This is called the Blue Dot Effect, remember? We fit our perceptions in a way that matches our expectations.

How does the world seem to look vs. what do I see myself? But no matter your perception of the world. The world does change and as much as we are aware we flow through life's ups and downs. Change is not only happening to us. It is at the same time happening all over the world. And the lack of control we have over the rain, is in line with the little control we have over the world. Although at least for the world, we are part of it. A small part, but we are a part and have a voice.

### **Change is the only constant**

My dad was born in 1944. The Second World War was still ongoing. Even though Germany was losing, it still held a strong grip on a large part of the European continent. D-day, under Operation Overlord, was still in the planning phase and would not be initiated for another four months after my dad was born.

After fighting on European soil had ended, it continued for years on the Asian continent. Even after the Second World War had officially ended, the Korean war followed at the beginning of the 50s. All took place before my dad turned ten.

When we contemplate our own life on this planet, there are so many things the world has gone through since. Since the passing of the millennium a lot has changed, while on the other hand, still many things are the same.

Now, I do not feel entitled to make predictions about the future. The only thing I know for sure is that the world will continue to change. Countries will change, and so will its people. It is difficult to keep up with such changes.

That is why often we call upon information that we have securely stored in our heads for years. But information becomes outdated. Like any mobile phone, we need continuous updates.

The only way to change our perception or values is through the experiences we might have that are contrary to our old perceptions and outdated knowledge. We cannot control the world, but we can control how we deal with these changes. We can control the extent to which we open ourselves up to new information while reading, by people we encounter or through new experiences when we are traveling.

### **Stay curious and open**

I feel blessed to have been brought up in a household where we even learned about the people we might disagree with, but understand they are also human and have their own reasons for becoming the way they are.

That is why in my parent's bookshelves you can find both Hilary Clinton's and Donald Trump's autobiographies. Even though they hold different opinions, and many opposite values than the people they read about, my parents want to gain a better understanding of the people they hear and see so much about today.

In recent years, and especially because of social media, we have created such small bubbles of information, that we only see our own beliefs continuously confirmed.

You have your inner group, the people like you and I who know it all, and your outer groups, the stupid people who do not seem to get it. When it came to the subchapter on rap I deliberately used the words insiders and outsiders to demonstrate how quickly we can be placed in- and outside of certain groups.

But if we want to come together and if you truly want to learn and grow, you have to be open to study the 'other side' as well. You might learn something new and at the same time, if people in the outer group really hold values we universally disagree with, by first learning about them, you might be able to change their perception.

A great example of someone who does this, is Daryl Davis. He is a black American who makes neo-nazis and KKK (Ku Klux Klan) members overhaul their beliefs and thoughts.

He does this roughly through seven steps:

1. Overall, if you want to change a person's reality you start with another person's perception, before you demonstrate alternatives or other ways of thinking.
2. Daryl starts by asking the other person to explain their reality.
3. He never attacks this reality.
4. This lowers the 'wall' of the other person and makes them less self-defensive.
5. Only then he starts to show alternatives.
6. And carefully presents his point of view on both perceptions.
7. So that the other person has time to reflect.

Engaging with fundamentally different people and remaining calm, and truly listening is an art in itself, if you ask me. We like to call others stupid and immediately want to intervene when 'they' say something ridiculous. In a conversation we already quickly tend to go for A instead of B:

- A:** When someone talks, we immediately think about what we are going to say or respond when it is our turn.
- B:** When someone talks we truly listen, remain open and curious, before we formulate another question or response.

People do not like to be told what to do or think. Even though many things we believe or think are simply not true. We all have to update our knowledge because the world is not the same anymore.

It is different from when we were born, and it is also not the same as five years ago, or as yesterday. Tomorrow and in five years the world will again look different. Change is the only constant.

Keep in mind that change and innovation are always hated at the start. We sometimes struggle to change ourselves. So changing the world, and different worldviews are often despised as well.

But when presented with new evidence, or if someone holds up a mirror, we must always be ready to question our previous assumptions, reevaluate and admit when we were wrong. Or the least we can do is to respectfully disagree.

With the rise of the industrial revolution, many workers lost their jobs, but new jobs were also created. Nowadays we work less than during the industrial revolution, and most of us are much better off compared to those times. With a digital revolution upcoming and already on the way, we might despise it at the start. Jobs again will disappear, and others will be created. We might need to work less, but we could be better off than we are now. This requires us to be adaptable. And as humans we have proved we can.

It is not always easy to align with how the world is operating, or with what society is expecting from you. Though we all have to stay true to ourselves. Following and navigating your own journey, no matter what crosses your path. This requires us to be adaptable.

### **Survival of the most adaptable**

If the human race has proven one thing, it is that we are highly adaptable. From adopting to living in the heat of the desert, living in the tropical jungle, in snowy ice cold regions up to living in mountainous regions at altitudes reaching five kilometers. We are amazing and are capable of extraordinary achievements.

Nowadays we start our school journey at a very young age, where we go through elementary school till the age of twelve, before we continue with our middle or high school. We finish high school roughly at the age of sixteen to eighteen, and then many of us continue to study for another degree to specialize in a certain field or for a job.

These steps on our path are roughly fixed, the job market requires a certain specialization, and society has expectations of what a good career looks like. Of course, changing directions is always possible, but often through external expectations directions into specific fields are regarded as successful, whereas not having a university or college degree amounts to failure in the eyes of some.

These days the need to specialize also causes limitations in our ability to adapt. A chosen career path is what many people stick to. Besides work, we see that in our big moments — we are expected to marry, have children, buy a house and often stop dreaming and taking risks.



Some continue to live through the dreams of their children, before the cycle repeats and their children also stop taking risks.

Now it is not that we should take risks, it is just that often we feel stuck in life, and taking a 'risk' could help us improve it. And no matter how risk averse we try to live, life is still random. It will disrupt your plans, and it will rain the moment you want to go to the beach.

**'Life is what happens to you while you are busy making plans.'** - John Lennon, musician

I have always been curious about change and how it evolves. With an original interest in psychology, I went the business route thinking this path would give more security from a job perspective. And maybe that is true. There are real world limitations, with pros and cons to any decision. But when we are intrinsically motivated towards a subject, we can develop the necessary skills and make it happen. Our journey becomes our own.

At least change came back when I took the innovation management route. It showed me how new services and products come to market, how teams improve their collaboration and how they can deliver value throughout both radical and incremental change. I learned about combining ideas and testing assumptions and hypotheses, which is always valuable. At the end of my bachelor's I graduated with my thesis on Motivational factors affecting personal creativity, which helped me write about intrinsic motivation in chapter 2. So indirectly my original interest did cross my path again.

Actually feeling something works for you is different than understanding a theory and trying to apply it. So I hope that applying the changes you have thought through while reading the first chapters of the book is altering your journey in a positive way.

The journey you and I are walking is not only about understanding that we have to remain adaptable. It is also to believe that things can still cross our path or we can partly create our path. We accept the journey we took so far, but the journey is not over. We can still alter parts of our

personal life as well as our job. Think of your habits and strengths that are useful in a world that is constantly evolving.

Nassim Taleb introduced the term 'antifragile', in which we must not be fragile, but neither robust. Adaptability is key, as has been true for human beings and the rest of the animal kingdom. The 'strongest' and most rigid building is not per se the best protected against earthquakes. And it reminds us that we should neither be a papaya nor a coconut.

In an ever changing world, with ever changing jobs, we have to remain adaptable. Instead of only reading and studying about how to remain adaptable, you can only feel it when you live with an adaptable mindset. At work, you might be sent to a course to learn a theory and receive your certificate. But only once you apply it in both a work context and on a personal level, will it become relevant.

The World Economic Forum predicted that the ten most important skills for the coming years in the workforce will be (Whiting, 2020):

- 1. Analytical thinking and innovation**
- 2. Active learning and learning strategies**
- 3. Complex problem-solving**
- 4. Critical thinking and analysis**
- 5. Creativity, originality and initiative**
- 6. Leadership and social influence**
7. Technology use, monitoring and control
8. Technology design and programming
- 9. Resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility**
- 10. Reasoning, problem-solving and ideation**

I would argue that except for seven and eight, all other skills are at least partially covered in the book. These skills are of course listed for work purposes, but I am personally a strong believer in the link between personal development and developing your skills at work.

The fact you are reading this book means you are already actively doing number two from the list. Through self reflecting you apply number three and four on your own personal level. And a lot in the book is covered on number nine.

Analytical thinking and innovation, complex problem-solving, critical thinking and analysis and reasoning, problem-solving and ideation are all developed throughout following your own journey.

What skill do you think is most important to develop? And how could you continue to develop it?

In 1999, The World Health Organization on the other hand identified six key areas of life skills, which are the following:

1. **Communication and interpersonal skills**
2. **Decision making and problem-solving**
3. **Creative thinking and critical thinking**
4. **Self-awareness and empathy (two parts of emotional intelligence)**
5. **Assertiveness and equanimity or self-control**
6. **Resilience and the ability to cope with problems**

All of these are covered in this book again. We make important decisions throughout our journey. We have seen that everything starts with self-awareness, since it is key for growth and self-control. And this chapter, plus the previous one, are all about resilience and the ability to cope with problems. So we are on the right path and on the right journey, not only for the present but also for the future. In order to remain adaptable, or to be ourselves, we are told to follow our natural instincts. But what does natural mean?

### **Real nature vs. created nature**

In the book *The Path*, by Christine Gross-Loh and Michael Puett, they give us tremendous insight into what nature really is. The Chinese philosopher Xunzi argued that little in life is really natural. If a cook cuts up an ox, which is a domesticated animal, with a knife that is man-made, there is little that is natural about it. The job of a cook is also created by humans. The cook has a name, given to him by another human being. We as humans have been domesticating animals and plants and we have been making tools for thousands of years. As a result we have been creating new jobs ever since.

In real nature everything is endlessly spontaneous, and that is also a scary thought. We want to limit dangers, because as human beings in a wild nature we have struggled for a long time.

Living in a tropical jungle is not easy, and neither is living in Siberia in winter times. In order to limit the danger and spontaneity of such areas we have innovated. And we could, since we as humans, can create more than there is.

We have stored information and passed through knowledge and wisdom over generations. However, endless technological innovation is also not what matters, it is what we do with it and how we build on it in each particular situation that determines its value.

So neither nature or things that are man-made should be blindly accepted. There are more valuable human innovations than robot vacuum cleaners.

Through communication, continuous learning and storing information we are able to build upon each other's ideas. By understanding what we have done, we can change where we go from here. We cannot go back to the past, but as long as we learn from our failures and our mistakes, we continue to learn.

We believe we can be in control through planning. We want to prevent bad experiences, but not all downs can be prevented. Still we want to predict the unknown, and plan a life around certain milestones to make it more predictable.

Though just like the stress paradox, life should not be completely predictable or unpredictable. A real balance is never possible, but how do we find the right mix of planning life vs being spontaneous?

### **Planning vs. spontaneity**

With all required skills for the future listed, we might wonder where to start. Well throughout the book we have already started well.

Most of the skills mentioned are not skills you can simply follow a course or study for. You do not simply graduate from such skills, and be done with them for the rest of your life. They require an open approach to a life full of learning and growth. This is a continuous process. With the journey as the destination, we have the right mindset.

1. Learning can happen through planning, when you plan a moment to learn and block time to expand your skills.
2. Learning can also happen spontaneously when you do not yet know something contains a lesson for you. Or when you are tested to deal with something unexpected. Through self-reflection both wins and losses turn into lessons.

Life can not be fully planned. And planning a lot limits our spontaneity. But funny enough even the most disciplined people do not follow their plan for the full 100%. We need freedom, preserve variance, as Tony Robbins has listed in one of the core human needs. And life will give you variance. Also when you do not want it.

Because of sudden changes in life we should not plan too far ahead and not to be too focussed on expectations for the future. For years I have been focused on the 'what is next' question? Planning my after work-life in such detail to continuously increase efficiency. This came at the price of never being fully engaged in the moment itself.

Being fully present is wonderful, since your eyes will be able to see more than ever before. There is no such thing as real time, only reality and presence. We often think so much about the future, what to eat for dinner, what to do on the weekend, what to do in the summer, that this comes at the expense of spontaneity and surprises.

But we cannot live without planning either. If we do not plan our birthday party, no one might show up. And if we start to plan our birthday party, we add our weekly sport's routine, before we know we are easily trapped into planning everything. If you do not plan your time well, someone else will help you waste it.

But through planning, we limit the chance to visit a friend spontaneously. We miss the opportunity to go to the beach or the park when the weather turns out to be great.

You can plan time to be spontaneous, block time where you will not have a fixed activity or appointment. If you do not have your habits and planning under control, you cannot follow your own journey.

It means you let everything happen to you. But if we plan too much, life becomes predictable, and that is also not what we want.

From the moment we are born we enter a world that is not predictable at all. It is full of random events that we have no control over. On the other hand we think we have control over being spontaneous. But is that real randomness?

### **Two types of randomness**

100 million sperm cells are being released with every man's ejaculation, whereas a woman has one to two million eggs at birth, even though this number immediately starts to decrease, we are still talking big numbers. If you remember your biology classes, only one egg and one sperm cell are needed to develop into a person like you and me.

The fact that you are born is already a miracle, let alone being born to your parents. Born in this day and age and in this space and time. You are you and were born as you.

Imagine the odds of this happening, in combination with the fact that this world will soon be inhabited by eight billion people, this is pretty amazing right? You are one of these eight billion people and given the fact you are reading this book I guess you could already feel lucky. You are already a winner in life. In the first place because you are alive.

We see that it is quite random that you are you and I am myself. Luckily, on average, we are way better off than the majority of the world. In Western media there is a lot of emphasis on millionaires who have it all, but they represent only a tiny sample of the world's population. Y

You do not have to compare yourself to others, but if you do, feel grateful because you already belong to the top 5% of the world, at least income wise. Economic factors do not directly translate into happiness, although the world's happiest countries are in general more wealthy. But we also belong to a part of the world that has the most opportunities.

So next time when you think about the choices you have made, and the habits you have built, just imagine where you would be if the world's

random generator had decided you should be born in a small rural village in Central Africa, growing up with limited opportunities.

What choices would you have and how would your current habits help you? Or would you even have developed them in the first place? Many of our achievements and accomplishments are due to luck, which started the moment we were born.

However at times we feel we have run out of luck, or luck is never on our side. Our happiness set point is increased or decreased because of all the ups and downs in life. Our journey is also tough. Yes life is tough for everyone, since numbers such as, averages in salary and happiness, fail to tell our individual stories. Millionaires can be depressed and lonely, whereas people living on a couple of euros a day might feel happy in their community. Being appreciative of what you have instead of focusing on what you do not have is a key lesson here. With gratefulness at the core, because we, as opposed to 95% of the world, have more opportunities to make choices and evaluate our habits. For some aspects in life we even have the ability and luxury to introduce randomness into our own lives.

Being born itself is already very random. Random events can be great. So be open to randomness and you can maybe even introduce it yourself.

### **Introducing randomness**

Welcome spontaneity into your life. Not planning anything and calling people up on the day itself to see if they would like to hangout might not always work. It is the reason many of us believe that everything needs to be planned.

The downside of planning is that once you start to plan one thing, that leads to planning the next one and the next; so when you try to find a time to meet up with friends and family, this also needs to be planned which leads to an endless cycle of planning that is difficult to break.

Only the predictable experiences are not always as mind-blowing as spontaneous and random ones. The reward feels better when we have

no anticipation, remember? Randomness can be introduced. Look at your inspirations and try out something new every month. That is what we wanted right? That is what made us feel alive?

- Visit a new place.
- Cook a dish in a different way.
- Meet an old friend.
- Have a talk with a stranger.
- Be open to new surprises and activities.
- Subscribe to a new class.
- Take another person on a surprise day trip.

Even a planned gathering can still instill randomness. You planned a day away with someone but you do not know what you are going to do; you may visit a different restaurant; or the holiday you might take is different from the ones taken before, where part of the group is in for a constant surprise.

The latter one applies well to a great tradition I have with three close friends. Together we have been completely open-minded to absolute randomness and new experiences. As a group of four we have been making trips for the past eight years to various locations in Europe, with the largest emphasis on countries that none of us had visited before. In this way we break away from more standardized and touristic sites, to new areas which are up and coming, and are definitely less known. This has led to us visiting for example all the Baltic States, Montenegro, Moldova (including the semi independent republic of Transnistria) and many more.

On top of this we organize the trip individually or in duos to make sure the others are in for a complete surprise throughout the entire trip. This has led to hilarious situations with surprising boat trips to Tallinn in Estonia, big detours while road tripping to the small republic of San Marino and visiting the largest wine cellars in the world in Moldova by taking a car underground to drive through the large tunnels.

At the same time it cannot all be fun and games. We have had a heart-shattering experience in Auschwitz by having a tour with a daugh-



ter of one of the Holocaust survivors. This is also a part of life and history, and something we should not neglect.

Even though the locations listed before might not have the allure of cities like London and Paris, the rich food culture of countries around the mediterranean sea, or even have all touristic sites optimally organized. It is exactly those initial downsides which are actually upsides due to more randomness and more spontaneity throughout the trip and all the interactions that then take place.

The people in those countries are pure, welcome you with open arms, and are truly grateful for you taking the time to visit their country. Each country has something unique to offer, each country has a history and all of its inhabitants are people just like you and me.

However, very often the people and countries that are not within the top ten, do not cross our mind when we book a trip, and are therefore even outside of our way of thinking and outside of our perception of the world. We can introduce more randomness through our travels, but traveling does not only lead to a unique experience, it can have a lasting and profound impact on the person you are today and will become tomorrow.

### **Real randomness**

There are also random events during travel you would rather not experience. These can be random events you have no control over. In 2016 my girlfriend and I were traveling through China's most western provinces. Visiting the more rural side of the country with crystal clear lakes, snow peaked mountains, green trees as far as the eyes can see, – this is quite a contrast to a city like Shanghai.

Moving from one place to another in mountainous and sparsely populated areas in Western China is not that easy. Local transport is limited, so a taxi was back then both a viable and quite affordable alternative. Being picked up in the early morning, with hours and hours of driving ahead, taking a nap on the backseats felt like a good idea.

At times we were gazing out the window, truly enjoying the journey.

The road drove us through and over the snow capped mountains, reaching altitudes well over 4.000 meters.

One moment we saw the snow, the next moment we were sleeping in dreamland. The next moment the car made a crashing sound, we woke up not being able to see what was going on. All of a sudden the car seemed to go backwards. It turned out the driver fell asleep at the wheel and crashed the car up the hill on the left side of the road. Luckily in his sleep he had steered left instead of right. Because on the right side there were no guardrails even though there was a cliff, so we would have fallen hundreds of meters down.

Consciously thinking about it, we survived a fatal accident, though we did not play any active role in the survival and neither did the taxi driver. Though the car was declared a total loss, we quickly realized real randomness had saved our lives.

On roads like this, yearly incidents are abundant. Many locals and tourists die in bus or car crashes in mountains all over the world. They are not as lucky, and are not saved by randomness. Feeling that we can also control all randomness gives us a fake sense of control.

Yes we can introduce more randomness into our lives, but real randomness comes when it comes. Real randomness can hit us hard, we go through intense downs, before we believe we can move up again. In other cases we feel we have been lucky and are grateful for randomness saving our lives.

### **Putting things in perspective**

Surviving a crash with a 50% of dying and a 50% chance of surviving, puts a whole different perspective on a game like Roulette. Not taking into account the zero, there is a 50% chance the ball ends up on either red or black. Still it is difficult to imagine another outcome of the story. We would not be there, so your thoughts immediately go to your close ones.

How would they feel, how would they respond? How can they put things in perspective if we would have died in a car crash? This is a sudden death, with no meaning on the surface.

For us this moment did have meaning. It has put things in perspective and makes us grateful for having more days, weeks, months and now years to live. Some Buddhists look at the world and see everything as if it is already broken, so they cherish everything as long as it is still whole, like the tea cups they drink from.

You can be grateful for what you have and accept what is outside of your power. If you are reading this book, big chances are, you are on many comparable factors better off than in other parts of the world. This does not mean you do not have your own hardships, own struggles and challenges. These are just different.

Most of the first world problems can be divided between complaints and anxieties. We all know people in our lives that either complain often or are dealing with anxieties. As a society we need to accept that anxiety and mental health are huge challenges and we need to tackle them together.

Just when it comes to putting things in perspective I refer to our society regarding our everyday complaints. Complaints like I cannot go on holiday this month or the weather is bad. Most of our complaints are trivial compared to real issues in other areas in the world. People have to fight for food and shelter in order to survive the day.

- Many people in the world are still illiterate.
- A big part of the world population still earns less than a couple of euros a day. They do not have the opportunity to save money, let alone to buy this book for the original price of 24 euros. You probably did not even have to think about spending this amount.
- Reading is leisure and leisure might be a given for many. But it was definitely not a given for most of our ancestors one hundred plus years ago. And up to today in many other places in the world people do not know leisure, and there is no such thing as a workweek and a weekend.

Two books that will help us to put things in perspective are Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* and *The Invisible Son* by Tey El-Rjula. Tey had to live for years in Dutch refugee camps in the Netherlands, before he finally got his Dutch passport. For a person without a birth

certificate a passport is something very special. For many of us having a passport is a given. Not having a birth certificate and therefore having any form of identification, makes life extremely difficult. You live on the same planet, but you are not visible, and therefore an outsider of the system.

Viktor Frank is a Holocaust survivor and wrote about his time in concentration camps. He is the one who saw the guards as the prisoners, because he still had a free mind. Having visited Auschwitz myself, it is an experience that is going to stay with me for the rest of my life. In this case I was luckily only a visitor for a day. We have to envision that when Viktor was freed by the Allies he had to conclude that a feeling of happiness was only present to him for a very brief moment. The world that he knew had changed and almost all of his family members had died. Despite all of this he was still able to achieve great things. He became the founder of Logotherapy and always remained a man with a free spirit and mind. Talking about perseverance of the human mind!

After reading such books, we

- know that everyone has a story, so we do not judge a book by its cover;
- do not take anything for granted;
- feel that there is always a lesson or an opportunity.

Important to keep in mind is that both these stories are real, they did happen, in the very same world, you and I live. We can try to always feel blessed, grateful and fortunate with everything that we have.

In certain moments we might feel different, however for most of us it is not too difficult to envision a worse situation than our own. Open a history book about life before our modern times and you can read tons of stories about how cruel life has been for most of our ancestors. So next time you complain about the weather, think again about what Aristoteles used to say:

**'Luck is when the guy next to you is hit by an arrow.'**

Speaking about putting things in perspective, that is definitely one.

## **The unpredictability of the weather**

Deliberately introducing randomness in life is still a choice, so how random is that exactly? Variation, experimentation and introducing randomness of course help us deal with uncertainty to some extent. But we mostly introduce randomness to increase the joy and fun.

But real randomness we have to deal with is already something as ordinary as the weather. Dutch people are famous for complaining about the weather, but just like life, the weather can still change, until the very last moment.

A friend of mine who is a geography teacher always tells me that it is impossible to have a 100% accurate prediction on the weather longer than a couple of hours upfront. Whether it is life at large or the weather, in both cases it is the uncertainty that is bothering us. Accept what is out of your reach, but take responsibility for what is.

Since a lot is out of our control this does not mean we cannot control anything. We can take control of ourselves by tempering our expectations and not planning too far ahead. So to make the best out of the current situation, we need to become more adaptable, in both our work and our private life.

We have more worries about things that are not there or are not real, than we have worries about things that are. Our thoughts often create problems that will never happen or that will be solved by life itself. This feels very optimistic, and a healthy dose of optimism can work. But sometimes a pessimistic outlook can help just as much. Having contemplated someone's death, as the Stoics advised might help when the moment comes.

There is so much uncertainty in life. We have to face this whether we like this or not. Who would have predicted the 2020 pandemic? There were some people who said that a pandemic would be one of the worst things that could befall us. But rationally understanding this makes it still very different from when the moment was actually there. We can simply not anticipate everything, not even with a pessimistic outlook.

If we would try to anticipate all the risks in the world it would leave us paralyzed. We would stay indoors 24/7.

But no matter what happens to us, except when we die, there is always another day. And we keep going.

### **Keep going no matter the speed**

Back in 1983, my mom temporarily stayed in a single room apartment. Little did she know at the time that the gas radiator in that room was leaking carbon monoxide. Weeks went by, while her energy was draining and she got more and more health issues. Interrupted by a short trip to the Austrian mountains, where she temporarily felt better, this better feeling immediately disappeared when she returned. What was going on?

After a visit to her doctor, he detected that she had suffered chronic carbon monoxide poisoning. A measurement in her apartment quickly supported this conclusion. Carbon monoxide can be deadly and even inhaling it for a short time can lead to brain damage. Chances are big that if she would have slept in that room for another week, it could have already been deadly. For this reason the Dutch government advises to have a carbon monoxide alarm installed in your house. This is because you can not smell the gas and that is why it is called the 'silent killer'.

Through this random period in life, the journey of a 27 years young woman, who had a bright and promising future ahead, had changed completely. She used to be active, out with friends, traveling the world and caring for other people, both privately and in her work as a social worker. The poison was fully nestled in her body and spread further in the years after.

Life had to be lived in a very different way. Learning to live a life with limitations and consciously thinking about everything that you do. Imagine that all simple routines, like brushing your teeth, are processes you consciously need to think of. This is what I meant earlier on that life 100% outside our comfort zone is an insane burden to handle. My mum's life was all upside down and had to be restructured completely.

Everything that was once taken for granted was now taken apart. From dreams for the future, now all the focus went to the present. Without an obvious purpose, everything had to be rediscovered. Up to this age and day my mum still feels the damaging effects of sleeping in that room for some weeks. The carbon monoxide poisons are like cancer cells that nest themselves in your body. Where with cancer, chemotherapy is often advised, for chronic carbon monoxide poisoning there is no concrete solution. However, the process of detoxification is similar.

While the doctors in the hospital had given up on any form of recovery, she chose her own path, her own journey. Through her own determination, perseverance and a positive mindset, she has been proving that original diagnosis wrong. Is she exactly the same person as she would have been without the poisoning? No, of course not, but in many aspects this is impossible. With the support of alternative therapists and by choosing her own journey, she has been making progress, step by step.

Up to the present this is a slow process with many ups and downs. But most of the time she kept believing in improvement, which made her pull through. I have seen with my own eyes that no matter how slow the recovery is, and no matter how small the steps are, progress is still possible.

One can find success in all the little achievements and daily progress. And despite the fact that she has never been able to work since, she was able to give meaning to life and to this challenge that had crossed her path. Finding meaning in life helps you rediscover yourself and evaluate your own journey. Through the deepest depths, to enjoying all the small things that life has to offer.

Through her life she had only two choices, resisting what happened, or embracing the challenge. She chose the latter, accepted what happened and refused to see herself as a victim.

My mother's life in the second half of the 1980s was limited by the fact that being in a large crowd was a big challenge for her. When her family offered her a ticket to attend a classical concert, she doubted.

But the concert was a positive challenge and so she decided to accept the offer. Before the concert and during the break she started talking with a man, who would later become my father. So I would not have been born, if it were not for that concert.

Her story relates well to a story of the Ancient Greeks. That story covers the first and second arrow. The first arrow is the one that inflicts real physical pain. It is the actual arrow that pierces your body. The second one is about how long we will keep inflicting pain on ourselves, by denying the first one.

Many of the downs in life are random events we have no control over. Illness, death and so on. Life is less about what happens to you, but almost all about how you deal with it. Seeing with my own eyes how my mum dealt with a random incident like that, has given me the mindset to not take anything for granted in life, be grateful for every day and to enjoy the journey.

As unlucky as my mum was with the gas leakage, I was very lucky with that taxi driver unconsciously turning left. We all have things happening to us that are outside of our control. But life goes on and we have to deal with it, whether we like this or not.

**'It does not matter how slow you go as long as you do not stop.'**  
- Confucius, philosopher

Life is a marathon not a sprint. With an open mindset to learn and grow, we stay open to new experiences and knowledge. We continue to create our own wisdom. We know what motivates us intrinsically, we know what we care about and follow our own journey.

And no matter what crosses our path, we have to embrace it. It does not matter how tough this may be and whether we like it or not. We do not judge our own speed, because we are never at a standstill.

**'I continue to learn until the day I die.'** - My grandma, my mum's mum



## **One book closes, another opens up**

We try to make life predictable, while it is actually very uncertain. Accepting randomness or accepting what befalls us, is a part of life. A necessary and important part. It might be time to turn the page and close the book. But closing a book before we know what is up next is not as easy.

Therefore from time to time we have to take a step back to catapult us forward again. Even though others might perceive it as a step backwards, it is our preparation for the journey onwards. For some aspects we actually take some real steps backwards.

Yet again it all depends on how we measure success, on how we measure forward and backward. A colleague of mine used to say, innovation is always two steps forward and one step backward.

Back in 2016 I had a different vision for the optimal growth path for myself and my career. I joined a promising consultancy firm in IT and as a junior proved myself immediately in a senior role. Everything looked as perfect as it had during the interviews.

However within three months, they no longer could let me keep the role I was excelling in. It was already promised to others who were already waiting for a promotion for a couple of years. They did acknowledge I performed well, but I would be needed in the junior role for the upcoming months.

During the interviews I specifically stated that such a role would not pique my interest, but I believe I am not the only one who has encountered promises that turned out to be false once you signed your contract. I was on a growth path and wanted to continue to learn and grow, not to take a step back from that perspective. They acknowledged I performed better than expectations, but there was no other way.

The alternative journey only became possible after I talked with the founders, with a resignation letter in my hand. But it is more difficult to regain trust once it is broken. Honesty and openness are two of my main core values that I will stand for at all costs.

As a result I did take a step back, but not on the growth path. I went back to my old friends at Milvum, the company I once worked for without pay, although I had to swallow a financial setback of almost 40%. But taking one step back in one area, can sometimes mean you can take multiple steps forward. It all depends on the criteria you have on what forward and backward actually mean.

It is still astonishing to see that employers can provide everything only after you say you are going to quit, instead of offering this the moment you are truly open about what you want to achieve together. Staying true to my core values, I quit over there, rejoined Milvum, and we landed a big corporate within two months and have been performing and delivering big and challenging projects ever since.

This experience of thinking you have chosen the right job, while it not being the right one, made me realize I wanted to help students via the Erasmus Mentor.me program. The strong emphasis on picking the perfect job after you graduate is so big, that it is better to realize perfect does not exist. You can always switch jobs. Furthermore the employer name, job title and salary are not as important as you might think. Your actual role and responsibilities, your actual growth path and how you and the company can grow together determine the real value. From growing your skills, your value will become apparent by itself, which then will translate into the job title you might want to have or the salary you had in mind.

But salary is not everything. Even with the highest salary you can lack the intrinsic motivation for the job at hand. Whether you are at the start of your career or at a later stage, sometimes it is better to close a book in order to stay true to yourself, so that new other opportunities reveal themselves.

### **Only someone who is well prepared has the opportunity to improvise**

Success is where opportunity meets preparation. Milvum, back then, provided me with a job opportunity to continue my growth. Simply quitting the other job, without having that opportunity, would have made me look quite stupid. This means my own preparation by itself would not

just simply translate into success.

Though I already believed in myself, they also needed to believe in me. Sometimes in life we need others to believe in us. What we can control is how we prepare ourselves for different situations.

**'The Five P's: proper - preparation - prevents - poor - performance'**

- Derrick Rose, NBA player

If you are knowledgeable and adaptable, you have two key factors that can shield you from troubles. Preparation is key here; and improvisation is possible due to that preparation.

The burden of having a full-time job while applying for another one and contemplating your journey is a tough one, I guess many of us have felt before. You want to free your mind, by quitting your job, but you can not always make such a risky decision.

For a long time I felt my time at the job I truly disliked was a waste of time. But looking back, that's where I learned to deal with all the ups and downs of that job. Also over there lots of lessons were learned.

Your journey always encompasses lessons, and in hindsight it is the times where you felt uncomfortable, whether it was at work, in a relationship or at life in general, that led to new decisions and opportunities for turnarounds and moving forward. This sometimes happens because you have felt that you moved backwards.

This journey is never ending, without a clear destination or a stop at the end. A station where you get off means, in time, you will move to another location; a degree as a reward for the study you have followed means you will continue to learn from other sources and experiences; and a ring that captures your love through marriage means you will still learn more about one another.

The journey itself is the destination which is a continuous cycle of walking, learning, growing and loving.

## Your journey is your destination: From Knowledge → Action

### Reflection questions

1. How can you introduce more randomness in life? You can link it with your inspiration and the new things in life you would like to try.
2. Do you find it difficult if you are not in control? Where does this come from?
3. Think back of a situation where you had to accept something that was out of your control. How did it make you feel at first? And how do you reflect on it now?
4. Is there a situation you can think of where you put something in perspective?
5. How well would you rate yourself on the future skills?  
Download the template from: [www.innolation-guide.com/free](http://www.innolation-guide.com/free)

### Your lessons

Your three key lessons from this chapter:

1 ...

2 ...

3 ...

**Reminder lessons:**

- There are two types of randomness. The first one is the randomness we create ourselves. We do this by being spontaneous. By trying out new things in life and having new experiences. The second one is real randomness. This is the randomness that we have no control over. This randomness can make us feel lucky and in other cases very unlucky.
- As much as we want to believe we can fully create our own success, this is not true. We can work hard. We can move with the right habits. We can self-reflect, but we still need opportunities. Life throws a lot of randomness at us. This randomness is beyond our control. The only thing we can control is how we deal with it. Four ways to deal with it are:
  1. See everything that happens to us, even the downs, as a lesson.
  2. Put things in perspective.
  3. Understand that not needing control, gives you a certain control.
  4. Prepare to improvise, by remaining adaptable instead of rigid.
- Keep going no matter what. The world keeps spinning. And you continue to go. Books close and new books open. Today is today and tomorrow is another day.