

## **LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY**

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**UUCD**

### **Meditation**

#### THE GLOVE IN THE SUBWAY

By Jane Ranney Rzepka (adapted)

A one-paragraph newspaper article describes a subway platform during the morning rush hour. A train pulls in; a well-dressed woman gets off. Before the doors close, the woman realizes that she is holding only one of her leather gloves. She looks back into the train and spots the matching one on the seat. It is obviously too late to dash back in to retrieve it, so with a cavalier shrug, she flings her arm out and, the doors about to close, tosses her glove onto the seat alongside its mate. The doors shut, and the train pulls away.

What a great image. One could use it, I suppose, as a metaphor for facing the inevitable, or arguing for an orderly universe, or even, with a little stretch, for sharing the good things in life. But the metaphor that comes to mind is the one of "letting go." To throw a favourite leather glove into the oblivion of a moving train must involve small pangs of uncertainty, pangs of some degree of loss, pangs of upset. After a lifetime of struggling not to lose our mittens, then our gloves, cavalier abandonment does not come easy.

[Yet] we need that. We need to cast that glove of responsibility back into the train. We need a vigorous and decisive toss about now to free ourselves of the confining gloves of life, even if we love them.

And the train's about to leave.

### **Sermon**

The train is about to leave.

What have you left on it accidentally?

What have you let go of intentionally?

In a world where uncertainty is the only constant,  
Where no one lives forever,  
No one is perfect,

No idea is shared by all,  
Where there are more questions than answers,  
And tomorrow defies predictability,  
The train is always about to leave,  
often with things we value left lonely on a seat.

If you were the person left holding one glove,  
Would you have the presence of mind to shrug and throw the other through closing  
doors?  
Would you try to dash back through, perhaps injuring yourself in the process?  
What if the glove left on the seat was more than a glove? Something or someone more  
precious?

Travis Bradberry writes:

“Our brains are hardwired to make much of modern life difficult. This is especially true when it comes to dealing with uncertainty. ... Our brains give us fits when facing uncertainty because they’re wired to react to it with fear. In a recent study, a Caltech neuroeconomist imaged subjects’ brains as they were forced to make increasingly uncertain bets. ... The less information the subjects had to go on, the more irrational and erratic their decisions became. You might think the opposite would be true—the less information we have, the more careful and rational we are in evaluating the validity of that information. Not so. As the uncertainty of the scenarios increased, the subjects’ brains shifted control over to the limbic system, the place where emotions, such as anxiety and fear, are generated.”<sup>1</sup>

Given this, I wonder about the state of our brains amidst our current political election, with the heightened uncertainty in our lives and in the world.

Bradberry goes on to describe traits of people who deal well with uncertainty, including some of the following:

First, “focus only on what matters.”

People who deal well with uncertainty don’t get distracted small decisions or fear consequences of appearing foolish. They save their energy for decisions and situations of larger consequence.

Second, “embrace that which [you] can’t control.”

Most of us like to be in control, and most of life isn’t controllable. People who are good with uncertainty don’t see situations as better or worse than they are, and acknowledge

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<sup>1</sup> Travis Bradberry, 11 Ways Emotionally Intelligent People Overcome Uncertainty, <https://www.talentsmart.com/articles/11-Ways-Emotionally-Intelligent-People-Overcome-Uncertainty-1596789451-p-1.html>

when something isn't in their control. They aren't afraid to make mistakes and would rather fail through action than fail to act.

Third, "don't seek perfection."

People who are good at facing uncertainty know there's no perfect decision in the face of uncertainty, and simply don't try to be perfect. That way when things go imperfectly, they aren't plagued with lamentation or a sense of failure, nor do they spend longer than they need to on a task with aims of perfection.

Forth, "trust [your] gut."

People who are good at facing uncertainty find the sweet spot between diving impulsively into a situation on one hand, mistaking their assumptions for instincts, and, on the other, rationally talking themselves out of listening to their guts.

Fifth, "have contingency plans."

People who are graceful with uncertainty hope for the best and plan for the worst. They admit they may be wrong and plan accordingly.

Next, "don't ask, 'What if?'"

Bradberry says: "'What if?' statements throw fuel on the fire of stress and worry, and there's no place for them in your thinking once you have good contingency plans in place." People who are good with uncertainty trust that they can deal with the what ifs when they happen, if they do.

Finally, "when all else fails, breathe."

People who manage uncertainty well remain calm in the face of uncertainty. They breathe, literally, when they feel fear and worry bubble up.

All of this is good advice: focus on what matters, embrace what you can't control, don't seek perfection, trust your gut, have contingency plans, don't ask "what if," and breathe.

And it's all still easier said, or heard, or read, than done.

And so I have the following wishes for all of you who struggle with uncertainty:

To all who are yearning for something that you hope will be, but fear may not come to pass:

May you be patient in your yearning

And active in your pursuit of your dreams.

May you know the difference between forcing and inviting,

And know that forcing often pushes away what we most desire.

May you remember to breathe,

Finding, perhaps, your dreams in unexpected places or unexpected ways.

To all who are dreading something that may or must come:

May you know the difference between the possible and the inevitable,  
and make your contingency plans where fitting,  
May you build trust in your ability to face whatever may come,  
And then let go of 'what ifs.'  
And if you can't, if the thing is too frightening, the 'what ifs' too overwhelming,  
May you find people who will travel arm in arm with you,  
Helping you make different plans,  
Better plans, safer plans,  
And then help you see them through.

To all who are perfectionists:

It can be exhausting, living with the uncertainty, the impossibility of perfect success,  
To risk appearing less than competent, less than skilled, less than talented.  
It can be debilitating, awaiting uncertain approval from peers, from supervisors, from  
loved ones,  
Approval that may arrive often or rarely, perhaps reinforcing perfectionism either way.  
I know because this has been my struggle, too.  
I wish you the knowledge that our "best" is not possible every moment of every day,  
That "good enough" really is good enough most of the time.  
And most importantly, when it isn't, that the consequences are rarely dire.  
I wish for you trust that you can deal with the results of your imperfection,  
And even find in them a life-giving gem from time to time.

To all who fear for your current or future health and wellness:

You are not the first nor the last on this journey;  
It comes to most of us at some point, some sooner and more intensely than others,  
But only those who die suddenly have the chance, perhaps, to avoid illness entirely.  
May you make space for grief and loss alongside hope.  
May you know the deeper healing that is possible when we step beyond ideas of cure or  
return to what was.  
Healing of not just body but of mind and soul  
May you have the determination to search out what works best for you,  
and the courage to face what is and may yet become.  
And may you have companions on the journey who understand your struggles, and fill  
your life with love.

To all who fear for the world, and feel we are hurtling toward devastating suffering and  
destruction,

If you find that hopefulness feels false,  
despite doing your part, large or small,  
despite rallies and protests and learning,  
despite connecting with others who share your fear and your commitment,

and despite the inspiration of impassioned speeches.  
If you still wonder if it can ever be enough, in time, and feel hopeless,  
May you consider this wisdom from Stephen Jenkinson,  
who differentiates between being hopeful, being hopeless, and being hope-free.  
In our time, he calls for us to be hope-free - to burn through the false choice between  
hopeful and hopeless.  
May you try it on for size, this hope free-ness, and see if it changes you and your capacity  
to carry on, free of false hope or incapacitating hopelessness.

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I do not speak to you today as a master of living with uncertainty.

I have long experienced uncertainty more challenging than the reality of my fears  
realized. I have been caught, frozen, in “what ifs.” I have felt pulled in many directions:  
hope and fear, optimism and pessimism, determination and acceptance... and it can be  
exhausting to hold it all, to hope for the best and plan for the worst, preparing  
practically and mentally for multiple outcomes simultaneously. And I have stared at my  
beautiful babe and wept, imagining the impossibility of life without him.

I don't know how to live perfectly with uncertainty; I am trying on hope-freeness for  
size.

But I do know this: To love is to risk loss. To live is to die. To really live and love hurts,  
sometimes too much. But to live without loving is not really living.

Brené Brown tells the story of a couple, a couple who had a son, four years old, whose  
signature move was slamming the screen door. They asked him, told him, reminded him  
to stop slamming the screen door. Over and over again.

And then they lost him to cancer.

In their grief, they often found themselves standing at the back door, banging the screen  
back and forth for five to ten minute stretches. Wishing for those ordinary, irritating  
moments. Over and over again.<sup>2</sup>

The best we can offer one another might be embracing not just the big moments, the fun  
times, the heights of joy, but the mundane, the ordinary, the irritating, the hurting, the  
afraid, the uncertain moments. To be grateful for our blessings, even when we are  
yearning for more, seeking healing, or hoping for more, or longer, than we have.

And so,  
May we be love fiercely,

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<sup>2</sup> Brene Brown, *The Call to Courage*, available on Netflix, 2019.

And live fully,  
Appreciating the slamming doors  
That will, inevitably, one day fall silent.

For the train is always about to leave.

Blessed be.

Amen.