

Fear and The Gift of Uncertainty
Tom Morris

I'd love to share with you a passage from my short novel, *The Oasis Within*. The two characters in this brief scene brought me some perspectives I'd never attained before, and that are greatly needed for our current time. The setting is the desert in Egypt in 1934. An older man, Ali, is speaking with his 13-year-old nephew Walid. The boy has just learned of some difficult and challenging circumstances that will face them both, as well as all their friends who are traveling with them by camel toward Cairo. It's evening, as they're about to begin the last segment of their journey:

They had now come to their tent. While Ali held open the flap for his nephew, the boy looked very serious and, as he ducked into their humble abode, he spoke up with a related concern that was on his mind. "I have one big problem, and attached to it, a worry."

Ali followed and sat down with him. He asked, "What's that? Tell me your concern."

Walid answered, "When I try to imagine the future, even next week, there's so much uncertainty about it all. And this really bothers me."

"Don't worry. Such is the world. And this is everyone's condition, whether they realize it or not. Each of us is a work of art in progress, and so is our journey together. Uncertainty is the canvas on which all our lives are painted. There are many intermediate points of certainty in life, and some large-scale universals, but for the most part, we play out our destinies against a backdrop of many unknowns."

"To be honest, Uncle, I think that uncertainty and the unknown sometimes really scare me, deep down."

"You're like most other people in feeling initially uneasy or even fearful about the unknown. And there's nothing wrong with that. It's natural. But then, the crucial question is, what will you do with your fear? Will you allow it to stop you? Will you give it the power to make your life small? Or will you thank it for its cautions, acknowledge its causes, investigate its concerns, and then move forward with it as your sometimes-useful advisor, but not the ruler of your heart?"

"I've never thought about it like this."

"That's what courage is. A courageous man feels fear, but doesn't follow all the orders barked out by this one emotion. He listens, and even consults its concerns. But, most of all, in the end, he does what he thinks is right, despite any fear he may feel. He doesn't allow the fear to rule him."

"So, brave people can feel scared?"

"Yes. But the more they act bravely, the weaker the fear becomes. They begin to manage the emotion."

"That's a really helpful insight."

"Good. And now I have another thought for you, a big one."

"What is it?"

"Consider the possibility that uncertainty is a gift." Walid actually laughed.

"What do you mean, Uncle? That's a very surprising thing to say."

Now the old man had a special sparkle in his eye, and spoke with great conviction.

“It may be that uncertainty makes possible many of the best things in life. Think about it for a moment. There’s a sense in which uncertainty and the unknown provide us with the possibility of possibility, and so with ample room to dream and do as we desire. Without the open future they give us, our souls couldn’t truly grow. These conditions establish the arena within which we can be original and creative. They also allow us to develop the important quality of faith, as well as an inwardly formed personal confidence, not in the easy way that simple certainty would give, but in a way that makes these characteristics genuine personal accomplishments.”

Walid spoke up and said, “I’ve never thought about uncertainty like that.”

“Most people don’t. But now consider something else, my friend: Perhaps we’re in this world to throw our own special lights into the darkness and illumine a path for ourselves as well as others. Without that darkness, we’d have no real work to do. Uncertainty allows for heroic effort, productive action, and distinctively human achievement. This condition that we tend to dislike and regret and even fear may be the thing that allows us to do and become all that we most admire.”

“Wow. These are completely new perspectives for me.”

“I’m glad I can provide new things for you to think about tonight, and as you ponder potential goals for the future. Don’t allow any worries about uncertainty, and all that’s unknown in life, to hold you back. We all face the same fog-shrouded field of action. Think of the unknown and the uncertain as making possible the most exciting challenges and opportunities that you need in order to develop and grow and become the best you can be. The secret is to embrace the always-open future as your creative playground, your own experimental laboratory, and as the place in which you can do your most fulfilling personal work. In an open field, we can choose many paths.”

“But why does almost everyone seem to seek certainty all the time, if uncertainty is so important?”

“The answer to your question is simple. And it’s sad. Most people don’t know what they truly need, because they don’t know who they really are. If they could even glimpse their own potential greatness, and understand how far they are from where they can go, and what they can become, they’d view the uncertainties and open possibilities of life very differently, and perhaps as I suggest.”

“I see.” Walid sat for a moment and then said, “So, it’s all right for me to set goals for myself, despite the many kinds of uncertainties to come?”

Ali laughed and replied, “It’s important for you to set goals precisely because of the many uncertainties to come!”

“That’s wild. I was looking at it all backwards!” The boy shook his head and thought for a few more seconds. Then he said, “I always love talking with you about things like this, Uncle. You give me new ways of looking at life. And you often show me that I’ve been thinking about something in the opposite way from what’s best.” Ali laughed again. He said, “That’s how it goes for all of us. We tend to get things wrong before we get them right. But then we most often remember better what we’ve learned when we do see the truth.” The old man patted the boy gently on his arm, as

they now sat on their blankets. “Life is full of surprises. That’s a part of what makes it so rich and interesting and good.”

Walid smiled.

From Tom Morris, The Oasis Within (Wisdom/Works, 2015), pages 160-164. You can find the book in hardcover, paperback, or e-book at www.TheOasisWithin.com, on Amazon, or through your favorite bookseller. Tom Morris, PhD, is a public philosopher serving the world of business through his books, talks, advice, and executive counsel. He can be found any time at www.TomVMorris.com