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# UNCERTAINTY

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Turning Fear and Doubt  
into Fuel for **Brilliance**

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**Jonathan Fields**

PORTFOLIO | PENGUIN



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“The chasm between idea and action is bridged by clarity. *Uncertainty* clarifies the steps and helps you get to the other side.”

—Julien Smith, coauthor of *Trust Agents*

“*Uncertainty* matters. If you wait until the fear is gone, you will never start and you will rarely do anything that matters.”

—Seth Godin, author of *Linchpin* and *Purple Cow*

“Life is uncertain. Embracing that paralyzes most people, but it also inspires a small number of brave individuals driven to create extraordinary art, businesses, and lives. This book is a window into the minds of the world’s greatest creators. It’s an essential tool to transform uncertainty and fear into power and genius.”

—Kris Carr, author of *Crazy Sexy Diet* and  
*Crazy Sexy Cancer Tips*

“*Uncertainty* is a great gift, a marvelous book. Jonathan calls out the elephant in our lives, the fear of failure, and gives us the insights, the rituals, and the presence of mind to tame it. Unless your life is limited to death and taxes, uncertainty is omnipresent. This book empowers the reader to gratefully accept the risks of a life worth living.

—Randy Komisar, author of *The Monk and the Riddle*

“Groundbreaking. Highly practical. Über provoking. This special and rare book will help you change the game in a world of deep uncertainty.”

—Robin Sharma, author of *The Leader Without a Title*

“A huge key to success is understanding the real mental blocks that can stop an otherwise great new project in its tracks. Another is knowing how to overcome them. Fields provides powerful tools for

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getting from the glimmer of an idea to a successful outcome and managing all the hard stuff that happens in-between.”

—Bob Burg, author of *The Go Giver*

“The only thing certain in business is that nothing is certain. Fields’s unique combination of practical and creative skills and solutions help transform uncertainty from a source of fear into fuel for action.”

—Carol Roth, author of *The Entrepreneur Equation*

“The most successful people in the world are comfortable with discomfort, embrace uncertainty, and have fun with fear. Read this brilliant book and you will too.”

—Michael Port, author of *The Think Big Manifesto*

“If you’re up to anything big, then what you’re attempting has probably never been done before. Which means you’re face-to-face with that great, terrifying void called uncertainty. We all need help to get through that void; Jonathan’s book is an invaluable guide to carry you safely to success in the face of fear.”

—Michael Ellsberg, author of *The Education of Millionaires*

“People hate uncertainty—not just on a gut level but at a deep neurological level. But there’s a proven correlation between comfort with ambiguity and creativity. And we live in an age where creativity is an inherent part of personal and organizational success. So what to do? The answer’s here—insights, stories, and practices—in Jonathan Fields’s wise and practical book.”

—Michael Bungay Stainer, author of *Do More Great Work*

“Jonathan Fields has taken the broadest of horizons—the role of uncertainty in the creative act—and distilled it into a highly readable,

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immediately actionable tool kit of insights, techniques, and practices that I guarantee will revolutionize how—and why—you do what you do. If you do any sort of work that involves the act of creation (and these days, who doesn't?), you must read this book.”

—Les McKeown, author of *Predictable Success*

“Fear keeps scores of people stuck in careers and lives they hate. Fields gives crystal clear guidance on how to engage with uncertainty so that it fuels creativity and action. Your productivity, happiness, and pocketbook will be massively improved by reading this book.”

—Pamela Slim, author of *Escape from Cubicle Nation*

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*To Jesse and Stephanie:  
You make it all possible.*

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## INTRODUCTION

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### THE SHAPE-SHIFTER

**RANDY KOMISAR IS** a bit of a legend in Silicon Valley. He started his career as a lawyer, then moved over to the business side of things, running LucasArts Entertainment and serving as CEO of Crystal Dynamics in the '90s. He was gearing up to become CEO of a bigger, perhaps public company. A fairly linear path lay before him, and he was executing on it masterfully. But Komisar began to notice something he didn't expect. He was becoming more and more successful on a path that was making him less and less happy.

So, in his words, he “jumped out of a perfectly fine airplane at Crystal Dynamics and just took off in midair.” He abandoned the safe path for a guy with his brains, abilities, and track record and decided to wing it, to create his career and his life from that moment forward by leaning into what made him come alive. There was no longer a blueprint for how he was going to spend the next ten or fifteen years of his life.

While others might have experienced that awareness as paralyzing, Komisar viewed it as immensely freeing. Energizing. It enabled him to think about his life and career from that moment forward very differently. The constraints of success no longer inhibited his ability to create what came next, so he started to reinvent himself. He began to see opportunities he never would have been open to before.

Komisar was looking for a way to interact with great entrepreneurs across a variety of ideas in a meaningful role. He didn't know what that was. He didn't know how to get paid. He didn't know if it would be the same role in every company. He didn't know what he'd do or not do. All he knew was he was going to put one foot down in front of the other in that direction. There was no map. No proof of concept. No promises of success.

Randy Komisar literally created a new job category, the Virtual CEO, around what he saw as a peculiar set of qualities and experiences he had and the specific needs of Silicon Valley during the start-up boom of the late '90s. At that time, there were insufficient resources to lead organizations, and the entrepreneurs coming up were not experienced entrepreneurs. They needed what Komisar had to offer.

In the role of Virtual CEO for legendary tech companies like WebTV and TiVo, Komisar partnered with entrepreneurs to help them grow themselves and their ideas into great businesses. As he put it, "I served as consigliere without displacing them, rolling up my sleeves to work through all the bits of building their businesses—strategy, recruiting, partnering, financing, leadership—the whole gamut. Their individual development was as important to me as the development of the business." Some things didn't work, some things did work, and the idea got a lot of attention and ultimately served as a model for people who would eventually follow in his footsteps.

Komisar's exposure as a Virtual CEO then opened up another entirely unforeseen opportunity. Harvard Business School Press was

looking to publish some interesting new books during the boom. The editor at the time, Hollis Heimbouch, flew out to the Valley and invited Komisar for coffee at the Konditorei, the coffee shop that served as his unofficial office. She said, “Let’s begin just writing a book.” Komisar’s first answer was no, because he felt he had nothing to say.

By the next morning, he had changed his tune. He said, “If you’re willing to give me a shot to do something completely different, I’m going to write a book that’s a business book but not a business book. It’s not going to be your typical Harvard business book. It’s not going to have thirteen chapters to tell you how to do something. It’s going to be full of ambiguity, uncertainty. It’s going to lay out the bread crumbs, but it’s not going to lay out the path.”

Heimbouch said yes. With that, the fable-driven classic and national bestseller *The Monk and the Riddle* (2000) was born. Out of the book came a teaching position at Stanford University that eventually led to Komisar’s current incarnation as a partner in the legendary Sand Hill Road venture capital firm Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers.

## THE CHANGE MAKER

Marie Forleo is a force of nature. A former fitness and dance instructor who traveled and presented around the world as part of the Nike team, she knows how to command a stage. Forleo doesn’t know the meaning of the word “no.” She self-published her first book, selling 8,000 copies on her own before it was picked up by a publisher (it’s now available in nine languages). A few years back, Forleo began to realize she’d built not only a strong personal brand but a real business. And she’d become fascinated by the idea of creating a completely location-independent company. She began to devour information on entrepreneurship and marketing, learning from some of the world’s

top marketers and entrepreneurs, then turning around and sharing what she was learning with a market she deeply connected with—women entrepreneurs.

She started with lower-priced trainings, coaching, and information products and was growing a nice business, consistently pushing her comfort zone as she grew. But it was her decision to make a huge leap in her brand in 2009 that left her shaking with anxiety. She'd discovered the concept of mastermind groups. These were generally groups of like-minded entrepreneurs or professionals who would pay to gather in the presence of a group organizer, usually a high-profile achiever in the field, and discuss business. Lower-priced mastermind groups would get together by phone, but the higher-priced ones would convene in person at a hotel or some other location.

Forleo was fascinated by this model in part because of how much potential it had to have a direct, ongoing impact on careers, aspirations, and lives, but also because of how much higher the price point was than the services she'd been offering. Moving her business to the level of offering mastermind groups and charging fifteen times the price of her existing highest-ticket service would mean a giant leap in income, reach, and fun.

The problem was that she had issues with the way mastermind groups were traditionally run. They were formulaic, stodgy, held in conference rooms, and often focused entirely on business, without reference to how the participants' lives interacted with their companies. Forleo wanted to create an experience that was radically different on every level. Something that would redefine masterminding. Something that had never been done before. That elated her . . . and terrified her. But more inspired than paralyzed, she set to work.

Forleo's experience would be built around exotic locations and adventures that wouldn't be revealed until the last minute. While they wouldn't exclude men, they'd largely be tailored toward the lives and fantasies of women entrepreneurs. They would incorporate not

only extensive business and marketing training, but a wide range of lifestyle-driven conversations and activities that ranged from making a music video to pole dancing to using business to drive social change. They would be about enduring relationships and spiritual transformation. And they would cost serious money—\$15,000 (which at last glance had bumped up to \$20,000) a year—with only as-needed access to her between quarterly excursions.

Pulling off this idea would mean a massive leap forward for her business and her reputation as an entrepreneur, thought leader, and marketer. If she crashed and burned, especially in what would be a public way, it could be devastating. It's hard to sell mastery of entrepreneurship, marketing, and lifestyle without being able to succeed at those very things in your own business and life. This was Forleo's moment to face the unknown, to lean into uncertainty, risk her reputation, and expose herself to judgment—all in the name of creating, building, and serving on a new level. Anxious, shaking, concerned but hopeful, she went public with her vision with a video made on her Flip camera.

The response was instant. People said yes. They'd never seen or heard of anything like what Forleo was planning to deliver. They wanted in. With that, the Rich, Happy & Hot Adventure Mastermind was born. Forleo's continued willingness to embrace uncertainty and fear, rather than run from them, has allowed her to now expand the brand to include an annual conference in New York, offshoot online programs, and tremendous business growth. Because it's close to her heart, it's given her the ability to give a lot more back.

In 2010, only a year after "the big leap," Forleo had grown her business to the point where she was able to launch an initiative called Change Your Life, Change the World, through which she gave 5% of the net profits of her online coaching program to women-focused philanthropy. This led to a partnership with Richard Branson's Virgin Unite Foundation. In early 2011, Forleo accompanied Branson and a



small group of entrepreneurs interested in using business for social change on a “connection trip” to Africa, where they visited selected Virgin Unite–funded initiatives, including various clinics, the Branson Centre of Entrepreneurship, orphanages, and schools. It was one of the most extraordinary experiences of her life and, for her, a signpost of much bigger work to come.

## THE FILMMAKER

For fifteen years leading up to October 15, 2008, Erik Proulx was a copywriter at a number of large advertising agencies. A week earlier, he’d been told a promotion to Associate Creative Director was on its way, along with a nice raise. That was great news. Proulx enjoyed what he did; he was a married father of two with a house in a suburb of Boston, so the extra money would come in handy. Maybe even, for the first time, he’d be able to start putting some money away for the future.

When he got the call on the 15th, though, he wasn’t sure what to expect. Since he’d been told he was about to be promoted, people all around him were being laid off. Sure enough, instead of getting a promotion, he was asked to leave. To this day, he remembers the only two words his career-executioner said: “Sorry, dude.”

Proulx was angry, sad, frustrated, and concerned about the future of his family. His modest savings wouldn’t cover them for long. And while he was thankful when new offers came in for copywriting jobs that were pretty similar to the position he’d just lost, for some reason, as each offer arrived, he kept saying no. Something in him had changed. A fire had been lit, but he wasn’t quite sure what was burning—or where it would lead him. While he loved the creative part of advertising, especially the storytelling aspect, he didn’t enjoy

working on campaigns for clients and products he could care less about. He didn't like the lack of security of being only as good as your last campaign. And he didn't want to go back.

So with a family to support, a house, a mortgage, and no income, he did the only logical thing: He became a documentary filmmaker.

Proulx had become possessed by the desire to tell the stories of the thousands who were being fired in his industry (remember, this was October 2008, the beginning of mass economic destruction) but had somehow reframed their demise as permission to finally do what they were here on Earth to do. He'd never made a film before. He had no money to do it, let alone pay his monthly living expenses. But there was no question about this movie's being made. This was his moment, and the movie *Lemonade* (2009) was the thing Proulx couldn't not do.

Was he afraid? Absolutely. Terrified? Maybe. Uncertain of nearly everything beyond the fact that this was what he wanted to do? Yes. Still, Proulx posted his intention on his blog. He tweeted it out and posted it on Facebook. Hours later, the advertising industry news mammoth *Ad Age* picked up the story. *Holy crap*, Proulx thought. There would be no turning back now—he had gone public. Whether he succeeded or failed, *Lemonade* was his to own.

From this public commitment, it seems, as W. H. Murray recounted in *The Scottish Himalayan Expedition* (1951), “all manner of unforeseen incidents, meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamt” came his way. His passion, his energy, his willingness to do whatever it took to tell a story that so many wanted to hear, at a time of great despair, propelled the quest. He needed cameras to film, but had no money. Sony made them appear. He needed to get to Los Angeles to interview four people but couldn't afford the airfare. He tweeted and posted his dilemma online. Two hours later VirginAmerica stepped up to cover his travel. Film and sound peo-

ple and color correctors rallied to the cause. Top movie editors and production houses donated time to help turn hours and hours of footage into thirty-six minutes of genius.

I remember sitting on a large slab of granite with Proulx on the southern edge of Manhattan's Central Park shortly after the movie came out. He was scrambling to piece together contract work while traveling around, showing the movie in small venues, and hustling to get distribution deals. It was a time filled with triumph but also with a new wave of self-doubt. The movie was done. It had been very well received but had been rejected by the major festivals that would have opened the way to major distribution money. The quest had crested.

Proulx wanted to keep telling stories that meant something. But he'd already put his family through so much. They were leveraged to the hilt, and though his wife was still his greatest champion, he was fairly certain they'd have to give up the house in which he wanted desperately to be able to live out his days. Scale down and move to another state where they knew nobody but could live more affordably.

I asked Proulx why he thought he had to make a choice between a job and being a filmmaker who tells stories that touched people. Why couldn't he do both? The world had rallied to support him once. There was no reason he couldn't keep making movies, using the same hustle that made the first movie happen to now line up enough advertising gigs to support his family and keep paying his mortgage. It might take a little longer to make a film. But so what?

And that's exactly what he did. A new quest was born. Four days before turning in this manuscript, I spent an hour catching up with Proulx. The night before, he'd paid off a \$16,000 credit card bill. He was still in debt, but an albatross had been lifted: he was making good money with his unconventional blended career. And he was well into his next film, *Lemonade: Detroit* (2011).

• • •

In rock climbing, each route from the ground to the peak is rated with a number. A climb rated 4.0 or lower is considered nontechnical. You need strength and agility, but not equipment. A climb rated 5.0 and higher requires ropes, harnesses, other protective gear, and a bit more experience. Climbing at a godlike 5.14 level requires years of training, practice, less than 5% body fat, and a will of steel.

The interesting thing about these ratings is that they aren't based so much on the difficulty of the entire climb as on a set of moves known as the crux. Crux moves are the most challenging moments of the entire route; they often require you to push physically, emotionally, and intellectually, to take big and often blind risks in a way no other part of the climb does. There may be multiple crux moves along a single route. The manner in which you handle the thousands of smaller moments of uncertainty and challenge along the way determines whether you get to the crux moves. But the way you handle the crux moves themselves so strongly determines whether you'll actually reach the peak that the difficulty of the most challenging crux sequence is often used to rate the entire climb.

Any worthwhile creative endeavor has its own crux moves. Your project may be defined in part by your day-to-day decisions and actions, but what really determines whether you succeed or fail—whether you're starting a business, developing a new product, making a film, or writing a book—is how you respond during a series of pivotal moments—the creation crux moves.

These are the moments the creators on the previous pages faced and will continue to face as their journeys evolve. Marie Forleo met hers when she decided to stake her business and career on a big risk and bring her secret vision to a completely untested public. Randy Komisar's unfolded the moment he chose to, in his words, "jump out of a perfectly fine airplane," and when each subsequent leap into something new introduced more challenge. Erik Proulx's first big one

was the decision to reject a return to the career that was paying his bills but emptying his soul and instead to live and die in a very public way by doing what nobody else would dare to do.

These creation crux moves are the moments when the legends and stories of every great artist, entrepreneur, corporate innovator, and quest-driven visionary are born. They are punctuated by the opportunity to rise above what Theodore Roosevelt called the “gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat” and lay claim to genius.

This is where the magic happens . . . if it doesn’t kill you along the way.

### **THE THREE PSYCHIC HORSEMEN OF CREATION**

One of the single greatest determinants of high-level success as an innovator or creator in any realm is the ability to manage and at times even seek out sustained high levels of uncertainty, bundled lovingly with risk of loss and exposure to criticism.

These three psychic horsemen of creation must often not only be sought, but embraced repeatedly and with increasing levels of intensity over extended periods of time. In fact, they are often signposts that you’ve entered your next big creation crux move. In the context of a single endeavor, you may need to live in this place for hours, days, months, or years until the project takes on enough form to prove the validity of the vision. In the context of the desire to build an extraordinary career, legacy, business, or body of work, we’re talking a lifetime of returning to that place again and again. For those driven to create something extraordinary from nothing, there is no end. There are only ebbs and flows.

The problem is, the vast majority of creators across all fields, from painters to entrepreneurs and writers to CEOs, are horribly equipped to handle the fear, angst, and anxiety that ride along with these crit-

ical moments. And it's this very failure, much more so than a lack of creativity or vision, that destroys so many endeavors and careers—and at times even the creators themselves.

Oddly, nobody talks about this. Most people just assume you either have the magical ability to lean into uncertainty, risk, and exposure or you don't. In a recent keynote address before 500 of the world's top creatives at the 99% Conference in New York City in 2010, Rhode Island School of Design president John Maeda spoke about the critical importance of being able to endure tremendous levels of creative ambiguity. He argued that one of the things that makes creative people different is that they “love mistakes” and are “completely okay with ambiguity.”

“It's quite natural,” he said.

But is it really? Is your ability to handle the uncertainty, risk, and exposure that are integral to the quest, especially at the critical moments, simply a matter of whether or not you landed in the right gene pool? Are all high-level creators simply natural-born fear alchemists, able to magically transform their fear into a positive force? And if you've been blessed with the compulsion to create, but not the seeming organic ability to live in the question without pain, does that mean your only resort is suffering or self-medication?

Or are there things you and the organizations you work within can do that will allow you not only to endure but embrace the purported dark side as fuel for creation? To invite uncertainty, take risks, and expose yourself to criticism in the quest for brilliant outcomes? Most important, can those things be taught?

## DECODING THE CREATION MIND-SET

*Uncertainty* is about what goes on in your head, your heart, and your gut as you strive to create anything truly extraordinary. It's about the

natty things we do, the gremlins we battle, the decisions we make and actions we take in the pursuit of long-term, large-scale creative, artistic, entrepreneurial, and organizational greatness.

The book begins with an in-depth exploration of the three psychic horsemen of creation: uncertainty, risk, and exposure to criticism. We'll uncover why they lead to so much suffering and why, in spite of the havoc they so often wreak, they must remain present. We'll also look at what happens when you try to snuff them out instead of embracing and even amplifying them.

We will explore the myth of the natural fear alchemist and discover how most of these “freaks of nature” are actually just as terrified as you but have adopted a set of personal practices, workflow adaptations, and have created or found themselves in environments that are built to support innovation and creation and that allow them to lean into the fear and anxiety.

Then we'll dive into those transformational personal practices, workflow and situational changes—the ones that let you feel the uncertainty, risk, and exposure necessary to high-level creation, but experience them more as opportunity rather than deep suffering, anxiety, and paralysis.

The book then will take a bold leap into the world of Creation 2.0, exploring what happens when you turn loose next-generation “social” creative and business processes—like lean methodology, rapid iteration, and community co-creation—on the worlds of entrepreneurship and traditional art. You'll discover how to adapt these approaches to radically enhance the creative output and speed of the process without bastardizing your ethos or diluting your output. You will learn how these approaches, artfully leveraged, can profoundly change the deeper psychology of creation and inject a serious shot of humanity into the journey. You will also learn to build these tools and strategies into the fabric and culture of your endeavor, allowing them to fuel

your own creative efforts and the work of those charged with moving the venture forward on all levels.

Finally, we'll look at an age-old question: How do you know when to hold and when to fold? We'll explore how so many people misinterpret the relief from anxiety when you pull away from the creative process as reclaiming peace of mind instead of what it so often is: the fleeting sensation of dreams dying. Then we'll consider a set of questions and metrics that rise above the amorphous answer "You just know," often offered almost by rote, and provide a more rational framework for making what is so often a brutally difficult call.

If you're someone with a natural and unrelenting ability to lean into risk, judgment, and uncertainty on a level that allows you to make what nobody else can make, this book will show you how to do it better, faster, and with less suffering (and, no, suffering is not mandatory).

If you feel organically unable to survive the angst of creation long enough to bring genius to life, we're about to hack the system for you. This book will give you a better understanding of your own creative process and a set of concrete daily practices and environmental changes that will allow you to reframe uncertainty, risk, and exposure as allies for creating and innovating on a level you never thought possible.



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