

CHAPTER 5

Key Number 1: Give Up Or Overcoming Uncertainty

“Traveler, there is no path. Paths are made by walking.”
—Antonio Machado

It’s a divine paradox. The one thing that inspires us to seek the impossible and dream the unimaginable is the very thing that squanders us as well. The unknown is both a blissfully inspiring motivator and a heart wrenching deterrent all at the same time.

Unlike other animals, we humans are self-aware. We have a powerful memory. With our big brains we can see what’s happened in the past and predict the future. We’re not always right, but just being able to have a pretty good idea of what’s to come gives us comfort. It gives us a sense of security and makes us feel safe.

The truth is that dreams are not always safe. Even if you don’t want to be a world champion synchronized sky-diver and you just want to start your own quilting business, it can be scary. What if you fail? What if people think your quilts suck? What if you quit your job, make no money, and have no way to pay the bills? What if you’re lousy at being your own boss and can’t stay focused?

These what-ifs go on and on in our minds and the unknown cripples us.

If fear of uncertainty is such a thorn in our sides, we need to confront the issue head on. We can’t just passively wait for our paths to be illuminated before us. In part, we need to research the path we’re about to follow. We need to read maps and guides that will quell our fears. But we also need to accept that we can’t figure out everything in advance. The most detailed guide will never make up for experiencing the terrain ourselves.

Let’s start with making things less unknown.

Getting Your Feet Wet

Usually the best way to overcome your fear of the unknown is to make it less unknown. Simple enough, right?

If your dream is to teach workshops on yoga, and you’ve never taught before, you’ll need to start out by attending some yoga classes. Study how the teachers work. Watch their movements and listen to their speaking voice. Study the rhythm of their words. After you’ve attended a few classes, you might want to

ask to interview some teachers. Maybe get a private lesson of your own, where you can have their undivided attention and are free to ask them as many questions as you need.

The next step might be to offer some classes for free. Do it in a park; tell your friends and family. Do it even if your dog is the only one that shows up.

This is about practice and becoming familiar with what you're getting into. It's called practice for a reason: you'll make mistakes and you'll learn from them. Don't be too hard on yourself if you mess up or don't get everything perfect on the first try. That's the way you get better.

The more you learn and practice your skills, the more confident you'll become. You'll find that it's not the task itself that got easier, but your increased ability that made it simpler.

Pushing Your Uncertainty Limit

In order to pursue our dreams, we have to become masters of the wisdom of uncertainty. We won't always know for certain how things will turn out. Only the person asleep makes no mistakes.

Nothing will ever change, though, unless you push past your comfort zone and push into the *discomfort* zone. How successful you are is largely determined by the amount of risk you are willing to take. If you're afraid of talking to a stranger, you'll probably have a hard time telling a client how much you feel you're really worth. You'll sell yourself short when you know

you're really worth much more. If you're afraid of telling your spouse how you feel, you'll probably be afraid of choosing a career that makes you come alive.

Fear begets fear. The more you let it take ownership over you, the more it spreads like a virus. Before you know it, you've lost control and fear is running your life, not you.

In order to get what you want, you have to be able to ask for it and persistently seek it out. If the squeaky wheel gets the grease, it's the acceptance of the unknown that creates the squeak. Accept the fact that sometimes you will get what you want, and sometimes you'll be met with resistance or rejection.

If you only do two things – take consistent action and lose your fear of failure – you'll already have a 95% chance of success. Guess what not fearing failure means? It means you can stop being paranoid about asking for what you want.

When you lose this fear of failure, you won't be afraid of:

- Telling a client how much you're worth.
- Letting your boss know you need more time.
- Admitting that you don't have all the answers (and in doing so, avoid making a fool of yourself).

Once you're able to act without knowing what the outcome will be, you'll no longer let uncertainty stand in your way. You won't be crippled by the fear of rejection or disappointment. You can develop this skill each day by making simple changes.

There are a bunch of little things you can do to push past your uncertainty threshold. Here are a few of them:

- Talk to strangers (also known as “social skydiving”).
- Smile at everyone you see walking down the street. Especially those who look angry or depressed.
- Eat a jelly doughnut instead of your usual poppy seed muffin (do things to step out of your routine).
- Take up a sport you’ve never played before.
- Conduct your own local meet-up on something you’re interested in.
- Use your left hand instead of your right. Or if you’re left handed, use your right hand instead.
- Volunteer to be the leader of a project. If you’re usually the leader, let someone else lead.
- Tell someone how you feel, even if it makes you uncomfortable.

These are just a few examples. There are so many opportunities to step outside of your comfort zone each day. The more you do this, the more you’ll build the habit of moving past your uncertainty threshold.

Build the habit of doing what you’re afraid to do with little things. Once it’s time to take big risks, they won’t seem as scary.

Putting Yourself on Auto-Response

Like uncertainty, one of the biggest reasons we don’t follow our dreams is because we don’t know what action to take. As long as the action is unclear, our response will be delayed.

We’ll take action toward our dreams someday, or in a few weeks, once we figure out the answer to a problem or collect more information. We tend to put off our dreams because the course of action is unclear.

We’re not really so afraid of going after our dreams, it’s just that we don’t know how. We don’t know where to start.

But planning can only accomplish so much. There will always be unknowns. You can rapidly decrease the amount of time it takes you to accomplish your goals through one simple decision: putting yourself on auto-response.

Doing this means you change your auto-response from “I don’t know” to “I’ll figure it out.”

The simplest way to overcome being paralyzed by uncertainty is to stop caring about not knowing. You’ll never know all the details in the beginning. Paths are made by walking. In order to develop the auto-response of “I’ll figure it out,” you need to develop the art of starting.

If you don’t know how you’ll get somewhere or how you’ll accomplish your dreams, that’s okay. Being okay with not knowing means starting with little or no information. But

whatever you do, don't commit to finishing. Only commit to starting.

Don't worry about being perfect. Perfection is the enemy of the good. Just worry about doing. Worry about whether or not you're consciously moving in the direction of your dreams, instead of remaining stationary.

Broken dreams aren't caused by a lack of belief in yourself, although that's part of it. They're mostly caused by failure to start because you don't know where to begin. Forget waiting for the perfect time launch. Launch now. Start anywhere and adjust your course later. The best time to start was five years ago. The second best time is right now.

Life is a messy business, and sometimes we have to make things up as we go along. Sometimes in order to succeed, we have to stop caring about not knowing. We just accept whatever comes our way and fly by the seat of our pants. (This is also known as being a pantster. No, I did not make that up.) You'll learn to listen to your gut while your brain is still trying to sort out all of the facts.

Climbing the mountain toward your dreams might be daunting when you're at ground zero. Take small steps if you need to. Don't look so much toward the top, just look slightly ahead and focus on the next step. Whatever you do, don't let not knowing keep you from moving.

Confronting and Dealing With Naysayers

Sometimes it's best not to tell your friends or loved ones that you're doing something crazy, like writing a book or planning to travel around the world. They'll be there to support you when you're down and out, but more often than not, your big aspirations will make them feel uneasy. Probably because you're forcing them to question their own values. They might actually have to face the fact that they don't like what they're doing for a living, that they're not comfortable in their ruts and routines, and they regret letting their own dreams die. It's hard to be a cheerleader for the living when you're walking around half asleep.

It's often best to keep your big plans and amazing dreams to yourself. I know this is really difficult to do, because you want to share your aspirations with others. You want to scream from rooftops that you've finally figured out what your passion is and you're determined to pursue it with everything you've got. Unfortunately, many of your loved ones will probably tell you that you're crazy, and they do this because they love you and don't want to see you fail.

Sometimes your loved ones won't be able to see things the way you do, because they're stuck in the same limited mindset you once were. If you're setting out to be an entrepreneur and all your friends are employees, it will be hard for them to relate. It's not always necessary to drop your friends, just don't be surprised if they're not as excited as you expect them to be.

So you have three choices: you can either find new friends, ones that are just as crazy as you; you can keep it to yourself, or you can persuade them to get on board with you. You might have to

do a combination of all three.

The key is to take feedback and criticism with grace, but remain detached when others are discouraging. Remember, great dreamers always encounter violent opposition from mediocre minds.

EXERCISE: TAP INTO YOUR SUPERHERO ALTER EGO

In one of my favorite books, [*How to Become a Famous Writer Before You're Dead*](#), Ariel Gore discusses how it's difficult to find time to write, and to face the absolution of the final product, while accepting the flaws that come with it. Gore suggests that maybe you can't do it, but your superhero alter-ego can (remember this from chapter four?). Tap into the power of your inner superhero, that part of you that is fearless and unafraid of imperfections; the part of you that can keep going when you feel it would be easier to drug yourself with TV game shows instead. If you feel like you can't do it, chances are your superhero alter-ego can. Learn to be his or her friend. It will serve you well.

POINTS TO MEDITATE ON:

- Regularly push yourself out of your comfort zone. Always do what you are afraid to do. The more you do this, the more you'll find doors where you previously only saw walls.
- Put yourself on auto-response. Instead of thinking "I don't know," change your automatic response to "I'll figure it out."

- Don't let not knowing keep you from taking action. Remember that paths are made by walking.