

Embracing Uncertainty

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The falcon flying high in the sky looking for prey has no certainty that it will find one today and have food. A daily labourer has a similar concern – am I going to get hired today? The weather forecast says there is an 80% chance of thunderstorms – the fisherman is worried; will he be able to reach the shore safely? Uncertainty – everywhere, every day.

Uncertainty originates from a lack of information and predictability. If you throw a dice any number from one to six can come up, there is no predictability of the outcome, and which face of the dice will turn up is uncertain. Suppose you are waiting for the results of a pathological test. You are anxious about whether the result will be good or bad, it's uncertain. Actually, the related medical condition is already there only you don't know it yet. Uncertainty creates stress and anxiety. It shoots up your blood pressure, disturbs your sleep, and destroys your mental peace. But for some people, it's a source of thrill that they enjoy and indulge in. Consider betting or gambling. The participants are so eager and excited! Their adrenaline running high – am I going to win or lose? Think about the faces of stakeholders in a horse race - so animated in anticipation! Their minds racing faster than the horses. They burst into joy for winning and crash into despair for losing.

In physics, there is an “uncertainty principle”. It was propounded by Nobel laureate German physicist Werner Heisenberg in 1927. In simple terms, the uncertainty principle says that we cannot determine accurately both the position and velocity of very small particles like electrons and photons. The more certain we are about the particle’s position the more uncertain becomes its velocity and vice versa. So, there is a trade-off between our ability to measure precisely the position and momentum of microscopic particles with negligible mass.

Actually, trade-offs are everywhere. To get something we always have to let go of something. Life is full of trade-offs. To achieve ambitious career advancement and professional success you might have to give up family time, social gatherings, vacations, and personal relaxation. To pursue a healthy lifestyle, you might have to adopt diet control relinquishing the immediate pleasure of indulgent treats. On a broader domain, there is a trade-off between the extraction of natural resources like fossil fuels, minerals, and timbers for the ultimate improvement of the standard of living and causing damage to the natural environment as well as increasing global warming. Our lifespan is uncertain. We don’t know how long we are going to live. We may be in very good health - no disease or debility. But then accidents can happen at any time. Yet we continue to make plans and engage in projects with indefinite completion timelines. We set goals to be achieved within specific timeframes, and we dream of the future. If we knew when we would die or when an accident might happen, all these actions and activities would freeze. Life would become stagnant.

Consider an individual who knows that he will die after three months, he won’t start building a house that will take two years to complete. In a world of such certainty, everything would be overshadowed by impending deaths, accidents, natural disasters, etc. Uncertainty is what keeps us moving forward. If we had full knowledge of what’s going to happen the next moment, we would miss out on many treasures of life. We wouldn’t have the joy of surprises, the charm of coincidences, the thrill of successful adventure, the ecstasy of surviving disaster, and so much more.

Sometimes the absence of knowledge about what the future holds and the accompanying uncertainty can also deter us from moving forward. Consider, for instance, a situation where a young man is deeply in love with a girl but the uncertainty about whether the girl will accept his love prevents him from proposing to her. Since we can’t read the minds of other people, we often doubt or distrust the intentions behind their actions or suggestions. If an unknown person calls you at midnight and proposes to send you a gift because he wants to share the joy of his winning a lottery with others, you will most probably be rather concerned than delighted.

The doubts and suspicion owing to the paucity of knowledge can take place not only between people but also between nations. The dearth of information might generate suspicion among governments that could lead to arms race, military buildup, espionage, propaganda campaigns, and more.

We want predictability and control in our lives. But uncertainty pervades every aspect of it. In the economic world, we have developed different mechanisms such as hedging and insuring to deal with ubiquitous uncertainty. We buy insurance policies to cover the risks of future uncertainties like accidents, disability, critical illness, etc. Similarly, investors and finance managers adopt hedging strategies to reduce and control the risks for their financial assets. Some people take a different approach to dealing with uncertainties. They want to remove them by acquiring information about the future. They go to fortune tellers or palmists who are believed to have the capability and expertise to sneak peek into the future and tell what’s lying ahead. Some look for protection from the unknown adversities of the future by wearing amulets, rendering vows at shrines, performing pilgrimage, etc.

Uncertainty leads us to question, explore, and inquire. It’s the source of creativity, resilience, and innovation that plays a great role in the progress of human civilisation. In navigating the complex web of uncertainty, we discover our capacity to thrive in an ever-changing world. We muster the courage to move forward and keep going. So, let’s not resist uncertainty rather embrace it with an open heart. Let’s recognise that uncertainty turns our life into an ever-unfolding story, with its twists and turns, making it worth living.

The writer is a former corporate professional and academic