

# Embracing Uncertainty

Riekus de Poel, London - 21-04-2017

A small network of people seeking alternative ways to look at our tomorrows, is taking shape in a form least expected. Instead of formulating a variety of ways to mitigate the vagaries and pitfalls of these daunting and uncertain futures, this group of "crazies" are trying to tell us to simply embrace it. Let me explain.

In yesterday's conference of GloComNet, we were told that the giants of complexity and uncertainty in our lives, were to be faced head-on in a variety of ways. I will not try to summarize that meet-up in this short write-up. What I will try and do is tell you how this new concept of thinking about our future is touching the nerve of young students and millennials.

The new thinking goes something like this: Though it is impossible to predict or know the future, you can imagine it. Instead of investing precious energy in the arts of facing down risk in all its forms and shades, there's a different professor in town, who argues that those endeavours to land a more certain and predictable future, could be better spent in channelling these energies in developing skills that embrace this uncertainty instead of avoiding it.

What then does Professor Hoogduin suggest? Well, simple really! His advice is to imagine your future in a variety of creative ways, polish up your adaptability-skills and adjust to the continuously changing circumstances. Be alert to all the crazy surprises that seem to forever chase you, as a cop does a speeding car.

To give an example of embracing uncertainty versus running from it, a vivid illustration is in order. Imagine a people being afraid of the water, simply for its potential to drown in it. Consequently, they would hedge that risk by building fences around it and warning their children to stay away from it. They would teach of the fatal dangers, lurking just below its surfaces. On the other hand, let us imagine a people that learn to love the water and use it to their advantage. They learn to swim in it, they build rafts and canoes, ships and ocean liners and fishing trawlers. A people who learn to play in it with water skis, snorkelling and diving equipment, with sailboats and yachts. The applications are endless.

As a matter of fact, some people embrace the water-challenges and uncertainties to the extent that they have made it their careers and became famous because of it. From all over the world, visitors come to visit the Dutch Delta-Works, an ingenious network of dams and dikes, sluices and viaducts, as well as water reservoirs creating safe living and working environments. Other companies specialise in dredging or building ports, imagining islands in the shape of a palm tree and then building it right in the middle of these "dangerous" waters. I could go on endlessly with all the fabulous applications of embracing this particular uncertainty of the water. The complexity of all these projects and products in all its

magnificent interplay, is mindboggling, challenging and beautiful, but I believe my point is made.

What then **was** the predominant way of preparing for this illusive and unknown future before? Well for many young people, the future is seen as a deadly-scary-skydive-jump, in which you must do exactly the right things at the right time, with the right equipment allowing you to make the right moves. Most people intuitively think that if they, God forbid, happen to make a single misstep at the wrong time, all is lost and their cherished dreams go up in smoke, leaving them at the mercy of unhappy destinies of second rate citizens. In other words, to be successful you need to be on the top of your game all the time. But how can you when you don't even know what this game is going to look like?

Pondering the new paradigm-shift and discussing it with other attendees over pints of beer, and delicious pizza's there was only one way to test this new school of thought really. Would people actually go for the new approach? Would it's brilliance be able to attract the travellers on life's journey, to its light?

My wife and I didn't need to wait for long. Next morning at breakfast in our cosy guesthouse, we were served by a pleasant young man. Starting up a bit of chit-chat, we soon found out he was attending London's prestigious Royal College of Music. Showing interest, as we usually do, he was eager to tell us how the competition was nerve-wracking and the pressure he was under was not his preferred choice or condition under which to plot his future or career.

While serving us coffee, hot bacon and eggs with steaming toast and marmalade, we laid out the case for seeing his future, not as this once in a lifetime chance he could so easily miss if all the stars weren't exactly aligned in just the right position, but rather as a 360 degree array of possibilities and options available to him, if he were only ready and alert to recognize them and continuously re-imagine himself in a variety of different ways as his circumstances change.

He looked at us, forgetting for a moment that he was our waiter, and said: "So what you are telling me is that our lives and futures are more like rugby-balls rather than footballs, in the way they bounce". We didn't say anything, as this bright young man had just summarized the essence of the conference in one simple sentence. All we needed to do was nod and marvel.

As he was pouring us a third cup of coffee, we encouraged him to dive in, holding nothing back and play the game of his life. Embrace that non-linear reality, in all its complexity and uncertainty because life isn't here to offer you just one unique chance, a chance you can miss so easily, but rather life is here to offer you a plethora of choices, each as easily imagined as the other.

We connected him immediately to GloComNet, said our goodbyes and were off to catch our flight. The snowball was gathering momentum and mass. We were excited.

Settling in our seats, we discussed how none of the above mentioned challenges and applications were easy or without setbacks and mistakes or what we call the trial and error

phase of life. The need of the hour was to persevere, to stay focussed, adapt, learn and thus become resilient. My wife mentioned that it reminded her of the story of the two frogs.

### Two Frogs

Two frogs fell into a can of cream,  
Or so I heard it told.  
The sides of the can were shiny and steep,  
The cream was deep and cold.  
"Oh, what's the use?" croaked number one.  
"We're lost! No help's around!  
Good bye, my friend, this is the end!"  
And sinking in, he drowned.

But number two, who wasn't through,  
Refused to compromise.  
He jutted out his creamy chin  
And dried his creamy eyes.  
"I'll keep on swimmin'! Where there's life  
There's always hope!" He said.  
"It really wouldn't help the world  
If one more frog were dead!"

For many an hour he kicked and splashed,  
At last he stopped to sputter,  
"Why, look at that! I can hop right out!  
I've whipped the cream to butter!"  
So if sometimes your problems make you  
Feel you want to scream,  
Remember how the frog churned  
The butter out of cream!

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