How to Not Know with Simone Stolzoff

Simone Stolzoff: I'm glad that you're here today because I've spent the last three or four years working on this book called, How to Not Know, and it came out on Tuesday. [Applause] This is the red carpet light version for Southern California, and I'm going to talk to you about it a little bit today. I'll talk for about 25, 30 minutes or so, and then Ren will join me onstage for some questions, and then I'd love to hear questions from you all as well. My wife and I recently had our first child.

This is a picture, I'm just fishing for compliments at the beginning. This is a picture from last week. As the parents in this room or the aunts or the uncles in this room know, there is a bittersweet moment when a child is brought into the world, one, the joy of new life and two, the anxiety and worry about the world that they are going to inherit. Just in the last few weeks, as I was preparing for this talk, here are a few of the headlines that came across my screen. Half of all entry level jobs may cease to exist. Climate change is decades ahead of schedule, and our home state could be wiped out by drones.

But the experts downplayed that effect, so we'll see. If you're anything like me, you might be feeling a little bit like the dog in this meme, where this world is swirling, burning around us, and yet here we are coping with the small minutia of our day to day life. If you feel like this, you are not only not alone, but you're also rather perceptive. This is data from Stanford that came out recently. They've been tracking global uncertainty since the '80s. The researcher Nicholas Bloom found that the five highest measurements have all occurred in the last five years. Things like the pandemic, these wars overseas, tariff policies, shootings in our backyard. There's this real sense that the world is getting more and more uncertain, but this isn't the only thing going on.

Here's another study from a researcher out of the University of Virginia named Nicholas Carlten, who found that our tolerance for uncertainty is in decline. He's found that since the rise of the Internet and then more specifically mobile phones, humans have become increasingly unwilling to sit with what they don't know. I think the phones do two things. One is they bring the world's uncertainties to our pockets. Now we can track the real time updates of a crisis overseas or the real time location of our children.

But as you and I both know, access to more information has not necessarily made us wiser. It often just fuels our anxiety. The second thing that phones do is they rob us of the practice of sitting with what we don't know. Whereas 10 years ago, I might have been okay not knowing the name of a given actor. Now I feel an almost involuntary need to reach into my phone, maybe while the movie is still going. These two things are happening at once. On one hand, the world is more uncertain.

On the other hand, our tolerance for uncertainty is in decline. That's why so many of us feel unmoored and anxious just going through our daily lives. I often feel like the gentleman in this picture. One of the nice things about being a journalist is, I don't necessarily have to have all of the answers myself. I've spent the last four years, as I mentioned, working on this book, talking to philosophers, psychologists, economists, trying to answer this question, how do we get better at dealing with what we don't know? It's fitting being on UCSD's campus right now

because this is also maybe the most pressing question in the life of our students these days, thinking about entering this tight labor market, this unknown future, where it feels like it's hard to get a toehold.

But fear not. This will be a rather optimistic talk. Because the research shows that, if we are able to build what I call uncertainty tolerance, the ability to withstand, to endure what we don't know. Individuals can be more creative, because they're willing to sit with the type of ambiguity that leads to breakthroughs. Communities tend to be more collaborative because they're open to new perspectives from others. Part of the reason why our world feels so isolated right now is because people aren't as willing to do what you just did to turn to a neighbor, to risk entering into an uncertain situation where they don't know exactly how the conversation will go. Too often, we're quick to judge someone to think, if we know who they voted for, we know everything about them. To not want to engage with the person on, say, the train because we don't know how it'll turn out.

Organizations with higher levels of uncertainty tolerance tend to be more resilient and adaptive because they're willing to, weather the types of ups and downs that both lead to generational defining products and services, and these types of ups and downs of a market cycle that is necessary to weather in any type of business. What I'm going to try to convince you today is that uncertainty tolerance is a superpower. It is an increasingly vital superpower. I'll teach you some ways in which we can cultivate it ourselves.

But first, an example, On the screen, there's a screenshot from this massive online multiplayer game that was founded in the early 2010s in Silicon Valley, and it was called Glitch, and it was made by this startup called Tiny Speck. When it launched, it was sort of the bell of the ball, it had raised $17 million. Its launch was covered in the New York Times. It was heralded as the next big thing. Early on, it had a lot of success. It had tens of thousands of active players in the first few weeks and months.

But the founder had the sneaking suspicion that something about the business wasn't quite working, that they weren't on a sustainable path. He did something that others thought was insane. He decided to shut the company down less than two years into founding it at the peak of its success. This is what he said, "I'd love to say that we knew all the answers in advance. But the truth is we discovered our product and opportunity rather than planning for it." This founder's name is Stewart Butterfield.

What he did is he took this tool that the team had built while they were developing the game, and he decided to pivot and start a whole company around this tool. That tool became what you and I both know today as Slack, one of the fastest growing enterprise software companies of all time. It sold to Salesforce for, I think a bajillion dollars was the exact figure. But I think the promise of the story is that when we are willing to face uncertainty, when we are willing to turn towards what we don't know, we can discover the possibilities that are hiding on the other side of our discomfort. Biologically, we are wired to fear uncertainty. You can think about an ancestor of ours in the jungle. If there was a rustling in the bushes and they didn't know the source of that noise, that uncertainty could be lethal. Our bodies, our minds are trained to perceive all uncertainty as a threat to enter into the fight, flight, or freeze response when we come across a situation that we don't know how it's going to turn out.

The problem with this is that often we avoid uncertainty and therefore opt for the safe way or the fastest way out, as opposed to discovering what might be waiting for us, the opportunities that are on the other side of our discomfort. Uncertainty is also the birthplace of possibility. If you're willing to face what you don't know, you might discover something like Mr. Butterfield did that is greater than anything you could have anticipated. What I'm going to do, I'm going to share four principles from my research that hopefully will help you deal with uncertainty in your own life and ask you four questions. It would not be a talk about uncertainty without a few pointed questions.

The first principle, find your anchors. When we are certain about some aspects of our life, it makes it easier to hold uncertainty in others. This woman on the screen you might be familiar with, her name is Twyla Tharp. She is one of the most famous choreographers and dancers working today. She's known for these really innovative genre busting pieces of dance. Yet her life conforms to a very strict routine. Every day, she wakes up at 5:30 AM. She takes a taxicab to the gym, which is like the most New York thing ever. She works out with her trainer for two hours. She comes home, she eats three hard boiled egg whites. Then she takes calls for an hour, works out in her studio for two hours, works out with her company, comes home, has dinner, reads for an hour, and goes to sleep. She attributes the creativity of her work to the ritual and regularity of her routine.

In her book, The Creative Habit, she says, "Before you can think outside of the box, you have to start with a box." My question for you is what aspects of your life or business will remain constant amidst all that is changing? In your personal life, maybe it is a commitment to your spouse or your commitment to live in a particular place or your commitment to a set of values. But when you find these anchors, they become the steady boulders that will remain constant amidst all of the changing winds around you.

How can you think about what are the things in your life that will remain constant, even though so much seems to be changing around us? Principle to second, build to learn. If I were to create a playbook for success in business today, it would look something like this: plan, execute, get your desired results. But having worked in the corporate world for over a decade, I know more often it looks like this: plan, get feedback from a dozen different people, and then the project gets lost in some Bermuda Triangle of corporate bureaucracy. In this age of AI in this age of rapidly changing technology, this model is becoming increasingly costly.

We spend all of our time planning and thinking about what we hope to build, you might not ever get around to actually building it. A more progressive approach looks something like this. Build first and then adapt, and then build and adapt and try to get these feedback loops as quick and regular as possible. I cut my teeth working at this design firm called IDEO. At IDEO, we used to have a saying, which was never come to a meeting without a prototype. The reason why we had this saying is so that we didn't spend all of our time just sitting around the table, and we actually spent our time going out and trying things. I'll give you an example.

Speaker 1: Music. This is possible dance moves for monster making. Music starts, and I'm the player. I come in, and I touch the monster, and he gives me a special dance move. I go to again, and it's a different one. It can go for as long as I want if he has a few signature moves. I've had enough and I'm done dancing, I push the "Back" button pauses and the music stops. Dance making.

Speaker 2: Cool.

Speaker 1: [Laughter] Sonic.

Simone Stolzoff: You guys are probably thinking, what the hell do you just make us watch? I'll give you some context after the fact. This was my team. We were working on a project for Sesame Street, creating Sesame Street's first ever mobile app. Rather than spend weeks and weeks planning and then building a software prototype, the team decided to take a different approach. And they printed out a picture of an iPhone, taped it to a cardboard sheet, and then brought the client in and said, "This is what we hope the app might do." Then in about two hours, we learned so much more than we would have in weeks and weeks of just building something without visibility into the public. Now, the lesson here is that the best way through uncertainty is through action, is through building, and building is the fastest way to learn. The question here for you is, what is a time bound, low cost experiment that can teach you what you hope to learn?

I think the two most operative word words here are time bound and low cost. How can you think about the minimum viable prototype to build what you hope to build, and then go out and show it to the stakeholders that you're hoping to impact as quickly as possible? Principle 3, trust in your future self to solve your future problems. This is my friend named Emily. Emily is a therapist, a mental health professional. She's become sort of a therapist to the stars, so she advises CEOs and entrepreneurs on how to navigate uncertainty and change.

But before she became this mental health professional, in her early 20s, her mom was given a potentially terminal diagnosis. Emily spent weeks by her mom's bedside, and she was really struggling. She was riding this roller coaster of anticipatory grief and fear about what might happen. One day, a family friend of Emily's came by, his name was Bill, and Bill is an oncology doctor. He has a lot of experience dealing with people at the end of their lives. He said, "Emily, how are you doing?" She said, Honestly, Bill, "I'm not doing very well. I'm terrified, and I have no idea how I'll manage if my mom were to pass away." Bill said something very wise. He said, "Emily, the version of you who will deal with that tragic event if or when it ever happens will be born into existence in that moment.

That version of you will have more context, more information, and be better equipped to deal with that tragedy than you are today. You have to trust in your future selves ability to handle your future problems. I love this idea of trusting in your future self because so often, especially when faced with uncertainty, we rush out to meet our suffering. Our minds catastrophize. We think about everything that could go wrong. Not only does this keep us stuck, paralyzed, fearful, it also misses out on the alternative of what if things go right", Emily is so glad that she didn't rush out to meet her suffering because her mom ended up recovering and making it out of the hospital, and she didn't have to preemptively suffer twice. It reminds me of what you might know as the serenity prayer, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Especially in today's day and age, it's so easy to worry about things that are out of our control.

I think about this in terms of climate change, for example. It's easy to fall into a doom spiral about where the world is going. For the book, I did some reporting in this country called Tuvalu, which is out in the Pacific, about halfway between Hawaii and Australia. In Tuvalu, the average height of the entire country is about nine feet above sea level. The forecast is that by 2050, half

of the country will be underwater. I spoke to a lot of the local leaders there on the ground, and they also spoke to a lot of psychologists who specialize in climate anxiety and grief.

One thing a psychologist told me has really stuck with me, which is the same thing that will help manage your anxiety will help make a difference with the climate movement, which is to see this tapestry of different problems and then find that one string that you can pull on to find a way to take action, and your action can absorb your anxiety. The question for you is what is something causing you stress that you have no power to influence today? Where are you giving energy and attention to something that is fundamentally out of your hands? Choose curiosity over fear.

I want to close with this parable that is often referred to as the parable of the Chinese farmer. It goes something like this. There's a farmer in a small village, and one day, his horse runs away, and all of his neighbors come to his door and they say, "We're so sorry to hear about your horse." It is such a tragedy. The farmer says, "Maybe yes, maybe no." The next day, the horse comes back, and with it, there are seven other wild horses in tow, and so now the farmer has eight wild horses, and the neighbors come to his door and they say, "You are so fortunate.

What great luck." The farmer says, "Maybe yes, maybe no." The day after that, the farmer's son is riding one of the wild horses, and he falls and he breaks his leg. The neighbors are returning to his door, and they say, "We heard about your son. It's such a bummer." The farmer says, "Maybe yes, maybe no." Then the day after that, generals from the Chinese military come to the small village to conscript people for the war, to draft people into the army. Because this son has broken his leg, he gets to avoid the draft. Again, the neighbors come to the door and they say, "You are so lucky.

What great fortune, and this time, you can join me. The farmer says, "Maybe yes, maybe no." I think about this in terms of this moment we're in all the time, this moment of AI revolution, where we have a tendency to pull to one of the extremes. You probably know people in your life who think that AI is going to automate all of this rote labor and lead to this golden age of creative expression, and other people in your life who think AI is going to undermine entire industries and lead to mass layoffs and class warfare. It is really attractive to think about this in black or white terms.

But in response, I'll give you two points. The first comes from an old professor of mine named Phil Tetlock. Professor Tetlock collated data from about two decades worth of predictions from some of the smartest people in the world, from politicians, economists, journalists. Then he compared them to what actually transpired in the world. His finding did not mince words, he said, The average expert was roughly as accurate as a dart throwing chimpanzee. The first reason to not read in too deeply to these future predictions is that as a species, we are very bad at making such predictions. Then the second reason is that we're in a room full of change makers. You would not come to an event like this unless you believed that the world could be brighter tomorrow than it is today. Yet, if you think you know exactly how the future will look, it can be incredibly disempowering. It leaves you without the power to actually shape that future.

In response to some of these extreme predictions about exactly how many jobs will be lost or exactly what 2050 will look like, I think we should return to the wisdom of the farmer and say, maybe yes, maybe no. My question for you is what is something you were once certain about

that turned out not to be true? One of the values of being able to maintain this posture of not knowing of uncertainty is that we can stay open to reality as it actually emerges.

When we are certain, it has a narrowing effect. We think we know exactly who's going to win the election or the game or exactly when the market's going to crash. It closes our mind. But when we're able to keep our minds open, to maintain that sense of, I'm not sure. Let's find out, then we can more gracefully adapt to whatever the future does hold. Find your anchors, build to learn, trust in your future self to handle your future problems, and choose curiosity over fear. I'll close with this metaphor. Being a leader, being an innovator is like rowing a boat on a lake that's shrouded in very heavy fog. You might not be able to see very far in front of you or know exactly where you'll end up.

But you have two jobs. The first is to maintain faith that you'll eventually reach land. Remember, you're in a lake. The second is to keep rowing. That's my wish for you all today, in spite of the uncertainty, in spite of the headlines, in spite of the budget cuts that you keep rowing. Through that rowing, clarity very well may emerge. Thank you. We'll do some questions together, and then here's some questions from you all.

Ren Powell: I think I'll start with some of the questions we had on the paper, and then we can open it up to the audience. First off, I wanted to ask if there's one mindset or daily practice you hope audiences will take away from how to not know, especially students and lifelong learners trying to navigate an unpredictable world, what would it be?

Simone Stolzoff: I think I alluded to this briefly, but that one mindset, in my mind, would be, Right now when we look at uncertainty, our tendency is to see it only as a threat, but we could also potentially frame it as an opportunity. When we do so, we are able to discover. I think about any scientific breakthrough or revolutionary piece of art or generational company. It started with someone who was willing to get to the threshold of what they knew and to persist.

This isn't to say that you can't be uncertain or you can't doubt. But one of my favorite quotes from the book is that Commitment is healthiest not in the absence of doubt, but in spite of doubt. I think that's a mindset that young people in particular could really benefit from today. You might not know exactly what the future job prospects or economy or world will look like, but you still have to be willing to place your heart on something to commit in one direction.

Ren Powell: Thank you. That's a good answer. I guess that's your job, though [Laughter]. Another question I had, I know you ended with the idea of keeping rowing and the importance of that. But the thing that sprang to my mind at that. Obviously, I don't know if y'all are on social media, but I do a lot of doom scrolling, and a lot of that is just seeing it's constant negative, oftentimes world events and, like, what's happening, and it can all seem a lot really overwhelming and, like, so, we've been rowing, but what do you do when it's, like, difficult to row and keep going?

Simone Stolzoff: I think, for one, there's a difference between rowing in the world and scrolling on social media. I think these platforms are incentivized to amplify fear and anger and doubt and these extreme emotions that keep us engaged. In my own experience real people, when you go out and interact with them, tend to generally be a lot more kind. But when the world is feeling particularly oppressive, one thing that I think can be helpful is to find the other people who may be sharing in your struggle or sharing in your hope or sharing in your optimism.

One of the things I love speaking to psychologists for this book is this idea that action absorbs anxiety. I think part of what we can get caught in is the state of indecision. Which is its own type of trap. We feel like if we don't have to make a decision or commit to anything, we can just suffer this low grade suffering, which is its own type of comfort. Yet it's only by making choices, going out into the world, sparking that conversation that we actually learn what it is that we value and what we care about.

Ren Powell: Thank you. Then, let's see. I would say, so many students like me feel pressured to turn to every hobby, passion, or interest turn it into productivity or career capital. How can people protect curiosity and creativity from just becoming another form of work?

Simone Stolzoff: I think this is a great question. There's a lot of pressure, not just for students, but for anyone to turn their passions into a side project or a side grind. I think part of this is in line with this country that we live in, where what do you do is often the first question we ask when we meet someone new, where our job title is often a stand in for our self worth. My first book was called The Good Enough job, and it was about this exact topic. It's about the shadow side of equating who we are with what we do.

One of the big things that I advocated for in that book is about diversifying our identities. Not just seeing ourselves as what we do for work, but also investing in other facets of who we are. I remember I talked to lots of Type A ambitious people for that book. Sometimes you give them the advice, invest in some other facets of who you are, and they say, I got it. I'm going to run an ultra marathon or I'm going to read 52 books this year. In some ways, they turn their leisure into another form of labor.

I think it's really important for us to have aspects of our lives that are protected from the market, to have communities of people who couldn't care less about what we do for work or what we plan to do after graduation or even what we study so that you can relate to the world in other ways so you can understand that your purpose on this earth is not just to produce economic value for a company or an organization. There's nothing wrong with pursuing passion or trying to find a source of meaning or identity or community in work. As long as it's not the sole source of identity, meaning, and community in your life.

Ren Powell: That was about three questions from the paper. I was going to open it up to questions from the audience. Does anyone have any questions for Simone?

Speaker 3: Thank you for this discussion. It's been very interesting. I'm curious to know if you've looked at generational differences. I was raised by parents who lived through the generation in World War II, to think that education and hard work would bring me a very satisfying life. Now that I get to the final chapter of my life, there's a lot of uncertainty. But the young people, say the college age people have been raised in a different environment where many of them have had too much, and there's so much uncertainty about what am I going to do? Am I going to be able to get a job? I just wonder if there are any generational differences with people early in their lives versus those and especially, I think in the final chapter of one's life, fortunately, we've lived many years. We've learned many lessons. We see the same mistakes being repeated. People who don't pay attention to history repeat the same mistakes.

Simone Stolzoff: Thank you for your question. I think you're spot on. I think every generation has their version of existential uncertainty, whether it was, Cold War, atomic bomb drills in the

50s or, living in Florence during the Bubonic plague. Who's to say that contemporary feelings of uncertainty are bigger or smaller than what it felt like to be a hand loom weaver in the Industrial Revolution, for example. But I think the felt experience of uncertainty is still very salient for people, especially young people today. I do think the Internet and social media and phones play a role into this. I do think there is a level of uncertainty that people who are facing the next chapter of their lives like retirement are facing.

For example, in my first book, I thought it would primarily resonate with young people who are trying to figure out work's role in their life. The generation that was actually the most fervent, passionate readers of the book were recent retirees who, for their entire lives had saw themselves as part of an organization, part of this community professionally, and they were trying to figure out, without my work, who am I? I think uncertainty goes from cradle to the grave, as they say. There's elements of uncertainty, especially as you are growing older in your life about mortality, which is both the great certainty that we all share.

We know we're all going to the same place, and yet the great uncertainty of how or when it's going to happen. In the last chapter of the book, it's about mortality. It's about death, and the main character is a death dualist, an end of life care worker. What she said to me, which really stood out is, there's a lot of talk today about longevity and trying to live as long as possible. She sees it as a version of death denial. The cost of that denial of death is that we don't get the gift of finitude, which is clarity about how we want to spend our time and how we want to live. There's a few frameworks or ideas in the book that I think change depending on your age. If you're in your 20s, maybe you do more exploring. Maybe you have to expose yourself to more uncertainty to figure out who you are, figure out your values, figure out your preferences.

As you're older, maybe you're a little bit more calcified, maybe you have a better idea of your preferences and what you like. But we both need that balance of exploring and exploiting our tastes and exploring new possibilities. One of the greatest benefits of uncertainty is discovering something about yourself, being able to grow and learn. I think that is applicable to anyone at any age, which I think this event is testament to as well.

Speaker 4: Yes, thank you for this great lecture. I enjoyed it. I was reading the paper this morning, the opinion column in it was from a graduating student from Stanford, and his point was that him and his cohorts are totally uncertain here with the AI issue, how it's going to affect their move forward, find a job, get on with their career and things. It seems like it's totally different and new and more uncertain than we had when we graduated from college and so forth. Is that true or we always had this and we just forget.

Simone Stolzoff: Great question. For some context, there was this Stanford senior named Theo Baker, and he wrote this piece in the New York Times over the weekend about being part of, say, the ChatGPT generation. When he entered college, ChatGPT was released, and now he's a senior and him and his peers are all thinking about what life after college looks like. I think there's a few things at play here. One is, I think AI chat bots are a great example of that definitive certainty seeking behavior that we all have that we think the answer about our future can just be the result of the perfect query. Or if we could just Google search who to marry or what job to take and wanting to know with definitive certainty about things that maybe don't have certain options, and yet they haven't necessarily been conditioned with the same need to be exposed to uncertainty.

One of the best ways to build uncertainty tolerance, like any phobia is through exposure. Yet, these tools are also incredibly empowering. It can help anyone with an idea be able to make that idea tangible and to bring it to life. If I were a young person today, I would think about a few things. One is, how can you get proximate to these tools yourself? How can you experiment and play with them so that they're not an ambiguous source of fear, and you can find your own agency and autonomy through what you might be able to learn.

The second comes back to this idea of finding your anchors. Thinking about what are the things that will remain constant in my life, even if the labor market or the economy is shifting around me. Maybe that's a commitment to a strong group of friends or a commitment to a particular place. But I think we live in an age of abundance. In this abundance, there are a host of other problems that come that we don't necessarily have when there's more scarcity. One of them is the paradox of choice, these myriad different options that are available to us at any given moment in our life.

I think as humans in this age of abundance, we have to be able to erect our own constraints. We have to think about what are the things that we are going to put stakes in the ground for and say are non negotiable. I empathize with the experience of young people entering the job market right now because they have both of these forces at play at once. On one hand, there's a sense of scarcity about the availability of jobs. On the other hand, there's this sense of abundance of all of their friends who might be able to start a company or get really rich around them. It's something that I can't necessarily relate directly to that experience, and I think part of what it means to be intellectually humble is not to assume that I know what it's like to be a 22-year-old entering the job market right now, but I do think that not letting that fear come at the expense of action is a great first step.

By trying to go out there and find a job, find a place where you can learn, get some mentorship, get some experience in the world, hopefully, the uncertainty will convert into a little bit more uncertainty about who you are.

Speaker 5: I was initially hearing a thread of Zen philosophy, be it Daoism or Buddhism, of going with the flow, let things come to you, the Farmer parable. I was really hearing that. You don't really know whether something was good or bad until more time passes. Take it easy, go with the flow. But then your philosophy also sounds a bit more proactive than just letting things come to you. My two part question is, did you ever study Zen philosophy? Do you have any background in Daoism or Buddhism? If you do, whether you do or you don't, how would you distinguish your personal philosophy from those philosophies that go back thousands of years of just going with the flow?

Simone Stolzoff: Thank you for the question. There's actually an inciting incident that led to the book, and it has to do with Zen. You're very perceptive. My first book came out. It was well received. I gave a TED Talk. I went on this national tour, and then my wife got pregnant and we were living in San Francisco, and it's one of the most expensive cities in the world, and I felt myself become extremely anxious. I wasn't really sure about the future of my own career. I wasn't really sure about whether I'd ever be able to afford to stay in my hometown. I started going to this place called the San Francisco Zen Center, and it was this nice community. You sit meditation for 20 minutes, and then there's a Dharma talk, a lecture. In one week, the leader of the community gave this talk about two monks who meet in the forest. There's a teacher and a student. The teacher says, Hey, like, what are you doing here?

The student says, I'm on a pilgrimage. The teacher says, What are you on a pilgrimage for? The student says, I'm not sure yet. The teacher says, Not knowing is the most intimate. It was like a Zen con. I didn't really know what to make of it at first, when I don't know something, I feel intimate with Google. I didn't know what it meant to be intimate. I think the wisdom of that teaching is about how when we don't know something, we open our eyes to the nature of reality, as opposed to when we think we know how something will go, it has that narrowing effect. It reminds me of something that my first editor used to tell me when she said, The story you find is always better than the story you seek. As a journalist, I think often we can fall into this trap of looking for a particular story and then cherry picking evidence or data to reinforce it.

There's something beautiful about this idea that when we don't know, we get intimate with the true nature of reality. That's why I think I'm so passionate about uncertainty. It's yes, uncertainty is uncomfortable. When people say embrace uncertainty, I sometimes see it as like a form of gaslighting. You're like, This is so hard and you're telling me to embrace it. What the ****? But Uncertainty is also where serendipity and surprise and the texture of life comes from. Imagine for a second a life without uncertainty. If we were all certain about exactly how things would go, if we were all sitting on a conveyor belt going to a known destination, no first date would ever have butterflies, no movie would ever not have a spoiler. There's something about uncertainty that really brings the world alive. Yet, if you are purely in a passive state, then you just go with a flow San Diego, There's a lack of autonomy that you get there.

There's a lack of agency. There's a lack of feeling like you can be the author of your own story. I think you need to balance those two things. The way that I square it is through that separation of what you can and you can't control. With that which you can't control, that's where you need to be like water. That's where you need to go with the flow. In the realm that you can control, that's where you need to feel like you are not a passive recipient of your life, but actually the author. That's where I might differentiate the two. Thanks.

Speaker 6: Over here. Thank you for a wonderful talk. I'm very much looking forward to reading your book. Can you tell us your process in writing this book and how has that made a difference to you? I mean, what uncertainties and certaintainties did you discover in your process of writing this story that you're now giving to us?

Simone Stolzoff: Yeah, I mean, you should ask my wife. If I have to hear about the uncertainty about you writing your uncertainty book one more time. I'm a narrative journalist, and so my approach is through finding stories. That is really what motivates me as a writer and what I seek when I'm doing a big reporting project like this. I open the book with a story of a couple who have been together for 17 years, married for ten, and they're out having a drink at a bar in Manhattan, and they decide to do something that is a little crazy. They say, Okay, we're not sure exactly where we're at in this relationship.

We both feel some uncertainty. Let's try an experiment. For one year, let's go our separate ways, and then we'll come back to this bar 12 months from today, and we'll decide whether or not we want to stay together or not. Show of hands. How many people think they stayed together? How many people think they broke up? Again, it's about 50/50. You have to read the book to find out. That's what I love about being a writer. It's about creating stakes, finding stories that you can really sink your teeth in and letting the stories do the teaching. It's not a very prescriptive book. Even though it has a how to title, it's a little bit of a bait and switch. It's not a personal development self help book. It's a story of ten different people dealing with

uncertainty. There's a chapter about the Federal Reserve and an internal team of devil's advocates that they created to poke holes in central bankers main arguments.

There's the climate change chapter. There's a chapter about social science research and the replication crisis, and what happens if a lot of hallmark findings aren't actually replicable. In my own way, it's like ten different ways of looking at a Blackbird. It's taking this big umbrella of a topic and then asking, how can I look at it from the perspective of psychology, from economics, from philosophy and try to triangulate the truth as opposed to just looking at it through one lens. Thanks for the question. Yes.

Speaker 7: Back here. Let's say you're at a dinner party with like 20 people, and the conversation is spiraling out of control with the difficulties of the world right now. Do you try to bring in positive factors? Do you join in the difficult conversations? What do you do?

Simone Stolzoff: I'm the good vibes man. No, I mean, I think some of the canonical research about changing people's minds basically states that you can't change people's minds. What you can do is you can hear them. You can validate what they say. You can try and find common truth and common ground, and then you can offer your perspective. I don't ever try to change anyone's mind. One of the data points that I cite the introduction of the book is that when we are particularly intolerant of uncertainty, we're more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. We're more likely to believe in misinformation.

I think doomerism is its own type of certainty seeking to say the world is screwed, and therefore, like, I don't have to think about that even more. But it really just depends on what frame you use. One of the quotes that I like is all models are wrong, but some are useful. If you look at the world through the lens of maternal mortality and birth, for example, the world has never been better. If you look at it in terms of a lot of these diseases that we've been able to eradicate in the last 30 years, the world has never been better. If you look at it from the lens of political polarization or vaccine health, You might think the world has never been worse, but it's not just one thing. That's where I try to bring in a little bit of, like, the maybe yes and maybe no thinking. I wouldn't try to convince someone that thinks the world is going one direction to turn around right away.

But I would try and hear them and try and think about what is the underlying fear that is sitting underneath their worldview.

Speaker 8: Yeah, I've got a question. I was brought up in South Africa, went to medical school in South Africa. I haven't spoken about education. I can see I've been in both worlds of certainty and uncertainty. The British South African tradition in teaching medicine is a very rigid, dogmatic way of looking at life. In other words, what I think it is, and I'm beginning this talk is very important. What I learned from that was we were not allowed uncertainty. Certainty had to be this is why you do it.

This is it. There is no discussion, which there is some validity for that. I came to this country about 42 years ago with that attitude. That did not serve me well. To say the least, because luckily, thank God I came to America where the education and the way of thinking allows for uncertainty, even in the world of medicine where you can't just live in uncertainty because your patient, I think you have this, this or that, you got to come up with an answer.

But I think the idea of sitting around with people and ideas and your educators need to encourage students to be uncertain, to think outside, what else could it be? How do I get to the answer? I'll say in no uncertain terms, I thank God I came here and got away from that rigid, dogmatic environment that I was brought up in. We'll talk about education in that, please.

Simone Stolzoff: The book is broken up into three parts, and I originally called them the Three Horsemen of delusion, but my editor thought that was too highfalutin. We call them the three certainty traps. The second trap is hubris. There's this idea that we know best, this overconfidence, this pride in our own knowledge. You see hubris all around, whether it's the AI executive telling you exactly what the world is going to look like or the politician or the professor in school. Yet I think there's also a balance because we are in this age where a common sense of fact is being called into question. There's a chapter about the scientific method in the book, for example. The point of the chapter is that even by using the scientific method, you can still get things wrong. The method is fallible, as one physicist told me, even the laws of physics around a black hole change. Yet the scientific method is still one of the best ways that we have to determine the truth.

The way I think about it is the truth is more of a asymptotic approximation of an absolute as opposed to black and white in a lot of fields. This firsthand in medicine, a lot of the wisdom of experienced doctors is being willing to have a differential and withstand judgment about exactly what is wrong until you have data that can confirm your thinking. But we don't need to question everything. One of the studies that I love from the book is of stock traders and a group of stock traders that got predictions wrong about whether a stock was going to go up or down and whether they would be willing to update their predictions in the following quarter. The researcher found is that they basically broke into two groups.

The first group was part of the majority, part of the consensus, and they got their prediction wrong, and they didn't have as much trouble updating their prediction in the next quarter. The other group went out on a limb for their prediction and had a much harder time of both admitting they were wrong and updating their prediction in the following quarter. The explanation from Katie Milkman, this researcher at Wharton, was that when we have a outgroup opinion, we likely tie a lot more of our identity to that opinion.

When we do so, changing our mind is not just about changing our mind, it's potentially undermining who we are. One of the best things that I think we can teach in educational environments is how to hold truths provisionally, to think, this is what I believe now based on the information I have today and stay open to that opinion or that belief changing when new data or new evidence is presented. I think one of the problems with the black and white, right and wrong disciplinary approach to education is there isn't room for that flip flopping.

I think flip flopping has a very bad brand, by the way, both in politics and in our personal lives. What I think we need in our education system is to have a common sense of truth of what we all can agree on, the things that are pillars to a functional democracy to be a citizen of this world. We need room for dissent and disagreement and people to change their mind. It's a much easier proclamation to make than something to be put into action. But I appreciate your question.

Speaker 7: Thank you so much for the talk. This might be a fitting final question. What would be a fifth lesson that maybe got left on the editing floor?

Simone Stolzoff: So many. I end the book with this idea that came from Cheryl Strayed, who was a famous writer and advice columnist. She once got this question about whether or not you should have kids. It's a fitting tie, given where I started the talk. She said that you can't know. You come to basically, like a pier in life. When you're on that pier, there's one boat that you can choose to get on. Part of why decision making under uncertainty is so difficult is because the minute before we make a decision, all the possibilities are still open to us. Then you make a decision, and you have to foreclose on all these other options.

This is the problem of abundance that we were talking about earlier. When we make a decision, sometimes you can feel more like a loss than a gain because you are aware of all of the paths that you didn't choose, and you're not yet necessarily aware of the benefits of the path that you did. What she said is that you have to make peace with the ghost ships that didn't carry you. The idea is you make a decision, you step on a ship, and that becomes your life.

But in that exact same moment, there's a fleet of other ships that also embark from the same pier. You can think about the sea where there's, like, your ship and all of these other lives that you could have led. What it means to be a human is to be able to still step on a ship and wave at those other ghost ships as they fade into the distance.