

Learning to live with uncertainty

By Ruth Ostrow

AFTER thinking about what I want to achieve this new year, I am basing my resolution on something a businessman I once interviewed said to me: "One of the greatest assets a person can have in life is the ability to live with uncertainty." I've often thought about these words as I've struggled, along with most of the human race, to make things secure, certain and stable for myself -- and as I've worked ceaselessly to create a sure-fire, reliable barge to carry myself across the sea. Yet, all too often, precarious weather conditions have stirred the waters in ways that have rendered me nervous and afraid.

And so it is my wish that over the coming year I make uncertainty something I accept, and something that can be a source of joy rather than fear.

As one reader recently wrote to me: "I live every day with the idea that I may still have cancer, but have opted not to have totally debilitating biopsy and possible surgery after radiation which would entail living in a wheelchair.

"So I live with ambiguity. But isn't that what life is?" Like this woman, we struggle so bravely, so valiantly for certainty and in the end have to accept the ambiguity of life as we wait for the outcomes of legal battles, medical inquiries, exams, declarations of love or results from the endless phone calls we make during the course of a week. The waiting can be crazy-making.

But the anxiety that robs us of our vitality is unnecessary in many ways. Because as this most wonderful of parables reveals -- told to me by an old rabbi and which I choose to retell to begin the year -- our quest for outcomes is just an illusory game.

"There was once a poor farmer who had a horse that used to do all the work around the property. The farmer would ride the horse into town to sell his produce. Then one day the horse ran off. 'Oh no,' said the townspeople. 'This is a terrible thing. You will be ruined.' The farmer just smiled in a thoughtful way: 'Let's wait and see,'" he said.

"A few days later the horse returned, and with it, several other beautiful horses. It had been out in the field mating and all the horses followed it back to the farm. 'Oh how wonderful!' said the townsfolk. 'Now you'll be rich, what good fortune.' The farmer just smiled in a thoughtful way. 'Let's wait and see,' he said.

"The horses indeed brought the farmer fortune. He expanded the farm and started breeding and training the horses. The old man retired and let his son run things. Then one day his son was training one of the horses and fell off and broke his leg. 'Oh no,' said the townsfolk. 'This is a terrible thing. Now he won't be able to run the business and you will be ruined.' The old farmer smiled thoughtfully: 'Let's wait and see,' he said.

"A few weeks later war broke out. All the young men of the village were drafted. But the farmer's son was not taken because of his broken leg. 'Oh, what amazing fortune!' said the townsfolk. 'You have the only young man able to work in this whole village. You will remain prosperous while the rest of us starve.' The old farmer smiled thoughtfully and said: 'Let's wait and see.'" And so the story goes on, for days if one wants to add and subtract. It's a wonderful yarn to tell children

late at night when they are troubled or when things are going badly with friends or teachers at school. Just wait and see is so soothing to the soul.

And really, we never know what the outcome will be, or why things are happening, or what will happen next, so we may as well enjoy the moment. As my mother always says: "Everything changes." The rabbi and indeed mystics from all religions suggest the best way to live with uncertainty is to accept it and to surrender in trust to a power greater than ourselves.

But I have also taken a few tips from pragmatists on how to best deal with the uncertain nature of things. One wise friend says that in times of trouble she imagines the worst-case scenario. "If you know you can survive that, you know you will be able to deal with everything else in between." Another says he has faith that we are always better equipped to deal with things than we think we're going to be. "The experience we gather along the way when handling an issue teaches us how to cope with whatever eventuates." However one deals with uncertainty in 2004, it's interesting to note that the businessman I quoted earlier is now one of the wealthiest men in the country.

Whatever wealth means for you -- health, love, happiness, money -- it pays to stay open to the endless possibilities of life.

Have a happy holiday season, my valued readers. I will be back in February.

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