

## INTRODUCTION

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Over the past 20 years, I've coached hundreds of corporate executives on dealing with pressure, uncertainty, and failure. Every one of them was more than capable of achieving any goal they set out to do – as long as they had full control. Not one of them had full control. None of us do.

We just like to think we do.

Nowhere does our lack of control become more evident than when the pressure is high.

Raise the pressure high enough, and your basic skills such as walking and even talking can suddenly seem out of reach. Tension fills our bodies. Muscles stop working. Brain cells quit connecting. We might “know” how to do something, yet under pressure, it's as if our knowledge is on the other side of an impassible canyon.

We all have a pressure gap, the space between the pressure in a situation and our mental tools. It's not about our skills. It's about our mental tools to bring those skills to bear under pressure. Even though we might have been talking our whole lives, giving a speech is not the same as talking to your neighbor across the fence. While we might all HAVE a pressure gap, we rarely if ever talk about it. For example, we might say we don't like giving speeches, but we don't say it's because there is a gap between my mental tools and the pressure in that situation.

The pressure gap can cause us to do illogical things, like use fear to fix fear. Or work incessantly to be free from work in some faraway future. Or use money to buy love and status and friendship. Or fall back on prior strategies when they are past their expiration date.

At some level, we know these things are illogical. For example, in all my years of coaching, not one client has ever asked me to help them figure out how to put more work into their work-life balance. We also realize that somehow, some way, we must address fear.

We also must work and make money, allow past strategies to inform us, and we have to balance thousands of other factors. During my corporate career, working in one of the mega-banks, it felt like I was always walking a tightrope, trying to balance SO MANY factors and walk the line to what I saw at the time as the path to success.

As leaders, we are walking tightropes all the time. We balance the short term with the long term. We balance the external forces of change with the internal ability to respond. We balance what is essential in our cultures with what is no longer serving us. We balance providing resources with delivering results. We balance our personal needs with the needs of the whole.

We value consistency, yet consistency overused is stagnation. We value flawless execution, yet flawlessness cheats innovation.

The balancing acts are endless.

Many of our most challenging balancing acts happen out of sight; the thoughts, inner beliefs, values, and emotions that drive our actions. We must balance the need to prove ourselves with the constant need to improve ourselves in an ever-changing world. We must balance what is good for ourselves with what is good for the people in our lives. In fact, many of our most delicate balancing acts happen around the question of what is good for the individual versus what is good for the whole.

These are the kinds of balancing acts that cause very smart, very capable executives to hire an executive coach. The pressure to perform, to align the many factors, and to sustain a high level of focus takes a toll. These same smart, capable executives second-guess themselves, put important areas of life such as family and health on the back burner, and lose their sense of purpose.

What clients ask me to do is help them find their power, restore their balance, and get a glimpse of peace of mind.

They want to change.

They want change.

You can't have one without the other.

There's a teeny, tiny problem with the need to change – or the act of leading change for that matter. You aren't going to get it “right” the first time. Or maybe the second time or third time.

In other words, changing something leads to mistakes. As a society, we talk a good game about mistakes. We say, “mistakes are learning opportunities,” and “mistakes will make us better.” If we really meant that,

change would be easy. We would not obsess over the little things that go wrong when so much is going well.

Instead, we change what we know without changing how we behave.

My favorite way to change has always been to read a book. Gaining knowledge seemed like the key to everything. Once, one of my many coaches along my journey said something to the effect of, “Why don’t you quit talking about being different and actually be different?” Another coach put me on a book moratorium. “Read no books for at least six months. Just DO the things you say you know how to do and see how that might actually work in real life.”

Can you see how I might have a pattern there? My knowledge-gaining pattern was sort of like me learning to throw pottery. It looked so simple in the movie *Ghost*. “How hard can it be?” I thought.

All the knowledge I gained in books was pretty simple until I needed to do it in a real situation with real consequences. Rarely could I tolerate the feeling I got when trying something new, making mistakes, and being a beginner.

Eventually I learned to apply many methods as well as develop my own – effective methods – of creating change. My life was much better after practicing what I had learned, such as journaling, meditating, inner child work, exercise, and creating new habits to replace old ones.

These methods worked – to a point.

Then I fell off a horse.

It was a bad, hospital-inducing fall. My pressure gap had life-threatening consequences. Yet this “awful” event led to life-affirming insights and real change. Recovering would eventually raise my pressure threshold and lead me to the other side of fear.

Falling off a horse happens to someone, somewhere every day. So how could a fall off a horse lead me to the other side of fear? Especially when horses were not even part of my life, other than having a couple of friends who asked me to start trail riding with them? How could a simple accident turn into perhaps the most pivotal, powerful defining moment of my life?

I had many pivotal moments leading up to this, and I can break those moments into one of three journeys. First came my Career Journey. This one started in early adulthood when I got married at eighteen, finished college graduating summa cum laude, had a successful career in banking, and became a single mom. My career began to feel empty, my daughter struggled

with drugs, and my marriage hit the rocks. Before my Career Journey killed me, I began to wake up to my Creative Journey. My Creative Journey was marked with meditation, self-awareness workshops, healing, painting, and pottery. It also correlated almost perfectly to my transition from being a cog in the corporate wheel to becoming an entrepreneur starting my own leadership development firm.

Dancing the Tightrope chronicles my Pressure Journey, covering a three-year period from the fateful fall to that pivotal test of my skills and confidence to get back on THE horse. (His name is Mocha by the way, and he's one of the most gentle, beautiful horses you could ever meet.)

This accident spiked my fear meter in ways I didn't even realize until I had a chance to get back on a different horse in a completely different setting. That's when I knew that I would either allow fear to own me or shape me. The first horse I mounted after my accident was a reining horse and a stallion to boot. My fear was tipping the scale at a solid 10. I was so flooded with adrenaline; I refused the reins to lead my own way. We just walked around the arena, the trainer leading me like a kid on a pony ride. In many ways, I WAS a kid on a pony ride.

A scared little girl with the opportunity to learn to use the tools that would help me grow up.

Fortunately for me, this accident conspired to put me in touch with different teachers, coaches, and mentors that, through varying levels of support, introduced me to a whole new plane than the one on which I had been operating. I had historically sought answers in the dimensions of knowledge, skills, rules, and effort. The horse trainers – and the horses – eventually helped me deepen my awareness, in real time and under pressure – that the root of the problems started with me, my beliefs, my thoughts, my emotions, my tools, and my energy. They taught me to recognize and be responsible for how I came to the situation or relationship and to actually DO something different – in the moment and under pressure.

It's easy to think that learning to perform under pressure is reserved for high-level athletes, public speakers, and daredevils. We often don't recognize the pressure we feel when the boss says, "Let's talk about that meeting," or when our spouse gets suddenly cold or when we realize that we might have made a mistake.

Early in my Creative Journey, I put enormous pressure on myself to make every painting a masterpiece. I had a personal rule that it was shameful to

waste art paper. The pressure to paint a beautiful painting every time often froze me, brush in hand, even though nobody ever died from a bad painting.

This Pressure Journey showed me that we are all under pressure, and the pressure is often higher than we are aware (or care to acknowledge). It's almost as if we try to pretend the pressure away so we can keep up the illusion that we are mistake-free, in control, and all is well.

Pressure can feel like our own personal hell.

Yet, what if the pressure is a good thing? What if the control we crave is only available when we quit striving for it? What if missing the target leads to something that matters so much more than making the goal? What if we have it all backward? What if pressure is the catalyst to living in the moment?

Over this multi-faceted, three-year journey – and beyond – I've come to see that if I reverse the direction of energy from outside-in to inside-out, I have access to a much deeper set of resources that allows me to handle pressure, uncertainty, and failure in ways that expand me rather than crush me.

Reversing the order of what matters is much, much easier said than done.

You can't think your way out of a problem created by how you think, any more than you can lift a bucket up while standing in the bucket. You must find a way to get out of the bucket.

The deeper I've gone into this journey, the more I realize that our goals are the byproduct of the internal work that really matters. Society, schools and even our parents teach us that achieving goals is the point of life. This set of societal rules only makes sense if the purpose of our life is to build a resume.

But I don't believe we are here to build a resume, achieve goals, or make a bunch of money. We are each born with a unique spark, and our domestication designed to force fit us into "the way things are" has a way of dimming that spark as it forms us into socially acceptable humans. While society might prefer we be cogs in the wheel, the Divine unleashes us to be the light only we can bring.

The work that really matters – at least to me – is to become who the Creator made me to be, quirks and all. The most important journey of all is the one that only we can do, the journey back to our true selves.

As I was finishing this book, a friend texted the following to me:

"Know thyself," said Socrates. "Be thyself," said Plato. "Know the world

of Nature, of which you are a part,” said Aristotle, “and you will be yourself and know yourself without thought or effort. The things you see, you are.”

There is no better teacher for us humans than Nature. Horses help bridge us to Nature. They are Nature. They show us our nature. They bring us back to who we really are.

Before I could understand any of this, first I had to deal with the big question: “Would I ever get back on the horse?”

## **A note to readers**

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I’m a huge fan of simplicity on the other side of complexity. My brain needs shortcuts to remember what really matters, especially under pressure. This book is going to take you through the complexity of my journey, including the false starts, denial, and the thinking that I already knew it all. During the process, I was introduced to new language, which I bring into this book, along with the stories and confusion I felt when I heard the words. Taking the reader through some of what I went through is the only way I can find to present incredibly complex information that is at the same time, very simple.

To that end, I’m going to go ahead and give you the secret to everything right here at the beginning of the book. When I’m under pressure, I can either reach for my Rules or reach for my Tools. Reaching for my Rules keeps me the same. Reaching for my Tools allows me to shed the armor that has kept me from accessing the spark the Creator gave me at birth.

Focusing on following the Rules perfectly causes us to over - or underreact, and that’s where the book title comes from. Dancing the Tightrope simply means I’m in the moment, here and now, and that I’ve calibrated my balance point in such a way that I don’t over - or undershoot in that moment. I’m only on the tightrope for moments at a time. Those moments are priceless, and anyone can have them. The side effect of all of those moments may hold the secret to a happy life. That’s what this book is all about.

## CHAPTER ONE

**Too Much Pressure for Me****Just a Simple Trail Ride Through the Woods**

As the three of us set out on the trail that day, I remember having the thought, steeped in ignorance, “This is sort of boring.” This was my second time to ride with my friend Babs and her sister-in-law Mary. I was on Babs’ horse Mocha. When she first asked me to come ride, I told her I knew how to ride horses and she confidently put us in the lead.

I might as well have claimed I knew how to do brain surgery because I successfully cleaned a fish once.

My definition of knowing how to ride horses was based on the false confidence of having five minutes of riding lessons when I was twelve years old. Our family owned a small farm about an hour from our house since I was in fourth grade. That was the year my teacher read us Walter Farley’s book *The Black Stallion* in class. I was enraptured with the idea of having my own black stallion. From the first minute we got the farm, I begged my parents to buy me a horse. After all, it looked to me like all you needed to successfully own a horse was a few acres and a fence. Our farm had that. It even had some old barrels laying around. To my young mind, the only thing missing from my dream of being a champion barrel racer was a horse.

Eventually, I wore my parents down and they bought a horse. My dreams were shattered quickly. We only had him a couple of months before we

sold him. Because I couldn't control him. This was one of two facts I had conveniently forgotten to tell Babs. After my parents sold the horse, I spent my lifetime blaming my parents for taking away my opportunity to be a champion. Now 40-plus years later, I was back on a horse and there were no barrels in sight. All we were going to do was walk on a trail in the woods. How hard could it be?

As with any discipline, what you see and what is under the surface are worlds apart.

Boring? It was as if I had dared the Universe to prove me wrong.

As our ride progressed, Mocha walked me right through an occupied spider web. My face took the full web, spider, and all.

This insult was an offer into a new dimension if I chose to take it. But of course, at the time I knew nothing of a relationship where the horse would offer his legs to me, where he would give me his trust and true connection. I had no idea the magic that was really happening on this boring ride in the woods. I was too busy being offended. He continued walking as I flicked the spider away, wiped my face and shuddered. My thought, "How dare he walk me into that web."

Mocha didn't walk me through the web deliberately – he was merely taking the lead that I had unknowingly left unattended. I saw the web coming. However, in this dimension, I had not made any kind of connection or contact with him. My lessons from childhood were long forgotten, so I had few tools to move him right or left to avoid the web. What few ideas I tried didn't work. Hmm. To my way of thinking, it was almost like I was riding a faulty motorbike. If I just knew which buttons to push, he would do what I wanted. Wrong. He was simply walking down the trail, waiting for that turn toward the barn, choosing every step for himself. He knew from the first moment I got on him that he was the leader of this ride.

As we continued down the trail, a part of me began to realize what he had known from the beginning: He had all the power. I was the unfortunate passenger on the back of an animal that had survived thousands of years by running away at the first sign of danger.

My lack of awareness about the consequences of the horse being in control created a form of unbalanced thinking. What I decided, more in the back of my mind than in the forefront, was that it would be good for

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the horse to like me. (Even as I write this, it's embarrassing to admit.)

My sense of boredom had transformed into something more ominous. I felt the need to correct the balance of power.

I said "good boy" to him a couple of times, but not for the right reasons. Yes, it's good to praise a horse who has learned something or gotten over a fear. This was definitely not in response to him having done anything like that. Nope, it was a verbalization of my thought, "I want him to like me."

I would be on the ground, unable to breathe within seconds.

As we turned down a steep hill, the horse perked up as he had done several times before. Everything in his body language told me we had made a turn toward the barn. Even though I could not have found the way home, he knew the way and would gladly be able to take me there. He picked up his pace, clearly excited at the thought of the pile of hay waiting in his stall. Later I would learn his lateral gait on such a steep hill created a rocking motion that feels like a trot. On this day, I just wanted the motion to stop. I pulled back on the reins to slow him down. Unconsciously, I also leaned forward and gripped his sides with my legs.

I had never been on such a steep hill in Texas, where I grew up. Leaning forward was exactly the opposite of what I should have done. I was saying slow down and go fast at the same time. By now, he knew the confusing requests from the woman on his back did not necessarily mean anything. But the barn was ahead, and gravity encouraged speed. So, he obliged. With my questionable balance, I quickly went from trying to slow him down to just holding on. That strategy lasted for one more step and then I was flying.

I landed with a hard splat on my side. My friends went into action to catch the horse I had just left to his own devices. When they came back to check on me, I could barely move, and every half breath hurt like hell.

I could tell something was very wrong. My arms and legs seemed to be in one piece; however, my middle wasn't working too well. Here we were, out in the woods, where getting back on Mocha to take me home was not going to happen. Walking out wasn't happening either. In fact, I tried to sit up and failed miserably. Luckily, we were in cell phone range. Babs' husband Bob met us with a four-wheeler and a question: "Should we call an ambulance?"

After they loaded me into the ambulance, I settled back, closed my eyes, and meditated. My meditation took me back to a very different ambulance ride almost twenty years before, one caused by me being out of balance in my career perspective.

## **The First Ambulance Ride that Started to Wake Me Up**

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Everyone bustled around me, hooking up monitors and watching my funky heartbeat bounce around like a pinball. As I lay there half dazed by the fluorescent lights, my irritation grew. Where were their priorities? Did they not understand that the pressure I felt letting important work fall through the cracks far exceeded the worry that I might die?

At that time in my life, I felt like my career was just taking off. My projects mattered on a national scale; my incentive package was anyone's dream, and I knew most of the senior executives of a mega bank. (And they knew me – which seemed incredibly important to me – back then anyway.)

It never crossed my mind that if I died, someone else would be doing my work tomorrow.

Fainting on my bathroom floor that morning scared my husband enough to summon an ambulance.

An erratic heartbeat scared my high school-aged daughter enough to think she might lose her mother.

A phone call from my husband to update my parents sent their worry meter off the charts.

Me? The one lying in the bed? I was worried if I would be back at work on Monday. If I wasn't, I was sure all hell was going to break loose.

Any prospect of being in balance in my life was so far out of reach, even the potential of dying of a heart attack blinded me to the miserable state of my life.

For many years, my corporate life had been marked by questions: How does one get ahead here? How do I stay out of trouble but also get some of the limelight that seems to help get people promoted? What do they really want from me? How do I do more of that?

Getting answers to those questions had started paying off in the past few years; I had been promoted and moved to increasingly bigger roles three times in less than six years. Time after time, I had proven my worth and had been rewarded with longer workdays, more pressure, and the dangling carrot of money that grew exponentially the longer I stayed.

The prison of my own making was closing in, and I welcomed it with open arms.

All this activity allowed me to join a select club of “high potentials,” meaning people who looked like they might eventually make it to the

executive suite. There were hundreds, if not thousands of us, all vying for a few spots and all certain that we had the right stuff to finally get there. The pressure to reach that pinnacle was enormous.

Life was good.

At least, it was good if I ignored the fact that my soon-to-be-a-drug-addict daughter had carried a bottle of pills to school a few years before with every intention of taking her own life. It was good if I ignored my frayed relationships, starting with my marriage. It was good if you didn't ask my team what kind of leader it had. It was good if I ignored the signs all around me that my whole world was out of kilter.

Life was good if I ignored the fact that my health in my late 30s was clearly failing even as I insisted they get me out of this hospital so I could go back to work.

For me to be discharged, they just had one condition. "You have to pass a stress test." Cool! Passing tests was in my wheelhouse! For a straight-A perfectionist like me, this would be a snap.

As the cardiologist strapped me to the stress-test machine, he asked me where I worked.

When I told him, he said, "Seriously, you work there? You're the fifth person I've tested for stress-related heart problems THIS WEEK, and I haven't worked that much."

“ Suddenly, my memory flashed to the several instances of ambulances leaving any one of our corporate buildings in downtown Charlotte. In fact, we had sent two trainees from my own Credit Training program to the hospital via ambulance in the past few weeks.

His incredulity about us bankers dropping like flies got through to my numbed-out brain. Here was a guy who had endured the rigors of medical school, had to be on call at all hours and was testing me on a Saturday night calling ME out for being a workaholic. It was a clue that something might be off.

While a part of me really wanted to reject his judgment, I couldn't escape it. There was something terribly out of balance here. But it

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would still take more reflection, warning signals, and facing the suicide of a colleague to wake me up and allow me to see the world with new eyes.

My diagnosis turned out to be Barrett's Esophagus, a potentially cancer-causing condition brought about by stress. I had to do something, or I would likely get stomach cancer and die an early and painful death.

For the next twenty years, I entered an intense, rocky personal journey of deep self-awareness. Without a doubt, I changed my relationship with anger, stress, and all the people in my life. My husband and I stayed married. We moved to the mountains, where I became an athlete, artist, and executive coach. My spiritual life became rich and fulfilling.

My daughter entered recovery and today helps parents of adult addicts navigate the rough waters of reclaiming their lives.

As today's ambulance pulled into the emergency room, I was so much calmer than the first ride some twenty years ago. I had truly come a long way.

I couldn't possibly see it yet, but the ceiling of possibility was about to be blown off. This accident would be a gift. It would teach me that mistakes are merely calibrations, and the balance point is always moving. Uncertainty would become an opportunity to use my Tools, and pressure would be the force to build them.

But first, I would have to accept the reality of what had happened.

## **Lack of Knowledge — or Something Else?**

After getting an X-ray in the emergency room, I looked at the clock. If all went well, I would be out of there in time to drive the boat as promised for Austin Abel, the pro water skier who runs a ski school on Mystic Waters, our 162-acre former Girl Scout camp. By now, I was breathing better and was pretty sure the doctors would tell me that I had a broken collar bone and perhaps some broken ribs as well.

My daughter Jen had followed the ambulance and was keeping me company. We were mostly bored and ready to leave.

The small emergency room was relatively busy for a Saturday afternoon, giving us plenty of opportunities to eavesdrop. In one room, someone had something going on with her foot. Maybe a broken or sprained ankle? As I strained to hear details, words like barn, horse, and gate landed on my ears. Hmm, another horse accident. No surprise, I guess. We do live in

horse country and this hospital was the closest to the Tryon International Equestrian Center, where a show was going on that day.

I turned my attention to the other room behind the curtain. Soon, it became clear that yet another horse accident had brought that man into the ER. I couldn't decide if I should feel vindicated or worried. After all, these other two victims surely knew a lot more about horses than I did. "So maybe I'm not so incompetent after all," was my first thought. My second thought was "Wow, horses can be really dangerous."

I didn't have time for the third, balancing thought. Suddenly, two emergency room doctors came rushing in the room and said, "We need to get your shirt off. We see a problem on your X-ray." Given the extreme pain on my right side, it took a lot of help to get me stripped down as they shooed my now white-faced daughter out of the room.

My questions started coming a mile a minute. "What is on the X-ray?" "Am I being admitted?" "Why the hurry?" Then the unspoken question "Am I going to die?" loomed large as they asked me to turn onto my left side.

"You have a pneumothorax. We have to put in a chest tube. First, I'm going to deaden the area where we are going to stick the needle. Then I'm going to ..." "Wait, what's a pneumo – whatchamacallit? I have pneumonia?" Finally, someone cleared it up by saying it's a collapsed lung. They wasted no time. Before I could ask any more questions, they rolled me to my left and started the procedure.

As soon as the tube entered the area between my lungs and ribs, I felt a release of pressure. The doctor said I should be breathing much better now. The pain in my side lessened and my breath came more easily. Ironically, my consistent oxygen levels of 98% had kept any of them from suspecting anything seriously wrong with my lungs. Plus, they noted that most people with a collapsed lung don't carry on a quiet conversation, as Jen and I had been doing right before they came running in. Evidently, meditating had made a huge difference in both my calmness and my physiology.

Over the next three days, I was a guest of the hospital as we waited for my lung to stay inflated without mechanical assistance. Between the many medical professionals and visitors, I answered the question "What happened?" the same way.

I had a knowledge gap. I did not know how to stop a horse.

That story failed to tell the truth on so many levels.

At the time, I had not yet learned about the idea of having a pressure gap.

I vaguely understood the idea of mental tools. I was intimately familiar with the impact of pressure, uncertainty, and failure. Most of my responses to pressure involved either building my skills or lowering the pressure.

One thing was sure at this moment in time. I would not be getting back on a horse anytime soon, if ever.

## Maybe I Should Just Walk Away

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I was on a tightrope. On one side was common sense and logic. At the time of my fall, I was 59. When the orthopedist came into my hospital room to see about my injuries, I told him to ignore the age on the chart and asked him to treat me as he would a 25-year-old athlete. Right before the trail ride, I had been cutting back and forth on my water ski and was determined to get back to it. His response reinforced my concern; he had experienced a similar injury riding. Now that horseback riding was proving to be much more dangerous than I realized, why would I risk another serious injury or worse?

On the other side was the desire to overcome my newly discovered fear. The proverbial adage to get back on the horse called out to me. Plus, I had friends who wanted me to ride with them. In their visits to me in the hospital, I started realizing that trail riding could be the MOST dangerous way for the uninitiated to get on a horse. Who knew?

However, riding would also be a wonderful way to spend time with friends.

I was faced with questions and choices. Would I be able to walk the tightrope of overcoming my fear while not taking undue risk? What would I need to learn if I decided to address my fear? What would I do with this life-defining moment?

My accident gifted me with several months to consider my options.

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