Career Curveballs: Fear Can Be a Powerful Friend

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I was on a plane recently and watched the Felix Baumgartner documentary about his mission "to the edge of space." Just watching him dive from 24 miles up in the sky, breaking the sound barrier while I was cruising along at 39,000 feet was enough to make me queasy in my seat. *(Another glass of wine, please.)* The story behind the daredevil act was engrossing; but the reason why he finally pulled the trigger and did it was even more juicy to me. Here was this young, brash, kind of crazy and fearless guy raring to make history. That's the story you've been told. But the real story is that in the end, good ol' fear is what glued his butt to the capsule that floated him up to the stratosphere.

What kind of fear? No, not the kind that prevents you from hopping on a motorbike going 100 mph down the speedway, which is likely what Felix does before breakfast every morning. I'm talking about "good fear" — the kind that drives you to do the really hard things because if you didn't, you couldn't live with yourself. Like many of us, Felix was fearless and fearful at the same time. At one point, he was so scared about the mission he literally fled the project for several months.

So what did the team do? They found a replacement. And what happened to Felix? He got jealous and returned to the mission. The leaders of the mission knew to tap into that one fear that drives greatness - the fear of regret. It is not a "bad fear" which is the kind that limits you; it is a "good fear" because it motivates you. Can you imagine how Felix would feel if someone else had accomplished what he set out to do?

To bring it back down to earth, literally, let me tell you about my own bout with "good fear." It came years ago when I was about to make a career switch into television, while also feeling the tug of wanting to take a break and become a mother.

I was worried if I waited too long, the timing would not be right. But then the timing could not have been worse either. I couldn't understand why I had two desires in my gut at the same time—to both switch into a new career and have a baby.

All these thoughts swam in my head for a while and the fear of moving on one but not the other only paralyzed me. On one weekend, we spent the day with my family in Ocean City, by the Jersey shore. We were sitting in our beach house relaxing when my father could see I was lost in my head.

"What's wrong? What's bothering you?"

I told him I was just confused. Starting a family is a huge commitment. And then to try to do that while also looking to switch careers is another big commitment. Not to mention worrying about finding a job and your finances. My then-husband at the time was just starting out in his career, too, so there was no option for me to just sit back and live on his income.

I'm not sure exactly what my father said, but he helped crystallize it for me. I think it was more the fact that he said it rather than the exact words that hit me. Here was my father, a man who wanted me to always go the safe route in my career, telling me to take a risk. Just go for it, he advised, and let the future work itself out.

"Do both and see what happens."

In that moment, what had been a set of bad fears turned into good fear—I began to fear the consequences of not going for it more than doing it. I thought to myself, if in five years, I was in the same spot as I was now, would I be happy? And the answer was an unequivocal no. There was no turning back.

Last time I checked, we only have one life. Whether your goals are setting world records or plunging ahead to juggle a career and parenthood, your job is to get rid of the bad fear and turn the less-bad fear into good fear that motivates you to strive for the bigger.