

What Did You Expect?

Buy the ticket, take the ride.

An expectation is a small prediction you have stopped noticing you made. You anticipate an outcome. You hold a picture of how this plays out. You arrive with a settled idea of what you need from the situation. None of that is written down and all of it is load-bearing.

Think of a model home. A model is a pattern, the thing that sets the standard, how it is supposed to look when it is finished. We carry models in our heads for entire lives, and they are startlingly detailed: two parents and a happy childhood, the right school, marriage, a career you care about that promotes you, good health, family reunions with matching shirts, a comfortable retirement with travel in it, staying sharp to the end, and dying within a few days of each other.

Where the model came from

- Partly from reality, and this is worth saying plainly. Things genuinely are better than they were. Violence is down, medicine works, lifespans are longer, and personal freedom is historically extraordinary.
- Mostly from other people's highlight reels. You are comparing your unedited life against everyone else's selected best moments, at a volume no previous generation had to withstand.
- And from the Christmas card, which deserves its own diagnosis. Every year a letter arrives in which the father's company went public while he trained for two triathlons, the mother won a national teaching award again, the eldest chose between Stanford and Harvard, the middle child captained two undefeated teams, and the eleven-year-old soloed with the symphony. Nobody's year contained only that. But the letter is what you measure your December against.

Notice that the model is not a hope. A hope knows it is a hope. This is held as a roadmap, as the route everyone is on, so that departing from it does not feel like bad luck. It feels like a wrong turn that somebody made.

Then reality arrives and does not match, and the mind runs a short and destructive sequence: something is wrong, therefore I am a failure, or somebody is to blame, and either way I am unhappy.

The gap is where the suffering is

$$\text{happiness} = \text{reality} - \text{expectations}$$

- Reality is the term you mostly cannot move. Expectations are the term you can.
- A mismatch registers as a loss, and losses are grieved. When a task turns out harder or longer than you expected, the reliable results are stress, frustration, and disappointment, and it is worth understanding that you are grieving the outcome you had already spent.
- Separate two things that get confused. **Pain is unavoidable and largely physical. Suffering is what you add to it.** That is not a claim that suffering is a choice made lightly or quickly. It is a claim that it has a second ingredient, and the second ingredient is yours.
- Jenkin Lloyd Jones put the whole session in one line: anyone who imagines that bliss is normal is going to waste a lot of time running around shouting that he has been robbed.

Part of why the gap stings is that we are built to feel losses more sharply than equivalent gains. Losing fifty dollars hurts more than finding fifty dollars pleases. An outcome that falls short of what you expected is processed as a loss of something you already owned, because in your head you did own it.

It reaches the top of the field too. Olympic athletes who miss a result they were expected to reach describe it in the language of devastation rather than disappointment, in front of an audience that mostly cannot imagine getting that far at all.

The bronze medalist

- Everyone knows how the gold medalist feels. The interesting question is who is happier, silver or bronze.
- It is bronze, reliably, and it is not close. (Medvec, Madey and Gilovich, 1995.) The silver medalist compares upward, against the gold he nearly had, and stands on the podium having just lost. The bronze medalist compares downward, against fourth place and no medal at all, and stands on the same podium having just won.
- Same event, same day, adjacent steps. The entire difference is the reference point each one chose without choosing it.

Recalibrating

Jones did not stop at the line about being robbed, and the rest of it is the part worth memorizing. Most putts do not drop. Most beef is tough. Most children grow up to be just like people. Most successful marriages require a high degree of mutual toleration, and most jobs are more often dull than otherwise. That is not cynicism. It is a description of the median, offered by someone who clearly enjoyed his life.

Instruments drift. They leave the factory accurate and slowly wander, and you recalibrate them against a known standard so you can trust them again. Expectations drift the same way, and the symptom of drift is the feeling of having been cheated. Three things that reset mine.

1. Get out of your bubble. Where I work does some of this for me, because a hospital is a place where the range of human outcomes is not hidden. The rest takes deliberate effort: putting yourself where people live differently from you, and staying long enough to see it rather than tour it.

2. Learn about the past. Not for grim entertainment, but because the scale of what ordinary people have absorbed is genuinely difficult to hold in your head.

- The Black Death moved through Europe between 1347 and 1351 and killed something like a third of the population, perhaps 25 to 30 million people. Villages simply stopped existing.
- In 1932 and 1933, millions in Ukraine starved under a policy that took their grain and then denied the famine was happening and blocked relief. Estimates run from 3.5 to 7 million dead.
- In 1937, arrest quotas were issued across the Soviet Union by number rather than by name. The way to save your own family was to confess and supply other names, so people named enemies, former lovers, and whoever had told a joke. Prisoners were driven through the streets in trucks labeled MEAT and VEGETABLES.
- A drawer of wedding rings taken from prisoners was found near Buchenwald after liberation. Every ring in it is a story you will never hear.

You do not have to reach for the extremes, either. Within living memory, ordinary people in Warsaw watched a city be walled off around them. The point of reading any of it is not to rank your troubles below theirs. It is that the baseline you inherited, the one that treats an uneventful life as standard issue, is a very recent and very local invention.

3. Run thought experiments. These work better than argument, because you cannot talk yourself out of your own answer.

The sack of troubles

A town where everyone was certain their own burden was the worst. The mayor had them write their troubles down and put them in a sack in the square, then draw a new one out. Every villager read someone else's life and quietly asked for their own back.

The button

You may upgrade every attribute you have: health, talent, looks, wealth, standing, whatever you consider an improvement. The price is that you forget everyone you know and every memory with them. Would you press it? If not, notice what you just valued.

And one more, which is less comfortable. Picture a night drive, a dark road, and a figure at the edge of it. In one version you swerve and nobody is hurt. In the other you do not. If you were living in the second version, what would you give to be returned to the first? Now count how many versions of that you are already living in, without noticing, today.

Why me

Before the reframe, an honest question. Have we started to believe we are owed an uneventful life? It is the exact charge every generation levels at the one behind it, and it is worth asking whether it lands closer to home than that.

- The question underneath most of this is why me, and it contains a hidden premise: that this should not have happened, and therefore somebody owes me an explanation.
- The recalibrated version is **why not me**. Not as resignation, but as an honest question. Where did the idea come from that an uneventful life was the standard issue?
- Which turns the Jones line over. Anyone who imagines that adversity is normal is going to spend a lot of time noticing how much he has been given.

TRY THIS

- Name one expectation you are going to retire, out loud, this week.
- Name one hard thing you are going to accept instead of contest.
- Catch yourself comparing upward, then deliberately compare downward once.
- Read one serious book about a period harder than yours.
- Write down three things that did not happen to you today.

Most putts do not drop and most jobs are duller than otherwise. It is an old railway journey: delays, sidetracks, smoke, dust and jolts, with the occasional beautiful view and burst of speed. The trick is to be grateful for the ride.

Resources

Questions that recalibrate

- What exactly was I expecting here?
- Where did that expectation come from?
- Who am I comparing myself to?
- What would the bronze medalist notice?
- Is this pain, or is it pain plus refusal?
- What has not happened to me?

Referenced in this session

- When less is more: counterfactual thinking and satisfaction among Olympic medalists. Medvec, Madey and Gilovich, 1995.
- Jenkin Lloyd Jones, on bliss, and on the old-time rail journey.
- *Symphony for the City of the Dead*, M. T. Anderson, for the 1937 arrest quotas.

Reading

- *The How of Happiness*, Sonja Lyubomirsky. What actually moves the number, with the research behind it.
- *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl. The expectations chapter of this course and the meaning chapter of the next one.
- *Bittersweet*, Susan Cain. On sorrow and longing as ordinary rather than as malfunction.
- *Stumbling on Happiness*, Daniel Gilbert. Why we are so bad at predicting what will make us happy, which is the engine under all of this.

Theme: adversity. From my course *Life's Obstacles*. The companion sessions are on mindset, preparation, and finding meaning.