



UNCOMFORTABLE GROWTH

Own your **reinvention**

 Rowena Millward

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Published by Rowena Millward

First published in 2022 in Sydney, Australia

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<https://www.macmorgan.co/rowena>

Melbourne, Victoria

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Edited by Jenny Magee

Typeset and printed in Australia by Golden Earth Publishing

ISBN: (paperback) 978-0-6454731-0-0

ISBN: (ebook) 978-0-6454731-1-7

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Dedication

This book is for my family, who have taught me more about myself than they will ever know.

David, my husband, who gives me love, inspiration and honesty to stretch and grow. It's a crazy adventure and one I always want to be on with you.

Charley, my thoughtful child, with great depth and feeling, thrust into a life challenge at the tender age of 14. You, my darling, have the knowledge and strength to change shape and grow throughout life. Nothing will stop your brilliance from shining through.

Roxy, my sunshine child, who sits in the lap of life with such natural happiness and acceptance. Your openness, fun and creativity will always open new windows when a door naturally closes.

I can't wait to see what we will all become.

Introduction

I had a long list of hobbies as a child and teenager, from learning guitar to swimming, dancing, and gymnastics. I loved trying new things, seeing what sparked joy, and figuring out what I was good at. A bit more of this, a bit less of that. My mother was the crazy woman in the blue car who drove me to all these different hobbies every day of the week. Our neighbour Ray even had a racing flag that he would drop as she sped up and down the street, taking me to various activities.

Fast forward into university, with more new experiences, and then into my twenties. My first serious boyfriend. My first professional job. My first marriage. My first divorce. My first house. My first promotion. My first international business trip. My first true love.

Some of these firsts were really hard, but most were rewarding and exhilarating. Stimulus and growth came from the trajectory of life. I followed (and loved) the unwritten 'this is what you do in your 20s' rulebook, which no one can give you, but everyone quotes from.

My thirties started with a huge bang as my husband David and I moved to the USA with my job. The same company (Johnson and Johnson) but a brand new city with brand new people, house, food, weather, culture, weekend getaways, friends, job, supermarkets – even grocery brands. When you come from a city as beautiful as Sydney, you quickly learn that enjoying living overseas means celebrating what is different.

My thirties continued with a roller coaster of new experiences, this time exhilarating and deeply challenging. First pregnancy. First baby. First major health scare. First time in hospital for chemotherapy. First time fighting for my life. First time surviving a life-threatening disease. First time realising I'm not invincible. First time moving home to Sydney and feeling out of place. It was like a dream. Friends and family are there, and they are similar, but you are different.

This was the first time I had faced significant challenges. Holding a newborn baby while being diagnosed with cancer changes your world – and your husband’s world. You question your perspective and your identity. This was not in my life rule book, and it made me feel uncomfortable, sad, angry, broken and scared. I wanted to get back to the way things were, back to the good life.

Despite this major bump, the universe was generous (I fully recovered from cancer) and still poured opportunities at my feet. New job roles back in Australia, a second baby, and another move overseas. This time to a resort apartment lifestyle in Singapore. Only this time, slightly less excitement at being in a different country. Now a job role with high travel. New countries, colleagues, and food (I loved that bit!). New knowledge of global time zones to fit the new family life stage (especially with Dora the Explorer and The Wiggles). Another job change for David and a move back to Sydney. New house renovation. New school for Charley and Roxy. New puppy.

It was still exciting, but the magic was waning slightly. I knew the ropes, though, having done so many new things over the previous decades. I had never been busier, juggling family, travel, and a demanding corporate role while (hopefully) still being a loving wife, mother, daughter and friend.

Then it all crashed with a job redundancy. Without realising it, my primary source of new experiences stopped. While it was no longer new and exciting, work was my still source of quick fix growth. Suddenly that drug was withdrawn, and an unexpected wave of emotions followed.

Deep fear. What would happen to my career? What if I couldn’t get another job? What if I was stuck at home packing and unpacking the dishwasher and slowly going crazy? What if I had peaked, and now it was all downhill?

Anger. How dare they. After sixteen years of loyal and committed employment. Yes, they had facilitated so many new and incredible

opportunities, but I also gave everything: commitment, talent and time (way more than forty hours a week). I had prioritised them over other parts of my life, so in my mind, we were dead even. And yet, in a blink, I was no longer needed. I realised I had been acting as though this was my limousine, only to find out I was just a passenger, and the ride had ended. They told me to get out and then sped off.

Looking back, this was my crash. Harder than cancer, it was a different kind of fear. Cancer wasn't my fault, but somehow redundancy felt a lot like failure. Now the hard questions began. Who would I be? Where would I go?

Suddenly I had to stop and reflect. To be honest.

I experienced how irrational and deeply paralysing fear can be. Not because it is real, but because it grows in our heads, and suddenly we believe it. It lives in our minds and affects everything. It makes us feel and act small. Fear feeds and grows unless we develop the skills to befriend it and move forward together.

Until then, I had assumed I could control my life. I had made big decisions, and they had generally delivered what I wanted. Now, everything felt out of control, and all I could manage was my next steps, my response.

I had followed the unspoken life rule book, but now I had to figure out the next chapter and take ownership of it. Did I want to do more of the same or decide what I could contribute and become? It required thinking through what I wanted across different parts of my life and consciously making decisions. Where did my career fit with my family? What excited and sparked joy for me? What about giving back and helping others?

Most importantly, I had to work out how to own my growth, at any age, in any context. I would never be a passenger again. I was going to get my own licence and my own damned limousine!

It's true that life is not easy. The older I get, the more I see that life's highs are more beautiful because of the lows. The reality of that

pendulum is rarely externally visible. The seeds for new growth come from knowing our smallest selves. The one we keep hidden. The one that keeps you awake until three in the morning. We become vulnerable and honest. We stop drinking the 'success is a bigger job/house/holiday' Kool-aid and figure out why we are doing this. What is happiness to me? What is my currency of value? How do I create that? How do I create new possibilities? How do I dig myself out when I'm in a hole?

Growth is being more tomorrow than you are today. Getting there requires embracing uncertainty. You have to be intentional and uncomfortable and learn how to combine your outer self with your inner self. This invisible work takes honesty, vulnerability, persistence, courage and commitment.

In business, we constantly talk about vision, transformation and pivoting. The end point is always clear (usually a business target required for shareholder return), while how to get there is not! That tension drives everyday work.

With this book, I'm doing it in reverse but starting with the how. Because the end point isn't defined, we are all bundles of unlimited potential. If you own your growth, you automatically unlock your potential and expand your life - on your terms. How you grow matters.

Your path through the book is in four parts, represented in the following Uncomfortable Growth Journey.

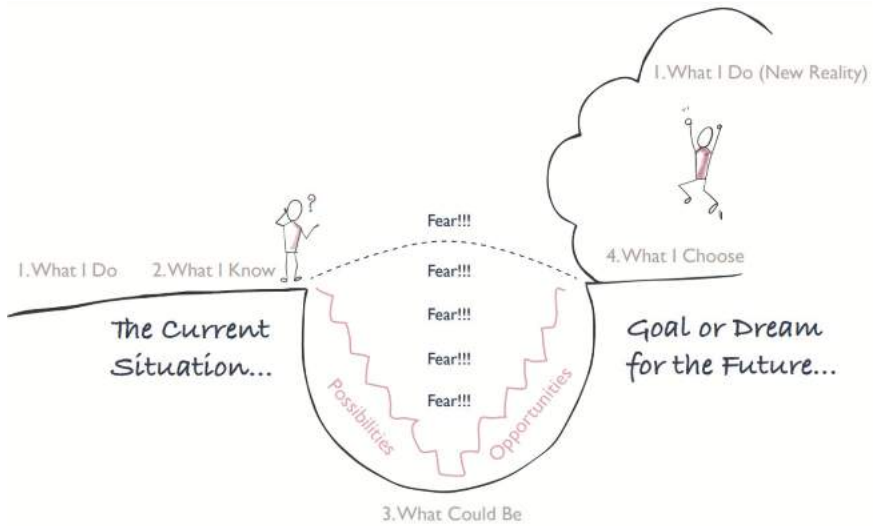


Figure 1: The Uncomfortable Growth Journey

Part One: What I Do. It is hard to articulate our life purpose, but we can all say what we do. Are you a teacher, an entrepreneur or a doctor? Are you a parent, a daughter or a mentor? More importantly, how does what you do match with how you feel? Does it bring meaning? Is it what you want? Part One is about recognising where you are at now and understanding how you are wired to grow.

Part Two: What I Know. We carry our knowledge and experience intrinsically, so we forget to reflect and appreciate what we know. We think everyone knows what we do. But they don't. Part Two is about appreciating what you know, what it means, and why it makes you unique.

Part Three: What Could Be. Even with a vision and a desire to move forward, we may not know how to do so – especially when it's easy to dwell on what we have to lose. Security. Esteem. Reputation. Part Three is about changing your relationship with uncertainty and fear, and creating the life you want.

Part Four: What I Choose. This final section teaches the Uncomfortable Growth formula, enabling you to embrace new possibilities, opportunities and choices. Understanding the motivation behind our decisions and knowing they are not set in stone gives us the courage and confidence to commit. We recognise that we can (and likely will) re-route. After all, the journey is often more important than the destination.

So here we are. You are the driver, and this is your road trip. Shall we start the car?

Part One

What I Do

'Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, "Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?" Actually, who are you not to be?'

– Marianne Williamson.

Chapter One

How Did I Get Here?

One day, you wake up and find you are middle-aged.

It certainly didn't happen overnight – it took many years. In your twenties and thirties, the decades stretched before you, unwritten and unfilled. Life was still in the beginning stages, with many new things to do – so many first times and so much to discover. You were in the first act, and there was no reason to think about the end.

Then suddenly, you realise you are somewhere in the middle. If your life was a play, then it's the interval where everyone gets to stop, stretch their legs, buy ice cream and reflect on the first part. What has unfolded, who is the hero, where is the tension, and what will happen in the second half?

“Plays and movies are a complete story, with the second half a continuation of the first.”

Plays and movies are a complete story, with the second half a continuation of the first. The story arc needs to unfold fully, and our minds and emotions crave a resolution before the end. We want to see how it makes sense. Was there a purpose to the tension? Was it all worth it? Does the boy get the girl? Does the hero win over evil? Does the world escape being taken over by aliens? Does the family scattered through tragedy finally find each other?

Of course, they do! That's part of what makes a play or movie enjoyable. Everything is neatly tied up, affirming that those hours were well spent as good triumphs over evil. We have all experienced those scary emotions and challenging circumstances, but it comes back to a happy ending within ninety minutes – from the safety of our seats. The resolution is complete. The uncertainty is gone.

Yet is life really like this? Does the first half of your life story determine your second half? Does the same story continue to unfold, or can you write a new one? Is there any guarantee of a happy ending?

“There is a reason that mid-life crises are so well recognised.”

There is a reason that mid-life crises are so well recognised. They are when people stop and realise that they are past the first act, and they no longer like the story. Something needs to change.

The big question, then, is what might your story become? Will it be a continuation of the first half, or will an entirely new twist change your trajectory? Will an unexpected event keep everyone guessing, or will there be a soft resolution of something already started?

Let's think about this.

By middle age, you have life experience – you have known great joys and complex challenges.

There are joys in finding love, having a family, and building a career. You learn more about yourself, know what you believe and what matters, and enjoy what life offers through your passions. It could be travelling, reading, gardening or spending time with friends and learning what brings out your best by understanding your strengths, your work and your family.

While there are wonderful highs, there are also lows. You know it's not always rainbows. The boy doesn't always get the girl. Good doesn't always triumph over evil – the dice of life fall in ways that we can't control or predict. Inherently we try to put the odds in our favour, and sometimes we think we are succeeding. We build security by working hard in our jobs, caring for our children, building a home, being good people. But then calamity hits, and we recognise that we are not in control. Someone leaves. Your job is made redundant. There is a serious health concern. You have a fight with your family. Your father dies. A pandemic happens.

Perhaps you have so much, yet you still feel stuck and unfulfilled.

*“In middle age, you suddenly know
that life is short.”*

Just like being on holiday, our early years had an almost endless quality. We had decades to live, and the end was not a consideration. It was so far off that it felt unreal. As we age, the reality is slightly different. More than half my life may have passed. Am I making the most of it? What do I really want? Will my life continue more or less as is, or is there something more for me to do? What could that look like, and how do I make that happen? Is there a new plot twist still to unfold?

Middle age reminds you that you can't control life. It's one of the hardest lessons to learn.

Of course, we can influence and skew things in our favour. I teach my children to clean their teeth to prevent fillings. Going to university increases your chances of getting a higher paid job. Saving money increases your likelihood of buying the home you want. These decisions can influence outcomes but not control them. You can still

have issues with your teeth, lose your job and miss out on that house. The only things we can control are our choices at any given moment.

*“Don’t wait to see what happens –
make things happen.”*

It's not that you should give up and be at the mercy of what life throws at you – quite the opposite. This is saying that much of life will happen beyond your control, so make conscious choices and decisions along the way. Go after what you want. Don't wait to see what happens – make things happen. You can't control life, but you can definitely influence it. Just know that the story that ultimately unfolds will likely not be the accurate spreadsheet you put together. There will be curveballs. The question is whether you wait for them to hit you or whether you throw some yourself.

So here we are, and this is what we have learnt in the first act:

Life has both great joys and tough challenges.

Life is short.

You can't control life, but you can influence it.

So, where does this leave your life story? Will you change anything for the second act?

It's a tough question – and one that most people duck. Why? I think there are three reasons.

1. We follow the stories around us.
2. We don't take time to explore what we want.
3. We are scared to fail, so we don't take action.

Let me explain these in more detail.

We follow the stories around us

We are surrounded by stories. Each person has their own. Yet most of us spend time with people like us, not a diverse mix of the eight billion people in the world. We mix with people in the same country and even the same city. The same work industry, hobbies, community, family and friends. While these may have some variation over time, it's a narrow band. Very few people move from Sydney (where I live) to a tribe in Africa or a village in India.

As a result, societal norms play a huge role in defining what is normal and what is next. You do what you do because everyone else you know is doing it too. The same story arc is playing out all around, so it becomes your story as well.

Think about your societal norm story – the one which most of the people you know follow. Mine goes like this: Finish school and education. Get a job. Fall in love. Build your career. Get married. Buy a home. Have a family. Juggle kids, careers and life. Travel. Support your kids to become adults. Plan for retirement. Retire. Become grandparents. Enjoy hobbies. Die.

Of course, there are variations, highs and lows and unexpected turns along the way. There could be a career change, moving to live overseas, a divorce, a health issue, a family fallout, an inheritance and more. Yet the story arc is similar. It's how the people around me live their lives, so it's normal. I feel compelled to follow the pattern because it's everywhere.

The story and conditioning are continually reinforced. Think about what your parents told you and the role modelling they provided. Consider the role of social media, which shows thousands of your friends doing the same. These constant reminders explain why there is so much comparison in society. We benchmark ourselves against those living similar lives and focus on the differences. We do it with big things and small. Who has the better job, house, car, holiday, or family? Who has the better looks, figure, clothes, handbag, or followers? While

the detail of this changes with age, it is a continual part of life and is why we don't spend much time figuring out what we really want. We act as if the storyline is already written. Who are we to *write* a different story? Who are we to want a story that is different?

“Who are we to want a story that is different?”

I am not saying this is wrong – only that we are so conditioned to follow what is around us that we don't even notice it.

We rarely explore what we want

With life laid out before us, we don't take time to explore what else we might want.

That's because we believe the answer is already written. Look at what everyone else is doing! Why should I want anything different? Everyone can't be wrong! It's a reminder that we are conditioned not to explore or question.

When we do, it is usually within a limited framework. We choose within a set menu. You can order from five entrees, eight mains and four desserts. Isn't that how we explore what we want? What do you want to study at university? Who will you marry? How many children do you want? Which suburb will you live in?

A conventional life is not wrong, but it doesn't help us understand what we truly want and figuring it out is not something you can answer in an afternoon. It takes reflection, consideration, experimentation and a commitment to listening to what you think and want, rather than accepting what is given.

Think about the last time you explored this question. Was it a passing thought dismissed while busy with other things? Perhaps there was a

catalyst; you were unhappy at your job and wondered what you might do next. Or maybe it's a thought that keeps crossing your mind, but you are unsure where to start, so it gets pushed aside. Sometimes it's easier to stay where you are than explore the unknown.

We become good at what we practice over time. Malcolm Gladwell has written extensively about ten thousand hours as the time required to become an expert at something.¹ Unless we invest time and effort in knowing ourselves and understanding what we truly want, we won't be able to pull the answer out of the air.

What we want is not set in stone; it evolves as we change and grow. We learn from our past and cumulative experiences. Unless you consistently ask 'What do I want?', you won't know. What I wanted in my twenties and thirties was different from my forties. I need to explore what is important to me now and see that it's okay for this to evolve and change. I was born to grow.

“Know yourself to grow yourself.”

A key concept of this book is to know yourself to grow yourself. Knowing is not instant. Humans are complex, and it takes work.

We are scared to fail, so we don't take action

Stepping outside norms is frightening. Our brains are wired to avoid danger and uncertainty, so the unknown sets off alarm bells. Suddenly all these fear-based questions leap into our heads. What if it doesn't work? What if I lose what I have worked so hard to gain? What if it's not actually what I want after all? What will people think?

These questions cause us to pause and become excuses not to act.

'What if' is a powerful phrase, as it can quickly lead to new opportunities. What if my presentation at work goes really well? What if this small decision is the start of something amazing? Yet fear means

we more often project the downsides. What if it goes wrong? What if I look stupid? What if I get hurt? What if I lose?

'What if I fail?' is at the core of every romantic comedy. We see it painfully in the characters as they want to get together yet are afraid. What if he doesn't like me? What if she doesn't like me? What if this ends up ruining our friendship? What if? What if? What if? We have even learnt to see this as comedic – as fear and awkwardness makes the characters more human. We agonise when they don't act while secretly encouraging them to take a chance. Then, of course, we cheer when they finally realise they are in love.

Unfortunately, real life is not a rom-com with a happy ending. The cost of being afraid and not acting is high.

“When we let fear create inaction, it becomes a habit.”

Fear doesn't just impact the big things like relationships – it's the small things too. When we let fear create inaction, it becomes a habit. We don't speak up in front of people. Or write a blog. Or go back to university. Or tell a friend you think they are wrong. Small things ultimately make up big things. Shying away from the small things becomes a learned behaviour and means we don't take chances on the bigger things.

But you might be wondering, 'What if I really do fail?' What if I end up taking that new job and hate it? What if I ask him on a date and he says no? Sure, that can happen, but most people discover that fear is far worse than reality. You look for a new job. You ask someone else out on a date. You change it up again.

“You learn that it’s not the end of the world and that you can handle it.”

More importantly, you learn that it’s not the end of the world and that you can handle it.

It gives you faith that you’ve got this. Think about how we teach young children. When they try to walk, we have to let them fall to learn. My daughter Charley was upset about a school exam mark as she had misread a question and received lower marks than expected. So we discussed her exam techniques – why it’s important to reread the question, even when you are under time pressure. That Science is more fact-based with shorter answers, while English or History want to hear your perspective and reward longer answers. She didn’t fail her test. She learnt valuable information about exam techniques that will help with every future exam.

We fear failure and avoid it, yet we learn most when things don’t succeed as planned. We discover we are resilient and can handle whatever life throws at us. Acting through fear and discomfort helps us grow and become more. Yet knowing and taking action are quite different. You have to be willing to consciously push through the tough stuff. You need to be ready.

Are you?



Time to reflect

What is the story of your life?

- Is there a story you feel expected to follow?
- Is it the story you want?
- If you could create any story for your life, what would it be?

Have you explored what you really want?

- Have you ever thought deeply about this question?
- Do you ask this question regularly?
- Do you talk about it with those closest to you?

Has fear ever held you back from taking action?

- Do you currently love your life?
- If you could wave a magic wand, would you change anything?
- What is your dream for the future?
- Have you taken any action to make it happen?

About the Author



Rowena Millward is an expert in growth and reinvention – for businesses and people.

After twenty-five years working in Top 500 companies, she now provides consulting and capability services for many of the world's most admired brands and companies. Rowena also provides executive career and life coaching, helping leaders navigate crossroads to turn personal trials into learning and new growth.

Uncomfortable Growth was born during the COVID-19 pandemic when even highly successful leaders began to question what they really wanted. Unable to find an approach which integrated leadership, neuroscience and psychology with practical application to work and life, Rowena developed Uncomfortable Growth. With insightful frameworks and deeply personal examples spanning Rowena's career, relationships, motherhood and cancer, Uncomfortable Growth is a blueprint for executive leaders looking to uncover who they are, what they really want and how to make it happen.

Uncomfortable Growth is Rowena's second book, having launched *Insights to Enlighten – for living, leading and marketing* in 2021, which became an Amazon best-seller in Business Communication and Brand Management.

When she is not inspiring and empowering growth in others, Rowena loves to escape to Pearl Beach on the Central Coast in NSW (her happy place) and spend time with her husband and two daughters swimming, laughing and dreaming of what comes next.

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'Rowena is an inspirational leader and an exceptional human being, and her book is incredibly motivational, practical and relevant.'

Aruna Natarajan - President

'Uncomfortable Growth' acknowledges that behind success is first fear. With imposter syndrome rife, this is a book the corporate world desperately needs.'

Pete Hurley - General Manager

'Uncomfortable Growth' shares a beautiful story that guides leaders on how to keep growing from the inside out.'

Angela Burr – General Manager Marketing

'Rowena is an expert at helping leaders navigate life's crossroads.'

Dan Gregory, Co-Founder, the Behaviour Report

'Rowena's writing combines striking simplicity with sophistication and deep insight, which you can apply on an everyday basis.'

Prashant Kumar, CEO and Founder

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