



Getting Unstuck

A Story

by

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The *Empowered by Choice* Series

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The jangling of the bells over the front door of the Black Velvet signaled another customer coming or going, reminding me of the wind chimes from my childhood front porch.

The scent of freshly brewed coffee, soft sounds of instrumental jazz, and the low-drone chatter of the patrons had enveloped me in familiarity from the moment I walked in.

I caught Jim's eye as he came in and gave him a wave. Jim replied with a nod towards the counter.

I blew on the steaming mug of dark roast in front of me before sipping. Settling deeper into the leather-backed corner booth near the back, I pondered how I would approach this with my friend.

Jim came bounding over, a mug in one hand and a small dessert plate in the other. Once he set them down I extended my hand in greeting, which, as usual, Jim ignored. With resignation, I maneuvered my heavy frame up from the booth to receive the Jim's ritual hug.

"Good to see you my friend," Jim said, holding me with his ever-present penetrating gaze.

Did he notice the dark lines under my eyes? "You too. Thanks for coming on short notice, it's not our usual day or place," I said haltingly.

"I always appreciate seeing you, and glad you finally decided to check out Black Velvet. What's your medicine?" Jim said, pointing to my mug.

"As dark and potent as I could get—an Ethiopian espresso blend. Dessert?" I asked, indicating the piece of chocolate on his plate.

"Made with raw cacao, which has been used as medicine for centuries. I like a piece once in a while," Jim replied with a wink. His face turned serious. "You look tired," he stated. "Not sleeping well?"

With a shake of my head, I replied, "Not for a while. Lots on my mind."

I watched Jim stir his own cup of dark liquid, adding a hint of frothy cream. My attention wandered to the photos on the wall depicting the evolution of roasted coffee.

Jim said, "It's believed an Ethiopian Shepard was the first to discover roasting coffee beans in the mid-twelfth century; although, both the Arabs and Turks would claim otherwise. That one there," he said, gesturing towards a photo showing a woman in heavy garb, stirring beans in a metal pan over an open fire, "depicts traditional roasting, which Black Velvet does its best to honor. They have a wood-fired stove in the kitchen, and roast the beans by hand. Time consuming, and expensive, but the results—"

"Tasty for sure, I said, "but it's no Tim Hortons."

“Thank goodness for alternatives,” said Jim, sipping the black nectar. “My opinion, everyone is entitled to their own.” Folding his fingers around his cup he asked, “You seem out of sorts. Something on your mind?”

I ignored the tightening in my chest and blurted, “I’ve been thinking, wondering actually, how you turned your life around. You seem—I don’t know—healthy and happy?”

“You mean since the heart attack a few years back?”

I raised a thumb skywards. “You seem completely different.”

“A crisis will do that. Not that I recommend that approach.”

Leaning forward, I clasped my mug. “Tell me about what changed. How did you do it?”

“I took a hard look at my lifestyle; what was working and what wasn’t. I asked myself what I might regret on my deathbed. What I discovered,” Jim said in between sips, “was that I was slowly dying - instead of living.”

“But we all die.”

“We all experience life and death. But how many of us are living, and how many of us are dying?”

“I’m confused,” I said with a shake of my head. *I had a feeling this wasn’t going to be easy.*

“I’ll just talk about me. I was going through the motions, unfulfilled in my career, my marriage, and with myself. I had dreams I had put to the side because I believed they weren’t practical. I got caught up in the game most people play: get married, buy a house, have a career, and then drank too much and ate too much—”

“So the heart attack woke you up?”

“It presented an opportunity for reflection. After that I decided to make changes. My marriage had been spiraling downwards for years, neither of us in a good place. No one’s fault. We were on different paths, I wanted to travel, pursue writing, simplify my lifestyle, and work less. She liked things the way they were, and that’s okay. I started working part-time online, took writing classes, and got a small apartment. Once I was healthy enough I started to travel.”

“That must have been a lot to go through,” I said, forcing my shoulders to relax.

“It wasn’t easy, but I took it one step at a time. I was determined. I changed my eating habits, exercised more, and focused on my overall health. I wasn’t ready to check out.”

“Living instead of dying . . . I get it.”

Jim enquired, “Why are you asking me now?”

Leaning back against the bench seat, I cast a glance around the bustling room. Finally meeting Jim's eyes, I mumbled, "I feel stuck."

"What do you mean?"

Running a hand through my ever-thinning salt and pepper hair, I heard myself say, "It's hard to say exactly, in a funk, and can't seem to get out of it."

"Is it the job? Your marriage?"

"Both, and more," I said, moving my arms like an orchestra conductor. "Everything," I said emphatically, leaning forward resting my elbows on the table. "I'm antsy, edgy, and frustrated. I am almost fifty, and what do I have to show for it? A pension when I'm sixty-five? A house I'm still paying for? Three-weeks vacation? My Doc says my blood pressure is sky-high, and I'm at risk for a heart attack and diabetes. Is there all there is?" I implored, shaking my head.

"You're not alone," replied Jim. "It's quite common for men to ask this as life passes by, never realizing their dreams, and getting worn down physically, emotionally, and mentally. A life of, 'if only' . . ."

"Exactly! And my boss is a prick. Brenda wants things her way. My job sucks. My investments are struggling. The government is screwing the economy. And every time I turn around the world is going bat-shit crazy."

Jim took a deep breath, and said quietly, "Bill, I'm going to be blunt. It sounds like you have a serious case of victimhood."

I felt like I'd been punched. "Excuse me, buddy?"

"You sound exactly like me a few years ago, where everybody and everything was to blame for my situation: work, marriage, the bank, the shitty drivers on the commute, blah blah blah . . . I thought my failing health and unhappiness were a result of what was happening *to* me."

"Geez Jim. You make it sound like we have control over what happens to us when we don't," I said, throwing my arms in the air.

Jim's head tilted slightly. "You said you're in a rut. Are you willing to hear me out?"

I looked to the front door as the chimes dinged. "I guess that's why I asked you here."

Jim nodded once, and said, "I'm going to ask you a few questions and I want you to be honest, what ever you say will be held in confidence. Agreed?"

"Why not?" I replied, my sense of dread increasing. *Here it comes.*

Jim settled back, the soft leather gently creaking. "I'm going to walk you through a process I used. The first question to ask is, what's your vision? If you could be doing anything you wanted, what would it be? What would your life look like?"

“Get right to it why don’t you,” I said, half-jokingly. “Anything?”

“Yes.”

“All right. I’d work part-time, collect gemstones and crystals, and work with kids— summer camps, and Special Olympics.”

“And your relationship with Brenda?”

“Well, I would still want to be with Brenda, but it would be different.”

“How so?”

I paused, taking a deep breath in then out. Looking into my half-filled mug, I said, “We would be more honest, spend more time on our own interests, and I wouldn’t be such a ‘yes’ man—always trying to make her happy and avoiding conflict.”

“Anything else?” Jim enquired.

“I’d also lose some weight,” I joked, both hands clutching the spare tire around my middle.

“What would those things *do* for you?”

“Good question,” I replied, rubbing my chin. “I’d be happier, more content, and healthier.”

Jim leaned in, and said, “You have an idea of what you’d like your life to be, and what it would *do* for you. Now, give me the rundown of how you currently spend your days.”

“It’s not pretty,” I said with a hitch to my voice. “Two hours a day commuting and eight to ten hours at the office, TV with a couple of beers at night . . . Then go to bed and do it all over.”

“Weekends?”

The words came out in a huff, “Chores, grocery shopping, maybe a night out to a movie or spent with friends.”

“What about free time?”

“When I have it: YouTube, watch sports, social media, game a bit, watch some porn—you know all the usual guy stuff,” I added forcing a smile, while shifting in my seat.

Jim's face remained stoic. “And what do those behaviors do for you—gaming, Internet, porn, TV, and drinking?”

“Do *for* me? Well . . . they take my mind off my shit-show life.”

“And how long does the feeling of escape last?”

I strummed my fingers on the table. “Until I stop doing them,” I said, my words hanging in the air.

“So they are a temporary distraction,” Jim said, holding my gaze.

Barely above a whisper I replied, “I guess so.”

Jim said nothing for a few moments, then continued. “You have a vision and a snapshot of your day-to-day life,” he said, licking his fingers, “now tell me what the blockages are. What is stopping you from moving towards your vision?”

“That’s easy: money, debt, time, and commitments. There’s no money in gemstones—unless you hit the big one—or working with kids.”

“And your relationship with Brenda?”

It felt my entire body sink further into the leather bench, ensnaring me. “Habit. We’ve developed a routine of how we get along.”

“Let me paraphrase what I’ve heard. You’re feeling stuck because of a lack of time and money—the amount you owe and there’s little money in what you’d like to do—and because your relationship with Brenda has developed into what it is, and you’re unwilling to talk to her about it.”

“I didn’t say that!”

“Have you talked to her?”

“No, not really,” I stammered.

“It’s okay,” said Jim holding up a hand. “Let’s come back to that in a minute. So are you clear on your vision, current state, and roadblocks?”

“Sure. But I feel more stuck than ever. How is this helping?” I argued, throwing my hands up.

“Think of it like this. You’re the Captain of your boat, about to go out to sea but you don’t know where you’re going. How do you know which route to take or, when you’ve arrived?”

“Well that’s bullshit. No one does that.”

“True, not in a boat, but what if you consider *life* as the voyage? How many people are living without a clear vision of where they want to go, and how to get there?”

“Most people are living to retire, or hoping to retire is more like it.”

“And then?” asked Jim.

“Then we do the things we’ve always wanted to.”

“And what happens while they work to get there—if they get there?”

This is beginning to piss me off. “Drudgery,” I sputtered, “getting through the day. Stress.”

“So the question is, how motivated are you to change your life voyage towards your vision?”

I moved my attention to my coffee, stirred it once, engaged in the swirling whirlpool.

Jim didn't let up. “Let me ask another way. Do you want to keep living like this?”

I forced myself to look up. *Oh, shit.* Under my breath, I said, “The pain of staying the same versus the pain of change.”

“Yes.”

“I'm getting to that state or I wouldn't be talking to you. But I don't see a way out of this.”

“One step at a time Bill.”

“What do you mean?”

Holding up a finger, Jim said, “One, small, step at a time. What small steps could you take today, tomorrow, and the day after, which would move you towards your vision? Lets take working with kids. What step could you take right away?”

“I'm not sure what you mean.”

“What are the prerequisites to helping with kids in the way you envision?”

“I need first aid certification, a police check—”

“Can you start there?”

“Yeah.”

“What else?”

“Make some contacts, call some people, go to a couple of events, and introduce myself.”

“Perfect. Can you commit to that? Not to me, but to yourself. I can follow up with you if you'd like, but it's your life, and your choices.”

“But where will I find the time and money?” *Damn, I hate when I whine.*

“How much time would it take, and what can you *trade* for the time needed?”

“What am I willing to give up?”

“Exactly.”

A rush of air escaped my lungs. Folding my hands behind my head, I looked up at the crossbeam ceiling. “I could make time on the weekend, on my lunch hour, or evenings, instead of cruising the net or gaming.”

“Can you see how this works? You need to take time from less important things you're doing to put towards your vision. You need to make your vision a priority.”

Clenching my hands I demanded, “What about my waistline, gemstones, and Brenda? How can I make all these changes? It seems like too much.”

Jim’s voice stayed calm and even. “Start small. Don’t try and change everything in your life overnight. What manageable steps could you take in those areas?”

My fingers encircled my almost empty cup. “Lets see . . . There’s a gym at the office. I could work out at lunch hours, come in early, or join a running group in the evenings. There are Continuing-Ed classes for gemstone study, and probably local or Internet interest groups.”

“Sure. And Brenda?”

“Tell her how I’m feeling?”

“Like you’re telling me. If you don’t say anything, how will she know what you’re going through? Perhaps you could start the conversation by sharing the actions you’re planning to take.”

“Something like, ‘I’ve always wanted to help out with Special Olympics, so I’ve decided to get started?’”

“Who knows, maybe she’ll surprise you and be supportive, or interested herself?”

“If not?”

“If nothing else, she’ll have a better understanding of how you’re feeling, and perhaps it will lead to a larger conversation between you about priorities and vision. Also,” Jim added, leaning forward, “it’s important to surround yourself with others who share your vision in some aspect. It helps with motivation and enthusiasm.”

“That sounds good in theory, but shit Jim, seems it will be damn uncomfortable, and a lot of work and ‘what-ifs’.”

“Change is uncomfortable. Taking risk is challenging, and not for the faint of heart. Growth comes from change and challenge. But hanging around in comfort and security leads to stagnation and decay.”

“What about money?”

“What about it?” Jim asked, finishing his dessert.

“How do I transition from my career to having more time, and enough money, to achieve my vision?”

“You embrace uncertainty.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

Jim put his palms up. “Hear me out. As you take steps in your spare time towards your goals, you might be surprised at the opportunities that come your way. In the meantime, what alternative ways are there to deal with money concerns?”

I absently stroked the stubble on my chin while my eyes searched the room for answers. Grudgingly, I said, “I could look into cutting back expenses and pay off the debt faster. There are a couple of different jobs I’ve been considering—one might allow me to work from home instead, cutting out that two-hour commute—which would create more useable time in my day.”

“And who knows what else will come to you as you start the process. The key is to always move towards the vision, one step at a time.”

“It’s going to take forever.”

“Practice, patience, and persistence my friend,” added Jim, placing a hand on my forearm. “Think of how long it’s taken you to get to this state. It will take time and effort to transition. Celebrate every success—no matter how small—that takes you closer to your vision. Each success will build your motivation and inspiration for the next step along the path up the mountain. Living at the bottom of the mountain is easy—it’s known and comfortable—like beer, social media, TV, and getting caught up in the daily grind.”

Over the lip of his cup, Jim added, “Look at me. Took me years to get to where I am today. But nothing would have changed if I didn’t take action. I would have continued living the way I’d always lived. Same routine. Same results. Same village at the bottom of the mountain.”

“You don’t make the bottom of the mountain seem attractive, more like an addiction.”

“In a way it is. It takes courage to break out of the known and comfortable and to take risks.”

“The devil you know . . .” I said quietly, draining the dregs from my mug.

Jim moved his head in agreement. “We’ll never get to see what’s over the mountain without taking a step. With every decision I ask: *‘Will this choice move me toward or away from my vision?’*”

My palms slapped to the table and I blurted, “So that’s why having a clear picture of where I want to go is important!”

Jim’s voice quickened. “Know where you are. Know where you want to go. Know what your roadblocks are. Make an action plan to implement change. Be committed to a life of no regrets. When we take responsibility for our life, we become empowered.”

Crossing my arms, I leaned back against the leather bench. “I appreciate it Jim. I’m going to need a few days to mull this over. But for now, can I thank you with another coffee?”

“More Black Velvet? Absolutely.”

Bill's story is not unique. I've met many men (and been one myself) who have felt 'stuck', unsure how to break free of the cycle of frustration and hopelessness. Jim suggests a common sense approach to getting unstuck and breaking the cycle.

Here is an overview of the process:

1. **Review** what's working and what's not.
2. **Get clear** on your vision - if you could be doing anything you wanted, what would it be, and what would your life look like?
3. **Define** - what would that vision 'do for you'?
4. **Take an inventory** of how you spend your time, what your current priorities are, and what those behaviors and activities 'do for you'.
5. **Identify roadblocks** that are preventing you from moving towards your vision.
6. **Check your motivation** to move towards your vision. *Do you want to keep living like this? Is the pain of staying the same outweighing the pain of change?*
7. **Take Action** - make your vision a priority.
 - Identify small, actionable steps to take towards daily, weekly, and monthly goals.
 - Identify activities and behaviors to be replaced or minimized with the actionable steps (what are you willing to give up?).
 - Garner support from those closest to you or find others who will help support your change.
 - Be prepared for uncertainty and challenge (practice, patience, and persistence).
 - Celebrate your successes.
8. **Evaluate** - with every decision, ask, *'Will this choice move me toward or away from my vision'?*

Getting unstuck doesn't happen overnight. It requires long-term dedication in order to reap long-term benefits.

'If you change nothing, nothing will change.'

– Tony Robbins

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