

## How to Overcome Fear & Uncertainty: Jonathan Fields

*Author of Career Renegade: How to Make a Great Living Doing What You Love and Uncertainty: Turning Fear and Doubt into Fuel for Brilliance*

JD Roth: Hey everybody. Once again it's JD Roth and today I am talking to Mr. Jonathan Fields. Jonathan is the author of Career Renegade, he's the author of a book that I really love called Uncertainty, and he's the guiding force behind The Good Life Project, which is a series of video interviews with all sorts of interesting people on a variety of subjects. Hey Jonathan. Thanks for taking the time out to talk with me today.

Jonathan Fields: It's always my pleasure. Good to be hanging out.

JD Roth: Yeah, so to start I'm going to ask you the same thing I ask everybody else. I was hoping you could give us a little bit about your background and what kind of projects you're working on currently.

Jonathan Fields: Yeah sure. It depends on how far back you want me to go but in a distant past I was a hedge fund lawyer and then left that behind after a bit of a medical emergency and an awakening to re-embrace a couple of dual passions of mine, entrepreneurship and sort of the world of wellness and vitality and health and I built a couple of brick and mortar companies, sold them and for the last six or seven years been operating largely online, writing books, speaking, and the about two years ago I started this thing you mentioned called Good Life Project, which is a blend of a media and education company where we're growing in this community around a series of weekly web shows and podcasts and at the same time developing educational programs for people to kind of step into a different approach to entrepreneurship and building a career.

JD Roth: Man, that's awesome so the Good Life Project is more than just the video interviews, which I'm most familiar with. It's also educational material then?

Jonathan Fields: Yeah, there are sort of three legs to the stool. One is media, one is education, and one is community so we actually started with the education, which most people think was backwards and then built the media. The education funds the media and the community is kind of the thing that creates this deep connection and sense of belonging and helps everybody support everybody, which I think is one of the real big missing things.

JD Roth: Sure. Now Jonathan on the face of it talking to you about personal finance and talking to you related to my book about becoming the chief financial officer of your own life, it might seem like sort of a disconnect but to me in my experience almost

all of the problems that people face with money are related to psychology and to a large degree they're related to uncertainty and fear and in fact I say that the fundamental problem in personal finance, the fundamental thing that we're faced with is this uncertainty over when are we going to die. If we knew how long we were going to live we'd be better able to plan. We'd be able to say 'oh, I've only got seven years left so I don't need to save so much for retirement. I could spend money on travel' or you might be able to say 'I've got 70 years left. I should not be spending money on video games. I need to save money because I'm going to live a long time and need some healthcare.' So there's a sense of uncertainty there but there's also a different kind of uncertainty, which is the uncertainty of the fear rather than a not knowing and this is the kind of uncertainty where you don't know whether a job is right for you. You don't know if it's all right for you to make the leap to become an entrepreneur and so on. So one of these I feel like is an uncertainty of having too many choices or incomplete information and another is a kind of uncertainty related to the fear of making the wrong choice. And I guess I'm talking a lot here but I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on the relationship or the experience people have regarding uncertainty and money. Have you come across anything like this in your work?

Jonathan Fields: Yeah, I mean I think it's huge and I think a lot of people use the accumulation of money as a proxy for certainty. You know they're like when I have X dollars in the bank life will become more certain and then I'll be okay. And the trick in that is not...it generally doesn't bear out all that well. Like you said nobody knows when that last step we're going to take or last breath we're going to take on the planet is. I have seen it go into the 90s and I have seen friends my age wake up one morning, go to work, and not come home and there was no warning. So I think there's this really fascinating balance between wanting to live in the present moment and honoring and respecting it and at the same time wanting to plan for the possibility that you may be around for a really long time but you don't know exactly how to do it. But I think fundamentally everyone's trying to lock down the future as much as humanly possible and people look at money as a way to do that.

JD Roth: Right and I think you said something very important and insightful there. I really feel as if personal finance fundamentally is trying to strike a balance between living in the present and planning for the future. We hear a lot about how people don't save enough for retirement and that represents a lack of planning for the future, spending too much time living in the present moment but I also know people who don't spend enough time or money on the present and they're solely focused on the future and I think you're right, you've got to find a balance between the two. Again, it's tough to know what that balance is.

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- Jonathan Fields: Yeah and I think for me part of it is about the metric that you're using you know and a lot of people use as their prime metric for life money.
- JD Roth: You mean it's like keeping score with money or something?
- Jonathan Fields: And it's also like success is about how much you have in the bank. So if you're going to take care of you...the best I can take care...typical dad or typical mother who is a provider for the family, if you feel like your role is to be a provider for the family, well if you ask most people what does that mean they'll be like 'I need to make a certain amount of money' and granted you do need to make a certain amount of money. I live in New York City, I have a family to support; it's not cheap. But at the same time you know if I...if everything is all about defining my role as a provider as providing financial security and that means that I end up working 80 hours a week, seeing my wife and my daughter 1 day a week on the weekends once a month, destroying my health, destroying my state of mind, destroying my dreams and aspirations along the way, really, to what end? So you've got money in the bank so that when you die without your family knowing you the college will be paid for. Who cares? That's not what they want.
- JD Roth: Right and I think this is very important. In the eBook one of the first exercises I have people do is to sit down and craft a mission statement, decide what is their purpose in life, why are they doing this, why are they going to work, why are they earning money, and I feel like once you've identified that then you can make choices with your money and with your career that help support what brings value to your life instead of doing it the other way around.
- Jonathan Fields: Yeah and I think we're on the same page totally there. It's not about extremes. It's not about forget about money; just live in the present. And it's not about forget about the present. It's just being a grown up. Look, I've got responsibilities. I want to put my kid through college, I want to make sure the family's okay but at the same time I want to be there, I want to know them, I want them to know me, and I want to be okay. And I think that's where a lot of the uncertainty comes in also because you just don't know what the future's going to hold for you and this is where...you know Daniel Ellsberg back in 1961 did what's commonly known as the classic Ellsberg paradox where he said the way that economists analyze risk in a vacuum, which is expected return, you know you quantify probability times magnitude, well that works really great in theory but in real life that's not how we live. You can't quantify things like that. There is a level of uncertainty that we just have to live with on a perpetual basis so how do you function and keep making decisions while accepting that?

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JD Roth: You know I feel like one of the fundamental problems people face is often they see success that it would be a good idea to make a change, either to change careers or to start a business or to move to a new city where the cost of living is lower and yet they're unwilling to do so because it's not 100 percent certain that the change will be beneficial. So instead of making the change they stay in something that's not completely...that doesn't make them happy I guess. It's comfortable. They're complacent. And so they just sit there and instead of making a change that might improve their lives they stay with something that's familiar and comfortable.

Jonathan Fields: Yeah and I think you're absolutely right and I think people tend to catastrophize around uncertainty rather than looking at if they're faced with an opportunity and they don't know how it's going to end it creates anxiety and that creates a certain amount of fear, it creates physical unease so people tend to catastrophize the possible outcome and I think we have a negativity bias in our brain because we go immediately to the negative possible outcome and we spin cycle it so that we think that we start to convince ourselves through repetition that that will be the inevitable outcome and it serves the purpose of paralyzing us and backing us away from the uncertain option, which makes us feel better momentarily but long term it can end up being the absolute wrong choice. But let me also share the opposite. So I think it's important to understand that dynamic and understand that anxiety, that uncertainty is something that may be a sign to us that this really matters and you should learn how to be with that rather than run from it but the flipside is something you brought up to, which comes from the famous TS Eliot line, which is you're miserable where you are so then you cross the ocean only to find yourself sitting there with your still miserable self. So sometimes you need to also look inward and say 'is the problem where I am or is the problem who I am?'

JD Roth: I think that's very insightful. So you know looking at people who are stuck in situations where they are complacent and they're afraid or unwilling to make changes or to take risks, what can people do to overcome this type of thinking? Do you have some recommendations for ways that people can become better at taking calculated risks and doing things that are uncertain?

Jonathan Fields: Yeah and I think one of basic techniques is something called reframing. Cognitive therapists call this cognitive reappraisal; it's a fancier word but it's just a matter of a couple of quick steps. When you find yourself thinking about this possible opportunity where there's an uncertain outcome but it could hold a lot of opportunity and the mind starts to default immediately towards that negative bias and catastrophizing and pony away from it, the idea is to dissociate that story line from the actual circumstance and ask yourself, kind of pull the lens back, and say 'okay, is this the only story I can tell about this opportunity or are there possible other stories that I can tell?' So if you find yourself telling the

what if I do this and I fail story that may be a legit possible outcome but then also ask yourself what are the other stories that could be associated with this possibility. And the what if I succeed one is very often the one that we don't tell ourselves so we don't give ourselves the counter story to weigh against the doom and gloom story for our brains to latch onto the potential positive outcomes too. So the reframe is you take a look at that and say okay, this is the circumstance. One possibility is that it doesn't work but what's the other possibility? What's the other story that I can be telling myself about this?

JD Roth: Right, it's looking at the upside instead of looking at the downside and giving yourself at least two possibilities to look at so you can make more of a deliberate choice rather than just defaulting to the primal state of running from something.

JD Roth: Right and you know...so even though I'm known for writing about personal finance and that's what people expect that I'm interested in, what I'm actually interested in is psychology. That's what my background is and moving forward that's what I want to work with and I've been doing a lot of reading and writing about fear, overcoming fear, but also finding happiness and as part of that I've been reading a lot of work on flow. And flow is this state of basically complete absorption where you're so wrapped up in what you're doing that it seems to be just a part of you. Runners experience it as the runner's high. I know when I was programming computers I would often get a state of flow and hours would just pass like minutes. But part of his research reveals a lot of...it's what you were saying earlier. A lot of how we interact with the world, it's not the world affecting us; it's us and how we perceive the world that create our emotions and basically define our experience. And so what I've been moving more and more toward especially when it comes to dealing with uncertainty is changing my situation, the situation is going to give me more opportunities perhaps and what it comes down to is how I respond to the situation, whether it's the current situation or the situation I'm moving into. That's actually the most important thing.

Jonathan Fields: Yeah, I absolutely agree there and there are two really, really powerful skill sets that allow you to respond to any situation of uncertainty with far more equanimity beyond the reframing we were just talking about and those two practices are mindset and movement. I mean meditation and movement are massive resets for your brain. It's not just for your body; it literally rewires your brain and your ability to be in those places where you don't know how it's going to end with far more ease and far more peace and so it gives you the ability to zoom the lens out and tell that positive story and recognize when you're not rather than just spiraling mindlessly into a place of oblivion and I mean those are just some really important practices in my life.

JD Roth: Yeah I know meditation is very important for you and it's something that...you should see my bookshelf over here. I have three books on meditating. I see Mindfulness in plain English right there and it's something that I've wanted to get into. Everyone keeps telling me, my therapist, my girlfriend, my friends, they keep saying 'JD meditation would be perfect for you,' and also learning to breathe. Apparently a lot of my tension comes from the fact that I don't breathe properly and so that's something I need to work on I guess is meditating more.

Jonathan Fields: And you know there are so many different approaches to it. One of my dirty little secrets is I owned a large yoga center and I taught yoga and meditation for years and I always struggled with sitting meditation and I didn't really embrace it as a really consistent daily practice until I was pretty much brought to my knees by health reason and I had to embrace it as a way to come back to being okay.

JD Roth: Huh and for me I find it very difficult to just sit still and meditate because my mind races and races and races; it's the monkey mind phenomena and what I've found is if I'm stressed, if I'm stuck, particularly when I'm stuck, for example working on this particular eBook there have been a couple of times when I've been experiencing writer's block, what I do in order to achieve a sort of meditative state is I go for a long walk. I live next to this trail, I'm looking at it right now, and I can set out and walk into Portland, it's about a four-mile walk, takes me just about an hour and a quarter to get into Portland, and during that time for whatever reason my monkey mind just calms down and I just start...I'm present in the moment and I'm looking at the things around me and just experiencing life and eventually for whatever reason in the back of my mind eventually answers will come. It's as if my stopping the focus on the things I'm trying to solve I'm actually better able to solve them instead of spending so much attention on them.

Jonathan Fields: Yeah. I'm the exact same way actually and I'm really fortunate. In just a couple of blocks from me, odd as it is the Bronx, I live pretty much right along the Hudson River and there's a reserve with a trail and you'll find me in there fairly often, especially when I'm deep into some project and there are three things that happen simultaneously. One is there's a pattern interrupt, two is that you're moving your body and actually controls the release of a chemical called BDNF, which really affects the way that your brain functions, and three you're in nature and there's a really interesting growing body of research about how nature affects mindset and cognitive function so those three things together can be really powerful. I don't know if you've read it but there's a book called Daily Rituals that goes through the daily rituals of about 400 of the world's greatest creators from composers to writers to all of these different people. One of the things that I noticed about it as I started to recognize patterns is that a huge percentage of them went on really long, daily walks, which...and

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they believed that they were absolutely critical to their creative process.

JD Roth: Yeah it can be really tough. I know when I was writing my first book I refused to leave my office and I would just get mired. I would spend eight hours in there and maybe get a few hundred words and I'd go home so miserable and I've learned that no, no, no, if I'm stuck I just need to admit I'm stuck and go do something else and in fact I was having a real tough time with a portion of this particular book that I'm working on now about budgeting and I just couldn't wrap my head about how to present that in terms of being the chief financial officer of your own life even though it seems like it should be obvious. So I went to the gym the other day and I spent two hours lifting weights and low and behold during that process the answer came to me and now I've got the hook and I know where I'm going with it.

Jonathan Fields: Yeah and it's so counterintuitive because if you tell people the fastest way to get the best answers and create the best creative output is to stop working you know for a lot of people that's really counterintuitive and you won't understand how true it is until you actually do it so you have to convince somebody to just try it in order for them to actually experience the truth of it.

JD Roth: Yeah. It's true. So I want to point out to people that I think if they're listening to this conversation they might be going 'what does this have to do with money?' and yet to me this has everything to do with money. In fact when I approached Chris with the idea of writing this particular book, well I guess he approached me, but when I was telling him what my idea for the book would be the first thing I wanted to do was something purely psychological and getting away from the nuts and bolts of personal finance. I wanted to talk about the fear stuff and the happiness stuff and the freedom stuff because I feel like this is actually the roots of how we learn to deal with money and learning to deal with uncertainty, learning to overcome the fear that's associated with some of our decisions and figuring out what makes us happy, these are the things that help us better control our financial lives.

Jonathan Fields: No, absolutely. I couldn't agree with you more.

JD Roth: Well Jonathan I really appreciate the time you've taken to talk with us and again if people want to find the work you're doing what is the best site for people to go to nowadays?

Jonathan Fields: That's a great question.

JD Roth: I just email you so I don't have to go...

Jonathan Fields: Yeah, probably just [GoodLifeProject.com](http://GoodLifeProject.com).

JD Roth: Okay, [GoodLifeProject.com](http://GoodLifeProject.com). All right, thanks very much.

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Jonathan Fields: My pleasure.

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