

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript

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(<https://www.3takeaways.com/>)

Ep. 191: Why Do We Keep Getting Walloped By Black Swan Events? Is The World On The Edge Of Chaos? Tune in.

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Lynn Thoman: I'd like to begin this podcast the same way my guest today begins his book, with a question. And the question is, if you could rewind your life to the very beginning and then press play, would everything turn out the same? For me, the answer is clearly no, it would not turn out the same. Chance events have had a huge effect on my life in ways both big and small.

LT: Here's just one example. The world-changing accident of COVID led directly to this podcast. While quarantining, I was so bored sitting around looking at the walls of my home that I decided it would be interesting to interview interesting people and put the interviews out into the world for other people to listen to.

LT: I didn't know how to make a podcast, but I learned. And pretty soon, I found myself in conversation with some extremely interesting people.

[Eric Schmidt:](#) Can you imagine having a pandemic

LT: Like Eric Schmidt of Google...

[Eric Schmidt:](#) ... without Google, Amazon, and all of the other tech companies and the services they provide?

LT: And Alex Younger, the former head of Britain's spy service MI6.

[Alex Younger:](#) visiting consequences on bullies and war criminals is profoundly satisfying.

LT: And more recently, the doctor and medical writer Atul Gawande.

[Atul Gawande:](#) We have doubled the human lifespan over the course of the last century. Not just for a select minority of the world, but for every person alive.

LT: So just the fact that you're listening to me right now is wholly predicated on at least one chance event. In fact, almost everything in our lives has an element of chance embedded in it. The people we happen to meet or not meet, our health and our illnesses, and even the children we give birth to. After all, you don't choose your child's genetic code. Chance does.

Given how large a role chance plays in history and human life, are we giving it its due? Or do we have an inflated sense of mastery or control over both our own lives and the world? Do we ignore random events to maintain our illusions of control? And are chance events like COVID that change the world aberrations? Or are they actually the norm?

LT: Hi, everyone. I'm Lynn Thoman, and this is 3 Takeaways. On 3 Takeaways, I talk with some of the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, newsmakers, and scientists. Each episode ends with three key takeaways to help us understand the world and maybe even ourselves a little better.

LT: Brian Klaas is a Minnesota-born professor of global politics at University College London. He's a frequent columnist for the Washington Post, and he hosts a podcast called Power Corrupts. He is someone who has thought a lot about chance in human life, and his book that I mentioned earlier, which is wonderful, is called Fluke, Chance, Chaos, and Why Everything We Do Matters. Brian Klaas, welcome to 3 Takeaways.

Brian Klaas It's great to be on the show.

LT: It is my pleasure.

LT: Brian, I just gave a positive example of how chance has shaped part of my life. What about you? Is there a chance event in your past that helped make you who you are?

BK: Yeah. So one of the first stories in the book is the story of a woman named Clara Maudlin Jansen, who lived in 1905 in a little farmhouse in a place called Keeler, Wisconsin. It's a tragic story because she basically breaks down and decides to take the lives of her four young children and then take her own life. Her husband came home after this horrible mass murder and found his whole family dead in the farmhouse.

BK: This was my great-grandfather's first wife in 1905. So 119 years ago, this happened, and shortly thereafter, he remarried to what became my great-grandmother, and that produced the lineage that led to me. Not only would I not exist, not only would every joy in my life not exist if those children had not been murdered, but more bewildering still is we wouldn't be having this conversation. You wouldn't be hearing my voice. When you think that way and you start to actually unpack what it means for society and for the arc of our lives, that's worth exploring. I think there's a lot of philosophy and a lot of thinking about social change that we ignore because we pretend that the noise of life is unimportant and I disagree with that very very strongly.

LT: I just talked about how COVID changed everything, but history is full of examples of chance playing a huge role in world events. Can you tell us about some of what you call flukes or chance events?

BK: Yeah, well, there's an infinite number of them, but I'll give you the one that is a story of a vacation that a couple took in 1926 to Kyoto, Japan. Nineteen years after the vacation, the husband in the couple, it turned out he was America's Secretary of War in 1945 at the moment when the generals were deciding where to drop the first atomic bomb. And the target committee basically unanimously agreed that Kyoto, the city that they'd vacation in, was the best place to drop it. So he sort of sprung into action to save what they called his pet city.

BK: And he met with President Truman twice and got Truman to take it off the targeting list. And so the first bomb ended up in Hiroshima instead. And the second bomb was supposed to go to Kokura, another city that was spared by a brief bit of cloud cover. And the bomber had to go to the secondary target on August 9th, 1945, which was Nagasaki. And I think that's the sort of stuff where whenever we set up models to understand the world, we write all this stuff out, right? If you were, if you were modeling, where is the U.S. going to drop the atomic bomb? The vacation history of U.S. government officials would be like the ten thousandth variable that would occur to you. And yet in this instance, it was the most important one.

BK: Everything we're told about life is about a sense of control, a sense of neat and tidy stories. I just don't think that's the way the world works. I think there's a lot of myths that we internalize for our own lives and also for economic modeling, political modeling, et cetera, that causes to basically misunderstand this incredibly complex place that we live in.

LT: It's so strange to me that unless you actually think about flukes and random events, you don't see them. World War One was actually started by a random event. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, which sparked World War One, happened because his driver took a wrong turn. Brian, you argue convincingly that with a few small changes, our lives could be profoundly different. Can you give some examples of how that could be true for our society, our world as well?

BK: Yeah, sure. So if you think about the 21st century, you have a series of huge shocks that have defined most of the last 24 years of modern global politics. You have 9-11. You have the Iraq war that follows. You have the financial crisis, where people thought they had control and they didn't. Then you have a person set themselves on fire in Tunisia in 2010 and boom, the Arab Spring happens. And a civil war breaks out in Syria, which kills hundreds of thousands of people. Regimes collapse from one person, a vegetable vendor in Tunisia. But also in the modern world, of course, COVID is one person in one part of the world getting infected by one mutated virus. If that person hadn't gotten infected, if that virus hadn't mutated in just the right way, if it hadn't jumped to humans, the world would be radically different.

BK: There are a huge number of events that could have turned out differently. And often they pivot on the tiniest, tiniest details and we just, for some reason, ignore them. We don't often hear people acknowledging chance in their own lives.

LT: Can you talk about our inflated sense of mastery or control over our world?

BK: This is the thing that I think is really dangerous about the current moment. We have never had more ability to control the day-to-day world than we do today. So you can go to Starbucks anywhere in the world and it's all fine. You can know that you're going to go to the supermarket and they're going to have your exact brand of Pop-Tarts or ask Amazon to deliver a package and they do. But the world itself is changing faster than ever before. I mean, things like the internet, AI, all this stuff. I mean, all this is happening in lifetimes, single lifetimes where the actual underlying structure of the world has shifted.

BK: And so what I think is really, really dangerous is that dynamic gives a false sense of hubris. So if you can control Amazon and you can control Starbucks and you can control your commute, you start to believe that you have mastery over global economics or geopolitics or AI. And that's the kind of stuff where I'm really worried about - the way that the political sphere has simply taken on board this notion that control is something we actually have more than ever, when I think we probably have it less and less. And that's why we keep getting walloped by these seemingly black swan events.

BK: But you can't predict what exactly will wallop us. But I think this is something where if you think about the long term of human history, I think the unexpected black swans are becoming more frequent. And that's because of interconnection and the illusion that we have that we can tame the world. So we're manipulating it much more as it's increasingly, increasingly complex.

LT: Are we a world on the edge of chaos?

BK: Yes. It's a very blunt and dispiriting way to put it. But yes... yes, we are. Physicists have this term, they call it the edge of chaos. And what they mean, there's a system that has some order remaining in it, but it's close to a tipping point, where it ends in chaotic dynamics. And I think there's loads of areas where this is the case. I think our economics are at risk of this. One major shock and boom, we're going to be back in a significant meltdown.

BK: Our geopolitics - we've got nuclear weapons and the risks of World War Three. We have extreme danger with China and Taiwan. We have questions about American democracy. We have questions about climate. These are not small potatoes. These are big issues where small perturbations could create catastrophic effects. This is the other thing that's really novel about the world that we live in, relative to 50 or even 100 years ago, it's the speed with which everything changes is so fast that we don't understand it.

LT: If speed and interconnectedness can exacerbate the impact of small events, is there a way we can reduce the risk from catastrophic events?

BK: Yeah. Both humans and society need resilience and they need the ability to explore and they need the ability to sort of have a little bit of slack in the system for when things go wrong. So, one example I came across in my research was a power grid in Latin America where they were looking at the trade-offs between optimization and efficiency versus resilience. And they figured, it will be way cheaper to build and it will also be way more efficient if we make a national grid without individual regional hubs and nodes. But someone said, but what happens if there's a blackout? And they said, well, then the entire national grid fails. So what they ended up doing was they did a more expensive, less efficient project where there's all these different hubs and nodes in the regions.

BK: And sure enough, there was a blackout and it was completely localized. And when they looked at it, they realized they had saved themselves a ton of money over the long run because the blackout did very little economic damage, whereas a national shutdown of the power grid would have been catastrophic. So these are the kinds of things where I think we think very short term in the language of efficiency and optimization, which is always about right now. Whereas the language of resilience is always about planning for the uncertainty

that you can't tame. But ultimately, it ends up being a better bet because we do live in a very chaotic world.

LT: Brian, you believe that we essentially have very little control over anything or at least much less control than we believe. Yet you believe that everything we do matters and big decisions we think are very important may not matter much, but small random events may change the trajectory of our lives and that of the world. Can you comment on that?

BK: Yes. You mentioned having children early on in the introduction. If you think about the moment of conception, if there is any millisecond difference to that, a different kid is born. And that means quite literally, and obviously logically, that if you stop to have a sip of coffee that day or you don't, you have a different child for the rest of your life. But that also means the next day and the day before that and the day before that and the day before that all had to fit together in just exactly the right way for you to have that kid. So every moment of your life produced that outcome. And that means that everything that you did did matter. It's really, I think, very ironclad logic to think about things that way, because it's impossible to imagine that it would have always been the same kid. It's obviously not true.

BK: But then on top of that, I think that when you think about these aspects of how everything we do matters, it's not always visible to us, even in the timescales that we can understand. And one of the points I always make to people is I say, have you ever heard of Albert Einstein's great, great, great, great grandmother? And the answer is no, I have no idea who it is. That person mattered. They mattered a lot because they're part of the lineage that gave rise to one of the greatest scientists that ever lived. If you think about her life in isolation as a little snapshot, maybe it wasn't profoundly important. But this is the stuff where a person who lives today, who may be the most lowly person on the social ladder, may shift the way the world unfolds a generation or two in the distance. And these are the kinds of things that we just ignore.

BK: We just imagine it's noise. And that's why I really dislike this idea that smart thinkers separate the signal from the noise, because I think the noise is seriously, seriously important. It's hard to model. It's impossible to model the noise, but it is something that matters. And I think that's where, when I say why everything we do matters, I'm not making a cute turn of phrase. I mean everything. I mean literally everything, including listening to this podcast, which is affecting every listener's neurons in some small way that may or may not matter in their lives, but might have ripple effects that they don't anticipate.

LT: Brian, can you summarize how should we be living our lives differently?

BK: What I've taken away from this is that we should experiment a little bit more, build a little bit more resilience, and also appreciate just the majesty and complexity of the world. I think so much about how we're told to live is about taming that uncertainty. And I think it's one of the most wonderful things of life. Of course, if you have a diagnosis that you don't know what it is, uncertainty is terrible. But it's also what makes us human. And this aspect of order and chaos, it's sort of the thing that defines what it is to be a human. We live between them. If we had complete order, life would be hideously boring. If we had

complete chaos, we couldn't have anything function. And so it's enjoying those aspects of life, embracing them.

BK: And also, because I feel a little bit like an arbitrary outgrowth of the universe. This mass murder happened 119 years ago, and here I am. If I don't feel like I have a cosmic purpose, which I don't personally, I don't feel like there's some grand purpose that produced my life, I think it was sort of an arbitrary accident. It tells me that the reason I should, the sort of compass I should use to live my life is to enjoy it and also to try to help other people's lives be more interesting or a bit better, and spend time with people you care about. And sometimes it frees us up to think about the random forces rather than imagining there's this grand cosmic purpose that you have to uphold and fulfill.

BK: Personally, I find the arbitrariness of my life uplifting. I think it sort of releases me from any pressure. And I just sort of think the reason I like to read is because I like to read, so I'm going to keep doing that. And for me, that's enough. Other people may get this existential dread when they think about these questions. But for me, I find it incredibly uplifting to think about the sort of randomness that has swayed my existence and produced the outcome of my life.

LT: Before I ask for the 3 takeaways you'd like to leave our listeners with today, is there anything else you'd like to mention that you haven't already touched upon?

BK: Anytime you go and see a science fiction film or read a science fiction book about traveling back in time, the same thing happens. They say, be careful not to step on the wrong bug, or be careful not to talk to your parents because you'll delete yourself from history or you'll eliminate humanity. And so we all understand chaos theory in the past, that's chaos theory. You step on a bug a million years ago, and then humans don't arise.

BK: We just somehow imagine that it doesn't also exist in the present. Because if you step on a bug, and it's changing the history of the future in the past, then if you step on a bug now, it's also changing the future, right? It's not like there's cause and effect that depends on which snapshot in time you're in. So every conversation, every interaction, everything you do is redirecting the trajectory of history and the future of humanity. And that, to me, it's bewildering. It's really bizarre and mind-bending to think about. I think it's also scientifically true. And personally, I find it really uplifting to imagine that there's nothing in my life that will have no effect. Some will be small, some will be big, but all of them are important.

BK: And this also yields a philosophical idea that I really like, which is, I've had to grapple with the fact that every positive moment in my life, my happiest moments, are inextricably linked to the deaths of children in 1905. And I know that's a bit more stark than other people might have from their sort of understanding of the pathway of how they got here. But that's true for everyone, right? And it also means something really profound in our own lives, which is the worst moment in your life is inextricably linked to the best, because there's a causal chain that allows both of them to exist. And I find that really comforting because when I'm feeling terrible, I know that that is going to inextricably cause the most joyous moment in my life later, because it's an unbroken chain.

So for me processing bad news, I find that uplifting as well as bewildering as it seems.

LT: It does seem a bit bewildering. What are the 3takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today?

BK: The first takeaway is that we control nothing, but we influence everything. And this idea is one that sort of alters or tweaks our worldview. It tells us that we need to understand the limits of our ability to shape our trajectories and also accept the fact that everything we do has a reaction in the world. It's a complex web of cause and effect. And part of that web is us, but we're also in the same web as 8 billion other people, as well as climate forces and geology and timing and all these random events. And we have to understand the limitations of our control so that we don't make hubristic mistakes while we try to manipulate or tame the world.

BK: The second takeaway is that you should experiment more in the face of uncertainty. And the best illustration of this is from a story from the Cologne Opera House where a jazz musician named Keith Jarrett tried to control a situation by ordering an exact right piano for his performance and someone screwed up and there was no piano to be found other than this rickety practice piano. He performed anyway, having to adapt to this instrument, experimenting with this really terrible instrument. And bizarrely, this is the best-selling jazz album of all time because he was forced to experiment in the face of uncertainty and he produced something really brilliant. And so when you don't understand a system, the best strategy is to try things out. So I think this is an important takeaway for life as well, as we accept less control, we dial up the degree to which we should experiment in order to navigate life more successfully.

BK: And the third takeaway is that we should focus on resilience over optimization. There were two words that my grandfather gave me as life advice on how to live a successful life. And I think they're the best pieces of advice I've ever been given. And they're very simple. He said, the secret to a successful life is to avoid catastrophe. When you think about things like that, it's totally flipping on its head the advice we're normally given about how to strive and improve things. And of course, all those things are important. But really, the stuff that wipes us out is the catastrophes. And I think we're better off focusing on resilience rather than trying to squeeze that last drop of efficiency, that last three percent of wasted time in your life, when in fact, very often that slack in our lives is where the joy comes from, and where the most serendipitous moments emerge.

LT: Brian, thanks so much.

BK: Thank you so much for having me on the show. It was lovely.

LT: Brian Klaas is the author of the wonderful book, *Fluke, Chance, Chaos, and Why Everything We Do Matters*. If you enjoyed today's episode, you can sign up for the 3 Takeaways newsletter at 3takeaways.com, where you can also listen to previous episodes like the one with [Eric Schmidt](#) of Google or the one with the former Chief of MI6, [Alex Younger](#), or the one with [Atul Gawande](#). You can also follow us on [LinkedIn](#), [Instagram](#), [X](#), and [Facebook](#).

LT: And if you're enjoying the podcast, and I hope you are, please review us in [Apple Podcasts](#) or wherever you get your podcasts. It really helps get the word out. I'm Lynn Thoman, and thanks for listening.

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