
Hope & New Horizons

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Photography: Lisa Pearl | Words by Jane Stephens

Charlotte Hillenbrand is a career high-flier: she worked as a lawyer, then pivoted to become an international pilot flying wide-bodied airplanes. She had a job and a life she loved.

Then, in March 2020, the global pandemic grounded the world. Like almost every pilot, Charlotte's career was abruptly put on what she thought was a hiatus. It was a challenging time, but she found joy in the unexpected time with her family in lushly beautiful Mons. It was a break from the long absences and working strange shifts.

Strength and resilience were themes in public discourse in the months after the COVID-19 outbreak, and Charlotte says she used the enforced downtime to drill into the evidence and studies around what made people not just bounce back but grow forward. She says she had always been curious about human potential and had turned her inquiring mind to studies in applied neuroscience and positive psychology in a systematic way. The seed of a book was planted.

But greater challenges were to come.

A chronic eye infection reared its head, permanently devouring some of Charlotte's precious vision – a disaster for a commercial pilot. Eighteen months after she was grounded with the rest of the world, she was told she was medically unfit and would not be rejoining her colleagues in the sky.

"It is one thing to have your job taken from you, but another to have the chance to return to it taken away as well," Charlotte says. "It was a very challenging time for me, those initial weeks. It raised all sorts of questions for me about who I was professionally, what to do and what I wanted to move towards next."

She turned her attention to the only thing she felt she could control: her thoughts.

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“I needed to reach for a helpful thought, and I needed to take little steps to start moving myself forward,” she says. “I knew as I made our way through the process that I needed to share my experience: how do we move from feeling small and scared to feeling strong and confident? I did a great deal of research and I found that a lot of the books out there on resilience and recovery are quite hard and pushy, and that is not my way.”

Charlotte’s book *Growing Forward: navigating change with ease* was recently published, launching her third career, this time as an author, speaker, mentor and coach.

Somewhat refreshing in the self-help genre, Charlotte’s book focuses on change from within rather than making adjustments to external circumstances and activities to feel more fulfilled. She is an advocate for a gentle approach and making small changes.

“I feel very strongly about the word failure,” she says. “I think so much focus is on getting up again after failure, so much talk about failing and overcoming. But I don’t think the things spoken of are failure at all and needs to be reframed.

“It is either a success or a learning to me. In framing it that way, we can just keep growing, and it will take us towards something new.”

In person, Charlotte is gentle and softly spoken. She is warm, quick to smile and speaks with an eloquence that makes her words compelling. Her first-hand experience with traumatic change gives fibre and form to the theory.

In a deficit-focused society focused on what it lacks or has lost, Charlotte helps others realise what they already have and can move towards. The key to opening new horizons is to identify what a person is good at rather than what they lack, she says.

“We can never get the life we want by doing what we don’t want,” she adds. “We have to take responsibility and stop feeling deficient; if we are not doing what must be done to move towards the life we want, we are never going to get there.”

Charlotte says a softer voice in navigating change is what many need and sees no contradiction between being strong and gentle at the same time.

“I have always seen myself as more than my profession, and I always found it strange that people attached certain properties to me just because I was a commercial pilot.

“And it was okay for a while to be able to say, ‘I was a pilot before the pandemic’, but once I was medically excluded, I did have that thought of, ‘what do I say now?’ I needed to find my feet as well as be able to define what I do to others. Such are the social conventions of our society. I am glad I am no longer in that window of time.”

Charlotte says her gentle approach to navigating change is anchored by the process rather than the prize.

“People talk about goal setting and I am not sure about that,” she says. “I am not keen on the idea of SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound) goals. Rather, I choose a direction and I walk towards it. Each step is just one step so that if you find that you are off course, it is easy to course correct.”

She says the approach of navigating change with ease is not just helpful for those at a low ebb or in a state of flux.

“I know how it feels: when you are on top of your game and life is good, you don’t have a reason to change,” she says. “I loved my job. I did not have a reason to want anything else. I did not think there was anything else to find, but I now know that even for high achievers, there is so much to be won by becoming self-aware. You can harvest so much more of your untapped potential.

“You don’t need adversity to get there.”

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