



Savoring the Possibilities of Life “BETWEEN TRAPEZES”



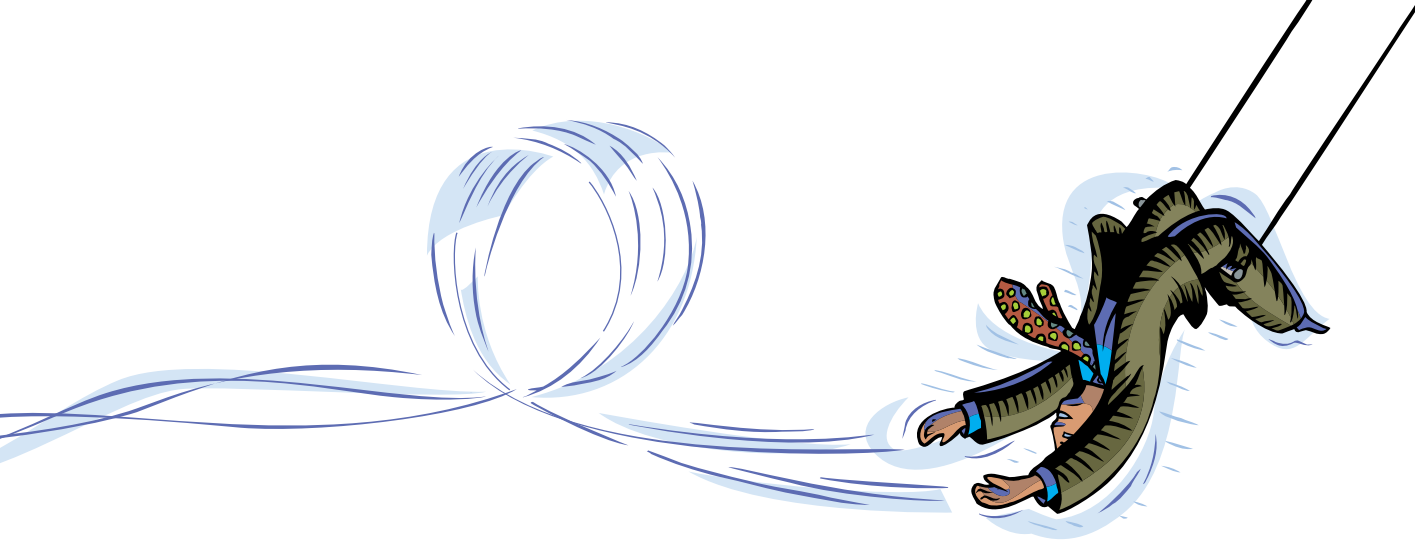
GAIL BLANKE

INTERVIEW BY SHARI LIFLAND

Have you ever thought of yourself as a trapeze artist? Unless your last name is Wallenda, chances are you tremble at the very thought of swinging from one trapeze to another high above the ground. Gail Blanke has a message for you: “We’re all trapeze artists. And unless you let go of the bar that you’re clinging to right now and reach out for the unknown, you’re missing out on the real ‘juice’ of life.”

Blanke, an executive coach and motivational speaker, has written an inspirational new book, *Between Trapezes: Flying into a New Life with the Greatest of Ease* (Rodale Books). Her mission is to show people that they have to let go of the old view of themselves (or of their company), identify their greatest accomplishments and then continuously reinvent themselves to move forward into previously unthought-of possibilities. “The great thing about trapezes,” says Blanke, “is that you can’t hold on to two of them at the same time. You have to let go of the old one in order to reach out and grab the new one. In between letting go of the old one and grabbing the new one, you’re not holding on to anything. And that’s where all the possibilities are—in between. That’s where you’re open to new possibilities. That’s when you learn to fly.”

ILLUSTRATION BY: JIM STARR/AMERICAN ARTISTS



Blanke shared with AMA her thoughts about fear, fun, personal power, flying into the unknown and much more.

Q How did you first come up with the “trapeze” metaphor that is the basis of your book?

For a while, I had been thinking about the incredible impact of change on us as Americans. It was around the new millennium, at a time when so many of us were reexamining our purpose in life. After 9/11, I met a 30-year-old woman who had lost her husband in the attack on the Twin Towers. She said to me, “I’m in this incredible place where I’m between everything in my life. I feel like I’m between trapezes.” Then I came across a poem by Danaan Parry. It’s in my book. Here’s part of it: “Sometimes I feel that my life is a series of trapeze swings. I’m either hanging on to a trapeze bar swinging along or, for a few moments in my life, I’m hurtling across space. In between trapeze bars...the transition zones in our lives are incredibly rich places. They should be honored, even savored...because hurtling through the void, we may just learn how to fly.”

There is so much change, so much unpredictability and insecurity all around us. We are meant to continuously reinvent ourselves, to move forward. The whole purpose of this book is to explore the concept of riding change, of actively looking for it and embracing it. That’s where the fun is.

Here’s what I want on people’s tombstones: “It was beyond my wildest dreams, and I wouldn’t have missed it for anything.” That’s my mission for people.

Q Isn’t flying through the air—without a net—a tough sell?

Sure. Most of us don’t want to be in between—and in fact, we do everything in our power to avoid those marvelous, pit-of-the-stomach, free-fall moments—usually because we worry that we might fall, and fail. If anything, lots of us can think of few things worse than being caught in between jobs, careers, relationships, lives. It’s terrifying. It’s embarrassing. It’s painful. It’s not where we want to be. Yet, like it or not, living in a world of extreme and ongoing change, that’s exactly where many of us find ourselves today.

I’ve worked with so many people—heavyweight executive types—who are so used to just holding on. They have to broaden their view of what is possible, not only for themselves, but for their companies, in order to expand the thinking of the people they lead. That’s what true leadership is—continuously asking the question, “How good could it be?”

Q Not everyone feels comfortable taking risks. Does even the most security-loving person have to make the leap to the next trapeze?

There's no "have to." But part of my job is to spark the imagination of a person. It could lead to their asking, "What new thing can I learn? What new source of delight can I find in my life?" Lately, in this severely difficult world, I'm talking a lot about finding delight. Yes, there are people who don't want to be in an insecure or uncomfortable place. But that's not very realistic, because everything's changing all around us. We can change with it or we can hang back. We do have that choice. But it's amazing, when we do step out into the unknown, that's where the thrill is—what you've been waiting for all of your life.

The big one could be a huge opportunity, a great love affair—whatever. And you could miss it, if you either hang back in fear, or if you are in such a rush that you grab whatever trapeze comes along, without taking the time to fly, to discover what you're really passionate about.

I use the "Michaelangelo Method" in my coaching. When someone admired his famous statue of "David," Michaelangelo replied "that the statue always existed in the rock. His job was to chip away everything that was *not* David." That's my job as a coach—to help people discover what's already there, within them. It just gets covered up—by anxiety, past experience—all the things we hang on to. You have to clear away all that stuff so that *you* can emerge.

Q Is there ever a fatal fall—where you can't get up again?

No. There's always getting up. Trapeze artists say that the greatest flyers are always the greatest fallers. They never confuse falling with failing. Just think about Christopher Reeve. After his accident, his interpretation could have been, "I have every reason to be bitter and angry for the rest of my life." Or, "Maybe I should just end my life." Instead, he decided that maybe his purpose was to gather up the resources that would enable him and a lot of other people to live better lives. He made more of a difference than he ever could have without his accident. Here are some other famous examples—the great flying Clintons, Cher, Madonna, Donald Trump. And keep your eye on Martha Stewart! She's fallen, but I have no doubt she's going to get back up again soon.

Q How does one begin the process of "flying into a new life?"

Most people don't understand that *they* get to decide how their life is going to go. But it's true. *You* get to decide just how brilliant your life will be. There are four basic steps to finding out just how good you can make your life:

Step #1: Develop a vision of where you want to be. Nothing important happens without a vision.

Step #2: Let go of past failures and fears.

Step #3: Own your achievements. Trapeze artists always walk into the arena thinking about their greatest performance. Use your greatest accomplishment as a springboard for the next challenge.

Step #4: Deal with reality. Learn to distinguish between fact and interpretation. Interpretations are what we decide about the facts. The stock market goes up or down over interpretations.

Elections are lost or won. Make up empowering interpretations for things that happen in your life that propel you forward.

Much has been written about the difficulties women experience in the corporate world because they haven't had experience in team sports. Do you agree?

No, I don't agree with that. Women are natural team players. We're creating teams all the time. A family is a team. We're used to listening for somebody else's needs and responding to them. It's never just about our own needs. In terms of change, we are faced with change all the time, compared to what happens with men. Suddenly we get married, we get pregnant, we go back to work, our children grow up and leave. Not to mention the changes we go through with our own bodies! So I think we are naturally disposed to dealing with change.

Today's companies are dealing with tremendous, perhaps even unprecedented, changes. How can we take the ideas from *Between Trapezes* and apply them to our organizations?

Today's organizations have to see themselves radically differently, in terms of their markets. I was at Avon for almost 20 years and the best fun I had there was when the company was almost taken over. We had been doing OK, but mostly just by staying the same. To avoid being taken over, we had to reinvent ourselves—before somebody else did it for us. We had to ask the questions: "How good can we make it? Who can we uniquely and profitably be that nobody else can be, given the world situation right now?" These were questions that we hadn't asked before, to look at ourselves in a new way. It was exhilarating. People look back on that period as the best time ever, yet we were in a crisis.

But you don't want to wait for the crisis—not as a corporation, not as a person, not as a country. You constantly have to think about new ways of doing things and about new ways of seeing people. The post-Jack Welch GE organization is doing that right now. It's thrilling to watch. What we need to do is to provide the wherewithal to enable people to continuously grow, not to hang back on the old trapeze of what worked before. Because true leadership is not about already knowing; it's about discovery.

We really aren't meant to be comfortable, to live tidy, predictable lives. Remember what Darwin discovered—it's not the smartest or strongest of a species that survives, it's the one that can adapt to change. [MW](#)

Gail Blanke is president and CEO of LifeDesigns. She is also the author of In My Wildest Dreams. She currently resides in New York City.