



## **The Certainty of Uncertainty**

Don and Fay Simmonds

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*Ottawa, ON*

*Fay*

Don and I want to thank you for including us tonight. We appreciate the work of the Christian Embassy and your steady hand of leadership, Darlene. And, what a nice party you have thrown for everyone!

*Don*

May we begin by expressing our best wishes to all of you in this beautiful Christmas season. With the warmth of this occasion we thought we would share with you on a more personal level than normal.

*Fay*

Don and I have been married for forty-three years and have lived all of them in Uxbridge, a typical rural Canadian town of about 10,000 people with only one hockey arena and one high school.

We met at that school when we were just fifteen years old. While our interests and responsibilities have taken us lots of place, we have loved the stability of life in our little community.

**Something that seems very, very certain is that all of us will face uncertainty.**

*Don*

With over four decades behind us, we are able to reflect back over our lives. And something that seems very, very certain is that all of us will face uncertainty. And you probably know that even with the joy of Christmas coming, sometimes this season actually accentuates some of the uncertainty that we may be facing in our lives.

*Fay*

So we hope and pray that some part of our story might be helpful to you tonight as we traverse three thoughts:

- All of us have a built-in desire for certainty
- The one thing that is certain is uncertainty

- If uncertainty is sure to come, how can we better prepare?

*Don*

Fay grew up in Uxbridge, but our family moved there when I was just starting grade 11. On the first day of school my bus arrived late. It was already a tough enough time of life to move schools but a late bus on the first day?

After searching the empty halls I finally found my homeroom - a science lab, known as the dungeon, located in the basement of the old school...you know, it had those black lab tables. There was only one open seat left – front and center.

So, I walked across the back and turned up the aisle. On that corner a young lady said hi to me as I passed by. That was Fay. And, on May 1st of that next spring, we had our first date. I now suggest every young man should marry the first girl that says hi to them in high school. Just kidding.

**We find great joy when we can intersect with a young person at their most impressionable point - when just the right word or experience can launch them for the rest of their lives.**

*Fay*

Since that first date we have had a full and rewarding life together. Aside from our relationship with God, each other and our family, we have invested most of our time and energy in two main areas: working with teenagers and the technology industry – perhaps the two most rapidly changing environments in our world today.

We continue to be amazed by the impact of helping a person when they are young. We find great joy when we can intersect with a young person at their most impressionable point - when just the right word or experience can launch them for the rest of their lives.

*Don*

As the coach for the Uxbridge Tigers, our high school hockey team uses a very simple concept to teach character to our players. We assign one of fourteen character traits (like respect, honesty, hard work, optimism, citizenship) to each player whose responsibility it is to help the team exhibit that trait throughout the season. There is literally hundreds of opportunities to teach life lessons through a single season.

One day after an away game, our team had boarded the bus on the way back to our school. I was just climbing on when the zamboni driver at the arena came running after me. Not sure if you've ever had a zamboni driver come running after you, but you automatically figure you or one of the players has done something very wrong. He was puffing as he said, "Coach, your team left the dressing room the cleanest I've ever seen after a game. I thought you should know." I thanked him and got on the bus.

The trait of respect. They'd got it. I was proud of my players and told them so.

We've had the fun of helping create more than thirty businesses in the last four decades. My first was a dairy farm that I started in my father's garage in grade 11. In the early '80's we entered the renewable energy field, equipping over 50,000 Canadian Coast Guard lights and lighthouses with solar systems.

And before most people had heard of a GPS, we married it up with a wireless device creating a fleet tracking business that allowed owners to see the precise whereabouts of their vehicles, or let dads know if their sons were speeding, or their daughters were safe!

We have just launched a new business called *CitiIQ*. An increasing percentage of the growing world population will be living in urban environments in the next thirty years and *CitiIQ* has created system that measures the health and wellbeing of an entire city. In fact, this year I met with the mayor of Accra, Ghana and the Mayor of Kigali, Rwanda on how *CitiIQ* could help their cities as they face the pressures of such rapid urban growth.

But our family is probably best known for having started *Clearnet*, an exciting company that built Canada's first two digital cellular networks. We believed, before most others, that people would use a cell phone everyday and risked everything we had for this belief. And sure enough, you all use a cell phone every day just like we hoped you would.

**We have built our life together, sharing confidence that our love for each other would hold us strong.**

*Fay*

Over the years, we have built our life together, sharing confidence that our love for each other would hold us strong. And we have taken our marriage commitment literally and our promise of "til death do us part" without option. The strength of our relationship has helped us face all kind of challenges, knowing we would face them together.

But throughout the years we have faced some very uncertain times. Circumstances that had the potential to derail us as a family. Things that blindsided us. We suspect you will have experienced similar things as well. And try as we might to plan well, to be reliable members of our community and country, to give a sense of stability to our children, sure enough, we ran straight into the wall of uncertainty. That's why our talk tonight is called "The Certainty of Uncertainty."

**Everyone hungers for certainty.**

*Don*

Everyone hungers for certainty.

According to experts, our brains crave certainty and avoid uncertainty like the plague. “Uncertainty feels to the brain, like a threat to your life and is in the same category as pain.”

When you can't predict the outcome of a situation, “a threat response occurs.” Studies demonstrate that with increasing ambiguity, the “threat response” is stronger, even as the brain struggles to make the complete map of a situation. In short, uncertainty is debilitating!

*Fay*

One of the areas of uncertainty for us was in having a family. We were young and healthy, but after eight years of marriage, we couldn't have kids of our own. We had just considered adopting when we found out I was pregnant. We had a little girl, who we named Shauna, meaning “gift from God.”

Sixteen months later, we were thrilled as we found out I was pregnant again. Life was good. But in my seventh month of pregnancy, our little baby, Amber, died at birth with a condition known as anencephaly, the absence of a major portion of the brain. We went from the mountain top to the valley of uncertainty within a few hours.

### **What do we do when uncertainty hits?**

*Don*

We are particularly grateful for six special couples with whom we have been “kindred spirits” for over thirty years. The type of friends we could count on to be right there with us through thick and thin and hopefully could count on us to do the same. Little did we know how this close-knit group of friends was to be hit by uncertainty.

*Fay*

For the last fifteen years or so, Les and Joyce have been face-to-face with implications of Parkinson's disease.

*Don*

August 1, 2008 was a normal day until the call came. We learned of a plane crash at our small, local airport. A plane had gone down, completely consumed by fire. One of the two fatalities was our friend Micky. He was 57.

*Fay*

Doug and his wife Beth ran a second-generation dairy farm, one of the top Holstein breeders in Ontario. Living a mile apart on the same country road, the four of us have been the closest friends from the age of fifteen. Doug was diagnosed with melanoma cancer in 2006 and on July 30th, 2009, passed away at the age of 56.

*Don*

We met Carson and Brenda in 1979, starting a rich 39-year relationship. Our kids call them Uncle Carson and Auntie Brenda and vice versa. While we have lived on opposite sides of the country, we have helped each others' kids at critical moments, visited often, vacationed together and Carson has used our country home as a writing retreat. One day, Carson called telling us that Brenda had been diagnosed with lung cancer. We were shaken. Brenda died 588 days after that call, at age 59.

*Fay*

We and our small group of lifelong friends would never have thought we'd be called upon to face such traumatic, life-changing situations. But uncertainty is a certainty. And if it has not hit you yet, it will.

*Don*

So how does one face this kind of uncertainty? How can we possibly prepare? And for people of faith, where is God in the midst of it? Why does an all-knowing, all-powerful God allow such pain and loss? Lots of people ask, "Where did your God of love go at your very moment of need?"

*Fay*

And then it was our turn. March 22, 2015. I woke up after fainting on the hard ceramic floor and was miraculously able to call 911 for myself.

For the previous two months, I was in Florida, as I had been for the previous six winters. Our youngest daughter, April, is an equestrian who expressed at the age of fourteen that "her riding was no longer a dream but was now her goal!" And, how we love supporting a kid with a huge goal! But, it meant my moving to Florida each winter to accompany her during training.

That spring was the final qualifying period for selection to the Canadian Pan Am Team, with the games to be held right in Toronto where we live. April had set out a deliberate two-year plan to make this team.

Four years earlier, we had been surprised with my diagnosis of liver cirrhosis. It turned out that two autoimmune diseases had unknowingly been attacking my liver for many years. Unfortunately, at the time of my diagnosis, my liver was already 70% damaged. We now know more fully just how central the liver is to our wellbeing. All of our body's blood flows through the liver every seven minutes, filtering unhealthy toxins from our system.

But, in January 2015 my cirrhosis was under control with the medicine keeping the attack on my liver in check. The doctors had approved my travel and I was living a fairly normal life.

On Sunday, March 22nd, April and Don were in Georgia at a qualifying competition and I was alone at our Florida home. They rushed me to a Florida hospital with a ruptured blood vessel

in my esophagus, one of the dangerous side effects of cirrhosis. My situation rapidly evolved into a multi-system breakdown and, in a matter of hours, I was battling for my life.

I spent the next two months in ICU's being managed through some very complicated daily manoeuvres and nine powerful medications. I should have died that day.

#### *Don*

I communicated the following to our friends and family. "Fay lost so much blood that she had seven transfusions. After four days in the Florida ICU we were able to fly back to London by air ambulance jet where she was admitted to the Post Liver Transplant unit. There could not have been a better place for her as the level of knowledge of the staff was superior."

At about 3am I sat at Fay's bedside with her nurse and said, "Tracey, she is just so sick. How could she be going downhill so quickly?" In a gentle but matter-of-fact sentence, she simply said, "That's what happens during liver failure!"

Oh my goodness, the words "LIVER FAILURE" had never even entered our minds. Silly us. It was simple. Fay needed a liver transplant very soon.

#### *Fay*

Transplantation is aptly very closely controlled. Liver transplant eligibility is governed by "The MELD" score. A liver patient has to be a 16 to be put on the transplant list, and sadly, due to a shortage of viable organs, liver transplants now occur around the 28 mark. A person measuring 28 is so sick that 1 in 5 are unable to have their transplant when a liver finally becomes available.

By the way, this is why every single one of us should be an organ donor...simply signing up on the back of your driver's license, or online can enable one of the most generous life-saving acts you can make. A single donor can save up to eight lives.

89% of Canadians support organ donation, yet only 20% are registered. Furthermore, you are five times more likely to need an organ than give one!

#### *Don*

In Fay's case, when she went to Florida she was a 12, ineligible for the list. She returned with full liver failure but surprisingly, still measured a 12. Scientists are learning that in some instances, the scoring mechanism does not match the physical status of the patient. So here we were, not being able to live without a transplant, but ineligible for the transplant list!

Fay's doctor set out to convince an ethics tribunal that her situation was critical. The decision came down: she would be granted a transplant, but only if we could find a living donor.

*Fay*

As we gained a clearer picture of what we were facing, Don resigned from all of his operating leadership positions so that he could concentrate on helping me have chance at life.

This was an agonizingly humbling experience as I was incapacitated and bedridden. Unfiltered toxins created a condition called encephalopathy, which left me incredibly confused and disoriented.

At times, I didn't even know how to perform basic tasks, like turning on a tap, opening a door, or using my cell phone. I thought Don was our daughter-in-law one morning. And we tied a string to our wrists at night time so that I would not wander to the top of the stairs and fall. I was down to 94 lbs, had aged dramatically in a matter of months, and, for the first time in my life, not in control of my own mind or body.

**No matter how strong your support system is, or how capable or accomplished you are, when an unexpected storm hits, where will you turn?**

*Don*

The question is NOT "Will there be a storm?" Rather, "Where will it come from? When will it hit? How strong will it be? Do we have the resilience to handle it?"

Some people try to live their lives avoiding the storms of uncertainty. Others work to develop sufficient self-determination and inner strength to face the big storms when they come. Or our confidence could also be falsely placed in another human being and their strength.

No, the notion of avoiding all uncertainty is impossible. And, no matter how strong your support system is, or how capable or accomplished you are, when an unexpected storm hits, where are you going to turn?

*Fay*

The search was now on for a very specific matching living donor. Our oldest son Craig, then age 29, was managing some of our businesses, so Don asked him to be the point person for the donor search.

42 people offered to be a donor for me. I am very deeply humbled and grateful for this. Our kids, relatives, associates, Don's hockey players, former classmates, people from all walks of life came forward, willing to make the ultimate sacrifice to help me stay alive.

*Don*

If Craig were here, he would tell you that when he first became aware of the need for a live donor, he decided to put his own name first on the list. In the end, he was selected by the hospital as the best match.

Fay

Many in our circle of friends and family prayed for a miracle. God performed that miracle through an incredible gift of love, advances in science, a brilliant medical team and the miraculous creation of an organ that is able to regenerate itself! On August 5th, 2015 – my 61st birthday – surgeons removed 65% of Craig's liver and transplanted it into me!

Don

Craig's wife Heather was carrying their first child. She and I spent quite a day as the first surgical team started Craig at 6:30am to make sure everything was as they expected. Fay's team had the go ahead about 10:30 and wheeled her into the operating room beside Craig's.

In my journal I wrote:

*"It has been a long night and Fay just arrived in the step down unit at 6:40 this morning. It was quite an emotional moment when we stopped her bed at Craig's door and they were able to say hi to each other! Craig had been restlessly waiting for some hours to see her go by and in her case she was anxious to see for herself if we were telling the truth that he was ok! The hall was quiet and it took a while for Fay's eyes to focus. But once she caught Craig's gaze, she returned his wave and Craig wished her a happy birthday and told her he was glad she was his mom! She thanked him for the incredible birthday present and even the heartiest of the nursing crew couldn't hold it together. Then off she went to her own team awaiting her in a room at the end of the same hall!"*

As memorable family moments go, this would be one of those indescribable ones for a father to watch.

**I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.**

Fay

On August 12th, exactly one week from my life-giving transplant, Brenda passed away. This has taken our two families to the widest breadth of emotions, as we have grieved for them even while they have rejoiced for us.

Before she died, Brenda made an account of her journey, reminding Carson and her family and friends that she fully believed what God said in the Bible: *"I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."*

Brenda's book, But if not... is a testimony to her confidence that even in death, this promise unfolded for her, Micky and Doug in heaven, just as it is for me still being here on earth. Can you say tonight that whatever storm hits you, your mooring will stay secure?

*Don*

We are not spiritual giants of any kind. We are practical, small town folks. But we are very, very thankful that when we were still teenagers, Fay and I also learned of the opportunity to make God our anchor in life through a personal friendship with Him. While this life decision did not exempt us from problems, it has been our trust in Him, and not in our own strength or resilience, that has allowed us to get through deep times of uncertainty...including the very real possibility of losing each other.

**The answer to uncertainty is to find an Anchor in life that will hold firm, no matter how powerful the storm.**

When we completely trust in our Creator we gain access to the attributes that are uniquely His and His alone. These are what bring certainty when all other answers fail:

- God is infinite and never changes.
- He is all-powerful, all-knowing and always everywhere.
- God is the very source of wisdom, is faithful, honest, true, kind, compassionate and fair.
- God does not make mistakes!
- He is forgiving and He loves unconditionally.

Friends, the answer to uncertainty is to find an Anchor in life that will hold firm, no matter how powerful the storm.

*Fay*

We are deeply, deeply grateful that I am alive and well. But by now you can see we are no strangers to uncertainty.

*Don*

On Friday night we had the privilege of hosting Sean Brandow, the Chaplain of the Humboldt Broncos, in Uxbridge. As a community we wanted to express our continuing concern for the Broncos, the town of Humboldt and him. Through this terrible tragedy, every Canadian became acutely aware of how life-changing uncertainty can come in an instant.

**When your life foundation is placed in God's hands, you can be at peace even in the midst of complete uncertainty.**

*Fay*

So many are living in uncertainty as we speak. Fear of world circumstance. Concern over business challenges. A beloved son or daughter who is rebelling, or has left home. How about those of you in politics - you need no lessons in uncertainty from us. Many of you are from countries whose people face uncertainty of many kinds. What about the person that has been told they have cancer—or those displaced or lost by hurricanes or raging fires! Or the millions in our world that have no idea where their next meal is going to come from.

In a way that defies logic, when your life foundation is placed in God's hands, you can be at peace even in the midst of complete uncertainty. Here are two rock solid promises from the Bible that we have relied on in the eye of uncertainty:

- Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever. (Hebrews 13:8)
- We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. (Hebrews 6:19)

Tonight, we are unable to promise a life of certainty. But it is an honour to point you to the One who can anchor you in any storm life brings!

Thank you so much for having us.