

“That’s genuine delight, right there in the circumstances we don’t expect and sure as heck can’t predict.”

story by CHIP GAINES

It doesn’t matter where you are in the country, you can walk into a chain restaurant and count on the fact that they will give you the same thing they always give you. That a cup of coffee or hamburger or chicken sandwich will look and taste the same in Tallahassee as it does in Topeka.

And it’s no wonder.. the whole reason franchises work is because they’re predictable. The same ingredients, made with the same equipment, prepared by employees who read the same training manual. You’ve got to give those places their due. They have the system down to a science.

But here’s the thing. A lot of times we live our lives on the franchise model too. Doing things today because that’s how we did them yesterday. We take the same road to work, talk to the same handful of people, and build ourselves an echo chamber of like-minded ideas. Day after day, week after week. And like that mega burger chain, we pump out the same result. The formula works.

Now, that kind of predictability has its benefits. For one, it can make for an efficient life. You can set up your schedule and routines to try and avoid any and all complications.. to avoid getting tangled up in other people’s messes. Sure, you can find what you like to eat and watch and just stick with it until the end of time.

Call me crazy, but I want more than that.

I want to be caught off guard. I want to be interrupted by new opportunities. I want to walk out the front door every day and have no clue what’s going to happen. Or more accurately, I want to approach the day in such a way that I’m open to the unexpected.

Don’t get me wrong. I find myself tempted by the franchise model, too. I have my favorite places that I go back to time and again. Heck, I wear the same clothes just about every day (Jo and the kids can back that up). What I’m talking about is how we orient our hearts and minds to the world. If we’re shut off to new experiences and new people, we’re selling ourselves short.

I’m a sucker for stories about chance encounters. Strangers who get seated next to each other at a restaurant in some faraway place only to find out they live in the same neighborhood, that kind of thing. Or it could be as simple as catching a glimpse of an old friend, and you choosing to say hello rather than choosing to pretend like you don’t see them. You won’t find yourself in extraordinary moments if you aren’t willing to engage with the unknown. That’s kind of the whole point. You have to put yourself out there, speak up, sing your song, be the first to say hello. You have to trust your gut and go for it.

Don’t know much about the other side of town? Take a little trip and meet some new folks. Wish somebody would fix that problem in your community? Be that somebody, and rally a group of people who feel the same. See somebody stranded on the side of the road? Pull over and give them a hand changing the tire. It’s easy to assume they have a cell phone and money to pay for a tow. But maybe they don’t. You won’t know until you find out.

I’m not talking about being random for the sake of being random. You don’t need to turn a 10 minute drive to the store into a day-long tour of the state. I’m talking about that sweet spot where your gut instinct, your values, and spontaneity run smack dab into each other. Where you can feel that tug start to wrangle itself free and you go ahead and let it lead. That’s genuine delight, right there in the circumstances we don’t expect and sure as heck can’t predict.

There is, and always will be, plenty of reasons to build your life around the predictable. When life feels hard, it’s easy to look up at the menu and order the #1 because you know exactly what you are going to get. And it can be comforting to think we’re in control by knowing that the shortest route to the office starts with a left turn at the end of the block.

But maybe, every once in a while, we can have the courage to tell the waiter “surprise me,” or even turn around, walk out the door, and go someplace we’ve never been. Maybe we can turn right one morning instead of going left.

Only you have the power to click off cruise control. Consider this: For the next week, challenge yourself to make a handful of decisions you usually wouldn’t make. Start small. Drink tea instead of coffee, dress up or dress down, go in the back door, start a meeting by celebrating your team, read a different newspaper, skip your workout for a day if it’s become mundane. Or hit the gym if it’s been a while.

Maybe not a whole lot comes of it. Maybe it changes nothing. But be open to the unexpected enough times, and eventually, it’ll change everything.

How CAN you APPROACH EACH DAY OPEN TO THE UNEXPECTED?

Handwriting practice lines consisting of ten horizontal lines.