







# BEST OF LUCK

Why good fortune  
isn't just a  
game of chance

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**O** **N APRIL 4, 2000**, I was a contestant on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, when more than 25 million viewers were tuning in three times a week, and all across the country it seemed that everyone was asking: "Is that your final answer?" For about 40 minutes on national TV, Regis Philbin was asking that of me.

The previous year, I had published a book. *States of Mind* was a literal and figurative journey through tiny hamlets like Pride (Alabama), Wisdom (Montana), and Joy (Illinois). The big New York publishers had passed on it, so a little North Carolina press took a chance. Over the first 10 months, sales were being counted in the hundreds.

Amid the banal banter between questions, I discussed the book with Regis. Within 24 hours of the show's airing, sales skyrocketed. Within a month, I found myself chatting with Oprah. My little publisher could barely keep up with demand. For a fleeting moment, it was the No. 2 best-selling book online, behind only an obscure tale about a bespectacled boy wizard.

And that's when I began to hear it from family and friends, usually accompanied by a wry grin: "That was a lucky break!"

I wanted to reply, "Really?" My wife and I had detoured careers, cashed in our savings to buy an RV, and embarked on a 48-state adventure. I had navigated the publishing gauntlet, eventually receiving an advance that didn't even cover fuel costs. I had earned a spot on *Millionaire* by correctly answering eight trivia questions during a phone tryout, then I had won the "Fastest Finger" round by 130 milliseconds. And I had clawed my way to \$64,000 in winnings before Regis even asked about my book.

Lucky? I held my tongue and just shrugged. "Well, you make your own breaks."

Yet I've always wondered: Is that true? Can we author our own good fortune? Or is it fate? The questions have nagged at me for years, so I sought a wise man for some final answers.

Actually, his name is Dr. Richard Wiseman, and his title at the University of Hertfordshire in the U.K. is professor in public understanding of psychology. In *The Luck Factor*, he summed up a decade-long study about the nature of luck, which, he wrote, can "make the difference between life and death, reward and ruin, happiness and despair."

He's adamant that luck is not random and has no magical properties. And while some folks seem to lead charmed lives, they are not born lucky. "There must be something *causing* things to work out consistently well for some people and consistently badly for others," he explained. And, he insists, it's possible to enhance our luck.

Humans have long suspected this, of course—hence, superstitions that date back centuries. Knocking on wood, for instance, comes from pagan rituals

involving tree gods. Lucky charms and avoidance of ladders are ubiquitous, but studies show they don't work. So what does?

**Opportunism** / Wiseman conducted an experiment in which, after asking volunteers to describe themselves as lucky or unlucky, he instructed them to count the photos inside a newspaper. On average, the unlucky people completed the task in roughly two minutes. The lucky people? Just seconds. Why? A half-page message on page two announced: "Stop counting—there are 43 photographs in this newspaper." The unlucky ones tended to miss this, as well as a second message: "Stop



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counting, tell the experimenter you have seen this and win \$250."

According to Wiseman, unlucky people tend to be more anxious, which reduces the ability to notice the unexpected. Lucky people, he says, "see what is there rather than just what they are looking for." That's how they "luck" into \$250. Benjamin Franklin famously stated that diligence is the mother of good luck. But perhaps it's really vigilance. Lucky people recognize chances, and they maximize them.

Like Scot Halpin. In November 1973, he drove two hours with a friend and waited in line for half a

day at San Francisco's Cow Palace to see The Who. An hour into the show, notoriously wild drummer Keith Moon passed out, slumping into his skins. Guitarist Pete Townshend grabbed a microphone. "Can anybody play the drums?" he asked. "I mean somebody good."

Halpin's pal excitedly pointed toward him. Show promoter Bill Graham approached Halpin: "Can you do it?" Although he hadn't actually played drums in over a year, Halpin simply replied, "Yeah."

Moments later, roadies relaxed the teenager with a shot of brandy. Townshend introduced him. And

that's how a teenager lived out a dream. He was later named "Pick-Up Player of the Year" by *Rolling Stone*. Halpin had willed himself to the right place at the right time with the right skill set.

**Optimism** / Tennessee Williams once declared that luck is simply a matter of "believing you're lucky." Wiseman tends to agree that, in general, optimism breeds good fortune. At the 2002 Winter Olympics, Steven Bradbury had no reason to be hopeful. He was a speed skater from Australia, and nobody from the Southern Hemisphere had won an Olympic gold medal in any winter sport—ever. In 1994, a skating accident left him with 111 stitches in his leg. In

1998, he spent months recovering from a broken neck. Although he was elated to return to the Olympics, he knew he couldn't possibly keep up with the world's best. Yet his perspective was this: "I've had my share of bad luck. What goes around comes around."

And it did. Bradbury kept advancing in an unlikely—and not unlucky—manner. In the quarterfinals, a Canadian racer was disqualified, so Bradbury received a spot in the semifinals. When three racers collided ahead of him in the semis, his second-place finish catapulted him into the finals. And that's when he came up with an unusual plan. He told a reporter, "I might as well stay out of the way and be in last place and hope that some people get tangled up."

With only 50 meters left in the 1,000-meter race, his four opponents—every one of them—were involved in a last corner pile-up, leaving Bradbury to glide across the finish line as the only skater left standing. *USA Today* commented that the victory "fell out of the sky Saturday night, like a bagged goose." Australians embraced a new colloquialism—"pulling a Bradbury" meant finding unexpected success. But he owns a gold medal, now and forever.

**Intuition** / Lucky people make lucky decisions by being open to hunches and following their instincts. Mine failed me 15 years ago, otherwise I might be perceived as lucky *and* rich. I didn't trust my gut enough, so by the time I was presented with the \$125,000 question, I had used up my three lifelines. And then came this: "Which of these American westerns was not a remake of a Japanese film?" Immediately, I zeroed in on one answer—*High Noon*. I told Regis I had "an inkling." All I had to do was listen to my intuition.

But I out-thought myself. *What if I'm wrong? I'll lose half my money. How reckless!* I took my \$64,000 and walked away. That was the wrong choice—because *High Noon* was the right one. Sure, I earned a nice payday anyway, but I would have been only three questions away from a million bucks. To this day, *High Noon* haunts me.

It's not that lucky people don't consider the angles. They're just open to impulsiveness. In 2012, Zachary Bodish was shopping at an Ohio thrift store when he found a poster for a 1958 exhibition of ceramic works by Pablo Picasso. Although money was scarce, he bought it for \$14.14.

At home, he went online and studied the print's history. Only 100 such posters were created and signed by Picasso himself, but Bodish figured his was just a high-quality reproduction. Then he took out a magnifying glass and examined the faded red writing near the bottom. It was Picasso's signature.

The print had been donated by a retired English teacher, who had stored it in his basement after receiving it as a housewarming present in the 1960s. For decades, nobody had closely examined that signature. After Christie's auction house authenticated the piece, Bodish sold it to a private buyer for an estimated \$7,000. "It's just been a rough struggle to make ends meet," he said at the time. "I may have been fated to find it."

**Resilience** / Cornell University's Tom Gilovich once conducted a study in which he had neutral observers examine the reactions of Olympic medalists immediately after an event's completion and moments later on the medal stand. He found that bronze medalists seemed happier than silver medalists. As Jerry Seinfeld once joked, "You win the bronze, you think, 'Well at least I got

something.' But when you win the silver, that's like, 'Congratulations, you *almost* won. Of all the losers ... you're the No. 1 loser.'"

I could compare my quiz show windfall to the worse-case scenario—going home empty-handed. Alas, I don't. After all, they don't call the show *Who Wants to Be Slightly Better Off*. But lucky people tend toward a positive spin. Instead of dwelling on ill fortune, they imagine how it could have been worse. Wiseman calls it "denying fate," an attitude that he says "transforms bad luck into good." The patron saint of this might be Frane Selak.

According to the story—never quite verified, but repeated countless times—Selak, a music teacher from Croatia, experienced a series of mind-boggling near misses. In 1962, he walked away from a train that derailed into a river. The next year, he fell out of an airplane—and onto a haystack. Three years later, he survived being a passenger on a bus that drove off a bridge. Twice, he escaped burning automobiles. He was once struck by a bus and suffered only minor injuries. In 2003 the septuagenarian Selak bought a lottery ticket for the first time in 40 years—and won the equivalent of more than \$1 million.

There are those who believe that much of Selak's story is, at the very least, exaggerated. But the tale's continued retelling is revealing. After all, we all want to believe we can change our fortunes. And Wiseman's principles suggest we may be able to influence them. Simple, right? Just relax, stay alert, have hunches in bunches, be grateful in comparison, and always look on the bright side of life. Maybe, just maybe, fortune will smile upon you.

Anyway, good luck with that.

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