



YOU ARE WHAT YOU RISK: ***The New Art and Science of*** ***Navigating an Uncertain World***

By Michele Wucker

Reader Discussion Guide

What drives a sixty-four-year-old woman to hurl herself over Niagara Falls in a barrel? Why do we often create bigger risks than the risks we try to avoid? Why are corporate boards newly worried about risky personal behavior by CEOs? Why are some nations quicker than others to recognize and manage risks like pandemics, technological change, and climate crisis?

The answers define each person, organization, and society as distinctively as a fingerprint. Understanding the often-surprising origins of these risk fingerprints can open your eyes, inspire new habits, catalyze innovation and creativity, improve teamwork, and provide a beacon in a world that seems suddenly more uncertain than ever.

How you see risk and what you do about it depend on your personality and experiences. How you make these cost-benefit calculations depend on your culture, your values, the people in the room, and even unexpected things like what you've eaten recently, the temperature, the music playing, or the fragrance in the air. Being alert to these often-unconscious influences will help you to seize opportunity and avoid danger.

You Are What You Risk is a clarion call for an entirely new conversation about our relationship with risk and uncertainty. In this ground-breaking, accessible and eminently timely book, Michele Wucker examines why it's so important to understand your risk fingerprint and how to make your risk relationship work better in business, life, and the world.

Drawing on compelling risk stories around the world and weaving in economics, anthropology, sociology, and psychology research, she bridges the divide between professional and lay risk conversations. She challenges stereotypes about risk attitudes, re-frames how gender and risk are related, and shines new light on generational differences. She shows how the new science of "risk personality" is re-shaping business and finance, how healthy risk ecosystems support economies and societies, and why embracing risk empathy can resolve conflicts. Wucker shares insights, practical tools, and proven strategies that will help you to understand what makes you who you are –and, in turn, to make better choices, both big and small.

This readers' guide provides questions to help you to kick off your book club discussion and to apply the insights from the book to your life, work, and the world around you. Delve as deeply as you like into each question.

Discussion Questions:

Think about your parents, your siblings, and other family members and the risks they have taken. When you were growing up, did your parents have similar comfort levels with different kinds of risks? Or did they clash over risks like finances, health, how much freedom children should have, or even how much time to leave to get places you needed to be? How did the relationships with risk you observed in your family shape the way you take risks now?

Reflect for a moment on the story in Chapter One about Annie Edson Taylor, the woman who rode over Niagara Falls in a souped-up pickle barrel on her 64th birthday in 1901. What role did her personality, experiences, economic situation, and the precautions she took play in affecting her perception of the risks involved in the stunt and her willingness to go ahead with it? Was the risk worth it? In 1901, when she took her risky trip, the United States and the world were going through tremendous economic, social, and political changes. How might this have played into the risks that Taylor and others of her time took?

How might today's social, political, and economic environment be shaping the risks we take?

Your risk fingerprint combines your innate personality, lived experience, and habits and environment. Answer the following questions about components of your risk fingerprint:

- Do you think of yourself as risk avoidant or risk seeking –or somewhere in between?
- What is your process for deciding whether to take a certain risk? Do you take forever to choose, do you leap before you look, or are you somewhere in between?
- What big shocks have you experienced in your life? How did these change the risks you took or avoided afterwards?
- How (if at all) has your relationship with risk changed over time?
- How self-aware are you when it comes to risk?
- What makes you more comfortable with or more likely to avoid a certain risk?
- How does your risk taking differ across your life: health, career, finance, relationships, ethics, etc?

“We’re both on the same page feeling that staying the same is the riskiest thing you can do,” Megan Bhatia says in Chapter One after she and her husband Marty sold their Chicago home and traveled the world as digital nomads with their two young children during the pandemic. What does she mean by this? Do you agree? Why or why not?

How do you define risk? Take a moment to write it down.

Now consider your answer. Does it reflect that you see risk as positive (an opportunity), negative (a danger), or something that depends on the context? What past experiences contributed to how you perceive risk on the spectrum between danger and opportunity? How does it compare to the definitions of risk described in Chapter Two?



EXERCISE: *If you're in a book club, have everyone write down their answer before sharing with each other. If not, try an informal poll of your friends or colleagues.*

Where are the biggest similarities and differences? What explains them? How can the variety of views about risk enrich your ability to make good risk decisions?

Using the two main axes of the Risk Type Compass framework described in Chapter Three, would you say you are more impulsive or methodical? More anxious or calm? How would you describe your risk type according to these eight terms: Excitable, Deliberate, Intense, Composed, Adventurous, Wary, Prudent, Carefree?

Don't worry too much about the detailed definition for now; focus on the feeling of each type.

EXERCISE: *Try taking this abridged version of the Risk Type Compass Assessment at <http://www.psy-key.com/> using the code GrayRhino.*

What risk type does the test assign you? How close are you to the axis? How do your risk preferences fall in different parts of your life? Does your risk type match how you see yourself? If not, what are the differences?

How often do you take active risks –extreme sports, leaving too little time to get to the airport, jaywalking, starting a business, being the squeaky wheel? How often do you take passive risks –Which category –active or passive—better describes you as a risk taker? How do you compare to the entrepreneurs profiled in Chapter Four?

The next two questions may be the most important ones you ask.

- What's the biggest risk you've ever taken?
- What's the biggest risk you've decided *not* to take? Was it related to the biggest risk you have taken?

Spend some time thinking about the logic and emotions that led you to make those choices. Are you happy with how those decisions turned out? If not, is your regret bigger that you took too much risk or not enough? Or that you made the wrong choice entirely?

Chapter Five explores how people from different demographic backgrounds interact with risk. Why are the people around you so important in creating a healthy environment in which you can take more “good” risks and fewer ill-considered ones? What influences do your peers, family, and friends have on your own risk decisions? If you were to change the mix, what kind of risk types would you add or remove?

What do you think explains the “risky shift” phenomenon which leads people to become much more conservative or much more aggressive in their risk taking when they are in groups compared to when they are alone?



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Take some time to talk about risk with people much older and younger than you are. How do your attitudes about risk compare to generations older and younger than yours -particularly when it comes to career, financial, and social risks? What do you have in common? How have events unfolding around you in the world -both in the past and now-- affected the way you think about risk?

Chapter Six explores the many misconceptions about the relationship between gender and risk taking. Do you feel you are expected to take more or less of some kinds of risks because of your gender? For example, speeding or drinking or borrowing money -for education or investments or on credit cards to support your retail habit? How much do you feel gender expectations affect your risk decisions?

Do you feel that you have been mis-judged because of risk stereotypes? Have you misjudged others because you made assumptions about them?

Why is the term “risk averse” problematic? How is it different from “risk savvy”? Describe the difference between how you perceive someone described as “risk savvy” versus “risk averse.” Think of some risk decisions—either ones that you took or that others have taken—that can be described as risk savvy even though they might have been seen as examples of risk aversion.

Men and women are far more alike than stereotypes have it when it comes to risk decisions, yet there are some differences. These involve how they make decisions and the kinds of risks they take. Think of people of different genders in your life. Where are they similar and where do they differ? How much of the differences do you think come from personalities and circumstances, and how much from gender?

One of the terms that has really resonated with readers of this book is risk empathy: the ability to understand the sources of someone else’s risk fingerprint and to adjust your behavior accordingly. What does risk empathy look like to you? Can you describe a situation where you or someone else showed risk empathy? Or one where it would have helped?

What steps can you take to be sure that your perceptions are accurate when it comes to the risk relationships of the people around you?

How would you describe your country’s risk fingerprint? What are its cultural, historical, geographical, and political roots? How does the national risk fingerprint affect government policies and business and citizens’ risk decisions? Are citizens fairly uniform in how closely they match the national fingerprint? Or do they range widely? Do those groups tend to group together along political, social, economic, regional, or other lines?

Are you typical of others in your country or culture? What assumptions you might be making about the risk perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of people from other cultures and countries?



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EXERCISE: *Chapter Seven cites research that sheds light on different risk attitudes around the world. If you'd like to delve deeper into the difference between countries, follow these links to explore:*

Lloyd's Register World Risk Poll: <https://wrp.lrfoundation.org.uk/>

Ipsos Perils of Perception <https://perils.ipsos.com/>

World Values Survey: <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>

Pew Research Global Indicators Database: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/database/>

How does your country compare to others on these measures? What do you think makes it similar to some countries and dissimilar to others?

Now think in more detail about public policies that make people more or less comfortable taking different kinds of risks, and more or less confident in their government and fellow citizens. What do your country's social safety nets, government effectiveness in ensuring citizens' safety, consumer protections, and health care system say about its values in protecting citizens from harm?

In the Biblical Parable of the Talents recounted in Chapter Eight, the owner of an estate gives three servants coins while he goes on a trip. When he returns, he praises the two who invested the money and scolds the one who kept his money hidden away safely. Imagine a new scenario: one of the servants invested the money in a bad bet and lost it all. What would the master have said then? Does it matter whether the servant could have foreseen the loss if they had done better due diligence, or if it was through an unforeseeable, freak occurrence? How would this new scenario and outcome affect the lesson the parable was meant to tell?

How would you likely have responded to the estate owner's challenge, and what does that say about what is most important to you?

EXERCISE: *Make a list of the things that you cannot do without, both material (ie, things) and less tangible (satisfaction at work, happy relationship), and for different areas of life. You can choose the areas that are most appropriate, but they may include some combination of work, health, relationships, family/children, home, community, recreation/fun, safety, ethics. Make another list of the things that are nice to have but not essential; that is, around which you are willing to make trade-offs. Now consider how you spend your time, energy, and money. Does this match up with the priorities you identified above?*

The process of assessing risks and the appropriate responses involves a mix of emotion, reason, access to information—and awareness of how much each of those factors influences your decision. That mix of factors is different for each person.

Chapter Nine describes this video from Prof. David Spiegelhalter, aka "Professor Risk," helping viewers to think in new ways some of the risks of daily life: <https://youtu.be/nLI9HEz5vng>
Full of both humor and facts, the video is well worth watching and a discussion on its own.



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You might be surprised if you take a closer look at how you approach risks and decide what is acceptable or not. People who like to think of themselves as rational beings likely will be surprised at the emotional undercurrents that affect how they judge a risk. People who respond emotionally may be aware that their fears or aspirations do not match the facts.

Do you decide more on emotion or reason? How does this compare to your friends, family members, and colleagues? Just like Professor Risk eating his bacon, how much do you factor your happiness into your calculation?

Let's take a look at a specific risk that was raging as this book was being written and published: Covid-19. How soon did you get vaccinated and boosted? How fastidious were you been about wearing a mask at different stages of the pandemic? Did you make those decisions based more on emotion or reason? In hindsight, are you happy with the decisions you made?

EXERCISE: *Below is a list of tools that can help you calculate your actual Covid risk in real time. Choose one and play around with it; compare to others if you like. Do the results match up with how much of a risk you think the SARS-CoV-2 virus poses to you?*

[Microcovid.org](https://microcovid.org). Location (geographic and indoor/outdoor), nature of activity, length of time, number of people, mask usage, personal risk factors. Generates risk estimate and personal risk budget.

[Covid-19 Indoor Safety Guideline](#) (Developed at MIT) Room specs, human behaviors (masks etc), age, viral strain. Generates 1) time estimate for how long it takes to violate safety guidelines and 2) recommended occupancy limit depending on amount of time.

[Rockefeller Foundation Pandemic Prevention Institute](#). Location in US, vaccination, pre-event rapid testing. Generates odds of one person arriving infected at an event.

[Center for Digital Health](#). Location (geographic and indoor/outdoor), nature of activity, length of time, number of people, mask usage. Generates risk on low to high scale.

[Mathematica/19 and Me](#). Risk factors, health factors including exercise, risk behaviors (PPE, hand hygiene possible exposures), your vaccination status (including which type of vaccine you received); generates calculation of estimated probability of catching Covid-19 through community transmission.

[COVID-19 Mortality Risk Calculator](#) (Johns Hopkins). Demographic, pre-existing conditions and lifestyle. Generates assessment of individual mortality risks for people who are not infected or vaccinated compared to the average risk for the US population.

Chapter Nine cites a series of factors that the social psychologist and risk perception expert Paul Slovic and his colleagues identified as affecting how emotional responses to different kinds of risks change the way you perceive them and how tolerant you are. As you revisit some of those factors below, how do you think they affected your responses to Covid-19?



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Confidence in the information you got: Think about the media you watch or listen to most often. What biases are they known for? Are they respected by a wide range of experts and people you know? Do you get your information from a variety of sources and points of view? What sources do your friends and colleagues rely on, and what biases are inherent?) How much trust do you have in what experts and public health officials say about the pandemic?

Sense of dread: Has the pandemic inspired more or less dread or fear for you than for others?

Size and distribution of risk: How big are the potential consequences to you and to those around you, both loved ones and strangers? What are the specific risk factors?

Many people changed their priorities during the pandemic, which in turn changed the risks they took – from where they live to how they invest to where (or whether) they work. Some observers have suggested that they are taking bigger risks, when in reality they are taking different risks. How has the pandemic changed what you are willing to risk, what is most important to you and what no longer matters as much as it once did?

Think about your preferences in food, music, temperature, environment, and other choices, and the evidence cited in Chapter Ten for how these factors might shape your risk choices in all areas of life: health, work, relationships, finances, ethics, safety. Do you like spicy food? Are you a smoker? Think about the environment around you: the temperature, the colors, the smells, how comfortable you are. Are these ideal conditions for good risk taking? If you have a big decision coming up, what would you change about your physical environment?

The role of companies in providing risk protection to employees is changing. So are people's attitudes toward risk, as research cited in Chapter Eleven demonstrates. What's your ideal job? Corporate, startup employee, startup founder, solopreneur? Why? Think about whether you're working in an environment that matches the amount of risk you're comfortable with, if some unhealthy risks feel too high, or if you feel you're not taking enough healthy risks.

What makes you feel more secure?

- A corporate job with generous benefits, but the possibility of losing the job if your boss changes or if the company does poorly or decides to change direction
- Controlling your own schedule and the jobs you accept and having several different sources of income so that if one gets cut off, you still have others.
- A job that pays well but where you have little control or satisfaction, or you have doubts about the company's values.
- A job that pays okay but gives you lots of autonomy and the chance to learn and

Now think about how those preferences align with your actual job. Do they match or not?



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Just as your personal preferences may affect where you choose to work, your place of employment in turn can shape your comfort level with different kinds of risks. Chapter Twelve describes dynamics in different kinds of organizations, from small businesses to medium-sized family business to larger corporations. Does the culture where you work or volunteer value or discourage risk-taking and failure? Do leaders create a sense of psychological safety; that is, are you and your peers confident that you won't be reprimanded if you speak up about ideas, ask questions, raise concerns, or flag mistakes?

How would you describe your CEO's approach to risk? Are they known as a risk taker or a traditionalist? How do they talk about risk? What about their own personal risk behavior and ethics (ie #metoo scandals, tantrums, media reports about eccentric, erratic, or extravagant habits?)

While you cannot control your innate personality or what happened in the past, you can develop habits and choose environments that can help you to take smarter risks and protect yourself if things go wrong.

First, how would you describe your safety net? (Financial, social, professional, family....) What kinds of people might you add to strengthen your safety net? Second, to whom do you turn to make important choices? What kind of information do you seek (and where) before making a decision?

Describe your comfort zone: what activities, people around you, work environment, home environment. What makes you feel out of your comfort zone? Do you regularly experience situations where you feel uncomfortable? How often do you deliberately get out of your comfort zone and do things that feel risky?

EXERCISE: Push yourself out of your comfort zone using one or more of these examples.

Dress up if you usually dress down, and vice versa; try a new style

Talk to strangers

Travel someplace new

Set new and more ambitious "stretch" goals

Eat a new cuisine

Watch a movie or show outside of your usual genre

Read a book outside of your usual genre

Listen to a new artist or kind of music

Try something new for fun

At a time when the entire world faces a pandemic, economic uncertainty, geopolitical tensions, and the accelerating march of climate change, nobody on the planet can avoid the consequences of bad global risk choices. Reflect for a moment on the global risks discussed in Chapter Fourteen. How do these giant, seemingly overwhelming risks impact you, your organization, community, and country?



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How much power do you feel you have to change the outcome (positively or negatively) of any big global issue like climate change or poverty? What, if anything, do you do to help reduce global risks?

“Risk can be a danger, an opportunity, or both. Risk is taking a chance: a possibility or an estimated probability. Risk is a muscle. Risk is a privilege. Risk is what you love or what you fear. What you are willing to risk signals your sense of purpose. Every risk is a choice; every choice is a risk.” Discuss this quote from Chapter Fifteen. What does smart risk-taking mean to you? What does your relationship with risk say about how you move through life and the world?

The tech-futurist artist Drue Kataoka reveres art like the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and other “immortal works” –undertakings that were hugely risky artistically, logistically, and financially but have yielded benefits to humanity that are many times bigger than the risks taken to create them. She credits the broader economic, social, and political ecosystem of the Renaissance with catalyzing the forces needed to make these works possible. What does an ideal risk ecosystem look like to you? How does a risk ecosystem support or discourage creativity, innovation, and healthy or unhealthy risk taking?

The Irish adventure athlete Mark Pollock and lawyer Simone George used radical risk empathy to work through the daunting challenge to their relationship after he fell out of a window and became paralyzed just weeks before they were to be married.

Watch their powerful TED Talk about the ordeal here:

https://www.ted.com/talks/mark_pollock_and_simone_george_a_love_letter_to_realism_in_a_time_of_grief?language=en

What risks most concerned Mark after his catastrophic accident –both for himself and Simone? Similarly, which risks most worried Simone, for herself and for him? Where were the overlaps in their risk perceptions and priorities? How did risk empathy help the two of them to move forward together and create a new future? How did their past experience taking risks make it possible to forge that path together?

In the conclusion of the book, Mark says: “The challenge is how we live with the twin possibilities of success and failure and for that, we must value ourselves by our willingness to try.” How does that relate to the idea that the risks each one of us takes defines us and identifies us to the world?



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