THERE’S NOTHING LIKE A NEAR MISS TO PUT THINGS IN PERSPECTIVE.

A few months ago, our flight from Hawaii back to Los Angeles made an emergency evasive move — a 600-foot dive in a matter of seconds.

Those seconds felt like hours as the sudden descent put my stomach in my mouth. During the dive, some passengers were yelling, others screaming. When the plane stabilized, nervousness and uncertainty overwhelmed the cabin. About 15 minutes later, the co-pilot announced on the public address system that another aircraft had been in surrounding airspace. In other words, we had almost had a head-on collision (although nobody realized it at the time).

A couple of weeks later, I was watching the nightly news when the anchor said, “Passenger jets almost collide midair.” As I listened, I thought, “OMG — we were on that plane.” Sure enough, the news report confirmed the eastbound plane we were on, United Flight 1205, nearly collided with a westbound US Airways jet.

Beyond the cliché of having “my life flash before my eyes,” I can say that being 20 seconds away from disaster overhauled my idea of happiness.

Throughout our lives, we pursue happiness. In the United States, it is our inalienable right, as the Declaration of Independence promises us. And so we chase after what we believe will make us happy — money, possessions, leisure time, adventure, even a job title. We tell ourselves that when we get this, can afford that, or arrive there, we will be happy. Yet, it doesn’t happen. Why? Because the destination, the achievement, the result is never as rich, as fulfilling, as satisfying as the personal growth, challenges and progress of the journey itself. This has broad implications for leaders who generally motivate by focusing on the final prize rather than celebrating the small wins.

As Teresa Amabile, co-author of “The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement, and Creativity at Work,” told business writer Dan Pink,
“Our research showed that, of all the events that have the power to excite people and engage them in their work, the single most important is making progress — even if that progress is a small win. That’s the Progress Principle. And, because people are more creatively productive when they are excited and engaged, small wins are a very big deal for organizations.” And yet, when Amabile and her co-author asked nearly 700 managers around the world to rank five factors according to what they thought most motivated employees, they put “progress” dead last!

Even those of us who understand the importance of simple progress don’t want to lose what we already have. People who get to the top typically want to stay there — the view can be pretty appealing. And even when they know, intellectually, that “you are not your job,” the prestige and perks that come with an impressive title can be hard to give up. Just ask any company founder who doesn’t want to step aside or a corporate leader who hesitates to retire.

The target, however, is always moving. We keep chasing after something bigger, bolder, brighter, better that’s just beyond our grasp, like a balloon carried by the wind. We are never content in the moment. Rather, we anticipate happiness, tomorrow. But in seconds it can all be gone. Disaster does not discriminate.

The near-miss incident has made me reflect, once again, on life and what makes it meaningful. My family? Of course. But my realization has gone further. The time we have is not unlimited. Each moment, therefore, really does matter. Meaning is created in how we invest those moments in our particular pursuit of happiness.

Does my job really matter? I am a CEO and, like other senior leaders, my job is to guide a company. We can contribute to providing opportunities for others. The decisions that chief executives make do matter, especially to job creation. But, unlike a pilot or a surgeon, a CEO does not hold human lives in the balance, moment-to-moment. Most executives don’t make life-or-death, split-second decisions.

Coincidentally, a chance encounter with the pilot of my United flight taught me another lesson about happiness: It is always nearby — whether we seize it or not. Before takeoff on that flight from Hawaii to Los Angeles, I noticed the pilot wheeling a flight bag with a guitar case strapped to it. “What are you going to play?” I asked him.

“Dylan,” he answered.

“Oh, I love Dylan,” I told him, and turned to my daughter and smiled.

In that moment, I did know, in the deepest recesses of my mind, that our lives were in his hands. But I never gave it a second thought. At that point, he was simply a cool pilot who plays guitar. Only after we landed safely could I contemplate what we all almost lost and how the pilot wasn’t just “cool” but remarkably competent and quick-thinking under pressure, in the moment. Thanks to that Dylan fan in the cockpit, each of us passengers was given another chance to pursue our happiness, whatever we consider that to be.

What appeals to one person may not be ideal for another. Yet, certain things are timeless and unbounded. As humans, we want to be loved, to fit in, to matter. We wonder what others will think of us; we want to be part of something bigger than ourselves. These are the universal goals in the pursuit of happiness, which is not over the horizon or at the end of some rainbow.

Happiness is not durable, it can be very fleeting; happiness is not abundant, it is in fact in short supply. Happiness is not given to you, it is recognized by you. Happiness is not living in tomorrow’s promise, but rather in savoring today’s reality. Happiness is indeed in the moment... ultimately, based on how you make others feel.

That’s happiness, imagined.

“From the CEO

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