



MARC WALLERT

STRENGTH THROUGH CRISES

THE ART OF NOT LOSING
YOUR HEAD

Econ

The book

In 2000, Marc Wallert and 20 other hostages were taken by terrorists to a Philippine island and imprisoned in the jungle for 140 days. 20 years later, he describes the strategies he used to survive and what he learned from the experience. The jungle didn't break him, but the day-to-day life that followed drove him to burnout. In order to better understand why, he set out to find answers by focusing on the defining moments of his life—the crises. In this book, he explains effective strategies for both private and professional life that can help people get through crises and become even stronger as they do so.

The author

Marc Wallert, MSc and MBA is a psychological consultant and certified resilience trainer. He worked for more than 15 years as an executive for internationally renowned companies such as PwC, Renault and Ottobock—speaking four languages and leading teams of more than 60 people. Today he inspires people and organizations on how to successfully master crises and stressful situations in talks and seminars.

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Insights

Dear Reader,

Maybe at this very moment you are trying to find inspiration for dealing with a crisis in your life. And maybe knowing how I survived being kidnapped will be useful. It happened more than twenty years ago...

Until now, I didn't find it easy to talk about it. In the year 2000, the abduction of my parents, me, and eighteen other hostages hit the world headlines. To be the focus of attention after our release was quite a challenge for me, and I consciously pulled away from the public spotlight. I didn't want to feed any more sensationalism, didn't want to tell my story over and over again. But now, twenty years later, I've written this book and give talks about that time, because I've recognized how important it was for me on a very personal level. Maybe reading about it will be helpful for other people too. It's not about the bare facts of my abduction, the "story," but to let others know what I learned from it. Twenty years ago, I was given a second chance. When I returned to freedom, I was allowed a new start and to create a future for myself, just as I wanted it to

be. Have I made use of this opportunity? Well, I think so—by and by. But the path to this point has been quite bumpy.

It still amazes me that I survived the kidnapping itself and the one hundred forty days of captivity in the jungle without any damage. It surprised everyone, especially the people closest to me. If I had withstood such an extreme experience, I thought, then nothing in everyday life could ever worry me again. Most people who heard about my ordeal thought the same. But they were all wrong. Five years after regaining my freedom, I suffered a total burnout due to stress at work.

You survived a kidnapping and a long period of captivity without any harm but suffered a burnout at work? Trying to rationalize this conundrum, I began an intensive search for the underlying reasons and arrived at an astonishing insight: my capacity to keep my head played an important part in both crises. In the jungle, it didn't seem to be a problem. But in everyday life, I needed to learn what it takes not to lose it even after a crisis had passed. Both experiences helped me to lead a happier life—and this is what I would like to share with you.

In a crisis, people tend to get overwhelmed by their feelings—mostly by fear, but sometimes by an exaggerated optimism. They are equally dangerous. This is one of the lessons I learned during my captivity. Positive thinking in the jungle could actually be lethal. But this also applies to the “economic jungle” of the corporate world. I learned that lesson during more than fifteen years of working as a consultant and senior manager for major companies. In the

business world, particularly in these fast-moving times of increasing digitalization, great anxiety prevails.

The ability to keep your head helps you find a clear path through times of uncertainty and crisis. It helped me to survive my abduction and captivity. In this book, I want to describe that capacity—it's almost an art—as well as further survival strategies and how to apply them to your day-to-day life. We jungle hostages developed successful strategies to meet our challenges as a team, and I want to apply those mainly to the world of work.

After they have overcome a crisis, people are often at risk of losing their mind. The presumed comfort zone turns out to be dangerous. “Wow, I made it!” they say. This is a thoroughly human reaction, but it can turn into a problem—unless you simply get back in the saddle again and move on. But you might stumble at the same point again. For years, I made that mistake and ended up on a carousel of crises revolving around the same issues time and again: burnout and broken relationships.

It is quite a challenge to deal positively with the punches life throws. Some blows are so hard that they nearly knock you out. There is no secret formula for how to deal with dangerous situations. During my captivity, when my life was in actual danger, I found consolation in gallows humor. It didn't solve the problems as such, but it reduced the tension. I intend to use humor in this book as well.

Strength Through Crises: The Art of Not Losing Your Head is meant to be a guide about how to be creative and find inspiration—but it doesn't try to be all-inclusive or complete. It's rather about giving suggestions for everyday

life. People and their crises are unique, and general advice might not be specific enough. However, examples from my time in captivity, as well as from my personal and work life, might inspire you to master your own challenges and to grow through them.

Strong in a Crisis

Many people have asked me: “How did you survive your dangerous crisis so well? What made you so strong?” Naturally, I’ve asked myself the same questions. As I sought answers, I discovered some elements of my success that correspond with what I call protective factors of resilience. There are many definitions of resilience—mental resistance, one’s inner strength under duress, and so on. Sometimes it is due to seven, eight, or even ten protective factors, also called pillars of resilience. They protected me, and that’s why I call them protective factors.

According to scientific studies, resilience most commonly depends on acceptance, optimism, self-efficacy, and social support. Competence in stressful situations and fitness are important too. The first part of this book is a discussion of the six protective factors that helped me most to survive my captivity in the jungle.

Why Me?

That's a question I've asked myself countless times when looking back at my life. I was the youngest in my year at school, physically awkward and intellectually overwhelmed. I would have loved to remain a child, to just play and live without any pressure, staying forever in my comfort zone. During swimming lessons, I stayed in the warm baby pool as long as I could while my contemporaries were already racing each other in the big, cold pool. They practically had to throw me in. I was never a member of one of the cool gangs, and for a long time, I played the unloved role of the class clown.

When I was fifteen years old, things got better. My first love was a popular girl who was definitely out of my league. We spent a wonderful year together and were already dreaming of having children. But it was puppy love, and jealousy and hurt replaced the romance. We separated with tears and heartache. The pain and jealousy nearly tore me apart, but at the same time, those feelings released an unexpected energy in me and made me more courageous. I suddenly wanted to change and at last leave behind my role as the straggler and the clown.

It meant leaving everything familiar behind, and that was something completely new to me. The decisive moment—and I clearly remember it—came when our English teacher stormed into our geography class and shouted: "Who wants to go on a student exchange to England for four weeks? There are only two places. First come, first served." I had never raised my arm so quickly, shouting "Ja!" *This is my chance, things can't get any worse*, said an inner voice. Another voice reminded me that my knowledge

of the English language was pretty poor. But it was too late to worry about that. I was one of only a few students in my class who had never been abroad. My older brother had already been to France and England. He was much bolder and independent and quite a good role model; whereas I was afraid of being far away from home and preferred to stay in the warm nest with my loving parents. But being lovesick worked like a kick in the butt. It threw me out of my comfort zone and gave me the momentum to embark on an adventure—something I had never dared before. For the first time, I jumped into the big, cold pool voluntarily.

The Beginnings of a Self-Determined Life

In Cornwall, I was born again. Laurence, my exchange partner, was a stroke of luck in every respect. I had a wonderful time with him, his family, and his friends. English people seemed to be more relaxed than Germans. Everything seemed easy, and even learning the language was fun. I progressed in leaps and bounds and conquered obstacles that previously seemed insurmountable. I did a week's internship with a local paper. At the end of it, they published an article about me with a photo. I was so proud! For the first time in my life, I had thrown myself into the unknown and come out the other side! My self-confidence grew amazingly, and I knew I wanted more of that! Back in Germany, I applied myself even harder. I studied, got good grades, found acceptance and respect, and was keen on more—more learning, even better grades. Most of all, I was

keen for more recognition. My time abroad had set a positive cycle in motion. But without realizing it, I fell into another trap: I became a junkie hooked on success.

Recognition from others increased my confidence and also raised my status in school. When I was younger, I was quite a talented drummer and had always hoped to use that talent to gain the acceptance of the other students. When I was nine years old, I played for the first time on a large stage in front of an audience of five hundred. It was with the teacher's band, with my father on guitar. At twelve, I won a few talent competitions with the school band. Our songs were even played on the radio (once!), but all that left no impression on my fellow students. The answer to the question "Do I feel successful?" was always no. It would never have occurred to me then that one day I would shine because of my grades *and* be proud of it. But that was exactly the case now. I passed my exams with excellent grades and enjoyed the respect it brought me, having longed for it for such a long time. It felt as if the world was my oyster. In my 1992 high school yearbook, I stated "Abroad (Australia)" as my dream destination.

For the duration of my civil service, I stayed in my hometown of Göttingen to save up for college. I had earned a fair bit of money as the drummer in a band, playing at weddings and office parties for a few years. It had been great fun too.

At nineteen, I had no idea what to do with the rest of my life. Yes, I wanted to go to college and get good grades, and possibly to do it abroad—to hopefully repeat my good times in Cornwall. And that's how my five years in college turned

out. I studied all sorts of things—social sciences, economic geography, and international management—in five countries, at four universities, and in three languages. I was ambitious and finished everything with excellent grades. I received a first in my diploma; a distinction in my MSc, and was “Best in Year” as I got my MBA. I was very proud and enjoyed the amount of recognition and respect these honors brought me. Prince Charles would have handed me my certificate if I had gone to the graduation ceremony. In Paris, I was asked to give an official speech as Best in Year in a splendid ministerial building.

My years of studying were exciting and interesting but didn't help much toward finding the right job. I had allowed myself to be influenced too easily, by adverts, articles, recommendations, that kind of thing. I was interested a little in a lot of things (though not in finance), but not really keen on anything, apart from languages. Whereas everyone else seemed to have chosen their favorite subject and committed to it, I was a specialist in the general. I had many fingers in many pies but couldn't decide which one to eat.

“Hey, go into consulting. They are always looking for flexible, well-educated people,” a friend of mine suggested. “You can always specialize in something later.” That sounded ideal and didn't commit me to anything—quite my thing. Because our careers officer had good connections to Luxembourg, I completed my second master's degree with a corporate consultancy company, PricewaterhouseCoopers Consulting (PwC) in Luxembourg.

When All Doors Are Open...

PwC was the ideal springboard for my career. Not only was I part of one of the most renowned management consultancy firms in the world, but also, I was in a heaven of multiculturalism. Consultants from all over the world made up the teams for specific projects. The working language fluidly changed between English, French, and German, often in the same sentence. For me, it was a dream!

For a year, I played the role of a firefighter on a project worth billions, coordinating IT projects for an international financing service. My team of consultants often worked until late at night on factsheets and presentations to finish the monthly report for the board in time. I was a good soldier, but had very little conviction. What I loved was the recognition it brought me.

At the university, my interests had been wide-ranging. I found learning easy, but to commit myself to detail wasn't really my thing. I had always reached for the next interesting topic, always reacting positively to encouragement and recognition. I only understood much later that just grabbing opportunities has very little to do with self-determination.

But, if I wanted to make a career as a consultant, I would have to specialize. My boss gave me a choice: It was either "private banking" or "investment funds." But I wasn't really interested in either. It wasn't real enough for me. Too many figures, too much... hmm, tax-avoidance. But there wasn't really anything else for me in Luxembourg.

What could I do? Move again? And where to? What on earth was I supposed to do—and where?

Many doors were open to me, but I didn't have a clue which one to choose. I was young and free but felt a complete lack of direction. Hadn't I reached my goal—a successful job abroad? Looking back, I know that Luxembourg was only a transit station on my hunt for recognition, on my endless search for more of it.

So far, my life had led me from one city to the next, one university to the next, one project to the next, one woman to the next—always without any commitment, always ready for the next kick. My job was really the equivalent of a lottery win for someone so new to the business, but it was killing me. I had felt burned out for a while.

But instead of taking things more slowly, I took on more and more major tasks. The next mega project for which they had already penciled me in was in connection with the German stock market. Together with a colleague, I frequently shuttled between Frankfurt and Luxembourg. We quickly grew fed up with anonymous hotels and planned to rent a lovely loft apartment for the coming months. It was a bargain compared with the hotel bills. We were about to pick up the keys when I hesitated. The Frankfurt project was going downhill. Again we fought our way from one deadline to the next. The stress never abated.

One night I was lying awake and asked myself what I was actually fighting for. Why perform all these complicated projections and process analyses? I felt cut off from myself and somehow completely in the wrong place; there was a yearning in me for a task to which I could

commit myself from the bottom of my heart. But what could that be? Maybe I needed some transcendent experience that would show me what was really important in life. I was desperately longing for a “compass.” I’m not religious, but that night I sent a fervent prayer to heaven, asking fate for some advice. And fate answered very quickly and also pretty clearly...

When I spoke to my parents on the phone the next day, telling them of my crisis, my dad said: “We’re flying to Malaysia over Easter for a diving holiday. Why don’t you come with us and relax a bit?” It sounded very tempting. During the previous year, I had seen my parents only sporadically, and some downtime would be very good for me. But how could I get two weeks off during these hectic times at work? My mother simply suggested: “Why don’t you just ask them?” I did exactly that, and my boss agreed.

I was highly successful at work then, but at the same time without a proper direction. Something wasn’t right in a life that on the surface looked so glamorous: a successful corporate consultant in an elegant suit rushing with a suitcase from one appointment to the next, lunching in top-rated restaurants. For years, my life had been restless, fleeting. The same applied to my relationships. I shuttled between noncommittal affairs and longer relationships without finding any fulfilment. Today I realize that I was in crisis already. At the time though, I only felt stuck.

Off to My Adventure

My parents and I flew to Sipadan in Malaysia, a dream of a tropical island a few kilometers off Borneo's northern Pacific coast. The sea around it is a paradise for divers. The coastal shelf falls steeply away for six hundred meters. The depths are patrolled by schools of barracuda you normally only meet far out in the ocean. Sipadan is particularly renowned as a breeding place for various kinds of turtles. They are protected, as they return to the beaches year after year to lay their eggs—one reason why the number of tourists on the island is strictly limited. I felt like Robinson Crusoe on his desert island. One could circle the island comfortably in half an hour, and we walked barefoot either on the fine sand or in the warm, lapping waves. On the inner part of the island, I came across an iguana, nearly a meter long. It was guarding its nest of eggs in a sandy hollow, and hissed a threat at me. Looking through my camera lens, I thought it would make an amazing shot.

But I enjoyed it even more when, one evening, the rangers from the turtle station called the tourists over to watch one of nature's miraculous sights: hundreds of baby turtles were hatching at the same time and raced across the beach to the safety of the ocean.

Several times a day we dived down to the immensely colorful landscape of the coral reef, just drifting in warm water, looking around in amazement. It was the perfect place for me. I managed to switch off at last, enjoying the simplicity of everything. Work and my worries vanished into the background, and the actual distance from my chaotic love life helped me relax.

On the evening that was to change my life—it was our tenth day on the island—my parents and I were lounging on deckchairs on the sundeck outside the open-air restaurant. It had been my idea, which later I would bitterly regret.

It was a moment of total relaxation and the highlight of a dream holiday. Holding an iced cocktail, I looked out to sea and listened to the lapping waves. A light breeze of salty sea air felt comfortably cool. My parents had put their feet up and smiled happily at each other. We talked about our afternoon activities and then clinked our glasses in praise of this perfect Easter Sunday.

If we had followed my parents' plan, we would have been ten meters away out in the water and ready for some night diving on the reef. But it would have been the fourth dive of the day, and it nearly felt like stress to me. So, in the afternoon, I had asked my parents to spend our Easter Sunday evening leisurely on land. They gave in and let the night diving session go.

Watching the sky at night was our TV. One minute the sky was a deep blood red; the next the stars were glittering so brightly that you felt a part of the cosmos. This abrupt change is typical for tropical countries. In front of us, some night divers let the air out of their jackets and sank down to another world. We watched as their lights slowly faded in the dark water. It was incredibly quiet, and my father murmured, "What a blessing to be allowed such a peaceful Sunday."

Then we heard panicky cries behind us, and the idyll collapsed. Everything happened very quickly.

When I turned around, I saw several armed men storming the restaurant. One of them had a rocket launcher on his shoulder. A second later, he loomed right behind me. Staring into the barrel of his bazooka, I tried to make sense of it all. Time seemed to stop. I felt my heart in my throat. Several gaunt and weedy looking men, partly masked, were waving semi-automatic weapons at us, calling "Police! Police!" But they didn't seem to be friendly and helpful at all, rather like fishermen and farmers from the fringes of the civilized world. We were chased toward the bungalows of the hotel complex. "Faster! Faster!" Their nervousness was palpable. They didn't seem sure of what they were doing, but that made them more dangerous. Armed weakness is much more dangerous than armed strength.

The men drove us, together with the other tourists and some hotel employees, past the bungalows toward the beach. I expected that they were about to rob us and ransack the bungalows.

In the pale moonlight, I made out two narrow wooden fishing boats. I felt the barrel of a gun in my back. My mother and I were pushed into one boat; my father into the other.

An American woman refused to get in. She couldn't swim and her fear of water was stronger than her fear of the men. Collapsing into the shallows she clung to her husband. Three men failed to get her into the boat. The situation threatened to escalate. The kidnappers were waving their weapons. Their body language said they were ready to kill. Suddenly, it seemed very possible that someone would be murdered in front of our eyes. But then

the men let the couple go, pushed the boats deeper into the water, and started the outboard engines. The condition of the boats seemed to indicate a short journey. But that turned out to be wrong.

We huddled closely together, forty people in two boats, about the same number of victims and hijackers. I could hardly breathe from a combination of fear and being crammed in, at a loss as to what would happen next. Would they throw us into the water and shoot at us once we were further out? I was overcome by deep regret. Why hadn't we gone on the night dive?!

Somehow, I found some space between two fellow victims. My mother was crouching a few meters further down, leaning against the side of the boat. With a sobbing voice, she whispered, "I'm so sorry that you are here because of me. I shouldn't have persuaded you to come on this holiday."

Thoughts about guilt and fate. Should I have refused to be persuaded to come? What if we were on a different island today as my father had suggested? But suddenly, a completely different thought surfaced. Was this the hint from fate I had asked for? Then my wish had been granted!

The thought caused my body to tingle with a kind of euphoria. Maybe I was still slightly hazy from the cocktails, but all of a sudden, I saw the possibility of being on a journey toward myself. That I was going to learn something that would give me a compass for life.

The fear remained, but now I was also curious. Wide awake, I decided to memorize everything that happened from now on and to look for a deeper meaning. I gradually

stopped bemoaning my fate and started to concentrate on how to best deal with the situation.

Clarity Gives You Strength

On that boat, I felt a clarity I had never experienced before, at least not in my job. I guessed that this journey would not only be very stressful but also life-threatening. But despite my fears, I knew exactly what I would be fighting for: my survival. Focusing on that goal, I gained inner clarity, and that gave me sufficient strength.

The hopelessness of the situation somehow had a liberating effect on me. There was only one direction. For the first time, I didn't have to make a difficult decision. When I recognized this clearly, it felt as if a burden was taken from me. All connections to my former life had been severed. Nobody could contact me here. The acute stress, my fundamental lack of direction at work, and the chaos of my relationships were far away. I felt strong and somehow in the right place—a feeling I had longed for since my childhood.

A Transcendent Experience

The kidnappers kept in touch between the two boats by light signals. My mother and I couldn't contact my father for hours, and were worried we would never see each other

again. Everyone was deeply troubled, but on the outside, a certain calmness gradually set in. The sea was calm, there was a pleasant breeze, and the star-studded night sky was breathtaking. Life on board began to take some shape. I talked to the man next to me. We speculated about what would lie ahead of us. Our imaginations explored robbery, ritual executions, or being kidnapped for ransom. Fear was mirrored in every face.

The man sitting between me and my mother introduced himself as Seppo, saying he had only just arrived from Finland. He couldn't stop sobbing, buried his face in his hands, and kept repeating "No, no, no!" At some point, he put his head in my mother's lap. She comforted him by stroking his back and calmed herself down a bit as well.

It was oppressively tight on the boat. Most of the space was filled with petrol canisters, and it seemed that we were going on a long journey. We could hardly move. In the night we were drenched by spray; during the day we were exposed to the hot sun. We had nothing apart from the clothes we were wearing and had to relieve ourselves in the boat. Soon the stench became unbearable: a mixture of urine, saltwater, and petrol was lapping at our feet.

We didn't know then that we were heading toward an island called Jolo—part of the Sulu Archipelago in the southern part of the Philippines. Our kidnapping was the first crime of this type that crossed the border between Malaysia and the Philippines.

Soon I began my search for the meaning of it all. Hadn't I longed for something like this? A kick in the butt like back at school? But this was an adventure and a half! During the

twenty hours at sea, I managed to accept my situation. Sipadan felt like a lifetime ago. I began to look ahead to this journey despite its very uncertain outcome.

In contrast with me, my mother had trouble dealing with the situation—particularly her own role in it. She kept blaming herself and whispered time and again, “I wish I hadn’t said anything. You wouldn’t have asked your boss for a holiday and wouldn’t be here.” I was deeply moved by the way my mother worried about her child’s wellbeing, even in this perilous situation.

I reached out over Seppo’s shoulder to touch my mother and comfort her. “Nothing happens without a reason. It will make sense at some point. Don’t worry about me, I’m okay.” But I realized that she kept imagining scenarios that would have kept us from ending up here. The spiral of thoughts was robbing her of all energy as she made a desperate attempt to turn back the clock and make everything disappear. But you cannot go back in time, so you should focus all your energy on how to make the best of the situation.

This is easier said than done. In such moments, it’s invaluable to be able to put down your thoughts on paper, to free your head. It was one of the many crazy coincidences of our journey that we got hold of some paper and pencils. After about two weeks of captivity, I began to write down our experiences in a “hostage diary,” and to process them at the same time. Scientists have established that some survivors of extreme situations develop a sense of gratitude for what happened to them and end up feeling

enriched. I hadn't come that far, but I was determined to make the best of my situation.

"This is my attempt to write down and process the events of this ordeal in real time," I wrote in my "Jungle Diary." "I regret that I didn't have the means and the energy in the first few days to remember everything we went through step by step. Nevertheless, I want to write down as many details as possible and thus process them, because it's never too late."

Most of the hostages kept a diary. Seppo was an artist and expressed his experience in drawings. For me, writing the diary was a way to accept what was happening. After our release, it also helped me to recollect the events and to put them into perspective. It was a very valuable experience.

What Is Resilience?

Any crisis is demanding. It takes a lot out of us, especially while it's going on. But a crisis, in my view, also has a lot of positive aspects. We can learn from it and grow. It takes a lot of energy and inner strength for this to happen. This inner strength, called "resilience," is the personal spirit of resistance in individuals and systems, such as in teams and organizations, when they come under stress from outside and within. It also means the capacity to quickly and sustainably recover after an ordeal. To this day, however, there is no precise definition of what characteristics, capacities, or forms of behavior are included. The word