Definitely
Ron Klein

I have always assumed that the word ‘definitely’ carried an implicit expectation of something certain to happen. So that, for example, when the driver of the vehicle bringing me from the Himalayan foothills of W. Sikkim to the Bagdogra Airport in the northern plains of West Bengal assures me that we will ‘definitely’ arrive in time for my flight, I should feel reassured of its certainly. But there is something about that word, or my driver’s confident use of it, that runs counter to my experience.

If ‘definitely’ implies certainty, how could my driver be certain that there would not be a sudden landslide blocking the mountain road until emergency equipment could be summoned to remove it, as often happens. Or that a very slow-moving traffic-blocking road-improving asphalt roller would not decide to make its way the 500 meters it needed to go while lorries and cars (including ours) wait impatiently behind it, or attempt to pass it on the one-and-a-half lane road. Or that there would not be a confluence of two vehicles wanting to be in the same place at the same time on the road just up ahead of us. Or that our tires would not give out from the sudden pits or stones in the surfaceless road surface. Or that, once clear of the mountain switchbacks, the throng of the Siliguri traffic would not form inevitable and unforeseeable bottlenecks, as oxcarts, trishaws, buses, taxis and lorries suicidally vie for any small space that opens in the road.

As all these possibilities that I have experienced fail to happen, or are narrowly averted, in order to calm my doubting mind, my driver further assures me that we ‘most certainly’ will arrive on time. Now ‘most certainly’ has me really worried. I understand that ‘most’ in his use is meant to be an intensifier, like ‘very’ or ‘absolutely,’ but it would have been more soothing to my worried mind if he had simply said, ‘absolutely definitely’ or something reassuring like that. But my fragile mind seizes on the word ‘most’ as a refutation of ‘definitely,’ a qualification, a subtraction, a diminution, a lesser form. ‘Most’ means not completely, as in ‘I ate most of the cake, but left some for you.’ ‘Most’ means like 90% or even 98%, but not all. As in not completely absolutely ‘definitely’ certain that we will get to the airport on time.

Thus disturbed, my nerve-jangled body-jostled mind asserts that in matters of time, getting to even 99% of ‘definitely’ doesn’t work for catching a plane. We are in two separate time frames, my car and the airplane. My car has entered its mountain journey of possible setbacks while the airplane is governed by its own set of factors that could make its scheduled takeoff time be less than ‘definitely.’ But I have also learned that while in the Old India, a bus due to leave ‘any time now’ could mean hours, in the New India, planes definitely do leave on time!

However, this time, we arrive at the airport with time to spare, my driver entirely oblivious of my doubting his integrity, vocabulary or driving skills. I always feel great relief and appreciation to get to my destination safely and on time in India, and that I can emphatically say quite definitely!

‘Definitely,’ Ron Klein.
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