When Automotive Language Sparks Curiosity, Clarity Follows — and Hope Sustains

Recalibrating Uncertainty

Curiosity is not soft. In high-pressure environments, it stretches thinking.

If you're someone who thinks in systems, diagnostics and adjustment rather than abstraction, consider this:

What happens when that same mindset is applied to uncertainty?

Not motivational slogans.
Not abstract reflection.
But the technical, cultural, enthusiast language someone already understands.

Previously, I worked with *Jason** (name and details changed to protect privacy), a military member in his early 30s navigating medical uncertainty following injury.

Prior to meeting with Jason, his life had direction, structure and long-term certainty. Then, he faced the possibility of leaving the military earlier than planned.

He described it like this:

"It's like driving in the fog — following someone else's directions and decisions with no control of the route or destination."

Frustrated. Angry. Uncertain.
Concerned about identity.
Concerned about belonging.
Concerned it might be "too late."

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Transition conversations may start with “what next?”

We didn’t start there.

Jason was also a car enthusiast. Precision. Engineering. Track days. Fabrication. Technical detail. Community.

He understood diagnostics.
He understood systems.
He understood that when visibility drops, you don’t panic — you adjust.

So rather than move into abstract reflection, we worked using automotive language and structured creative activities.

Not as decoration.

As cognitive scaffolding.

Not because I like cars.

But because metaphor, imagery and technical language — when aligned with someone’s lived experiences and interests — creates traction.

And traction builds sustainable hope.

The Creative Activities

Across our work together, we explored using:

- Liminality Cards
- Dashboard Decoder
- Drive Configuration
- Shifting Gears
- Past Success Pit Stops
- Bounce Back Reflections
- Test Drives
- Possibility Mapping

Each activity used automotive imagery, systems thinking and enthusiast language to make abstract concepts tangible.

Warning lights become emotional signals
Gears became staged action.
Pit stops became evidence of resilience.
Test drives replaced irreversible decisions.
Configuration replaced self-doubt with system awareness.

A warning light isn't a problem. It's information.

Most people know that about vehicles.

Few apply it to themselves.

Curiosity sparked.

But it wasn't only used to generate ideas. It was used to reduce emotional friction.

When friction reduces, thinking expands.

And when thinking expands, clarity follows.

Stretch-the-box thinking becomes safer.

Why Automotive Language Works

Automotive language shifted the question entirely.

It didn't simplify the situation. It made it workable.

We stopped asking:
"Where should you go next?"

We started asking:
"What can be tuned?"

And started exploring:
• What variables are interacting?
• What can be recalibrated?
• What is data, not failure?
• What can be tested before being committed to?

That shift reduced emotional volatility.

Curiosity replaced self-judgement.

And once judgement softened, options reappeared.

When thinking expands, clarity follows.

Relation to Hope Action Theory

This work was grounded in Hope-Action Theory and creative engagement strategies by intentionally strengthening hope through movement across its six competencies.

Early interventions focused on **Self-Reflection and Self-Clarity**, using liminality-aware metaphors and dashboard activities to normalise uncertainty while increasing awareness of emotions, identity and strengths.

Visioning emerged as we reshaped Jason's fog-driving metaphor and explored multiple, flexible participation pathways rather than a single fixed outcome.

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Goal Setting, Planning and Implementing were activated through test-drive thinking and Shifting Gears — translating hope into small, achievable actions.

Ongoing **Adapting** was reinforced through bounce-back reflections, allowing recalibration while maintaining agency and forward momentum despite medical uncertainty.

Hope was not treated as optimism.

It was treated as movement.

This Is Not About Career Alone

Although this work occurred within a transition context, the methodology extends far beyond career. For example:

The Dashboard Decoder supports mental wellbeing.
Shifting Gears helps leaders manage overload.
Test Drives support idea generation.
Configuration mapping supports team clarity.
Pit Stop reflections strengthen identity continuity after challenges or change.

When language resonates culturally and personally, people feel understood.

And when people feel understood, they become curious.

Curiosity leads to possibility thinking.

Possibility thinking leads to clarity.

Clarity leads to movement.

And movement sustains hope.

I don't use automotive language because I like cars.

I use it because metaphors, imagery and technical language — when aligned with someone's lived experiences and interests — creates traction.

And traction builds sustainable hope — whether someone is navigating health, leadership pressure, ideas generation, life redesign, team solutions or career change.

Automotive thinking doesn't simplify complexity. It makes it navigable.

If you are a car enthusiast, leader, veteran, creative thinker or simply someone navigating a foggy stretch of road — what language already lives in you?

That may be where clarity begins.

Jenn Barfield is a clarity-focused practitioner who supports people and organisations to get unstuck by building sustainable foundations through curiosity, stretch-the-box thinking, creative engagement strategies and challenge-led approaches to work and life.

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