



CHOOSING WORK

BEFORE WORK
CHOOSES YOU

A GUIDEBOOK FOR MAKING
INTENTIONAL CHANGE

MARGIT HESTHAMMAR

CHOOSING WORK BEFORE WORK CHOOSES YOU

—A GUIDEBOOK FOR MAKING INTENTIONAL CHANGE—

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ENDORSEMENTS FOR CHOOSING WORK BEFORE WORK CHOOSES YOU

Choosing Work is a brilliant synthesis of the forces that influence choice in a career transition. Hesthammar demonstrates how the interplay between one's inner and outer worlds affects the decision-making process and offers the understanding required for arriving at a satisfying choice. I highly recommend this elegant, thought-provoking guidebook to anyone looking for encouragement and practical support through a career transition.

— Martine Charles, Ph.D.

Readers are unlikely to find a better guide through the psychological traps of job loss and job seeking than Margit (Mog) Hesthammar, author of *Choosing Work Before Work Chooses You*. Down to earth, compassionate, with years of experience helping those in the midst of career change, Hesthammar knows the pitfalls of that in-between, often insecure, state: if we don't recognize what trips us up, we are also blind to possibilities. With humour and good practical advice, she shows how to get past self-sabotaging habits and take manageable steps toward success. If you haven't found the career that fits, don't give up. Before work chooses you, read *Choosing Work*.

— Judith Penner, Writer and Professional Editor

Not only is Margit Hesthammar's book, *Choosing Work Before Work Chooses You*, beautifully organized, clearly written, and on task for a reader seeking to sift through career possibilities, it is also inspirational for anyone wishing they had a better handle on their day, their week, their life. This book offers a wonderful assortment of organizational tactics in a background radiant with encouragement. It's a book to get you off the chesterfield. It's a book to make you reach out and grab your life. It's a book I heartily recommend.

— Shan MacPherson, Freelance Editor

This is a remarkably thorough and useful book on a topic of great importance to most of us. Considering the role of work on so many levels – practical, psychological, existential, social and spiritual – it is valuable to have guidance of this caliber. The book is easy to read, reassuring without over-simplifying, well organized, practical. Judicious use of examples and personal anecdotes give it a warm, personal tone. Reading it feels like sitting with an experienced, trustworthy guide who knows the territory first-hand and who knows us intimately. Some of its insights are timely reminders of familiar material. Others are subtle and profound. I predict this book will have value well beyond the search for a job, and I think it is a book that will serve many.

– John Davis, Professor, Naropa University; Teacher, Ridhwan School

Choosing Work deserves a category of its own on the overcrowded bookshelves of the career transition industry. A masterful career guide, Hesthammar brings nuance, precision and a down-to-earth style to her examination of the many subtle challenges faced by people in transition. Struggling career-changers are encouraged to identify and address their own specific obstacles using the tools and practical strategies offered throughout the book. Hesthammar's tone is respectful, humorous and non-judgmental. She coaches, commiserates, nudges and champions the reader in just the right ways at just the right times. This is a must-read for job seekers, career practitioners and concerned parents – clear, compassionate, unique and evolutionary.

– Margot Sutcliffe, MA, CCC

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I'd like to make it clear that I am not a trained psychologist and that *Choosing Work* does not represent any one school of thought or psychological approach. The ideas in this book are intended to be viewed as tools – approaches to change that have good success rates for helping people through life transitions. The experiences documented here derive from first-hand observation and direct communication with individuals who have attended my programs. All names and some genders have been changed.

I'd also like to acknowledge that *Choosing Work* neither ignores nor directly addresses the economic uncertainty of our times, except insofar as to recognize that career decisions need to be made strategically. What it does address directly is the range of obstacles that tend universally to interfere with the progress of making conscious change, whatever the variables may be in age, cultural background, or economic climate.

Margit Hesthammar

DEDICATION

To the memories of Nonny and Siri, and to my students—
teachers one and all.

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Grateful acknowledgment to A.H. Almaas for his brilliant teachings and love of the truth.

A deep bow to Jeff, my brother and hero, for always helping me to laugh and remember what's important; to my mother Margaret, for quietly modeling the person I want to be when I grow up; and to all of my family and friends for their love and encouragement.

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ACCESS AS A FREE DOWNLOAD AT: hesthammar.com

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

In my fifteen years of facilitating career transitions, I've repeatedly witnessed wildly different people of every age and background being frustrated and immobilized by the same elusive forces. I now believe that an understanding of those forces is the single greatest determinant of success in making intentional change. Providing that understanding is the purpose of this book. The tools and suggestions offered here have emerged from direct experience with people in transition and a life-long study of the psychodynamics of change. Though the book speaks directly to the frustrated career-seeker, it is also intended to bring insight and support to anyone struggling to make conscious, intentional change in any area of their lives.

There are many inspiring books on the shelves about heroes who made good in spite of obvious major obstacles. These can be great for lighting the fire, but they don't offer lasting support to the quietly struggling individual whose fire keeps going out. The forces addressed in this book are the not-so-obvious obstacles, so if you're one of those who have been quietly struggling, recognize that solutions become apparent once problems are clearly understood.

Some problems are simple, others more complex. Since career transitions tend to be complex, to understand and address them we must first identify their elements. The book examines three main problem areas:

ONE: THE MINEFIELD

Unless we possess unusual skills that are highly in demand, most of us going it alone through a career transition are meandering unprotected through a mental and emotional minefield. All the progress of a productive day can be blown away in a heartbeat by a careless comment or a wayward thought, neither of which is likely to be registered consciously. When we're in transition, we're more vulnerable than usual—and more easily deflated. A negative response to a career idea from one key person in our lives may be all it takes to snuff the spark of a perfectly viable choice. We lose our steam overnight, often without knowing why.

Even if we've made a good decision, few of us are practiced or effective at making things happen on our own. Maintaining the momentum of change requires a raft of practical skills. Though we may use these skills to a limited degree in routine activities, we may not be familiar with their principles or proficient at adapting them to new situations. This adds mud to the minefield. We lose our steam gradually because we don't know how to progress beyond a certain point.

Part One of *Choosing Work* organizes the minefield into six general categories and addresses the problems specific to each. It looks at the nature and location of the hidden mines, what can be done to defuse them, and how to maintain the momentum of change.

TWO: GOING IN CIRCLES

When the terrain is unfamiliar, we usually find a map and plot a course. In other words, we plan. Yet despite the fact that rapid change is making the terrain of work less

familiar by the day, most people try to navigate a career change without a solid plan. This is a recipe for going in circles, particularly when the main terrain is generally accessed through the ever-expanding sprawl of cyberspace. If the destination is an informed decision, the course must be plotted through organized research and planning. Guidelines for effective planning are introduced in Part One of the book. Part Two elaborates on these with a specific focus on career exploration. It offers a fifteen-step plan, a twenty-five-question research guide and a tool for evaluating and comparing options.

THREE: A LACK OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE

A sound career decision and a successful job interview both depend on a reasonable level of self-knowledge, yet surprisingly few people possess more than a superficial understanding of who they are. Describing yourself to a potential employer is torturous if you've never looked deeply at what you're bringing to the table. It becomes less torturous once you have a clear grasp of your values and strengths. It actually becomes enjoyable once you've grasped the principles of effective presentation. Part Three is a workbook titled "The Self Portrait," also available on this website, that generates a detailed overview of your values and strengths. It culminates in a unique response to the universally-dreaded request, "Tell me about yourself," providing a strong foundation for both a good career choice and confident self-promotion.

Since the three main parts of the book are self-contained, you can work through them one at a time or concurrently. I suggest that you acquaint yourself briefly with the contents of each and begin where it feels appropriate for you.

INTRODUCTION

Whether you quit your last job, would like to quit your current job, have been laid off or fired, I assume if you're reading this book that you're faced with the problem of what to do next. This problem can be experienced in many different ways, all of which are normal and all of which have a common denominator.

For example:

Perhaps you lost your job suddenly, without warning. Your money is running out and the problem of what to do next is at you like a pack of barking dogs. Your thoughts are snarled, your emotions are shredded and you're really not breathing. Though uncomfortable in the extreme, it's important to know that this is a perfectly normal response.

Or perhaps you were laid off and you've been enjoying an interval of grace thanks to employment benefits, savings or a severance package. Until recently the problem of what to do next has been tucked away in some distant corner of your mind, not an immediate concern. But lately you've realized that the halfway point of your time off has come and gone. Barking dogs are audible in the distance. You're breathing, though not very deeply, and you haven't been sleeping that well. Again, perfectly normal.

Or maybe you quit your last job because it was making you miserable and your first weeks of unemployment have been euphoric. Now, however, your euphoria is being displaced by the problem of what to do next. You

figured you'd have a few offers by now—you've never had a problem finding work—but so far not even an interview. Daytimes are manageable, but evenings are becoming a challenge, what with the dogs. The barking cranks up right around bedtime—nature's way of saying that sleep is no longer an option. All absolutely normal.

Or perhaps you're working in a job you hate, a job that's making you crazy. You've been doing this job for way too long and you've vowed to get out by the end of the year. While at work, you sneak a little time to sift through the classifieds. You browse through a few postings on the web. You get distracted by a meaningless article and then you stop for lunch. It strikes you that there must be a better way. Nothing looks remotely interesting. For that matter, you don't even know what half those jobs are about. By the time you get home you're too tired to deal with the problem of what to do next. It's like a floater in your eye that you can't quite catch up to. Or the distracted barking of a dog that's forgotten its point. Your sleeping and your breathing have been shallow for so long that you're used to it. Completely normal.

On the other hand, you might have been out of the work force for some time. Maybe you stayed home to raise children or care for an aging relative. You might have been off because of illness or an injury. Or perhaps you retired just prior to the recession, only to discover that your funds are suddenly half of what they were. Whatever the cause, the problem of what to do next has been steadily creeping in. There's a stitch in your breathing from time to time and a whiney din that starts up whenever you think about work. Absolutely par for the course.

Then again, perhaps you're just starting out and feeling full of hope about the future. School is finally out, you're still living at home and your breathing is pretty regular. Still, there's the little problem of what to do next. You're supposed to have it figured out by the end of the summer,

but it's hard to get a grip on. About all you know is that you don't want to go back to MacDonald's. Woops – the days are getting shorter now – and so is your breathing. You could swear you just heard a small bark...

Welcome aboard.

Whatever the background particulars, the common denominator in a career transition is anxiety. And nothing could be more natural. Work is about survival – physical, mental, emotional and social. Uncertainty about work naturally activates our most primitive fears. For many, choosing work is the most nerve-wracking challenge they face in a lifetime – which is why so many wait for work to choose them.

MY STORY

I spent my entire twenties panicking about what to do for a living and I don't believe I ever talked to a single soul about it. Every time I realized I was not going to last one more month in yet another job I would feel the same sickening wave of dread. And every time I started something new, I'd know it was just a matter of time before my discontent returned.

It was not that I'd grown up without advantages. I was one of three kids in a middle-class family at a time when it was relatively inexpensive to get a higher education. I was reasonably intelligent and I did not have a problem with discipline. I did fine at school and I was conscientious on the job.

It was not that work was hard to come by either. I came of age in a golden era in British Columbia. The primary industries were still booming and jobs of every kind were plentiful. I worked summers in an electrical factory while going to university – union job, great money. I did public

relations work for the Xerox Corporation for a year and a half – the longest job I held through my twenties. I managed the advertising department of a local newspaper and I taught high school English for a year. I also had lots of short runs: reception person at a dry-cleaners, sales clerk in a gift shop, delivery driver for a photo finisher. I sold flowers at a street kiosk and I scrubbed gangways on a Norwegian freighter. I was a chambermaid in a fancy hotel and a traffic controller on a construction site. There were jobs everywhere and I seemed to be trying them all.

But none of them seemed to be working for me. Sometimes I thought it was the fault of the job, and sometimes this was true: I was not cut out to be a traffic controller. Other times I was convinced that I was defective in some way; after all, other people seemed to be getting the hang of it. It would take a long time and a lot of torment before I realized that my problem was not so much a defect as a lack of self-knowledge. For one thing, I had no idea what my needs and preferences were when it came to structured eight-hour activities. Employment counseling had not yet arrived in any meaningful way.

The other thing, the thing that was harder to grapple with because it lived like a shadow in the background, was a habit of my mind – a habit that was thoroughly entrenched by the time I turned thirty: As soon as I'd mastered the basics of a job, I'd start projecting ahead. I'd see a vision of my life disappearing down a dark tunnel while I mechanically repeated an endless list of pointless tasks. I would hear myself saying "This is all so meaningless!" or "Is that all there is?" as I began to feel more and more trapped. It was like looking ahead to the number of times I'd have to brush my teeth before I died. It produced an antsy, itchy mixture of boredom and claustrophobia that was so intolerable I'd feel compelled to give my notice. I'd be out of one job and into the next without once giving a thought to what was driving me.

Like many in their twenties, I was restless and idealistic. I'd done five years of university and I was tired of buckling down. I wanted work to bring meaning and adventure to my life and I was completely foggy about what that meant. All I knew was that every job I tried turned into a cul-de-sac and I wanted to find the freeway.

Though I couldn't have known it at the time, my problem lay less in the work I was doing (though granted, some jobs were meant to be short-lived) than the fact that I hadn't yet learned to observe my own thinking. I believed the stories I was telling myself and I had no defense against the feelings that went with them. If you tell yourself repeatedly "I will die if I have to stay here one more week," it definitely has an impact on your day. For one thing, you tend to leave half of yourself at home when you go to work and it's just not possible to enjoy yourself when you're only half there.

I was also confused about the place of work in my life. Should it be central or peripheral? The general consensus said central. My family said "Be a professional." But I wanted to be creative. Could I do both? Could work provide a venue for expressing my creativity or should it be a means of supporting it? I wanted to be a writer, but I didn't want to write technical manuals or news reports. I enjoyed photography, but I didn't want to make ads or take pictures of weddings. As for publishing or showing my own work, I knew I needed time to develop. I had not yet found my voice and I was not about to expose myself to public ridicule. The whole work thing was making me dizzy.

What finally happened just as I was turning thirty was that I stumbled onto work that suited me. I should add that I might not have recognized it as such had I not begun to notice the stories I was telling myself and the conflicting drives that were keeping me from finding work enjoyable.

The perfect field turned out to be the hospitality industry—in particular, bartending and waiting tables. The money was great; I could survive on part-time work, so I was able to study and write. The environment was recreational; going to work after a day of writing was more like going to play. And it was a great workout, both mentally and physically. It was also a wonderful venue for studying the habits of humans. Work was finally working.

I tended bar and waited tables for the next two decades and only stopped because my body was starting to complain. It feels highly ironic, if somehow fitting, that I should have gone back into education and ended up an employment facilitator.

My problem was: not knowing what my problem was.

My main problem in my twenties was that although I was torturously aware of having a problem, I didn't understand what the problem really was. So I assumed it was me. In fact, the real problem was made up of several elements: I had no idea what kind of work suited me, I had no clear sense of what I wanted out of work or life, I wasn't aware of my thinking habits and I didn't know the first thing about problem solving.

A UNIVERSAL STRUGGLE

If my years as a career transition facilitator have taught me anything, it's that the struggles I faced in my youth are still pretty universal—with a few added features. Compounding the dilemma these days is the fact that change is now a constant in the workplace. The advent of globalization and the rapid growth of technology have meant that people are making career transitions several times in the course of a working life. Most find the process completely bewildering and few have the tools to navigate it on their own. Adding to the aggravation is the maddening assumption, usually by well-meaning onlookers, that choosing a career should be a relatively straightforward affair. When it isn't, people commonly lose both confidence and steam and become vulnerable to default choices. Work chooses them.

Figuring out what to do for a living can be a remarkably challenging business. The good news is that it can be done, so if you have been going quietly crazy with the problem of what to do next, please read on. The people you're about to meet have all been at their wit's end at some point and have nevertheless made it to the other side of change in one piece. None of them, incidentally, are disadvantaged heroes who beat horrendous odds on their way to the big leagues. They are people with the usual advantages (arms, legs, essential faculties) who felt incompetent and confused and couldn't understand why they were having such a struggle choosing work.

PART ONE :

NAVIGATING THE
MINEFIELD

"Don't ask what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

—Howard Thurman



GETTING STARTED: ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT

ONE: I'D LIKE TO GO TO SLEEP NOW TRANSITION FATIGUE

Situation: You have been spinning your wheels for months, getting nowhere, and you now suspect that you are less than a hair's-breadth away from being completely insane, pretty much paralyzed, and utterly unfit for anything (on top of still not having a job). In other words, your struggle with the question of what to do next has been making you anxious. At the risk of restating the obvious, this is a perfectly normal response to uncertainty about the future. We worry. Worry is part one of a two-part problem and it's not the bad part. A certain amount of worry has kept our species alive. (Picture a large cave with human-looking bones at the entrance. Something about that picture made one of our distant cousins anxious. He gave it a pass; hence, we exist.)

However, if you're like most of us, feeling this anxious makes you uncomfortable. You don't like it. So what do you do? Without even knowing you're doing it, you resist it. You turn away. How? By creating a fog of some kind, or a bunch of distracting white noise. Or by getting really really sleepy.

Unfortunately, this initial, rather primitive solution leads to a secondary, more serious problem: In a turned-away state, you can't see what's in front of your face. Nothing is in focus. This makes you feel blind and inept, which provokes more anxiety, and of course, more discomfort.

So what do you do then? You turn away some more. More fog, more distractions, more white noise. You jump into a silly melodrama, you abuse a few substances, you trance out or you get really really busy. You are now caught in a spiral of resistance — turning away from the effects of being turned away.

All of which makes you very tired. It feels like you've been dealing with this what-to-do-with-my-life question forever and you're getting nowhere. You would like to just go away and fall

asleep now. Or have someone wind you up, point you in the right direction, and *push*. You have what I call transition fatigue.

In actual fact, you may not have been dealing with the question at all, but because it has been dominating your mind, you may think you have. What you may have been doing more than anything is resisting the anxiety that the question provokes, and this takes a huge amount of energy.

A resistant state is almost always more miserable than the experience being resisted. In fact, there is nothing drearier. It's like a massively botched attempt at self-sealing, where instead of sealing yourself off from your discomfort, you've actually sealed it in. You've locked the door and closed the blinds, not realizing that the bogeyman is locked in with you. In this state, everything is dull and stale and filled with a chronic background dread. You may not feel any really sharp pain, but you don't feel pleasure either.

The good news is that this is as bad as it usually gets. The other good news (given that misery loves company) is that it's all quite normal in a career transition. In fact, it's very common for people to reach this point before discovering that there is help out there—programs sponsored by the government, books, web-sites, career coaches, and whole floors of the library designed to help people through a career change. A good percentage of the people I saw were in this state when they came to my program and I can assure you it's a highly democratic affliction. The person with a doctorate is just as susceptible as the high school drop-out or the CEO of the latest dot-bomb.

A resistant state is almost always more miserable than the experience being resisted.

The really good news is that the situation changes very quickly when people stop resisting and start embracing their transition in an organized way.

Throughout this book you'll encounter some of the many forms resistance can take in the course of a career change. You'll look at the factors that trigger it, the dynamics that perpetuate it, and some useful strategies for arresting it. You may notice as well that while the phenomenon itself feels familiar—resistance

is pretty universal – it's often easier to spot in others than in ourselves.

Meanwhile, if you have been going it alone for some time and are still feeling crazy, paralyzed, and generally incompetent, please try to relax. This is a very difficult thing to do by yourself and if you stay with us, you will find yourself in the company of some brilliant people who have felt just as crazy, paralyzed, and incompetent and have nevertheless miraculously gotten on with getting a work life.

TWO: WHY BOTHER?

“Why Bother” is a variation of “I’d Rather Be Asleep” and is more of a position than a question. The position is generally taken out of sheer exhaustion and/or the belief that life doesn’t work. If you have been endlessly spinning your wheels, going nowhere and not finding help, you may be tempted to resign from the whole project.

Unfortunately, you will now be susceptible to falling into a default choice that might deepen your resignation and reinforce your belief that life doesn’t work. This is of course your prerogative. There is always a certain grim satisfaction in being right about our beliefs. However, if this wears thin, you might find that there is also some rather cheerful satisfaction in finding work you like.

If “Why Bother” is a response to hopelessness in the face of general global collapse (pollution, earthquakes, wars, economic recession, energy crisis), then essentially you are saying that there are no solutions and nothing you can do will make a difference. Unfortunately, this makes you part of the problem. No one reliably knows what’s possible, but if everyone took this position, the belief would indeed become self-fulfilling.

Despair, even in the face of global economic collapse, is a largely unsatisfying choice.

The “Why Bother” stance offers a suspiciously convenient argument for doing nothing. The world is not ending tomorrow, despite what the fundamentalists have always said. There is still a lot of time to fill (or kill) before the fat lady sings. I say find something meaningful to do with that time. Even if it feels like you’re fiddling while Rome burns — better to learn to fiddle than to waste a precious life.

Getting Started

Despair, even in the face of global collapse, is a largely unsatisfying choice. It doesn't offer any range, and it can escalate into the deadly paralysis of prolonged depression.

If "Why Bother" is a real question for you, the answer that generally works best for me is: "*What else is there to do?*"

THREE: I REALLY DON'T WANT TO WORK

This is another variation of “I’d Rather Be Asleep.” It comes up quite frequently at the beginning of a program and though it’s sometimes said facetiously, it’s often an honest statement. In fact, I’m sure we’ve all said it at some point.

The conversation will go something like this:

“You know what? Even though I’m here doing this program, I actually don’t want to work at all.”

“So what do you want to do?”

“Oh, you know – learn stuff, travel, listen to music, make art, spend time in nature, hang with my friends, relax, watch movies, come and go as I please, dodge routines, avoid the herd, be my own person...”

It’s not hard to relate. However, this is usually where the thinking stops and the fog of fantasy takes over. Consider for a moment the very real challenge of having all your time to yourself. Think it through. Somehow you have been magically excused from having to work and you now have all the time in the world to do all the things you’ve been dying to do.

If you think it through you will notice that you also have a bunch of long empty days sprawling ahead with nothing to give them a shape. Most of us find long stretches of unstructured time pretty daunting. Particularly if our days have been fairly structured up till now, to suddenly have a lot of free-form time can be disorienting.

Naturally, if you’ve just quit a job that you really disliked you may find that the first few days or weeks are quite euphoric. The relief of being out of a bad situation feels wonderful – for a while.

Fairly quickly, however, unless you have a clear sense of purpose, a definite plan and lots of discipline, you’ll fall into

the doldrums of empty time. With a whole day yawning ahead of you and no particular plan (except of course to learn stuff, listen to music, make art and hang with your friends), you'll find yourself in that trancey place where it takes three hours to get into the shower or go to the store for milk. You may also notice that you have been staring at that blank page or empty canvas for not just three hours, but three weeks, and it's still looking pretty empty.

Then there's the realization that most of your friends are at work, which makes you feel like you're a little out of the loop. You might remember that work, for all its potential prickles, gives you another world to play in, a place to go each day where there are people around and things happening.

Another thing you might notice, if you're by yourself and not particularly engaged in anything, is that it isn't entirely pleasant listening to all that static inside your head—all those unnecessarily crabby voices saying critical things and telling you what to do. In fact, listening to that muddly din can become so exhausting and so uncomfortable that you might find yourself turning away from it all... and then turning away from turning away... and so on.

Which brings you back to "*I'd Rather Be Asleep*" and the botched self-seal. Only this is worse, because you're where you thought you wanted to be—assuming you're still magically excused from working for a living—but you're also feeling crazy, paralyzed and generally incompetent.

Most of us don't do well with empty time.

Which is not to say that we can't learn to work with it. People do it all the time. People with a clear sense of purpose, a definite plan, and lots of discipline. If you want to use your time to create something—a work of art, perhaps, or a business—you will need all three. No matter how brilliant you may be, if you don't know how to get down to it, your time will sprawl and you'll sprawl with it.

In his book *Flow – The Psychology of Optimal Experience*—Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi states that an enormous and largely unsung benefit of work lies simply in its potential to engage us. Humans are a wild ride looking for a track. We are little nuggets of pulsing protein that want to be put to good use. When we're not engaged, we dangle. We get disoriented. Life

feels wobbly and weird. We lose our familiar sense of self and we enter the dreaded blob-zone.

Work offers a container to pour ourselves into. The container brings flavour and shape to experience. It gets us in gear in very particular ways and the great thing about getting in gear is that we tend to get better at what we're doing. So not only does our sense of self return—the good old shape and flavour of *moi*—it returns in better condition. Engagement helps us develop mastery; mastery enhances our self-esteem.

A largely unsung benefit of work lies simply in its potential to engage us. It gets us in gear in very particular ways and the great thing about getting in gear is that we tend to get better at what we're doing.

Another great benefit of engagement lies in the fact that our minds can only be in one place at a time. When we're fully occupied with what we're doing, we don't have the mental room to be worrying about problems or listening to cranky mind-chatter. In other words, while the positive stuff is getting reinforced, we're getting a break from the negative stuff. This, for many, is worth more than a month in Mexico.

When you examine it closely, real enjoyment is not what we usually take it to be. TV, movies and superficial socializing are fun, but they're not profoundly fun. They are comfortable diversions, useful for getting us *out* of gear when we need to idle, but not always nourishing. They create a comfortable wall of white noise that gives us some distance from our barking dogs, but they don't necessarily engage us in a transformative way.

The more profound form of fun happens when we get so deeply involved in what we're doing that we no longer experience ourselves as separate. Time stands still. We become so merged with our activities and immediate surroundings that our barking dogs disappear altogether. There's no room for them because the present moment is fully occupied.

In this state we shift from an outcome orientation, where what we're doing is for the sake of some future reward, to a process orientation, where what we're doing is for the intrinsic pleasure of the doing itself. In other words, the doing becomes its own reward. And the name we give this is *play*.

Humans are a wild ride looking for a track. When we're not engaged in activities that bring structure to our lives, we get disoriented.

There's a lovely story about a man who dies and finds himself in the next world. When he gets there, he's treated to every kind of delight—music, food, wine, you name it. For the first few weeks he has a fabulous time, but at around the three-month point, he asks the social director what there is to do. The director looks confused and asks what he means. "Well, you know," says the man, "This has all been great, but now I'm ready to get my teeth into something. What do we do for work around here?" The director looks even more confused. "I'm sorry," he says, "but there's no work here." "No work?" says the man. "What kind of heaven is this?" The director leans in and whispers, "My dear sir, what made you think you'd gone to heaven?"

Freud said that the most important things in life are love and work. For all the controversy around his other ideas, I think he had a point.

FOUR: WHAT IF IT'S ALL TOO MUCH?

Let's say for the sake of argument that you've decided you *wouldn't* rather be sleeping, you *would* like to bother and you *might* actually prefer to fill some of those long empty days with something work-ish. One of the fresh new terrors that might arise is "What if I discover my passion and it's all too much? As in *way* too much? As in *overwhelming*?"

This is a reasonable terror. James Latke, an amiable, outgoing man in his mid-forties, came into the career transition program after several years in sales. Though he liked his job and was good at it, his company had gone under and he saw this as a good opportunity for a rethink.

It was quickly apparent that James had a passion for the law. He enjoyed reading about it, knew lots about the history of it, and was particularly drawn to international mediation. He began to think about what it would take to become a lawyer: number one, seven years of full-time university; number two, living very frugally for the entire time on the income of his wife (who was quickly becoming more terrified than he); and number three, incurring a mega-debt that he could probably pay off by the time he was eighty if he took no holidays and bagged his lunch.

James fretted like mad for about a week and then decided he was going to go for it. For a few days he wore the messianic look of one who has found his Everest and can already taste the top (unnaturally bright eyes, gravity-defying chin). This would alternate almost immediately with the haunted look of one who knows he has just sentenced himself to life in a very small cell with a very angry cell-mate for a very long time (shifty eyes, wobbly chin).

But he'd made up his mind and he was committed. After all, he'd discovered his passion and any other choice would be a self-betrayal – wouldn't it?

I made one request of James: that he arrange to speak to a few lawyers about their jobs—what a day in the life was all about, what they liked and disliked, how they felt getting up on a work day and so on. I also asked him to delay his final decision until he could picture himself doing the specific tasks he expected to do in an actual law firm. He agreed to do this by Monday of the following week.

That Monday he came in looking deflated. I asked how the meetings had gone. He told me that he had talked to four lawyers and not one of them was doing anything that remotely interested him. One was up to her ears in nasty litigations, another was defending drug dealers and the other two were doing very dull-sounding corporate work.

Now James was looking at seven years in a small cell with you-know-who and no big peak at the end of it. All that work was only going to get him to some droney little base-camp at the bottom of his mountain—where the view (for James) looked cloudy on the best of days.

Through his research he had also learned that the odds of working at the level that really interested him were about one in a million and would require at least three more years of university (after the first seven). With preferably a brief but brilliant career in politics sandwiched in somewhere along the way.

For the record:
There is never only one way to pursue a dream, and it is never appropriate to sacrifice everything on your way to getting a work life.

Rough days for James. It had taken a lot of moxie to admit to his passion in the first place, and now he felt invested in it—even though he was rapidly learning that his dream was nothing like his dream.

Interestingly, the story has a happy ending. James eventually decided against law school and went back into sales—work he enjoyed and was well suited to. His marriage, which he also enjoyed and seemed well suited to, remained intact, and all in all, his relief was quite palpable (clear eyes, steady chin).

What allowed this to happen fairly painlessly was an important realization: *Honouring a passion does not have to be an all-or-nothing venture.* There are many angles of approach.

When James looked at his situation freshly, he realized that he could still commit to *learning* more about the law – which was really the whole point anyway – without sacrificing the next decade of his life doing it. What he also realized, after looking at a very dry first-year curriculum, was the upside of learning on your own: you can start wherever you like and get to the good parts right away.

For the record: There is never only one way to pursue a dream. Though we all expect to make sacrifices here and there, it is never appropriate to lose everything on your way to getting a work life.

If “What If It’s All Too Much?” comes up for you, I say first, *find out*. Do your homework. Know what a job will demand of you. Try it on. Walk around in it, visualize it, see how it feels. *Talk to the people who are doing the job* – they are the ones who know. If after this you discover that it really is too much, then run for the hills.

PERSONAL INQUIRY

Questions for personal inquiry will appear at intervals throughout the book. They’re designed to help you explore the dynamics that are having the biggest impact on your career change – for better or worse. Respond in a dedicated notebook to the ones that feel relevant to you. The questions below invite you to inquire into the kinds of resistance that may be stopping you from getting underway. If other forms of resistance surface while you’re doing the exercise, *including resistance to the exercise itself*, inquire into these as well.

- 1) Does the subject of work trigger resistance in you? If so, what forms does your resistance take? Do you feel sleepy, trancey, zoned-out? Itchy, antsy, irritable? Confused? Overwhelmed? Unable to focus? Are you drinking or smoking too much? Is your inner voice active? Are you making up stories? e.g., explaining, criticizing, denying, judging, scolding, rationalizing?

Getting Started

Do you sometimes hear yourself saying “*Why bother?*” Or “*I really don't want to work*”? Or “*What if it's all too much?*” Are there other thoughts that come to mind? If so, write them down.

- 2) How do these thoughts, behaviours and feelings affect your ability to take charge of your work life?
- 3) Have you noticed that the discomfort of turning away from the subject of work is actually worse than the discomfort of finally addressing it? Have you been caught in a ‘resistance-loop’ – i.e., repeatedly turning away from the discomfort of turning away? If so, what effect has this had on your energy and spirits?
- 4) When you do address the subject of work directly, what happens? Do you find that there is always another obstacle to overcome? If so, what effect does this have on you?
- 5) List in your notebook the obstacles you believe you are currently facing.

FIVE : WHAT IF I'M MESSING WITH DESTINY?

You've been sifting through your options and there's one that's looking pretty good. But every time you think about taking the definitive step, you start worrying that you might be messing with destiny. Interfering with "The Master Plan."

Well, for starters, you can't. If you believe in predestination—i.e., that your fate is already determined—then anything you do from here on in (or have done from here on back) must have been in the script all along. So, by definition, you can't mess with it.

This won't mean a thing, however, if you have been waiting for that moment when all will be revealed, or if somewhere in the back of your mind you have bought in to a non-interference policy.

In other words, if you believe that God or some force out there has plans for you, you might be dragging your heels unconsciously because you don't want to interfere. Suggestion: instead of trying to stay out of the way (which is a little like trying to stay out of the car when you're the one driving), try tuning in to what those plans might be.

If your God is a personal God in the traditional sense, then you bet They have plans for you. And They have been doing everything short of pulling the pavement out from under you to tell you what

If you believe that God or the universe has plans for you, you might find yourself unconsciously dragging your heels because you don't want to interfere. Suggestion: instead of trying to stay out of the way (which is a little like trying to stay out of the car when you're the one driving), try tuning in to what those plans might be.

they are. You have an intricate, brilliant, fail-safe guidance system already installed at birth, put there by God Himself so that They can stay in touch. And all you have to do is pay attention.

There is nothing of any personal importance that you need or ever will need to know that you can't find out by tuning to your own internal guidance system. And you do that by noticing your immediate experience. Your guidance speaks through hunches, impulses, attractions, aversions, reactions, sensations, thoughts, emotions, intuitions, images, fantasies, sudden insights – and a whole chorus of body signals.

This is not to say that we can't get signs from outside; help happens in all kinds of mysterious ways. But if we're not tuning to our internal guidance, we won't know when a sign is really a sign and we won't know what to make of one when we get one. External signals can lead to wild goose chases if we're not strongly tuned to our immediate experience. As the saying goes, sometimes a sneeze is just a sneeze.

Incidentally, if you really do believe that your fate is predetermined, you will want to pay close attention to the impact this has on your energy and motivation. Concluding that *"if it's meant to be, it will just happen,"* or worse, *"if it was meant to be, it would already have happened,"* leads directly to a stall. I don't like to interfere with personal beliefs, but you have to admit, this kind of thinking does offer a suspiciously convenient argument for doing nothing.

*It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare.
It is because we do not dare that things are difficult – Seneca*

PERSONAL INQUIRY

- 1) Do you believe that your destiny is predetermined? If so, are you concerned that you might be interfering with it if you make an independent career choice? Elaborate.

Getting Started

2) How are you benefiting from this belief? What does it give you? What are the side-effects of this belief? How is it affecting your ability to choose work?

SIX: I'M TRYING TO GO WITH THE FLOW HERE

*Now that you have broken through the wall with your head,
what will you do in the neighbouring cell?—S.J. Lec*

A variation on the “Messing With Destiny” question is the “Go With The Flow” dilemma. A superficial interpretation of Daoism is a great way to turn inaction into a spiritual path. If you find yourself avoiding a career choice because you’re trying to go with the flow, recognize that going with the flow is not the same as doing nothing. The flow is not some force out there that will float you as long as you stay light (i.e., uncommitted). It is not the line of least resistance. It is the deepest current of your being. Going with the flow means connecting with this current and helping it to find expression in the world. It is a commitment to honouring the unique being that is struggling to emerge in you. And this doesn’t happen without effort. In the deepest sense, it *is* the line of least resistance—to becoming who you are in the fullest way possible.

The flow is not some force out there that will float you as long as you stay light. It’s not the line of least resistance; it’s the deepest current of your being.

Think of the way a tree will buckle the pavement in its relentless drive to realize itself. Or the way a salmon will batter itself almost to death as it swims against the river in its drive to go home and spawn. Both are going with the flow.

There are currents at every depth. The shallow ones are the distractions, the friends who persuade you to go partying just as you’re getting down to some meaningful work. They quickly turn into whirlpools and back eddies—lots of foamy action, no forward motion. This is not to say no to play; just don’t move in to the party house. When we stay too long in the shallows

we lose touch with the depths, and this leaves us hungry. We can't satisfy our deepest appetites if we've lost touch with them, or never discovered what they are.

So how do you connect with these deeper currents? How do you learn to listen to them? Simple. They speak through your guidance system, just like God.

If you want to get good at anything, first get good at paying attention. It is *the* foundational skill, and it's what they pay you for at work.

Incidentally, if you want to get good at anything, first get good at paying attention. It is *the* foundational skill. It is the only way to stay tuned to your guidance system and it's what they pay you for at work. There is no part of your life that won't be enhanced by learning to notice what is happening in the moment—inside and out. If you're not a meditator, I highly

recommend Eugene Gendlin's book, *Focusing*. It is beautifully simple and it's one of the best guides I know for helping you to hear the messages you're trying to send yourself.

Tip: Start with the body first. Unlike the mind, it doesn't know how to lie.

PERSONAL INQUIRY

- 1) Do you believe that "going with the flow" means drifting along and allowing the various currents of life to carry you where they will? If so, how does this affect your ability to make a career choice?
- 2) Do you experience other side-effects of this belief?
- 3) Have you noticed any conflicts or contradictions in your beliefs around taking control of your life? If so, what are they? How are they affecting your career search?
- 4) What strategies have worked best in the past for overcoming resistance, taking charge and regaining your momentum? What do you think would work best now?



ADDRESSING MESSAGES

SEVEN: I DON'T KNOW WHO TO LISTEN TO! MESSAGES FROM OTHERS

The messages we receive from others can make it more difficult to hear the messages from within, particularly when they conflict. Most of us grow up with some pretty strong ideas about who we're supposed to become and what we're supposed to do with our lives. Some of them may be spoken directly, some simply modeled, while others may be more subliminal – unspoken beliefs that are taken for granted in our family and early environment.

It's vital to get clear on the messages you received – or are currently receiving – from the important people in your life, for they have the potential to produce enormous conflict in a career transition. Bringing them into focus allows you to choose the ones that empower you and discard the ones that don't. Leaving them out of focus may stall your decision-making process indefinitely.

Messages from the important people in our lives can produce real confusion when we're trying to make a career decision. Bringing them into focus allows us to choose the ones that empower us and discard the ones that don't.

Messages may take the form of simple, solid work values that you feel quite happy with – e.g., *If it's worth doing, it's worth doing well*. Or they may take the form of 'family imperatives' that are distinctly in your way. For example, if you grew up with the message that success meant becoming a lawyer, or a film star, or a professional athlete, and you weren't drawn to the field – or even cut out for it – then you may

have felt like a nonstarter from the get-go.

Following are some of the most common messages reported by clients undergoing a career transition:

“BE A PROFESSIONAL”

This is a common message in most cultures. Parents want their children to do well and doing well is typically seen in terms of professions such as law, medicine, engineering, the sciences and teaching. A higher education and good earning power mean status and respect almost everywhere.

Gayle Sloane, a woman in her early forties, announced on the first day of the program that she was going to become a social worker. She looked oddly grim at the prospect, but she was determined.

Gayle’s background was in the culinary arts. She had worked as a chef in a variety of venues and she obviously loved cooking – just talking about food made her face light up. It was therefore puzzling that she seemed so set on a career that was obviously not attracting her.

When we looked at messages, the reason became clear. In the Sloane family, the only “good” jobs were “professions,” and these did not include the culinary arts. Her cousins and siblings were all doctors, lawyers or teachers, and Gayle’s work was seen by the family as a survival job – an “on-your-way-to-a-real-job” job.

Without consciously realizing it, Gayle had bought the family message and was now feeling urgent about finding herself a “real” job. At the same time, she felt it was too late and far too expensive to return to school for a six-to-eight-year degree. However, she had discovered that with less than two years of schooling she could do various kinds of community service work. Though it wasn’t social work in the strictest sense, she knew it would pass for at least semi-professional in her family’s eyes.

It’s important to understand that no one in Gayle’s family was trying to insult or diminish her. It was simply that they all held an unquestioned belief that Gayle needed to identify and examine for herself.

Once the message was clearly identified, Gayle could see it as just one perspective. She remembered that it was she, not her family, who would be living with her choice and she also recognized – with some reminding from the group – that being a chef is a highly respected profession in many circles.

Gayle ultimately returned to cooking, but without the shadow cast by the family perspective. Having located and discarded what was interfering with her choice, she was free to embrace it with real conviction.

“YOU CAN BE ANYTHING YOU WANT!”

It sounds so positive and inspiring, so confident and permissive, but telling people they can be anything brings quite a different set of problems. It is the typical declaration made to children by people whose own parents told them to “become a professional!” Children who were given little or no room to make their own career decisions often, in their determination to leave the gate wide open for their own kids, leave them with no sense of direction at all.

“BE AN ARTIST”

“At last – an artist in the family!” One of the most difficult roles to fill is that of the family’s designated artist. Some parents are so thrilled when a child shows talent that they unconsciously sentence the child to becoming a career artist. This is great if the child is that one in a million whose work happens to capture the attention of the critics. In this case they might be celebrated as part of the avant-garde, though they may or may not make money.

It’s also great if the child is that one in a million who happens to become a commercial success, in which case they might make money, though often at the expense of critical regard. If they’re trying to support themselves completely through their art (i.e., without teaching or doing some other job for money), they may also find that they have to trade integrity for survival. Truly original art is rarely a bestseller.

“Be an Athlete” is a variation on the above. I’ve met more than one young adult who felt like a failure in his early twenties because he couldn’t fulfill a parent’s dream of becoming a professional hockey player or basketball star. Hard place to land when you’re just starting out.

FLOATERS

Some messages are floaters—old sayings or associations that float like driftwood in the back of our minds. They appear for a moment in consciousness, washed ashore by some stray current of thought, and they’re gone on the next tide. Much of the time they’re just meaningless flotsam and jetsam, but occasionally they create a real barrier to our view of what’s possible.

One of mine surfaced when I decided to make a career change after several years in the hospitality industry. I had been suffering from chronic tendonitis in my right elbow and ankle and was recovering from a slipped disk at the base of my neck—all due to the repetitive stress of waiting tables in a busy restaurant.

My younger co-workers were used to seeing me arrive with a brace on my elbow, but when I arrived one night with braces on my elbow, ankle and neck, they told me it was time to take me out to the alley and shoot me. They had a point—I was becoming visibly lame by the end of each shift.

I was also nearing the end of a long writing project, however, and did not want to interrupt it with a full-on job search, so I started using a simple affirmation that the right career choice would announce itself.

Within a month or so, I received a call from an old friend who was managing a GED program in a local college. They were looking for an instructor and she asked if I was interested. I said no. I had taught high school years before and given it up as too time-consuming.

I continued to affirm each day that the right choice would announce itself. A month later she called again. Again I said no.

When she called for the third time, I began to feel like the man in the flood who’s stuck on his roof praying to God for help. A raft comes by, a boat comes by, a helicopter comes by,

and the man refuses them all because he's waiting for God. When he drowns and goes to heaven, he asks God (who by now is considering a career change Himself) why They didn't save him. "What were you waiting for?!" says God. "I sent you a raft, I sent you a boat, I sent you a helicopter...!"

I decided I should at least look at the job, so I visited the college and found out more about the position. The job itself looked less time-consuming than I'd anticipated and they were willing to let me work part-time. Still, I felt oddly resistant to the whole idea.

Then came the floater. I remember the exact moment when it washed ashore. I was walking into the Granville Island Market when a voice said "Those who can do, and those who can't teach." I stopped in my tracks. The saying was old and familiar, and I realized it had been playing in the back of my mind since childhood. I also realized with some surprise that it was the main source of my resistance.

I took a moment to examine the saying and discovered that there was more than one meaning to the message. The most obvious was that if you had to teach, you couldn't be very good at your art. This evaporated quickly. Most of the artists I knew were teachers, and though many of them were doing great work, none were making a living from their art.

The less obvious meaning was connected to memories of teaching high school, when I'd had no time to do anything but work and sleep. The message here was that teaching would eat me alive and leave no time for the making of art. Once this was in focus, it was obvious that the message did not apply to the job I was being offered. For one thing, I'd be teaching motivated adults, who in my experience are a little less labour-intensive than hormone-driven teenagers. For another, it would be a three-day work week, which was what I'd been used to in the restaurant.

What's strange to realize is that a simple saying could have so much power. Had I not caught it consciously, I might have declined an offer that ultimately led to the most enjoyable work I've ever done.

WHEN THE MESSAGES SUPPORT US:
REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE

For some, an interesting dilemma can arise when family messages actually support what they want to do. If they're still unconsciously (or consciously) rebelling against their parents, they may feel stalled—unable to act on their choice because it would feel like capitulation. Many opportunities have been lost or ignored simply because people did not want to feel controlled by their parents.

Mannie Webber spent most of the program coming to terms with this conflict. He freely admitted that he wanted to rebel against his dad—or at least assert his independence—and he saw this as a healthy impulse. At the same time, it just happened that he also wanted to do exactly what his father had suggested he do.

As he became more conscious of his dilemma, he began to see the humour in it. “Don’t get me wrong—my dad’s a great guy. But I’m young; I’m supposed to be rebelling, right? How can a person rebel and still do what their father wants them to do?”

In the end, he decided that rebelling just for the sake of rebelling was a lot like cutting off his nose to spite his face: not a profound statement of independence. When he allowed himself to embrace his choice whole-heartedly, he also found that agreement with his father no longer felt like self-betrayal.

What’s critical once again is that until the dilemma was consciously examined, Manny remained stuck.

Many life decisions are made out of reactivity—the desire to rebel or to prove someone wrong. It’s a perennial theme in novels and movies, and there’s no question that the energy generated by reactivity can be highly motivational. It can even lead to success—if the choice turns out to be appropriate and the reactivity is replaced with fulfillment.

However, any choice that is sustained on the basis of reactivity alone is not a free choice. A rebellious stance chains us to the thing we’re rebelling against, ironically tightening rather than loosening the ties that bind.

Check in. Ask yourself if there are options you're discounting because they are somehow associated with people you're reacting to.

CONFLICTING MESSAGES

It's not uncommon to receive mixed messages, or even contradictory messages, from the people in our lives. This can be crazy-making if the messages are not examined consciously.

Nadia Terras, a young woman in her mid-twenties, came into the program with a BA in English Literature. She was feeling pressure from her parents to do something with her education and had finally decided to return to university to become a high school teacher. Relieved that she had made a decision that she assumed would please her parents, she announced her plan at a family dinner.

To her dismay, her father responded by saying "I don't know why anyone would want to teach kids today; they're nothing but trouble." This same man had been urging her to look into education for three years. His response was thoughtless and no doubt due to his mood in the moment, but Nadia was flattened.

At the same time, she was strongly resistant to acknowledging her hurt because, like most of us, she didn't want to admit to her need for approval. It was much easier to feel angry with him. But since anger was covering need and hurt, it was preventing her from connecting with the real issue.

Once she was able to see that first, the need for approval is universal, and second, nobody likes to see it in themselves, she was able to admit to her need as well as her hurt. Paradoxically, this released her from an undue dependence on her father's approval. She went ahead with her decision to become a teacher, confident that her own approval was her best support.

Conflicts in messages may not be immediately apparent because related conversations often happen at different times. As a woman, depending on your age and background, you may be expected to be a stay-at-home mother in one discussion and the family's first brain surgeon in the next. If you were brought up in a culture where gender roles are strictly delineated, you may be expected to become a professional with significant

earning power, yet be prohibited from making more money than your husband.

Bottom line: when any decision starts looking like a no-win scenario, you might as well choose what feels best for you. When you tend to your own garden first, the people around you inevitably profit from what you grow. When you neglect your garden, no one profits.

SOLICITING MESSAGES

Having looked at various messages that can cause confusion, it's good to recognize that messages can also be empowering—particularly when they come from people who know us well. An exercise I strongly recommend in a career transition is to approach the people in your life who you think would have the best insights into your strengths. Explain that you're trying to make a career decision and ask if they would mind answering a few questions. Send the questions through e-mail or present them in written form, being sure to give them adequate time to reflect before answering. Explain that their honesty is essential and that you won't be offended by constructive, well-intentioned feedback. In other words, be sure they realize that you're not just looking for flattery.

Following are some guideline questions that students have found useful. Choose the ones that you believe will be most fruitful for you and add any others that feel personally relevant.

- 1) What would you say are my most significant strengths?
- 2) What would you say are my strongest interests?
- 3) Is there anything you can think of that I would do well at?
- 4) Where would you say my blind spots or weaknesses lie?
- 5) Have you noticed changes in me over time, and if so, how would you describe them? What would you say I enjoy?
- 6) What do you know you can count on me for?
- 7) What would you not count on me for?
- 8) Have I added value to your life, and if so, how?
- 9) Do you have any specific career suggestions for me?

PERSONAL INQUIRY

Identify the messages you received about work as you were growing up. Think of the specific messages, if any, that you received from family members, friends, neighbours and teachers. Think also of the general messages of the culture and times in which you were living. If you find yourself drawing a blank, remember that not all messages are verbal. Many are expressed through particular behaviours, while others are sensed energetically. Think of how the subject of work *felt* when you were growing up. Use the questions below as prompts, choosing the ones that feel most relevant to you.

MESSAGES FROM THE PAST

- 1) Did anyone offer you specific career suggestions? If so, what were they?
- 2) Was your family wide-open and permissive, though lacking in guidance? (*"Do whatever makes you happy!"*)
- 3) Were they overly-directive? (*"Be a doctor!"*)
- 4) Were they somewhere in between?
- 5) Did one of your parents want you to live the life they didn't have? Did you become the family's designated artist, or athlete, or professional?
- 6) Did you have a sibling who "claimed a territory" before you got there? (e.g., sports, art, science) Did you avoid that territory even though you were equally talented because you didn't want to compete?
- 7) If you had several siblings, did you get lost in the shuffle? If you were an only child, did you get too much interference?
- 8) Was there someone in your life who saw something in you that no one else noticed? If so, who were they and what did they see?
- 9) How would you describe your family's attitude to work? Did they like it, dislike it? Was it a passion, a joy, a grind?
- 10) How would you describe your family's work ethic? Did they believe that a job worth doing was worth doing well? Were they anti-establishment? Did they believe in "beating

Addressing Messages

the system” in some way? Were there “good jobs” and “bad jobs”? If so, which were which?

- 11) Which messages felt the most supportive? Are they also objectively believable? If so, hang onto them!
- 12) Which messages feel non-supportive? Question them!

MESSAGES FROM THE PRESENT

- 1) Identify the messages, if any, that you’re receiving now, through family members, friends, neighbours, co-workers, employers and the culture at large.
- 2) How are these messages affecting your ability to choose a career?
- 3) Are there contradictions between what you want and what others are suggesting? If so, elaborate.
- 4) Are you receiving mixed or contradictory messages from others? If so, elaborate.
- 5) Which messages feel supportive? Are they also objectively believable? If so, hang onto them!
- 6) Which messages do not feel supportive? Question them!

EIGHT : MY INNER CONVERSATION
IS DRIVING ME CRAZY!
—MESSAGES FROM WITHIN—

No thought lives in your head rent-free – Robert Allen

Paradoxically, the most insidious messages generally come from within. Hidden in the din of our incessant mind-chatter is the voice of internal authority – a voice that can shift our mood in a heartbeat and flatten us without warning. We rarely see it coming and because of this we're usually defenseless against it. It's the most repressive force in the psyche and one of the principal reasons why people lose heart for their dreams. It is also the granddaddy of the sucker-punch, the master of stealth, and it's a shape-shifter: if you bar it entry from one direction, it will find another. It has been called the enemy within and our awareness of its movements is our best defense against it.

'The voice' was first identified as a psychic structure by Freud, who called it the *superego*¹. In brief definitions, it's usually referred to as the voice of conscience, though "conscience" in this context has more to do with how our minds have been programmed around right and wrong than the mature internal guidance that develops with age. It has several other names, among them "the judge," "the critic," and the "internal

¹ For a brief and straightforward description of the superego as originally defined by Freud, see Priscilla Roth's article, 'The Superego' at: <http://www.freud.org.uk/education/topic/10575/subtopic/40017/>

parent.” Traditionally it has been viewed as the force that “keeps us in line” by shaming us for being “bad” and applauding us for being “good.” A.H. Almaas², who has studied the structure extensively, describes it as the part of the psyche that works to maintain the status quo, ensuring that the deeply embedded impressions we have of ourselves, others, and our life circum-stances remain unchanged³.

It’s generally believed that the superego develops in childhood to ensure our physical and social survival as we begin to take our first independent steps. It yanks us up short as we’re about to run into the traffic (*Stop! Look both ways!*) and it tames our more primitive impulses (*No! The ears on the bunny are not meant to come off!*). In the simplest terms, we internalize the voice of authority so that we’ll know what to do when there’s no authority present. Not surprisingly, when we notice the voice, we commonly recognize the tone of our parents or early caregivers at their sternest. Even praise will tend to sound a little harsh and threatening (*You did fine this time, but don’t think you can rest on your laurels...*).

The superego’s mandate is to convince us, using liberal doses of guilt and dread, that we’re never good enough, safe enough, capable enough or lovable enough. Needless to say, though it’s essential to our early survival, it long outlives its usefulness.

I witnessed my own “voice” in action one day as I was walking to the market. I was in a good mood and I had the conscious thought that it was great to be feeling happy for no reason. A split second later, I heard the voice say “*Oh-oh, look out – what goes up must come down...*” On this occasion I happened to notice it, so I was able to shrug it off. But I knew that

² A.H. Almaas is the founder of the *Ridhwan School*.

³ Selected quotes from A.H. Almaas on the superego: “The superego is that part of the person that maintains repression and fights any changes to the status quo.” – *Work on the Superego*, p. 5 – Diamond Books, 1992.

“From our perspective, the superego is the inner coercive agency that stands against the expansion of awareness and inner development, regardless of how mild or reasonable it becomes. It is a substitute, and a cruel one, for direct perception and knowledge...” – *Essence, the Diamond Approach to Inner Realization*, p. 137 – Red Wheel Weiser, 1986.

in a less conscious moment that dreary little warning would have cast an anxious shadow over my mood; in no time my radar would have set itself to scan for—and probably find—something to make my “up” go “down.”

We all experience to some degree the involuntary impulse to scan for disaster. It creates the semi-comforting, semi-prickly illusion that by keeping our radar hyper-tuned we’ll see danger coming before it reaches us. This is the superego in action, trying to keep everything under control. Unfortunately, when we’re focused on the rocks in the river, we tend to steer right for them—a very different experience from keeping our heads up, trusting the current and enjoying the day.

The superego is the antithesis of trust; its engine runs entirely on fear. What’s truly devious about it, however, is that it won’t hesitate to criticize us for being *unable to trust*—if that helps it to “keep us in our place.” In other words, even though it can’t understand or coexist with a state of trust, *it can still co-opt the ideal of trust* to shame us for falling short. More devious still, it will manage to sound like an authority on the subject.

Since it’s naturally hostile to uncertainty and change, “the voice” tends to be particularly active during career transitions. Because of this, the ability to recognize and disengage from it is for many the single biggest key to successfully moving on. Perhaps the most seductive aspect of this slippery force is that

The most seductive aspect of the superego is that it takes a grain of the truth and puts a wickedly negative spin on it. For those in career transitions, this is a vital understanding.

it always works with a grain of the truth. This is a vital understanding for those in transition. Let’s say, for example, that you’ve done your research, settled on a new direction, and you’re planning to take a training program. The program will take a year and will mean a definite investment of money, energy and time. The prospect is both

exciting and a little daunting.

As you begin to take your plan seriously (or even before), the voice starts up: “*Oh please, what makes you think you can go back to school and actually complete a college course? My God, it’s been years since you were in school. Face it, you weren’t that good at it then – you’ve probably forgotten how to learn at all! You’ll make a*

total fool of yourself! And you'll probably be the oldest in the class... Yuk! All those young kids running circles around you! And they were born using computers! Why, you can barely even type! Humiliating! You'll waste all that time and money and end up right back where you started – only broke! What's worse, everyone will know what a failure you are!"

And on, and on, it goes. Notice how it takes a grain of the truth and puts a wickedly negative spin on it. Yes, it may be years since you were in school, but the rest does not follow. In fact, your capacity for learning has developed in all kinds of interesting ways just through living your life. Motivated adults are generally excellent learners.

It's also possible that you'll be in a class with younger people. You may even (horror of horrors) be the oldest student in the class. That this should lead to certain humiliation, however, is not the case. Everyone loves someone who tries. Smile at them, laugh with them, and let them help you – every one of them is a potential ally and cheerleader.

The best defense against an attack from the superego is always, first, to notice it's happening. Until you're consciously aware of it, it will tend to control the show. Notice your emotional state: if you're feeling punctured and gloomy, if there's a stale, familiar harshness to your inner voice and if your energy is going south, you're probably under attack.

Next, you need a strategy for disengaging. A mental device can be very effective if you use it convincingly. For me, a Harry Potter wand works perfectly. I mentally take a step back, get a firm grip on my wand, and then I nuke the voice as if I were swatting a mosquito. Thank it for sharing, if you like – it's trying to help in its backward way, after all – but under no circumstances try to argue or reason with it; it will only find new angles of attack. And take heart: the superego is a mechanical, predictable structure. Once we're familiar with its strategies it becomes easier to disengage from its attacks.

PERSONAL INQUIRY

- 1) What is your inner voice saying about what you can or cannot, should or should not do for a living?
- 2) Do the messages vary from day to day?
- 3) What does the voice say when you're looking at something new and challenging?
- 4) Do you have a good strategy for telling the voice where to go when it's being negative? (Remember, mental devices can be very powerful – I recommend the Harry Potter wand!)
- 5) Which messages feel supportive? Are they also objectively believable? If so, hang onto them!
- 6) Which messages feel non-supportive? Question them!

SELF IMAGE

We all have a collection of images that makes up our familiar sense of self. Each self-image reflects a belief about ourselves that we hold to be true, and it's the job of 'the voice,' or superego, to preserve these images. Because they give us our sense of who we are, we become very attached to them. Self-images may be experienced as positive or negative. A simple negative self-image might be "*I'm not creative.*" A positive one might be "*I'm a good person.*"

One or more self-images is always present from moment to moment. They all serve a purpose and we're always looking for evidence to support them. They can be useful to us and they can be in our way.

Some self-images conflict. For example, you may believe on the one hand that you are intelligent and capable. On the other hand, you may believe that it is not safe to *express* your intelligence and capability in the world. Conflicts such as this can cause us to play small or hide our light when it comes to choosing work.

FURTHER INQUIRY

- 1) What self-images are present when you think about work?
Some examples might be: "I'm smart / stupid / attractive / unattractive / powerful / weak / successful / a failure / popular / unpopular / competent / incompetent."
- 2) Do any of your self-images conflict with one another? If so, name them.
- 3) When you look at them under the microscope, which images come closest to the truth? Which look a little suspicious? Which are most in your way?
- 4) There is a payoff for every belief we hold. Looking at the self-images that feel suspicious or in your way, what would you say the payoff for them is? What do they give you? What do you get to do or not do, feel or not feel because of them?
- 5) Which self-images would you most want to revise? Write them down. Can you revise them convincingly? If so, write down your revisions. If not, why not? Are your reasons "reasonable"?



HARNESSING YOUR ENERGY

NINE: I START OUT STRONG,
BUT I ALWAYS BACKSLIDE
—COMBATTING HOMEOSTASIS—

Despite its tendency to flatten us and generally rain on our parade, the superego is in reality just doing its job by maintaining a particular kind of equilibrium in the psyche. All living things are self-regulating, from the smallest cell in the body to the body as a whole to the family system and all of its social groupings. And they all maintain their “steady state” through a process we call homeostasis.

A thermostat is one of the simplest examples of homeostasis at work. When the temperature in a room drops below a pre-set level, the thermostat sends an electrical signal to turn the heater on. When the heat reaches the pre-set temperature, the thermostat sends a signal to turn the heater off. Through a simple feedback mechanism, the room is kept at a steady temperature.

The human body has billions of such feedback mechanisms regulating functions like blood pressure, body temperature, respiration rate, and glucose levels. Without the ability to self-regulate, no living system could survive.

The psyche is also a self-regulating system, with its own version of homeostasis. This is what we’re referring to when we call ourselves creatures of habit. The psyche, like the body, is committed to maintaining its established equilibrium,

Despite its tendency to flatten us and rain on our parade, the superego is really just doing its job by helping to maintain a particular equilibrium in the psyche.

making it highly resistant to change. This can be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on the nature of the equilibrium.

Following is the story of a woman I'm calling Katherine, taken from a composite of student experiences with homeostasis.

Katherine had already made a career decision when she came into the program, so her problem was not so much *what* to do as *why* she was having such a struggle doing it. Having worked at the same job in retail for eight years—the only job she'd had since high school—she was itching to take on something more challenging. Since she'd always been interested in management, she'd decided to take a management program at night. Her goal was to be certified within two years.

Having made her decision, she told her friends and family about her plan. They were all positive and encouraged her to go for it. She investigated courses and signed up for the first one. It felt great to be finally moving on.

She attended her first lecture, which was interesting but a little daunting. She figured she'd know most of the material but there was apparently more to it than she realized. And the reading list! Looked like her evenings would be taken for the next few months. After class she had the nagging feeling that she'd missed something important when her phone went off (how embarrassing—she thought she'd turned it off), but she didn't know what. Then again, she might have missed a lot. She hadn't had to focus that intensely for a long time.

On the night of her second lecture Katherine started feeling like she was coming down with something. She was sweating and she felt quite nauseous. The thought of going out made her feel even worse, so she decided she shouldn't risk it. Besides, it wouldn't be fair to the others.

Miraculously, once she decided to stay home, her symptoms disappeared. This was mildly unsettling, but she decided not to dwell on it. She turned on the TV, vowing to get down to her overdue homework tomorrow. What she needed most right now was a little R & R.

For some reason, on the night of her third lecture she found herself having dinner with friends on the other side of town. They asked how her course was going and without much forethought she told them she'd decided to wait for the next

one. This wasn't the best time, what with this and that, and to be honest, some of her classmates were a little immature. She had the reading list, though, so she'd be able to get a jump-start on the next program...

Whether she was conscious of it or not, I'd venture to guess that a distant voice in Katherine's head was now saying "*Whew! – it's handled!*" or words to that effect. If she was paying attention, she might have noticed a distinct feeling of relief, mingled perhaps with mild remorse. She might also have felt more at ease as she looked ahead to the next stretch of road, realizing that it looked pretty much like the last. If she was really paying attention, she might even notice that she had the feeling of falling back into an old familiar shape. A *comfortable* shape...

This is homeostasis at work. Of the forces that interfere with making intentional change, it's one of the most ubiquitous and seductive. It's also one of the most difficult to pinpoint because its tactics can feel so legitimate (Katherine really *did* feel sick that second night). Remember that its primary function is to keep things the same, whether for good or for bad. If Katherine doesn't learn how to notice it in action, she may discover that the process repeats itself when the next program rolls around. This time, she might be late for registration or discover that the course is already full. She might sprain her ankle, making it that much more difficult to get there. Or she might find that a dear friend is going through a difficult stretch and needs her support at all the wrong times...

Once you've noticed the tactics your psyche employs to resist change, they naturally begin to lose their power. *It's easier to dodge an arrow when you can see it coming.*

The bad news *and* the good news is that homeostasis is a mechanical function. Bad news because it's on automatic, operating behind our backs. Good news because, like most mechanisms, it can be interrupted once we become aware of its tactics.

Awareness is always the key. Once you have an understanding of the strategies your psyche employs to resist change, those strategies will naturally begin to lose their power. It's much easier to dodge an arrow when you can see it coming.

In the next section we'll look further at the effects of homeostasis on the process of goal-setting.

PERSONAL INQUIRY

- 1) Recognizing that homeostasis – the force of habit – can be either an ally or an enemy in creating a satisfying future, how would you say it affects you when it comes to exploring career options?
- 2) In what ways, if any, does it move you forward?
- 3) In what ways, if any, does it hold you back?
- 4) Do you have any specific habits that stop you repeatedly from going after what you want? If so, what are they?
- 5) Is “the voice” active during these times? If so, what is it telling you?
- 6) What changes could you make in your life, starting now, to harness the positive and eliminate the negative effects of homeostasis?
- 7) Are you willing to make those changes?
- 8) If the answer is yes, write them down as statements of intention that you can track. Make them quantifiable wherever possible. (E.g., “*Research four careers a week*” rather than “*Do more research.*”)

TEN: I'M NOT THE PROACTIVE TYPE: THE THING ABOUT GOALS

You can't get what you want if you don't know what you want – T. Harv Eker

It's an amazing thing when you think of it that human beings can make things happen simply by deciding to. It's also pretty amazing that they don't do it more often.

We are blessed—and perhaps cursed—with the ability to project ahead and make conscious choices, setting plans in motion that come to fruition weeks, months, years, even decades later. You can decide in November that you want to go to Mexico in February, and presto, three months later, there you are in Mexico. You can decide at the age of eighteen that you want to get a degree in Engineering, and lo and behold (all things being equal), there you are four years later with your degree. The odd thing is that we make these choices fairly effortlessly in some areas of our lives (where to go for a holiday, what to have for lunch), and not at all in others.

It's amazing that human beings can make things happen simply by deciding to. It's also pretty amazing that they don't do it more often.

THE MANY FACES OF RESISTANCE

People get funny around goals. It seems perverse, given that goals are just things we want. Why should we feel a resistance to going after what we want? In fact, there are many reasons, all of which will be reinforced by homeostasis if they remain unconscious. We'll look at reasons shortly, but first, a small but important distinction: There are forces that trigger, or

initiate resistance, and forces that *perpetuate* it, and though they work together, they are not inseparable.

This is a fortunate thing when it comes to arresting non-supportive habits, for once you become aware of your triggers—the thoughts, feelings, and images that *initiate* your resistance—you're more likely to notice them when they're active. And once you've noticed them, you have the option of consciously disengaging from them, which means that homeostasis—the *perpetuating* force—is interrupted. Neurologically speaking, "what fires together wires together." When you notice the trigger in time to stop the neuron from firing, you interfere with the wiring that maintains the "steady state."

In the last chapter you met Katherine, the woman who wanted to improve her work life by taking some management courses. Despite her obvious enthusiasm, it took her a while to get off the ground. Let's suppose that her resistance was initially triggered by a fear of failure. Had she noticed how this fear expressed—the nasty things her superego was saying, the agitation in her body, the suspicious nature of her distractions—and had she understood these things as normal responses to the prospect of change, she might have succeeded on the first go.

Again, awareness is the key. When we're familiar with the forms our triggers take, we have power over them. When they remain unconscious, they have power over us. Set your radar to notice especially the thoughts, feelings and images that agitate you to an extreme (you're stuck in overdrive), drain you (you can barely move), or trance you out (you're off in deep space).

WILY STRATEGIES

Be prepared for real surprises. The psyche uses some pretty wily strategies. I noticed one recently in my own repertoire that had to do with the publishing of this book. I've developed the bad habit of finishing one piece of writing and moving on to the next before making even a first attempt at publishing, and I've been consciously determined not to let that happen this time. I've always assumed that it was mainly out of a fear of

failure, which was probably the case initially, but by now it has become my steady state.

As I was thinking about the publishing process, a strange image took over my internal field of vision. It was like a massive blind spot – thick, opaque, reddish in colour and disk-shaped. It took up the entire space in front of my face; I couldn't see through it and I couldn't see around it. The emotional impact of it was to make me feel blind, confused, and genuinely incapable of thinking about publishing. As I noticed it for the first time, I realized that like my *'What goes up must come down'* example, it had a very familiar quality. I knew it had been back there for a while. When I examined it more closely, the reddish colour began to form itself into small even rectangles, like bricks. The image was so blatant I had to laugh – I had literally been throwing up a brick wall to keep myself from getting too close to change! The good news is that as I learned to notice the strategy *while it was happening*, it soon lost its power over me.

Even the simple (ha!) process of writing, when I first started out, was fraught with blocks and stops. Fortunately, I came across a seminar some years ago that addressed exactly this phenomenon. Our instructions were to simply notice what happened when we tackled the thing we were struggling with and to continue anyway. I discovered that every time I sat down to write I would either feel sick – actually nauseous – or overwhelmingly tired. Interestingly, if I got up to do something else, the symptoms would disappear almost immediately. Following the recommendation to continue in spite of how I was feeling, I found that the first time I sat it through my symptoms lasted for about twenty minutes, the next, about fifteen, then ten, then no symptoms at all. My psyche simply gave up on those tactics once I understood what it was doing.

This is not to say that it gave up entirely, however. I've noticed three other strategies that my psyche uses to entice me to backslide. They all make use of vague mental images, none of which becomes apparent until I've noticed the agitation in my body. When I finally sit down to examine my agitation, one of the following images will often take form in the back of my mind:

In the first, a tidal wave is cresting behind me and I'm trying to outrun it. It's keeping me anxious, agitated, on the

run. I can't slow down long enough to get my bearings and get organized. I feel doomed and chronically behind; eventually I give up.

In the second, a whip is cracking just behind my head. It has the same effect as the tidal wave, only harsher. It makes me feel like I can never rest and I'll never do anything worthwhile. It's like trying to work in a crowded room filled with angry white noise. I can't focus; I give up.

In the third, I hear the sound of an engine revving, as if from a car that's parked at the curb. It's an angry, impatient sound that's telling me to *hurry up, I'm late, I'm behind, I'll probably never catch up*. I feel squashed. I feel like I have no air. I'm exhausted; I give up.

The awareness that the images are threatening and punitive is my first clue that my superego is active. Until I consciously notice what it's trying to do, I'm completely under its spell. Once I do notice, I set myself free by remembering that the mechanism at work is an automatic function whose sole purpose is to keep things as they are. Since it has already had an impact on me energetically—the agitation is palpable and I'm stuck in overdrive—I disengage first by changing my energy. If I've been strongly engaged in mental work, I'll do something physical, like dancing. For others, the thing that works best might be listening to music, visiting a friend, or changing their physical setting.

OTHER FORMS OF RESISTANCE

Resistance shows up in different ways for different people. The images I just described all have a driven quality and they all produce extreme agitation. Not surprisingly, I'm an introvert who happens to be cursed with a driven personality. I'm easily overwhelmed, even when alone.

Following are a few other common strategies of resistance. As you can see from the previous examples, they come in many strange forms. They may appear singly, sequentially, or bundled together, and they will generally produce thoughts and emotions that distract or disable. Since resistance to change produces stress—there's always a war between stasis and

motion—the list will resonate with some of the common symptoms of stress.

- Nausea, feeling sick
- Fatigue, tiredness, lethargy
- Whirling mind, inability to focus, poor concentration
- Confusion, anxiety, agitation
- Gloominess, depression
- Irritability, anger
- Being chronically distracted and/or busy
 - Images that obstruct your inner vision (“I just can’t see it!”)
- Rationalizing, blaming, making excuses
- Feeling incapable, unable
- Substance abuse, appetite disorders, escapism in general
- Attacks by the superego

Is it any wonder that people struggle with making a career change when there can be such an arsenal of forces working against it? When you really understand what you’re dealing with, it’s easier to feel compassion for the process—and to take it on with real heart.

ANY TIME WE’RE MAKING CHANGE

We face the same struggle in any area of life where we’re attempting to make significant change. Think of what happens when you decide to take on a new exercise program. Perhaps you have been sedentary for a time and you decide to start running. You start off excited, you buy the sporty outfit and off you go. Half-way round the track on the first day you come to a full stop, gasping for air. Your lungs feel like coarse sandpaper, your legs are starting to buckle and your heart is about to explode. You’re actually dizzy; you think you might be about to faint. What were you thinking? This stuff is obviously dangerous. You decide to go home, if you can still drive. Maybe next week, when you’re feeling more normal... Of course “normal” at this point still means sedentary...

On the other hand, if you start out gently and stick with it patiently, you discover that your steady state is gradually changing. It doesn't happen overnight, but soon enough your heart starts to get with the program. Your legs get a little stronger, your lungs hold more air and suddenly you've run a mile quite comfortably. If you continue to stick with it, a new habit kicks in. Homeostasis starts working *for* you: Instead of dragging yourself to the track, you feel an actual pull to go running.

GETTING OFF THE GROUND

Newton's Law of Inertia:
Bodies in motion stay in motion unless interrupted by an outside force; bodies at rest stay at rest, unless interrupted by an outside force.

Point: When making intentional change, the interrupting force has to come from us.

The hardest part of any major shift is simply getting off the ground. A rocket uses two-thirds of its fuel on take-off. Once it has been properly launched, its own momentum will carry it great distances. This is because it has shifted from being a body at rest to being a body in motion. These are two very different forms of homeostasis. Consider Newton's Third Law of Motion: *Bodies in motion tend to stay in motion, unless interrupted by an outside force; bodies at rest tend to stay*

at rest, unless interrupted by an outside force. When we're making intentional change, that interrupting force has to come from us.

WHY SUCH RESISTANCE IN THE FIRST PLACE?

We've been looking at some of the strategies employed by the psyche to produce a resistance to change. These are the "hows" of resistance. Let's look now at some of the "whys." If homeostasis *perpetuates* a resistant state, what *initiates* it? Why do we feel such resistance in the first place?

NO PRACTICE

There are many reasons. Perhaps the most obvious is the fact that humans have a longer period of dependency than any other animal. This means that our goals are set for us for a very long time. Few of us get any real practice at independent decision-making as we're growing up. By the time we reach adulthood we're thoroughly habituated to being told what to do. So the human condition itself gives homeostasis a head start.

Our first goals are the directives laid down by our parents: *Get up at eight, go to school, finish your homework, make us proud...* When we get to school, they come from our teachers: *Be seated by nine, write this essay, do these sums, study for this exam...* If we go on to college, it's more of the same: *Write this paper, solve that problem, defend this theory...* And once we're working, they take the form of job descriptions: *Meet this target, complete that report, close this account...* In fact, it's actually quite possible to go through an entire lifetime without making any significant in-dependent choices beyond what to do on a Saturday afternoon or what to watch on TV.

It takes guidance and practice to become self-directed in a meaningful way. Few people start off naturally attuned to their inner compass and unfortunately, few are encouraged at home or at school to develop this skill. Yet oddly enough we still expect our young to jump out of the nest at the age of eighteen with a sense of direction.

Most follow the line of least resistance, which is either to take a track that has already been laid – by family, teachers, or random chance – or to rebel and do the opposite. Young people rarely reach their twenties with a strong set of personal goals and the confidence to pursue them. It happens, but it's not the norm. In my experience, it happens more often in entrepren-

- Set goals that you can fully and happily own.
- Optimize your chances of success by writing your goals down.
- Be clear that the goals in all areas of your life are compatible.

erial families. If parents are self-employed and talk about goals around the dinner table, then at least the discussion is familiar. We're more likely to do the things we've watched others doing.

NO ONE TO BLAME

Take your life into your own hands and what happens? A terrible thing: no one to blame! —Erica Jong

Having our goals set for us brings some questionable advantages. For one, when things don't work out, we don't have to take the blame. It's only human to take a certain comfort in this. *"I was just doing my job... it wasn't my fault... I was doing what I was told..."* If we have always been directed by others, it can be frightening to suddenly take the controls and have no one to blame for the consequences.

In fact, to take the controls can feel at first like jumping off a cliff without a net — very scary for most of us. The alternative, however, though apparently "safer" and in some ways easier, can be more costly in the long run. The leading cause of death in North America is heart disease, and studies show that most major heart attacks happen between 8:00 am and 9:00 am on a Monday morning. Given the link between stress and heart disease, it's not a great leap to suggest that those heart attacks are happening to people who are going to jobs that make them miserable. Playing it safe may feel more comfortable in the short run, but it can be deadly in the long run.

Learning to make our own life decisions is like learning to make original art when all we know is paint-by-numbers — difficult, often daunting, but well worth the effort. We live with the background awareness that we will never again experience this reality. At the heart of every human being is the yearning to live a full and meaningful life. It's no wonder that the heart suffers most from an un-lived life.

Backing our own choices takes practice and a willingness to own the consequences. It also takes kindness and a willingness

to remember that we're works in progress, with the right to make mistakes and the right to change our minds.

DON'T KNOW HOW

It also helps to know how to set goals effectively. If you've had no training in goal-setting you may find yourself at a loss for where to start. For those who have never learned the basics, here are a few tried-and-true rules:

First, the goals you take on should be goals you fully and happily *own*. They should feel meaningful enough and worthwhile enough to engage in fully – even if they're shared with a partner or a team. It's difficult to summon up energy for goals that feel inessential, obligatory, or personally compromising.

Second, goals need to be *written* down. Your chances of success are 80% higher when you write your goals down than when you keep them in your head. The mind can only hold a few elements of any one thing at a time. A moderately complex goal will contain many elements, all of which need to be itemized as the goal is broken down into steps. The process of writing forces you to get clear about the elements that are most essential and the sequence in which they need to be addressed.

Third, the goals you set in one area of your life should be *compatible* with the goals you set in other areas. Writing goals down makes it easier to notice if there are conflicts. Set goals for your career and financial life, your relationship life and your personal development. Know what you're committed to in your close relationships and make room for quality time with those you love. Know what best supports your personal development and commit time for this as well. The exercise at the end of this chapter will help you to create a broad vision for your life that includes these essentials.

For success with goal-setting in the short or long term,

THINK SMART:

- 1) Specific: "I will have \$25,000 in the bank by December 31st of next year" (rather than "I want to be rich.").

- 2) Measurable: "I will drink four 8-ounce glasses of water a day" (rather than "I'm going to drink more water."). Specific and measurable are closely related.
- 3) Achievable: "It *feels* possible to me." If it doesn't feel possible, you will not have the confidence to begin.
- 4) Relevant: "It's consistent with my overall plan and the other important goals in my life."
- 5) Timed: "I have clear deadlines and sub-deadlines for the completion of my goal."

A goal without a deadline is not a goal at all. Think of your goal as a target. You're a sling-shot. When you have a deadline, the elastic in your sling-shot is pulled taut. It gathers and aims the stone—your energy—and propels it toward the target. Without a deadline, your elastic is slack. Nothing propels you.

It's human nature to wait to get down to work till we feel the pressure of an approaching deadline. By breaking deadlines into sub-deadlines, we naturally get down to work more frequently.

APPROVAL RATINGS/FEAR OF FAILURE

The fact that we're habituated to having our goals set by others is a logical and obvious reason for the difficulty we have setting goals of our own. However, even with training and practice, most people still find the process challenging. There are other forces that can trigger a resistance to goal-setting. Each has its own storyline and each carries a distinctive emotional impact.

Perhaps the most common is the fear of failure, which is essentially a fear of embarrassment or criticism. The feedback we receive from others has an enormous impact on our image of ourselves. Our family and friends are like mirrors, reflecting back to us our standing in the world, and though we know that the mirrors are often distorted, we still take great pains to avoid unwanted reflections. By avoiding failure, however, we may find that we've restricted ourselves to situations where we can't stretch or grow. Keep in mind that there is a self-image attached to every path, whether or not the path is socially sanctioned. Which do you prefer? The image that goes with playing it safe

or the image that goes with having the guts to take a shot at something – and maybe failing?

It's important to be selective about the people you share your plans with. Outside input is great when it's productive, but it's easy to lose steam for a plan when the people around you are doubtful or negative. Be discerning; ask for the kind of feedback that will support you in a real way.

Story: *If I fail and they criticize me – or worse, laugh at me – I'll die!*

Better story: *My real friends will encourage my dreams and support me when I fail.*

Some fear failure because they have experienced it in the past. We tend to believe that what happened before will happen again. In fact, it may be true. To quote Les Brown, "*If at first you don't succeed, you're running about average.*" Successful goal-setting is an art, and every art takes practice. Don't walk off the field just because you've lost a game or two.

Story: *I failed before; therefore, I'm a loser.*

Better story: *My failures are my best teachers.*

Best story: *The only real failure lies in not trying.*

The following is a message published by United Technologies Corporation, Hartford CT, in the Wall Street Journal:

You've failed many times, although you may not remember. You fell down the first time you tried to walk. You almost drowned the first time you tried to swim... Did you hit the ball the first time you swung a bat? Heavy hitters, the ones who hit the most home runs, also strike out a lot. R.H. Macy failed 7 times before his store in New York caught on. English novelist John Creasy got 753 rejection slips before he published 564 books. Babe Ruth struck out 1,330 times, but he also hit 714 home runs. Don't worry about failure. Worry about the chances you miss when you don't even try."

FEAR OF SUCCESS

A less obvious reason for not setting goals is the fear of success. This one seems truly perverse. Why should we be afraid of actually getting what we want? In fact, the fear of success is every bit as profound as the fear of failure, though the reasons are often less obvious. Fundamentally, a fear of success is a fear that getting what you want will mean a change for the worse – which brings us back to homeostasis. *The enemy we know feels safer than the one we imagine.*

As with the fear of failure, the fear of success is often centred on relationship. People go to great lengths to maintain the stability of their connections with others. When those connections are threatened in any way, they do what they can – often unconsciously – to restore the steady state.

Success can rock the boat in big ways. If one member of a couple suddenly gets inspired and starts moving forward, it's common for the other to feel threatened. He may start to feel inadequate by comparison or she may worry that she'll be left in the dust while the other zooms ahead. Though we need to be sensitive to the feelings of loved ones, we are not serving them – or ourselves – when we allow their insecurities to hold us back.

Connections between siblings and schoolmates follow a similar pattern. If a child suddenly gets the spotlight for doing well in some way and his mates feel dejected or resentful because of it, the child will often unconsciously dumb down. Similar dynamics sometimes exist between parents and their same-sex offspring. A son might arrest the progress of a successful career so as not to show up his father. A daughter might short-circuit her success so as not to surpass her mother. In fact, even a babe in arms will shut down her joy in mid-beam if a shadow crosses the face of her mother and her joy is not reflected back.

Stable, reliable relationships are often valued more highly than personal success. Despite the enormous amount of energy we expend asserting our independence, the need for stable connection is one of the biggest reasons why people abort their projects just as they're about to succeed.

Story: *It's not safe to shine – I'll lose my loved ones.*

Better Story: *If they truly love me, they will celebrate my successes.*

The following is an excerpt from Nelson Mandela's inaugural speech. It was taken from a poem by Marianne Williamson:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us most. We ask ourselves, "Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous?" Actually, who are you not to be?... Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that people won't feel insecure around you... As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

SUCCESS STEREOTYPES

Resistance to goal-setting may also derive from buying in to simplistic success stereotypes – stories popularized by movies and the media. In these, the definition of success is often confined to the amassing of material wealth. Keeping in mind that material prosperity is only one measure of success, notice if any of the 'success stories' that follow make you feel resistant to setting goals.

Story: *Successful people are crooks; they cause harm in the world; they are part of the problem.*

Better story: *Successful people have choices; they can do great good in the world; they can be part of the solution.*

T. Harv Eker, founder of the Peak Potentials Training seminars, claims that the saying "It is better to give than to receive" is a misquote from an earlier Greek saying: "It is better to be in a position to give than to be in a position where you can only

receive." Clearly, if you are in a position where you can only receive, you're more likely to be part of the problem.

Story: *I'd be too stressed out if I were successful; I'd have no time for fun.*

Better story: *Being successful means doing what I enjoy doing and maintaining a healthy work-life balance. Occasional stress is natural and manageable. If it becomes excessive, I will look for support or move on.*

Story: *I'd have to be insensitive to succeed; I'd have to hurt people; I wouldn't like myself.*

Better story: *In fact, I'm far more likely to be successful if I'm likeable and supportive of others. No one wants to do business with someone they dislike.*

Story: *Everyone will want something from me if I become successful; I won't know who my true friends are.*

Better story: *My friends are my friends, sometimes true, sometimes not so true. They're all human. The real question is: "How generous do I want to be with my friends?" How generous would you expect them to be with you if the shoe were reversed?*

SUCCESS AND IDENTITY

Blocks to goal-setting may also derive from our sense of identity—the way we see ourselves in the world. It's not just difficult, it's actually counter-intuitive to go after what we want if we simultaneously see ourselves as incompetent, inadequate, unlucky, or doomed.

Notice if any of the following 'stories' resonate with you:

Story: *I'm not the type to succeed; no one in my family has ever been successful.*

Better story: *I am not my family or my history; where I come from does not determine where I'm going; my past is not the predictor of my future. I have the power to create my life as I want it to be.*

Story: *I'm not deserving / worthy / good / smart / young / old enough... to succeed.*

Better story: *I not only deserve to succeed, I owe it to myself to give it my best shot. My goal is reasonable, achievable and worthwhile and I have what it takes to realize it. I will harness all the energy I've been wasting in self-doubt and turn it into positive action toward my goals.*

OLD PROGRAMS/FAULTY REASONING

Resistance to setting goals also shows up in old programming and faulty reasoning:

Story: *It's selfish to go after what I want.*

Better story: *If I don't care for myself first and most, the quality of what I have to offer others is negligible. When I water my own garden well, it naturally spills out to the gardens around me.*

The flight attendant says it all when she warns mothers to fasten their own oxygen masks before attending to their children.

Story: *I have to have all my resources together before I begin. Or: I have to know the "how" before I identify the "what."*

Better story: All evidence points to the contrary. We identify the "what" first, we make sure we know the "why," and then we work on the "how."

When I'm clear about what I want and my reasons for what I want, I'm far more likely to notice the opportunities that will take me there. With a vision that inspires me, I also find it easier to handle the rocks on the road. And knowing where I'm headed, I naturally switch to the fast lane – instead of chugging along in the slow lane wondering which turn-off to take.

Story: *Things never work out the way I want.*

Better story: *Things have a way of working out.*

Whether or not they're true, I'm constantly collecting evidence for my beliefs. If I believe I always end up in the slowest line-up then that's what my radar will see and select. Why not try on a better story? What have I got to lose?

Incidentally, those last two questions are seriously worth answering if this story is resonating. There's a pay-off for every behaviour and a reason for every belief. What's the pay-off for believing that life doesn't work?

Story: *What if I get there and don't like it or want it?*

Better Story: *If I know what I'm getting into, I'll know if it's what I want; if I engage fully, I'll find the enjoyment that's intrinsic in being present with anything I do.*

The advantage to getting clear on commitments and goals is that we get to try them on in advance. Do your homework. Know what you're getting into and don't commit if your heart or your gut says no. Also, keep in mind that enjoyment is a by-product of full engagement and engagement can only happen when you're present. You could have the perfect job, the perfect relationship and the perfect life-style—but you won't enjoy them if you're missing in action.

FEAR OF A VOID

For some, the prospect of setting goals and achieving them conjures up the vision of a void. *"What happens when I get there? Nothing to look forward to... just a big empty space."*

This is a more profound fear than many realize. It's sometimes called 'The Olympics Blues' because of the unusual amount of time and energy that Olympics contenders must devote to such a relatively brief event. All that preparation, and it's over so quickly. After long years of training, even successful contenders can feel let down for a time.

Buzz Aldrin, one of the first astronauts to land on the moon, had a breakdown after his return to earth. Despite being one of the most celebrated people in the world, the shock of complet-

ing his mission left him – quite literally – lost in space. He had no other goals on returning to Earth. As he later explained, “I forgot that there was life after the moon.”

It is natural to feel deflated after completing a major project. I used to feel that way at the end of a year of university, or after completing any long piece of writing. People who work in the film industry often feel lost at the end of a production if they do not begin another one right away. Especially if they’ve been working with a great crew, the wrap-up will find them facing not just a void but the break-up of a film “family” as well.

People who retire after years of productive activity can become depressed if they stop working entirely. Business executives have been known to die within a very short time of retiring, simply because they’ve lost direction and purpose. These days, people are encouraged to retire more gradually so that they have a chance to adjust to free time in stages. There are programs in place to help retirees find new projects that will occupy their time in meaningful ways.

Our mental stability is largely dependent on having a sense of purpose. We need to feel like we’re heading toward something that matters to us. From this perspective, the fear of a void is natural and the solution self-evident: Always have something ahead to look forward to. Know what comes next, at least in a general way. Have a long-term vision for your life that includes but is not restricted to your immediate goals.

Incidentally, this does not mean that the exploration of emptiness is not a worthy practice in itself. It is in fact at the heart of most Buddhist traditions. However, when it comes to the day-to-day growing of a life, a little planning ahead will avert a lot of unnecessary suffering.

When I’m working on a long-term project now, I take some time to make notes on what’s next. Where I used to feel deflated, I now enjoy the luxury of a sense of completion. Knowing there is something ahead to look forward to makes the whole starting-and-stopping process less fraught.

Story: Once I reach my goal, there won’t be anything left to live for.

Better story: Once I reach my goal, I’ll enjoy a sense of completion and then I’ll begin work on my next project.

FEAR OF COMMITMENT

Many of us get stalled by a fear of commitment. We hesitate to make a definitive choice out of the background anxiety that choosing will mean shutting down our other options. It's true that making a definitive choice to do one thing means choosing *not* to do others—at least not right now. We'll look at this in more depth in Chapter Twelve. Meanwhile, realize that *keeping your options open is not the same as exercising them*. You can only do one major thing at a time. It is through your whole-hearted engagement with that one thing that new, unforeseeable options will arise. If you're trying to keep *all* your options open, you're really just spinning your wheels.

Story: *If I open this door, I can't open any others.*

Better story: *Once I open a door, all kinds of other doors will open.*

True Story: *Spinning my wheels is not the same as going somewhere.*

HARNESS VERSUS HARNESS (THE PRESSURE! THE PRESSURE!)

Goals are like harnesses, and we all resist the harness to some extent. Notice, though, that the word is a verb as well as a noun. By providing direction, goals harness our energy. They create a channel through which our energy is able to gather and build and flow. This allows us to take action in the world. Without a harness, our energy is like water on an open plain, scattering in all directions.

At the same time, a harness restricts our movements. It says "*here,*" not "*there,*" and we feel the rub. If we have too many time constraints, we feel resentful; the harness is too tight. If we're doing too many things that we don't want to do, we feel oppressed; the harness

Warning: Looking forward can become addictive.

Reminder: Keeping your options open is not the same as exercising them.

is an impingement. If we grew up being overly directed, constantly ferried to soccer games and piano lessons and after-school events, we may find ourselves feeling the rub and unconsciously resisting it, *even when the goals are our own*. The moment we feel like we're "supposed" to do anything—even something we really want to do—it can feel like an unwanted pressure.

We all have moments when we want to throw off the harness. The more productive thing to do is to take some real time to examine it. If it's chafing because you're chronically over-booked or doing what you don't want to do, then you need to do the more challenging work of identifying what's missing—and what you can afford to let go of.

Customize your harness. Learn how much free-form time you need and build it in to your schedule. Know what's essential to your well-being and make sure that it's coming first in your life. Make room for real down time and remember that staying busy is a common defense against emotional discomfort. If you're chronically on the run for no good reason, it might be wise to ask yourself (*lovingly!*) what you're running from.

LIFE DESIGN EXERCISE

If you have never sat down to consciously identify the kind of life you want to create for yourself, take some time now to do the exercise below. Use the notebook that's dedicated to the exercises in this book.

Imagine that you're in your nineties, in good health, looking back with satisfaction on a rich, full life.

- 1) What roles have been most important to you in this life?
Your role as an individual? Friend? Parent? Partner? Family member (sibling, aunt, daughter, son)? Employee? Employer? Business owner? Artist? Athlete? Professional? Community member? World citizen? Or...?
- 2) Keeping these roles in mind, what *activities* has your life included? How have you expressed and developed yourself

in the world? Through the creation of a healthy, happy family? The development of a business or an art form? Some kind of involvement with your community? Or...?

- 3) Again, keeping these roles in mind, what *kind of person* have you become? How would you like to be remembered at a celebration of your life? As the one who was always there in an S.O.S.? The one who could make people laugh, even on the darkest days? The one who stayed calm, who consistently brought order to chaotic situations? The one who inspired others by staying true to their dream? Or...?
- 4) Coming back to the present, what conscious commitments could you make, starting now, to ensure that you will honour the roles, perform the activities and develop the qualities that matter most to you? Write these down as positive statements in your dedicated notebook under the heading "Commitments To My Life Design." Think in particular of the habits you may need to reinforce or eliminate in order to support your potential for success.

PERSONAL INQUIRY

In the first section of the book, *Getting Started*, we looked at the effects of a resistant state and the attitudes that prevent people from getting started on a career search. In the last chapter, we looked more specifically at the strategies the psyche employs to resist goal-setting and the reasons for its resistance. These included:

- habituation to being directed by others
- no training or practice at setting goals
- fear of failure
- fear of success
- fear of a void
- fear of commitment, or of making the wrong choice
- ignorance of the power of goals

Harnessing Your Energy

- 1) Are you currently experiencing a resistance to goal-setting?
- 2) If so, what strategies is your psyche using to create this resistance?
- 3) Looking at the list above, what do you think are the main reasons for your resistance?
- 4) How have you overcome your resistance in the past?
- 5) How do you think you can best overcome your resistance now?

ELEVEN: WHERE DID THE DAY GO? MANAGING TIME

The person who chases two rabbits catches neither – Confucius
The tragedy of life is not death, but what we let die inside us while we live – Norman Cousins

The subject of time management is inseparable from the subject of goal setting, since accomplishing goals is the whole reason for managing time—even when the goals are for quiet and relaxation. You can't manage your time without first knowing what your time is being managed *for*.

Having said that, even when your goals seem clear you may still find yourself at four in the afternoon wondering where the day went. Particularly if you're the only one structuring your time, it can be easy to get caught up in unnecessary busy-work (bodies in motion) or fall into lethargy (bodies at rest) until that point in the day where it feels too late to take any real action toward your goals.

Keep in mind that 'busy' is not synonymous with "productive" and "lethargic" is not synonymous with "relaxed." Both can be forms of resistance, particularly when accompanied by a background discomfort.

Remember that a resistant state is unpleasant in and of itself. It can actually feel a bit like a low-grade infection. Because of this, it tends to compound the original discomfort, which leads to the self-perpetuating loop—more resistance, more discomfort, more resistance, and so on—*until we become conscious of it*.

In the last chapter we looked at the many forms resistance can take in keeping us from achieving—or even identifying—

our goals. In this chapter we'll look at some tried-and-true strategies for optimizing time. But first, a word on being conscious: *There is nothing you can do to arrest a habit or change a pattern until you have first become aware that it exists.* Your conscious awareness—i.e., your ability to pay attention in the here and now—is always your first and most foundational tool.

It is also, incidentally, what you get paid for at work. Though you're renting out your energy and time, it's the quality of your attention that makes you valuable—or not—to an employer. With good attention skills, you optimize your energy and time. With bad attention skills, you waste your energy and time. Wasting your energy and time means wasting your employer's money; you become a bad investment. Optimizing your energy and time means making good use of your employer's money; you become a good investment.

If you're self-employed it's no different, except that the market has taken the place of your direct employer and your success depends on convincing that market that your product or service is a good investment. Your ability to do this will depend on how well you pay attention to consumer needs, competitor strategies and emerging technologies.

Paying attention well means being present and observant: you notice your surroundings. You're awake to opportunities for saving energy, time, and money. You're aware of your emotional state without being controlled by it, which allows you to maintain a generally positive attitude. This in turn supports you in believing that obstacles can be surmounted and that unexpected change can be a good thing.

Having good attention skills also means that you have discipline. You eat well, you get enough sleep and you look after your health. You're awake and your energy level is high. You can make yourself do the things that need doing, when they have to be done, whether you feel like it or not. You know that attention is your primary tool and you keep it honed.

The core element of good time management is attention to priorities. How are priorities determined? By looking at the *potential consequences* of leaving things undone.

Above all, *you attend to priorities*. You tackle the important stuff first and you don't waste time on inessentials. And how do you tell the difference? By looking at potential consequences.

The core element of good time management is attention to priorities. Priorities are determined by looking at the potential consequences of leaving things undone.

If you have several things to do within the same time frame and you're trying to decide which to do first, look ahead and imagine the potential consequences of *not* doing each thing. If the consequences of leaving task-A undone have more of a negative impact than the consequences of leaving task-B undone, then task-A is your first priority.

Covey's Quadrant offers a useful way of categorizing consequences. It divides activities into those that are important and urgent, important and not urgent, urgent and not important, and not urgent or important.

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	1	2
Unimportant	3	4

Attend first to Quadrant One—the activities that are both urgent and important. These are the things that, if left undone, will quickly result in serious negative consequences (e.g., paying bills, keeping appointments, handling health issues, honouring commitments). Ignore them and the house will come down.

Next, attend to Quadrant Two—the activities that are important, but not urgent. These are the things that have long-term potential benefits for your life. Not doing these will generate negative consequences over the long term. They include such things as continuous learning, spending time with family, staying fit, and any form of personal development. Ignore them and the house will fall gradually into disrepair.

Third, *if there's time*, attend to Quadrant Three—the activities that are urgent, but not important. These are the things that if left undone might have mild negative consequences. They include routine interruptions from co-workers, requests for information that you can't immediately access, petty griev-

ances, office politics, and so on. Ignore them and the house will be fine. (Well, it might lose a shingle or two.)

A lot of time gets wasted on Quadrant Three activities. The trouble with these is that they have an *apparent* sense of urgency about them. (The phone's ringing off the hook, someone's hammering on the door). If you're easily infected by the agitation of others, these things can be sticky, time-consuming and enormously distracting. On the other hand, if you're paying attention, all it usually takes is a purpose question: "*What can I do for you?*" followed perhaps by a polite, but distinct refusal "*Sorry, I don't have that information...*" If you don't mind being unpopular, you might even follow the lead of the manager who put this sign on her office door: *Your lack of planning is not my emergency!*

Quadrant Four activities pretty much speak for themselves. These are the activities that are neither urgent nor important—the time-wasters. They include taking extra-long coffee breaks, browsing aimlessly on the net, doing the crossword and/or checking personal e-mail twelve times a day when you could be getting down to work. Ignore these and the house will smile.

If you always move on to inessentials (Quadrant Three or Four stuff) after handling essentials (Quadrant One stuff), it will be difficult to move forward personally or professionally. It will probably be difficult even to stay where you are because of the speed with which global economic trends and technology are affecting the face of work in every industry. You will stay on track if, after handling what's most urgent and important, you dedicate regular time to Quadrant Two—the activities that promise positive long-term benefits for your life.

Incidentally, if you are not completely certain of your priorities once you're working, do not under any circumstances proceed on guesswork. Go to your boss with your perceived list and ask if you're on track. Most problems at work arise out of not knowing or attending to your boss's main priorities. If you're the boss, make a date with yourself to do the same. Following are a couple of principles that should help.

THE PARETO PRINCIPLE

There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all – Peter Drucker

Also known as the 80/20 Rule, the Pareto Principle was named after the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto (1848 – 1923), who observed, among other things, that 80% of Italy's wealth was owned by 20% of the population. There have been many variations on his initial observation, some of which are quite trivial – e.g., we might wear 20% of our favourite clothes 80% of the time or visit 20% of our friends 80% of the time. Others are more significant – e.g., Microsoft found that by fixing the top 20% of the greatest number of reported bugs they were able to eliminate 80% percent of their errors and crashes. (Examples from Wikipedia)

For our purposes, the most significant implication of the principle is that 80% of outputs generally derive from 20% of inputs. In the world of work, this means that approximately 80% of the value of what you do comes from 20% of your efforts.

Conversely of course (if you're devoting equal time to all tasks), 80% of your efforts result in only 20% of the value. Obviously, the secret to high performance lies in identifying the activities that make up that super-productive 20% and concentrating your time on those.

A variation of the rule is that approximately 80% of sales come from 20% of clients. The logical implication here would be to concentrate as much time as possible on that high-yielding 20%. In his eye-opening best-seller, *The 4-Hour Workweek*, Timothy Ferriss attributes a significant part of his success to doing just that. He discovered that 80% of his clients were not only the least profitable, but also the most troublesome and time-consuming. Ignoring them freed up huge amounts of his time.

PARKINSON'S LAW

Question: "How Long Will It Take?"

Answer: "As Long As We Have."

Clients sometimes remark that the career transition program should be four weeks long instead of three. In response to such a remark, one woman wisely observed that if it were four weeks long, the same people would probably think that five would be better. She further commented that for her, the length she'd been told to expect was the length that had come to feel right. Knowing in advance that it would take three weeks had given her an overall sense of the sweep of the program and she was pacing her work accordingly. Three weeks was what she had, and three weeks was what it would take.

Parkinson's Law proposes that whether it's a three-month project or a three-week transition program, we tend to use whatever span of time is allotted to a given activity.

I was aware of this phenomenon when I was an undergraduate, though I didn't fully realize its implications. If I was behind with a paper that was due the next day, I would give myself twenty or thirty minutes to complete it. I would actually set the timer on my oven. The results were quite extraordinary. Not only did I get more done in that twenty or thirty minutes than I would normally have done in a whole evening, the quality of my work was often much higher. At the time I thought it was just a fluke. I was programmed to believe that good work could only come from long hours and a lot of blood, sweat and tears. I now realize that it was the added pressure of a tight deadline that improved my results. It forced

However much time we have for a task is generally how much time we take.

Argument for self-imposed deadlines: The pressure of an imminent deadline is what forces most of us to focus our attention and get down to work. Because increased focus gives greater access to intelligence, this not only serves to optimize our time, it also tends to improve the quality of our work.

me to stay focused, keep it simple, and stick to what was relevant. It also made for a livelier writing style.

If clients have not made a definite career decision by the time they leave the program, I ask them to set a deadline for having one within two weeks. If they want more time, I ask why, and in some cases there's a good reason (e.g., they won't know for a few weeks if a course is available.) In most cases, a little digging reveals that they still have some unanswered questions or they're experiencing some form of resistance (procrastination, perfectionism, commitment anxiety...). The imposed pressure of a two-week deadline forces them to focus on essential tasks, overriding resistance through concentrated action. Without that pressure, the process is liable go on indefinitely.

FOCUS QUESTIONS FOR STAYING ON TRACK :

- A) While Exploring Careers, ask yourself the following:
- What is work primarily for in my life?
 - What strengths do I want to use most in the workplace?
 - What conditions do I most want to find in my work environment?
 - What obstacles do I need to overcome in order to find satisfying work?
- B) To Excel at Work, ask yourself the following:
- Why am I on the payroll? What results are expected for the money I get back?
 - What activities contribute the most to those results?
- C) To Thrive At Home, ask yourself the following:
- What are my standards and goals for a happy, healthy family life?
 - What activities contribute the most to those standards and goals?
- D) For Ongoing Personal Development, ask yourself the following:

- What are my standards and goals for continuing growth and personal development?
- What activities contribute the most to those standards and goals?

Again, good time management requires good attention skills. If you are able to stay conscious and concentrated in the here and now you will have no trouble staying clear on goals and priorities. You will also notice when changing conditions require that they be adjusted. Develop the habit of regularly pausing to ask "*What is the most valuable use of my time right now?*" That simple question will bring you into present time and produce an immediate priority shake-down, which is often all that's needed to keep you on track.

Finally, to make the best use of your time, you need to work from a plan. In the next chapter we will look at how a good plan can take the worry out of living.

PERSONAL INQUIRY

- 1) What are your good and bad habits around managing time?
- 2) Do you have a strategy for setting priorities?
- 3) Which tasks do you generally tackle first?
- 4) Which tasks do you tend to procrastinate on or let slide altogether?
- 5) In what ways could you improve your management of time?

TWELVE: I HAVE A GOAL, BUT I CAN'T GET STARTED MAKING A PLAN AND USING IT

When you fail to plan, you plan to fail—origin unknown
A clear plan relieves you of the torment of choice—Saul Bellow

An action plan is essentially a goal that has been broken down into sub-goals. It is a list of the specific steps that need to be taken, in order of their priority, to reach a particular goal by a particular time. It differs from a regular to-do list in that it is concerned with one goal only. Since each step in the plan is a small goal in itself, the same rules apply as for all goals: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timed; also, it is *compatible* with your other goals, it is something you fully *own*, and it is *written down*.

There are different styles of planning, but the real art lies in simply doing it. Get your list down on paper, prioritize it, and get going. You can work from the present to the future, listing all the steps you need to take, starting now, to arrive at your destination. Or you can work from the future back to the present, starting with your destination and listing your key steps in reverse. Or you can use some combination of the two.

The Action Plan: a list of specific steps that need to be taken, in order of their priority, to attain a particular goal by a particular point in time. It differs from a to-do list in that it's concerned with one goal only.

Whatever you do, don't fall into the trap of thinking that planning is a waste of time because it's not the

same as “doing.” Your plan is like a map; it plots your course through a forest of possibilities to an actual destination. It may change a little as you go—most plans do—but without it you will find yourself wasting enormous amounts of time, going in circles, or worse, not even getting started. Following is a brief elaboration of the present-to-future and future-to-present planning styles.

PRESENT TO FUTURE

Working from the present forward is the most common approach and tends to get us focused on immediate action in the short term. This is great for short-term projects. The danger in making long-term plans from present to future is that we run the risk of getting fuzzy at a certain point along the way. The mind’s eye is a lot like the physical eye—it can only keep so much in focus. When looking at long stretches of time we can fall into the trap of assuming that we’ll identify distant tasks when we get to them. This is fine if we don’t overlook essential steps or meet with unexpected obstacles.

FUTURE TO PRESENT

Working from the future back to the present brings our focus to the end-point or destination first. This is useful for projects that unfold over longer periods of time and depend for their success on a series of mid-term, or milestone goals. When we start by visualizing the end-point and looking backward, we get the long view of the terrain we’re about to cover. From this perspective, it’s easier to identify and clarify the milestone points. Having these in clear view offers two advantages: First, we’re less likely to stop short of our long-term goal, and second, we’re more likely to anticipate and prepare for potential obstacles.

CHOOSE THE STYLE THAT WORKS FOR YOU

For short-term goals I recommend working from the present to the future, mainly because it works and it’s what

most of us are used to. My recommendation for long-term goals is to use both models. Start by working from the future back. Identify your final destination and then chunk it down, blocking out the secondary destinations that need to be reached before arriving at the end-point. These are your milestones—things like completing a course or achieving a particular level in your career.

Now take your secondary goals—the milestones—and chunk them down. Write a to-do list for each, this time working from the present to the future. Visualize each step along the way—no vague spots—and brainstorm for potential glitches. Where problems are likely, brainstorm for ways to reduce risk and identify possible solutions. Where milestones feel too distant to break down, block out your vision as clearly as you can. By seeing it clearly and getting it down on paper you are laying a track that may lead to surprising results. If there are significant unknowns, create back-up plans so that you won't be derailed if your first approach is blocked.

Whatever you do, don't fall into the trap of thinking that planning is a waste of time because it's not the same as "doing."

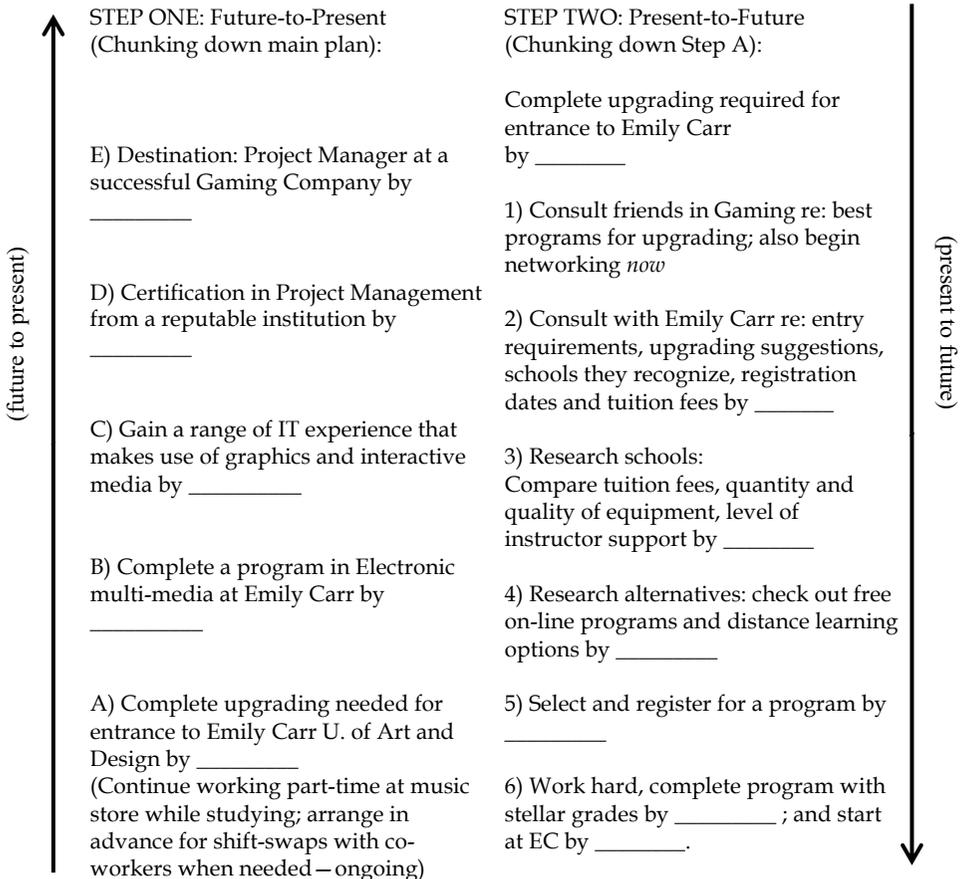
Having broken down your secondary goals, review the activities involved and set your priorities. Ask which activities should come first and which can be done within the same time-frame. Now create a master to-do list that can be checked off and up-dated at least once a week. Some tasks will be ongoing (e.g., networking) while others will be one-time events (e.g., registering for a course).

Remember that people vary a lot with the level of structure that feels right for them. A plan that feels too open-ended for one person might feel like a straitjacket for another. The strategies offered here are designed to bring a fair amount of detail to your planning. Try them on and use what works. Experiment a little. Customize your harness.

If you don't yet have a career goal, I recommend using the plan in Part Two. It provides an overview of the essential steps involved in making a sound decision and includes twenty-five specific questions to guide your research. Keep in mind that this is a plan for arriving at a goal—i.e., a *starting point*.

Once you have a career goal, use the strategies suggested here to break your goal into concrete, orderly steps that you can act on starting now. Following is a sample plan that starts with the future-to-present style and then breaks the first milestone down from present to future.

Goal: To be gainfully employed as a Project Manager in the Gaming Industry earning \$ _____ per year, by January of _____.



PERSONAL INQUIRY

- 1) Do you experience a resistance to consciously making plans? If so, what thoughts or anxieties come up for you around the subject of planning?
- 2) Do you usually work from a written plan or to-do list?
- 3) If so, how is it generally organized?
- 4) If not, how do you go about getting things done?
- 5) Is there any way you could 'customize your harness' for a better use of your time?

THIRTEEN: IF I MAKE A CHOICE I'LL LOSE
MY OTHER OPTIONS
—CONQUERING COMMITMENT ANXIETY—

For some it feels more comfortable—and more exciting—to be on the way to something than to actually arrive. As long as we're looking forward, we can live with the sunny hope that everything will turn out brilliantly... one day.

It's appropriate to suspend decision-making while you're investigating your options. However, if you've done a thorough job of your research and you still can't get down to making a choice, you may be experiencing some anxiety around commitment.

The common predicament with commitment, whether in work or relationship, is that making a choice means shutting down our other options. We know we can't do it all, at least not all at one time, and our thinking gets stalled at the realization. It's as if we see ourselves in a long hallway with many doors and each time we think of opening one, we're stopped by the thought that we won't be able to open all the others.

When we stop and think it through, however, we quickly realize that if we don't open a door, we're leaving ourselves out in the hallway—which is not where the action is. If we're there long enough, our chances of falling into a default choice (grabbing any job because the rent is due) increase substantially, and we're likely to find ourselves back in the hallway a little later on. The hallway may prolong hope, but if hope is the only action we're getting, it will soon lose its appeal.

COMMITMENT INITIATES CHEMISTRY

The reality is that the action starts when we commit to a choice. When we open a door whole-heartedly, all kinds of other doors open too. Our commitment initiates a chemistry with our surroundings that can't happen as long as we're hesitant or ambivalent.

A commitment is an act of conscious intention. When we commit to a goal or plan it's as if we shift from being an inert arrangement of chemicals to being an active one. Inert chemicals can't react with their environment, however alive that environment might be. Active chemicals can react in all kinds of interesting ways—many of which we could never foresee.

COMMITMENT ACTIVATES YOUR RADAR SYSTEM

One reason for this is that when we commit to a goal, we send a signal to the part of our brain that's responsible for selective attention. Everyone is familiar with the effects of this personal radar, technically known as the reticular activating system. It's the mechanism that kicks in when we buy a Volkswagen and start seeing Volkswagens everywhere, or date a redhead and start seeing redheads everywhere.

When we're operating without clear goals, the mechanism is on automatic, randomly tuning to the things it believes are important to us. It draws our attention to objects and people that have some kind of significance for us, or events that resonate in some way with our expectations.

If we have strong negative expectations, the system will scan the environment to find evidence to support those expectations. As the evidence piles up, the expectations—and the negativity—will be reinforced. If we have strong positive expectations, the system will scan the environment for opportunities to realize those expectations. Keep in mind that it's working anyway, one way or another. We might as well make it our ally.

COMMITMENT SPARKS THE LAW OF ATTRACTION

“ENERGY FLOWS WHERE ATTENTION GOES”

A partner of selective attention is the Law of Attraction, a concept that’s had many different interpretations over the centuries. Put simply, the notion suggests that clear commitments activate forces that support us in unexpected ways. The best explanation I know for this is that *energy flows where attention goes*⁴ — quite literally. If you focus your attention on the palm of your hand, you’ll soon feel it tingling, simply because your attention has directed energy to the area.

Similarly, when we say to someone struggling with a problem *don’t give it any energy*, we’re essentially telling them not to add fuel to the fire by worrying, or dwelling on it. When we worry, our attention is focused on imagining the worst, thereby fuelling the very thing we most want to avert. Imagine sitting in a cold dark place, hoping that if you focus hard enough on how cold and dark it is, the place might get warm and bright. It doesn’t work that way. If you want warm and bright, you have to first imagine warm and bright — *convincingly*. As you do, you feel the shift in your energy immediately. Whether or not the Law of Attraction is “real,” we tend to attract events and circumstances that match the energetic frequency of what we’re *avidly* imagining.

When we make a strong commitment to a goal or plan and envision it convincingly, we are literally fuelling our plan. As our attention becomes more focused on our vision, our energy

Commitment activates your personal radar system.

Commitment directs and concentrates attention—and “*energy flows where attention goes.*”

Commitment activates the Law of Attraction.

⁴ “Energy flows where attention goes” is a shamanic expression thought to have originated with the Kahuna of Hawaii. It was revived and popularized as one of the principles of Huna, a new-age philosophy developed by Max Freedom Long.

is gathered and channelled more intensely than usual. This intensification of energy creates its own force field, with its own gravitational pull. We find ourselves attracting support in ways we could never have orchestrated or predicted.

Most of us have had some experience with this kind of unexpected support. One of mine happened when I was intensely involved in the writing of my first manuscript. I was waiting tables in a busy restaurant at the time and the hostess had just warned me that she was about to seat a very fussy man in my section. Apparently, he had refused every other table in the place.

The man was in fact a little testy, but he was also hungry and quickly mellowed after he'd had some food. We got chatting and he asked me if I worked in the restaurant full time. I told him I worked part-time. He asked me what else I did and I told him I was a writer. He asked if I was working on anything right now and I said yes, I was writing a book about attention. "Interesting," he said. "I did my doctoral dissertation on the subject of attention." I was immediately about five hundred times more interested in this conversation. It turned out that he was a doctor of Psychology from a university in San Diego. His post-doctoral work had focused on various aspects of attention and he was a goldmine of information on the subject. He had just started a one-year sabbatical and was doing a lecture tour across Canada. Aside from a fairly loose lecture schedule, his time was free.

I asked if he'd let me buy him lunch the next day in exchange for answering a few questions. In that brief lunch, I not only gained all kinds of insights into my subject, I also discovered that a book I'd had on my shelf for over ten years (but never read because I disliked the cover) was still considered to be a pivotal work on the origins of consciousness. It was exactly what I needed to take me into the next section of my book.

This kind of synchronicity happened continuously throughout the writing of that book and continues to happen whenever I consciously commit to a major project.

THE CATCH: AMBIVALENCE VERSUS CONVICTION

*Whether you believe you can or you can't,
you're right* — Henry Ford

The main catch to working successfully with conscious intentions is that we need to feel real conviction about our chances of success. Doubt and ambivalence divide our energy. If part of us is unwilling, unsure, or unconvinced of the possibility of our plan, then we have as much energy draining away from it as we have moving it forward.

To warrant real conviction our intentions should express more than our superficial desires. They should challenge us and they should feel worthy of our energy and time. If they don't there will be an internal disconnect that erodes conviction and stalls us at a deeper, less conscious level.

Our subconscious minds cannot tell the difference between what's real and what's convincingly imagined. Both leave the same kind of memory trace in our brains and both activate our radar systems, setting them to tune to opportunities we might otherwise miss. Once you feel you have a worthy goal, summon your conviction by engaging your senses and emotions as fully as possible. Simple statements of intention are primarily mental. They create the wiring, but they don't turn on the juice. It's your whole-hearted enthusiasm and your ability to vividly imagine your project in detail — to see it, taste it, touch it and feel it — that plugs you in and gets the current moving through the wires.

The subconscious mind can't tell the difference between what's "real" and what's convincingly imagined.

All professional athletes are coached in the tools of mental simulation. Whether it's visualizing a play on the football field or a faster mile on the racetrack, they learn to replace the doubting mind with convincing images of bettering their best. It doesn't mean they win every time, but with imagination working *for* them instead of against them, they know they have a better shot. It's interesting that though we know these tools work brilliantly in sports, we tend to forget about them in other areas of our lives.

If you haven't experienced the power of a vividly imagined intention, you will have to go on faith at first. Once you begin to see results, your confidence in the process—and in yourself—will increase. You'll also experience a significant increase in your sense of personal power.

Cherokee Elder: *"Sometimes it feels like I have two wolves fighting inside of me, one filled with love, the other with hate."*

Child: *"Which one wins?"*

Elder: *"The one I feed."*

PERSONAL INQUIRY

- 1) What thoughts and feelings come up when you're thinking seriously about committing to a career?
- 2) Do you experience anxiety around making a definite choice?
- 3) Have you worked with conscious intention in the past?
- 4) If so, what were your results?
- 5) If you were successful, do you know why?
- 6) If you were unsuccessful, do you know why?
- 7) How can you ensure that your future commitments will have a chance to gather momentum and materialize?

FOURTEEN: WHAT IF I JUST DON'T KNOW? ADDRESSING THE PASSION/PURPOSE DILEMMA

But wait just a minute, you might protest. Aren't we getting ahead of ourselves? There's still the little problem of what to do next. Don't I need to find my purpose in life? How can I make a commitment when I don't yet know what my passion is?

Important questions, requiring an important distinction:

Saying that commitment is necessary to the realization of a goal is not the same as saying that there is only *one* goal or purpose worth committing to. Every living thing is capable of growing and expressing in many different ways. To believe that there is only one "right" path is like believing that the tree will grow toward the sun only if it's planted in a particular spot. In fact, the tree will grow toward the sun from wherever it finds itself.

The myth of a single life purpose, so endemic to new age culture, frustrates and discourages as often as it inspires. We're led to believe that embracing our life purpose is the only way to be true to ourselves, to live original, authentic lives, to experience the Great Adventure in a deep and meaningful way.

Buried in the notion of the single life purpose are two rather maddening assumptions: One, that your purpose is just sitting there out in the open, obvious as a horse, waiting for you to saddle up and ride off. Two, that once you embrace your purpose, your life will be filled with meaning and passion.

It sounds inviting, even heroic, when you first try it on. But buried in the myth are two rather maddening assumptions:

One, that your purpose is just sitting there out in the open, obvious as a horse, waiting for you to saddle up and ride off; and two, that once you embrace your purpose, your life will be filled with meaning and passion.

The danger in the second assumption is that it's destined to inspire doubt. Even if you enjoy what you're doing and feel fairly certain that you're on the right track, if you've bought the belief that your days should be filled with meaning and passion, then one flat day might be all it takes to test your certainty. If the drama isn't there, you might conclude that the *real* "right track" must be somewhere else.

As for the first assumption, it's not that simple for most people—either to know what they love or to go out and do it. The recommendation to 'do what you love' has a nice ring to it, but it can feel like an insult to those who have a passion they can't transform into bread, and a frustration for those who feel they have no passion at all.

Rather than "Do what you love," perhaps the better advice would be: "Find work that feels appropriate, and then *love what you do.*" To love something is to engage with it whole-heartedly, and that's what

It is not the norm to feel a deep connection to a passion or sense of purpose—or even, for that matter, to life itself. Most of us are stuck on the surface of our lives, a little on the run, a little agitated, chronically distracted by issues from the past and concerns about the future. We live in a perpetual barrier of white noise and busy-ness that prevents us from being in present time—the one place, ironically, where passion and purpose might have a chance to sprout.

Rather than "*Do what you love,*" perhaps the better advice would be: "Find work that feels appropriate and then *love what you do.*" To love something is to engage with it whole-heartedly, and to engage whole-heartedly is to be fully present. Remember, it is our whole-hearted engagement that turns work into play. If you're feeling in need of a sense of purpose, try making it your purpose to be present and engaged in your life. Then make your work your practice. Allow for the possibility that passion and a sense of purpose

might evolve over time, through bringing yourself wakefully and willingly to what you do.

UMBRELLA INTENTIONS, GUIDANCE, AND THE SOUL'S DNA

Expecting absolute certainty about our choices is a recipe for getting stalled. We know as we go in this life; we find things out by trying them on. A good way to avoid going in circles with questions of purpose is to hold the umbrella intention that all of your undertakings will support the development of your soul; that like the tree, it will find the sun from wherever it stands. You can do this without knowing how it will all unfold.

Expecting total certainty about our life choices is a recipe for getting stalled. In the end, it's not so much what happens to us as our relationship with what happens that determines the quality of our lives.

Every living thing tries to optimize its opportunities for growth and every living thing has an internal blueprint. The acorn *will* become an oak, wherever it lands, and no two oaks will be the same. There is infinite variety within the templates, but every life form has a shape it's trying to grow into. Humans are no exception.

It can be useful to play with the notion that your soul has its own form of DNA. That is, it has an agenda, a trajectory, a shape it wants to take—and it will do its best to grow into this shape, with or without your conscious awareness. To align with your soul's agenda is to honour what we earlier called 'the deepest

A sense of purpose may take different forms at different ages. It may evolve quietly over a lifetime and it may not be felt as obvious at any stage.

current of your being.' When you hold the umbrella intention that whatever you embark on will be food for growth, you stay open to the wisdom that lives beyond the rational mind. This creates a supple soul. It prevents you from being overly preoccupied with unanswerable questions and it allows you to

be flexible with goals and plans. It also enables you to greet setbacks as opportunities for course-correction. When your radar is set for growth and support, you're more likely to see the upside of unexpected change. You are also less susceptible to the backward pull of homeostasis.

Of course, if you do have a singular sense of purpose, by all means go for it. Give it all you've got, but don't be so attached to it that you can't adjust to changing times or shifting priorities. A sense of purpose may take different forms at different ages. It may evolve quietly over a lifetime and it may not be felt as obvious at any stage. For many, a sense of purpose might ultimately have more to do with finding balance and peace in a busy life than with any singular activity.

REALITY IS A LIQUID

When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change – Wayne Dyer

Our experience of reality is a highly fluid affair. Like water, it tends to take the shape of its container. We have the choice of living with a positive, empowering container, a negative, disabling one, or some mix of the two. This is not a reference to what's 'real' or 'true,' but rather to the subjective nature of experience.

If your container says that your soul has an optimizing force that moves you to mature and express in healthy ways, then your experience will begin to conform to that story. Your radar will be set to notice evidence for this force, your life will be imbued with a sense of integrity, and you'll notice whatever support is there.

If your container says that your life is a series of random and meaningless events, your radar will be set to notice evidence for that and your life will feel random and meaningless. You'll also fail to notice whatever support might be there.

We build the forms; "reality" conforms. Decide that there is a wisdom informing your soul that transcends the rational mind; then learn to attune to it. If it knows you're listening it

will find ways to speak. We may not have the power to create reality at an objective level (I can't grow a third arm), but we *can* create our personal experience of reality. In the end, it's not so much what happens as our relationship with what happens that determines the quality of our lives.

Decide that your soul will find the nourishment in all of your choices. Then look at your options, choose what feels most enlivening (especially if it's a little scary), and *act* – with enthusiasm!

PERSONAL INQUIRY

- 1) Do you believe that you should feel passionately about your choice before you commit to it?
- 2) How does this belief affect your ability to take action?
- 3) Are you waiting to feel absolute certainty about your choice before you commit to it?
- 4) How does this belief affect your ability to take action?
- 5) Do you feel willing to hold the belief that you possess a wisdom stronger than your rational mind that's available to guide you if you attune to it? If so, why not try it now?
- 6) If not, why not? What do you believe you have to lose?
- 7) Do you feel willing to hold the belief that you will find opportunities for growth in whatever you do? If so, why not do this now?
- 8) If not, why not? What do you believe you have to lose?



AVOIDING THE ROCKS
ON THE ROAD

FIFTEEN: TAKE CARE WITH WHOM YOU SHARE

We have been looking at some of the larger, more obvious hindrances to getting on with it – the elephants, as it were. Now let's look at some of the less obvious ones – pitfalls that can beset the most well-intentioned of career seekers. These are the little invisible mice that scurry around in the background, harmless enough in singles, but collectively strong enough to scare up the elephants.

Humans are social by nature. It's natural to want to share your ideas as you're trying on various careers, especially if you're getting excited about one or two in particular. A small warning: *When you're in transition you tend to be more vulnerable than usual to the responses of the people around you.*

Imagine you're meeting a friend for coffee. All day you've been thinking about a new idea for a career and you're totally excited. You tell your friend about your idea and she says "Really?" in one of those "you-have-got-to-be-kidding" tones. Then she rolls her eyes and changes the subject.

If you're feeling flat for no apparent reason and find you've lost interest in a perfectly viable career choice, think about who you've been talking to. How have they been responding to your ideas?

A new idea is like a little spark. If it's blown on in just the right way, it can become a flame. If it isn't, it will quickly go out.

Or maybe she just says "Uh-huh" as she's rummaging distractedly through her bag, looking for the new T-shirt she wants to show you. As a result, your bubble pops and you lose your enthusiasm. In the back of your mind, you begin to think it's not such a great idea.

A new idea is like a little spark. If it's blown on in just the right way, it can become a flame. If it isn't encouraged, it will quickly go out.

Most of the time people are caught up in their own concerns and not particularly present when we're sharing our ideas. It's not that they mean to trivialize us or hurt us; it's just that they're not really engaging.

Consider keeping your ideas to yourself until they feel solid enough to share.

If you want to share an idea with people, first ask them if this is a good time. If they say yes, then tell them that you want them to really engage, to try on the idea with you. The genuine attention of another should bring energy to our ideas and enable us to see them more clearly. Even if our friend has reservations, if they're really engaging, we will hear their reservations as expressions of support.

If you know you won't get this quality of engagement from people, then keep your ideas to yourself until they become more solid.

PERSONAL INQUIRY

- 1) Make a list of the people you currently have the most contact with.
- 2) Look at each of them in turn and using a few simple words or phrases, describe in your notebook the impact the person has on you. Do this by picturing the person in your mind's eye and allowing their image to really "inhabit" your body. Your body expresses every experience you have, including your interactions, in a highly particular way. Sense your *physical* response to the person, especially in the forward part of your torso (throat, chest, belly). Use physical terms such as '*smooth, warm, expanded, prickly, agitated, rough, contracted, sharp, calm, choppy, tight, relaxed.*' If you're having a struggle, imagine the person as an ocean or lake and describe the conditions of the water, or think of them as a type of weather and give a quick weather report.

- 3) Now describe how you feel during and after a visit with this person. What happens to your energy? Are you motivated, inspired, enlivened? Dull, depleted, deadened? Limit your description to a few simple words and don't think too hard.
- 4) Finally, ask who in this group is likely to really engage when you're talking about a new career idea. Who is most likely to fan the flame and who is most likely to blow it out?
- 5) Looking at the results of your inquiry, who of the people around you do you feel you can afford to spend time with? Who would be better to avoid until your career decision feels solid?

SIXTEEN: THROWING OUT THE BABY WITH THE BATHWATER

During introductions on the first day of a program, Shauna Green, a woman in her early fifties, announced to the group that she would “never ever *ever* set foot in an office again.” She was definite; this was not negotiable.

What was odd, however, was that it was evident almost immediately that Shauna was a brilliant office administrator. She actually got lights in her eyes when she talked about filing systems. She waxed poetic about the efficient use of space. Organization was like a spiritual practice for this woman—she even got *me* inspired to create a few files (truly not my forte). Something wasn’t clicking.

As it turned out, Shauna had been the office administrator for a pair of psychiatrists in her last job. The doctors shared an office, alternating days, and both were extremely fussy about how they wanted the office arranged. Unfortunately, their styles were incompatible in every way.

What this meant for Shauna was that she could never feel mastery in her job. If she arranged things to suit the first doctor, she’d be in trouble with the second, and vice versa.

The result was that she was under constant pressure, not only because she was always being corrected, but because the

When we’ve had a bad experience in a past job, it’s not uncommon to characterize the whole field or occupation as bad because of that experience.

continual reshuffling of papers and procedures wasted so much of her time. She could never feel really caught up with her work. Add to this the fact that she was surrounded every day by people in distress and it began to make sense that she’d lost her heart for office work.

When we’ve had a bad experience in a past job, it’s not uncommon to characterize the whole

field or occupation as bad because of that one experience—in other words, to throw out the baby with the bathwater. What Shauna needed to remember was that there are as many venues for office administration as there are industries. All businesses, from schools to airlines to day-cares to law firms require someone to do the books, create systems and generally keep order. And every one of them will have its own unique environment.

Post Script: Ironically, not long after having quit her job out of sheer frustration, Shauna was besieged by her former employers to come back. It seemed they were having problems with employee retention. Shauna agreed, but only on condition that she be allowed to manage the office in her own way. I bumped into her on the street a few months later and can happily report that she was still smiling.

PERSONAL INQUIRY

- 1) Have you had a negative experience in a past job? What was the job and what was the experience that put you off?
- 2) What field was the job in (e.g., if it was an office admin job, the field might have been IT, Education, Law, Accounting, Engineering)?
- 3) Have you characterized the whole occupation as negative because of this one experience? Have you decided that you never want to work in this occupation again?
- 4) When you revisit the occupation objectively, looking at your skills and strengths, do you believe that the occupation itself was the problem—i.e., a bad fit for your personality—or did the problem lie more in the work environment? If the latter, can you imagine enjoying this occupation if you were working in a better environment or a different field? Is it worth taking a second look?

SEVENTEEN: IDEALIZATION, DISAPPOINTMENT AND LOSS

For many of us, certain jobs have a bit of a halo around them – an aura of romantic appeal. This doesn't mean that they aren't great jobs; it means that you should look very carefully through the glamorous image to see what's really there. Again, talk to people who are doing the job and find out what a day in the life is all about. Remember James Latke, the man who wanted to become a lawyer. Not one of the lawyers he talked to was doing a job he wanted to do.

Beware of the 'halo-effect.' If a job has a glamorous appeal for you, look carefully through the glamour to what is actually there.

People often find themselves doing things they're not suited to because somewhere along the line they bought in to an idealized image of a career. If their training was long and expensive, they may end up feeling trapped in their field because it's the only way they can see of recovering their investment. Imagine going all the way through medical school only to discover that you really don't like sick people, or long shifts in sterile environments...

COMMONLY IDEALIZED CAREERS:

INTERIOR DESIGNER

You love being creative with your own space and people are always saying you'd be great at interior design. Sounds appealing, doesn't it? You see yourself working with beautiful fabrics, finding those wonderfully eccentric color matches, creating beautiful spaces, feeling like an artist...

There are two things to keep in mind here: interior design is a highly competitive field that depends on a rich clientele—*and*—you will not always be doing what you want to do, the way you can at home. Which does not for a minute mean you should toss the idea if it really fits and you're ready to compete.

EVENT PLANNER

This one comes up frequently in assessment tests for personalities who like a lot of variety. It's an incredibly broad field that includes everything from hotel work to wedding planning, booking bands for clubs, and organizing conferences. If you get hooked on the idea of planning events without getting specific, you'll find yourself floundering. The territory is far too general. You need to imagine exactly what *kind* of event you'd like to be part of and what actual *tasks* you'd like to do. Also, most major events—e.g., large conferences—involve very few paid positions and lots of volunteers. If you want to be in line for a paid position you will have to do your time as a volunteer and you will need to do a lot of networking.

RESTAURANT OWNER

This is a wonderful career for anyone who has capital to burn, loves spending all their time in restaurants, knows how to put real heart into a place, and has a psychic pipeline to that mystical, ever-changing fusion of elements that makes one in a hundred succeed. I include this one because I worked in bars and restaurants for years and am absolutely clear that bartending or serving were the only positions for me. Unlike managers or owners, I was always free to go home when my shift was over.

COUNSELLOR/THERAPIST

People who have gained important insights through counselling therapy or recovery programs will often decide that counselling is the career for them. They may favour this choice even more if they're the kind of people others come to for

advice. Again, the choice may be perfectly appropriate, but beware of the common illusion that a counsellor is there to give advice. What they are mostly there for is to listen and resist giving advice. Being with people who are anxious, depressed, addicted, or afflicted with personality disorders is one of the most demanding jobs there is. It requires full presence, an ability to harness attention in a completely selfless way, compassion even for people you don't like and god-like acceptance in the face of relapse. As we all know, understanding their destructive patterns rarely prevents people from repeating them. Most counsellors, in spite of pouring their hearts into their work, must learn to live with fairly low success rates.

WORKSHOP LEADER/MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKER

This one is similar to the last. If you have found great inspiration in workshops you may feel tempted to look into leading them. Again, the choice may be perfectly appropriate. But before you quit your day job, remember that you're looking at self-employment in a highly competitive forum. Unless you find work with a large motivational firm or happen to be extremely well connected to a group who wants exactly what you have to offer on a regular basis, you will be spending only a fraction of your time presenting and the bulk of it promoting. Ask yourself first: *Do I have an original niche*—i.e., new material or a novel approach that's not already on offer? *Do I actually know what's on offer?* and *Do I have charisma?*

AIRLINE PILOT

Though it's not as idealized nowadays as it was once, flying a plane is still a romantic ideal for many. Jack McConnell, a young man of twenty-two, moved to BC from Ottawa with the intention of getting his pilot's license. He'd been working at a lucrative job in a high-end restaurant and had managed to save a good portion of his tuition. Everyone back home knew about his plan and applauded him for going after his dream.

During his first six months of training, Jack began to realize that his picture of flying—and of flying school—was incomplete. For one thing, there was a lot more bookwork than

he'd anticipated. For another, the reality of piloting a plane commercially was a lot more serious than he'd imagined – and considerably less adventurous. In fact, it began to look more and more like driving a bus – only in the air, with way more things that could go wrong. As the excitement of zooming around in the skies was replaced by the mundane realities of the work itself – shifts, short stopovers in odd places, cramped quarters, huge responsibilities and constantly interrupted sleep patterns – Jack decided to cut his losses and drop out. He came into the program with a burst bubble and no idea of what to do next.

ATTACHMENT AND LOSS

For a good part of the program, Jack was on an emotional roller coaster. One moment he'd be antsy and impatient, the next he'd be absent and flat. He couldn't concentrate for five minutes. He wanted to feel excited about a new career, but nothing remotely compared with his fantasies of flying. Self-employment looked mildly interesting but vague; he couldn't work up any enthusiasm. Besides, every idea looked like just another bubble waiting to pop. How could he trust his own judgment? He was already embarrassed about his change in plans – he hadn't even told his friends yet – and he didn't want to make the same mistake twice.

What Jack really needed was some time and space to recover from his disappointment. He had spent a long time feeding the flame of his dream and it was natural to feel a loss when the flame went out.

It takes a while to make the shift from looking back to looking ahead, and the interval in between can be uncomfortable. As it happened, Jack found an interesting way to move through that interval: a sudden opportunity to work for the father of a friend on a construction job in Guatemala – room, board and airfare all paid for. Though he still didn't know what his next steps would be, the opportunity for

Investing time and attention in an idea naturally creates an attachment to it and there's bound to be a sense of loss if it doesn't pan out.

an adventure in another country was a nice compensation for the loss of his dream. He left the program with a lighter heart, deciding to review his options freshly when he returned.

Investing real time and attention in an idea naturally creates an attachment to it. Our attention brings the idea to life—quite literally—and there is bound to be a sense of loss when it doesn't pan out. Still, it's better to experience a little disappointment now than to commit to a career that's wrong for you and lament it for longer later—especially if you're planning to invest real money in training.

Keep in mind that the whole experience of getting attached is something we generate from within. It's a simple function of our ability to focus attention—which means that when the time is right, we can give life to other ideas in exactly the same way.

I hope I haven't punctured any dreams with these examples of idealized jobs. At the same time, I can't stress enough how critical it is to have a realistic picture of what a job entails. There are a million exciting careers out there and every one of them is right for someone, but you need to play devil's advocate and ask the hard questions. If you were in my classroom, I'd be taking you aside and grilling you on the details of not just a day, but a year in the life of any choice you're looking at. I'd persist until I could see the picture clearly—with you in it—and feel confident that it was a reasonable fit.

PERSONAL INQUIRY

- 1) Is there an occupation that has a particularly compelling appeal for you right now? If so, what is it?
- 2) In a few words, how would you describe its appeal? What does your imagination conjure up when you think about doing this kind of work?
- 3) Are you clear about what a day in the life of this job entails? Do you know what your main tasks would be from day to day and week to week?
- 4) Have you ever had to let go of a career idea? If so, for what reason? E.g., you don't or can't meet the job requirements,

your physical or mental condition won't allow you to do the job, you've discovered that your picture of the job was mistaken or incomplete, or...?

- 5) If you have suffered a disappointment around a career choice, is it still affecting you now, or have you recovered enough to move on? If the former, do you believe it's possible to feel enthusiastic about another occupation once you've had a little time to digest your disappointment or do you believe that no other job will ever suit you as well? If the latter, what does this belief do to your energy? How does it serve you? Remember, there's a payoff for every belief.
- 6) Recognizing that beliefs are choices, can you substitute your defeatist belief for a more empowering one?

EIGHTEEN: WAITING FOR THE ELUSIVE “AHA!” DEFEATIST EXPECTATIONS

Are you waiting for an epiphany? That “*Aha!*” moment where you suddenly get what you’re meant to be doing and it’s now just so obvious? Whether it’s conscious or unconscious, the expectation that green lights will start flashing or bells will go off when you hit upon the “perfect” career is very common. Unfortunately, it’s probably the least common phenomenon in a career change and when it does happen it’s often related to the halo-effect described in the last chapter. Consequently, it’s often a bubble that bursts quite quickly.

Are you waiting for an “*Aha!*” moment? Expecting bells to go off or green lights to come on when you hit upon the ‘perfect’ career can stall your decision-making indefinitely.

Harpaul, an enthusiastic young woman in her early thirties, established in the first week of the program that her two biggest loves were writing and travel. Not surprisingly, the occupation of travel writer came up on some of her assessment tests. That decided it—the lights were flashing, the bells were ringing; a travel writer she would be. She was so excited she dropped out of the program after the first week. Why waste time?

It was easy to sympathize and great to see the enthusiasm, but what felt like a waste of time would have been a major time-saver in the end. Harpaul was not a professional writer and had no idea how much competition there would be for this kind of work. Most travel writers get the odd trip paid for through their writing, but few make a living at it. She realized later that she

would need to invest real time in honing her skills before she could even begin to compete. Meanwhile, she still had to figure out how to pay the rent. She came back to the program a few weeks later to do just that.

PERSONAL INQUIRY

- 1) Are you expecting an “Aha!” moment when you suddenly come upon the perfect career for you?
- 2) If so, how does this expectation affect you as you’re looking at various options? Does it feel like nothing is hitting the mark?
- 3) It’s useful to recognize that expectations, like beliefs, can set us up for disappointment. Is there a more productive expectation to work with?

NINETEEN: THERE IT IS IN BLACK & WHITE —DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU READ—

Harpaul fell into two traps. First, she was carried away by her epiphany and got too starry-eyed to bring it down to earth. Second, she was taken in by words on a page.

Assessments are mechanical tools—good places to start if they offer a few new ideas or help to confirm a well-considered choice. But all they're really doing is asking you questions about your strengths and interests and feeding back your answers in different words. They will ask if you're good with your hands; if you say yes, they will tell you that you have manual dexterity (and *now* you believe...).

Something happens to people when they're doing assessment tests and they see certain occupations coming up as potential matches for their personalities. It's as if the experts have spoken and now they have *proof*.

Personality assessments are mechanical tools. They do not measure the essential self. They measure the constructed self, the person you have grown into over time. They're a good place to start if they offer a few ideas you haven't looked at or if they help to

confirm a well-considered choice. They're also useful for providing an overview of the enormous range of work that's out there today. But don't be programmed by them. They're only there to get you thinking. All they're really doing is asking you questions about your strengths and preferences and feeding your answers back in slightly different words. For example: They will ask if you're good with your hands. If you say yes, they will tell you that you have manual dexterity (and *now* you believe...)

Remember, too, that we are always unconsciously looking for evidence to support our choices and beliefs. If you approach assessment tests with a hidden agenda, it's easy to manipulate your responses to get the results you're hoping for.

If you approach assessment tests with a hidden agenda, it's pretty easy to make them give you the answers you're looking for.

Assessment tests may also give you suggestions for jobs you have done in the past and have no interest in doing again, simply because those jobs reflect skills you have developed over time. Do *not* feel condemned to doing something just because you can. This advice applies as much to the things you *like* doing as to the things you *dislike* doing. It's great to 'do what you love,' but not necessarily for a living. I love writing, but I only love it when I'm writing what I want to write. After researching writing for a living, I was very clear that writing all day for someone else would spoil my appetite for my own.

Finally, computerized assessments in particular can generate some pretty strange career suggestions. Janet Ray, a passionate animal lover, was more than a little offended when one of the occupational suggestions she received from an on-line test was "butcher."

PERSONAL INQUIRY

- 1) Are you looking for confirmation for your ideas through personality assessment tests? If so, remember that you can distort your results by having a particular field or occupation in mind when you write them. How might this be affecting your career search?
- 2) Do you find yourself drawn to certain careers mainly because they have shown up as matches on assessment tests? If so, remember that there are many factors besides assessment results that go into determining the appropriateness of a choice (e.g., age, health, preferred work environment, education level, personal ethics, work/life balance, safety concerns).

- 3) Are you being conscientious about researching the options that are coming up on assessment tests? For support with your research, I refer you again to Part Two of the book, *Plotting Your Course*. In it you will find a plan that includes twenty-five questions that should be asked of any career before making a final decision.

TWENTY: PERFECTIONISM

When you aim for perfection, you discover it's a moving target.

– G. Fisher

There is a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in.

– Leonard Cohen

Closely related to “Flashing Lights and Ringing Bells” is the notion that there is only one right choice. Perfectionism leads directly back to the Passion/Purpose dilemma addressed in Chapter Fourteen.

Once again, if you do have a driving passion or a strong sense of purpose, that's great; I hope you'll find a way to honour it. If, like so many, you don't have a driving passion, try to avoid the trap of feeling there's something wrong with you or something missing in your life. Humans are notorious for believing that there is only one right way: one right relationship, one right job, one right answer to a question, one right view of things. This can be an enormous hindrance in a career transition.

Let's say you have done your research and you're trying to decide between two options. If you believe unconsciously that one is right and

Recognize that there is always more than one right choice.
--

the other is wrong, then no matter which one you choose, you'll be left with the gnawing fear that you've made the wrong choice. You'll be haunted by *what-ifs* and you'll find yourself waffling back and forth, unable to make peace with either decision.

Again, the more productive approach is to recognize that there is always more than one right choice. In her wonderful book, *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*, Susan Jeffers suggests that if you're trying to decide between two choices, look at one of

them as blueberries, the other strawberries. Both are good. Both will open doors and take you in new directions. Both will teach you many things.

Doubts about the rightness of a choice can prevent you from being present at work. Unfortunately, when you're not there, you can't get the enjoyment that's available there either.

Doubts about the rightness of a choice can prevent you from fully engaging. When you believe, even un-consciously, that you've made the wrong choice, you tend to absent yourself from whatever you're doing. Unfortunately, when you're not really there, you can't get the satisfaction that's available there either. What you do get is that hungry feeling that tells you something's missing. If you aren't aware that that something is you, it will be easy to blame the job—which will lead to further doubts about your choice, further disengagement, and a cycle of disenchantment that can ultimately poison even the most "perfect" of jobs.

PERSONAL INQUIRY

- 1) Are you waiting to find the perfect career choice? If so, take a moment to list all the conditions that would make your choice perfect.
- 2) Now ask yourself if there are realistic career options that meet those conditions. If there are, then your idea of "perfect" is reasonable. If there aren't, then you might want to revise your idea of "perfect."
- 3) What effect, if any, is your search for perfection having on your career exploration? Are you discarding any reasonable ideas because they don't fit every one of your criteria? Which ideas would they be?

TWENTY-ONE: NOTHING DOES IT FOR ME! THE MISSING WOW-FACTOR

The essence of boredom is to be found in the obsessive search for novelty—George Leonard

A variation of “*Something’s missing*” is “*Nothing does it for me.*” Note that buried in this complaint is the assumption that something *should* do it for me. Not only do we tend to expect the elusive “*Aha!*” and an immediate sense of certainty, we may also expect a built-in ‘wow-factor’ when it comes to making a career choice. Before we even engage with it (and of course thereafter), our choice is supposed to promise—and deliver—*excitement*.

As George Leonard points out in his book *Mastery*, we are a plugged-in, consumer-based culture whose national nervous system is the media. Given the enormous impact of electronic devices, TV, movies, video games and the internet, it is critical to keep an eye on what’s pumping through those electronic veins. Consumerism depends on perpetuating an appetite for *more*, whether we need it or not. If the culture already has the basic essentials for survival and relative comfort, then it needs to create an appetite for novelty and excitement: new toys, new styles, new adventures, new highs—new *distractions* from the deeper hunger that goes unfed when only superficial appetites are being served. It’s genius, really—a perfect self-perpetuating loop. The rush to the new becomes addictive because the ‘rush’ that’s on offer is always short-lived. It *produces* but only temporarily *appeases* the hunger for something deeper, thereby creating a perpetual need for itself.

We are constantly bombarded with the message that life should move from high to high to high—all peaks, no valleys or plateaus. If you look at advertising, half the ads promise

some kind of peak experience: The lucky couple boarding the cruise ship after winning the lottery; the loving family gathered happily around the table because Mom and Dad had the forethought to buy house insurance; the senior's new lease on life (Tennis! Hiking! Romance!) since he started using low-fat margarine on his toast. It may be a good way to sell margarine, but it's not a great model for living the good life.

In our conscious moments we know that the expectation of continual peaks is impossible to fulfill, but in our unconscious moments, particularly in front of the TV, we are still being subliminally programmed to expect a life that is full of climactic moments.

If you expect your job to be all peaks and no valleys, first, you'll never find a choice that delivers, second, even a great choice will feel like it falls short, and third, you'll rob yourself of the mastery that comes from engaging with an activity over time.

This expectation can be one more way of getting stalled when it comes to choosing work: If you expect your job to be all peaks, first, you will never find a choice that delivers, second, even a great choice will feel like it falls short, and third, you will rob yourself of the enjoyment and mastery that come from engaging with an activity over time. It's simple physics – if you don't embrace the valleys and plateaus, where real

learning occurs, you won't have a chance to experience the peaks.

PERSONAL INQUIRY

- 1) Are you expecting work to bring excitement and novelty into your life? If so, in what way? How is this expectation affect-ing your ability to make a good career choice?
- 2) Do you believe that you're not really living if your days don't include some "peak moments"? Are the "peaks" where life really happens for you? How would you describe

a “peak” moment? How does your desire for excitement impact your day-to-day life?

- 3) Are there parts of a day that “don’t count” for you because they feel familiar and predictable? Do you find yourself checking out in the midst of daily routines? How would you describe the quality of your life in those moments?
- 4) The desire for novelty and excitement can prevent you from engaging with what’s going on in the present moment, yet mastery in any form can only develop through full engagement. Recognizing this, is there a way in which you might revise your expectations so as not to miss out on the deeper opportunities your life might bring?

TWENTY-TWO: I WANT IT ALL! CLARIFYING YOUR EXPECTATIONS

A close relative of “*Nothing does it for me*” is “*I want it all.*” As you begin to look closely at your interests, beware of the belief that your career should incorporate everything you enjoy doing. People get stalled by the expectation—often unconscious—that there is one occupation out there that will magically incorporate their love of animals, their fascination with genealogy, their passion for astrology and their certainty that they have a book in them.

People get stalled by the expectation that there is one occupation out there that will magically incorporate their love of animals, their fascination with genealogy, their passion for astrology and their certainty that they have a book in them. Wanting it all is a classic form of resistance.

While it’s great to have lots of interests, if you feel the need to explore all of them *now*, it’s unlikely you’ll explore any of them. Under this kind of pressure, interests and fantasies become real distractions, arresting the decision-making process indefinitely.

Pay close attention to the “what-abouts” and “yeah-buts.” If every time you lean in to take a closer look at something a little voice pulls you back with a “*yeah-but... what about the book?*” then you’re caught in a loop that’s preventing you from making a decision.

There’s a peculiar kind of self-torture that goes with wanting to do it all. What you get is that first delicious feeling of promise that goes with imagining each thing—the infatuation stage—followed by the realization that there’s actually a fair bit of work involved in getting each thing off the ground (work you mean to do but don’t quite get around to because of

all the other things that are pulling at you). This in turn is followed by the mounting frustration that nothing is materializing in your life. All of which may now be followed by the need for another enticing distraction—a new interest perhaps?

Too many enticing distractions can lead to the kind of commitment anxiety described in Chapter Seven. Though they may initially create the illusion that we are approaching something wonderful, distractions also ensure that we never arrive. Window-shopping becomes a trap if you never stop to buy.

It's only human to enjoy fantasies. Whether we're flirting with a new romance or a new career, our fantasies can be both compelling and inspiring. As they become more grounded in reality, however, we inevitably discover that there are challenging passages and a fair bit of concentrated work to do before we start seeing results. It's tempting to prefer the illusion of promise to the nuts and bolts of developing competence, but ultimately, illusions don't deliver.

Notice how your fantasies make you *feel*, emotionally and energetically. If your energy is constantly revving at the thought of each new possibility, then you may be addicted to intensity. This kind of intensity is like the sugar hit you get from a fresh stick of gum: short-lived and ultimately unsatisfying. When nothing substantial is landing, you're left hungry, so you reach for another stick. Interests at this level are just another form of consumerism—distracting, but in the end unsatisfying.

If your energy is chronically sinking, if you're throwing up your hands and feeling hopeless as you imagine each new possibility, then your interests are overwhelming you and it's time to do some serious sorting. What's more common is that people vacillate between revving (feeling hopeful and excited) and crashing (feeling hopeless and flat). The only sure cure is to buy into something substantial.

Ask yourself which interests are closest to your heart. Which feel most meaningful and worthwhile? You'll probably find that those are the ones that bring up the most resistance. The other ideas, despite their appeal, may be decoys, servants of your resistance designed to turn you away just as you're about to commit to something that matters. Choose what feels

both meaningful and possible and then get to work. Do what needs doing, learn what needs learning, and enjoy the deeper satisfaction of developing mastery.

If you're looking at starting a business or developing an art form — things that are unlikely to bring in money right away — find a day job that won't eat you up. Look for something that provides you with the time, stability and mental room to get seriously underway, and then get started.

If you want your day job to be your main work, remember that you can always pursue other interests once your career is on track. In fact, there is nothing greater than having enjoyable outside pursuits. When you have something to look forward to after a work day, work becomes more fun. Think of what it's like to be reading a really good book. You don't read it all at once; you set it down and do other things, but between readings you're still enjoying it. *Time away brings the pleasure of looking forward.* By the same token, if your job is reasonably agreeable, you'll find yourself looking forward to work while you're pursuing your other interests.

PERSONAL INQUIRY

- 1) Are you hoping that your job will allow you to develop all of your main interests and utilize all of your main strengths?
- 2) If so, do you believe that this is possible? If yes, list all the interests and strengths you have in mind and name all the occupations that encompass those interests and strengths.
- 3) If you find occupations that fit your list and are also realistic, congratulations. Choose the one that fits you best. If you can't find an occupation that fits your list, ask what effect your expectations might be having on your career search.
- 4) Ask if your expectations are actually a sneaky form of resistance — a way of keeping you from making a career choice. How might you revise your expectations to ensure that they don't stall you indefinitely?

TWENTY-THREE: I JUST WANT STABILITY! REDEFINING JOB SECURITY

The desire for stability is a common theme these days – and an understandable one if, like Mike Hammond, you’ve been laid off four times in the last eight months. Mike was spinning when he came into the program. His first layoff had come after fifteen years with a large printing company. Along with twenty of his co-workers, he was “restructured” out of a job and declared redundant as the result of a merger.

Having been in one business for so long, Mike felt limited by what he believed was a very specialized set of skills. Feeling unqualified to do anything else, he continued looking for jobs in the same industry. Through his many contacts he was able to find work in three other print shops. Two of his next three layoffs were due to downsizing; being the last one hired, he was the first to be let go. The last company to hire him went under after six weeks.

It was easy to understand why Mike had promised himself that his next job would be absolutely, positively, rock solid *permanent*. Unfortunately, a promise like that in times like these is not so easy to keep. After telling his story and listening to those of others, Mike began to realize the obvious: By restricting his search to a threatened industry (where ironically, he felt “safest”, he’d been seriously limiting his opportunities. He needed to look to fields that were flourishing rather than struggling and he needed to lose his insistence on guarantees.

Holding out for permanence in a time of rapid change is a recipe for frustration—and another way to get stalled.

Ultimately, he took his skills with computers and electrical equipment into the field of telecommunications. After a brief training program, he found work with a growing company, and though the company offered no guarantees of “rock solid permanence,” what they did offer

was perhaps more interesting: benefits and advancement possibilities for anyone willing to keep up.

As Mike would attest, too much unexpected change can be hugely stressful. It's hard to enjoy the day if you're constantly waiting for the axe to fall. On the other hand, holding out for permanence in a time of rapid change is a recipe for frustration—and another way to get stalled.

STUDY DEMOGRAPHICS, RESEARCH THE LABOUR MARKET

While no one can make infallible predictions about the shapes that change will take in every industry, we can still make educated guesses. We can study our population, pay attention to the economy and anticipate which goods and services will be in greatest demand over time.

At the time of this writing a huge segment of Canada's population—the lead edge of the Baby Boom—are entering their sixties. A third of the population are between forty and sixty. It's not a great leap to recognize that health care, community support services, fitness, recreation and entertainment will be major markets.

There are all kinds of websites dedicated to disseminating information about the labour market. One of the simplest ways to stay informed about current or emerging trends is to Google the name of your province or town and add "hot jobs" or "economy." If you don't want to drown in stats, Wikipedia has good overviews of the demographics and economies of most towns, along with brief synopses of their histories, government, educational services, forms of transport and more.

Meanwhile, if you realize that like Mike you've been holding out for "rock solid permanence" in a career, consider the following passages from *Composing a Life* by Mary Catherine Bateson:

Assumptions about careers are not unlike those about marriage; the real success stories are supposed to be permanent and monogamous... (p. 6)

All too often men and women are like battered wives or abused children. We hold on to the continuity we have, however profoundly it is flawed. If change were less frightening... far more could be lived... (p.8)⁵

Clearly there can be a down side to playing it safe. Staying in any situation purely for the sake of stability is not a recipe for happiness.

Ask if your next job is not only a good place to land, but a good place to take off from as well. Where is your field or industry heading? Notice what the people around you are saying and doing. Stay tuned to emerging trends. Read everything you can find about your industry; it will not only keep you up to date and ready for change, it will keep you interested in your work.

CONTRACT AND PROJECT-BASED WORK HAVE BECOME THE NORM

Recognize that contract and project-based work are the norm in many industries and have significant advantages of their own. Just as there are now generations of people who have grown up using computers, so there are generations who have worked at contract or project-based jobs through most of their careers.

Many of them actually prefer it—as long as their industry is healthy and they can reasonably expect that there is more work to come. They enjoy the sense of completion when a project is over, they enjoy having a break, and they enjoy the freshness of beginning something new. In fact, for many, the prospect of continuous, uninterrupted work can seem dull after so much variety.

Examples of fields in which contract or project-based work is common: the film industry, technical writing, web design, computer programming, fund raising, tour guiding, ESL teaching, most of the arts, seasonal jobs, event planning of every kind, advertising, and many more.

⁵ Bateson, M. C. (2001). *Composing a life*. New York, NY: Grove Press.

Without realizing it, I myself shifted from continuous work to contract work fifteen years ago when I stopped waiting tables to go back into teaching. At the time I believed there could be nothing less secure than earning minimum wage, depending on tips, having no benefits, no seniority, and even, at times, no set hours.

Tend to Essentials

- Research the labour market; understand the demographics of your region; learn everything you can about how your industry is doing locally.
- Ask if your next job is both a good place to land *and* a good place to take off from.
- Recognize that contract and project based work are the norm in many industries.
- *Network!*—before you get hired, while you’re working and when you’re not working.

When I started working in a private college, I thought I had found a secure job as a GED teacher. I was stunned to discover a year later that there would be no more work until the government renewed our contract. I had not thought to ask, and no one had told me that my job was contingent on the success of an annual proposal made by my employer.

As it turned out, the contract was renewed, and by the time it was eventually cancelled, I’d moved

on to another program. In the place of the cancelled contract, a new program emerged that better met the needs of our changing client base.

My new position facilitating career transition programs started out as a six-month contract. At the time it felt very risky to let go of a longstanding contract to take on a pilot project. However, transition skills were what I wanted to teach most and I was coming to realize that, though changes in my industry were constant, new opportunities were as well. When programs ended, others generally emerged—and with them, new venues for work. Incidentally, I had six different managers over the dozen years that I was an instructor for this program. When times are tight, management positions are often the first to go. There is something to be said for frontline work.

NETWORK, NETWORK, NETWORK

I have also come to realize that my whole field is one big buzzing hive. People hook up in this industry, as in most, in a million interesting ways. There are endless opportunities to connect with the people in your field if you're alert, enthusiastic and interested in your work. Be good at what you do. Develop yourself. And look around. Notice who's doing what. When unexpected change hits your company, call your contacts. If your industry is healthy, there will be other opportunities.

Network before you get hired, network while you're working and network when you're not working. Remember it is human nature to turn first to the people you know and trust. If you were an employer in need of a new employee, you would check out your own contacts first. If a person in your network recommended someone, then that's who you would want to check out—not only because someone you trust has recommended them, but because it will mean a significant saving in time and money. It will allow you to bypass or at least abbreviate what Richard Bolles in *What color Is Your Parachute?* calls the most Neanderthal practice left in the workplace: the interview process.

DO NOT ASSUME...

Do *not* assume, by the way, that just because you know someone well, you also know the nature and extent of their network. This was the mistake made by Norbert Kessler, a doctor of chemistry who spent the entire three weeks of his career exploration mourning the "fact" that there was no work for chemists in Vancouver. He had been working as a pharmacy assistant since moving to Canada and was dying for something more challenging and lucrative. He was also so blinded by his negative convictions that he nearly failed to notice the gold at his feet.

Two days before the program ended Norbert came in with a huge smile on his face. A cousin of his wife's had given him the number of a friend who worked in a chemical engineering

firm. As it turned out, the friend was a chemical engineer himself and an executive with the firm. After a brief conversation over the phone, he invited Norbert in for an interview. A week later Norbert was offered a job as a full-fledged, card-carrying chemist, starting the following week.

Note: Norbert rather sheepishly confessed that his wife had been pestering him to call this man for six months.

There will always be people who believe that whoever shows up in their little circle doesn't have anything of value to offer. *Don't be one of them.*

There will always be people who tell you not to join their line-up because it's sure to be the slowest. *Don't be one of them.*

There will always be people who wouldn't want to belong to a club that would have them for a member. *Don't, under any circumstances, be one of them.*

PERSONAL INQUIRY

- 1) Have you been employed in a dying industry or shaken by one too many downsizings in recent months? If so, have you decided to hold out for rock-solid security in your next career? What effect is this having on your career search?
- 2) Do you believe there is such a thing as rock-solid security in these times? If not, can you think of a more useful description of stability?

TWENTY-FOUR: DON'T CAST SHADOWS UNDERSTANDING PROJECTION

Li, a creative woman in her late twenties, arrived in Canada from China with a degree in Economics. She was conflicted about whether to take her Masters in Business Administration—an enormous commitment of money and time—or find part-time work in some area of customer service. Part of her wanted the status and earning power of a successful professional, another part wanted the chance to work on her English and develop her creativity.

This is not an uncommon dilemma for people with a strong creative drive and it can take real work to decide which priorities need to come first. However, as I talked to Li, it seemed that no matter how she looked at her options, nothing appealed to her. She would shake her head wearily as we discussed each possibility, utterly disenchanted by the prospect of any of them. Everything looked stale and uninspiring.

It is human nature to project our emotional state onto the ideas we're investigating. If you *feel flat*, your options will tend to *look flat*.

As you may have guessed, it was Li herself who was uninspired. A recent immigrant, she was overwhelmed by the challenges of settling in a new country. She was struggling with a language in which she still felt maddeningly inept. She was confused by value clashes and cultural differences she didn't yet understand. And she was suffering the loss of self-esteem that is particularly acute when one's sense of personal mastery is diminished on not just one, but several fronts at once.

In a word, she was feeling depressed, and without realizing it, she was projecting her depression onto every option she looked at. In this state she was incapable of feeling enthusiastic about anything.

Before she could make a decision, Li needed to recognize and accept her emotional state and to see it as a natural response to the changes in her life. She also needed to remember that all states are transitory.

If you're going through a difficult time, remember that taking small steps each day toward a concrete goal can help to bring order and a sense of progress to even the most chaotic of life circumstances.

As she became more aware and more acceptant of how she was feeling, she began to see the wisdom in taking small steps. She decided to look for a simple job in customer service. This would allow her to make a little money, improve her English and acclimatize to her new home. After six months or so, she would review her situation and reassess her options.

PERSONAL INQUIRY

- 1) Do you find that every career option you look at feels stale and uninspiring? If so, is it possible that you might be stuck in a mild depression and projecting your feelings of dullness onto the choices you're considering?
- 2) Can you accept your state as natural, give it a little time and space, and give yourself permission to take things one step at a time?
- 3) List some of the small steps you could take starting now that would give you a feeling of progress without overwhelming you. Now act on them, one step at a time.

TWENTY-FIVE: CLIMBING OUT OF THE HOLE OVERCOMING DEPRESSION

One of the greatest challenges of down times is to actually notice we're having them. Depression – the garden-variety that Li was going through and that we all experience from time to time – is uncomfortable, and as we noted in Chapter One, we all resist uncomfortable states. We deny them, we avoid them, we override them. We judge ourselves as weak or wrong for having them, and *we turn away*.

Unfortunately, the effects of turning away only compound the problem. Though we may remove ourselves, at least briefly, from our original discomfort, we invariably encounter the discomfort of feeling removed.

What we typically fail to realize is that a resistant state is depressing in and of itself – so naturally, we resist it. We get caught in a cycle – distracting ourselves further, removing ourselves further and suffering further from feeling removed. The solution becomes the problem.

Meanwhile, ironically, the state we were initially resisting remains intact, perfectly preserved under all our commotion. As the saying goes, *what we resist persists*.

Daniel Jensson was in his mid-forties when he came into the program. Married with two teenaged sons, he was a hardworking man who prided himself on his dedication. He'd been a valued employee of the same bank for eighteen years and had always felt secure in his management position. He had never once considered that he might become a casualty of downsizing.

When it happened to him, he was stunned. By the time he came into the program, he had been virtually unable to move for two years. Initially overwhelmed by the shock of his termination, his first reactions had been outrage and disbelief. As the shock wore off and the reality of his loss sank in, these were gradually replaced by the torment of self-doubt. Ultimately,

Daniel took his termination personally, becoming convinced that he had nothing to offer in the workplace.

Feelings of worthlessness led to depression, and ultimately inertia. Unconsciously, Daniel turned away from his pain by going numb to it. Because numbness and depression are painful in and of themselves, he got caught in the resistance cycle, turning away from the effects of a turned-away state. He became even more depressed and inert.

Resistance not only compounds depression, it disables us as well. When we turn away from what's happening in the moment, by definition we are not present enough to see or take charge of our situation. And the part of us that knows this feels chronically anxious and out of control.

When he was finally able to take a step and sign up for a career transition program, Daniel was still pretty wobbly. However, the simple shift from being alone to being with others in the same situation made a difference right away. Through telling his story and listening to those of his classmates, he came to see that his plight was shared by many and not a reflection of him personally.

Having a structured time schedule and a concrete plan allowed Daniel to get back in the saddle. A little self-awareness helped him to disengage from his emotional state without denying or rejecting it. He learned to arrest the process of turning away and to make room for what he was feeling. As he systematically took inventory of his values and strengths, he finally began to remember who he was. He left the program with renewed confidence and a much more accurate picture of himself.

We need to remember that emotions are like the weather; they come and go. They are not who we are in any essential way. We are like the sky—the stage on which the weather plays. The sky is open and allowing. It doesn't try to dodge the rain and it doesn't judge what's passing through.

The key to avoiding the resistance cycle is to be aware and allowing of your states. Notice how you're feeling and remember that your moods colour everything you see. Journaling is a great tool for this. When you record your feelings with simple curiosity, without judgement or blame and without falling into

them, you allow your inner observer to mature. You learn that it is possible to disengage from a state without rejecting it.

Give yourself regular weather reports and remember that every system passes. When you feel a storm coming on, don't ridge against it. Think of what happens when a storm hits a ridge of mountains. The mountains block the storm's passage, trapping and prolonging it rather than allowing it to disperse.

Mood swings are natural during a transition. Give your feelings easy passage and have compassion for your dark days. We don't make the weather wrong for raining.

There's an interesting postscript to Daniel's story: On the evening of the last day of the program, a Thursday, he decided to organize his office space at home. As he was cleaning out his desk, he came across a stack of business cards that he'd collected during his years with the bank. He was about to scoop them into the wastebasket when he remembered how much emphasis had been given to networking throughout the program.

Mood swings are common in a career transition and they often include brief depressions. Observe your changing states as you would changes in the weather. Like the clouds and the rain, emotions come and go. Be like the sky—the stage on which the weather plays. The sky is open and allowing. It doesn't try to dodge the rain and it doesn't judge what's passing through.

Remembering that the majority of job offers happen through personal connections, and realizing that the cards represented most of his business network, he started sifting through them. The first one that caught his eye was that of a man he'd been friends with some years before. They had golfed together, shared the odd dinner, and become quite close. At some point their paths had diverged and they'd lost touch. He decided to give the man a call the next day.

Please note: This was the *first* work-related phone call that Daniel had made in two years. As it happened, his friend answered the phone himself. Not only was he delighted to hear from Daniel, but when he found out he was unemployed, he asked him to come down to his office that afternoon. When Daniel arrived, he offered him a job on the spot. As it turned

out, he had lost his office manager the week before. Hearing from Daniel was like a gift from God.

Now here's the kicker: As the two men conversed, Daniel shared a little of his experience over the last couple of years. After listening for a few minutes, his friend exclaimed, "I can't believe you didn't call me through all this time! Do you realize, man, that if you had called me the day you were terminated, you would have been working for the last two years!?"

They don't know if we don't tell them; we don't get help if we don't ask.

PERSONAL INQUIRY

- 1) Have you been stuck in a depression for some time? If so, do you feel you have lost touch with the strengths that you bring to the workplace? How are you seeing yourself right now? Do you believe your picture is realistic? Remember, in times of anxiety and depression, people tend to focus more on their perceived inadequacies than their strengths.
- 2) Are you aware that a 'situational depression' is a natural response to the shock of job loss and/or uncertainty about the future? Did you know that most people experience such states at some point in their lives, especially in times of prolonged stress?
- 3) Have you been resisting your state? If so, how? What forms have your resistance taken? What have you been doing to escape? Has your resistance been helping or hurting your career search?
- 4) If your resistance has been hurting your search, have you also been resisting your awareness of this? Are you caught in a resistance-loop (compounding your depression by resisting it)? If so, what could you do to arrest the loop and get back on track?
- 5) A situational depression can usually be alleviated, at least to some degree, through participating in structured activities (i.e., following a plan) and focusing in an organized way on your strengths. To structure your career

Avoiding the Rocks On the Road

search activities, follow the plan in Part Two. To connect with your strengths in a fresh way, complete the Self-Portrait in Part Three, which is a separate upload on this website.

TWENTY-SIX: ANALYSIS PARALYSIS TOO MUCH INFORMATION

*We first raise the dust and then claim that we
cannot see—Berkeley*

Are you caught up in eternally getting ready? Do you find it difficult to take the first concrete steps toward your goals? If so, you may be suffering from analysis paralysis. We can get stalled indefinitely by feeling that we need to know more, do more research, talk to more people, take more courses.

Beware of the need to know more when your preparation is pretty much complete. Unless you have significant questions to answer or essential skills to obtain, you may be overwhelming yourself with the need to know everything. This can keep you spinning your wheels forever, waiting to take that one last course or find out that one last thing.

There's always more to know – and you can never know it all. Recognize that your need to know more may simply mean

Beware of the need to know more when your preparation is pretty much complete. Set time limits on your research and stick to them. Have a simple, logical system for recording your findings so that they can be understood at a glance. Otherwise you may find that you've amassed a wilderness of inessential information that leaves you confused, disorganized... *and feeling like you need to know more.*

that you're scared to take the next step. Know that this is normal, take a deep breath, and jump. Trust that as soon as you land in the water, you'll do what it takes to stay afloat. The longer you *look* at the water, the more reasons you'll find for not jumping in.

If you tend to be perfectionistic, hesitant, and/or overly cautious in other areas of your life, you may be more prone to this kind of hold-up than others. Particularly if

your style of research tends to branch off automatically into finer and finer detail, you will need to consistently return from the branches and twigs to the main trunk of the tree.

Set time limits on your research and stick to them. Write down your questions and answer them one at a time. Have a system. Record your findings in a simple, logical way so that they can be understood at a glance. Otherwise, you'll find that you have amassed a wilderness of inessential information that leaves you confused, disorganized... and *feeling like you need to know more*.

Janet Carver, a woman in her late thirties, joined the program after staying home for a couple of years with her second child. She had an MA in counselling psychology, which she had not yet used, and she was in the program because she wasn't sure if counselling was for her.

As the program progressed, all the evidence indicated that counselling was not only a great choice for Janet, it was clearly something she believed in and felt she could do well. It was therefore puzzling that she kept insisting that she needed more courses to upgrade her (already adequate) skills. Or that perhaps she should be looking at careers that did not involve counselling at all.

When she finally examined her need to know more, she realized that she was unconsciously resisting her fear of jumping in by waiting for that magic moment when she would feel completely ready. Given that she was about to start a new and challenging career, it was unlikely that that moment would ever arrive. She needed to trust and jump.

DO I KNOW WHAT THE REAL HOLDUP IS?

There is no more powerful thing to do with fear than to notice it, bring it clearly into focus, and engage with it consciously. When it's living in the background, a little out of focus, it can keep us in a perpetual fog, busy on the surface, but essentially going in circles.

As Janet became more conscious of her fear, she began to realize that there was more to it than simple nervousness about her inexperience. Part of it came from a very isolating image of

self-employment. Unconsciously she had been picturing herself alone in an office waiting for clients to magically appear. Her common sense was telling her that this was not going to happen – certainly not right off the bat.

As she realized that it wasn't just counselling, but self-employment that scared her, she also realized that she had a legitimate concern. Obviously, skill in counselling does not necessarily spell skill in business.

Once she was clear about this more practical concern, Janet did a very sensible thing: she started interviewing with different counselling agencies so that she could begin working in a setting that already had its own client base. That way she would also have the collegial support of experienced counsellors.

It all seemed logical and obvious – after the fact. However, as long as Janet was unconscious of the nature of her fear, it had her on the run, convinced that she needed to know more, do more research, take more courses, and so on.

PERSONAL INQUIRY

- 1) As you have been researching various career options, do you feel you have gathered an overwhelming amount of information?
- 2) If so, are you feeling even more confused than you were at the start because of all the detail?
- 3) Have you noticed that in your confusion, you keep thinking you need more information? If so, come to a *halt!* and start sorting. Certain personalities dig up such a wilderness of information that they end up feeling paralyzed by it. Organize your information into simple categories and toss out all unnecessary detail.
- 4) Ask yourself if it's possible that the need to know more is a red herring – i.e., a form of resistance in disguise. Is the process of gathering more information stopping you from taking the logical next steps toward a career choice? If so, you know what to do!

TWENTY-SEVEN: WHY AM I STILL CONFUSED? NOT ENOUGH INFORMATION

Feeling confused about your options is usually a signal that you need more information. You may have narrowed down your choices to two or three, but if you still have unanswered questions about them, you will find yourself unable to decide.

It may be that you don't yet know what the labour market is like in a given occupation. Are there ample job opportunities? Or you may not know what the wages are like, or what the actual tasks are that you would be performing. Or perhaps you are having trouble visualizing yourself in an occupation because you haven't yet identified a field. Office administration will look different in a law firm than it does in a college, a church, a library, or a furniture store. Customer service will look different in a bank than it does in a bar, a post office, or a technical support line. Ask yourself what information is missing or out of focus. Know what your questions are and set about answering them one at a time. Track your findings in an organized way.

NO PLAN

Even if you have arrived at what feels like a satisfying choice, you will still feel fuzzy until you have a clear plan. How will you set your choice in motion? Take some time to write down what needs doing. Ask yourself what should come first and notice if you've been stalling or filling your time with inessential activities. Always be working from your first priorities. Attending to peripheral details when you could be tack-

ling essentials is just a sneaky way of spinning your wheels. Review Chapter Twelve for tips on planning.

A MORE FUNDAMENTAL DECISION TO MAKE FIRST

Are you currently faced with more than one issue in your life? If so, is there a more fundamental decision to make before deciding on a career? Mona Doucet was confused for half the program because she had two different but interrelated issues on her plate. One was the obvious question of what to do for work; she'd recently been laid off from a management position with a department store. The other was whether or not to move to France.

Mona's husband Michel, a French teacher at a local college, wanted to move (I loved his reason—he believed that any country that didn't take August off was uncivilized). However, though he was adamant on the subject and talked about it as if it were a *fait accompli*, he wasn't taking any concrete steps to make it happen. The time-line and the logistics were always left up in the air.

Because of this, Mona's ability to weigh her career options was completely undermined. What was the point of making a decision based on living in Vancouver if they were going to be moving to Nice? It seems obvious that the question of moving should be decided before the question of what to do, but it wasn't actually obvious to Mona. This was because the subjects came up at different times and she had been looking at them separately.

They also had different levels of urgency. Though the question of moving was in one sense more fundamental, the fact that it had been a background conversation for some time made it *feel* less urgent. By contrast, the need to find new work was both recent *and* urgent, so it was naturally more in the foreground.

There is a particular kind of fuzz that surrounds someone who is faced with multiple issues and not dealing with first things first. It's like watching someone trying to build a house before the foundation is laid. They go round in circles, getting just so far, then stalling, then covering the same ground again. They may be quite aware, as Mona was, that they have other

decisions pending, but if they don't identify them clearly and address them systematically, they continue to go in circles.

As it turned out, Mona was not against moving. What was making her crazy was the uncertainty. She wanted to get started on something new and before she could do that she needed to sit down with her husband and make a plan. This she finally did. After weighing the pros and cons, they decided to stay in Canada for four more years, at which point Michel would be eligible to take a year's leave. They would then re-evaluate their options and open the question again.

Moral of the story: You can't grow anything if you don't know where you're going to plant your seeds.

Other kinds of entangled issues:

Should I move to the country or stay in the city? If you're living in the city but drawn to a rural area, you should focus your research on work you can take out of town.

Should I have kids now or later? For women in particular, the question of which to have first, family or career, can keep the wheels spinning for months, if not years.

Can I afford to go back to school? If this question is not dealt with consciously, it will be hard to look seriously at the options that require more training. Look clearly at your financial situation and check out your eligibility for funding and/or student loans.

THE ILLUSION OF FIXED ALTERNATIVES

Confusion may also arise out of the illusion of fixed alternatives, none of which really appeals to you. Have you narrowed down your options to choices that don't attract you? More importantly, are there occupations you are drawn to, but have dis-counted for some reason? Are those reasons "reasonable?"

It's one thing to accept that becoming a brain surgeon at fifty might be a bit of a stretch. Or that becoming an English teacher may not be the best choice if you're still struggling with the language. It's another thing to decide that you can't be a bartender because your family wouldn't approve.

Know what your real reasons are for eliminating options that appeal to you. Some may be perfectly legitimate, while others may need to be examined more closely. Remember that we are all affected to some extent by the beliefs and opinions of the people around us – are there any messages, from within or without, that you haven't yet uncovered?

SWITCH-HITTING: THE BIRTH OF THE "YEAH-BUT"

Constantly switching your *grounds* for a career decision from one set of values to another is also a common recipe for confusion – and almost inevitable if you have not systematically identified those values, on paper, in the order of their importance. Your work values are the conditions you're seeking in a job – the things you know will bring you satisfaction at work. They include such things as financial rewards, preferred work environment, potential approval ratings (social status), preferred tasks, appropriate work/life balance, and so on. If you haven't identified what these are and weighed their relative importance to one another, you will find yourself caught up in "yeah-buts" every time you get close to a decision.

- | |
|---|
| <p>Common Causes of Confusion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Not enough information• No plan• A more fundamental decision to make first• The illusion of fixed, unappealing alternatives• Switch-hitting: variations on the "yeah-but..." |
|---|

When you switch your focus from one consideration to another, and another, and another, without the benefit of knowing which ones take priority, you inevitably get caught in circular thinking: Just as you're imagining how enjoyable a certain job might be, a voice in your head says "*Yeah, but the family won't be impressed.*" Maybe you manage to avert the family con-

sideration, but the voice then comes back with "*Yeah, but what about the money,*" or "*Schooling will take too long,*" or "*The economy might take another dive,*" or "*The hours might be too much*" – or all of the above. It's enough to make you dizzy – and give up in confusion.

In fact, all of these considerations may be genuinely important to you, but as long as they're just floating around in the back of your mind, they will only perpetuate your confusion and lead to negativity.

To get off the wheel of circular thinking you need first to get clear on your work values. You then need a method of evaluating the careers you're considering in a systematic way so that you can compare them with one another on the basis of those values. If you have not yet completed *The Self Portrait – Part Three* of the book, which is available on this website—I recommend that you do so now. The first two exercises will help you to identify both your work values and your values in life as a whole. Once these are clear you can use the evaluation tool at the end of Part Two to compare your career ideas and find the fit that's best for you.

PERSONAL INQUIRY

1) Not Enough Information

If you're feeling confused about how to make a choice, first ask yourself if you have all the information you need to make a choice. Where are the gaps? What information is missing or out of focus?

2) A More Fundamental Decision

Is your confusion related to another issue in your life? Do you have another, more fundamental decision to make before deciding on a career choice (e.g., whether or not to move to another country, whether or not to have a child)? If so, what is it?

3) The Illusion of Fixed Alternatives

Do you believe that you're limited to a small range of options, none of which really appeals to you? If so, what is your belief based on? Does it feel realistically true or has it been imposed on you in some way? Elaborate.

4) Switch-Hitting and the Birth of the "Yeah-But"

"Yeah-buts" are often red herrings, forms of resistance that keep us treading water when we could be taking action. Do

you find that every time you look at a career idea, a voice says “Yeah, but if you choose that, you won’t be able to do this,” or “Yeah, but this choice doesn’t offer that...” What are your biggest “Yeah-buts”? What effect are they having on your decision-making process?



STAYING IN MOTION

TWENTY-EIGHT: PROBLEMS, PROBLEMS

Wherever you are in your transition, you're likely to encounter the odd problem as you move forward: lack of funding for further training, wait-lists for courses, no contacts or poor prospects in your field of interest. Problems are an inevitable part of living, but they don't have to grind you to a halt if you have a systematic approach for dealing with them. Providing that is the purpose of this chapter.

We solve problems continually in our day-to-day lives. If you're good with your hands, you probably do well with mechanical problems; if you're good with people, you might be great with communication problems. You may never have consciously thought about it as problem solving and you may never have consciously thought about how you do it; you do what you do because it works. If pressed to describe your strategy, you might shrug and say you're just using your common sense—which is what problem solving feels like when it's happening in familiar territory.

It's when problems show up in unfamiliar territory that we tend to get stuck. A career transition is a case in point: If you've been working in one field for some time, the problem-solving skills you developed in that field may not be transferring all that well to the problem of what to do next.

It's when problems show up in unfamiliar territory that we tend to get stuck. A career transition is a case in point: If you have been working in one field for some time, the problem-solving skills you developed in that field may not be transferring all that well to the problem of what to do next. The world of work is constantly changing and increasingly unfamiliar to most of us.

More and more, a versatile strategy for problem-solving has become an essential tool—in a career transition, at work, or

for that matter in any other area of living. Being able to *describe* that strategy simply and clearly will also greatly enhance your credibility in an interview or at work. It's one thing to say "yes" when the interviewer asks if you're good at solving problems, quite another to have an articulate response when they say "Great! So tell me how you do it."

FIRST THINGS FIRST

In the Introduction to this book, you may recall a short section titled "My Story," in which I briefly recount a few of my early problems with finding enjoyment at work. I mention some fairly common obstacles: unrealistic ideals, a lack of self-knowledge and the conflict between my desire to develop creatively and the pressure to become a "professional."

I then refer to a less obvious obstacle, one that was harder to grapple with because it lived in the background as a habit of my mind. As soon as I had mastered a new job, I would project ahead and see a vision of my life disappearing down a dark tunnel while I mechanically repeated an endless list of pointless tasks. To repeat:

I would hear myself saying "This is all so meaningless!" or "Is that all there is?" as I began to feel more and more trapped. It was like looking ahead to the number of times I would have to brush my teeth before I died. It produced an antsy, itchy mixture of boredom and claustrophobia that was so intolerable I'd feel compelled to give my notice. I'd be out of one job and into the next without once giving a thought to what was driving me.

For me at that time, habits of mind were still unfamiliar territory. As long as I was unaware of what my mind was up to, I had no power to consciously challenge it. I genuinely believed that my problem was with work, not my *relationship* with work (I didn't even know I *had* a relationship with work), so I continued to apply the same ineffective solution over and over again, with the result that all work—including the fun jobs—felt like prison.

The point: *You can't tackle a problem if you don't clearly understand what the problem is about.* Colossal amounts of time, energy and money are wasted every day by people diligently attempting to solve the wrong problems.

The first step in problem-solving, always, is to get clear on what the problem actually is. Half the time, if your description is accurate, the solution will be evident through that first step (which is not to say that it will necessarily be easy to implement).

Of course, when a problem is so simple that the solution is obvious, the first step happens reflexively: *The house is on fire; we put the fire out.* When a problem is more complex, however, the first step needs to go down on paper. This is essentially what we've been doing throughout this book with the problem of what to do next. As you have seen, the problem is not simple. In fact, it is actually a cluster of problems, all of which fall under the broad, general heading of career transition.

Given that the human mind can hold very few elements of any one thing at a time, it is logically impossible to tackle a problem of this complexity in your head. There are thirty chapters in this book, each of which represents a potential spoke-jam in the wheel of career change. All of you are probably dealing with a few of them; a few of you may be dealing with all of them. If you've been hard on yourself for dithering, I hope that by now you're beginning to understand why the problem of choosing work can feel so confounding. I also hope that by having the problem broken down into its component parts, chapter by chapter, you have found some clarity with your own particular issues. Again, once we're clear on the nature of the problem, the solution, though not always easy to implement, is usually pretty evident.

Imagine for the sake of argument that you have addressed the problems that apply to your particular situation. You will next be making an actual choice, and not just any choice, but an *informed* choice. This is a big moment. In fact, it's *huge*. My congratulations.

Your next task will be to set your choice in motion, and given that things rarely go exactly as planned, you will want to be prepared for the odd glitch. Whether your next steps involve training, research, or applying for work, there are bound to be snags. *You can accept this without expecting it.* Fasten your seat belt—a little turbulence is manageable if you have a strategy for dealing with it. Begin with the following steps:

ANTICIPATE PROBLEMS FROM THE OUTSET

Start by looking ahead. Ask yourself what are the things that might turn into rocks on the road. Then ask yourself what you can do to prevent them. Anticipating problems is not the same as inviting or expecting them. It's what forces you to create back-up plans so you don't lose momentum at the first sign of trouble.

If a problem has already occurred, the following seven steps should help you resolve it:

- One: define the problem clearly
- Two: identify the real cause of the problem
- Three: determine the worst possible outcome and resolve to accept it, should it occur
- Four: brainstorm for solutions and select the best one(s)
- Five: assign responsibility, set deadlines and take action
- Six: follow up and evaluate
- Seven: where possible, ensure against recurrence

Let's look at the steps in a little more detail:

ONE: DEFINE THE PROBLEM CLEARLY

- Know what the real problem is. Write it down. What are the facts?
- Is there more than one problem to address? Is the problem made up of more than one element? Write them all down.

TWO: IDENTIFY THE REAL CAUSE OF THE PROBLEM

If the origin of the problem is not apparent through Step One, brainstorm for causes, both obvious and hidden. If a problem is recurrent, you have not yet addressed the real cause. Identify the conditions common to each breakdown or concern.

Beware of assuming causality: The fact that two things happened at around the same time does not always mean that one caused the other. Also beware of seizing on causes that offer low-stress or band-aid solutions. We tend to resist ack-

nowledging causes that mean the most change or discomfort (e.g., *My industry is dying*).

THREE: DETERMINE THE WORST POSSIBLE OUTCOME AND RESOLVE TO ACCEPT IT, SHOULD IT OCCUR

Ask yourself “What is the worst thing that could happen in this situation?” Face it squarely so that nothing is out of focus and accept it as a possibility. *Note that this is not the same as being negative.* When we consciously face the worst, we get clear on what needs doing to ensure that the worst doesn’t happen. When we avoid facing the worst, we get caught up in worrying, *which means we’re imagining the worst and doing nothing about it.* The first is conscious and empowering; the second is unconscious and paralyzing.

FOUR: BRAINSTORM FOR SOLUTIONS AND ACCEPT THE BEST ONE

In the initial stages, quality often means quantity. Don't decide that there is only one solution and stop there. Be creative. Brainstorm. Stay positive and assume that there is a viable solution. Come up with a variety of ideas and put them on paper. The more ideas you generate, the better your chances of hitting on the best solution, rather than a merely workable one. Brainstorming on paper is ten times more productive than doing it in your head. Brainstorming with others can be ten times more productive again.

FOCUS QUESTIONS: THREE R_s— RISK, REALISM, RESULTS

- 1) What *risks* are associated with each alternative? What level of risk is reasonable in this situation?
- 2) Which approach is the most *realistic* in terms of time, money and available resources?
- 3) Which approach will have the best *results* in the long term?

Before deciding on the best solution, be clear on your conditions for a successful outcome. Know what results you're looking for. Ask if a decision needs to be made right away and ask if it needs to be made by you. And be discerning—sometimes a complex situation requires time to play itself out. Notice your agitation level and beware of making premature decisions out of tension or a sense of urgency. The ability to hold a little tension is a sign of emotional intelligence. On the other hand, sometimes any decision is better than none. If the building is on fire, don't be worrying about whose job it is to notify the occupants.

FIVE: ASSIGN RESPONSIBILITY, SET DEADLINES, AND TAKE ACTION

We have probably all at some time been to a meeting where strategies were discussed and agreements reached about what needed doing in a given situation. We have probably also had the experience of meeting again two weeks later only to discover that nothing had been done. Inevitably, this was because no specific tasks were assigned and no deadlines set. If there are tasks to delegate, be specific and clear. Agree on the details and set deadlines for their completion. Be certain that everyone involved has verbally taken ownership of his or her part.

SIX: FOLLOW UP AND EVALUATE (DID IT HAPPEN? DID IT WORK?)

Check to be certain that all tasks have been accomplished and the solution implemented. Then determine whether or not the solution has been effective. Have your conditions of satisfaction been met? Is the problem actually solved?

SEVEN: ENSURE AGAINST A RECURRENCE

Finally, ask if the problem is likely to recur. If it is, ask what procedures can be put in place to ensure against recurrence.

REVISITING STEP ONE: THE POWER OF DEFINING THE PROBLEM

It was stated that in many cases the solution to a problem is pretty obvious once the problem has been acknowledged and clearly defined. It was also stated that this doesn't always mean the solution will be fun or easy to implement. It may call for uncomfortable confrontations, admissions of mistakes, or disclosures we'd just as soon not make.

Comfort level is not a good measure of merit when it comes to evaluating solutions. However, it's probably the factor that stops more people from implementing solutions than any other. In fact, the real problem often lies more in our *resistance* to a situation — our refusal to face it and deal with it honestly — than the situation itself. When we're faced with the prospect of significant discomfort, it can be very tempting to turn our attention to less essential tasks. Our neglect, avoidance, denial, rationalization, or deflection of blame can then turn a minor breakdown into a major catastrophe.

Wherever there is some form of resistance operating, a problem is not yet in focus. You may feel *dominated* by it, you may even feel as if you're working on it because you're so *aware* of it, but more likely what you're doing is "worrying at it" — in the same unconscious way that your tongue will "worry" at a sore tooth. The tongue doesn't help the tooth by fiddling with it; in fact, it may irritate it further. And we don't solve a problem by unconsciously "fiddling" with it in the back of our minds. Until it's in focus, front and centre, we are powerless to tackle it.

I illustrate this point to students with an example from my life: I needed something from my bathroom cupboard one day — the cupboard under the sink — and when I opened the cupboard doors, the top hinge on the right-hand door came apart. The door was still held by its bottom hinge, so when I pulled it open it dropped, point first, onto the top of my foot. I said a few colourful words and then tried to fix the hinge. Easier said than done. It didn't look like any of the hinges I was used to; in fact, it looked like an indecipherable mass of metal.

I was in a hurry, so I closed the door by propping it against its partner, then went off and promptly forgot all about it.

A few hours later I again needed something from the bathroom cupboard. Forgetting about the faulty hinge, I opened the doors and again got stabbed by the pointy part of the right-hand door. Same foot, same spot. I said a few more colourful words and again looked at the hinge, with the same results. Because I was still in a hurry (I know, there's a lesson here), I propped the door closed and again forgot all about it.

I repeated this routine for close to a week. By the end of that week, the top of my foot was one big bruise—and I was no closer to fixing the hinge. I decided to ask my neighbour Dennis to fix it for me, but the thought of asking a man to help with something so basic embarrassed me. So I decided to look at the problem one more time.

This time I knelt down with real determination and looked as closely as I could at the hinge. Strangely, it still wouldn't come into focus. Then it dawned on me—finally—that I wasn't wearing my glasses. At this point glasses were a relatively new feature in my life; in fact, it might be fair to say that I was in denial about needing them. I went and got my glasses. Miracle of miracles, there was the hinge, clearly outlined, right in front of my face. And not only that, right below it was another hinge that *was* working. The bottom hinge was showing me just what the top hinge should look like; I had it in place in about ten seconds.

This mundane event had a big impact on me for two reasons. First, I was struck by how easy it is to believe that I'm seeing something clearly just because it's in front of my face. Despite the fact that it was completely out of focus, I really thought I was seeing that hinge. It struck me that this is what often happens with problems in general. Because we're aware of them, and often so dominated by them, we think we're seeing them clearly. It is not always so.

The other thing that struck me was that my problem had become more complex than it was initially. As the week had worn on and I'd made my various attempts to fix the hinge, I'd come to believe that it was beyond me. So not only was the problem literally out of focus, it was now compounded by my belief that I wasn't 'mechanical.'

This realization has dramatically changed my relationship with all things mechanical. I now recognize that all I need to do in most cases is to really *look* at a breakdown in order to correct it. As with the hinge, so often the thing itself is telling me just what I need to do.

IF A PROBLEM IS COMPLEX, BREAK IT DOWN

One of the traps in problem solving is the assumption that a problem is simple when it's actually complex. (The reverse, of course, might also be true.) In the hinge example, a simple problem became more complex because of my growing belief in my own incompetence. The belief acted like an extra blind, reinforcing the difficulty I was already having with seeing. In a career transition, as we've seen, there are so many factors to consider that it's impossible to deal with them all in your head—or all in one go. Without a system, you end up going in circles.

SAMPLE PROBLEM: THE JOB INTERVIEW

Let's now consider a problem that most of you will be facing once you start looking for work: the job interview. The job interview is a good example of a problem that often gets compounded by the discomfort it produces. People will get so caught up in worrying about an interview that they'll fail to get clear on what they're actually worrying about. Instead of looking at their specific concerns, they vividly, repeatedly, imagine all the things they don't want to have happen. This is what worry is, and it only leads to more. However, the cycle can be interrupted and solutions uncovered simply through the first step in problem-solving: defining the situation clearly.

The interview, like the career transition, is another cluster problem; it's made up of many different elements. By itself, it's too general to grapple with. When we break it into its component parts, however, we come up with a list of concerns that we *can* grapple with.

I invite groups to tackle this challenge together, partly because many of them will be facing it next, partly because it

demonstrates the power of collective brainstorming, and partly because it offers a great example of a problem that can't be tackled until it's broken down.

Following are the specific concerns that inevitably come up in a brainstorm. As different issues are called out, we categorize them under general headings for the sake of coherence.

STEP ONE: DEFINE THE PROBLEM CLEARLY

- 1) Problems with Presentation:
 - a) Physical appearance – How should I dress?
 - b) Communication – What should I say about myself?
How can I come across as intelligent and articulate?
 - c) What is appropriate body language?
- 2) Problems with Difficult Questions:
 - a) How do I answer difficult questions about myself?
 - b) How do I answer difficult questions about the company or the industry?
 - c) What are “behaviour questions” and “stress questions” and how do I answer them?
- 3) Problems with Nervousness:
 - a) What can I do about sweating, nervous tics, talking too much, going blank, or getting my words mixed up?
- 4) Problems with Qualification:
 - a) What if I don't have what they're looking for?
 - b) What if I'm obviously over-qualified?
- 5) Problems with Chemistry:
 - a) What if I feel no rapport with the interviewer?
 - b) What if he or she seems to actively dislike me?
- 6) Problems with Interview Style:
 - a) What if it's a panel or group interview?
 - b) What if there is some form of testing?
 - c) What if I'm asked to say or do something that I think is demeaning or ridiculous?
- 7) Problems with Discrimination:
 - a) What if they make me uncomfortable with racial slurs or other obvious indications of discrimination?
 - b) What questions are illegal?

The group is now invited to feel the difference between approaching the job interview as a large, vague, general concern and approaching it as a list of specific concerns. The first gives us nothing to grapple with; the second gives us an organized list. Note that the brainstorm produced seven main categories of concern, which broke down further into sixteen sub-categories. Until all of these concerns are identified and written down, we're helpless to deal with them in any systematic way. We simply can't hold this much information in our heads at one time.

TWO: IDENTIFY THE REAL CAUSE OF THE PROBLEM

The next step is to identify the cause of the problem. In the case of the job interview, the obvious cause is our need to put food on the table, a roof over our heads, and find meaningful occupation—in other words, the human condition. *However, what turns this condition into a problem is not so much the condition itself as our unwillingness or inability to bring it into focus – which we have now done through Step One.*

THREE: DETERMINE THE WORST POSSIBLE OUTCOME AND RESOLVE TO ACCEPT IT, SHOULD IT OCCUR

Ask yourself “What is the worst thing that could happen in this situation?” Face it squarely so that nothing is out of focus and accept it as a possibility. *Note that this is not the same as being negative.* When we consciously face the worst, we get clear on what needs doing to ensure that the worst doesn't happen. When we avoid facing the worst, we get caught up in worrying, *which means we're imagining the worst and doing nothing about it.* The first is conscious and empowering; the second is unconscious and paralyzing.

Obviously, assuming we want the job, the worst possible outcome in the job interview would be not getting hired. Again, addressing this consciously is not the same as being negative or expecting defeat. It is simply a willingness to recognize that if worst comes to worst, we will handle it. In the interview ex-

ample, it means that we have an attitude of healthy indifference. We'll be enthusiastic, we'll give it our best shot, but we'll also operate with the mind-set that if this door closes, a better door is opening. At the very least, we're getting practice with interviewing.

Having looked clearly at the worst possible outcome, no part of us is turning a blind eye. We have faced the demon, we're still in charge, and we're ready to move on to the next step, which is:

STEP FOUR: BRAINSTORM FOR SOLUTIONS AND ACCEPT THE BEST ONE

Having broken the problem down, identified the worst that can happen and adopted the most empowering attitude toward possible failure, the group is now ready to look at each concern in turn and identify what can be done about it. Through another brainstorm, they come up with a list of possible solutions. After selecting the best of these, they arrive at something resembling the following:

- 1) Solutions to Problems with Presentation: Physical appearance, Communication, Body language
 - a) Physical Appearance: Dress as you would for the job for which you're applying; if in doubt, dress up, rather than down; be as attractive as possible, but be on the conservative side – unless of course you're applying at a punk bistro, in which case green hair and a nose ring will be fine. Above all, look like you're organized and efficient and there to work. Women: one bag only – a purse or a briefcase – and a subdued, coordinated outfit. Men and women both: neat, clean, well groomed, and no strong scents.
 - b) Communication: Have a prepared statement that includes your work and educational highlights, your strengths, skills, relevant accomplishments and (optional) strongest interests. The last section of Part Three on this website will help you with the wording of your statement.

Pause to reflect before answering difficult questions and ask for more information if needed. Don't feel as if you

- have to know it all. Coming across in an intelligent way does not mean having all the answers; it means knowing how to ask intelligent questions.
- c) Body language: Be open and undefended (no folded arms or ankles on knees, which will make you look barricaded); be relaxed without slouching—sit upright, demonstrate that you have a spine and can support yourself; make eye contact without turning on the high beams or locking eyes; lean slightly forward to help you to look and feel engaged.
- 2) Solutions to Problems with Difficult Questions: Questions about myself, Questions about the company or industry, Behaviour Questions, Stress questions
- a) Difficult questions about myself: “Who are you?” (i.e., “*What strengths are you bringing to the table?*”) and “What do you want?” (i.e., “*What are you looking for in a work situation?*”) Now identify any other questions that concern you and take some time to answer them in a memorable way (e.g., questions about your weaknesses, your goals for the future, your work history, gaps in employment, qualifications).
- b) Difficult questions about the company or industry: Again, prepare! Do your research. Gather as much information as you can about the company and the industry before the interview. Check out the company’s website, look for articles about the company and industry in your library’s electronic data-base, and if possible, talk to people in the industry. Also, bring a list of informed questions for them. The next best thing to having great answers is having intelligent questions.
- c) What do I do with behaviour questions and stress questions? Behaviour questions are the ones that start with “Tell me about a time when...” or “Give me an example of...” They ask you to prove that you have the strengths you say you have by giving examples from your life. Look at these as golden opportunities to sell yourself and take some time to write down past scenarios that illustrate your strengths. (See “Work Highlights” and “Education Highlights” in Part Three.)

Stress questions are designed to put a little pressure on you so that the interviewer can tell if you're able to take the heat when a situation is charged — or if you're going to get huffy as soon as someone fails to return your smile. They're particularly common when the job involves customer service. If a question makes you squirm, *notice just that* and realize that the interviewer may be trying to simulate a situation that will no doubt come up on the job. Stay composed, don't take it personally, and recognize that the interviewer has limited ways of gaining essential information.

- 3) Solutions to Problems with Nervousness: Sweating, Tics, Talking too much, Going blank
 - a) Keep your sense of humour; if you really lose it, demonstrate that you can laugh at yourself and recover quickly; whenever you think of it, breathe from the belly, as deeply and evenly as you can; before the interview, visualize yourself being relaxed, comfortable, and fully present; sense the feeling of this at a physical and emotional level, with real conviction; make it a rule to listen about 70% of the time and talk about 30% of the time; if possible, do a little roleplay beforehand, in the mirror or with a friend.

- 4) Solutions to Problems with Qualification: Being under- or over-qualified
 - a) First of all, don't apply for jobs you can't do. If the job requires driving an eighteen-wheeler or performing a surgery, make sure you're qualified. Having said that, if there are tools you don't yet have, but know you could pick up quickly, be prepared to express this when questioned. For example, *"I haven't learned this particular prog-ram, but I do know what it entails. I'm a quick study and I'd be happy to dedicate some free time to mastering it."*
 - b) If you're overqualified, your employer's obvious concern will be that you'll jump ship as soon as you find work that matches your qualifications. If this is not the case, be prepared to explain why. Perhaps you have targeted this particular company because of its reputation and you're pre-

pared to start wherever you can, in the hope of future advancement. Or perhaps you're finished with your old occupation, or seeing its imminent demise, and you're prepared to take an entry-level position elsewhere in order to learn something new.

If you do plan to jump ship at the first opportunity, then your employer's concern is well founded. You won't get much sympathy—or a good reference—if you don't play fair. Particularly if she is investing a significant amount of time and money in your training, she will want to see a return for her investment—as would you, in her shoes. This means committing to a reasonable amount of time with the company.

On the other hand, with all the restructurings, downsizings and capsizings in today's marketplace, the employer may not have the wherewithal to play fair herself. A reasonable answer to all questions about your future plans (including "*Where do you see yourself in five years?*") might be the following: "*I would see no reason to look for work elsewhere as long as there was room to advance and grow with this company.*"

- 5) Solutions to Problems with Chemistry: No rapport, Active dislike
 - a) If it feels like you're not making an easy or natural connection with the interviewer, don't take it personally. Be amiable and responsive, stay composed, and follow their lead. Stick to the task at hand and do what you can to keep the interview on a professional footing.
 - b) If the interviewer appears to actively dislike you, again don't take it personally. Assume either that they are having a very bad day or that their style is intentional. If the job you're applying for involves customer service of any kind, they may be trying to determine whether you're the kind of person who gets reactive with a hostile customer, or the kind who can calm the waters by remaining professional and relaxed.
- 6) Solutions to Problems with Interview Style: Panel interview, Group interview, Testing, Strange requests

- a) For the first two, the best advice is to ask. Find out beforehand, if you can, so that you can be prepared. If it's a panel interview, answer the way you normally would, making sure you address the questioner first, and that you're inclusive in your eye contact with the other members of the panel. If it's a group interview (i.e., a group of you are being interviewed at the same time), be courteous and professional. Step up to the plate when called on and show that you can be assertive without being aggressive.
 - b) If there is some form of testing, do what you can beforehand to brush up on the skills being tested.
 - c) If you're asked to say or do something strange, like reciting the alphabet backwards, do it, if you can, as if it were a game you've been challenged to play. It will tell the interviewer that you're a good sport and ready to risk looking a little foolish. If you want to ensure that they are aware that you don't do just anything people tell you to do, you might preface it by saying that you're being a good sport on the assumption that that's what they're looking for, but that you would not normally follow ridiculous orders without explanations.
- 7) Solutions to Problems with Discrimination: Racial slurs, Obvious indications of discrimination, Illegal questions
- a) Unless this is an obvious interview strategy to see how you react to overt discrimination, the short answer is to get out of the interview situation as quickly as possible. Even remaining silent will compromise you, so unless you're prepared to work for a company that has no respect for human rights, your best bet is to run for the hills.
 - b) Generally, illegal questions centre on your personal life rather than your professional life. They have to do with race, religion, politics, sexual preference, marital and/or parental status, geographical origin, mental or physical conditions that have no impact on job performance, and any other questions that are not directly related to your qualifications for the job under discussion. Feel your way with such questions; they may be asked quite innocently because the interviewer has learned what he needs to know about your strengths and is trying to get to know

you personally. Try not to take offense. Your best bet is to answer briefly and crisply and to do what you can to stay on professional ground. Remember, you're under no obligation to take a job if you discover that a company is using unfair practices.

STEP FIVE: ASSIGN RESPONSIBILITY, SET DEADLINES, AND TAKE ACTION

Individuals facing imminent interviews now take personal responsibility for completing the steps most relevant to them within an appropriate timeframe.

STEP SIX: FOLLOW UP AND EVALUATE

Is the problem actually solved?

In the job interview, the proof is in the pudding. Questions to ask after an interview:

- Was the interview successful? How and Why?
- What worked? What didn't work?
- What would I do differently next time?
- What was learned? What questions remain?

STEP SEVEN: ENSURE AGAINST A RECURRENCE

Individuals now look at areas where they feel their performance is weak and work to improve on them. This ensures that unnecessary mistakes are not repeated from interview to interview and that regardless of outcomes, they have done what's in their power to do.

We return to the original theme of problem solving. Having spent approximately one hour on a concern that can cause endless hours of non-productive worrying, the group feels a

Seven Steps to Problem-Solving

- 1) Define the problem clearly.
- 2) Identify the real cause of the problem.
- 3) Determine the worst possible outcome and resolve to accept it, should it occur.
- 4) Brainstorm for solutions and select the best one.
- 5) Assign responsibility where necessary, set deadlines and take action.
- 6) Follow up and evaluate— Were the right steps taken? Did they work?
- 7) Take steps to ensure against a recurrence.

dramatic shift in their level of confidence. It's not that all their interview challenges are resolved; for many this is just the beginning. What is different is that having moved through the seven steps, they now have a place to start and a plan to follow. Rather than feeling overwhelmed by their situation, they have taken charge.

PERSONAL INQUIRY

- 1) Take a moment to review the problems you believe you are currently facing in your career transition. These were first itemized in Chapter Four, *Personal Inquiry* # 5.
- 2) Using the seven-step formula offered in Chapter Twenty-Eight, address these problems one at a time.
- 3) Once you have a list of things you can do to address your problems, create a proper plan, prioritize your activities, and set deadlines for their accomplishment.

TWENTY-NINE: PROBLEMS ON THE JOB

In earlier times, the relationship between employer and employee was more like that of parent and child. The employer or manager, generally a father figure, did the thinking and made the decisions. The employees, like good girls and boys, waited to be told what to do next.

Global competition and shrinking profit margins have led to the gradual elimination of middle management. In progressive companies, the parent-child model has long ago been replaced by a more adult relationship. Employees are expected to think on their feet when breakdowns occur and to take active roles in resolving them. This does not mean ignoring the chain of command or implementing procedures without authorization; it does mean engaging with problems creatively and assuming responsibility for their resolution. The ability to solve routine problems is essential in today's workplace.

Consider the difference between the old model and the new:

In the old model, when a problem occurred in your area, you would go to your boss and announce the breakdown. Your boss would have to drop his own work and come to your rescue. He would have to take time to assess the problem (after all, he wasn't there when it occurred), identify the cause of it and arrive at a plausible solution. And all this while, you would be idling.

Having suggested a solution, your boss would now return to his own work area and use up more time getting back to what he was doing when you called him away. If his proposed solution doesn't work, he'll be called away again, which will lead to more circling in, more wastage of his time and yours, and — time being money — more dollars down the drain.

When breakdowns occur, employees are expected to think on their feet and take active roles in resolving them.

This doesn't mean ignoring the chain of command; it means engaging with problems creatively and assuming responsibility for their solutions.

A wise employee does the preliminary work first, then approaches the employer with *solutions*, not problems.

In the new model, ideally, such bottlenecks of wasted time are eliminated because your boss or manager is encouraging you to think independently. If a problem occurs in your area, you are expected to take time to assess the breakdown yourself. After all, you were there when it happened, you were aware of what went before and you are in the best position to understand the subtleties of the situation. Once you have a clear grasp of what has happened and what caused it, you are in a good position to identify a solution. If there is more than one solution available, you will stop to consider which is the most effective and why.

You will then, and only then, go to your boss. You will describe the problem briefly, explain what you believe to be the cause of it, and recommend a solution. Your boss will look up from his work for a moment, hear what you have to say, and either give you the go-ahead or suggest an alternative. Either way, since you haven't disturbed him unduly, his recovery time will be negligible and none of your time will have been spent on hold.

Wise employers will direct employees to solve their own problems as much as possible. It empowers and motivates the employee, it optimizes human resources and it saves both money and time. I remember being impressed when a former boss, owner of a college in which I was teaching, called a meeting for expressly this purpose. She was busy expanding the school and did not have time to put out routine fires. Her message was eloquent, empowering, and straightforward:

"You guys, I hired you because you are bright and capable and I trust you. So please, handle your problems yourselves. Assume that I am always busy and don't interrupt me! Come to me only if the place

is on fire – literally – or there is something that absolutely cannot be done without my authorization. Thank you!” End of meeting.

Wise employees will be treasured if they take the time to do the logical footwork before asking for help.

PERSONAL INQUIRY

- 1) What has been your approach to problem-solving in previous jobs? Have you been encouraged to think on your feet and solve problems on your own? Have you been discouraged from thinking independently? Have you received mixed or contradictory messages?
- 2) What would be your strategy regarding problem-solving in your next position? Remember, it's fair to ask an employer how much responsibility they're expecting you to take on.
- 3) If an employer asked you in an interview to describe your problem-solving style, what would you say?

THIRTY: PEOPLE PROBLEMS

People problems are probably the greatest source of unhappiness and unrest in the workplace. They generally have to do with breakdowns in communication due to misunderstandings, conflicting opinions, power struggles, language barriers, emotional immaturity, differences in work style, and differences in personality or culture—to name just a few. Because of the enormous impact personal interactions have on productivity, good communication skills are universally valued in the workplace. Odds are in any job interview most people will say they have good communication skills. But they may not be prepared for the next question, which is likely to be: *“What exactly are they?”*

People problems are introduced in a program through the first step in problem-solving: defining the problem clearly. The question posed to the group is: *“What are the things that drive you craziest in a communication with a friend or family member?”* The room heats up as people start calling out their pet crazy-makers, which we race to get down on the board. The list invariably includes:

- 1) Interrupting
- 2) Hogging the spotlight— not letting me speak
- 3) Having bad breath or poor hygiene in general
- 4) One-up-man-ship— always trying to “go me one better”
- 5) Not listening
- 6) Pretending to listen when they’re really just waiting their turn to speak
- 7) Using swearwords and foul language
- 8) Finishing my sentences
- 9) Always making it about them (*“When that happened to me...”*)

- 10) Being restless or distracted, looking away, yawning, fidgeting
- 11) Spraying/spitting on me as they speak
- 12) Hearing only what they want to hear – taking things out of context
- 13) Not paying attention – not being present
- 14) Invading my personal space or being too physically distant
- 15) Being condescending, judgmental, critical – speaking as if they were the final authority on the subject
- 16) Endlessly repeating themselves – going on and on
- 17) Playing devil’s advocate – being challenging, contrary, adversarial
- 18) Changing the subject – digressing or going off on meaningless tangents
- 19) Giving pat, simplistic advice so that they can “get me over with” and bring the focus back to them
- 20) Being non-responsive or mechanical in their response

As you can see, it’s a complex problem and one that needs to be written down. I now tell clients that I’m going to go over the list, starring all the items that have something in common. With most lists, the related items usually account for at least 75% of the total. On the list above, I would star every item except #3, #7, #11, and #14, leaving sixteen out of the twenty (80%) with something in common.

I point out the exceptions – poor hygiene (#3), bad language (#7), spraying/spitting (#11), and spatial preferences (#14), and ask them to ignore these while they determine what the others have in common. I note that the common denominator is already on the list in a couple of forms.

Within moments someone has said “not listening!” or “not paying attention!” Other responses might be “lack of respect,” “rudeness,” or “self-centredness,” all of which are possible *explanations* for not listening or not paying attention. As the group examines the list freshly, it doesn’t take long to see that beneath the surface of every related item is the thing that drives most of us crazy: *not having the real attention of the person we’re talking to*. It’s an unspoken expectation – and an agreement – that when we speak to an audience, the audience will be listening.

Interestingly, most of us equate good communication with verbal skills. While there's no question that a dynamic speaker has a certain edge, the essence of good communication, always, is knowing how to listen. As the exercise demonstrates, verbal skills won't take you far if you haven't learned to give up the floor.

We have now completed step one of problem-solving, which is to describe the problem clearly. Step two, identifying the cause of the problem, involves a discussion of human nature, the gist of which goes as follows:

While there's no question that dynamic speakers have a certain edge, their advantage is lost if they haven't learned to give up the floor and *listen*.

No one starts off as a good listener. We're all narcissistic, each at the centre of his own spinning universe. Listening to another means having the willingness to leave that universe and step into another, with the sole intention of discovering who's there. It means suspending our opinions and judg-

ments. This level of willingness is the greatest gift we can offer another – and the most difficult to achieve when we're strongly attached to a point of view.

Humans are positional by nature. That is, we are always in a position *relative to* a given experience. In a sense, we can't not have a point of view. You and I may be standing on the same ground, but if I'm facing east and you're facing west, the difference in our positions will give us radically different views. We will both be convinced that what we're seeing is real, and in a relative sense we'll be right. What is harder to get – until we shift positions – is that the other's view is just as real and right from their perspective.

Anyone who has grown up with siblings knows that family events tend to be recalled and recounted in wildly different ways, depending on the point of view of each child. The art of listening is in large part the art of remembering the subjectivity of "reality." If we can see different points of view as different spokes on the same wheel, each adding something to the total picture, we are less likely to insist that our spoke is the "right" one.

Having spent a little time on step two, identifying the cause of the problem, we move on to step three: identifying the worst possible outcome. This was already evident as we worked through step one: by not listening, the speaker loses us. From here, nothing very productive can happen until the connection is restored.

Steps four through seven are combined. Finding a solution, taking responsibility, following up, evaluating results and ensuring against recurrence all boil down to the same thing: a commitment to listening.

How to do it? Here's a tip: There's a simple way to tell if you're really listening: *You feel relaxed.* When you're fully attentive, your blood pressure goes down. This is because no part of you is clamouring for attention, waiting for your turn to speak. Because your level of

engagement is high, you're in tune with both yourself and the other, which means that *you have full access to your native intelligence.* You know you can trust your responses, so you don't feel the need to rehearse what you're going to say next while the other is still speaking. When you do speak, your words are relevant, appropriate and mutually supportive.

Listening means staying present and engaged while another is speaking. It requires conscious intent, generosity of spirit, and emotional maturity. It takes real work and it pays off enormously. Nothing makes people more interesting or attractive to others than their ability to offer real attention.

As we have seen, the ability to direct attention at will, whether for listening or for any other activity, is the skill from which all other skills are derived. Learning to listen well is not only foundational to good communication; it is also a major support for learning on all fronts.

Good communication is about really tuning in to what another is saying. It requires conscious intention, generosity of spirit and emotional maturity. It takes real work and it pays enormous dividends. Nothing makes people more interesting or attractive than their ability to offer real attention.

TEN GUIDELINES FOR GOOD LISTENING

- 1) Stay at the same eye level as the other and offer comfortable eye contact, neither “locking eyes” nor avoiding them.
- 2) Be physically open and engaged, arms and legs uncrossed, if possible, head and torso leaning slightly forward rather than back. Remove any obstructions (plants, books, bags) between you and the speaker.
- 3) Offer physical and/or verbal indications that you’re following what’s being said. Nod, pause to digest, repeat or paraphrase the gist of a message.
- 4) Ask questions for clarification if a message is unclear or if you feel you’ve missed something. If you drift off, come back!
- 5) Offer adequate time for the speaker to complete his message before you begin to speak.
- 6) Resist the temptation to insert descriptions of your own related experience unless they’re brief and directly relevant.
- 7) Listen for subtext. Many messages have more than one level of meaning. Try to address the speaker’s message at the level she’s really speaking from. If a message makes you uncomfortable, acknowledge it. This is more respectful than dodging or diverting the conversation.
- 8) Avoid “you” messages; own your own experience. Especially when negotiating for change, speak from your own thoughts, feelings, observations, intentions and desires: “I feel this/think that/notice the other,” rather than “You make me mad/must be crazy/just don’t get it.” As soon as we hear “You” in a declaration (particularly “You *always*...” or “You *never*...”), we feel a finger pointing at us. “You” messages are perceived as attacks and generally lead to counter-attacks.
- 9) Stay in the present tense. If you have a difficult history with the speaker, try not to bring up issues from another time.
- 10) Remember that everyone is right from his/her own point of view.

RESOLVING CONFLICTS

It's easier to listen when we're emotionally calm and "on the same page" as the person we're speaking to. However, when tempers are high and differences seem irreconcilable, even the most skilled of listeners are challenged. Following are seven more guidelines designed to support good listening in conflict situations. Attending to these will ensure that all parties feel respected and heard:

- 1) Choose your battles; don't sweat the small stuff. Life's too short to worry about the pencil he made off with last month. Ask yourself if you're clear about what the real issue is. Be honest. Is the situation personally loaded? Is your position in any way coloured by unrelated factors (e.g., history, personal preferences or style, projection, resentment, jealousy)?
- 2) Whether your conflict is with a co-worker, boss, acquaintance or friend, address it as soon as possible. Do not allow it to escalate and build steam. Molehills are not all destined to become mountains.
- 3) Approach the other party in private and invite them to discuss your differences at a time that works for both of you. If this is a colleague, invite them to meet outside work hours. If it's not possible to approach the person in private, send your invitation through a note or by e-mail. Warning: do *not* begin a discussion of the issue itself through e-mail. Body language and tone of voice strongly influence the way a message is given and received. Words by themselves can be easily misinterpreted.
- 4) Assuming the other party has agreed to meet, express your concern at the problem you're having and your desire for a solution that works for both of you. Then offer them the floor first. Invite them to share their point of view and *really listen* to what they have to say. Most of us could count on one hand the number of people who have really listened to us in a lifetime. It is rare and it always brings relief. A real hearing is sometimes all it takes to resolve your differences.
- 5) Once the other has expressed their point of view, if the issue is still unresolved, request respectfully that they listen to yours.

- 6) If, and only if, the issue still remains unresolved, find a third party to mediate. If at all possible, do this together. It's more respectful to seek help as equals than for one to initiate further procedures without the knowledge of the other.
- 7) Keep a record of your conversations and date your entries. Include all relevant points made by each party as soon as possible after each meeting. When written records are kept, there is less room for revisionism, should the process continue over time.

KNOW WHEN TO FOLD: BLACK ICE

Once again, choose your battles. If a work environment is truly toxic and you know in your heart you can't change it, then cut your losses and move on. Serious damage gets done to people who stay in seriously dysfunctional environments.

One of the stickiest problems people deal with after being fired is whether or not to sue for wrongful dismissal. If you have a great case and the work environment was generally okay, then go for it. But if your case is not airtight and the work environment was unhealthy, I'd suggest you don't do it. Lawsuits take time, and through that time you'll continue to stay embroiled in toxic energy. Too many people get eaten up by bitterness and frustration while the company they're suing drags out the legal process. It's good to stand up for your rights when you have a good hand, but know when to fold.

PERSONAL INQUIRY

- 1) How would you describe your ability to listen to others?
- 2) Given that successful communication depends on good listening, what could you do to improve your listening skills?

INQUIRY ON THE GO

You have been looking at some of the issues that hold people up when they're faced with the problem of what to do next. As you have no doubt noticed, the problem can be quite complex. If you're new to the field of employment counselling, I hope you've gained some insight into the challenges facing your clients. If you're involved in a career change yourself, I hope you've found support through addressing the issues that speak most strongly to you.

Your challenges are shaped by your relationships, finances and all the other particulars of your life, and these things will continue to change with time. It's my hope that your inquiry will also continue and that you'll identify and tackle new issues as they arise. Remember, solutions become apparent once problems are clearly defined, and problems of any complexity are best defined in writing.

Engaging in inquiry is an excellent practice for any kind of problem-solving. It keeps us honest and it shifts us from a passive, reactive stance to an active, creative one in addressing our challenges. With good problem-solving skills and the courage to keep inquiring we can avoid the dangers—and temptations—of falling into default choices.

On the next page is a quick recipe for inquiry on-the-go. The 'SHIFT' acronym invites you to explore the internal dynamics that are universally at play when we're faced with difficult decisions. Clarifying these will free you from rigid positions and support you in facing your challenges honestly.

In Appendix I, you'll find a recap of the questions for personal inquiry that appeared at the end of most chapters. If you overlooked these on the first reading, I invite you to browse through them again, addressing the ones that feel most relevant.

THINK "SHIFT" FOR INQUIRY ON THE GO

S—STORY:

What story am I telling about this? In other words, how am I explaining this situation to myself? What do I believe is happening here?

H—HISTORY:

What is my history with this kind of problem, event, or person? Does it feel like I've been here before? How have I handled situations like this in the past? What, if anything, does my history have to teach me?

I—IMAGE:

What self-image am I invested in here? How do I want or need to see myself? How do I want or need to be seen by others? Is my image of myself feeling threatened in some way? If so, how?

F: FEELINGS:

What am I feeling in this moment? What am I feeling physically? What am I feeling emotionally? Am I resisting my feelings in some way? If so, how? If my emotions and physical sensations could speak to me, what would they say? What are my fears?

T—TRUTH:

Having looked at my story, my history, my self-image and my feelings, what is the truth of this situation? Is there some way that I might change my story to reflect more truth? Is there some way that I might see myself more honestly? Finally, what action, if any, would be most appropriate for me to take in this situation?

May you find pleasure and fulfillment in all of your choices!

PART TWO:
PLOTTING YOUR
COURSE



THE PLAN

TIME, FOCUS, STRATEGY AND UNDERSTANDING

Where to start? How are you supposed to find your fit in the workplace when there's so much you don't know and it all keeps changing so fast? The answer is obvious, but not necessarily easy. You need four things: time, focus, a strategy and a basic understanding of human nature.

Part One of the book provides some basic understanding; Part Two will provide a strategy. The time and focus are up to you. If you feel you can't afford the time, consider the point, made ad nauseam by career practitioners, that most people spend more time planning a two-week vacation than they do planning what will occupy two-thirds of their lives.

If you struggle with focus, consider that your struggle may be more complex than a simple attention disorder—if there is such a thing. Making a conscious decision about what to do with our lives involves going inside, and going inside can be uncomfortable. For one thing, when we consciously look at what matters to us, we may stumble onto places where we're not living up to what matters. The process will be enlivening if it inspires us to fresh commitment, uncomfortable if we're afraid, as we all are to some degree, of making change. Remember that no one ever died of discomfort—and that enormous gains can be made from enduring just a little of it.

Consider the point, made ad nauseam by career practitioners, that most people spend more time planning a two-week vacation than they do planning what will occupy two-thirds of their lives.

Also keep in mind that staying out of focus is a common way of escaping without actually going away. It removes us from our situation, which makes it easier to abdicate responsibility for our choices. We can't feel fear or discomfort if we're not there to feel it. It's therefore wise to have a healthy suspicion when your attention seems to wander involuntarily. Check in. Ask yourself if there's anything going on that you might be avoiding or resisting.

Another thing: Going inside requires a different kind of focus than most of us are used to. It involves more listening and attuning than *doing*, and most of us prefer doing. We don't like the feeling of being suspended and undecided. We want the decisions made so that we can *act*.

Unfortunately, taking action before connecting with a sense of direction is a lot like scattering seeds before turning the ground. It's a crap-shoot: Something might grow when you add water, but it's more likely to be the weeds than the seeds. They're older, they're stronger, and they got there first.

Going inside means turning your deeper ground. This requires some effort, but the effort pays off quickly. As the rich bottom soil rises to the surface, you begin to get a taste—or a scent—of what you might be good at growing. You start looking at what will thrive, not just survive, in your little patch of earth. The sense of promise that arises from this deeper connection with yourself produces the best fertilizer there is: *heart*—the heart to keep weeding and watering through the worst of droughts and blights.

There's a conscious threshold to cross in taking on a garden. You know there are rocks to be moved and you know that the weeding is never done once and for all. It definitely requires some time and focus, but I invite you to consider the rewards: for that relatively brief investment you will produce a harvest that is completely unique—and you'll have the pleasure of watching yourself develop in the process.

I also invite you to consider the alternative: If you're not taking ownership of your garden, that same time and focus will be squandered in running away—first from the knowledge that you've deserted your patch, and second from the awareness that nothing much, including yourself, is growing. What have you got to lose? And really, what else is there to do?

The Plan

In this section of the book, you will find a plan: a simple strategy for arriving at a sound decision. Without a strategy we tend to go in circles. We dither about, covering the same ground endlessly and never quite feeling equipped to decide. As the bills pile up and our frustration escalates, we become more and more vulnerable to default decisions. Out of sheer desperation, we grab the first thing that comes along and then find ourselves six months (or six years) down the line in a job that's at best putting us to sleep, at worst killing our souls.

A plan forces us to keep our destination in sight. It breaks the journey into simple, logical steps, shifting us out of frustration into a sense of orderly progress.

I strongly recommend using a binder or computer file to track the results of your research. If you don't own a computer or printer, your public library or the employment resource centre in your town should offer access to both. Try to commit regular stretches of uninterrupted time to your exploration.

Following are fifteen guidelines for your career research:

- 1) Start with three questions
- 2) Locate employment resources
- 3) Look at the labour market – where is the work?
- 4) Investigate personality assessments
- 5) Conduct information meetings
- 6) Ask: *“what's the most valuable use of my time right now?”*
- 7) Work from a daily or weekly to-do list
- 8) Look at one option at a time
- 9) Avoid surfing
- 10) Stay conscious
- 11) Track your results
- 12) Evaluate your results
- 13) Revisit the three questions from #1
- 14) Make a decision
- 15) Make a plan and act on it

Note: The steps that follow should be taken after you have completed the Self Portrait in the Workbook (also available on the Hesthammar website) or while you're completing it, but they are not a substitute for it. The Self Portrait is in many ways the heart

of your work. It will take a little time, but that brief investment will bring you substantial rewards for years to come. If you haven't completed it yet, now would be an excellent time.

To get a feel for the plan that follows, I recommend reading through all fifteen steps before you begin. You will see that the steps are not rigidly sequential and can be done concurrently with reading the first section of the book and/or working through the Self-Portrait.

ONE : START WITH THREE QUESTIONS

Take ten minutes to do a brainstorm on the following three questions. Write quickly, include whatever comes to mind, and don't think too hard. Place the questions and your responses at the beginning of your binder. Other ideas will probably surface as you're reading this book. As they do, add them to your list.

1) Do you believe that work (or a particular career) will prevent you from doing something else that really matters to you? If so, what?

See if you can identify the background priorities, conflicting desires, agendas (yours or others'), unanswered questions or pending decisions that might be creating shifting ground in your decision-making process.

2) What's stopping you?

Are there circumstances or personal barriers that you believe are in the way of finding a satisfying career at this time? If so, what are they? Which field(s) or occupation(s) are you discounting because of these circumstances or perceived barriers?

3) Aside from material support, what is work primarily for in your life? That is, aside from a pay-check, what do you want work to do for you?

Do you want your work to be the main focus of your energy, the thing you fully immerse in? Do you want it to be the area where you develop yourself and find advancement? Do you want it to support other efforts, such as an art form, a

spiritual practice, the raising of a family, or the creation of a business?

TWO: LOCATE EMPLOYMENT RESOURCES

To find out where the employment resources are for your province or state, Google the name of your location plus “employment resources” (or words to that effect). Employment Resource Centres usually offer computer access, employment postings, schedules for upcoming job fairs, information about government-sponsored programs and training initiatives, support for writing resumes and cover letters, and local labour market information.

THREE: LOOK AT THE LABOUR MARKET— WHERE IS THE WORK?

In researching employment prospects, look for the most current labour market information you can find. Check to see when sites were last updated, recognize that many do not take the 2008 recession into account, and use your common sense: in uncertain times, there is always less money available for what are perceived as frills.

FOUR: PERSONALITY ASSESSMENTS

If you haven't done so already, I recommend that you set some time aside for on-line personality assessments as you work through this book. These are designed to match your strengths and preferences with suitable occupations and may open your eyes to possibilities you have not yet entertained. Their usefulness will naturally depend on the accuracy of your responses, which makes this a bit of a catch-22: If you don't know yourself well to begin with, it will be harder to get useful results. The Self-Portrait in Part Three will be helpful in this regard. Keep in mind that assessment testing is essentially a cookie-cutter approach to personality. Some of the tests may really hit home; others may miss completely.

One of the sites I recommend to Vancouverites is Career Cruising, partly because the Vancouver Public Library makes it available to anyone with an active library card and partly because it's a user-friendly, straightforward assessment with great links for research. Various versions of the Meyers-Briggs assessment are also available on-line, though generally for a fee. Check with your public library to see what's on offer in the areas of Career and Job Search. And Google "free online personality assessments" to see what's available on the web.

Track your ideas and file your research in your binder.

Following this section is a list of twenty-five questions that should be asked of any career idea. You should know *at least* this much about an occupation before making a final decision.

FIVE : CONDUCT INFORMATION MEETINGS

He who asks may be a fool for five minutes. He who doesn't is a fool for a lifetime – Chinese proverb

Try to find people in your geographical area who are doing the jobs you're researching and ask the same basic questions of them. People working in your city or town will have more detailed information about local trends and opportunities than you'll find in books or on the web. Talk to everyone you know to see who might have contacts in the field you're targeting. Use group e-mails and social media sites such as Facebook and Linked-In to connect with your network quickly and efficiently. Have responders ask their contacts for a brief meeting on your behalf, and *be sure to follow through on all positive responses*. If at all possible, avoid approaching people for information meetings while they're working. If you have no other recourse, be clear that you're asking for a meeting *at their convenience* and not expecting them to interrupt their work. Do as much preliminary research as you can, have informed questions, and send a thank you note afterward. Treat the interviewee with the same respect you would a potential employer.

SIX: ASK YOURSELF—WHAT'S THE MOST VALUABLE USE OF MY TIME RIGHT NOW?

Before getting busy with anything, ask *“What’s the most valuable use of my time right now?”* Make it a habit; use it as a mantra. Be suspicious of any activity that draws you in, eats your time, and/or distracts you from your career search. This does not mean that you can’t rest or relax. Rest and relaxation clear your head and restore your energy. What it does mean is that you *don’t waste time on inessentials.*

SEVEN: WORK FROM A TO-DO LIST

Based on your answers to the question above, keep a running to-do list related to your career search and commit a set amount of time, daily or weekly, to working through it. Plan this time in advance and make it sacred. Allow at least an hour for any one session.

EIGHT: LOOK AT ONE OPTION AT A TIME

Once you have a list of options that interest you, look at them one at a time and for each one, answer the twenty-five questions listed in the next section. Unless you’re quite clear that an idea is not for you, try not to move onto a new one until all questions are answered. Do not dismiss any option before you can visualize a day in the life of that career.

NINE: AVOID SURFING

Know what you’re looking for when you’re on the web. Once you’ve found a useful site, avoid the tendency to skim through it too quickly. Too much superficial skimming will scatter your focus, make you anxious and leave you hungry. At the risk of irritating you, I repeat: *Resist the temptation to look at several options at once.*

TEN: STAY CONSCIOUS

Notice how you're feeling as you proceed. If your investigation is orderly, you will feel like you're making progress—and you will be. If you're all over the map, you will feel like you're going in circles—and you will be. Nothing makes us lose heart faster than the feeling that we've been covering the same terrain over and over with no results in sight.

ELEVEN: TRACK YOUR RESULTS

The twenty-five questions that follow will provide you with a guideline for your research. As you answer them, track your results in your binder. Use dividers or Post-it notes to separate career ideas. Keeping everything in one place will help you to stay organized. If your research takes the form of printouts from websites, highlight the information that is most relevant to you. Otherwise, you may end up with a wilderness of paper that feels too daunting to look at.

TWELVE: EVALUATE YOUR RESULTS

After answering the twenty-five questions of each career option, move on to the Evaluation Tool. It asks you to score your ideas according to how well they meet your conditions of satisfaction. The career(s) that score highest should represent your best choice(s). The values section of the Self-Portrait (Part Three) should help you identify what these conditions are. Because we seldom look at choices in such a specific and orderly way, you may find that your results surprise you. You may also find that they reveal priorities that were hitherto unconscious or unclear.

THIRTEEN: REVISIT THE THREE QUESTIONS FROM NUMBER ONE

As you're identifying your conditions of satisfaction for the Evaluation Tool, take a few minutes to revisit the questions you addressed at the beginning of this section (page 185). Ask your-

self if your answers to these questions are still the same. If so, be sure to consider them as you're drawing up your conditions of satisfaction. If not, be sure your conditions reflect what feels both real and realistic to you now.

FOURTEEN: MAKE A DECISION

Once you have thoroughly evaluated your options and compared your results, you should feel ready to make a decision. If your decision means that you will be facing new challenges, know that you will probably be facing a little resistance, conscious or otherwise. Part One of this book is designed to support you in overcoming that resistance. Meanwhile, having made your decision, your next step should be to:

FIFTEEN: MAKE A PLAN AND ACT ON IT

Write a to-do list for the next days and weeks including all the things you need to do to get underway with your new career – and then *begin*. If it involves more education, you should know which schools offer the training, when their programs start, what they cost, and whether or not they have waiting lists. If you're eligible for funding, you should be applying for it now. If you're planning to look for work, you should decide how much time you will dedicate to your job-search each day.

On the pages that follow are twenty-five questions that you should answer before making a final career decision. Your answers to these questions represent the *minimum* amount of information you should have about any career before either choosing it or discarding it as a possibility. Some can be answered through printouts from websites – simply highlight the information that is relevant to you. Others may require a little reflection. Respond to those simply and quickly, in point form if you like, without thinking too hard or judging your responses. Keep all your notes on a particular career in one location in your binder, and remember to focus on only one career at a time.

CAREER RESEARCH: TWENTY-FIVE QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE DECIDING ON AN OCCUPATION

A) The Occupation Itself

- 1) What is the Job Title of the occupation you're investigating? Is it known by any other names?
- 2) Give a detailed Job Description of the occupation. What do people actually do? Describe a typical "day in the life."
- 3) What is the main appeal for you in this work? What does it offer you?
- 4) Why do you think it's suitable for you?
- 5) Are there any similar or related occupations that appeal to you? Which ones? What is their appeal?
- 6) What are the working conditions for this occupation?
 - hours of work (shifts, weekends, overtime, part-time, full-time...)
 - place of work (inside, outside, office, classroom, assembly line...)
 - degree and quality of interaction with clients and/or co-workers (e.g., lots of light-hearted contact, small amounts of quiet contact...)
 - degree and quality of independent work
 - forms of mobility (walking, standing, sitting, driving...)
 - health/safety concerns (dust, noise, heights, germs, allergies...)
- 7) Can you visualize yourself feeling reasonably comfortable and relaxed in this job on a full-time basis? If not, why? Is it a job you would prefer to do parttime? If so, why?
- 8) Do you have any problems – physical, mental or emotional – that would interfere with your ability to do this work?

B) Salary

- 9) What salary do you expect to start?
- 10) What would you expect to make five years down the line?

C) Education

- 11) What specific training, if any (diploma, certificate, journeyman ticket, degree) is needed to work in this field? Do you have this training?
- 12) If not, which schools offer it, how long are their programs and what do they cost?
- 13) Are there currently waiting lists to get in to these programs?
- 14) Which school would you prefer to attend and why?
- 15) What prerequisites, if any, are required to get into this program as stated by the school calendar (e.g., courses, grades, certificates)?
- 16) Do you have these prerequisites? If not, what do you need? Where and when will you do your upgrading?

D) Employment Prospects

- 17) Name five companies in your city and/or province that hire people with your training and qualifications. Who are the main employers?
- 18) What are the labour market projections like for this occupation? Is it currently on an up-swing or a down-swing?
- 19) What are the opportunities like for people entering this field? Where did you get this information and do you trust it?
- 20) Do you see any opportunities for self-employment in this field? If so, and if self-employment appeals to you, elaborate. Who would be your target market?

E) Information Meetings

- 21) What have you learned from people who are knowledgeable in this field (e.g., employees or employers working in the field, counsellors in resource centres or training institutions, teachers, online interviews)?
- 22) What do people like or recommend most/least about this work?
- 23) Were there any surprises for you?

The Plan

- 24) Do you feel you have a complete picture of this occupation?
- 25) If not, what do you still need to find out? Where do you feel gappy or out of focus?

CAREER EVALUATION TOOL

The Career Evaluation Tool will help you determine how well your potential career options satisfy your conditions for enjoyable work. By scoring all your options (including past careers) on the same range of conditions, you'll be able to compare them with one another to see which are most likely to bring you satisfaction.

- 1) Identify the conditions you feel are most essential to your happiness at work. A review of the section on work values in Part Three (see copyright page) will help refresh your memory. If you have not yet completed the Self Portrait, now would be the time. Describe each condition briefly, as indicated in the exercise that follows, and include about ten to fifteen items.
- 2) Now ask yourself if your list is self-explanatory. In other words, would someone else know exactly what you mean by each condition? If not, take a moment to define them, in point form, as briefly and concretely as you can. For example, if one of your conditions was 'Wage of \$35K or higher' you will need no further elaboration. On the other hand, if one of your conditions was 'Good Co-workers,' you will need to say more. What is a good co-worker to you? Someone you can be friends with? Someone who is professional and conscientious? Someone who consistently brings in positive energy? All of the above?
- 3) After your list has been clarified, rate each condition on a scale of 1 – 5 according to its level of importance *relative to the other items on your list*. The most important conditions should receive a 5 rating, the least important a 1. For example, one of my conditions was 'Pleasing Surroundings;' another was 'Good Management.' When I compared these two items with the rest of my list, I decided that 'Pleasing Surroundings' was worth about a 1, 'Good Management' a 5. If there are one or two conditions that feel exceptionally important to you, feel free to score them higher (i.e., as a 6, 8, etc.). If you want help

with the rating process, Google 'prioritizing grid' for a useful online tool.

- 4) When you have rated all your conditions, transfer the conditions and their values to the designated spots on the Evaluation Tool that follows. I suggest rotating the page so that you can list your conditions horizontally rather than vertically. You are now ready to assess a range of occupations based on how well they match your conditions. If a condition is worth 3 and it's well met in a given occupation, you will give it a score of 3. If it's barely met, you will give it a 1 or a 2. If it's not met at all, you will give it a 0 or even a minus value (-1 or -2), according to what feels appropriate.
- 5) Under "Careers" on the left-hand side of the Evaluation Tool, list a few of the most significant occupations you have done in the past as well as the occupations you're currently considering. Since you already know a lot about your previous occupations, these will give you useful base-line scores with which to compare new possibilities.
- 6) Your perception of past jobs may change somewhat through doing this exercise, for better or worse. There may be some real surprises. You will also find that there are conditions you have to guess at when grading new occupations, either because there are gaps in your research or because certain conditions, such as benefits and management style, vary from company to company. Score each condition as well as you can and *circle the scores that are guesses*.
- 7) When you have scored every occupation, total the scores and place your final totals in the designated spaces on the right. You can now compare the totals to see which occupations best satisfy your conditions for enjoyable work.

You'll notice, depending on how many numbers you circled, that your results are based to a greater or lesser extent on guesswork. Take a moment now to review the conditions you had to guess at and in your dedicated notebook, list these as questions you still have about the careers you're investigating.

Use them to guide your continued research, particularly when conducting information meetings with people in your field of interest.

It may turn out that certain questions can only be answered in the course of an actual job interview (e.g., questions about training and advancement opportunities, frequency and style of performance evaluations, level of employee autonomy, company-specific challenges or hazards). If this is the case, you'll find it useful to bring these up when the interviewer asks "Do you have any questions for me?"

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Appendix I: Recap Of Personal Inquiries

GETTING STARTED—ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT

ONE to FOUR: *I'd Like to Go to Sleep Now... Why Bother... I Really Don't Want to Work...What if it's All Too Much?*

- 1) Does the subject of work trigger resistance in you? If so, what forms does your resistance take?
- 2) How does your resistance affect your ability to take charge of your work life?
- 3) Have you been caught in a 'resistance-loop' I.e., resisting your resistance by continuing to turn away from your situation? If so, what effect has this had on your energy and spirits?
- 4) When you do address the subject of work directly, what happens? Does it feel like there's always another obstacle to overcome? If so, what effect does this have on you?
- 5) Make a note of the obstacles you believe you are currently facing.

FIVE: *What If I'm Messing With Destiny?*

- 1) Do you have a belief that your destiny is predetermined? If so, are you concerned that you might be interfering with it if you make an independent career choice? Elaborate.
- 2) How are you benefiting from this belief? What does it give you? What are the side effects of this belief? How is it affecting your ability to choose work?

SIX: *I'm Trying to Go With the Flow Here*

- 1) Do you believe that 'going with the flow' means drifting along and allowing the various currents of life to carry you where they will? If so, how does this affect your ability to make a career choice?
- 2) What are the side effects or benefits of this belief? E.g., does it allow you to abdicate responsibility for certain choices?
- 3) Have you noticed any other beliefs around taking control of your life? If so, name them. Now notice if any of your beliefs conflict. If they do, how are those conflicts affecting your career search?
- 4) What strategies have worked best in the past for overcoming your resistance and regaining your momentum? What strategies do you think would work best now?

ADDRESSING MESSAGES

SEVEN: *I Don't Know Who to Listen to! Messages From Others*

- 1) Did anyone offer you specific career suggestions as you were growing up? If so, what were they?
- 2) Was your family wide-open and permissive, though lacking in guidance? (*"Do whatever makes you happy!"*)
- 3) Were they overly directive? (*"Be a doctor!"*)
- 4) Somewhere in between? (*"Do what you like, but get rich!"*)
- 5) Did one of your parents want you to live the life they didn't have? E.g., were you the family's designated artist, athlete, professional?
- 6) Did you have a sibling who 'claimed a territory' before you got there (e.g., sports, art, science)? Did you avoid that territory even though you had talent because you didn't want to compete?
- 7) If you had several siblings, did you get lost in the shuffle? If you were an only child, did you get too much interference?
- 8) Was there someone in your life who saw something in you that no one else noticed? If so, who were they and what did they see?
- 9) How would you describe your family's attitude to work? Did they like it, dislike it? Was it a passion, a joy, a grind?
- 10) How would you describe your family's work ethic? Did they believe that a job worth doing was worth doing well? Were they anti-establishment? Did they believe in 'beating the system' in some way? Were there 'good jobs' and 'bad jobs'? Which were which?
- 11) Which messages felt the most supportive? Are they also objectively believable? If so, hang onto them!
- 12) Which messages felt non-supportive? Question them!
- 13) What career suggestions are you receiving *now*, through family members, friends, neighbours, co-workers, employers and the culture at large?
- 14) How are these messages affecting your ability to choose a career?
- 15) Are there contradictions between what you want and what others are suggesting? If so, elaborate.
- 16) Are you receiving mixed or contradictory messages from others? If so, elaborate.
- 17) Which messages feel supportive? If they're believable, hang onto them! Which messages feel non-supportive? Question them!

EIGHT: *My Inner Conversation Is Driving Me Crazy!*
Messages From Within

- 1) What is your internal voice saying about what you can or cannot, should or should not do for a living?
- 2) Do the messages vary from day to day? If so, how? What kinds of things trigger positive messages? Negative ones?
- 3) What does the voice say when you're looking at something new and challenging?
- 4) Do you have a good strategy for telling the voice where to go when it's being negative?
- 5) Which messages feel supportive? Are they also objectively believable? If so, hang onto them!
- 6) Which messages feel non-supportive? Question them!
- 7) Thoughts about ourselves are always accompanied by images of ourselves. What self-images come up when you think about work?
- 8) Do you notice any self-images that conflict? If so, describe them.
- 9) When you look at them under the microscope, which images come closest to the truth? Which look a little suspicious? Which are most in your way?
- 10) There is a payoff for every belief and every self-image we hold. Looking at your negative or non-supportive self-images, what would you say you get from them? What do they give you? Is there anything you get to do or not do, feel or not feel, because of them?
- 11) Which self-images do you most want to hang on to? Write these down as positive statements. (E.g., *"I'm really well-organized."*) Which self-images do you most want to revise or let go of altogether? Rewrite these as positive statements that feel truthful and convincing. (E.g., if you see yourself as being poorly organized, don't say you're organized; say something that feels true, such as *"I'm learning to become well-organized."*)
- 12) For support in soliciting useful feedback from people who know you well, refer back to the questions at the end of Chapter Seven.

HARNESSING YOUR ENERGY

NINE: *I Start Out Strong, But... Combatting Homeostasis*

- 1) Recognizing that homeostasis – the force of habit – can be either an ally or an enemy in creating a satisfying future, how would you say it affects you when it comes to exploring career options?
- 2) In what ways, if any, does it move you forward?

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- 3) In what ways, if any, does it hold you back?
- 4) Do you have any specific habits that stop you repeatedly from going after what you want? If so, what are they?
- 5) Is your critical voice active during these times? If so, what is it telling you?
- 6) What changes could you make in your life, starting now, to harness the positive and eliminate the negative effects of homeostasis?
- 7) Are you willing to make those changes?
- 8) If the answer is yes, write them down as statements of intention that you can track. Make them quantifiable wherever possible. (E.g., 'Research four careers a week' rather than 'Do more research.')

TEN: *I'm Not the Proactive Type – The Thing About Goals*

- 1) Do you experience resistance to the prospect of setting specific goals?
- 2) If so, what are the main reasons for your resistance?
- 3) How have you overcome your resistance in the past?
- 4) How can you best overcome your resistance now?

ELEVEN: *Where Did the Day Go? – Managing Time*

- 1) What are your good and bad habits with regard to managing time?
 - 2) Do you have a strategy for setting priorities?
 - 3) Which tasks do you generally tackle first?
 - 4) Which tasks do you tend to procrastinate on or let slide altogether?
 - 5) In what ways could you improve your management of time?
- For support on managing time, revisit the 'Focus Questions For Staying On Track' at the end of Chapter Eleven.

TWELVE: *I Have a Goal but I Can't Get Started Making a Plan and Using It*

- 1) Do you usually work from a written plan?
 - 2) If so, how is it generally organized?
 - 3) If not, how do you go about getting things done?
- For support on planning, revisit the sample plan at the end of Chapter Twelve.

THIRTEEN: *If I Make A Choice I'll Lose My Other Options*
Conquering Commitment Anxiety

- 1) Have you worked with conscious intention in the past? If so, what were your results?
- 2) If you were successful, do you know why? Elaborate. If you were unsuccessful, do you know why? Elaborate.
- 3) Do you experience anxiety around committing to a specific career?
- 4) What thoughts and feelings come up when you're thinking seriously about committing to a career choice? Which ones feel enlivening and which ones drain you of energy? Which can you hold on to without feeling unrealistic? Which can you let go of without feeling unrealistic?

FOURTEEN: *What If I Just Don't Know?*
Addressing the Passion/Purpose Dilemma

- 1) Do you believe that you should feel passionately about your choice before you commit to it? If so, how does this belief affect your ability to take action?
- 2) Are you waiting to feel absolute certainty about your choice before committing to it? If so, how does this belief affect your ability to take action?
- 3) Do you feel willing to create the belief or hold the intention that you possess a wisdom stronger than your rational mind that's available to guide you in your life direction if you attune to it? If so, why not try it now? If not, why not? What do you believe you have to lose?
- 4) Do you feel willing to create the belief or hold the intention that you will find opportunities for personal and professional development in whatever you do? If so, what can you do to optimize those opportunities?
- 5) If not, why not? What do you believe you have to lose?

AVOIDING THE ROCKS ON THE ROAD

FIFTEEN: *Take Care With Whom You Share*

- 1) Make a list of the people you're currently most in touch with.

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- 2) Look at each one in turn and using a few simple words or phrases, describe in your notebook the impact the person has on you. How do you feel during and after a visit with this person? What happens to your energy? Limit your description to a few simple words and don't think too hard.
- 4) Now ask yourself who in this group is most likely to really engage when you're talking about a new career idea. Who is likely to feed the flame and who is likely to blow it out?
- 5) Looking at your results, who do you feel you can you afford to spend time with? Who would be best to avoid until your career decision feels solid?

SIXTEEN: *Throwing Out the Baby With the Bathwater*

- 1) Have you had a negative experience in a past job? What was the job? What field was the job in?
- 2) Have you characterized the whole occupation as negative because of this one experience? Have you decided that you never want to work in this occupation again?
- 3) When you revisit the occupation objectively, with your skills and strengths in mind, do you believe that the occupation itself was the problem (i.e., a bad fit)? Or did the problem lie more in the environment? If the latter, can you imagine enjoying this occupation if you were working in a better environment or in a different field? Is it worth a second look?

SEVENTEEN: *Idealization, Disappointment and Loss*

- 1) Is there an occupation that has a particularly compelling appeal for you right now? If so, what is it? In a few words, how would you describe its appeal? What does your imagination conjure up when you think about doing this kind of work?
- 2) Are you clear about what a day in the life of this job entails? Do you know what your main tasks would be from day to day and week to week? (If not, finding this out should be your next step!)
- 3) Have you had to let go of a career idea for some reason? (E.g., you don't or can't meet the job requirements, your physical or mental condition won't allow you to do the job, you have discovered that your picture of the job was mistaken or incomplete.)
- 4) Are you still feeling disappointed about the loss of your idea or have you recovered enough to move on? If the latter, great. If the former, do you believe it's possible to feel enthusiastic about another occupation once you've had some time to digest your

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disappointment? Or do believe that it's hopeless because no other job could ever suit you as well? If the latter, how does this belief affect your energy? How does this belief serve you? (Remember, there is a payoff for every belief.)

5) Recognizing that beliefs are choices, can you substitute your defeatist beliefs, if you hold any, for more empowering ones?

EIGHTEEN: Waiting For the Elusive "Aha!" Defeatist Expectations

- 1) Are you expecting a dramatic "Aha!" moment when you suddenly come upon the right career for you?
- 2) How does this expectation affect you as you're looking at various options? Does it feel like nothing is hitting the mark?
- 3) If so, recognize that expectations, like beliefs, can be conscious choices and ask yourself if there is a more useful expectation to work with.

NINETEEN: There It Is In Black and White! Don't Believe Everything You Read

- 1) Are you looking for confirmation for your ideas through personality assessment tests? If so, are you remembering that you can distort your results by having a particular field or occupation in mind as you write them? How might this be affecting your career search?
- 2) Do you find yourself being drawn to certain careers mainly because they have shown up as matches on assessment tests? If so, are you remembering that there are many factors besides assessment results that go into determining the rightness of a choice? (E.g., age, health, preferred work environment, education level, personal ethics, work/life balance, safety concerns, creative pursuits.)
- 3) Are you being conscientious about researching the career options that are coming up on assessment tests? For support with your research, Part Two offers a plan with twenty-five questions that should be asked of any career before making a final decision.

TWENTY: Perfectionism

- 1) Are you waiting to find the perfect career choice? If so, take a moment to list all the conditions that would make your choice perfect.

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- 2) Now ask yourself if there are occupations that meet those conditions and if those occupations are realistic choices for you. If there are, then your idea of 'perfect' is reasonable. If there aren't, then you might want to revise your idea of 'perfect.'
- 3) What impact, if any, is your search for perfection having on your career exploration? Are you discarding any reasonable ideas because they don't fit every one of your criteria? Which ideas would they be? Are they worth a second look?

TWENTY-ONE: *Nothing Does it For Me!* *The Missing Wow-Factor*

- 1) Are you expecting work to bring excitement and novelty into your life? If so, in what way? How is this expectation affecting your ability to make a good career choice?
- 2) Do you believe that you're not really living if your days don't include some peak moments? Are the peaks where life really happens for you? How would you describe a peak moment? How does your desire for excitement impact your day-to-day life?
- 3) Are there parts of a day that don't count for you because they feel familiar and predictable? Do you find yourself checking out in the midst of daily routines? How would you describe the quality of your life in those moments?
- 4) The desire for novelty and excitement can prevent us from engaging in the present moment, yet mastery in any form can only develop through full engagement. Recognizing this, is there a way to revise your expectations so as not to miss out on the chance for real mastery in your life and work? If so, elaborate.

TWENTY-TWO: *I Want It All!* *Clarifying Your Expectations*

- 1) Are you hoping your job will allow you to develop most of your main interests and utilize most of your main strengths? If your answer is yes, list the interests and strengths you have in mind and then name the occupations that suit those interests and require those strengths.
- 2) If you find occupations that fit your list and those occupations are also realistic, congratulations. Choose the one that fits you best. If you can't find an occupation that fits your list, ask what effect your expectations might be having on your career search.
- 3) You might also ask if your expectations are actually a sneaky form of resistance—a way of keeping you from making a final career

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choice. How might you revise your expectations to ensure that they don't stall you indefinitely?

TWENTY-THREE: I Just Want Stability Redefining Job Security

- 1) Have you been employed in a dying industry or at the effect of one too many downsizings in recent months, and if so, have you decided to hold out for rock-solid security in your next career? What effect is this having on your career search?
- 2) Do you believe there is such a thing as rock-solid security in these times? If not, can you think of a more useful description of stability? Review Chapter Twenty-Three for suggestions.

TWENTY-FOUR: Don't Cast Shadows Understanding Projection

- 1) Do you find that every career option you look at feels stale and uninspiring? If so, is it possible that you might be stuck in a mild depression and projecting your feelings of dullness onto the choices you're considering?
- 2) Can you accept your state as natural, give it a little time and space, and give yourself permission to take things one step at a time?
- 3) List some of the small steps you could take starting now that would give you a feeling of progress without overwhelming you. Now act on them, one step at a time.

TWENTY-FIVE: Climbing Out of the Hole Overcoming Depression

- 1) Have you been stuck in a depression for some time? If so, do you feel you have lost touch with the strengths that you bring to the workplace? How are you seeing yourself right now? Do you believe this is a realistic picture? Remember, in times of anxiety and depression, people tend to focus more on their perceived inadequacies than their strengths.
- 2) Are you aware that a situational depression is a natural response to the shock of job loss and/or uncertainty about the future? Did you know that most people experience such states at some point in their lives, especially in times of prolonged stress?

- 3) Have you been resisting your state? If so, how? What forms have your resistance taken? What have you been doing to escape? Has your resistance been helping or hurting your career search?
- 4) If your resistance has been hurting your search, have you also been resisting your awareness of this? Are you caught in a resistance-loop (compounding your depression by resisting it)? If so, what could you do to arrest the loop and get back on track?
- 5) Review Chapter Twenty-five for an example of a depression that resolved in a positive way through structured activities and a detailed review of strengths. To structure your own career search activities, follow the plan in Part Two. To connect with your strengths in a fresh way, complete the self-portrait in Part Three (see copyright page).

TWENTY-SIX: *Analysis Paralysis*
Too Much Information

- 1) As you have been researching various career options, do you feel you have gathered an overwhelming amount of information?
- 2) If so, are you feeling even more confused than you were at the start because of all the detail?
- 3) Have you noticed that in your confusion you keep thinking you need more information? If so, come to a *HALT!* and start sorting. Certain personalities dig up such a wilderness of information that they end up feeling paralyzed by it. Organize your information into simple categories and toss out all unnecessary detail.
- 4) Also ask yourself if it's possible that the need to know more is a red herring—i.e., a form of resistance in disguise. Is the process of gathering more information stopping you from taking the logical next steps toward a career choice? If so, you know what to do!

TWENTY-SEVEN: *Why Am I Still Confused?*

- 1) *Not Enough Information*—If you're feeling confused about how to make a choice, first ask yourself if you have all the information you need to make a choice. Where are the gaps? What information is missing or out of focus?
- 2) *A More Fundamental Decision to Make*—Is your confusion related to another issue in your life? Do you have another, more fundamental decision to make before deciding on a career choice? (E.g., whether or not to move to another country, whether or not to have a child) If so, what is it?

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3) *The Illusion of Fixed Alternatives* – Do you believe that you're limited to a small range of options, none of which really appeals to you? If so, what is your belief based on? Does it feel realistically true or has it been imposed on you in some way? Elaborate.

4) *Switch-Hitting and the Birth of the "Yeah-But"* – "Yeah-buts" are often red herrings, forms of resistance that keep us treading water when we could be taking action. Do you find that every time you look at a career idea, a voice says "Yeah, but if you choose that, you won't be able to do this," or "Yeah, but this choice doesn't offer that..." What are your biggest "Yeah-buts"? What effect are they having on your decision-making process?

STAYING IN MOTION

TWENTY-EIGHT : *Problems, Problems*

1) Take a moment to revisit the problems you identified in # 5 of your first inquiry (page 22). Removing any items that have been resolved, list the problems you believe you're still facing in making a successful career change. Now, using the formula offered in Chapter Twenty-Eight, address these problems one at a time.

TWENTY-NINE : *Problems On the Job*

1) What has been your approach to problem solving in previous jobs? Have you been encouraged to think on your feet and solve problems on your own? Have you been discouraged from thinking independently? Have you received mixed or contradictory messages?

2) What would be your strategy for solving problems in your next position? Remember, it's fair to ask employers how autonomous they expect you to be.

3) If an employer asked you in an interview to describe your problem-solving style, what would you say?

THIRTY : *People Problems*

1) How would you describe your ability to listen to others?

2) What could you do to improve your listening skills?