

The courage to backtrack

With every decision you make, you create a new future for yourself. You choose to attend a party and meet your future spouse. You select one high school course over another and set yourself on a career path. You wander left instead of right when looking for an apartment and wind up in a completely different area – and life – than you would if you'd gone the other way.

Sometimes you know that a decision is momentous in advance: *"Which school shall I attend?"* Sometimes a choice seems unimportant but has huge consequences that are only obvious in hindsight. *"Should I go bowling tonight?"*

We can think of our lives as almost infinite arrays of future possibilities, some of which are made more likely by each tiny decision we make, each phone call, each purchase, each meal – while other possibilities are made less likely. Inevitably we make some decisions that we regret. We choose paths that are unfulfilling, we base our futures on the expectations of others, we rely on instincts that prove faulty, we create futures out of mistaken ideas. And the momentum of our choices often causes us to look only forward, further along the path we have chosen. Never back.

We resist backtracking. Many people feel compelled to stay on a life course that is intensely unfulfilling. They are unwilling to give an inch, to give up any ground, perhaps because they already feel they have given up so much. *"No, I trained too hard for this career to change it now, even though I hate it."* *"No, I couldn't move to a smaller home, even though the mortgage payments make me a slave."* *"No, I can't give up on this relationship, even though my partner beats me and will never change."*

Have you ever walked in a hedge or corn maze? Inevitably, you take wrong turns. Indeed, if you don't, the experience isn't satisfying. You go back, knowing the only way to the end is along another path. The feeling of "stuckness" to which we are all prone at times, often comes when we find ourselves in a dead end, a blind alley. The solution is to let go of the progress we have made, turn back, and try another path.

When we feel stuck or trapped in our life, the real problem is often the crisis of meaning it brings about. *"Without this relationship/job/home/role, what am I?"* The resolution of the crisis involves letting go of the former path – to the point that we can look around and see what other possibilities await us.

Is there a part of your life that seems to be a dead end – even in those moments when you are feeling somewhat better? (During depression or when we feel particularly awful, almost everything can seem like a dead end, even when it isn't.) What is it?

Have you been resisting “letting go” of something that seems to be dragging you down because you worked so hard to get it? What?

It can be a bad idea to make big life decisions when you are particularly depressed or discouraged. You can wind up discarding perfectly good parts of your life because of the negative filter that a low mood can impose on your judgment. Generally it’s best to wait until you feel somewhat better, then re-evaluate.

Nevertheless, if you were to change course in this area of your life, which path might you take instead? For example, if you were to give up your present job, what else would you like to do?

Is there any information you would need in order to evaluate this new path to see whether it really would be a positive move? How could you find this out without actually committing yourself to a change of course?

What’s one thing that you could do to get started on this information gathering effort? It should be clear, achievable, and straightforward.

Consider carrying out this first step in the coming week. If it seems too big, cut it down some more.