

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

Muddling Happens

Anyone else notice that predicting the future used to be the exclusive job of prophets and oracles, but now it seems like everyone's supposed to do it? I mean, let's take a closer look at the messages so many of us manage to pick up from our culture:

- You must do well in school to go to a good college, get a good job, and have a good relationship; you will not be happy without these things.
- You should always know what you want to do next.
- If you get what you want, you will be happy.
- There is one right path for your life and if you miss it, you will never recover.
- You should pick one career in your teens or early 20s and do it happily for the rest of your life.
- Sufficient planning can guard you from future pain.
- You can achieve clarity about your next step if you only think hard enough about it and ask enough people about what you should do.

At first glance, these might seem like reasonable proverbs: sayings that are likely to be true as long as circumstances don't do anything too weird. At a second glance, though, these don't actually match the lived experience of the majority of people. Frankly, how many of us have gotten what we wanted and then realized we didn't like it? Or our hard work in college got us a job we hated (or didn't get us a job!) that actually hurt our relationships? Or by trial, error, failure, luck, and indirection—not careful planning—we ended up loving something we never would have dreamed we'd like in our teens and twenties?

Since these cultural “shoulds” don't match most people's experience, they aren't actually conventional wisdom. They're really more like oracles: predictions of the future particular to one person's situation that are not really transferrable to everyone.

What's so sad though, is how we torture ourselves when our experience doesn't match these supposed predictions. We tell ourselves we are failures because we couldn't stay on the course we originally planned. When we pursue what we wanted and don't succeed, we tell ourselves that our desires and reasoning must not be trustworthy. Or, we feel dysfunctional because we can't figure out what we want, or because we get what was supposed to make us happy and it doesn't fit.

The Necessity of Muddling

But what if told ourselves and our children the truth about life: that there is just no way around muddling? What if we guaranteed ourselves that there will be periods where all the thinking and planning in the world will not be able to produce the experiences we would need to be confident about what to do next? Even if we take years to think through a “foolproof” 5, 10, or 30 year plan, our planning can only take us to the circumstances a little ways ahead, maybe a few months or a year or two. During that time, unforeseen directions and opportunities will come our way and there is no way we can know in advance how we will feel about them and the kind

of person we will become as a result of it all. We will just have to reevaluate what we want and what to do in light of these unexpected experiences.

Imagine the pressure that could be lifted if we approached our major decisions with the necessity of muddling in mind. Rather than stressing out about whether we will like engineering forever, as we choose our college major, we could tell ourselves, "With everything I know about me and life right now, engineering seems like a good choice. Maybe something else will come along and I will change my mind later, but this is what I've got to work with now. No use stressing about what I can't know. I won't ruin all my chances of future fulfillment by changing my mind about a career. These days, people average 7 career changes in a lifetime. This one could be just a good place to start."

Or, rather than flogging ourselves because we've hit a confusing life transition and we don't have an answer for all those people who always asking us what we will do next, what if we told ourselves, "There are about four things I can kind of imagine myself trying at this point. I don't have enough experience with any of them to know whether I'd like any of them long term. So there's no way I can make a "perfect" choice that will guarantee I don't end up disliking whatever I try. I guess I will just try something for awhile and see if I like it and what unforeseen opportunities it might present themselves in the process."

Learning to Muddle

What decision has been bugging you lately? You keep thinking about it or asking other people what they think you should do, but the pressure of everything you can't know about the future is keeping you stuck at the crossroads, unable to go one way or the other because of all you can't predict. It may help to ask yourself the following questions about this decision:

1. What future things that are impossible to know right now are you pressuring yourself to know to feel okay with your choice? How can you practice accepting these unknowns?
2. What good things could come out of your making the "wrong" choice? What possibilities might that open up even if you don't succeed?
3. What do you fear is true about you because of your difficulty with this decision? If you were to ask a reasonable friend about these fears, what would that person say is probably true about you in this area, as opposed to what you fear is true?
4. What experiences have you not yet had that you would need to have had already to be really confident about this decision? How might you free yourself up to try out some of these experiences to grow your confidence through them, rather than pressuring yourself to have clarity and confidence beforehand?
5. Who might you ask about the path their life has taken—the twists, turns, and unexpected possibilities and tragedies—to help reassure you that other people can't make foolproof plans either?
6. Looking back on past life transitions, what was the muddling process like? What unexpected events happened in the middle of confusing periods to help bring you to your next direction? In what ways is your current transition similar to that past process?

If you or someone you know would like help muddling through a major decision or life transition, free to *call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email info@jenniferdiebel.com.*

Thanks for reading!

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