

The 'Keeping One's Options Open' Mentality

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 28 August, 2003 - 12:12

Originally published in Taking Children Seriously, the paper journal (TCS 30).

Sarah Fitz-Claridge (<http://www.fitz-claridge.com/>).

There is a very nasty syndrome which parents sometimes inadvertently pass on to their children while trying to help their children have better lives. I call it the Keeping-One's-Options-Open mentality. Here is one example of what it looks like:

You study hard to ensure that you pass your school exams. In Britain that would be GCSE exams at the age of 16, which you do to keep your options open so that you can do A-level exams at 18 if you want to. Then you do A-levels to keep your options open in case you want to go to university.

Then you go to university to get a good degree (not necessarily one that you will enjoy) so you can get a good job. Then you take the wrong job (a 'good' job) and kowtow to your boss so that you can get promotion and thereby security, to keep your options open after retirement.

This is a very common syndrome in which people sacrifice themselves for the next phase of life, which itself consists of nothing but sacrificing themselves for the following phase.

A friend of mine, whom I'll call Henry, has this syndrome badly. He is so desperate to keep his options open and set himself up financially that life is passing him by. He is living for retirement, and totally forgetting to live now. And as retirement looms, he is increasingly fearing it. In this lifetime of unhappy sacrifice, he has systematically sacrificed his real interests, and has destroyed his capacity to acquire any. When I think of Aristotle's dictum: 'The unexamined life is not worth living', I think of my friend Henry. What has his life been for? It was supposed to have been for him.

And the most frightening thing of all is that in his desperate wish to help his daughter have a good life, he has successfully instilled in her the very same syndrome. She now studies hard whether she enjoys it or not in order not to end up in a dead-end job. Henry's job, apparently, is not a dead-end job, but it does take all his time from when he gets up to when he goes to sleep, almost every day, and this has been the case for the many years I have known him – and there is no reason to expect that to change.

As Herbert Spencer said in 1867, 'A living thing is distinguished from a dead thing by the multiplicity of the changes at any moment taking place in it.' By that criterion, Henry is dead, or nearly.

Keeping one's options open closes off options.

It is not that doing exams or going to university closes off options in itself. Indeed, doing exams or going to university is just the right thing for some people at some point in their lives. But if you proceed mechanically through predetermined,

standardised processes like exams in order to keep your options open, you are not doing what you otherwise would have done – namely, building up the capacity for making your own real choices – so you fail to build up a rich structure of things you enjoy, things you want.

Indeed, any time you do something to keep your options open instead of because you want to do whatever it is, you are falling into the Keeping-One's-Options-Open mistake.

For any human being who is not actually facing death by starvation or the firing squad, the hardest thing in life is not *getting what you want* – far from it – it is finding out (or rather, creating) what you want. That is what we deprive children of when we channel them into ‘keeping their options open’. It looks as though they are keeping their options open, but at each stage they are actually presented with only one option – the option where you do the standardized thing: something you can do without being human, by sacrificing the human part of yourself, the individual part.

If you do something you don't really want to do, how will you ever know if it was a mistake to do that? At least if you do something you do want to do, you will be able to tell later if that choice was a mistake.

A chap I knew many years ago, whom I'll call Patrick, was reading Medicine at Cambridge, and hated it. He had not chosen that course because he wanted to do medicine. He had chosen it reluctantly, on the advice of his mentor, Lord somebody-or-other, to keep his options open, in case he wanted to become a Member of Parliament.

Because Patrick was not expecting to enjoy Medicine, when, lo and behold, he did not enjoy it, that didn't give him any information about whether doing Medicine was a mistake or not. So he spent those years miserably getting his degree in Medicine instead of doing something he might have enjoyed. And after all that sacrifice, not only has he not become an MP, he hasn't even become a doctor. What a complete waste of time!

Contrast that with George Orwell (the author of *1984*). Orwell had certain values and aspirations which made him want to go to fight for the government side in the Spanish Civil War in 1936. But he discovered that the situation there wasn't what he expected, not because of the ghastly conditions, but because the communists were slaughtering the anarchists who were on the same side, instead of the fascists they were all supposed to be fighting. He began to think deeply about why and how.

Because George Orwell (unlike Patrick) was there because he really wanted to be, he learnt an enormous amount as a human being. Making that particular mistake turned out to be what his life was for! It gave him new understanding and in particular, a deep understanding of the roots of totalitarianism. He became a great writer.

Fighting in a war isn't everyone's cup of tea, but it was his life and his choice to make, and his to learn from. We need to remember that, don't we? Our children must make their own choices in life.

Instead of channelling your children into your vision of what they should be or do, help them to pursue their own ends in life. Don't destroy their creativity by channelling them into the Keeping-One's-Options-Open Mentality. Ask yourself whether you might be doing or saying anything that might be channelling your children into this unfortunate syndrome and try to stop doing so. Do you ever suggest that your children study for a particular examination or set of examinations in order to keep their options open later? Do you ever suggest that your children ‘learn’ such-and-such in order to keep their options open in case they need it later? Do you advise your children to keep practising an instrument to keep their options open in case they want to pursue it professionally later?

Talk to your children about this syndrome explicitly, so that they may be, to some extent, protected from any inadvertent coercion you may be subjecting them to. Next time you feel the urge to ‘encourage’ them to take the Keeping One's Options Open route, remember my friend Henry and poor old Patrick.

And remember that this applies to you and your life too. Instead of going through life making yourself miserable by taking the 'keeping one's options open' route, take the route that you prefer – the one you really want. If you want to enjoy life in retirement, make choices you expect to enjoy now, or you'll be miserable both now and in retirement.

to post comments

Comments

Just for the record

Submitted by Woty on 28 August, 2003 - 12:46

You study hard to ensure that you pass your school exams. In Britain that would be GCSE exams at the age of 16, which you do to keep your options open so that you can do A-level exams at 18 if you want to. Then you do A-levels to keep your options open in case you want to go to university.

*GCSEs are **not** a prerequisite for A levels; one can take A levels as a private candidate without ever having sat a GCSE exam or cracked a GCSE textbook.*

to post comments

Guides to better decisions

Submitted by Tom Robinson on 28 August, 2003 - 16:57

The idea in this article has become thoroughly embedded into my daily thinking over the past 2 years or so, and has proved amazingly useful.

When making your mind up about something you test a proposed decision against all sorts of criteria: technical, moral, financial, fun, time consumed, etc.

Well, these days, I very often **consciously** rank decisions on the "Keeping One's Options Open" scale (I imagine it as 'K triple O')

"KOOO" "Doing what I want right now"

Many people take decisions that fall far too far to the left on this scale, and pay enormous opportunity costs. Furthermore, as the article suggests, they numb their ability to decide what they want generally. In England if they go to university they often train as lawyers and accountants after graduation (OK, that last bit's unproven, but I sometimes wonder about it)

Another useful mental check (that I gleaned from a TCS article by Yvonne Rowse) is the "What Will People Think?" scale. So many of our wants we ignore because we're worried that we'll embarrass ourselves or damage our reputations in the eyes of others. Often the people concerned are strangers who we'll probably never see again, and they're busy thinking the same thing.

"WWPT" "What do I think?"

Many of my decisions in the bad-old-days fell too far to the left.

So I say, don't be an instrument of your own repression! By dredging up these rankings into the light of consciousness you may find you're able to cut out a great deal of irrationality from your life.

[to post comments](#)

Not Keeping My Options Open

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 29 August, 2003 - 06:44

During the time I was nearing the end of high school and heading into university I copped a lot of criticism from my teachers and parents for not "Keeping my options open", especially when it seemed I was going to miss out on a career option that I had decided to appeal to me.

At the time I was deciding what subjects to do in my final two years at high school I opted out of a couple of courses that were pre-reqs for certain uni courses. This was criticised by my teachers, but my parents didn't question it since I had expressed no interest in those fields.

About a year and a half later I started working part time with a recent engineering grad who was working at my father's employer and I found that I not only had some aptitude for it, but that I enjoyed it as well. Unfortunately I wasn't doing the pre-reqs for it, and I was told that meant the only way I could get in was to repeat the last two years of school. Since I would have done just about anything to avoid any more time at school than was necessary, plus my parents didn't want to pay for me to repeat the last two years when I was passing anyway, it meant I finished what I was already enrolled in, went to uni to do a generic business degree, drifted for a while, before giving up and not going to classes.

By this time I was spending most of my time sitting round the common room playing cards or messing around with the computers. Eventually one of the IT students pointed out to me that I seemed to know as much or more than most of them about computers so why wasn't I doing IT or Comp Sci? I enrolled in IT the next semester (after writing letters begging them not to terminate me) finished it two and a half years later, and have now been doing a job I thoroughly enjoy for over four years.

Would I have enjoyed engineering more? Possibly, it would depend on who I was working for and what things I got to do. If I was stuck doing the same thing every day, then I probably wouldn't. One of the things I enjoy most about my job is working on things I haven't done before, and at my current job, my boss understands that and makes sure at least a certain amount of my work involves doing new things and getting to program fun gadgets.

So I'm happy with where I ended up, but wasted several years getting here. I don't think the problem was that I didn't keep my options open and couldn't get into the course I wanted. I think I didn't give any thought to what I might do with my life, and the advice I was given was to continue to not give it thought, to keep my options open so that I could put off giving it any thought until some later point.

To me KOOO is to avoid making a decision. While there's nothing wrong with delaying a decision for a while until you have better information, never making that decision is hardly ever likely to be the best way to go.

[to post comments](#)

Reality check

Submitted by Pokemamma on 3 September, 2003 - 12:36

Face it, the world of work's hard enough without being hampered by lack of qualifications. For most kids, getting through school and getting into university is the only way to avoid ending up in a dead end job. Let's get real, people. Reality bites.

[to post comments](#)

My reality does not need to be checked

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 3 September, 2003 - 13:21

I think one of the MAJOR reasons that "the world of work's hard enough" is that people try to separate their lives into work and play. I believe a majority of people that I got a liberal arts education with would have been better off pursuing their passions or even vague interests to see where they led. Many students are fanatical about keeping options open until the very last minute, and they don't even realize that they are closing off the one option that really makes it all worth getting up in the morning -- enjoying their work. Instead they all filed off the corporate management jobs, consoling themselves with good paychecks and their continuing "flexibility" in the job market.

It's sad, really. If you love horses, is being a horse trainer a dead-end job? It all depends on what you think living is about.

[to post comments](#)

"Qualifications"

Submitted by MomInTheMidwest on 3 September, 2003 - 15:51

Pokemamma, Most jobs people I know have are dead-end jobs, even the supposedly good ones. Perhaps even especially those. I live in a state capital, and the state is one of the biggest employers in town. I could name ten friends and acquaintances off the top of my head who have told me they would like to leave state employment to do something else but feel they "can't" because of the excellent pay and benefits the state offers. These are highly qualified people who feel trapped in "good" jobs. One of my friends is finally being motivated to think about how she might leave because she has been diagnosed with a potentially disabling illness and is realizing that her plan of "sticking it out" at the state for another 12 years until she's eligible to retire, and then having a really great retirement with a good pension and all, will be pretty much useless if she's too crippled to enjoy it.

Forcing kids to pursue areas they aren't interested in in the name of security is to trap them in lives they don't enjoy. It is not "reality" to push them in that direction; it is just as true that people do well and are happy in life when they are able to choose their direction based on their genuine interests and aptitudes.

My father pushed me into engineering in college, when I knew that all I wanted was to study English. He made studying engineering a condition of him paying for my college. He wasted his money, and I wasted my time, and

later I returned to college to study English and I am now a pretty happy English teacher (I'd be happier if the system within which I teach were less coercive and grade-based).

One thing I want my kids to learn is that reality emphatically does not bite.

[to post comments](#)

Let's get real!

Submitted by Alice Bachini on 3 September, 2003 - 23:51

Pokemamma wrote: "Let's get real, people."

Hi Pokemamma! I'm real! Nice to meet you :-)

I don't find that reality is as shit as you describe it to be, though. Maybe we live on different planets?

Your reality: "Face it, the world of work's hard enough without being hampered by lack of qualifications."

My reality: The world of work largely makes sense. People with wit and wherewithal succeed. Qualifications have some limited value.

Yours: "For most kids, getting through school and getting into university is the only way to avoid ending up in a dead end job."

Mine: Qualifications sometimes help some people get good jobs, mostly when they represent some kind of decent knowledge. There's also a huge con-market in crappy useless qualifications measuring nothing other than willingness to conform to boring stereotypes.

Yours: "Reality bites."

Mine: Reality is generally good and reasonable.

Still, each to his own. Have fun! (if you can...)

[to post comments](#)

here in America at least, the...

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 4 September, 2003 - 13:22

here in America at least, there is no age limit as to when you are too old to go to school. Not going to school/studying something has never seemed like closing off options.

[to post comments](#)

Face it, the world of work's...

Submitted by Woty on 5 September, 2003 - 11:38

Face it, the world of work's hard enough without being hampered by lack of qualifications. For most kids, getting through school and getting into university is the only way to avoid ending up in a dead end job. Let's get real, people. Reality bites.

But there are good ways to get qualifications! One certainly **doesn't** have to sit through 12 years of school in order to go to university, or even to take A levels. One doesn't have to take a program that doesn't interest them in order to get a qualification for something they **are** interested in.

People can make choices about what they want to do, and get qualifications, and be happy. That **doesn't** bite.

~Woty <http://woty.davidsj.com> (<http://woty.davidsj.com>)

to post comments

Cherryh's Law says...

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 24 November, 2003 - 00:14

..."No rule should be followed off a cliff". This is (in my opinion and experience) an excellent strategy (or really, meta-strategy) for life. :)

There's a lot to be said for the notion that "keeping your options open" borders on a mental disorder. We all probably know people who have suffered from an overabundance of that strategy. And it's hard to say which ones are more pathetic...those who are in pain because they recognize the foolishness of unwarranted risk-averseness, or those so totally brainwashed that they don't even recognize the possibility of another option.

On the other hand, as your experience shows, there are virtues to approaching irrevocable choices conservatively. (It amazes me that your education system is so rigid that those choices would truly be irrevocable, though.)

It seems to me that if we do indeed truly believe in our own fallibility, it is not rational to say that "keeping one's options open" is per se a bad decision...indeed, the presumption of fallibility (and the corrolary knowledge that we may change our minds in the future) would seem to argue rather strongly for it.

Perhaps it would be better to negate the phrase and speak instead of preventing the avoidable closure of opportunities, since "keep your options open" has become a cliché codephrase for one very narrow way of life.

to post comments

What the meaning of life is;

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 31 December, 2003 - 09:40

Not a loaded subject by any means...

I will say this of life, and its' meaning;

It means, precisely what it does, and, that is most chiefly so, to you.

If you, and I borrow heavily from Confucius here...

"If you enjoy what you do, you will not work another day in your life."

What did I just say?

I said the truth.

As stated originally, by, no one knows.

But Confucius was a wise man, and he believed this.

And so, I too believe this.

And so, I realize, now, and since, that I don't "need" anything, aside from those things which keep me alive, and wants are both changeable and valued by one's own self.

To loathe one's existence is to loathe one's self.

If so, than change it; and loathe no more.

But never loathe, or in so doing; loathe.

Be happy in what you do, is, being happy in what you are doing.

Be happy with who you are, and this is, to experience happiness with the self about the self.

I could state more; but you'll either believe; I speak madness,

In the case of the former, I needed state anything, because I needed state nothing.

In the case of the latter, I could never state enough, because enough would never be enough stated.

Life is what you make it.

You see a basket of fruit

And you see rot and decay

This is your perception

You see a basket of fruit

And you see beauty that fruit had grown as such,

You see what was for what is, and, in that moment,

Will live happily forever.

Most people, on some level, accept Free-will over everything being Determined. That I type this now, without making an error typing (or noticing it)... is either proof itself of Free-will, or proof of Determinism -- each will cite it, as evidence of the rightness of their own theory.

Regardless; this is perception.

That you can close this window now, and continue reading, or that you click the button to close it, these are similar; either Pre-determined or 'not' based on method provided by either system.

So I will say this, of your life, judge it as you will;

If it is pre-determined, that you should be as you are, accept it, and be damned or blessed accordingly. -- It is not within your control.

To the Free-will adherents:

It is open to change, that you should be as you are, change it, and be happy then with those changes, or be miserable with the results derived therefrom. -- It has been within your control all along.

IF the meaning of life is happiness; and you get that... than to you it was meant for, and to you it shall go to.

"If we do not change direction, we are bound to wind up where we are headed" - Ancient Chinese proverb.

Is this true?

Well, there are some truths that are self-evident.

You have two choices; To accept it, or not (this implies rejection.)

You may ask another for advice, but they can neither accept nor reject a given notion for you.

That, is your job.

Which brings me back the original theme:

Your life is in your control. > You are responsible for your actions and results therefrom.

Your life is not in your control. > You are not now, nor ever were in control of your actions, and so then not the results derived therefrom.

I don't pretend to not recognize odds.

But a sufficiently determined person will find little resistance that s/he cannot overcome, and short of killing that person, or them killing one other in their quest for what-have-you...

That person will generally, ultimately get what they want.

Life, is what you make it.

Reject this, and find life was not only not what you made it; that it was never made.

Never passed, Never futured; Never past.

to post comments

Me too

Submitted by [chunter \(not verified\)](http://www.xanga.com/chunter) on 6 March, 2006 - 21:22

I took a big risk going to music school, but it was something I *mostly* wanted.

What I really wanted to do out of high school is just have a band for a while, and see where it would take me. I think after reading this that it is indeed what I should have done, but there's not much you can do about the past, or my grandmother paying half my tuition from half her life's savings, or most of the adult world insisting that college in the only way to a career.

I loved music school, but I indeed spent three years waiting to take a handful of classes, and frankly, once I got that handful, I quit because the money was gone and I learned what I wanted to learn.

I still owe enough money to buy two cars because of my time in music school, though I normally don't regret the overall learning experience, which extends well beyond music, though I hate sounding so cliched.

If you didn't deduce it, my music career has gone nowhere, but seven years in retail at a store I loved led me to a relatively pleasant job in customer service as a telephone operator. It's not a 'perfect' job, but I do it so well that it doesn't feel like I do anything while I'm at work, which keeps my mind clear to think about what I want to do next.

Best wishes

to post comments

More articles

- [Respecting Other People's Wishes](#)
- [Curious Young Children Taking Things Apart](#)
- [Why Stuff-Management Matters](#)
- [Does Your Child Love Visiting The Dentist?](#)
- [Unschooling and Karl Popper](#)
- [Parental Aversions](#)
- [Optimism](#)
- [Home Education Articles Index](#)