

## Which Path Do You Choose?

Danica Cantrell  
September 27, 2016



Can you think of a time in life when you were actually given permission to **NOT** know the **answer**? In school when the teacher called on you, you were expected to give a clear answer. If you didn't have an answer you were stigmatized; even made fun of by peers if your response differed from the norm.

So in life too, as we take a stand at the bar, we sometimes can feel like there's an anonymous crowd jeering expectations for our life path. Yet the resulting anxiety at getting it "right", at best elicits uncertainty and at worst paralysis. We are all

"promising empty vessels", but this is hardly comforting. Expectations (and possible disappointment) soon trail the boy or girl with "lots of potential".

### What To Do With Your Life

The problem is we can't always *think* our way out of not knowing what to do, the right path that leads to our perfect job, relationship, etc. It just doesn't happen that way.

The New York Times article, "Life has Questions. They Have Answers" brings this issue to light. In Stanford there is a class (and book) "Designing Your Life", dedicated to coaching students and individuals in facing the intimidating 'what to do' question.

Mr. Burnett, one of the teachers of this class, reminds us (as if we needed reminding) of the ubiquitous meta-narrative held in society that by 25 (now maybe 27) one should have "figured it out". [What is this "it" and why is figuring or calculating involved?]



He goes on to list reasons many older adults give for our ambivalence: millennial laziness, widespread failure-to-launch, etc. One thing offered in this class isn't often offered in any other school room, job-setting, or family gathering: permission to not know. In fact, even going so far as to say, "**You're not supposed to have it figured out.**"

Being told it is okay to not know— now that is new in history!

As suggested by Mr. Burnett, "**A common mistake that people make is to assume that there's only one right solution or optimal version of your life and that if you choose wrong, you've blown it.**" He finds that idea absurd. "**There are lots of you. There are lots of right answers.**"

### Every Path is Right

This reminds me of the movie *Mr. Nobody*. Early on the protagonist as a little boy has to decide whether to go board the train and live with his mother or stay behind to live with his father. Either choice (with "Chance" written on the building behind him) would lead him to a possibility of three distinctly different lives, with three distinctly different women.

A poignant part of the movie is at the end when the man interviewing Mr. Nobody asks him,

–Man- "*Of all those lives, which one is the right one?*"

–Mr. Nobody- "*Each of these lives is the right one.*" "*Every path is the right path. Everything could have been anything else, and it would have just as much meaning.*" (*Tennessee Williams*)

Another line that re-emphasizes the point: "We cannot go back, that's why it's hard to choose. You have

to make the right choice. As long as you don't choose, everything remains possible." But this stagnation from fear of committing in the wrong direction only exacerbates the dilemma. At some point we have to make a "Choice". Come what may.



### **1.) Ask the Right Question**

-To guide discussion Mr. Burnett in his class asks a simple but profound question: **"When did you seem the most animated, the most present?"** Hmm. This one will make you stop and think, as only you can know this. Mr. and Mrs.

Nosy-pants over there cannot make a suggestion that comes close to what you've seen to be true for you.

### **2.) Say "Yes"**

-When an opportunity comes, and you abruptly say "No" to it, you are violating one of the principles discussed in his book: being open to "latent wonderfulness". Make sure you're saying 'No' because of self-knowledge and not looking a gift horse in the mouth. Sometimes the Universe sees further down the road than we do.

### **3.) Make 3 Life Plans**

-So you thought making one 5-year plan was hard? Well, maybe making three might be easier!

-The book and the class emphasize making 3 "Odyssey Plans" that allow you to imagine and map out 3 radically different life/career paths. In this way, no longer are you pressured to condense who you are and what you want into one narrow avenue; you now have 3 vastly different future potentials!

### **You Can Make Mistakes**

Furthermore, even if your eventual choice doesn't pan out, don't despair. "Your whole future and happiness aren't tied to this one plan working out. You can make mistakes. Failure is good." – Mr. Burnett

One of the students at the end of the class admitted he still didn't know what he wanted to do. "But I'm more open to trying something and seeing how it goes. It's that bias towards action. You can't think your way into your future."

Give yourself permission to not know the answer. Only then can there be a space for it to come.

---

### **Danica Cantrell**

Having earned an English major and philosophy minor in college, Danica Cantrell has an affinity for weighing and pondering the existential crises of life. She enjoys expanding her mind with classic literature and having a perpetual adventure on the horizon. While still young, she has done a fair amount of traveling, having been to: Sweden, Austria, Prince Edward Island, and Arizona to name a few. The combination of wanderlust and desire to know her purpose led her to creative avenues such as paper crafting and creating her own blog [Free Wheeling Woman Unbound](#). She is currently living in Cape Cod with her Aunt and Grandma, working as a Caregiver with the Elderly in their homes.