

WHAT TO DO WITH YOUR LIFE – HOW TO DECIDE

By Nicholas Lore

Choosing a vocation that is not a compromise need not be a terribly daunting task, if you go about it in a way that is effective. Basically, it is simply a process of posing questions and then answering them. It is a little like buying your first house. You start the house buying process by making a commitment to yourself that you are going to own your own home. Then you start to explore. You really don't start from square one because your mind is already filled to the brim with wishes, dreams, feelings, preferences, prejudices and everything you already know and believe about houses. As you go through the decision-making process you may alter some of your dreams and hopes. You may discover that some of what you think you know about houses is not necessarily so. The more you dig into the subject, the more you learn. The more energy you give to the project, the more likely it will be that you will have the skill to buy a house that does not turn out to have terrible flaws you didn't notice when you chose it.

At some point, you will probably realize that doing a great job of picking a house is a lot more complex and demanding than you thought. You discover that there are many important questions to consider that you hadn't even thought of previously. After lots of careful consideration, you begin to make some smaller decisions. You may decide that the house absolutely must have four bedrooms or a large country kitchen or that it must be located on a quiet side street. As your explorations continue, you make more and more of these smaller decisions. As you make them, other pieces of the puzzle come together naturally and usually fit together perfectly. While all this was going on, you would be out there in the real world, looking at houses, checking out the realities of how much of a mortgage you could get and doing other practical research. Each of the pieces contributes to the others. The research helps you make decisions. Each decision helps you explore the areas you have not yet made decisions about. And continuing to explore helps you make more decisions. The house you eventually decide to buy may be quite different than your original idea because its features are the result of in-depth exploration and an on-going process of decision-making.

One thing that is very important to notice is that your definite decisions have a much more powerful effect on putting together the pieces of the puzzle than do your preferences. For example, if you have decided that the house absolutely must have four bedrooms, then you would not even bother to look at houses with fewer bedrooms. Your preferences do not have the same effect. In fact they often make things more confusing. Let's suppose you have lots of strong preferences but no clear commitments. You might dream of a house with five bedrooms, two fireplaces, a huge back yard with a stream, nice friendly quiet neighbors, a big party room and a large Dutch windmill coming out of the roof. That's a wonderful dream. But since you are living in the ephemeral world of dreams, you are highly susceptible to becoming lost in the twilight zone. When the real estate agent shows you a house with a large Dutch windmill coming out of the roof, you jump for it. After all, if you don't grab it today, someone else will. Only later do you discover that the neighbors file their teeth to a point and raise cobras. When you return to reality, you discover that the house only has two bedrooms, the fireplace doesn't work and the stream is actually sewage outflow from your neighbor's house.

You will go through a series of steps that lead toward the final goal of deciding exactly what you will do with your life, or at least as much of your life as you want to decide about now. Each of these steps builds toward that final goal. Let's take a look at each of them now. I've broken down the career choice process into several steps for the sake of clarity. In reality, deciding what you will do is not quite as neat and linear as that. You will be engaged in several of these steps: research, making some smaller decisions, investigating, asking new questions, all at the same time. But as time goes on, you will find that you are more and more clear and the final goal will become closer as you fit the pieces of the puzzle together. And then, one day soon, you will have put together enough of the pieces together that you will see the light at the end of the tunnel.

1. Make a commitment to decide on your future vocation. The first step is to decide to decide. Wanting to decide will not get your plane off the ground. What do you suppose the glazed over, office bound people you see on the subway, on their way to work, are thinking about? Probably they are thinking the same sort of things we all think: "I wish my life was ____." "Wouldn't it be great if I could ____." "What I want is ____." It can be very entertaining to think this way. But, no matter how much they wish and hope and dream, they keep getting on the same subway each morning and go off to the same old job. You want to become so certain about your future that you can take potent and resourceful action to make your commitments become your reality. The way to do that is to step out and make definite commitments that you are willing to keep, even when you don't want to. If you are one of those people who has trouble with the C word, don't worry. We will handle it together. It is one part of the career choice process that gives everyone the heebie jeebies.

2. Begin by looking in. The idea is to design a career that fits you rather than trying to squeeze into something the wrong shape or a few sizes too small. To do that you must turn your attention inward. Get to know yourself thoroughly. Inquire into every aspect of your nature and personality. When you have achieved some internal clarity, then turn your attention to matching your vision to the realities of the outside world.

3. Seek full self-expression. You would be wise to honor every aspect and each domain of your life. Consider each thoroughly if you want your work to be balanced and harmonious. Full self expression doesn't necessarily mean swinging from the chandeliers. It means including all the important parts of your nature and your intentions. A career that fits perfectly demands that you be who you are fully and do what you do naturally.

Everyone else on the planet, from the lowest amoebae to the great blue whale expresses all their component elements in a perfect dance with the world around them. Only human beings have unfulfilled lives. Only humans suffer from career discontent. But then again, we are the only inhabitants of the earth that get to decide what we will do with our lives. Since we have the option to choose to be the author of our destiny, why not do it well? The reward for taking on the adventure of choosing and creating a career is a life of fulfillment. There is nothing mystical or magical about this. It is simply a function of learning to have all aspects of your nature play together in harmony, like the instruments of an orchestra.

So without any intentional, fancy way of adjusting yourself, to express yourself freely as you are is the most important thing to make yourself **happy, and to make others happy.**

-Shunryu Suzuki in Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind

4. Break down the big question "What am I going to do with my life?" into smaller, more manageable chunks. If you are like most of us, when you attempt to make career decisions, you imagine careers that might be interesting (doctor, lawyer, Indian chief). Your mind hops from one

potentially interesting career to another. Your romantic imagination kicks in. You think of all the positive aspects of the job: "Let's see, I really like the idea of becoming an Indian chief. It seems like an exciting job, working outside, nature all around, not a boring desk job, great clothes, etc." Then, after a while, you have an attack of negative considerations, an attack of the "Yeahbut" thoughts: "I'm allergic to feathers, those cold winter nights in the teepee, and what about cavalry attacks?" You are left with a veritable blizzard of mental images and opinions about potential careers - yet are no nearer to making a definite decision about which to pursue. What's worse, using this method, things tend to get foggier rather than clearer.

When you first think of a new potential career, it is an idea as pure as new fallen snow. Then as you think about it more, your opinions, both positive and negative, tend to get stuck onto the original picture. After a while, whenever the thought of that particular career surfaces in your mind, all you see is all the stuff stuck to it. You think Indian Chief, instantly up pops a picture of a cavalry attack. The way the human mind tends to approach career decision making is not very effective. It is like eating peas with a knife. Although people find ways around this situation (like coating the knife with honey so the peas stick to it), it works better to have a really effective, road tested method to make decisions. When you break the "What shall I do with my life?" question down into small chunks, everything gets easier. It's like eating peas with a big, deep kitchen spoon.

As you wind your way through the career choice process, you will have a chance to look into everything you need to consider to pick the best possible career, including some things you might not give sufficient attention to, left to your own devices. WE divide the big question, "What will I do with my life?" into smaller components, each a distinct domain. You will have an opportunity to consider and explore each of them. Each is a vitally important component of making the perfect choice. Leave one out at your own peril. Within each of these domains there is much to explore and many questions to ask. Let's take a brief look.

Natural talents and innate abilities Everyone is born with a unique group of talents that are as individual as a fingerprint or snowflake. These talents give each person a special ability to do certain kinds of tasks easily and happily, yet also make other tasks seem like pure torture. Can you imagine comedian Robin Williams as an accountant? Talents are completely different from acquired knowledge, skills and interests. Your interests can change. You can gain new skills and knowledge. Your natural, inherited talents remain with you for your entire life. They are the hand you have been dealt by mother nature. You can't change them. You can, however, learn to play the hand you have been dealt brilliantly and to your best advantage.

Personality traits and temperament Many people are engaged in careers that make it necessary to suppress themselves at the job. An elegant fit between you and your work includes and supports the full self-expression of your personality. Tell-tale signs of a career that doesn't fit your personality include: the necessity to assume a different personality at work, restricted self-expression, activities that conflict with your values.

Purpose, meaning, mission People who are enthusiastic about their work are usually engaged in something they care about and are proud of what they do. They feel they making a contribution. They may need to go to work to pay the bills but that is not what gets them out of bed in the morning.

Willingness to stretch your boundaries One of my clients was a forty-year-old woman who decided to pursue a career in medicine. Her previous college record was insufficient for entry into medical school. She had no money to finance a medical education. Her willingness

to stretch beyond what seemed possible was so strong that she went back to college and completed pre-requisite courses. She gained admission to a fine medical school and managed to creatively finance her education. Other clients are unwilling or unable to make more than a modest stretch in a new direction. I encourage you to stretch as far as possible toward a career choice that will not be a compromise. At the same time, be completely realistic. It makes no sense to make plans you are unwilling or unable to achieve.

Fulfills your goals To have something to shoot for is an important part of the joy of working. A custom designed career supports you to fulfill your life goals and gives you a sense of challenge on the job.

Rewards fit your values Like the biscuit you give the dog, rewards are the motivators that help keep you happily performing your tricks at work. Some rewards mean more to you than others. That is because they are linked with your values. If recognition for doing something well is a value important to you, then it may also be a necessary reward to motivate you to keep performing well. Doing without adequate recognition will slowly erode your well-being on the job.

Compatible work environments Each person flourishes in some work environments and finds others stressful or otherwise inappropriate. Several different aspects of the environment that surrounds you play a vital role in the quality of your work life. You live in a certain geographical environment. The company you work for has a particular organizational environment, style and corporate personality that affects you every minute you are at work. On a smaller scale, your immediate work environment includes the physical work setting, the tone or mood of your office, and your relationships with others including your supervisor, fellow employees and clients or customers.

The bottom line Are the careers you are considering really suitable, do-able and available? Do they really fit you? The decisions you make about your career direction are no more than pipe dreams unless they are achievable and actually turn out as you hope they will. Research is the key to understanding the reality of potential future careers.

5. Ask resourceful questions. The quality of your life depends on the choices you make. Your choices stem from how well you answer fundamental questions about your self and your future. The quality of your answers directly depends on how focused, how succinct and how clear you are willing to be when posing important questions.

"Questions are the creative acts of intelligence."

- Frank Kingdomy

Like most intelligent people, you may have already learned a great deal about yourself. Many people who know themselves well still have difficulty making the best decisions. Getting a Ph.D. in psychology has never make anyone well-adjusted or happy. However, the way you understand yourself and how you use this knowledge is often more important than how much you know about yourself. The art of inquiry is an essential skill in designing your life. The better job you do in framing the question, the better the answers will serve you. In fact, when you frame a question perfectly, the answer often seems to fall from the question naturally and easily, like rain from a thundercloud.

One secret to successfully asking and answering important questions is to break them down into small chunks. Answering the question, "What shall I do with the rest of my life?" is a mammoth

endeavor. The only possible way to tackle it is to break it down into small, manageable pieces. As they say, the way to eat a mammoth is one bite at a time. Instead of trying to leap directly from the swirling uncertainty of an internal storm of impressions, wishes, hopes, dreams, preferences, and information to a definite career choice, take it one step at a time. That way you can consider each important piece of the puzzle thoughtfully and carefully.

6. Delve into all important questions using inquiry tools and self-tests that help you become absolutely sure what the elements of your future work will be. As you continue on through the career choice process, you will work on many guided assignments and exercises called "Inquiries." Some of them are like telescopes or microscopes. They allow you to look farther or deeper. Some are a bit like the transporter room on the Starship Enterprise. They give you access to new possibilities and new worlds. Others serve the function of a crow bar, prying you off the rock you are clinging to for dear life. Each is designed to delve into one important area in a way that allows you to get clear enough to make some decisions.

You will focus on the issues that are most important, both the ones you are already thinking about and ones that have never crossed your mind before. You will explore what is unique about you. Some of the eight domains you just finished reading about a few minutes ago may seem more important to you than others. That may be true. But don't neglect the others. They will almost certainly turn out to be more important than you think.

You learn to develop a good working relationship with those aspects of human nature that are common to all of us and seem to get in everyone's way by throwing up barriers and complicating the process of making choices. You will have an opportunity to become more effective in making the best possible choices by successfully dealing with indecision, confusion, uncertainty and fear, pushing through procrastination, and turning your dreams into reality.

7. Design your career one piece at a time. Build with definite commitments. Often, people attempt to hold back on making decisions until they have done all the research and answered all the important questions. They have mounds of information but nothing definitely nailed down. They try to manage the wild herd of mustang dreams, needs, wants, insights and goals stampeding through their minds. Every good cowperson knows you can't get the whole herd through the corral gate at once. Like an Eskimo building an igloo, build your future career one block at a time. Build it from solid chunks, made from definite commitments.

There is a big difference between wanting something and making a commitment to achieving it. Wants and commitments may seem very similar in nature. The wording may be almost identical. The statement, "I want a glass of water" seems very similar to, "I am going to have a glass of water." Yet they are as different from each other as a tree is from a picture of a tree. "I want to have a great day today," often produces a very different quality day than, "I'm going to have a great day today." Tentative decisions engender fuzzy commitments which in turn give rise to irresolute actions.

8. Make decisions that shape and define your career path. At the same time that you are engaged in delving into and wrestling with all of the important questions, you will begin to build the foundations of your future career, step-by-step. You do this by making decisions. They are one of the main building materials you use to construct your future vocation.

Over many years of road testing with thousands of clients, we have figured out some ways to make decision-making easier. One way, as I have mentioned, is to break everything down into small chunks. It is much easier to make a definite decision about how many bedrooms your new house must have than it is to make the whole enormous "which house to buy" decision all at once.

It does not work to put off making decisions until the end. Some people think they need to consider everything carefully before they make any decisions. They think they will figure everything out, then decide. As attractive as this method seems, there is one small problem with it. It just doesn't work! I see a steady stream of clients who have spent years trying to do it this way. They know themselves as well as the canary knows its cage. But they still haven't decided what to do with their lives. The only way I know that works consistently is to build a piece at a time, to make a series of smaller choices that fit together like the blocks of snow in an Eskimo's igloo. It doesn't matter if you make big decisions or small ones. Each is a worthy piece of the puzzle.

9. Fit together everything you are sure of like pieces of a puzzle. Like the Eskimo building an igloo, you construct your future block by block, piece by piece. The building blocks are made of the one and only element you have to work with that is as solid as the blocks of snow the Eskimo uses: certainty. You build with whatever you have become sure of as you go through this decision-making process. There are really only two ways to be sure of anything. You can look inside yourself and uncover pre-existing requirements, elements about which you are already sure. For example, living in a safe neighborhood might already be a definite requirement for you. The other way to be sure is to decide that you are sure, to declare some element you want to be a definite requirement. You make a commitment. Once you make the decision that the house you are going to buy must have a large, private back yard, that choice becomes one building block of the larger decision you will make about which house to buy.

Passions, insights and dreams live in the realm of inquiry, where they serve as guides. But they become as evanescent as clouds when you take them out to the career construction site. If you build your future on a foundation of solid rock, using career components you have become sure of and definite decisions you have made as the building blocks, you will be more able to stand firm when doubts and difficulties arise.

Taking things one step at a time and building from solid chunks is like putting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. When you start assembling a large, complex puzzle, you have a table top covered with a seemingly endless number of unconnected pieces. It's difficult to fit the first few pieces together. Once you have fit some together it becomes much easier to add new pieces. It is also a bit like doing a crossword puzzle. You fill in whatever you can. When there is a piece of the puzzle you cannot answer, instead of getting frantic, you simply go on and work on answering other parts of the puzzle. Then, later on, you return to the part you could not figure out before. Because you have filled in some other, related pieces, it is now much easier to answer the previously unanswerable question. So, we will concentrate on what you can answer.

10. Go for vitality, not comfort. Be unreasonable. At every moment you have one essential choice: to let the programming steer the boat or to take the helm yourself. Your present circumstances, your mood, the thoughts that pass by all have a life of their own, independent of your will. You can, at any moment take flight on new wings into an unprecedented life by making a choice for vitality, for living fully, for LIFE spelled in capital letters. It is, however, an expensive journey. You pay by giving up the familiar, comfortable, every day ways of living and thinking that are the wages and rewards of going with the flow of your programming. The willingness to feel fear and keep going forward distinguishes the living from the merely breathing. In fact, it is not just the so-called negative emotions that are uncomfortable. When you choose to live fully, your palate of experiences, thoughts, emotions and possibilities expands. This leads you onto new ground in other areas of your life as well. And folks, all that newness swirling around just ain't comfortable. The question is not whether to take risks or not but which ones to take. The peril of being reasonable is that you will miss all the fun. It's not enough to cautiously edge your way toward the

cliff. Learn to revel in taking risks for the sake of your soul. Every choice you make gives birth instantly to certain risks as surely as your shadow follows you.

"There are really only two ways to approach life - as a victim or as a gallant fighter - and you must decide if you want to act or react, deal your own cards or play with a stacked deck. And if you don't decide which way to play with life, it will always play with you..

-Merle Shain

11. The bottom line. Up until this stage, you have been looking internally for the questions and answers, deciding on some of the major components of your career. Go out into the world and do research to discover what matches the pieces of the puzzle you have assembled so far.

Now it is time to look out in the world around you and do some research. You need to find out more about potential careers you are considering. You may need to poke around and see if there is anything that exactly matches what you are looking for. What is the work really like? What is the work environment like. What is the usual mood and tone of the people working there like? What would it be like to do that all day, every day? How well would it fit with the commitments you have made up to now? What would you have to do to make it happen? Where could it lead in the future? What preparation would be necessary? How would you go about making it happen? These are only a few of the things to research and consider. As you combine this research with your continuing internal inquiries and decision-making, the shape of your future career becomes ever more clear. If you point toward the stars while keeping your feet firmly planted on the ground, you will have the best chance to get to your destination. Research and an honest relationship with yourself are the keys. Unless you check in continually with the real world around you, the perfect career may turn out to be no more than a pipe dream.

Although I have research listed as the eleventh step, don't wait to start this phase until you have gone through the previous steps. You can begin to do research from the very beginning, as soon as you have some questions to answer. What seems to work best is a feedback loop where you continually research in the external world whatever you discover and decide by looking within. Then check out how you feel and what you think about what you have learned in your research.

12. Keep repeating the steps of this process until you have defined enough pieces of the puzzle to be able to make the final decision. then, make the leap and make the choice! Once you have put together many pieces of the puzzle there comes a moment of existential choice. It's time to leap, to decide on your future career. For most people, the final answer will not appear out of the fog on its own. You have to make your own final choice. A few weeks or months ago it may have seemed like an impossibly large leap. Now you are ready. Because you have worked so diligently making some of the smaller decisions, it is easier to decide. At the movies, the hero often has to make impossibly long, death defying leaps from the roof of one building to another. Making the final decision may feel a little like this. But all the work you have done has paid off. It has brought the buildings sufficiently close together so making the leap is now within the range of what you know you can do.

You may have assembled enough pieces of the puzzle that the final career is revealed to you. For example, if you decided that you will work with lions, in a large cage, in front of an audience and carry a whip and chair, it should not be too difficult to make your final decision. You still have to make the leap, however. You have to decide to do that which was revealed by all your hard work. You have to commit. Otherwise, all you have is a nice description of a career that fits you perfectly, which you will probably never get around to doing.

13. Persist in spite of obstacles and setbacks. Don't stop until you know what you are going to do with your life. If you quit before you reach your goal, you won't reach it. That last statement seems almost idiotically obvious, doesn't it? Yet, it is the number one reason people do not get what they want.

Let me tell you the secret that has led me to my goal. My strength lies solely in my tenacity.

- Louis Pasteur

Throughout history, men and women who have made extraordinary contributions have been asked the secret of their genius. The one thing that most of them agree on is the power of persistence. No matter how brilliant your idea or how large your dream, without exceptional tenacity it is likely to remain unrealized. The quirk of human nature that makes it difficult to persist when the going gets rough is that most people are more committed to experiencing their habitual, comfortable range of inner sensations than they are to accomplishing what they have said they will do. If you are willing to experience fear, disappointment, humiliation and embarrassment, you become an almost unstoppable force of nature. The secret to perseverance is a simple one: have a bigger commitment to getting the job done than to attempting to control your inner feelings and sensations.

You will discover that your biggest difficulty in persisting, as well as in making the final decision, is something I call "Yeahbuts." These are thoughts generated inside you by internal survival programming that seeks to keep you safe by keeping everything in your life the same. You will meet up with it often on this journey. For the time being, begin to notice that you have attacks of thoughts that try to convince you to give up on making any substantial changes to your life.

Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never...

- Winston Churchill

14. Celebrate! When you have decided what to do with your life, celebrate! You owe it to yourself. Or, even better, why not celebrate that you started this process today. Tomorrow, celebrate that you are moving towards your goal. When you get stuck, celebrate that you are stuck. Celebrate when the sun shines and when the cold winds blow. Make this process one of joyful creation rather than a job you have to do.

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