

Cite as: Haverkamp, Christian Jonathan (2017). Your Path. *Life Improvement (Vol I)*, edited by C J Haverkamp, Psychiatry Psychotherapy and Communication Publishing, Dublin, 2017, pp. 152-157

YOUR OWN PATH

Dr Jonathan Haverkamp, M.D.

It is not necessary to know exactly where the future takes us. It is not even desired that we know where we will end up because life would lose what makes it enjoyable, the fine balance between certainty and uncertainty. We could no longer dream or imagine a future that motivates us. However, many people try not to think about their future because it stresses them, causes fears and anxiety. The opposite is to be as fully engaged in the present moment as possible. This can relieve anxiety, but eliminates the drive and motivation for future directed work. Thus, it is important to have both a sense of the present and a sense for the future, which already maps out a path. Equally important is, however, to be flexible and open enough so that the path can adapt to life.

Keywords: life, path

Table of Contents

Living with Uncertainty	2
Values and Interests	4
Awareness.....	5
Decisions	5
Access.....	6
Reflection.....	7
Meaningful Messages	7
The Human Timeline	8
The Path to Help against Overwhelm	9
A Creative Process	9
A Path for the World.....	10
Against Resistance	11

Living with Uncertainty

It is not necessary to know exactly where the future takes us. It is not even desired that we know where we will end up because life would lose what makes it enjoyable, the fine balance between certainty and uncertainty. We could no longer dream or imagine a future that motivates us. However, many people try not to think about their future because it stresses them, causes fears and anxiety. The opposite is to be as fully engaged in the present moment as possible. This can relieve anxiety, while some may be worried that it eliminates the drive and motivation for future directed work. However, when we can experience the future arising from the present moment, our concept of the future no longer exerts a pressure which can make it even more difficult for us to accomplish things.

Take a deep breath, wherever you are. Connect with yourself and think about what is really important to you, what your needs, values, and aspirations are. I have seen many patients in

everyday practice who never found that moment to really connect with themselves, to find themselves. We live in a world of uncertainty and connecting with ourselves can help us to find that point that can give us the stability we are looking for. Unfortunately, many are desirous for our attention and give us the sense that we need to connect with them rather than us. Advertisers often try to get us to believe that purchasing something or signing up for that special holiday is the key to connecting with ourselves. It is not. We connect with ourselves by doing what feels right and good to us, as long as we do not harm anyone else or encroach on their own ability to find happiness in everyday life.

When we connect with ourselves today, we will also be connected with ourselves in the future. Faith in the future requires faith in the present moment, as the former follows from the latter. Being able to connect with the now, connects us with the entire timeline. Whatever information we have about the past becomes accessible, when we connect with ourselves in the present moment. It has to go through oneself in the now. You cannot connect through a point that is already in the past, but you can find past information when you go through your present self.

Why do we need to have a sense of our past when we want to define our present, and thus future path? There is a treasure trove of information to be found that can give us insight into our actual needs, values, and aspirations. If you genuinely enjoyed something in the past, it must have met at least a need and value or a value and aspiration, where 'value' simply means something that has value to you. This is important information about oneself that helps avoid the need to reinvent the wheel again and again. There is so much valuable information in the history of our life about our basic parameters and what can work in the future that it would be a great loss to ignore it. To build a future means learning how to build and what to build it on. This is where insight into oneself with one's own life story is important. True wisdom about oneself requires true connectedness with oneself, which requires the space and the frame of mind to do so. However, one can find this space even in a mundane everyday task, and the frame of mind is whatever we want it to be. It does not require elaborate meditation techniques or a secluded mountain hut. No, it can happen right here by the hot dog stand in a busy city. All it needs is that you just let things be and become observant of yourself. Be aware and be open while focusing on where you want to go. Then just let it arrive from wherever it comes. A feeling of happiness? An image of seeing someone at a birthday party ten years ago? Dreaming up a project with others in a diner last year? Drifting on your back in the ocean,

looking at the mountains? All these images contain information, and communicating them to yourself is at the heart of inner connectedness.

Thus, it is vital to have a sense of the present and the future, which already maps out a path. However, this needs to be done in a very different way from the concept of ‘planning.’ Feel it as a continuation that actually helps you rather than holding you back. Your sense of self is a part of this world. Information glides through you, is processed by you, and then sent on into the world again. These processes are on a continuum. The ‘now’ you experience is you surfing on the ocean that just exists. Your path has a continuum. That is why we call it a path. Once you can see the continuum and understand ‘past’ and ‘future’ as mere mental constructs on this continuum, it takes away the pressure on the ‘now’. You are a continuum, which is within a continuum. No decision you can make today can change the existence of the overall continuum. At the same time, we can reflect on our decisions and make them in ways that bring us more joy and happiness in life by making them align with what is truly important to us.

Important is to be flexible and open enough so that the path that evolves can adapt to life. This is where external connectedness with your environment is crucial. Through engaging with others and the natural world around you, you get to know the world outside of you. This insight allows you to build for yourself the world you need, value, and aspire to within the constraints and possibilities of the real outside world. Also, it helps to keep in mind that external constraints are often short- rather than long-term. Thus, time can be an incredible resource on your side.

Values and Interests

Our values and interests should inform the choice of what path we take because there will be greater happiness, contentment and satisfaction now and in the future. Values do not change much throughout one’s life, providing an extra feeling of stability to the path. If you identify these values and basic interests, you have a constant course in life, even if your momentary direction changes. Anxiety and depression are often a result of blindness to the reality of one’s true values, needs, and aspirations. If I cannot see them, I will have no bearings in choosing a suitable path. Instead, it will be unstable, unreliable, and unable to impart a sense of safety and security. The key to a stable path, where one does not end up in dead-end jobs or relationships and the psychological and medical drama of burnout, is to be fiercely honest with oneself. This

requires communication in the form of internal connectedness with oneself and external connectedness with the world around.

Awareness

Awareness of one's values and interests allows one to be more open in life. If music is valuable to you, it will be so for the rest of your life. If you like people enjoying each other's company, you will find this a worthy endeavor for the rest of your life. Many people are afraid to explore these values and interests because they feel they cannot live them and fit them into their lives. However, for a happy life there is little alternative to living in sync with one's values.

Awareness as used here is when perceptions become knowledge. Openness is important to be able to receive information that is novel and meaningful. If I narrow my mind to the same source of information, over time the meaningful information I receive will decrease. Going one's own path thus also means opening oneself up to new information and following one's bliss by seeing more of the world. In everyday life, this may sometimes not seem so easy. Often there can be a fear that one risks something valuable by making changes, such as adjustments to work or social relationships. However, one will quickly realise that every adjustment one makes from awareness, openness, and increasing insight into one's needs, values, and aspirations, brings one closer to where it is best to be for oneself. A life's path is never a straight line because that would assume complete knowledge about oneself and the world. No, celebrate if your path seems crooked or curvy, which shows openness to yourself and the world. To be sure, this does not mean running around in circles like a headless chicken without any sense of direction or bearings. Crucial is that you are allowing connectedness with yourself and the world around you. 'Headless' means disconnect, quite literally. Greater awareness comes quite automatically the better connected you are.

Decisions

Your path is made up of the decisions you make, based on your interests and values. It unfolds as you live your life, get information from yourself and from others, find new ways of processing this information and making decisions. Your personality and your true sense of self and your values provide a constant background. They are a strong determinant in the decisions you take.

Decisions seem to define your path, but it is really the being on the path and the awareness, openness, and the connectedness with yourself and others that define it. This also allows you to become more relaxed about the path, because you can now when you connect, when you are aware and open. You cannot know a particular outcome in a week, let's say, of a decision you take today unless you have unlimited knowledge. But you can now that over time through practicing connectedness, awareness, and openness, the path as a whole and the benefit to you and the world will be greatest, because you are meeting your true needs, values, and aspirations in agreement with the reality of the world you live in.

Access

Even severe traumata do not change what we value, although they can lead us to not being able to retrieve these values anymore, often because one sees a conflict between the values and life itself. To resolve a trauma means to integrate what happened in such a way that you can follow your own path again, rather than being forced to behave in a certain way by the trauma. To resolve the impact the past has on the present we need openness and awareness to ourselves and our reflection in the world. A therapist can be helpful in supporting this work. The author has developed Communication-Focused Therapy® for this purpose, which works particularly with communication on the internal side with oneself and on the external side with the others. Many of the main psychotherapies, however, include aspects of this in their working frameworks as well.

Looking at one's path in life can provide important insight into oneself. The only temporary frame we live in is the present, the now. The past is to our direct actions as inaccessible as the future, at least given our current understanding. The difference between the two is that the future grows out of present moments, while time points in the past appear frozen and subjectively fade as we move into the future. But, since we are consciously aware and have a memory of the past, that is information of past events has left traces in our neural network, which we can read and can make an effort at reconstructing. Thus, we can form a mental image of a path that we have taken to reach the present moment. Of course, we can see an infinite number of paths depending on the type of information we focus on. For example, one may see one's life trajectory geographical in terms of where one used to live or work. At another time, we may focus more on certain tasks and link it with the amount of enjoyment we experienced

at each point. This latter approach to working with paths mentally already illustrates how we distill meaning from them. By making linkages of different attributes and their sizes we can look for insight we can gain from our life history, such as linking levels of enjoyment and specific tasks or jobs we worked on. When we use this information to make adjustments in the present, for example to our work, we also change the trajectory of our life path, and these adjustments over time can lead us to a more satisfying future that has a better fit with who we are, our needs, values, and aspirations.

Reflection

Finding one's values means reflecting on what has been enjoyable in life and made one feel complete. Often the problem is not that we do not our values, but that we repress them subconsciously because we are unsure whether we are allowed to have them or perceive them to be in conflict with other beliefs we hold about ourselves. Changing one's values should not be the goal, but rather to find better ways to live and express them. If I value making music and stable material conditions for my family I will be interested in work that lets me combine those two.

Fundamental values are not a reaction to experiences in one's life but mostly a mix of biology and early learning. They go deeper than personality, because one's personality may change in response to severe traumata. One's values may no longer drive one's behavior, but they have not changed, whether one's personality is informed by them depends on how connected one is with oneself, one's inner worlds. Values per se cannot be bad. However, some people are so out of touch with themselves and others that they pursue things they feel they are supposed to attain by unethical or even illegal means. Meaningful communication with their own emotions and with others has broken down, they feel isolated and not understood.

Meaningful Messages

Psychological problems arise when people can no longer exchange meaningful messages with themselves or with others. Meaningful messages always contain some novel information that is relevant to the recipient. Being connected with oneself and others makes it possible to change and be changed. Being connected essentially means an openness to new information. 'Connection' is the ability to send and receive meaningful information, information that can

bring about change in oneself in others. A baby and its mother are just doing exactly that when there two worlds of perceiving, thinking and feeling meet. They both benefit from it because it is an interaction between two people with different information about the world.

The life path itself contains meaningful messages when we reflect on the paths that make it up. Very often, older people feel in retrospect ‘it made all sense’. Whether this is a very deep insight, carried by the greater space to reflect in retirement, or a form of make belief is probably the wrong question. Ultimately, both reflect a need to make sense of the whole and enormous picture of an individual life. One looks for meaning, a *raison d’être* of it all. But below it there is the sense that the life path fits into a linked narrative, a story or myth, that moves it and lets it shine beyond mere factual existence. By affirming that ‘it’ makes sense, one seems to say that a life history contains structure and a deeper story line that transcends the infinity of facts and flies into a higher realm, where a life, an act, or an event counts and is more than a water molecule in an ocean. The role of the life path is to bear out this truth. It is not random, but serves a higher purpose. One can be an agnostic to follow this argument, but it may be difficult to align it without acknowledgement of some form of spirituality.

The Human Timeline

Humans are conscious of a past, a future and a present. This means they can develop a story where the past is different from the future. They can bring about future-directed change. The vision of the future is informed by our values, interests and aspirations. It requires both, internal and external meaningful dialogues. There may be several reasons why this dialogue is difficult. One’s own life experiences can cause conflicts and emotions that raise fears if one wants to look past them. If there are fears, anxieties, a lack of motivation, clinging to safety, routines that are hard to break through and various communication impairments one’s values and the feedback from others becomes less visible. The information is there but one loses the necessary openness to receive it. If this is the case therapy can be very helpful.

The Path to Help against Overwhelm

Knowing your path helps against feeling overwhelmed in a world with information overload. Many people do not have a concept of their own path, they assume fragments of paths that are provided by the social institutions of the day. However, only owning fragments that are from an external source and do not necessarily meet one's own values, needs, and aspirations, makes it impossible to filter out the information from the world that is truly relevant to oneself. Only insight into my own authentic path can help me to safeguard against being overwhelmed by information that has no meaning to myself. The most important knowledge one can have is to understand one's own inner basic parameters, such as the ones just mentioned, because they help to know where to look next. This does not mean limiting one's openness but to clearer understand and distinguish meaningful from meaningless information. The alternative is to run around in circles like the headless chicken already mentioned, stumbling aimlessly through a world that appears fragmented and senseless.

A Creative Process

Building the future is a creative process. It requires exposure to the information one needs and to find an own way that is built on one's fundamental values and perspectives of the world. It brings with it also the growth and development of oneself as an individual. But we expose ourselves to the right information and the right situation by walking a path with openness, connectedness with ourselves and others, and awareness.

Many people try too hard to find their path, not realizing that they are already on it. They often also try to do the 'right' things, but what is right for oneself and the world emerges and evolves if we let it. Gandhi famously answered a reporter's question if he had a message to the readers of his newspaper: "My life is my message." But this also means that one cannot formulate the message and describe the journey of one's life and talk in terms of absolutes, such as what is right to do given the circumstances of one's life, unless one's life has been completed. Don't try too hard to find the answers that can only be given once you are at the end of your life. In the meantime, live it! The answers write themselves along the way. At the same time, observe the questions you are asking about the path and life overall. Answers can only be as good as the questions, and we often tend to ask questions that seem important but do not further our

progress throughout life and towards the things that are truly important to us. The mind can look at life, but it cannot live life by itself.

Over time, the path emerges. It is bound to do so, whatever you do. If you sit silently in the corner of a meditation hall, your life story keeps unfolding at the same pace as someone else's. Subjectively you may experience time differently. You may even remember the experience of stillness as much richer and fuller than when you were rushing mindlessly and stressed from one business meeting to another. However, in each situation your path progresses further. In both situations, you may feel that you want to make adjustments over time, that bring you closer to a life that resonates your needs, values, and aspirations. It is a process that unfolds naturally as long as we promote a connectedness with ourselves and others.

A Path for the World

When you walk your path with openness, mindfulness, and awareness, the whole world becomes a better place. As you are doing more of the things that truly have meaning to you and you interact with yourself and other people in a better way, the whole world becomes a richer place. Unfortunately, the opposite of openness, mindfulness, and awareness is what one sees often in the world today in businesses, in relationships, and even in the everyday small interactions people have with themselves and others. When one does not have a feeling that one's lived life is not aligning with true basic needs, values, and aspirations in the long run, one can contribute less to the world and will also feel less positive. Many people are so overwhelmed by the complexity of the world that they fail to see the simplicity of doing what is in their deepest nature to do. Ultimately, this misalignment leads to burnout and a host of mental and somatic conditions.

You make the world a better place by going *your* path, not someone else's. The starting point is to connect with oneself and others to an extent that you can better identify what is truly important and relevant to you. This requires some space to do so. You can only develop insight and pass on insight when you actually live the changes. So, within this space you begin to try out things mentally but also by beginning to do them. A path is the work of art you see developing, it is not something you map out in your brain and then bring into the world. It is something that reflects what you do in the space you give yourself. Many people never give themselves the space they need in their work or in their relationships to let authentic change

evolve and develop. But how can you find a new world if you do not set out on the ocean to reach it? We tend to forget that creating space is actually quite simple, only the first step seems difficult, the step where we decide to set sail. The rest happens almost by itself. After all, the new world is really the place we can safely call home.

Against Resistance

When we go our own path, which is really the only thing we can do, we are bound to encounter resistance. Having understood our own resistance as the false fears of losing an illusion of security and safety, which is a creation of fearful society, we can also see any external resistance for what it is, a manifestation of fear. Society faces the basic dilemma that it needs people who muster the courage to go their own path as artists, scientists, businesspeople, and engaged citizens on one hand, while fearing disintegration if everyone just went consistently their own paths following their inner beacon rather than the edicts of society. Once we acknowledge, however, that the external and internal worlds are really reflections of each other on the most basic levels, we can our own path, while knowing it is at the same time the path of the world at its deepest level. This makes it possible to look behind resistance and to identify it merely as a fear that is only real by appearance. To gain confidence in walking one's path it helps to be able to distinguish this type of illusory resistance from meaningful signals that highlight if one is no longer on one's path. Connectedness with oneself and one's true needs, values, and aspiration, and with the world are the best antidote to both, yielding to illusory fears and distancing from oneself and one's authentic path.



Dr Jonathan Haverkamp, M.D. (Vienna) MLA (Harvard) LL.M. (ULaw) psychodynamic psychotherapy (Zurich) trained in medicine, psychiatry, psychotherapy, law, and management and works in private practice for psychotherapy and counselling in Dublin, Ireland. He is the author of several books and hundreds of articles and founder of Communication-Focused Therapy®.

The author can be reached by email at jonathan@jonathanhaverkampf.com or through the websites www.jonathanhaverkampf.com and www.jonathanhaverkampf.ie.

This article is solely a basis for academic discussion and no medical advice can be given in this article, nor should anything herein be construed as advice. Always consult a professional if you believe you might suffer from a physical or mental health condition. Neither author nor publisher can assume any responsibility for using the information herein.

Trademarks belong to their respective owners. Communication-Focused Therapy is a registered trademark.

Please note that the author reserves all rights to the contents of this article, which has also been registered with the US Copyright Office.

© 2012-2017 Christian Jonathan Haverkamp. All Rights Reserved
Unauthorized reproduction, distribution, and/or publication in any form is prohibited.