

## **Three Forks in the Road**

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Which of these two questions is the one that you find yourself asking?

1) What do I want to do?

2) What will give my life meaning?

In midlife we're likely to be shifting from the emphasis on doing found in the first question. We begin asking the question in a more complex way, looking for the meaning inherent in what we do. I recently came across an article written by David J. Powell, Ph.D that addresses this issue ("Understanding People in Life's Second Half"). The article articulated some core concepts that help point to the choices we have for defining what our success will look like during this time of life.

Dr. Powell stated that at some point in our 40s or 50s we reach a time where we're faced with "a crisis of limitations". Our sense of having unlimited energy and physical possibilities shifts to seeing the limits in what we can accomplish, limits in how long we might live and loss of important relationships. This shifting is what causes us to reach a decision point or a fork in the road.

### **Three Forks in the Road**

Dr. Powell describes the first road as one where the traveler tries "to ascend the ladder even higher". This road focuses the journey on creating external success by accomplishing more, having more "power, prestige, and possessions". Although this path may create external results, the quality of experience may feel shallow or empty. Think of the executive who places all of her focus on work and later in life finds herself without family or close friends.

The second fork he calls the "rusted-out road". The traveler on this road continues to do the same old thing, running into the same road blocks and vistas. Disappointments and frustrations can become internalized into depression and addictions, and externally be expressed as blame, negativity or indifference to life.

The third fork, which I call the Meaningful Way, begins by taking an inward journey. This journey requires getting off the outward track, going inside and facing the fears about what "might happen". As the focus moves inward, the traveler begins to look at what is personally meaningful. Society's external measurements of success take on less importance. Being on this path opens up the opportunity to discover what brings positive energy and joy. It may open up new vistas that include seeing the bigger world and the interdependencies we have with our fellow travelers.

This fork isn't necessarily easy or comfortable. It typically involves introspection as well as sitting with the unknown during a time of exploration...allowing a new direction to emerge. Yet this road offers the potential for creating new meaning to the current activities of life and a new way of internally experiencing success. The options that emerge may include making subtle changes in past activities, carried out differently with a new perspective. Or in other cases, new directions may be taken that are quite different, perhaps revitalizing a past, previously discarded passion. Here's a story from one of my clients that chose to explore this third fork and found a new, meaningful way.

"I used to joke that my purpose in life was to find my purpose in life. I thought it was a clever line, and it may have been funny to anyone else hearing for the first time, but after twenty-five years,

any humor it had for me was long gone. I hadn't been happy in my work for years, but I seemed paralyzed about making a change, or even starting the process of making a change. For that reason, I (reluctantly) turned to coaching.

When I signed up for coaching, I had two goals. I wanted to change jobs, and actually write the book that for the past several years I'd been saying I was writing. Coaching helped me take a look at both. I began to realize several things. First, while my job has some low points, it's not bad. At least, it's not as bad as I sometimes make it out to be, a result of my focusing on the negative. I can get myself all worked up about what bad things could happen, instead of just living in the moment. I began to realize that most things I had worried about never came to pass. I decided not to worry until I had good reason to, and noticed that wasn't very often.

Second, I realized that getting a different job in my field wasn't the answer. Although the reframing I described above has helped, what I'm doing isn't what I want to do forever. Why go someplace else and start doing the same thing in a different environment? So I'm not going anywhere for a while.

Third, I started to do things I've wanted to do for years. I've started bicycling to work most days. How does that relate to coaching? I'm not completely sure, but I started doing it when I started coaching, and I love it. I feel much better all the way around when I bike to work. (My coach pointed out to me that this ties in with a goal I set to lose a few pounds and tone up my stomach as well as my personal mission of living with fun and creativity.) Better still, I've started writing. I've written more in the three months since starting coaching than I've written in the past two years. I'm better organized about how I'm doing it, too. Writing an outline so I know what I'm going to write sounds like common sense now, but I hadn't written one. Now I have. I know the book will be written and published. What I'm really looking forward to is when the movie based on it comes out.

It's hard to isolate an experience and say, "I'm different now, and it's because of this one thing," but I think coaching has had a positive impact. I'm more confident and relaxed. I've set goals for myself that, for the first time, are realistic. I'm doing what it will take to accomplish those goals and will stay on that path, unless something happens, indicating a course adjustment. Then I'll adjust."

## 5 Steps to Move Down the Road to Meaning

If you're ready to get on that Meaningful Third Road here are some steps I find effective in my coaching that will help you move forward.

1. Identify one next step you can take that will move you forward on your meaningful path.

**Hint:** Keep it small and doable!

**Example:** Start taking the inward journey by journaling on what gives you the most joy/meaning in your life.

2. Set a time frame for completing that step and schedule a specific time(s) when you will act on it.
3. Identify and contact a friend/family member with whom you can be accountable for completing that action. Schedule a check-in time.

4. Celebrate the benefit you are getting from taking action and keeping your commitment to you.
5. Plan your next step and repeat this process.

If you'd like to receive a full copy of Dr. Powell's article, "Understanding People in Life's Second Half", send me an email [mary@pathmakercoaching.com](mailto:mary@pathmakercoaching.com) .

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