

What do you not want to be when you grow up?

B.F. Skinner, the behaviourist psychologist, is famous for his experiments with rats. Like other famous psychologists, such as Freud, a key to their genius is that their discoveries are today considered to be obvious. So what I am about to say about Skinner will seem obvious to a modern educated mind, which I am assuming you have. Skinner was interested in what motivated rats - more specifically, what would motivate a rat to take the time and trouble to navigate a maze. The most famous example of murine motivation is of course the piece of cheese at the end of the maze. Sex is of course another motivator of rats and any other animal. The third one that is less known is the opportunity for play.

These motivators have one thing in common, which is that they are motivations which the rat will go towards. An animal though can also be highly motivated by something undesirable which is coming at them from behind - namely, a predator. The most highly motivated rat, and the champion rat navigator, therefore, is the one which is not only expecting a piece of cheese, or sex, or play at the end of the maze, but can also simultaneously smell a cat approaching from behind.



Motivation can be subdivided into what you want but also what you don't want.

Jordan B. Peterson, a psychology professor at the University of Toronto, has created what he calls a 'future authoring program'. The future authoring program has two main components. The students who participate in the program are asked two fundamental questions. The first question is the question which young people are often asked and often ask themselves. Certainly, at college age, this was a question which was constantly on my mind, as I remember. The first question is: what do you want your life to be (say, ten years from now.) I pick the number ten for two reasons. Firstly, ten years is a significant but not overwhelming period of time. Bill Gates once said that people often over-estimate what they can achieve in one year but under-estimate what they can achieve in ten. Ten years is enough time to master a skill, for example, or rise up in a profession, or train and establish yourself in one of the top professions such as medicine and law. The second reason is that I consider that it is around the age of 16 to 18 that a person begins to have to seriously consider what their life as an adult will be and ten years on from that, around 26-28 is the time when a person comes to face the reality that they are no longer a kid. So what do you want your life to be ten years from now is a very good question to be asking high-school age people, but it is also valid at any age.

So that's all well and good. What do you want your life to be ten years from now seems like a reasonable and important question for a young adult or someone older to be seriously considering. Moving on from that, then, there is a second part to the future-authoring program which is a question that I was never asked and that I never considered as a young adult and is a question which is not commonly posed. The second question is: what do you *not* want you life to be ten years from now? In my experience with teenagers I am finding this to be, not only a very powerful question, but also a question which teenagers and young adults can more easily find a meaningful answer to than the question of what do you want you life to be. Many young people, myself included back

then, do not really know what they want to be or what they want their life to be. There are too many possibilities. What you don't want, on the other hand is a more easily handleable quantity, for anyone I think but especially for a young person. There is also a philosophical underpinning to this idea, where the positive is the absence of the negative. Schopenhauer wrote extensively on this subject, broadly speaking that good is the absence of bad. In my own life I have found this to be true. I have never found anything that makes me happy but there are certainly things that make me unhappy. The closest approximation to happiness that I can conceptualise is the absence of all the things that make me unhappy. I don't know if I love silence but I'm damn sure I hate noise!

So what do you *not* want your life to be ten years from now is a very powerful and much more accessible question. I was recently discussing this with a small group of high-school students and it was clear that the negative was much more easy for them to conceive of than the positive - as from the philosophical perspective, as outlined above, the positive can emerge from the absence of the negative. This is a powerful approach because there can be a great deal more paths towards avoiding what you don't want than in finding what you do want, including doing things that you don't want to do in order to not end up with what you don't want. Let me explain that apparent contradiction.

One of the problems facing young people, or people of any age, and certainly me as an emerging adult was that there was not any clear path for me that interested me. Therefore, all immediate courses of action tend to be eliminated. For example, let's say that what a person doesn't want ten years from now is to be stuck in a boring full-time job. That seems reasonable and would describe most people. However, the path to not having a boring full-time job may be in the short-term to get a boring full-time job. While doing the job a person can develop other interests and contacts and develop a plan to get out of the job. Doing something you don't want to do can be the path to not having to do the thing that you don't want to do. This is a rationale which was not explained to me when I was young.

The piece of cheese at the end of the maze is a great motivator, no doubt, but nothing motivates a rat to haul ass than the smell of a cat. If you or your kids or students don't know what they want to be or what you want your life to be like, then start with this: what don't you want your life to be ten years from now? Then from that, go about figuring out what steps you are going to take so that it doesn't end up that way.



Gary John Ilines
26/08/18