

A lot of my influence and inspiration from Zen Buddhism and meditation has been about surrendering to experience and letting things unfold naturally. Within that is a hidden message that trying to control the future and chasing security of any kind is futile.

Yet, no matter how much I find myself immersed in these teachings, my natural instinct is to plan, control, worry, and optimize some vision of myself in the future and what I think a good life will entail for my soul and the art I want to express in the world. Oftentimes, the things I grasp onto (such as journaling about different career paths) in an effort to quell my self-exploration and anxieties about life turn out to be the things that create these anxieties themselves. At a deeper level, they are still rooted in attempts to control the future in a world that is inherently uncertain, in which you cannot know how things will end up.

This weekend I was at a company offsite in Calistoga, nestled between Sonoma and Napa wine counties but surrounded by redwood forests. I had a couple of experiences that really shook my core and brought my awareness to this futility of trying to control the future.

The first was a conversation with a co-worker as we sat by a stream and listened to the sound of water flowing beneath us. He turned to me and asked if I could travel in time anywhere as a spirit for a day, either in the past or future, where would I travel and why? My answer was that I would go to the future, around the time when I imagine I'd be dying, to look at what the world would be like so that I could come back and make better decisions in my current life. Since most present decisions are rooted in certain guesses about the future, I wanted to better understand the future so I could plan for it.

This answer came naturally to me. Yet when I heard his answer, it made me feel misguided. He shared that he would go back to the past to see the dinosaurs or just to see what the world was like then. He wouldn't go to the future because he worried that if he went there and then came back trying to recreate life to meet that goal, he either wouldn't reach it because of his effortfulness instead of letting things unfold naturally, or if he knew what was coming, he just wouldn't enjoy the journey. He said, "If I was on a trip to Los Angeles and along the way stopped at Santa Barbara and Vegas, knowing L.A. was my destination is all I would think about." He wouldn't have enjoyed what he was seeing along the way, and might not have reached L.A. because of his unnatural effortfulness. Even if he did get there, he wouldn't be the person he would have been had he enjoyed the journey and been present for what he would have naturally learned along the way.

I heard him, and it made sense, but it didn't change my emotional response. That desire to know the future was just so strongly embedded within me.

He then said something that really impacted me: "The future is like a butterfly. The more you try to catch it, the more you will fail, and it will just fly away. But if you stop and rest and relax and sit back, it might just come and sit right on your shoulder."

That image of the future as a butterfly really spoke to me and showed me how I had been approaching things quite wrongly. It inspired me to seek something different.

The second experience happened the next morning when I woke up early, walked to the top of the mountain to meditate for 30 minutes, and spent time looking at the redwood trees and watching deer. On my walk down, I ran into an old man walking a dog. I interacted with him for an hour, and from both ends it felt like our meeting was fated to happen. We spoke about many things, from the Fourth Way (his spiritual belief system) to the Urantia book (a supernatural book on God / purpose that artists like Jimi Hendrix and Jerry Garcia swore by).

The most impactful part of this conversation was a parable he shared when I told him about my life and struggles. The parable was about a student who went to a cabin in the woods to study with a teacher. His teacher told him to find his place on the porch and would check in with him the next morning. The student felt a lot of pressure, thinking this was his first test. He walked around the porch looking for his place, sitting in different spots and searching, but couldn't find the right spot. Eventually, he got tired and just sat down somewhere to rest until morning. When his teacher came, he said, "Oh, how great! You found your spot."

The moral of the story is that if you keep searching for your place and where you belong, it will keep running away from you. But if you just accept where you are and find a home there, you can really start to belong. This teaching was so relevant to me as I am in a great job that many people would kill for. Yet every day I go through emotional struggles because of ideas about ego, identity, and life purpose—concepts that prevent me from just being, accepting, and making the most of what I have. It's my own mind getting in the way of what I am seeking.

When I think back to this meeting with David (the man's name) and his dog Blake, it was never meant to happen. He said he wasn't actually going to walk further on the road, but Blake pulled him along to keep walking this one time. In his 50 years of walking up and down that road, he had never run into another human there. When I started telling him about myself, he stopped me and asked whether I had time. I said, "Yeah, of course, I don't have anywhere to be." He said, "Okay, well then listen because this interaction might be exactly what you came here searching for." Pointing to the redwood trees, he said, "Clearly you're searching for something." He said that if I listened and internalized what we talked about, it would change my life and take me on a different path.

I walked back with the intention to take this other path: to let go and accept, find home where I am, and let life take me where it does. I still don't know how to actually live this way, but I'm trusting that it will find me if I just stopped trying so hard.