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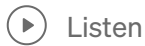


What Am I Doing With My Life? — Skylar Hawthorne



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Do you ever question the meaning of life, your purpose in life, or what you're doing with your life? That's called an existential crisis. The founding father of existentialism, John Paul Sartre, coined this term to refer to that feeling of dread when life feels meaningless. It commonly manifests as a mid-life crisis. However, anyone can have an existential crisis, especially college students.

The Danish Doctor of Dread, Soren Kierkegaard, famously stated, "Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom." He meant that since there's so many different choices we can make, we can become overwhelmed with freedom. In college, your whole life is in front of you. There are so many paths you can take and major decisions to make. I made many of these major decisions and most didn't work out, but now there's nowhere I'd rather be. I hope that by sharing my convoluted journey, it will make you feel better about wherever yours winds up.

While an existential crisis can come on all at once and be overwhelming, it can also be less severe but persistent. I've felt this way for the past five years. My senior year of high school, everyone was going to college so I figured I should too. I had no idea what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. It seemed like every year, I was a totally different person than I was the year prior, but I had always been a musician so I decided to major in music. Then, in music school, I took a philosophy class and fell in love. So I switched to a philosophy major but then realized that it's specifically psychological philosophy that has my heart. So then I added a psychology major, in addition to my

philosophy major, with a minor in music. This seemed to combine all my interests but still, as I approached graduation I had no idea what I would do to make money. I panicked, discovered that people with the same degrees as me are often hired for HR positions, and elected to get a certificate in human resources essentials from Cornell. The course was four months long and my main takeaway was that I hate HR. It's absolutely not for me and I paid a few thousand dollars to learn that.

Upon graduation, I had no job, moved back in with my parents, and wondered what the purpose of the last four years had been. I found myself one click away from flying to Thailand to teach English. This made my mom panic. She's religious, told me to have faith, and convinced me to wait a week. The day after I talked to her, a social science research position opened up at the University of Michigan. It was absolutely perfect for me in every way. I wrote the most passionate cover letter of my life, practiced hours for the interview, and now I work here to this day!

Over the past five years, I set out on five different paths. Four of them (music, philosophy, HR, and Thailand) did not work out. The failure of these pursuits inflicted existential crises and realizations such as: "I'm not going to make it in HR, what I just spent four months studying, now what am I going to do?" So many times throughout my life, I have asked myself: 'now what?'

The honest, most truthful, and best answer: I don't know and that's okay.

One of the central tenets of Taoism is Wu Wei. This term translates to "non-doing" or "non-action." It's about being in effortless alignment with the natural world. In more colloquial terms: it's about going with the flow. Taoism highlights the harmony of nature; how nature does nothing but leaves nothing undone. In practice, "the mind of wu wei flows like water, reflects like a mirror, and responds like an echo." It's like a cork in the water — hitting it down will cause it to effortlessly float back up.

A person embodying Wu Wei doesn't deliberate about what they will do or how it will work out because that's not helpful. If you go with the flow and act in harmony with nature, everything will work out. If it doesn't work out, it wasn't meant to work out, and you're now on the path you are meant to be on. Like many people, I've faced many

serious decisions about my life path.

Instead of agonizing over them, I should have realized that whatever happens is what's meant to happen. That there isn't an ideal answer because whatever the answer ends up being will be the right one. So don't worry about what you're doing with your life because you don't need to know what you're doing with your life. Just go with the flow.

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