



Getting Stuck Can Help You Grow

After an accident, there is often a second of calm when you realize that you are seriously hurt. Memory captures the scene in fine detail, as if you're hovering outside your skin, before pain and confusion pull you right back in.

I can still see myself getting up from a fall, almost exactly thirteen years ago, dusting snow off my tingling left arm. It looks odd, no longer in its usual place. I am somewhere between medical school and settling into my residency, before I could even imagine working in a school of business.

That winter, for a moment, the idea of becoming a ski instructor had turned into more than a fantasy. I had been training with a group of aspiring instructors and was flirting with that job, so to speak, while in a complicated relationship with medicine. It was very romantic. I would say torrid if we weren't talking snow.

I have always loved skiing. I love the anticipation of watching snow fall late at night, counting the hours until the lifts reopen. I love the crackling of boots on packed snow. The loud click of bindings. The whisper of smooth turns. The vast quiet. The burning tickle of inhaling cold, clean air and snowflakes on a powder run. I love the solitude and conviviality of skiing. The restoring exhaustion. The mountains are the places where I have felt freest, happiest, most at peace.

I was a solid amateur, not nearly good enough to be an instructor. I would not know, however, if I could have reached that bar until I had skied full time for a season or two. The only way to find out was to put my "real job" on hold.

I think about that winter every time a student, a colleague, a friend confide that they're wrestling with the temptation to change jobs, take time off, go back to school, make a commitment. *Will I enjoy it?* they wonder, *Will it be worth it?*

It wasn't the time or money I had invested in medical training that made me hesitate. Neither was it the fear of pursuing an unconventional career. There are many physicians who are also ski instructors. Many more than are also, say, management professors.

I was prepared to offer devotion and make sacrifices. I have never believed work would be rewarding without both.

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My concern was spoiling the passion I felt for skiing by turning it into a job.

When we're lost in the space between potential futures, it seems, we can't help but torment ourselves with impossible questions. Our ruminations tend to focus on what we are missing, what we may or may not get, or what we fear giving up.

These days those sentiments go by the popular acronym FOMO, "Fear of Missing Out." Back then we called it escapism. Most of us make sense of it as either cue or cowardice — either a healthy reminder to look beyond our current horizon, or a neurotic fear of commitment because there may be something better elsewhere.

Once we reduce those feelings to a binary choice, however, we become too focused on yearning and too little on learning. The preoccupation with picking the right future — whether to follow or forget the temptation to make a change — obscures the question of what the temptation may be trying to teach us.

It is often when we yearn for an answer that we stand to learn the most from staying with the question. It is neither resolution nor fulfillment that we long for in those moments, I suspect. It is desire. (We remain suspended because desire feeds on distance and possibility). If we can't figure out which option is better then it may be worth examining what those options mean to us.

My recollection of life after that fateful fall is organized not by hours, days, or months, but by different kinds of pain. The stabbing from the muscles pulling the split bone in my shoulder apart. The dull burning after the surgery that screwed it back together. The welcome sting of painkiller injections. The strain and jolts of physical therapy and the diffuse, sticky pain of feeling trapped.

Nothing makes one focus on meaning quite like hurting. It is as if pain cracks the shell of a place in our hearts where we know what we need to do and why.

I spent those months revisiting my relationship with work — the place it had in my life, what I hoped to experience, what I was prepared to give.

While I had prided myself on my work-life balance, I realized, it was never work that made me feel alive. I had that version of work-life balance that resembles a frosty marriage — built on habit, convenience and reciprocal need. Skiing was refuge, restoration and escape. Work was ambition, duty and service. By keeping them apart, I was never fully present in either.

I didn't want work to take over my life. But I was not content for it to just fund my life, either. I wanted work that conjured passion and devotion. That made me serve and learn. That reflected who I am and brought me close to interesting people. That exhausted and restored me and excited me and scared me and kept me on edge the way skiing did at times. No job would do that for me. I had to work that way. A job could at best encourage me — literally, help me sustain the courage — to do it.

It was then that I learned that in any job, the meaningful moments are like mornings of fresh powder and blue sky — few, far between, and all the more enjoyable the more prepared you are. So we better choose work, to the extent we can, where those moments of bliss are worth the effort it takes to be present and ready for them.

In the best cases, the effort itself feels valuable often enough. But even when it doesn't, we can still tell that our work is meaningful if between its moments of bliss we are more often frustrated than bored.

I'll never know if I could have become a ski instructor, or what life would be like if I had. That version of me rests somewhere in my psyche, among what Rice University Professor Otilia Obodaru calls our "alternative selves." It wakes up from time to time, as these selves do, mumbling "what if..."

For all the value we put on plans and pursuits, what makes us who we are is often what we do with life's surprises. Temptations don't always point to what we really want, but often hint towards who we are trying to become. Maturity is not the ability to pursue or suppress them. It is the ability to take them seriously without always taking them literally.

I needed that break, it turns out. I had thought I needed to move on, but it was getting stuck that helped me grow.

By the time I was back on a mountain, I had begun the transition that led me, through years of uncertainty, to what I do and who I am today.

This month, I'll be teaching my children to ski.

This post originally appeared in HBR. I'd love it if you shared your comments, reactions, questions, stories, [here](#).

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