



Finding New Direction

Having a plan presumes you know your direction.

Lincoln Stoller, PhD, 2025. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)
www.mindstrengthbalance.com



“How does it feel to be on your own with no direction home.”

— **Bob Dylan**, from *Like a Rolling Stone*

Goals and Ideas

Most of us presume that a new direction results from abandoning the old plan and adopting a new one. That kind of redirection is rarely new, it's usually a different version of the old. A new direction leads to a different place. That's something we tend to hold for emergencies.

If you can't get through the forest, you might try the swamp, but that's not a new direction because it leads to the same place. A new direction might lead to the old goal, but it might be more useful if it took you to a new goal. You might revise your whole notion of direction.

We can break this process down into parts, starting with two parts at the highest level and breaking subsequent parts down further. Two parts to finding new direction are reconsidering your goals and reconsidering your ideas of progress.

Have a Large Goal

A goal is a picture of what you want to accomplish. What is the underlying goal? What was your last goal? A goal should have a meaningful purpose. If your purpose is weak, then it's likely you're rationalizing the goal.

Cultural, political, and religious goals are inadequate because they're impersonal, abstract, and unreal. Such things as wealth, security, virtue, and respect are insubstantial goals because they don't make anything happen.

Lacking meaningful goals is why most people don't commit themselves. This applies as much to marriage and family as it does for business and planning.

The narrower your goal, the clearer are the paths to it. But the narrower your goal, the more likely it will fail to yield the rewards you hope for. There are always elements of chance, discovery, and ignorance that make it hard to hit a small target.

Wider goals are better, but the path is less clear. It takes longer to achieve broader goals, but there are more options both in getting there and accepting the destination. It's easier to find new connections if you explore more territory. It may be easier to search a small haystack, but if there are several haystacks, then you'd better check them all.

Follow a Wide Path

Progress is a tricky thing when the path is uncertain. It's almost impossible to judge progress without a goal, you need some idea of what you're aiming for. It's essential that this be something you understand.

Consider progress in terms of geographical movement. In most cases you'll have a destination and location. This might be your location on a map or your location in terms of satisfaction. You expect to achieve some portion of what you're aiming for, however small. If it's wealth, you expect some income. If it's love, you expect some affection. If it's peace, you expect some comfort.

I remember walking across a miles-wide glacier toward a distant peak where the nearest visible landmark was miles away. We walked for hours and with almost no visible progress. It was unreal. After a while, with nothing new to see or say, your mind starts to turn to jelly.

Ideas

Ideas connect things, and important ideas create a path to progress. On one hand, ideas are simple, in the same way that connectors are simple: they clearly relate things and let you move from one thing to the next.

On the other hand, ideas arise mysteriously. Solving a problem depends on new ideas, but there's little you can do to expedite their arrival. It supports our notion of free will to think that we conceive our goals through a process of far sighted genius, and we figure a path to those goals using our independent powers of deduction. From this picture comes our arrogance.

It's just as likely—more likely in fact—that the paths we choose are pre-programmed by our memories, habits, and perceptions. We find what's evident to us and recognize what feels right. Just as water does not choose a goal and then find a way, much of the time we don't either. Our hungers and inclinations are our laws of gravity and, depending on where we start, understanding these laws can determine where we'll finish.

If you're ready for new ideas, schedule a time to speak with me at:

<https://www.mindstrengthbalance.com/schedule15>

If this were true, then life might seem hopeless: it would all be predetermined, but you'll never believe this no matter how true it is. Our belief in our autonomy is built into our consciousness. It may be false, but it keeps us sane.

Our nature is to feel autonomous, and that's why we cannot see where our ideas come from. Most of our ideas are both unoriginal and predetermined, but they still come from somewhere. If we knew the genesis of our ideas, then we'd be disappointed in our lack of originality.

An article by Paulo Belardi titled "How New Ideas Arise" (<https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/how-new-ideas-arise/>) appeared in January 2023 in *The MIT Press Reader*. Belardi is an architect and poet who suggests these sources:

- habit
- necessity
- circumstance
- accidental encounters
- observing the unfamiliar

- boredom
- mistakes
- dreams

All of these depend on awareness. Awareness is the conscious recognition of things. Distinguish this from unconscious recognition, which is what machines do. Without awareness you operate automatically. Without ideas, the universe simply winds down.

Changing Goals

If you want more control, recognize your goals rarely change. You may redefine or expand your goals, but your new goals will, hopefully, be better versions of your old goals. Your main goals won't change if you've defined them according to your deeper feelings.

Young people are unstable, and some adults are perpetually unstable. We expect young people's goals to be uncertain partly because their minds and circumstances are changing, and partly because they're learning.

There is a point, usually at the end of adolescence, where you're expected to gain clarity. Our institutions push people to define themselves at this stage, but few of us are entirely ready. If we're mentally healthy, then we'll continue to refine and deepen ourselves. A measure of mental ill health is the inability to learn.

It's okay to continue to grow with age. Growing insight is a sign of greater maturity. At the same time, negative circumstances often impede or prevent our growth, and the more and the longer we're held back, often the harder it is to move forward.

It's difficult for a person to judge how much they've changed or need to change. Therapy amounts to facilitating change. This could be a change in goals or means. It could involve new ideas or new perceptions.

It is poor therapy to attempt to put these things into a person. Good therapy enables a person to find them, which is why a good therapist is always ready to disappear. Therapy should be catalytic, not sustaining. I feel this is true even for people who feel themselves to be disabled.

Changing Ideas

Ideas, on the other hand, are not so predictable. You might wake up one morning and decide to paint, write, listen to music, take a cold shower, or go on vacation. These are not goals, they're means; they foster new ideas.

There are two ways to pursue science. One is to apply old tools to new problems, and the other is to apply new tools to old problems. Science is like life in that both attempt to proceed reasonably.

There are two ways to pursue therapy, just as in science. But in therapy there is also a third track which is to achieve nothing. This is recognized as unproductive in science, but it's a common approach in therapy.

People often use the same means to achieve the same goals and will pay for help to do this. Therapists might accommodate them, as to do otherwise is to contradict your client. You might call this the "do more of the same" approach. It's like engaging in greater indulgence as a means of overcoming addiction. There is a certain logic to this since you'll hit bottom at some point.

Personally, I prefer change. I have some good ideas but even when I'm unsure I prefer novelty. I'm creative by nature. I advocate avoiding hitting bottom.

As I become more experienced as a therapist I see the same patterns reappear in different forms. Rationalizing the illogical is one common pattern. Denying the circumstances is another. Failing to listen, feel, and perceive is a third.

When clients refuse to change their pattern I stop working with them. I don't have to say that they are their own obstacles to progress, as I believe a person must come to that conclusion themselves. I merely persist in challenging their pattern. Then they fire me.

It's fairly easy to see the error in the ways people think, it only requires understanding their goals and the thoughts they're using to achieve them. Most people state healthy goals but have only a shallow understanding of them. Understanding what you want must precede getting what you need.

On the other hand, people's thoughts are all over the map. This would be good if they were making progress in exploring new conceptual territory, but most people are lost and don't recognize it. Often, they're convinced they're not lost and they expect me to confirm this.

There is a certain amount of manipulation on all our parts and this is understandable. We argue our perspective and want to be right even if our plans have gone awry. In some respects therapy, or counseling, is a battle of wills, a contest of different ideas. The crucial question is, when you can't achieve your goals, how open are you to new ideas?