



TWELVE

Getting Out of the Woods

I took the [road] less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.

—Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*

You didn't intend to get lost in the deep forest, but it happened. Fortunately, you came prepared. You brought along a sleeping bag and small packing tent that kept you warm and dry last night, and this morning you were able to build a small fire. You wore appropriate clothing and shoes and have enough food and water for another day or two. What you don't have is a compass. If only you were in Iceland, it would be easy: The local joke is that if you are lost in an Icelandic forest, just stand up (because the trees are short). You know that this is a sizable forest, and the treetop canopy obstructs your view of the sun by day and the stars by night. There are no trails or stream to follow, and in exploring last night before it grew dark, you discovered that you had been wandering in circles.

Now it's a new day, and you want to get out of the trees. You know from a map that the forest is not more than six or seven miles on a side. You're not sure which direction to head, but you reason that if you could just walk in a straight line

in any direction, you would eventually find your way out. But how to do that—how to keep from retracing your steps and walking around in circles again?

Aha! You have an idea. You find a tree that is some distance away from you, and looking past it you focus on a second tree that is farther away. Then keeping those two trees in your line of sight, you spot yet a third tree still farther away that lies in a straight line with the other two. Now you walk from tree 1 to tree 2, keeping an eye on tree 3. As you approach tree 2, you then spot a fourth tree in a straight line out beyond tree 3, and so on. In this way, with any luck, you can keep moving from tree to tree in a reasonably straight line and eventually find your way to a road or stream or to the forest's edge.



Getting unstuck from ambivalence is a bit like that. A natural tendency is to keep going around in circles, thinking first about one possibility and then another, retracing your steps. Another possibility is to find a way to be comfortable living with ambivalence (Chapter 13). To get out of the forest, however, you would pick a direction and keep moving that way. This can feel uncomfortable at first. Particularly with the yoyo and pendulum types of ambivalence, moving in one direction can give you second thoughts. To avoid more nights in the forest, though, you would just keep on moving in a straight line, undeterred by second thoughts, from tree to tree to tree.

Reaching a decision is a first step in resolving ambivalence. That was the focus of Chapter 11. Carrying out that decision can be a longer process of putting your choice into action and coming to peace with your decision.

THINKING AND TALKING YOUR WAY OUT

The interior work of resolving ambivalence has to do with what you say to yourself (in silent thoughts, writing, or even aloud) and to other people about your choice. You are literally talking yourself through the process. George Carlin observed that “the reason I talk to myself is because I’m the only one whose answers I accept.” It’s true enough. In your own talk you are, in essence, discovering, rehearsing, and strengthening your motivation to keep on moving.

Several types of language are useful here. You are already familiar with these forms of speech. Whenever you make a request of someone, you listen carefully to what they say in response. Why do you do that? Because what they say gives you clues about whether or not it will happen.¹ Suppose, for example, that you ask a friend to do something for you. The specific content of the request doesn’t matter here, because the types of language that you will be listening for are the same. Here are some things that your friend might say in reply to your request:

- I would like to do that for you (and then you listen for a “but . . .”).
- I wish I could do that for you.
- I might be able to do it.
- I could do it.
- I can do it.
- I should do it.
- I know it’s important to you.
- I’m willing to do it.
- I’m going to do it.

Can you feel the differences among these? Some of them sound hopeful, others not so much. This is the language of change, a negotiating dance of words that happens when people make and respond to requests.² By living in society, you already know this dance, although you may not have thought about the specific steps. The same kinds of language are used when making requests. For example:

- Would you like to . . .
- Could you . . .
- Are you willing to . . .
- Will you . . .

Below are seven specific types of self-motivational language that were discussed in Chapter 3. These were clarified through decades of research on listening to what people said during counseling to help them make changes.³ We found that such speech does in fact predict later behavior.⁴ It's possible to be dishonest, of course, as when people say things they don't mean. But when people talk honestly about themselves, these kinds of language can strengthen their motivation for change.⁵

You can practice these for yourself if you wish. Start with a still-ambivalent topic on which you have decided the direction in which you want or choose to move. You can generate each type of change talk about the direction you choose. These are things that you could say to yourself or to someone else, but I suggest first that you actually write them down. On a tablet or sheet of paper, write at the top the decision that you made (perhaps in Chapter 11). The tasks in this chapter may not make much sense unless you are thinking of something specific that you want or have decided to do. Then try out these seven different kinds of statements.

To show specific examples of each kind of change talk, I will offer some of my own self-talk as I worked through ambivalence about exercising when I was first diagnosed with “pre-diabetes.” I knew, of course, that regular activity is one of the best things you can do to stay strong and healthy as you age, particularly if you are in a fairly sedentary occupation like mine. I had plenty of excuses *not* to exercise, and I don’t need to go into those here. Being diagnosed was a good motivation to give it more serious consideration, although many people with diabetes (or other chronic illnesses) still don’t do what they need to do to be healthy.⁶ Even having a heart attack may not be enough to persuade people to stop smoking and change their diet and physical activity. So how might I talk myself into doing the right stuff to stay healthy? As I offer examples, you can come up with your own statements on the ambivalent topic of your choice. Don’t just think about it. Write them down!

Desire

Desire language is basically a way of saying “I want.” A *desire* statement might start with the words *I want to*, *I wish to*, *I would enjoy*, or *I would like to*. Here are some of mine.

- I would *like* to keep my eyesight.
- I *look forward* to playing with my grandchildren.
- I do *enjoy* some kinds of physical activity.
- I *want* to do what it takes to stay healthy.

What desire statements might you make about your own chosen direction? Try writing some down using starter words for desire: *want*, *wish*, *like*, *enjoy*.

Ability

A different form of speech is *ability* language, which says it's possible for you. Ability statements might begin with *I can*, *I could*, *I am able to*, or *I know how to*.

- I have always liked bicycling, and I guess I *could* do more of that.
- It's *possible* for me to get some exercise equipment to use at home.
- I think I'd be *able* to exercise in the morning for an hour or so.
- I probably *can* do that two or three days a week.

What ability statements can you make about the decision you chose? What can or could you do? (The difference between those two words is interesting in itself. Which one feels easier for you to say, and why?) What would be possible; what would you be able to do?

Reasons

Reason statements explain why you would choose as you did. There are two general forms:

- If I do this, then . . . [and you give a positive reason for the choice you made].
- If I don't do this, then . . . [and you state why the path you chose is better than the alternative].

A good start is to come up with three different reasons to do what you choose:

1. The doctor said that *if* I exercise regularly, *then* it will help keep my blood sugar level down.
2. *If I do* exercise, I might not need to go on insulin.
3. I remember what the “complications” can be *if I don’t* control my diabetes, and I definitely don’t *want* to go blind or lose my feet. (This statement doubles up reason and desire.)

So what are at least three good reasons supporting the choice you made? Make a list.

Need

Need language emphasizes importance. Some common forms are *I need to*, *I have to*, *I must*, and *it is important for me to*. What can you say about the importance of what you chose? You don’t have to explain why. In fact, doing so would turn it into a reason (which is also OK).

- I’ve *got to* start exercising more.
- Exercise is *important* for me.
- I really *must* be more physically active.

Try writing down a few of these. You can add “because . . .” if you wish, doubling up with a reason.

Activating Language

It is possible to want and need, to have good reasons and ability, and yet not be willing or ready. Activating statements are not quite

“I will,” but they are getting close. Here are some possible kinds of statements:

- I am ready to . . .
- I am willing to . . .
- I am prepared to . . .
- I plan to . . .
- I intend to . . .
- I have decided to . . .

Regarding exercise, I might have said to myself or others:

- I am *willing to consider* joining a gym.
- I *plan* to exercise for 45 minutes three nights a week.
- I have *decided* that it’s important enough to buy some exercise equipment.

So what are you willing, planning, considering, or ready to do? Write down some statements.

Commitment

Commitment speech is stronger still. This is the language used to make promises and enter into agreements. It says what you are *going* to do. If you were asked in court, “Will you tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?”, the judge would not accept any of the statements above: *I want to!* *I could!* *I have good reasons to!* *I need to!* or *I am willing to consider it!* The only acceptable answer is *I will.*⁷

Some possible forms of commitment language include *I will*, *I am going to*, *I promise*, and *I guarantee*. Restating my readiness statements above, commitment language would be:

- I am *going to* join a gym.
- I *will* exercise for 45 minutes three nights a week.
- I *promise* to buy some exercise equipment.

So what statements of this kind are you prepared to make regarding the choice you made? What do you think you'll do?

Taking Steps

Often by the time people decide to do something, they have already taken some small steps in that direction, as if preparing or trying it out at least mentally. Here are some from my own situation regarding increased physical activity:

- I looked online to see what an elliptical machine would cost
- I bought a pair of comfortable shoes for exercising
- I asked my doctor what kind of activity would be safe for me.

What (if anything) have you already done to consider, prepare for, lean toward, or try out the choice or change you're considering? Even small steps count. If you don't think of any, what steps *could* you take to move in the desired direction?

A CLINICAL EXAMPLE

Sometimes people find it hard to keep moving in one direction on their own. With conflicting motivations, there is a natural tendency to keep switching back and forth among them rather than going from tree to tree in a straight line. We developed the

method of motivational interviewing⁸ to help guide people out of the woods of ambivalence. Typically a conversation begins with people describing a change they have been considering (or wanting or needing to make), but haven't managed to do so far—in other words, something about which they are ambivalent. While listening to and respecting their hesitations, the interviewer helps them voice their own motivations for change and keep moving forward. This method has been shown to help people get unstuck with quite a few different types of change.⁹ It can help people either increase or decrease behavior. Here is an example interview with Charles, whose concern is the amount of time he is spending on the internet.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me a bit about what's on your mind.

CHARLES: I really enjoy surfing the web, meeting and talking to people there. I'm on for hours every day, and sometimes I think it's too much, but it's just what I do.

A clear statement of ambivalence

I: There are things that are good about it for you, and also maybe some less good aspects.

Echoing his ambivalence

C: Well, I'm not sure it's all that good even for me really. I log in and before I know it hours have passed.

Reason for change

I: It really engages you, maybe too much.

C: Right. I mean it fills in the time for me, but I don't do much else.

Reason

I: How would you want to spend the time if you weren't on screens?

C: We have two little kids, 2 years and 6 months old, and I like to spend time with them.

Desire

I: And their mother?

C: Yes, sure. We all live together.

I: What do you enjoy most about your time together?

C: They're growing up so fast, and I think I miss a lot. I want to be there for them. I mean I work all day, so mostly we can be together at night or on the weekend, and that's when I'm mostly on the computer. We like playing with them together when we can.

Reason

Desire

Desire

I: Your family is pretty important to you.

C: They are, and I feel guilty sometimes like I'm not doing my part.

Reason

I: And what else might you enjoy doing when you're not on the internet?

C: I like dirt biking, and sometimes we go to the zoo or out for food together. That's fun. I have some friends, too, and I don't see them much.

Desire

Reason

I: How important would you say it is for you to spend less time online and more doing other things like with your family?

C: How important?

I: Yes. Like on a scale from 0 to 10, how important do you think it is?

C: I don't know. Maybe 7 or 8.

Need

I: Wow—pretty important then! So what could you do if you did decide to spend more time away from the internet? How might you do that?

- C: Maybe I could set a time limit for myself, like just an hour a day. Actually I should probably do that with our 2-year-old as well. When I'm not with him and his mom is busy, he's getting my bad habit and watching TV. *Ability*
- I: You think you could stick with a time limit. *Reason*
- C: Sure. I mean it's a big change for me, but I could do it. I could set a timer. *Ability*
- I: Are you willing to do it?
- C: Right away?
- I: Well, whenever you choose, but is that something you're willing to try?
- C: I think it would be a good idea. *Readiness*
- I: And why is that?
- C: Like I said, the kids are growing up and I want to be there to see it. I just feel like I'm getting way too hooked by the stuff on the web. *Reason*
- I: Hooked. Like it's controlling you. *Reason*
- C: Kind of. There's no end to it really. I just get kind of mindless and the days fly by. When I think about it, I don't like that. *Desire*
- I: You're thinking maybe it's time. So what do you think you'll do then?
- C: I like the idea of no more than an hour a day.
- I: Do you think you can do that?
- C: Yeah, I do. Maybe I'll even start tonight. *Ability*
- I: Really. Tonight. It's up to you.
- C: Sure, why not? I'll try it. *Commitment*
- I: Makes sense to me!

What the interviewer is doing here may look simple but it is actually quite skillful and takes some practice. The interviewer could have spent more time talking about all the things Charles likes about the internet, why he wouldn't want to change, and the obstacles to doing so. It also would have gone very differently if Charles was being told why and how he should do it. Instead the interviewer asked particular questions and highlighted aspects of what Charles said to help him keep moving out of the forest. Charles was literally talking himself into change. Just as you listen to what people say when you ask them to do something for you, what someone says during an interview like this predicts whether it is going to happen.¹⁰ By the way, we have found that it's not essential to get to commitment language right away for change to happen. All of the kinds of change talk seem to have their own momentum.

Using Your Own Motivational Statements

Could you do that on your own?¹¹ Actually that's how it happens normally. The statements that you wrote in the previous section before this example were in your own words, and using them can help to strengthen your motivation and commitment to do what you have decided. They can help you keep moving down the path you chose. You could keep your list in a place where you will see it often. You can add to it. You can say the statements quietly to yourself as reminders. You could speak them aloud to others.

Don't expect perfection. You might go three steps forward and two steps back, but keep moving forward. Perfectionism is the main downfall of New Year's resolutions: taking your statement to be a *rule*. Break the rule once and you may abandon your original intention. Instead of giving up, keep renewing your motivations for the

choice that you made. Saying your statements aloud to other people can increase your commitment.

ACTING YOUR WAY OUT

Language isn't everything. Actions speak louder than words. You can enact your decision by what you do. Can you break it down into smaller steps and take them one at a time? Not just saying but *doing* things can move you farther down the path that you have chosen.

If the path is really new, your actions at first can feel like, well, acting. Like riding a bicycle, new behavior can feel uncomfortable and awkward at first. That's how you learn many new things. Living as if your choice is already a fact is one way of getting used to it.¹² Going from heavy daily alcohol use to being a nondrinker can be a huge lifestyle change, and the aphorism "Fake it till you make it" contains the wisdom of lived experience.

So in addition to strengthening your motivation by what you say, how about putting your intention into action? Doing so further strengthens your commitment. What steps could you take to move yourself farther down the chosen path? Over time in my own transition to a low-fat, vegetarian way of eating I read books on the subject, stocked up on healthy foods, tried new recipes, learned to use a spiralizer, told friends what I was doing, even bought some new cookware to enjoy.

Steps like that don't have to be done all at once. Implementing a new decision can take time, whether for an individual, a family, an organization, or a nation. As with the tree-to-tree example, once you're out of the woods you can keep an eye on the horizon and continue moving toward it with steps in the right direction.

A FINAL CHAPTER

So you have read this far in this book without succumbing to ambivalence. The journey began with the nature, flavors, and language of ambivalence. Part II explored its sources, influences, unconscious forms, and effects, and then how people respond to ambivalence, including some personality differences. This Part III on working through ambivalence began with exploring your values and getting a big picture as a context for choosing your direction at a fork in the road. This chapter focused on thinking, talking, and acting your way out of the ambivalence forest once you have made a choice. However, as discussed in the opening chapter, ambivalence is not always to be avoided. Janus has important strengths through being able to look in two directions at once, and ambivalence can be advantageous and even enjoyable. Chapter 13 is about living with and embracing ambivalence.