Making Plans

I had the opportunity a few years ago to attend a meeting in a recovery center in the desert of southern California. It was housed in a nondescript building located on a rough, hardscrabble lot. The attendees were a raw group, most with less than a month of sobriety. At the time I was six years into the program, which landed me somewhat awkwardly in the ranks of long-term sobriety for that room. During the course of the meeting a few former gang members described their lives before coming into recovery. I had few experiences in common, having grown up in a low-key suburb. I recall hoping that I had something useful to say, given that drinking was the only common bond that I could see. When my turn to share came, I internally played the little mantra that helps me put my ego aside, ‘speak through me.’ I cleared my mind as best I could and spoke from my experience.

A man approached me after the meeting, confusion on his face.

“What does it mean when you people talk about not making plans? I don’t get it.”

He had perhaps a week of sobriety, and was asking in earnest. This is a very often misunderstood concept, similar to that of acceptance. I felt a connection with his plight, and wanted to help. Words rushed into my head, unbidden, at least not consciously. A clear picture formed in my mind and then I answered.

“When we talk about being present, living in the moment or not future-tripping, it is not an invitation to be irresponsible. The key is to not get tied up in specific outcomes. I cannot spend all my paycheck and leave none for rent at the end of the month. We all get this, but what about making actual plans?

Imagine that you have been saving a little money each month, to build up a buffer against losing your job. By the time you have a few thousand dollars in the bank, your car’s transmission dies. You spend almost all your savings to fix it.

There is a temptation to take this personally, and get angry at life for conspiring against you. ‘Just when I start to get ahead it all gets taken!’ Another view is that if you had not been saving money the transmission would have died anyway. In that version of the story, you have no money to fix it, and therefore cannot get to work, guaranteeing your job loss. Viewed in this light, it was vitally important that you acted responsibly with your funds, even though they were not used for the outcome you had in mind. Next month you can resume saving some money, and at some point, it may stick. It may take years, but it can work.”

When I was done talking, he looked me directly in the eyes.

“Thank you. I *heard* that.”

I breathed a sigh of thanks. I wish I could take credit for knowing the precise story to tell that would make sense to him, but I cannot. ‘We intuitively know how to handle situations that used to baffle us.’

In other situations, it is not the outcome that changes, but the path. I recall the phrase ‘an airplane’s autopilot is off-course 95% of the time, yet it gets where it is going.’ The continued adjustments back and forth keep the plane going in the proper compass heading.

I intentionally consider this analogy when making plans for my own life. Of particular importance to me is that a computer-based autopilot does not take a change in weather personally. It dispassionately notes the change, adapts, then moves on. Previously I used to interpret the need to handle an unexpected event as a failing on my part. I was always plagued by a sense of ‘I should have seen this coming.’ I now see that this was hubris on my part. The real work involved is the ongoing maintenance of the plan, not its initial creation.

A fringe benefit of this new perspective is that I have lost the compulsion to plan everything. In hindsight I can see that I would spend energy attempting to predict most elements of my day, including things outside my control. I wasted tremendous amounts of effort managing events that did not bother to consult my plan before occurring. When I finally let go of this nonsense it freed up huge reservoirs of mental cycles that could be spent more productively.

A second outcome was an ability to slow down. I noticed that once in a while I could enjoy my surroundings without feeling the need to change them. For a few moments here and there, I could go with the flow. I now see that planning too much is the same as ‘getting in the way.’ By letting go more often, I can get out of the way and let things happen.