

Take a step back

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This post introduces a new series, [Raw Nerve](#).

For most of my life, I saw my job as just making good choices. I was the decider, tasked with making the best selection from the options life presented. I could play with this friend or that one, go to this college or that one, take this job offer or the other one.

Even my problems I dealt with this way. If someone was annoying me, I'd choose to avoid them. If something was bugging me, I'd choose to stop thinking about it. I mostly kept my eyes on what was in front of me.

But recently I've started appreciating the virtues of stepping back and trying to see the bigger picture. Instead of just picking the best option, I try to invent new ones. Instead of just avoiding the stuff that bugs me, should I start making plans to fix them.

It's given me a weird feeling. I feel more in control of my life, more able to cope with my problems. I feel like I'm charting my own destiny, instead of following some track. It's hard to explain, but it's a feeling like I'm getting stronger — not physically, but psychologically. It's a good feeling. I feel like I'm growing as a person.

So I started wondering: *Is there more where that came from?* I realized I've never stopped to ask whether I could get better at life. After all, in my day job, I'm constantly looking for ways to learn and grow — reading the latest books and articles about the field, talking to other people with similar jobs and hearing what's worked for them. Why aren't I doing the same thing for life?

It turns out to be surprisingly hard. Life comes with no instruction manual and the advice parents give is all over the place. TV and the newspapers don't offer much more than narrow Quick Tips and I never saw a course in this stuff at school. There are self-help books and self-improvement courses, of course, but they seem overly practical: they're usually less about working through tough problems and more about energizing you to Get Up And Go! And there's philosophy about The Good Life, but it seems to go too far in the other direction: there's very little in there for someone to practically apply.

The blogs are a weird mix. There are the blogs on “life hacks,” which are full of gadgets and gizmos that seem to cause more problems than they solve. There are the anti-procrastination blogs, where the author has a constant stream of epiphanies that all seem to amount to “just put away the distractions and get

stuff done.” And there are the charlatans, who tell you that all your wildest dreams can come true if you just follow their patented advice.

So instead of an obvious place to go, I’ve just been finding little bits and pieces in all sorts of strange places: psychology experiments, business books, philosophy, self-help, math, and my friends. But since there’s no community around it, it’s hard to discuss it with anyone (trying to persuade other people to be interested in what you’re interested in is a fool’s game).

So I figure I’ll just start writing about it here and see if anyone cares. Maybe it’ll grow into something, but even if it doesn’t at least I’ll clarify my thoughts and hopefully get a few good suggestions for further reading.

I don’t have a name for what I’m talking about or even a good sense of what it is. I’m hopeful that will become clearer with practice. But in the meantime, what’s helped you get better at life?—at thinking, deciding, working, thinking. Whether it’s a gadget or technique or book or person, I’d love it if you [posted what you’ve found most helpful in the comments](#).

Next in this series: [Believe you can change](#)