

How to Pick a Career Path (That Actually Fits You): The Worksheets

Wait But Why

based on the [WBW article](#) by **Tim Urban**

(Read the article first.)

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Some rules

- This probably won't make sense if you haven't read the original article, so start there: ["How to Pick a Career Path \(That Actually Fits You\)" – Wait But Why](#)
- These worksheets are a deeper-dive extension of the post to help reflect on your career path from first principles. It might take a while. Grab a few blank sheets of paper and set aside an hour or two, go one section at a time, or skim through it for ideas.
- Be honest with your answers—write down whatever you actually think, even if it feels a little weird. The whole point is to find something that's a good fit for *you*, so your answers have to be authentic and you have to get past the most obvious answers.
- Don't forget that this is a no-pressure situation! This is just a framework to help you think through some possible options—never more than a rough draft and always revisable.

Sketch your life path so far

Starting from birth, draw a path that sums up your major life / career / lifestyle moves up until today.

Evaluate your career path so far

Think about the jobs you've had in the past. (If you haven't had a job yet, think about roles you've had in school or even at home.) Evaluate each one:

Why did you take on the role in the first place?

How did the job meet your expectations? How was it different than expected?

What felt *right* about the job or company? What felt like a bad fit, or made you frustrated and/or unmotivated? These factors can be anything about the day-to-day, no matter how small, or can be bigger things like belief in or disagreement with the company's purpose.

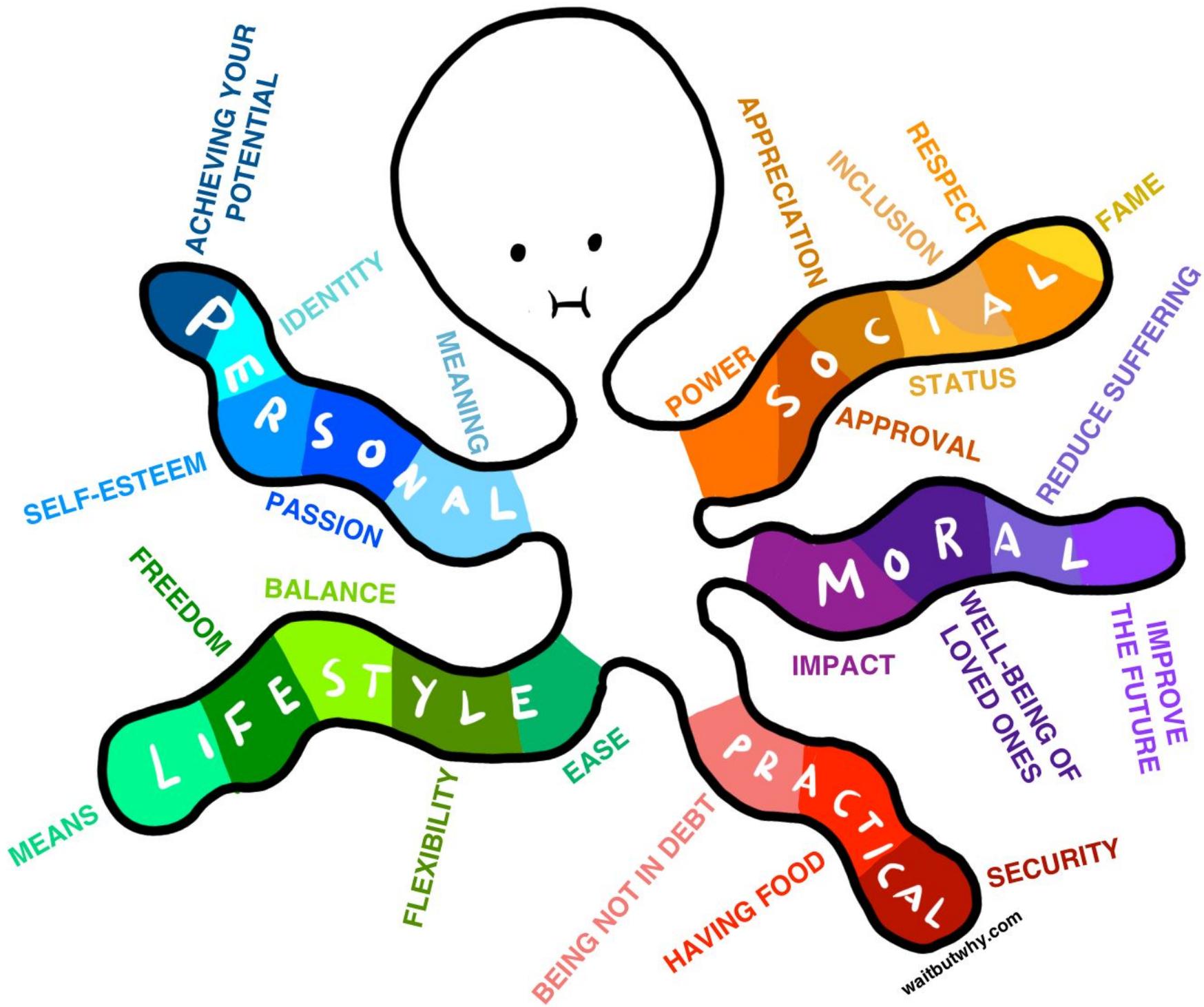
Draw your Career Plans map

What are you currently pointed towards? Do you have a plan for where things are going? How do you feel about it?

Part 1: Your Want Box

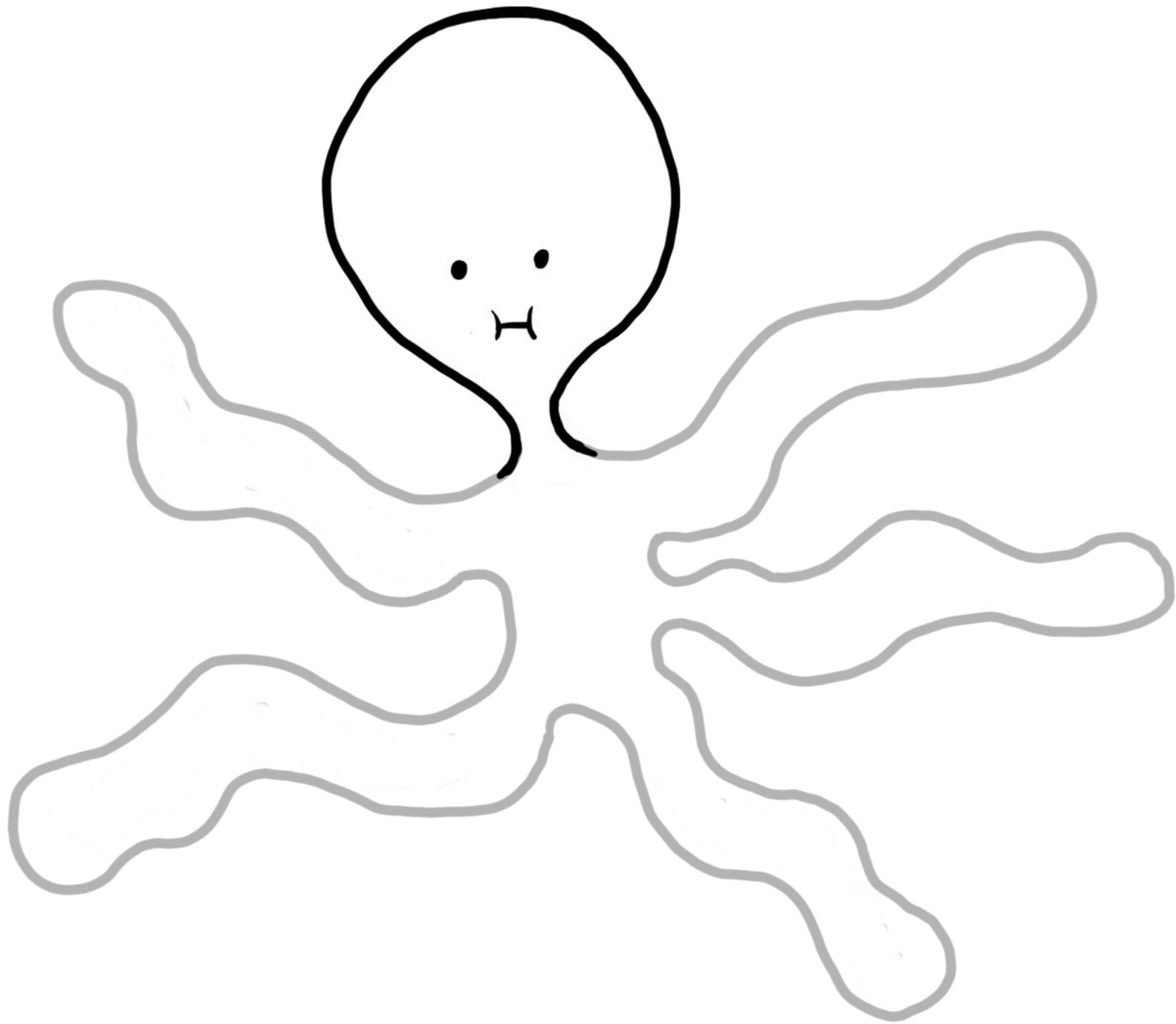
Your Yearning Octopus

Everyone has a Yearning Octopus in their head that determines what they want in life. On the next page is an example of what might be a typical one.



Draw your octopus

On the next page, sketch what yours might look like (with tentacles and segments that represent what really drives you). Really think through what your most prominent drives or fears are, along with others that may lie underneath but not have as much influence.



Dissect the octopus

Think about each yearning or fear, one by one, and interrogate it. Ask yourself why you feel that way, and why you feel *that* way, and keep going until you arrive at where you think the feeling originated.

At the end of each interrogation, ask yourself:

Who really wants this?

Is this a core you thing, or is it derived from the feelings of others? If you believe it's not really you underneath a particular motivation, evict the imposter and replace it with either a question mark or something you think better represents your authentic self.

Go down to Denial Prison

Part of who you really are may be buried pretty deep, suppressed or denied. Try to get in touch with these feelings. Some questions that might help:

Who were your biggest influences growing up? How about today? What did they want for you?

Do you ever act in direct conflict with what you say you want?

What are you curious about in passing that you've never really dug into?

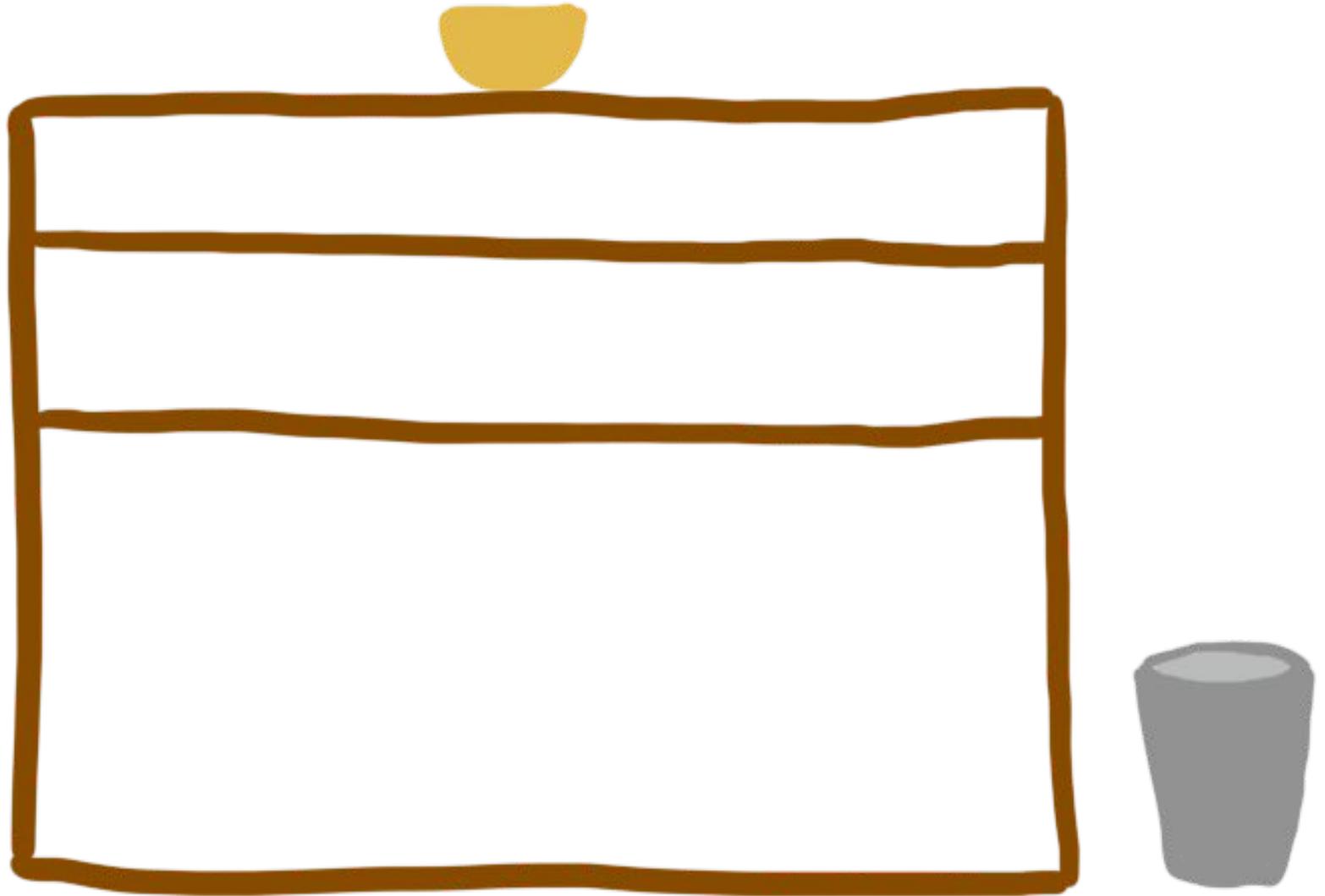
How do you spend your money/time/attention when you aren't working?

Rank your yearnings & fears

Once your octopus represents a draft of the things you feel you really want, deep down, try to rank those things in order of what you care about most. If it helps, you can use the shelf on the next page, which divides things into five categories:

- **Non-negotiable bowl** — things you hope to **guarantee** yourself.
Use this only sparingly.
- **Top shelf** — things to **strive hard for**.
These things will drive most of your career choices, so be selective.
- **Middle shelf** — things to **avoid total failure** at.
This shelf is good for the less-important qualities you feel you can't totally neglect.
- **Bottom shelf** — things to **keep in mind**.
Nice to have, but not at the expense of anything above it.
- **Trash can** — things to **reject**.
Things you're actively choosing to deny.

YEARNING HIERARCHY



Fill in your Want Box

On the next page, with all of this in mind, jot down some potential career options that seem to fit who you really are. Don't worry about what's possible or not possible—the Want Box is simply about all the options that feel right to you.

WANT BOX



Part 2: Your Reality Box

The Career Landscape

List at least 25 career fields that exist today or could exist in the near future:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.
- 11.
- 12.
- 13.
- 14.
- 15.
- 16.
- 17.
- 18.
- 19.
- 20.
- 21.
- 22.
- 23.
- 24.
- 25.

Look at specific game boards

Each career is its own unique game board. For careers in any fields that sound interesting to you, think about what the game boards and rule books might look like today. Ask yourself:

How does conventional wisdom define the rules for this career?

Are there any less obvious factors that are critical to the game?

Example: Beyond acting skills, an acting *career* requires thick skin and a knack for networking.

How have people most recently found success in this area?

Are there any loopholes or shortcuts to be exploited?

Draw your career paths

For the careers that interest you, define a **starting point** and a **success point**:

- **Starting point** — defined by where you are now: your current set of relevant skills, knowledge, and connections in the field
- **Success point** — defined as the minimal level of success you'd need to achieve to feel happy about having chosen the path

Plot these points out for different career options on the next page.



Evaluate your potential

For each career path, think about the distance between your starting point and success point (the **progress** you'll need to make), and the challenge at hand in trying to make that progress. This depends on two key factors:

- **Pace** — how quickly you can progress at playing the game
- **Persistence** — the amount of time you're willing to put in

Progress is a product of these two components:

$$\text{Progress} = \text{Pace} \times \text{Persistence}$$

You'll define these variables in the next step.

List your strengths & weaknesses

Rather than worrying about your specific skill sets, think about the things that will affect your *pace* and *persistence*. Here are some examples:

Pace Strengths

- Chefness (adaptability, humility, the ability to reason independently and trust it)
- Likability, social skills
- Cleverness, savvy
- Lifestyle flexibility (ability to prioritize work)
- Ability to deeply focus
- General talent and speed of learning

Pace Weaknesses

- Stubbornness
- Intellectual laziness
- Tendency to procrastinate
- Other priorities (family, debt, lifestyle balance)

Persistence Strengths

- Patience
- Resilience
- Determination
- A willingness to appear unsuccessful for a good chunk of time

Persistence Weaknesses

- Restlessness
- Need for instant gratification or acknowledgement
- Short runway to retirement
- A fear of failing at something for too many years; an urgency for success

Try to think about what you *really* know to be true about yourself, based on feedback from other people and examples of your actual behavior.

Fill in your Reality Box

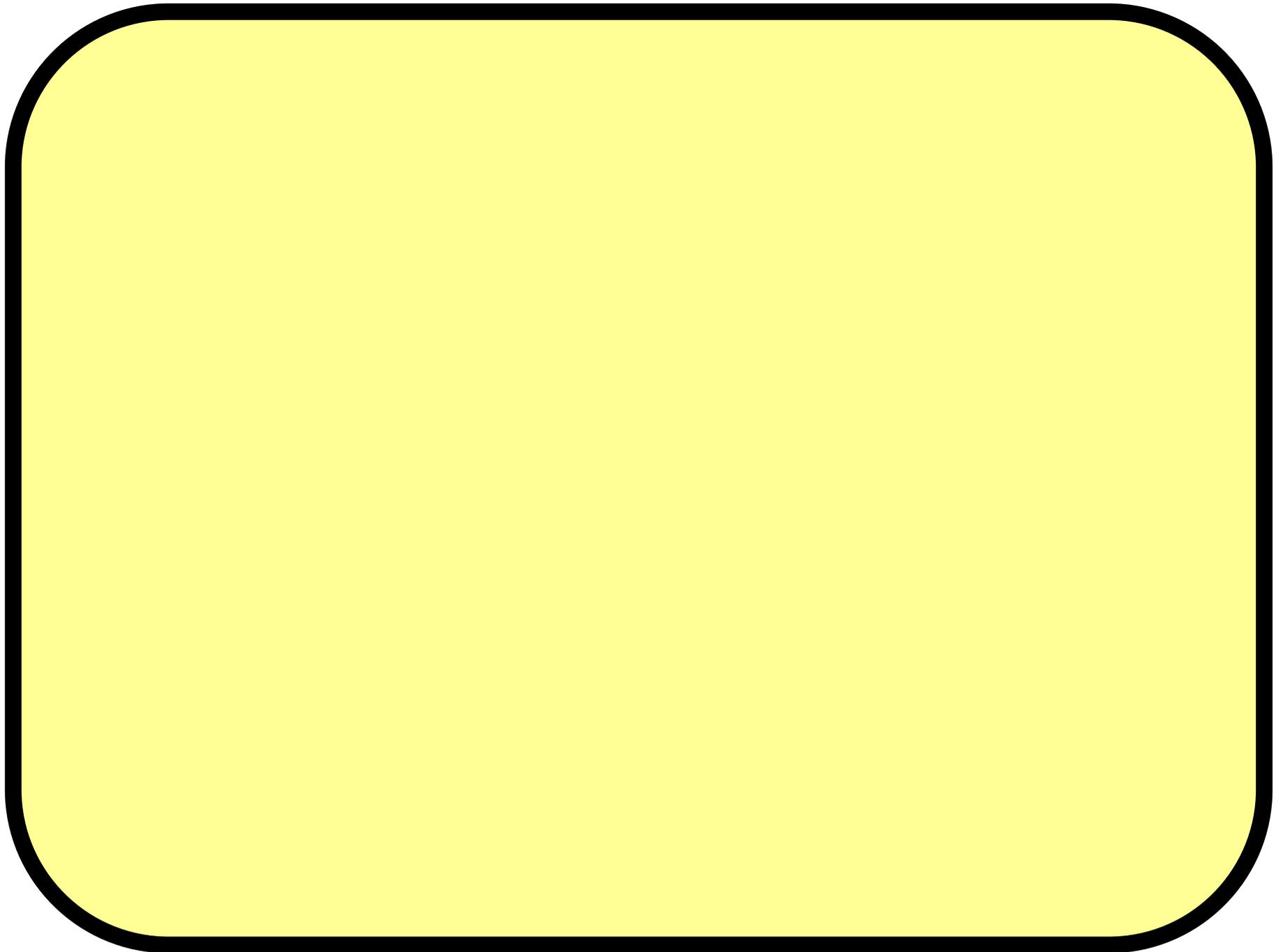
Look at each career path and evaluate your potential:

How can you improve your pace- and persistence-related strengths?

With enough time, could you get good enough at the career's game to reach your definition of success?

If it seems like your **Pace x Persistence** in a career is enough to cover the path's total length, write that career in your Reality Box on the next page.

REALITY BOX



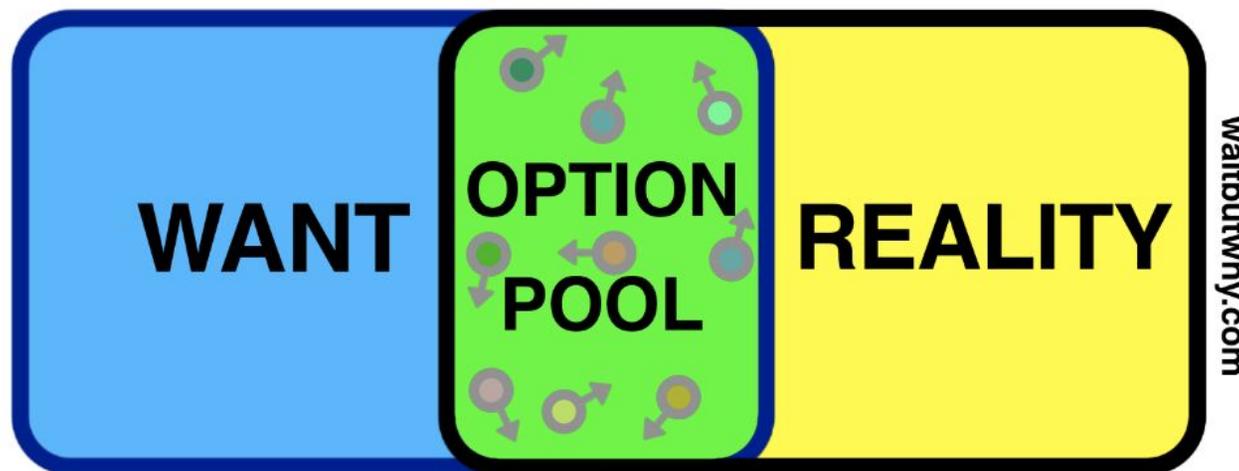
Part 3: Your Option Pool & Picking a Path

Fill in your Option Pool

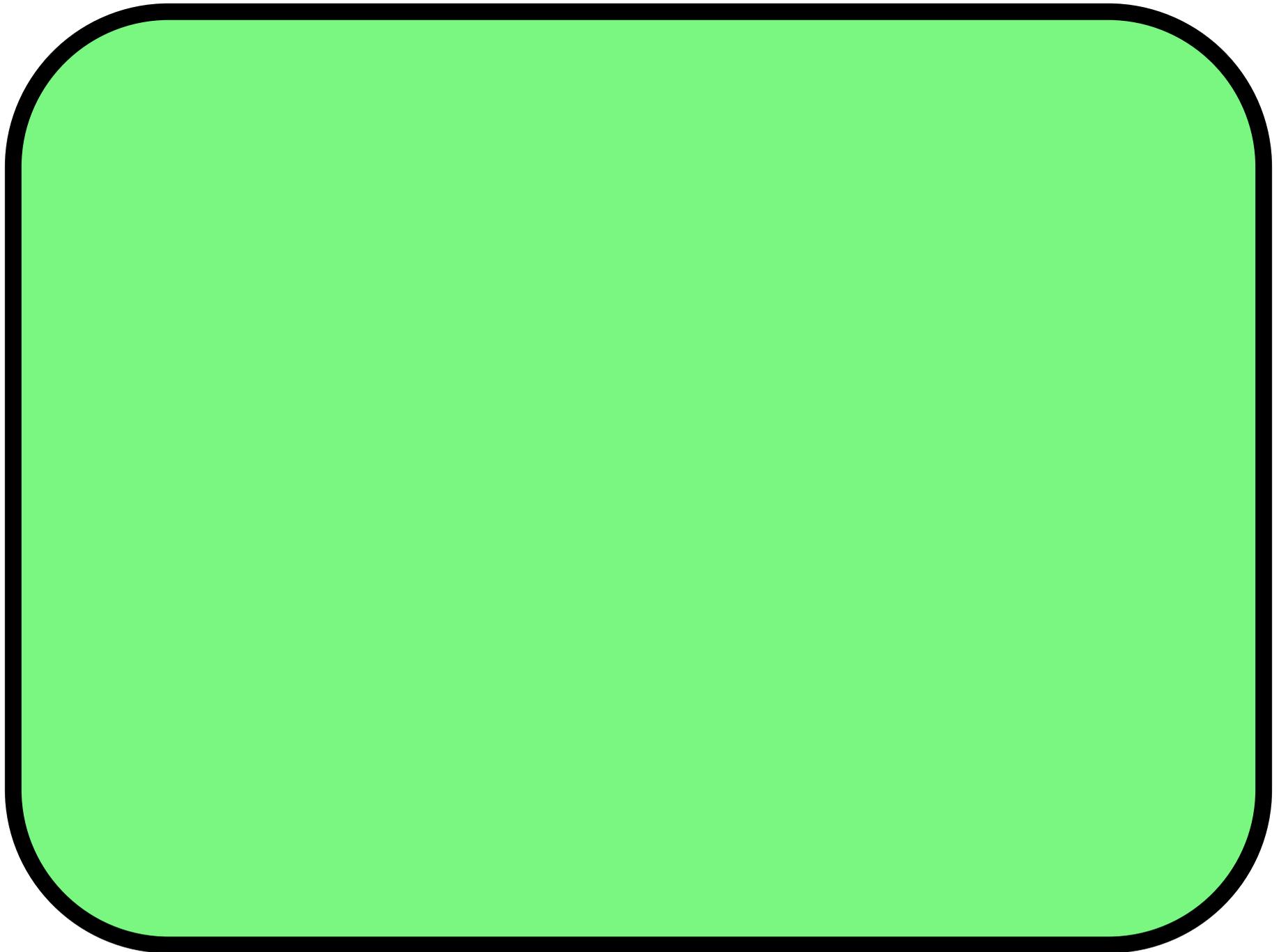
Right now, you have two lists:

- **Want Box** — careers that sound good to you
- **Reality Box** — careers that seem potentially possible to succeed at

These boxes overlap to make your **Option Pool**. Using your Want & Reality Boxes, fill in the Option Pool on the next page with any careers that fall into this overlap.



OPTION POOL



Connecting the Dots
into the Future

Pick a career path

With all of this in mind, **redraw your Career Plans map**. What's your next move? How do you feel about it?

Remember that choosing a path now is just like making a hypothesis. You can't predict where you'll end up, and you can continue to adjust your plan as you gain experience.

Tell your plan to Future You

Draw your future self on your deathbed. Then draw your current self telling Deathbed You about your new mission:

- What you want (the non-negotiable and top-shelf priorities in your Want Box)
- The career path you're starting down (your hypothesis)
- Your reason for choosing this particular macro mission

Do one last gut check: **Is Deathbed You cool with it?**

(If this freaks you out too much, try the opposite. Imagine a 90-year-old you traveling back in time to tell you how your life went. What is Current-Age You hoping to hear?)

Return to this “mission statement” whenever you feel restless or unsure about your macro mission. If you think it's time to make a change, move on to the last section.

The Next Jump?

Find your place on the inertia spectrum

When it comes to change, think about whether you tend to have **cement shoes** or **winged shoes** or something in between.

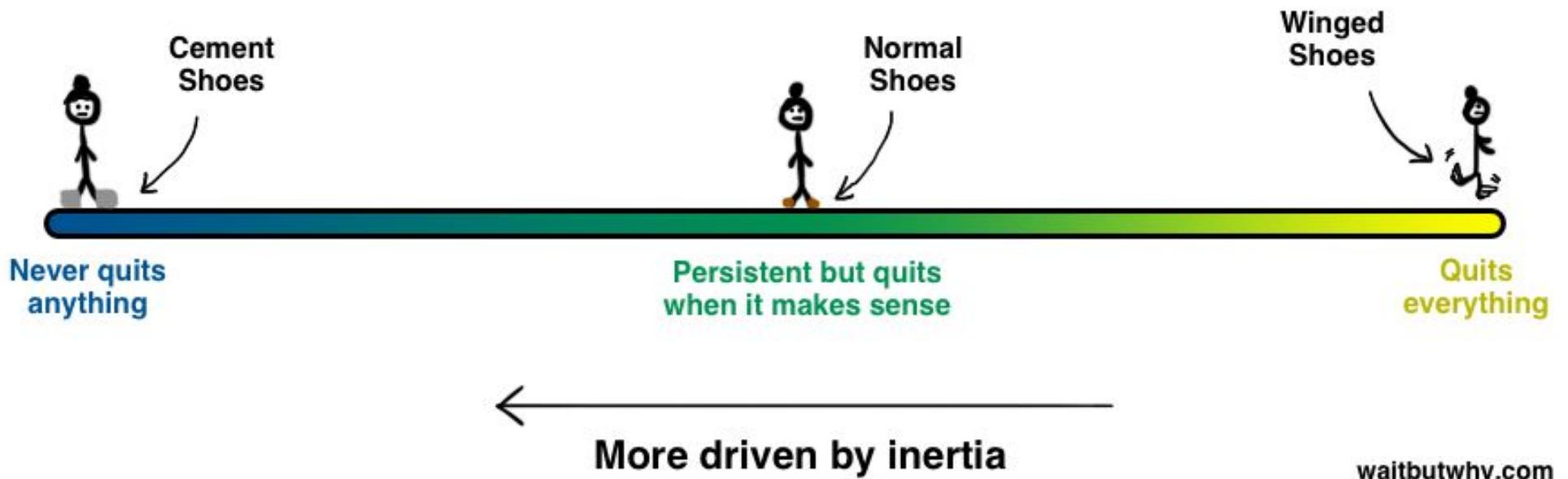
In times of fight-or-flight, which impulse tends to be stronger?

In retrospect, have you stayed in past jobs (and relationships) longer than you should have? Or have you jumped ship too early?

Do you give second chances easily?

Are you more likely to be bored or content?

Understanding what drives you—inertia or restlessness—will help you get better at the game of jumping from dot to dot in your career.



Test your restlessness (wing-footed)

If you're restless by nature, answer these questions when you feel like it's time for a change.

Is someone you admire, fear, or want to impress pushing you towards jumping?

What can you do to make things better if you stay? What have you done so far?

What do you expect to change if you leave? How?

Have you learned something new about the job, the career landscape, or yourself since you started? Do you need to *enhance* your mission, or get a new one entirely?

How does Deathbed You feel about jumping? Will you be proud of your boldness, or disappointed in your impulsiveness?

Test your restlessness (cement-footed)

If you're usually beholden to inertia, answer these questions when you're feeling unsure about things.

Is someone you admire, fear, or want to impress holding you back?

Imagine one year has passed. Where do you instinctively picture yourself? How will your life look next year if you stay on your current path? What might it look like if you make the change?

What's the worst that could happen if you *stay*? What's the best case if you *jump*?

How can you minimize "risk" if you jump? What qualities do you already have that prepare you for the change? Can you make a mission-*enhancing* jump rather than reevaluating your mission entirely?

How does Deathbed You feel about staying? Will you regret dragging your feet, or be grateful that you chose the sounder path?

Moving forward

Self-reflection is a hard thing to do, so well done!

It's even harder to act on our conclusions. If this exercise has brought on any epiphanies about your path, do whatever you can to act on them moving forward. What you want and what's possible are both works in progress and always in flux, so don't forget to come back here and reevaluate things from time to time.

Good luck!