

KILROY CAFÉ

Philosophy for the Modern Age

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tabula rasa

The Virtues of Nothingness

The most fertile soil for creativity and growth is a slate wiped clean.

By GLENN CAMPBELL

What is freedom? It is your ability to change your path based on the circumstances of the moment. If an unexpected opportunity arises to pursue something important, you are “free” if you are capable of taking it, and “imprisoned” if you can’t.

Every time you commit to something in the future, you are reducing your freedom, because when that special opportunity appears your prior commitment may prevent you from following it.

Commitment is necessary, because it is next to impossible to accomplish anything without it. You can’t build a barn, write a song, get a job or maintain a meaningful relationship without committing at least some of your future to the project. If you get over-committed, however, you may find yourself trapped in the goals and assumptions of the past while the rest of the world moves on.

For freedom to be meaningful, you have to have the opportunity to use it. This means you must have regular periods of non-commitment when all your options are open. There have to be times when your life is a blank slate,

tabula rasa, and you are again free to choose a new path.

Young people, drowning in freedom, are usually desperate to get rid of it. They think all they need to do is choose a path, commit themselves to it irrevocably, and everything will work out. They think if they pick a route then burn all their bridges, they have to make it work because they’ll have no choice.

Unfortunately, life doesn’t work like that. There is no path you can choose right now that is guaranteed to work for you years from now. The future is just too full of uncertainty. Your ability to adapt is also limited. Just because you are trapped in a cell and have to survive there doesn’t mean it is the optimal environment for your skills.

The best commitment is the minimal one needed to get the job done. Why commit five years to a project if you can accomplish something similar in six months? A series of “for now” commitments is always better than a “forever” one because it gives you opportunities to change course as conditions warrant.

If you value your freedom, you must never enter into a commitment without having an exit plan. How long is this going to take? How will I escape? How am I going to return control and responsibility to the person or entity who most properly should have it?

Beware of contracts with no ending date or with terms so long that they are meaningless. These are what kill your creativity. You may be “happy” in world that never changes—assuming disaster doesn’t intervene—but you won’t be

getting the most from your abilities.

It is okay for a short-term project to evolve into a long-term one as long as it happens naturally, not forced by external contracts. It is a lot easier to renew a one-year contract than to renege on a five-year one, and at the three-year point, you’ll know for a fact that you’re there by choice and not obligation.

Once you enter into a commitment, your ultimate goal is to put yourself out of a job. You want to discharge your obligations and shift away responsibilities so you can return to that blissful state of nothingness, *tabula rasa*. Once you return there, you can again shop for commitments and perhaps take a totally new direction.

It may sound horrible to enter into a relationship with the goal of getting out of it, but it’s going to happen anyway no matter what you do. Sooner or later, you are going to die, and the people who relied on you are going to have to get along on their own. Why not acknowledge this upfront and plan for your own graceful retreat?

If you “die” many times before your death, you’ll have many times for rebirth and the opportunity each time to create a new life even better than the one before. And if you do it right, no one will notice you have died. You just push responsibilities back where they belong and return to an open state. No debts, no obligations, no expectations.

Tabula rasa.

—G.C.

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