

Things I learned by  
bumbling my way through:

HOW I REDISCOVERED MY  
SELF-ESTEEM  
and  
SENSE OF  
DIRECTION

by CANDICE NINA

## ABOUT THIS ZINE

This zine documents my journey of growth and healing.

I had the wrong expectations about my life and my career path growing up and learned some lessons (the hard way) through life-changing events, university, and later on in the workforce.

Although I did go through some rough times, I eventually DID rediscover my self-esteem and sense of direction.

Most of the ideas and thoughts in this zine were brewing in my head for about a decade or longer, and I'm finally writing them down to give them a permanent home. This was long overdue.

I wrote down some things that helped me get my self-esteem and sense of direction back, just in case you find it useful.

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# HOW I LOST MY SELF-ESTEEM AND SENSE OF DIRECTION

I remember what one of my teachers said to me when I graduated from high school: "You have a well-paved path ahead of you." I think I misinterpreted what that meant back then. I thought it meant that there would be a straightforward career path waiting for me after university.

A couple of things happened not long after I graduated: a divorce and an illness. I did not experience these things directly but was affected by them: I had to withdraw from university after my first year and had no idea whether I could ever return to school to finish my undergraduate studies. I thought there would be a straightforward career path waiting for me after university. But I learned that "university" itself was just a mere assumption.

In hindsight, I can confidently say that everything worked out better than I could have ever imagined. But at the time, I didn't see the path anywhere. All I saw was a void. It felt like I was the only one in there. My ex-classmates were progressing in university. Some of them landed co-ops and internships, and some figured out their careers beyond graduation. I had no idea what I would do with my life, and I felt like I was lagging behind everyone else.

At that time, I stopped using social media. While I think this was the correct decision (I probably would have kept comparing myself against others if I was still active on social media), that also meant I lost touch with many of my friends from high school and earlier. My small circle of friends shrank even smaller.

Fast forward two years and things changed again: the illness I mentioned earlier took a good turn and resolved, and I resumed my undergraduate studies. I transferred to a different university as a second-year student, so I restarted my journey in a country I've never been to before. No family, no friends. Just me. All my classmates were at least two years younger than me - I remember one of my classmates in university being as young as 15 years old. I felt like I wasted so much time already.

That was how my self-esteem degraded over time. I was not (and I admit that I'm still not) good at adapting to change - especially changes that broke my assumptions about the world. That certainly contributed to me losing direction, but there's more:

In university, I majored in "Cognitive Systems." It is a field of study (or rather a convergence of multiple fields of study) that examines and asks questions about systems (both natural and artificial) in which cognition takes place through four lenses: computer science, linguistics, philosophy, and psychology. Since the

major requires you to have both depth AND breadth in expertise (I majored in the psychology-focused stream within the program, but it was required for me to take courses in computer science, linguistics, and philosophy), all students MUST take courses that are outside their comfort zone. Early on, I realized that I can't know it all. I can't be an expert in all four fields as an undergraduate.



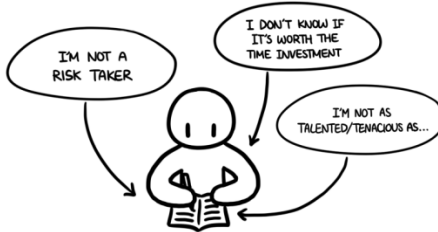
While my program kept me humble, my humility also grew disproportionately out of scale. The more I learned about a topic, the more I realized that I know SO LITTLE about that topic and I need to learn so much more (cf. Dunning-Kruger effect). The more competent I got at something, the less confident I felt. I was doing very well academically speaking, but I was ridden with self-doubt. I didn't know where I was going, not because my "path" was taken away from me, but because I didn't feel like I knew which way was the right one.

Nearly ten years later... I'm doing and feeling much better. The rest of this zine will address how I got back the self-esteem and direction that I lost.

# HOW I GOT MY SELF-ESTEEM BACK

## Temporary suspension of self-doubt

Doubts that thwart your progress might come from yourself or your loved ones. The thoughts mean well; they want to keep you safe. But when you are brainstorming ideas, they will likely try to stop you. I wrote those thoughts down:



And when they showed up while I'm brainstorming ideas...



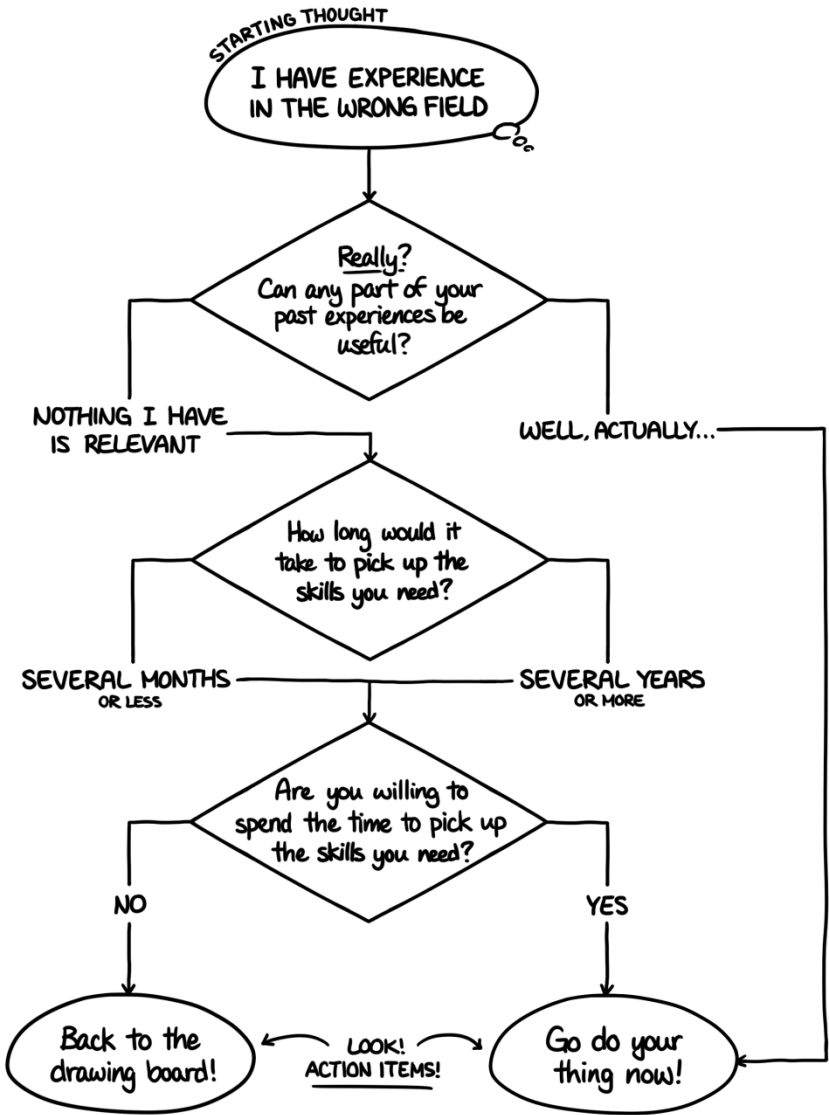
I asked them to wait until I finished brainstorming.

DO YOU MIND WAITING WHILE I FINISH COMING UP WITH WACKY IDEAS?



# From doubts to actions

I learned how to turn the thoughts that stop me from moving into thoughts that help me move forward. Here's an example:





## Weaknesses could be strengths in the wrong context

I used to think I had very few useless strengths and a TON of weaknesses, but I discovered that I might have more strengths than I thought when I learned to reframe:

- 1) Thinking about strengths not as skills but as a lifestyle (How do you think? How do you work? How do you live?)
- 2) Thinking about strengths as pure power - not something that is inherently good. (e.g. too much power can be a bad thing.)



Think of a weakness that is working against you. Can that be a strength in a different context? Here are a couple examples:

"I'm a jack of all trades, master of none." -->

"I can become the bridge between experts."

"I'm never going to be good enough." -->

"I will never settle in complacency."

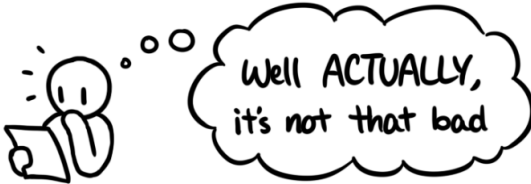
I realized that some of my "weaknesses" were strengths in the wrong context. Part of how I got my self-esteem back was to change the context I was in.

## From shame to humor

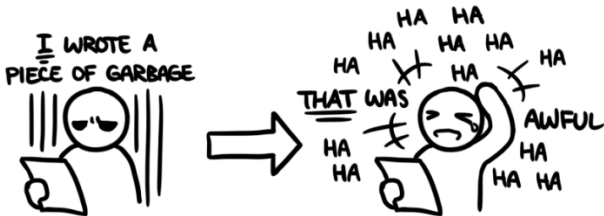
Emotions are not reliable sometimes. One day, you can feel like:



But the next day, you can look at the exact same thing and feel something different, so it's not a bad idea to let things sit for a while:



You are allowed to make fun of your attempts too:



If you can make mistakes (that you would have been initially embarrassed about) into something not cynically but genuinely funny and enjoyable, that's a superpower. I am still practicing this skill while watching someone who has mastered the art:

## The breakthrough after the backswing



The backswing is "the movement of a club, racket, bat, or arm backward to a position from which the forward or downward swing is made" (definition from Merriam-Webster). I first heard about the backswing in the context of career navigation at a conference.

The concept of a backswing in the context of career navigation is that if a breakthrough is the downward swing, it doesn't come out of nowhere - there is a backswing situation that accompanies it. The backswing here can take the form of preparation or an impetus for the breakthrough to occur.

At the conference, I remember the workshop facilitator asking us this question:

**WHERE WERE YOU, WHAT WERE YOU DOING,  
AND HOW WERE YOU FEELING, MOMENTS  
BEFORE YOU MADE THE BREAKTHROUGH?**

Here's my backswing story: I remember the time I went on a weekend getaway to celebrate a 5-year anniversary with my partner... except I never got away.

It was a weekend. I was out of town. But my phone was constantly buzzing with text messages throughout the day (and into the night) from work. I was managing short-staffed shifts at the time.

I was sitting in a hot tub, blankly staring at the trees changing colors as the sun went down. While the view was breathtaking, the thing that took my breath away was stress. I thought to myself, "why am I letting my work ruin this special occasion?" I started to feel indignant about my work with no winning conditions. I felt like I was in a stupid card game, where no good hands were dealt my way. I had to play with only sh!tty (pardon my language) cards or not enough cards. Why do I even need to do this? I asked myself that question. Then came the moment of clarity, the downswing, the breakthrough:

## **NOTHING CAME TO MIND.**

I didn't have an answer to that question. I, in fact, didn't need to do this. There was no reason why I needed to play this stupid game - I was just playing it out of inertia.

So I put my cards down, picked up my long-abandoned self-respect, and got myself a job that aligned with my strengths and interests (that was my winning "home run" moment that came after the downswing).

# HOW I GOT MY SENSE OF DIRECTION BACK

Articulating what I am willing to commit to

I started writing down what I am willing to commit to and eventually started ranking these in order of priority to prepare for situations when I can have one but not the other.



"I will do work that I am proud of and enjoy telling other people about."



"I will do work that changes the way people think about themselves."



"I will not work for a dysfunctional organization that does not care for its employees' well-being."



"I will diagnose and fix problems in organizations."



"My work environment will be relaxed, friendly, and fun."



"I will fight against mediocrity, and for excellence."



"I will accomplish something (can vary in size) every day."



"I will be my own boss."



"I will do work that is good for the world."

# Knowing what direction I DON'T want to go

Sometimes you don't know what you like vs. don't like until you try. I learned a lot through trial and error. Some examples of workplace attributes that were NOT for me were:

One-off projects  
(stuff happens only once)

FOR NEXT TIME  
I WILL DO...



BUT I DON'T SEE MYSELF  
DOING THIS AGAIN IN THE  
FORESEEABLE FUTURE



Operations  
(stuff happens all the time)



Event planning

ON THE MORNING  
OF THE EVENT:



Being the messenger



Good work is rewarded with  
WAY MORE WORK



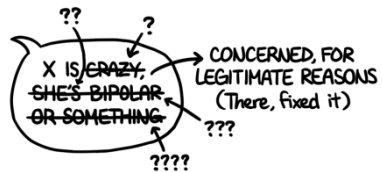
Being on-call



"Everything is a priority"



No mental health literacy



## Putting Myself Out There

I'm not a risk-taking person by any means, but I did take small, manageable, low-stakes risks (where the risk = getting my ego hurt) and started putting myself out there. This took me a few tries across several years, but I eventually found a safe place to showcase my work to people who don't know me personally. In my case, it was in the form of a 30-day project.

What is a DayKnight\* 30-day project?:

"Have you ever told yourself 'I'll do it someday' and later realized that someday may never come unless you make that day today? Want to clean out your garage? Get in shape? Learn a new skill? Write a story? DayKnight 30 day projects provide a place to commit to a personal project and share your goals, progress, and delays with a supportive community."

(from: <https://day9.tv/dk30-about>)

The community cheered me on as I took on smaller drawing projects. That acted as a springboard to take on larger, multi-month projects (like making zines!). Over time, with the community's support and encouragement, I discovered a direction I actually wanted to pursue.

\*Individuals who are part of the Day[9] community are known as the DayKnights. Day[9] is "an evangelist for gaming, e-Sports and the gamer lifestyle." (from: [day9.tv/about](https://day9.tv/about))

## The multi-pronged approach

Fresh out of high school, I expected that my career path will just "reveal" or "present" itself. Now I recognize that it is something I need to build. I also understand that career stability is illusory and elusive, so instead of searching for the "one right path," it is worth pursuing **multiple paths** at all times.

I make a point of doing a "possible worlds" exercise every once in a while. A **possible world** is a "complete and consistent way the world is or could have been" (from [Wikipedia](#)). I use it to explore my possible futures. Here are some examples:

1) Based on my interests, experience, demand, etc. what would I most likely pursue?



2) In a world where the industry I am in or was planning to enter is GONE, what would I pursue instead?



3) In a world where I WILL NEVER FAIL, what would I pursue?





# THE RESULT

As I regained my social life in my fourth year in university and started interacting with more people and hearing their stories, three things "clicked" for me.

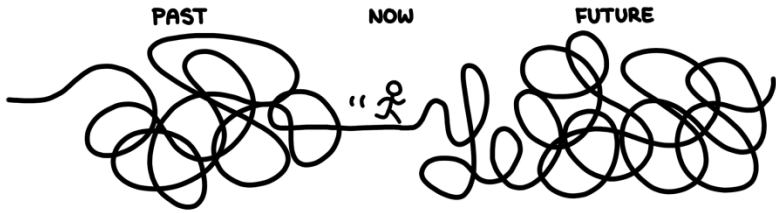
1) I thought it was just me who had a long and winding career path, but after catching up with friends after several years, I realized that I wasn't the only one. Life throws curve balls to WAY more people than I thought.

2) I also thought that having a nonlinear career path made me inferior to everyone else who found their way earlier in life. As I listened to more stories told by more people, it made me remember the concept of kintsugi.



Kintsugi or Kintsukuroi is the "Japanese art of repairing broken pottery by mending the areas of breakage with lacquer dusted or mixed with powdered gold ... As a philosophy, it treats breakage and repair as part of the history of an object, rather than something to disguise." (from [Wikipedia](#))

3) I also thought that things would stabilize once you figure out what you want to do, but I realized that the long and winding road does not end:



It just keeps going because everything changes. Sometimes it's the environment that changes. Sometimes it's the people who change. Some people change industries and start from scratch.

I'm proud of people who have the gumption to pivot and restart, and I'm also proud of my career path that looks more like a spaghetti dish more than a path, and I am learning to celebrate the imperfections along the way. The cracks in my life are now lined with gold.

Over time, I have come to understand that I can only give a finite number of f\*cks so I started prioritizing what I should give a f\*ck about. I think I actually still give as many f\*cks as much as I used to, but I give less f\*cks on things that don't matter and instead give more f\*cks on things that do matter (e.g. well-being).

# SPECIAL THANKS

- I learned how to manage my self-doubt and how to think more flexibly and analytically about my future from: "The Pathfinder" (Nicholas Love), "StrengthsFinder 2.0" (Tom Rath), "Designing Your Life" (Bill Burnett & Dave Evans), and "Pivot" (Jenny Blake). I haven't mastered it by any means, but I am practicing and improving on it.
- Thank you to my parents who showed me how to roll with the punches and still do what you've got to do in times of adversity. You are an inspiration.
- Thank you to my high school biology teacher who taught me arguably THE most important skill I possess today: discipline. Although my path may not be neatly paved, now I have more confidence that I can make my own path with tenacity and the discipline that I learned from you.
- Thank you to Day[9] and the DayKnights: one of the most welcoming, supportive communities I've ever seen on the internet. :dayheart:
- Thank you to my life partner who convinced me to get out of a toxic situation for a full year with undying determination and reasoning that is sharp as a scalpel.
- Thanks to Kimberly Geswein for the "Gloria Hallelujah" typeface, and...
- Thank YOU for reading!

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