

KILROY CAFÉ

Philosophy for the Modern Age

©2008, Glenn Campbell, PO Box 30303, Las Vegas 89173
familycourtguy@gmail.com www.KilroyCafe.com



Issue #17

July 22, 2008

44.533°N, 10.867°E

So you're having an Existential Crisis

(Welcome to the club!)

By GLENN CAMPBELL

So you're having an existential crisis. You've been looking in the mirror and asking yourself "Who am I?" Due, no doubt, to an unfortunate series of events, you now find yourself at a personal crossroads and don't know which way to go.

It's nothing to be ashamed of. Millions are suffering from the same disorder. Unfortunately, society doesn't offer much sympathy or support. "Don't you know who you are?" people seem to say. "Are you some kind of dummy?"

But you're no dummy. Just recognizing the existence of a crisis is evidence of your intelligence. Most people coast through life playing simple-minded roles: fireman, fashion model, soldier, mommy. You at least have the presence of mind to know you have a choice and that none of the available roles quite fit.

An existential crisis is sometimes known as a "mid-life crisis." You recognize in a panic that your life is half over and that most of the things you intended to accomplish aren't happening. That's when middle aged men dump their wives for younger girlfriends and invest in the proverbial red sports car. Alas, it rarely solves the problem.

Turns out, a mid-life crisis can happen at any stage of life, and the earlier you start having them the better. There's nothing wrong, in fact, with being in continuous existential crisis from the age of 14 until you die. All of us are facing a deadline, and none of us can afford to waste much time.

Not knowing what to do with ourselves is an inherent condition of life. Things are easier when we have no

choice—when our career, relationships and goals have all been arranged for us by others. Once we recognize our ability to choose, we start to fret about it and wonder if we are accomplishing all we are capable of.

The pain is numbed when we fall into a role and it is reasonably successful. Someone playing the role of "doctor" or "corporate executive" doesn't usually think much about where his life is going because the role itself takes up so much time. It is mainly when we are unsuccessful in our chosen pursuits that a crisis emerges.

And thank God for that! Our most important and potentially rewarding decisions are prompted by failure. Had you been successful in your original plan, you would have continued along a fairly bland straight-line track. Failure forces you to make a bold departure. It is riskier than the straight-line route, but the potential is also greater.

So what should that departure be? In the midst of a crisis, everything is on the table. Should you chuck it all and join the Peace Corps? Should you change your sexual orientation or even your whole gender? (Chop, chop, snip, snip!) Or should you just quit the game altogether, opting for a clean or messy suicide? (A plea from the living: Please don't be messy.)

While it is useful to think about all the theoretical options, your practical choices are much more limited. You're not going to get a sex change, and it would be silly to check out. It would also be unwise to completely change your career. If you are already a doctor, it doesn't make much sense to try to become a lawyer. It is just too costly to start over from scratch.

Listen up because this is the important part: You've got to stick with what you know and what you're already good at.

Okay, your life up to present may have been an abject failure, but you've still built up certain skills and assets, and you shouldn't abandon them lightly. In a crisis, there is often a temptation to completely discard the past and start over in an entirely new field. Unfortunately, you're probably a babe in this field and are competing against those who grew up there and are much better at it than you are.

The first step to resolving your existential crisis is making a cool, objective inventory of your assets. For example, there are things you have been doing since your earliest consciousness—singing, writing, drawing, etc. These skills are part of your nervous system, so it is senseless to try to purge them. You need to be working *with* your native skills, not against them.

The solution to your crisis lies not in radical change but in rediscovering to your roots. What do you do well? What are you already set up for? What product comes out of you effortlessly? It is easy to devalue your native skills because they come so easily to you, but in the context of society, they are still remarkable and shouldn't be dismissed.

Once you complete an honest inventory, an existential crisis usually resolves itself. There are things you can do with your current resources and opportunities and things you can't. Obviously, you are going to focus on what is doable right now.

You don't need to know where your whole life is going to make adequate decisions for the moment. You just look at the real opportunities in front of you and choose the one that's most consistent with your past and your core abilities.

Just work with what you have.

—G.C.

KilroyCafe.blogspot.com