

# The Healthiest Attitude: 'I'm Not Lost; I'm Exploring!'

---

*Not all who wander are lost.*

J.R.R. Tolkien

Usually, I would not use the word “profound” to describe bumper sticker sayings. But several years ago, I did indeed stumble upon a bumper sticker phrase that struck me as quite insightful in the paradigm shift it implied. I was driving near the Minneapolis/St. Paul International Airport when I spotted the message, which said: I’m Not LOST; I’m EXPLORING!

It was good for a quick chuckle at the time. But not long after that, it began having a significant impact on me and the college students and recent graduates I work with in my career counseling practice, many of whom define themselves using such negative descriptors as “completely lost” and “clueless.” I can relate. That is how I saw myself when I was in college and, especially, right after I graduated with my bachelor’s degree in mass communications (journalism) in 1990. I did not know what I wanted or who might want me at the time. I managed to extend my sports-writing internship for almost a year following graduation, in hopes that buying time would buy me a clue. It didn’t. So I made—or, more accurately, I was forced to make—one of the most demoralizing decisions of my young life: I moved back home with my parents. (Note to my parents: Nothing personal!)

I can still vividly recall the summer of 1991, even though my intuitive, big-picture personality typically prevents me from

remembering yesterday or even an hour ago in much detail. I was not exploring at that time; I was lost, clueless. And that just made me depressed. (I did not see it this way at the time, but as I look back on the summer of '91 now, I am certain I could have been diagnosed as clinically depressed.) I felt like a total loser. And though my parents were incredibly supportive, in my mind I imagined their voices asking painful questions like “What’s wrong with you?” and “Why can’t you find a job?”

When you are in the “lost” frame of mind, you do not think about exploring; you do not see your situation as an opportunity. You just want to get “un-lost”—pronto. You will take the first decent job offer that comes along because anything is better than feeling like an idiot again tomorrow, and the next day, and the next. Indeed, you will run into this trap throughout college, especially early on during your freshman and sophomore years as you try to figure out what major to select and what career you will ultimately pursue. The pressure will come from two distinct sources:

- **Outsiders.** Your least favorite part of any vacation from school will be the annoying question you get from your parents, relatives, friends, and others: “So ... what are you majoring in?” Your “I don’t know” or “I’m not sure yet” reply will bring not a pat on the back, but a look of puzzlement and perhaps even ridicule on each questioner’s face. You will then return to school to find that every one of your friends (or so it seems) has everything figured out where majors and careers are concerned—leaving you as the only one (or so it seems) who is “completely lost” and “clueless.”
- **Yourself.** “Why can’t I figure this out?” you will admonish yourself. “What is wrong with me? Why am I the only one (or so it seems) who is so lost and clueless?”

There is only one problem with this hurry-up-and-choose tendency: The short-term “solution” of picking something—anything—just so you can get un-lost will only lead you deeper into the woods months or even years from now, when you will be even more lost than you are now. That is what happened to me. I was able to escape my parents’ house four months after I got back there by taking a job at a small publishing company in Madison, Wisconsin. And while the job was not a bad one and I learned a lot in my time with the company, just shy of three years later I was lost again. I tried using the same sort of shortsighted strategy I used before to get un-lost: I went to graduate school to pursue my master’s degree in journalism. It seemed sensible at the time—I was a journalist, after all—but I lasted only one semester before I realized I was just walking in circles.

Then—and only then—I finally did something right: I started looking around. “I’m not lost,” I thought to myself (perhaps not in those exact words, but you get the idea); “I’m exploring!” Only then could—and did—I see that I did not need to limit myself to the world of writing and publishing. I had other skills and interests, and a desire to impact the world in other ways. Ironically, a master’s degree in counseling became the path for me. (I say it is ironic because in journalism school they teach you *not* to get involved; in counseling school, they teach you *how* to get involved!)

On many campuses these days, there is no such thing as the “undeclared” or “undecided” major anymore. Instead, students who have not yet chosen a major are referred to as “open majors” (University of Iowa) or “exploratory majors” (University of Connecticut) or “deciding majors” (Xavier University of Louisiana) or \_\_\_\_\_. When you are defined in the negative—as in “undeclared” or “undecided”—you begin to see yourself in the negative and to be viewed by others in the negative. But if you are defined in the positive—as in “exploring” or “decid-

ing”—you begin to see yourself in the positive and to be viewed by others in the positive.

Are you “lost” and “clueless” right now? Perhaps you should be “deciding” instead—seeing yourself not as someone lacking direction but as someone finding direction.

**Highlight This:** One person’s “clueless” is another person’s “deciding.” The first descriptor suggests you are stuck; the second says you are moving. You are not lost; you are exploring!