

- “I’d be happy to follow my passion...if only I knew what it was.”
- “I worry that if I commit to one career, I’ll lose out on something better.”

If any of these sound like you, don’t bother with classic career guides; like my GPS, they’ll have you meandering in circles, stumped at dead ends, or just profoundly lost. The fact is, as we’ve become accustomed to our over-managed, overstimulated 21st-century lives, we haven’t realized that there might be another—decidedly low-tech—way to get onto the right path.

I suspect you’ve been advised to think rationally about your career decisions. That would be a big mistake. You might expect people with damage to the emotional parts of the brain, presumably free from the distractions of emotions, to be brilliant decision makers. Quite the opposite. Though they retain full use of their rational faculties, such patients are tragically indecisive, endlessly debating logical pros and cons, unable to choose any path. Their brains send out random, contradictory, and confusing directions, like my rogue GPS. It turns out that, as Jonathan Haidt writes in *The Happiness Hypothesis*, “it is only because our emotional brains work so well that our reasoning can work at all.”

Although humans are the only beings on Earth with advanced linguistic skills, any

The way to do that is to make your rational mind not the master but the tracker of your own irrational instincts.

Tracking Your Inner Animal

I was trudging down the traditional career path of academia when my students, weirdly, began offering to pay me for advice. I didn’t think of it as a career path; I’d never heard the phrase “life coach,” and if I had, I’d have gagged like a sommelier drinking Kool-Aid. But I loved my students, and I loved helping them build happy lives. My emotional self trotted cheerfully forward, enjoying the scenery, while my rational, verbal GPS argued, puzzled, and worried:

Animal brain: *Me like this!*

Rational brain: *But what are you doing?*

Animal brain: *Me like this!*

Rational brain: *Is it secure? Is it respectable?*

Animal brain: *Me like this!*

Rational brain: *Get a job, dammit!*

This process continues even now, with my animal self migrating through unknown territory as my logical mind struggles to make sense of where in God’s name I’m going. How grateful I am to be familiar with what one expert describes to me as deductive/predictive animal tracking. It’s helped me calm my nerves and follow my animal into a thousand joyful and productive career events I

If you find no tracks—if the trail runs cold—return to the last hot track, make another educated guess, and repeat. Using these steps, you can follow your wild self as it instinctively migrates toward your perfect career:

STEP 1

Discover your hot tracks.

Grab a pen and make a list of every time you remember being utterly, happily absorbed in an activity, no matter how odd. This focused attention is the hot track you’re looking for, evidence that your animal self was here.

For example, my client Adeline loved helping her mother bake, playing doubles tennis, assisting her husband as he built his business, and raising money for AIDS research. Dora was happiest while shopping, throwing ceramic pots, and gardening. Lily loved singing in her church choir, going to parties, volunteering for political candidates, and working at a large marketing firm. Write your own list of hot tracks from the past.

STEP 2

Predict the next track.

If you were tracking bison in the wild, you might notice they migrate along predictable grassy routes. Geese, by contrast, follow a route from one marshy area to another. To predict the next likely step for your inner animal, scan your environment for conditions that seem likely to foster that happy state of absorption, but are just outside your regular routine. Try an activity within that sphere to see if it’s a hot track.

Warning: Many people assume that a hot track is leading them toward a job directly related to that track. Unwittingly, they start heading to the nearest “logical career.” For example, Adeline’s love of baking initially led her to train as a pastry chef. Dora’s shopping passion convinced her she should work as a retail buyer. Lily decided to run for office. Perfectly reasonable predictions—but all these trails froze. Adeline found culinary school boring, Dora loathed working with retailers, and Lily became exhausted and disillusioned running for city council. The lesson: Even if you’re pursuing a course that’s perfectly rational—a job that makes total sense on paper—emotions like boredom, hopelessness, anger, or anxiety mean the trail’s gone cold.

ON SECOND THOUGHT...

• **JOSIE NATORI** • FOUNDER AND CEO, THE NATORI COMPANY

After nine years as a banker on Wall Street, it was all beginning to feel too easy. I considered different ventures: a car wash, a McDonald’s franchise, a scuba diving company. Then a friend sent me some peasant blouses from the Philippines. I took them to a buyer at Bloomingdale’s, and she suggested I turn them into nightshirts. That’s when I hit on the niche of doing innerwear based on outerwear. The day you don’t feel that rush of excitement, it’s time to move on. The goal is to have every bone in your body engaged in your life.

animal with a brain has the automatic capacity to form preferences. It’s an irrational sense of “Yes, this!” that takes a migrating goose a thousand miles to its perfect nesting ground, or a whale to its calving waters an ocean away. To find—or rather, design—your perfect career, you have to let your animal self lead you through a wilderness of choices.

never dreamed possible.

Deductive/predictive tracking goes like this: Locate a clear footprint left by an animal you’re trailing—a so-called hot track. Make an educated guess, based on the animal’s previous behavior, about where the animal would probably have gone next. Proceed to that spot. Look for more tracks.