

Do You Need To “Justify” Your Choices In Life?

By Christopher R. Edgar

I want to tell another story about my friend, the computer programmer who wants to be an interior designer, because my conversations with her raise so many fascinating questions about the challenges surrounding career transitions and pursuing one’s calling.

My friend is fully ready to start her own interior design business—she’s got the ambition, the startup capital, and the contacts to make it happen. But a few fears are holding her back. One of her fears is that she won’t be able to explain why she went into her new field.

When she told me this, I was a little confused. “Isn’t it because you really like decorating people’s houses?” I asked. “That doesn’t sound hard to explain.”

“But I like to do a lot of things,” she replied. “That doesn’t justify choosing interior design. I like snowboarding, but that doesn’t mean I should quit my job and become a professional snowboarder.”

“Is that what people will say when you tell them you enjoy interior design?” I asked.

“I know my Dad will,” she said. “He’s very logical, and he’ll come up with some argument for why I shouldn’t be a decorator that I can’t answer.”

I then realized what the problem was. My friend believed she’d be obligated to explain to others why she made her career change, but that wasn’t all. She also thought that, if she explained her choice, others would come up with arguments for why her choice was wrong or irrational. If she didn’t think she could adequately answer those arguments, she believed, she had no business changing her career, even if she had a strong desire to do so. It was almost as if she were a lawyer or a White House press secretary—someone whose job involves justifying their position to others and answering hostile questions attacking that position.

I could identify with my friend’s perspective because I used to share it. I not only felt I was required to “defend” my decisions in the academic and career realms—I even felt obligated to defend my choices regarding matters of “personal taste” like the furniture in my apartment.

For instance, I don’t have a television. A while back, when someone was about to visit my home for the first time, I found myself wondering how I’d explain the absence of a TV. Perhaps I’d say I thought watching TV was a waste of time. However, I thought, someone might be dissatisfied with that explanation and push back. They might ask questions like “what if someone else wants to watch TV?” or “well, you have a computer. Do you look at any websites just for fun? What’s the difference?” I would think of logical answers to those questions, but then I would come up with a whole raft of further “counterarguments” against my “position.” Deliberating on how I’d “defend” a decision as seemingly insignificant as my choice not to have a TV could take up hours of my time.

Doing all this rationalizing and justifying in my head was hard, unrewarding work, and eventually I got sick of it. One day, while pondering how I’d justify the car I just bought to other people, I got so frustrated that I said, out loud, “I’m tired of having to explain everything I do!”

But as I expressed my frustration, a question occurred to me: do I really *have* to explain everything I

do? There's no law saying I have to justify the car I drive, the food I eat, the career goals I pursue, and so forth. There's no reason why I must be able to defend every action I take against every possible criticism other people might level at me. When and why, I wondered, did I decide that I had this obligation?

As I contemplated this issue, memories of my childhood surfaced. I remembered that my parents, when they didn't like something I did, would ask me why I did it. "Why did you leave that sock on the floor?" they'd ask. "Why didn't you do the dishes?" "Why did you stay out so late?" And so on. I wanted to please my parents and make sure they kept loving and caring for me, so I'd try to come up with a reason that satisfied them. But they wouldn't be satisfied, and I'd feel ashamed and ignorant.

Those memories were painful, but they held the key to understanding why I had this need to rationalize my every decision to others. In spending time devising convincing reasons for everything I did, I was just repeating behaviors I'd learned in childhood. When someone asked me why I did something, I'd try to give a reasonable explanation to protect myself against the shame I felt when I couldn't "explain myself" as a child. I would even plan in advance the conversations I'd have about my choices in life, to make sure I could respond adequately to criticism and avoid getting stumped and feeling guilty.

But this strategy didn't make sense in the context of my adult life. To illustrate, I didn't need people I'd just met at cocktail parties to love and care for me—I could live without their approval. However, just as I did as a child, I'd feel the need to make sure I could logically explain my every choice to those people. I was following a strategy geared toward ensuring that my parents loved me—even when dealing with people who weren't my parents and whose love I didn't need.

Further, I recognized that my strategy of explaining myself hadn't even benefited me as a kid. My parents, when they asked why I did something, really meant that they *didn't like what I did*. It wasn't as if they would see what I did, ask for an explanation, and then decide how they felt about it based on whether my explanation was reasonable. When they asked me to "explain," they'd already made up their minds that they were unhappy with what I did—they didn't actually care about my reasons.

In sum, I realized I was following a strategy in dealing with people that had been useless all of my life. Thus, I decided to experiment with just telling people what my choices were, without any justification. For instance, when I left the legal profession, I predictably got a bunch of questions from people about why I did it. Some of these questions were pretty pointed. "Aren't you throwing your career away?" one person asked. "Have you had some kind of breakdown?" another asked. Instead of explaining that I hadn't gone insane and listing all my legitimate reasons for making a transition, I simply said "no." Answering without backpedaling, apologizing or rationalizing felt empowering, and I was surprised at how many people respected my answer and my decision.

If you're thinking of making a career transition, but you're afraid you won't be able to justify your decision to others, I have an experiment for you to do. For a moment, take your attention off the arguments you must make to convince others that your choice is right, and place it on why you feel the need to justify your choice at all. Ask yourself what will happen if you don't satisfy others with your justifications. Also, ask yourself whether you're really accomplishing anything by convincing others that your life decisions are right. Developing awareness around these issues may make you feel freer to make the change you want.