

# The Life Coach

Francine Campone

## Baby, You Can Drive My Car

Getting back on the map when we  
drive ourselves off the road to change

**I ZOOM THROUGH LIFE** under the impression that I'm in the driver's seat and I know where I'm going. While this may be true for much of my day to day existence, it is less accurate when I'm behind the wheel of an actual car, trying to find my way around unfamiliar territory. A recent experience at a meeting in Florida reminded me of how lost we hard drivers can actually get.

After a long day of working on a collaborative project, I got into our rental car with three colleagues. Knowing that I am quite gifted in the extent to which I lack a sense of direction, they promised to help. The short version of the story: it took us two hours to make what should have been a twenty-minute trip. When we realized we had passed our first turn off, we pulled in and asked for directions to the airport, knowing that our hotel was just the exit before. We followed the directions provided by a gentleman with a British accent, only to find ourselves headed in the direction opposite the one we needed to get home.

Florida is a state which has had a great influx of federal highway building dollars. So it seemed that every exit of every turnpike led to another turnpike, with no avenue to turn around and right ourselves. At one point, we managed to exit onto a neighborhood street and pulled into a gas station. To maximize accuracy, I asked two of my colleagues to go in together and get directions. They emerged several minutes later, laughing like crazy. It seems that the fellow who gave the directions spoke Spanish. While Edith could follow quite closely and catch all of the specifics, Lillian could only make a quick translation of the numbers, not sure if "cinco" referred to blocks, miles or palm trees. When we did get ourselves back on the interstate going in the correct direction, a sign noted it was 22 miles back to our original starting point. My laughing colleagues knew how far astray we had gone and had made a pact to not tell me.

As one of the group pointed out, between the four of us we had six graduate degrees, including two doctorates, and decades of professional experience in leadership positions. So how could we have gotten a simple trip from here to there so wrong? While it was a great bonding experience and we laughed ourselves silly, I thought her question warranted some reflection. Our misdirected car journey was not unlike journeys we all undertake off-road. We set out with a specific destination in mind (e.g. more self-discipline, a neater office, finishing that degree), believe we have a pretty

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good idea of how to get there and find ourselves side-tracked again and again. One wrong turn leads to another. There's a frustrating sense of being somehow prevented from getting back on track. We find ourselves just driving around in search of someone to provide directions we hope we can understand and use. Our unplanned scenic tour of South Florida offered several lessons which could apply to life journeys as well as to getting lost on the road.

1. It's all in the details. Our first wrong turn was a result of inattention: none of us noticed the little sign at the intersection which pointed to I-95. When we asked directions from the British gent, what we all noticed was his charming accent. What we all failed to notice was that we hadn't specified which airport we wanted to approach. It's so easy to be distracted by the prospect of getting home or reaching a personal goal and it's so difficult to anticipate the details needed to get there. Clients often start with somewhat general goals: "I want to be kinder to my spouse" or "I want to be more organized at work." In order to take successful steps toward the desired end result, it's necessary first to have a more specific direction. What does "kinder to my spouse" look like or sound like? It's not enough to talk about what one wants to *not* do (e.g. I don't want to yell at him when he forgets things). It's essential to articulate what one wants *to* do (e.g. I want to thank him when he remembers to do things).
2. More isn't always better. While two of my colleagues went into the gas station in the belief that teaming would ensure better, more detailed recollection, only one had the skills necessary to get the needed information. I'm sure the moral support was helpful but their laughing return to the car pointed out the fallacy of relying on more rather than better. Frustration, exultation at finally getting off the turnpikes and onto a street, and growing weariness with driving led me to jump at the first available opportunity rather than considering a number of options. There's a phenomenon that often occurs when people start to make small changes in their lives and see improvements. What happens is they accept the small changes as indicators that they're on the right track and they pull back from the continued effort needed to make the changes sustainable. A couple of weeks of eating more vegetables and getting more exercise doesn't guarantee a change of lifelong habits which will be maintained over the next decades. A new practice of ten minutes of mental down time in the morning and afternoon at work doesn't necessarily roll over into a better approach to the stresses of the job. These changes, like the directions we received in Spanish, point out where to turn around and provide some encouragement. But we may still have miles to go before reaching the real destination.

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3. Laughing improves everything. As the facilitator of the project we were meeting about, I had been directing the group's work all day. When the interstate sign noted we had gone more than 22 miles out of our way, I started to laugh, commenting that if there were a Guinness World Record for wrong-headed driving, I might qualify. My colleagues eagerly jumped in to share the credit. Instead of seeking to make anyone wrong, we cheerfully celebrated our shared misadventure and all contributed to getting back on the right track. In many coaching conversations, clients criticize themselves (and mean it) or they look to pin responsibility for their challenges on others. Instead of pushing away one's lacks or shortcomings, we can celebrate them and, in so doing, acknowledge the beautiful human qualities that keep people needing each other. Laughing allows us to appreciate that life is sometimes ridiculous and we are sometimes ridiculous. There's a nice synchronicity there if we can only appreciate it.

I doubt that I'll be tapped to be a designated driver for this group any time soon. And I'm grateful to my colleagues for this opportunity to reflect on my driving skills, on and off the road.

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