

# taking the tun

**M**Y FRIEND KEELY invited me to co-lead a workshop focused on personal growth and process work that ended with each participant “anchoring” the gains they had made by descending into an underground cave.

My job during the cave trip was to be present in the main cavern near the entrance to a twenty-minute “crawl” through a tunnel-like section of the cave in case some participants turned back. I would be there to escort them to the main entrance of the cave.

It seemed easy enough, but I am claustrophobic due to a childhood experience I don’t want to think about.

We had a stalwart group and all members began the crawl. As I looked into the depths of the now-empty tunnel from my post, something came over me. I was actually considering doing the unthinkable, (known as “impulsivity” in the world of ADHD) and taking the tunnel. Before thinking too much, I entered the tunnel’s beckoning maw and began the crawl.

I had earlier given up my helmet to a crawler, so I went bare-headed. I soon became lost and disoriented. I banged my head on a rock, began bleeding, and approached panic as I realized I was pretty much lost. Fortunately, Keely came to my rescue and offered me a choice—going forward or going back out the entrance of the tunnel. Once again, I chose the way forward.

**F**rom that moment on, I moved through a brutal rendition of my worst nightmares, squeezing through spaces little more than two feet in diameter. As I arrived at the most difficult point, I had to twist and turn while moving up through the tiny enclosure. I looked up to see Keely holding her hands above my head, trying to prevent me from hitting my head a second time. In retrospect, it seemed like her hands were placed as though delivering an infant during birth. And the choked tunnel seemed much like a birth canal. Would I be successfully delivered through this transition into the outside world?

My determination not to give up and leave the tunnel brought to mind a similarly stressful transitional epoch in life: young adulthood. Choosing a path, deciding on a career, and selecting a college major—all are part and parcel of defining ourselves during this era, so that we have a solid and positive answer when someone asks us, “What do you do?” or “What is your major?” or “Who are you?”

During this challenging life stage, underlying psychological issues, stresses, old psychic wounds, and even psychoses can emerge. The stress of this transition is brutal. Like my journey through the tunnel, this young adulthood transition arouses our deepest fears and showcases our greatest weaknesses.

For my part, at that age, I struggled with undiagnosed ADHD and depression. Starting, failing, changing paths, and starting again—all came in recursive fits and starts on my journey to adulthood.

Symptoms such as difficulty with sustained attention, distractibility, and disorganization were first explained as lack of ambition or motivation. An enlightened college counselor later diagnosed my symptoms as “minimal brain dysfunction,” an early forerunner of the ADHD diagnosis. The early stimulant medications left me anxious and jumpy. Ultimately, I relied on sheer determination and a set of regimented behaviors to bring me the marginal grades which enabled me to graduate. And so began another set of decisions as I sought a career path.

**T**he initial choice of a path and then its pursuit are difficult enough. But think of the regret and self-recrimination you might feel if you were to spend so much energy pursuing your chosen path, only to realize when you are far along that it was the wrong choice, or that you can’t complete it. Imagine how difficult it is to turn around in the middle of challenging programs like med school, engineering, or information technology, and begin again.



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Yet that is far better than continuing down a path that is not the right one. Consider how much worse it would feel to look back near the end of a career and realize you pushed yourself through a tunnel that led to a place of little opportunity for happiness or fulfillment—and that having made the commitment, you now have little option but to continue the journey.

Over the years, I've encountered many young people who are aware that their parents' unhappiness resulted from their premature commitments. Those young people are in no hurry to do the same. They are the millennials who trend toward taking far longer to decide on careers, relationships, and parenthood.

And what of those who never enter the tunnel? They stand at the entrance and wonder about the consequences, the work, the effects of wrong choice, and for a long time they do little or nothing. What can help this "failure to launch" (FTL) group? How can we empower these immobilized young adults to take a series of first intentional and productive steps?

There is no magic bullet, since FTL can result from many different and combined factors. However, effective intervention requires discovering the genesis of each individual's chronic failure—a craft that requires the ability to effectively create a trusting dialogue and successfully pose relevant questions.

Has this person grown "too big to fail" by having insufficient opportunities to try and fail in earlier years? Does he now fear stepping out and risking failure with one of the most significant choices of his life?

Does this person struggle with fear of failure or rejection—a syndrome William Dodson, MD, terms *rejection sensitive dysphoria*?

Or perhaps she has experienced too much unprocessed failure in life resulting in a belief system and self-

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concept that tell her, "I am a failure—there's no need to try further."

Some people may lack models for developing visions, sequencing and executing plans to accomplish their goals, as well as critical thinking skills to refine and redefine the path along their journey.

Learning the role of helping in the tunnel has to be difficult. Keely spoke encouraging words, advising me when I was going off course, about to bang my head again. She simply said, "You will need to struggle through parts of this tunnel—and you can do it." It was totally up to me to decide and motivate myself to continue crawling.

At times it seems impossible to get through to a person compressed at the squeeze points of a difficult journey. Sometimes all that we can do to help a transitioning young adult is to empathize with the difficulty of the journey, offer models and tools, and, as Mark Twain said, "shout on encouraging words" as they take the more crucial steps along an uncharted, personal trail.

When I ultimately emerged on the other side, I joyously splashed through a freezing underground stream. Nothing was as hard as deciding to take the tunnel, except passing through the tunnel itself. But everything beyond seemed simple by comparison. As crazy as it sounds, I would do this all over again. And I would wish for everyone who faces challenge, adversity, and possibility that they experience the singularly wondrous feeling that comes from persevering and coming out on the good side of it all. 🗨

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