

THE TRAINS OF REALITY by Stewart Blackburn

“Reality is the only thing that’s real”
—Wade Watts, *Ready Player One*

Let’s play a game. Pretend that you’re on a train moving around under a city. You have chosen this train because it is heading where you thought you wanted to go. But, suppose you changed your mind and have now decided to go to a different place. As you have done hundreds of times before, you get off of this train and find a train that’s going where you now want to go and you get on it.

Now, the game of this is to spot how this train analogy applies to your daily life. Sure, it’s easy to see that if you change your mind, you can do something differently. But, there is something deeper here. When you are on a train, you have chosen that particular train because you expected it to take you where you want to go. You don’t have to power that train; you don’t have to steer that train; you don’t even have to know what is between where you are now and where you want to be. You just choose the train and stay on until you’re there. Either at the end or somewhere before then you have to decide whether or not that’s where you really want to be. You have to notice whether or not your destination or goal pleases you. In the train system you can only change your destination at certain places where the train stops. The rest of the time you’re just along for the ride. In daily life we have a few more places where we can change, but most of the time we just have to live, at least for a while, with the consequences of our choices.

Getting married is much like getting on a train. Once the train leaves the station you are committed to ride for a while without being able to easily get off. And each station that the train stops at is a moment when a different choice could be made, not necessarily easily but it’s a possibility nonetheless. Some of these stops are hubs, where usually there are a number of other possible trains to choose from and many other destinations connected with each train choice.

There are some things that need to be pointed out here. The first is that at each station there is no mandate to stay on the train you’re on now. You have the power and the right to get off the train and to choose an entirely different train going in a different direction. It may be daunting and disorienting to change trains, but that’s how we find our heart’s desires. You can change your entire journey, if you like, at any station along the way. You are not bound by any of the preceding trains or stations you have experienced, except that right now you’re on one particular train or in one particular station. All your decisions right now need to begin with where you are at this present moment.

Secondly, each succeeding station has different trains that run through it. This means that your conceivable choices of where to go change with each station you reach. Some potential destinations can be reached by different combinations of trains and some by only one train, which, if missed, means that that destination is no longer a potential one. The implications of this vast array of changing choices means that you have to stay aware of where you want to be going. There are people at each station who can tell you their opinion about the various destinations and how to get there, but no one will tell you which one you have to take.

And thirdly, all of the trains will run whether you choose them or not. Your reality is not based on the vast number of possibilities; it's based on which trains you choose to ride and which stations you get off at. None of the trains is better than any other, but some you will enjoy more than others.

For me, the most useful aspect of this train metaphor is that it reminds us that the past doesn't have much to do with what our future is. Sure, we might want to understand just how we got to this place. But, the truly valuable information is about where we want to go and how we would like to get there. We aren't beholden to where we've been as we make our choices for our future. A well-held focus on where we are going is significantly more useful than any reconstruction of our past.

I find that as I age, I look back at significant points in my life and marvel at my brilliance or, more likely, my stupidity and pluck whatever wisdom I can from my experiences. But, that's a luxury of age. It is not really any more important than imagining new adventures, whether physical or mental.

The prospect of changing trains, altering my life patterns and trajectory, is still a thrilling vision. Each potential train-change changes my reality and enhances my life. Each one that I actually take is even more enriching!

"I knew I was going to take the wrong train, so I left early."
Yogi Berra

"Many times the wrong train took me to the right place."
Paul Coelho

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