

milestones, waypoints, and tollgates

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IT'S ASTONISHING HOW MUCH EFFORT WE SPEND ON figuring out where we are. From simple devices that counted the rotations of a wagon wheel to an integrated ring of satellites in precise orbits, we pour more and more effort into knowing our exact location on, over, or under the earth. The human need to know precisely where one is has made and lost fortunes and caused and ended wars.

We also strive to know where we are in the journeys of our lives: a metaphysical navigation that is both harder and simpler than the celestial kind. There are three types of measures that may help in figuring out where on life's journey one happens to be.

Milestones

Milestones are as old as civilization. They mark the distance traveled or remaining to travel from one point to another. They tell you one more thing; that you are in fact on a traveled road—sometimes very welcome information if you've been lost or have forgotten where you were headed.

Waypoints

Waypoints mark not just a distance traveled; they mark a specific point along the journey, usually one at which you make a change of course. Waypoints can be concrete—when you reach the grocery store, turn left and go up a hill. Or they may be an abstract set of coordinates on trackless waters, telling sailors it's time to change direction and avoid hidden dangers that can be sensed, but not seen beneath the surface.

Tollgates

Tollgates are about a journey's process rather than direction or distance. In project management, a tollgate is a step that must be completed before one can do something else. You must turn in your tax return if you want to get a refund and buy a new couch. You must obtain an FAA airworthiness certificate before you can put an aircraft into service.

Tollgates tell us we have accomplished something in our lives, and now we're free to consider where to go from here.

How can we use these markers in our journeys?

Milestones are handy if you're on a known course, are sure where you're headed, and want to know your progress. Only 14 credit hours left until that diploma is in your hand or 150 mortgage payments down and 210 to go. Such milestones can be reassuring that we're making progress toward clearly-held goals.

Waypoints are a lot like milestones but are more flexible. They're sometimes harder to recognize, but useful when you do. Our children are now plunging through adolescence. It's clear that the great handoff has started and that as they're picking up the pace, we're starting to slow down. This is a waypoint for us; where do we turn from here? As my wife put it, "I think I'm going to start living in a different room in the house, probably my sewing room." That metaphorical room change is a waypoint for her; she gets to make a course correction and change the emphasis in her life from work and motherhood to creating quilts and textile designs. It's not a new journey, but it is certainly a change of course.

Considering whether one has encountered a milestone or a waypoint can help illuminate the nature of the journey and cause one to ask (for the hundredth time, perhaps), "Am I on course? Do I know where I'm headed? Is that really where I want to go?"

For each of us, the answer will be different at different times. Today's milestone may be tomorrow's waypoint; but considering the question can help us find our path and make the needed changes to stay on track.

Finally, there are tollgates. When you've been through one, you know it. They are fees we must pay, barriers that must be encountered before we're free to proceed. A quadruple bypass was a tollgate for me a couple of years ago. For others it might be obtaining an advanced degree, a real estate license, or going online for the first time. Rites of passage in age, marriage, education, societies, or religious organizations are tollgates in many cultures.

The reward of getting through a tollgate is the chance to say, "I've done it!" And the freedom to ask, "Now what?" Tollgates can be joyous and sometimes heartbreaking, but they mark a fundamental change from one stage of the journey to another.

I'm far from claiming that these markers are the only ones we need to discern our path of choice over rocky ground, desert, swamps, and oceans. But they can be useful terms to help us keep or regain our sense of direction as we journey through the new millennium.



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