

My Dancing Landscape

In his incredible lectures on complexity theory, Scott Page discusses how to find the optimal solution to different types of problems. To use his example, let us imagine that there are three types of problems, or landscapes, and that the optimal solution will be finding the peaks of these landscapes.

In some situations, there is one optimal solution. In this situation, we have what we can call the Mt. Fuji landscape, where there is a single peak and we can find this peak by following a simple idea of “continue in the direction that goes up.”

In other cases, we have what can be called a rugged landscape. In these, there are multiple peaks. In these situations, if we followed the strategy of “just keep going up” we will often find a local peak, but not the global peak. We might imagine that we have found a good-enough restaurant, but not the one that we would like the best. In this case, it would be wise for us to first explore the landscape before settling on a peak and calling it the highest. We can first explore, and then exploit the information we obtain to help find the tallest peak.

In the third landscape, there are also local peaks and valleys, but the landscape also changes over time. In his terminology, this is a dancing landscape. In a dancing landscape, one is better advised to explore for longer before exploiting this information and settling on a particular peak as the highest. Further, since the landscape is changing, it is advisable to continue to have some portion of one’s time spent exploring.

In reaching the midpoint in my life, I have discovered that I have changed over time and I will most likely continue to do so. My preferences, my interests, my goals have all changed over time. In addition, the world around me is constantly changing. In other words, I believe we live in a dancing landscape.

I have long believed, even before I had the words, that one should continue to explore new areas. I have long believed that one should continue to grow, to push the boundaries of what one knows, what one believes one can do, what one has experienced, and the people one knows. There’s a restlessness that characterizes much of my personality, a gypsy spirit that pushes me down new pathways. Like much of my personality, this restlessness is double-edged and I don’t know how to have one side without the other. Part of the struggle that I face in being an authentic human is though I know that everything has a season, I often don’t know when the seasons begin and end. I’ve left good relationships and activities that I should have nurtured, and nurtured some that were weeds. I clung to ideas about who I really am and resisted changes, even though the changes were for the better and ultimately allowed me to become who I am today. Perhaps I still am. It’s tough to know when to hold on, when to let go, when to swim against the current, and when to float along with it.

I believe we live in a dancing landscape, and on this day I want to say thanks to those who share my music and to those that have taught me new rhythms. I value you all.

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