

the bus driver metaphor



It can be useful in a whole series of ways to think of ourselves as bus drivers! We're driving the bus of our life. We have a whole bunch of often unruly passengers in the back. The passengers are our thoughts and feelings. At times they can be a nuisance. Sometimes they shout out stuff like *"You're a useless driver"*, or *"You're going in the wrong direction"*, or *"There's too much racket in the back here. You should stop and come to deal with it"*, or a whole series of other potentially distressing/distracting feelings and mind noise. There are at least half a dozen useful lessons that can be taken from this metaphor.

- 1. *the importance of values:*** It's hugely important for our health and wellbeing that we mostly focus on driving the bus in the right direction. The "right direction" is determined by our values, by what truly matters to us. Our values are the compass bearing which we need to steer by. Values are things like *"I want to live with courage and kindness"*, or *"I want to look after my health"*, or *"I want to prioritise those I love"*, or *"I want to develop my interests and talents as far as I can"*. As the Hasidic rabbi, Susya said *"When I get to heaven, God will not ask 'Why were you not Moses?'. He will ask 'Why were you not Susya? Why did you not become what only you could become?'"*
- 2. *distinguishing values and goals:*** It's often helpful to distinguish values and goals. Values are likely to be compass bearings we use to steer by for many decades. We don't typically prioritise those we love for a while, or look after our health for a while, and then get to a place where we've arrived and can stop doing it. Our current goals however we may well reach. So we might want to arrange a surprise birthday party for our partner or train to run a marathon or target other goals that are an expression of our values. Hopefully we'll achieve these goals and then we'll want to make fresh ones. It's like driving on a particular compass bearing (values) and seeing that some way ahead in this direction is a landmark (goal) – maybe a tree or a hill – that we can steer towards for a while. The landmark is the goal we head for as we follow our values compass. When we reach it, we look ahead on our compass bearing for the next landmark to steer towards. Values are the way that we walk, the direction. Goals are checkpoints on the journey.
- 3. *values are not about the future, they're about now, today:*** This way of distinguishing ongoing values from checkpoint goals, leads to another realization. We live or don't live our values right now, today. Values (unlike goals) are not some destination that we're travelling towards. Values are the way that we are travelling, the way we make our journey. If my key values are to live with determination and courage, or with love and kindness – this is the direction, the way I want to travel. It's like saying *"I've decided to travel North-West. This is the compass bearing I'm going to follow."* I can start to follow the compass of my values right now. If I'm heading North-West right now, then I'm doing it. It's not something I have to wait for or work towards. It's now. As the Christian mystic Angelus Silesius put it (possibly rather over-bluntly) *"In good time we shall see God and his light' you say. Fool, you shall never see what you not see today!"* While the founder of Soto Zen, Dogen, said *"If you cannot find the truth right where you are, where else do you expect to find it?"* and the poet T. S. Eliot wrote *"And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."*

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4. ***self-definition by values not goal-achievements:*** Fascinatingly there's a good deal of evidence that living a life rich in meaning and values promotes resilience in many different situations. For example, this has been found for people facing chronic pain, cancer, everyday life stresses, and for overall levels of wellbeing.
5. ***mindfulness and dealing with unruly "bus passengers":*** As I commented initially, we're driving the bus of our life. We have a whole bunch of often unruly passengers in the back. The passengers are our thoughts and feelings. At times they can be a nuisance. Often our best strategy is simply to continue driving in the direction of our values and goals. Some of the passengers we all have at times in the back of our buses are anxiety, fear, depression, anger and worry. Mindfulness treats these mental contents as passing flow – like traffic noise outside our window, or like leaves floating past on a stream. Our task is to let the mind noise be, let it flow by. It's not what's important. It's part of being human and we can treat ourselves gently as we struggle with mental content. So our task is to realize that the mind noise is a normal part of the human condition, to treat ourselves with gentleness and encouragement, and to focus on what matters – whether it is our values and the tasks we have set ourselves, or (in meditation practice) our breath, our bodies, and other objects of attention in the present moment. There's much evidence to show that developing this ability to be mindful can help us in many overlapping and important ways.
6. ***sometimes it's helpful to listen to a "bus passenger":*** Although the best strategy is usually to simply let the passengers shout while we get on with "mindfully" driving the bus in the direction of our values, sometimes it's useful to listen and respond to a "passenger". For example **a.)** when the "passenger" (the thought or feeling) repeatedly shouting in the back of the bus is due to trauma we have experienced earlier in our lives. In this situation it's good to keep driving the bus in the direction of our values, but when we have time it is often worth stopping to "emotionally process" the troublesome memories with their associated – currently inappropriate – upsetting imagery and feelings. High scores on the revised Impact of Event Scale suggest that this processing approach might be relevant. **b.)** when the thought or feeling is raising an issue that needs to be problem solved. The worry tree diagram can be a helpful way of clarifying whether we should be problem solving or simply mindfully allowing the passenger thought or feeling to shout away while we get on with driving our values-directed bus. The handout on problem solving also explores this issue more thoroughly. **c.)** overlapping with this issue of when to problem solve and when simply to be mindful is the question about whether a particular set of thoughts & feelings are more useless noise or useful responses. Emotions that are useful and appropriate responses to a situation are likely to be helpful in energizing adaptive actions – see the handouts on emotions are like a 'radar system' and emotions, 'arriving' & 'leaving' for more on this.

It can often be useful though, as a reminder, to think of the bus driver metaphor when we're trying to get on with the busy-ness of every day life while struggling with difficult thoughts and feelings. These ideas are adapted from Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT). Below are details of two interesting ACT self-help books.

Harris, R. *"The happiness trap."* London: Robinson, 2007.

Hayes, S. & Smith, S. *"Get out of your mind & into your life."* Oakland: New Harbinger, 2005.
