

The Advantages of Closing a Few Doors

John Tierney The New York Times (2008)

THE NEXT TIME you're juggling options—which friend to see, which house to buy, which career to pursue—try asking yourself this question: What would Xiang Yu do?

Xiang Yu was a Chinese general in the third century B.C. who took his troops across the Yangtze River into enemy territory and performed an experiment in decision making. He crushed his troops' cooking pots and burned their ships.

He explained this was to focus them on moving forward—a motivational speech that was not appreciated by many of the soldiers watching their retreat option go up in flames. But General Xiang Yu would be vindicated, both on the battlefield and in the annals of social science research.

He is one of the role models in Dan Ariely's new book, "Predictably Irrational," an entertaining look at human foibles like the penchant for keeping too many options open. General Xiang Yu was a rare exception to the norm, a warrior who conquered by being unpredictably rational.

Most people can't make such a painful choice, not even the students at a bastion of rationality like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where Dr. Ariely is a professor of behavioral economics. In a series of experiments, hundreds of students could not bear to let their options vanish, even though it was obviously a dumb strategy (and they weren't even asked to burn anything).

The experiments involved a game that eliminated

the excuses we usually have for refusing to let go. In the real world, we can always tell ourselves that it's good to keep options open.

You don't even know how a camera's burst-mode flash works, but you persuade yourself to pay for the extra feature just in case. You no longer have anything in common with someone who keeps calling you, but you hate to just zap the relationship.

Your child is exhausted from after-school soccer, ballet and Chinese lessons, but you won't let her drop the piano lessons. They could come in handy! And who knows? Maybe they will.

In the M.I.T. experiments, the students should have known better. They played a computer game that paid real cash to look for money behind three doors on the screen. (You can play it yourself, without pay, at tierneylab.blogs.nytimes.com.) After they opened a door by clicking on it, each subsequent click earned a little money, with the sum varying each time.

As each player went through the 100 allotted clicks, he could switch rooms to search for higher payoffs, but each switch used up a click to open the new door. The best strategy was to quickly check out the three rooms and settle in the one with the highest rewards.

Even after students got the hang of the game by practicing it, they were flummoxed when a new visual feature was introduced. If they stayed out

of any room, its door would start shrinking and eventually disappear.

They should have ignored those disappearing doors, but the students couldn't. They wasted so many clicks rushing back to reopen doors that their earnings dropped 15 percent. Even when the penalties for switching grew stiffer—besides losing a click, the players had to pay a cash fee—the students kept losing money by frantically keeping all their doors open.

Why were they so attached to those doors? The players, like the parents of that overscheduled piano student, would probably say they were just trying to keep future options open. But that's not the real reason, according to Dr. Ariely and his collaborator in the experiments, Jiwoong Shin, an economist who is now at Yale.

They plumbed the players' motivations by introducing yet another twist. This time, even if a door vanished from the screen, players could make it reappear whenever they wanted. But even when they knew it would not cost anything to make the door reappear, they still kept frantically trying to prevent doors from vanishing.

Apparently they did not care so much about maintaining flexibility in the future. What really motivated them was the desire to avoid the immediate pain of watching a door close.

"Closing a door on an option is experienced as a loss, and people are willing to pay a price to avoid

the emotion of loss,” Dr. Ariely says. In the experiment, the price was easy to measure in lost cash. In life, the costs are less obvious—wasted time, missed opportunities. If you are afraid to drop any project at the office, you pay for it at home.

“We may work more hours at our jobs,” Dr. Ariely writes in his book, “without realizing that the childhood of our sons and daughters is slipping away. Sometimes these doors close too slowly for us to see them vanishing.”

Dr. Ariely, one of the most prolific authors in his field, does not pretend that he is above this problem himself. When he was trying to decide between job offers from M.I.T. and Stanford, he recalls, within a week or two it was clear that he and his family would be more or less equally happy

in either place. But he dragged out the process for months because he became so obsessed with weighing the options.

“I’m just as workaholic and prone to errors as anyone else,” he says. “I have way too many projects, and it would probably be better for me and the academic community if I focused my efforts. But every time I have an idea or someone offers me a chance to collaborate, I hate to give it up.”

So what can be done? One answer, Dr. Ariely said, is to develop more social checks on overbooking. He points to marriage as an example: “In marriage, we create a situation where we promise ourselves not to keep options open. We close doors and announce to others we’ve closed doors.”

Or we can just try to do it on our own. Since conducting the door experiments, Dr. Ariely says, he has made a conscious effort to cancel projects and give away his ideas to colleagues. He urges the rest of us to resign from committees, prune holiday card lists, rethink hobbies and remember the lessons of door closers like Xiang Yu.

If the general’s tactics seem too crude, Dr. Ariely recommends another role model, Rhett Butler, for his supreme moment of unpredictable rationality at the end of his marriage. Scarlett, like the rest of us, can’t bear the pain of giving up an option, but Rhett recognizes the marriage’s futility and closes the door with astonishing elan. Frankly, he doesn’t give a damn. 