

What You Wanted
By
Daniel E. White April 13, 2026

What if what you think you wanted doesn't turn out to be what you really wanted?

The movie *Jay Kelly* ends with Kelly facing the camera asking for a do-over. He has come to realize that his life has not turned out in the way he had expected, especially his relationships with his family and colleagues.

Wanting do-overs has been a habit for Jay. We have seen him at work, asking for another take several times after a filming sequence was completed. He claims to have a "feeling" about how to do the scene better. The people around him rarely agree to do so.

Kelly is famous, a Hollywood star beloved by his fans. With his wealth, he can "make things happen," and his movies make money because he is in them; his appeal is box office magic. He has two daughters, one grown and working as an early childhood teacher and the second about to leave home for college. He has ex-wives and is not currently in a romantic relationship.

His manager and his publicist are devoted to sustaining his success. They benefit financially from it, even though their work has fractured their personal lives. Both seem ready to reclaim what they feel they have lost by devoting so much of their time and energy to Jay's image and success.

As Kelly was beginning his career, an older professional asked him if he wanted to be a star. Kelly hesitated slightly but then said yes. The old pro then told Kelly that he would need to become good at acting in two ways. First, he had to be good at being the person in the role, spending his professional life pretending to be someone else. Then he would have to be good at playing himself.

In the film, Kelly warns a minor character about how hard it can be to play oneself.

The movie made me think about a friend of long-standing who took me to lunch to tell me about the changes he was making in his life. A school administrator, he was chucking that role to become a full-time independent school teacher and coach. He was leaving the school where we both were working and divorcing his wife. He bought a sports car and got a dog.

He could barely conceal his glee "After all," he chortled. "Life is not a dress rehearsal," (dropping in a line attributed to Nietzsche). It was hard to tell which made him happier—the prospect of the life he was choosing for himself or his commitment to pursue what he believed would make him happier.

I am still in contact that friend. He has retired from the roles to which he had moved so many years ago. He has been writing poetry in a unique style, often about events in his life.

What comes through in the poems is both a thoughtfulness about those events and also an underlying appreciation for how these events have shaped his life in a manner to his satisfaction. No Jay Kelly regrets.

Novelist Thornton Wilder, in "Writer's at Work," published in the *Paris Review*, wrote "nothing ever had to happen the way it did, and no one ever knew how things would turn out." He noted how easy it can be to forget that much, if not most, of what happens in a life has occurred in freedom; there is no script.

People of a Certain Age, we know the truth of Wilder's observations. We believe in free will, the liberty each of us has to choose. We need only think back to events in our own lives to understand ways in which what we chose at a certain point produced whatever were the subsequent events of our lives. Indeed, many of us, as teachers or parents, have offered the young people in our charge the admonition that "choices have consequences."

Chances are that you and I know people like Jay Kelly. Kelly recognized that he had chosen career over family and discovered that the relationships he had foregone because of his choice were not recoverable. He paid the costs for being what he thought he really wanted to be. Might there be real-life professional athletes, politicians, corporate titans, etc. who have made similar choices and reached a point later in life where they have questioned the choices they made?

Life seldom provides do-overs. Weren't many of us enthralled with Omar Khayyam and his "Rubaiyat" in our younger days?

"The Moving Finger writes; and having writ,
Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it."

We sounded erudite and wise as we recited the verse even as we often acted in ways that belied any clear understanding of what it meant. Important, though, is that the wisdom does not preclude acting differently in the future. Khayyam said that "what's done is done." What's left unsaid is "what comes next is up to you."

As Wilder noted, there is no script to our lives. No one can ever know for certain how things will turn out. What a frightening and freeing thought!

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