In the U.S., most people tend to think of progress as a straight line. One begins with a goal, sets and implements some objectives to attain it, and then reaches it. This perspective has its roots in American values of pragmatism and efficiency; what is the shortest distance between two points? There is nothing inherently incorrect about this view. On the other hand, it can be both disappointing and disheartening when one inevitably hits a setback. That is, there is only one place to go: back to the beginning. During such moments, giving up can be a tempting option.

An alternative, and more realistic, vision of progress is shaped like a bolt of lightning. In pursuing a goal, especially one that involves a challenge that necessitates changing one’s usual view of the world and/or way of doing things, one takes two steps forward. Along the way, new perspectives are learned and new skills developed. Then, when one encounters a barrier, one steps back into the familiar. Such a model may seem counterintuitive on the surface. After all, Americans are taught to fear regression. On the other hand, from a big picture angle, this perspective has a safety net—and a substantial degree of hope—built into it. Yes, there is a step taken backward, but not nearly as far. Rather than fall all the way back to square one, with new outlook and capabilities under one’s belt and recent successes as motivation, one has a better chance of acting on the courage to pick up the pieces and take on the demands of the current situation. Accordingly, one takes another two steps forward in a more sustainable direction.

This point of view also is conducive to a greater degree of compassion for both oneself and others. Using the definition of compassion from Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) as the act of balancing unconditional positive regard with right judgment, regression to the familiar can be reconceptualized as one’s effort to take back a sense of power when faced with ambiguous situations. What typically are regarded as problematic thinking and behavior patterns usually began as adaptive means of dealing with difficult situations; they become maladaptive when they become habitual and/or ineffective and outmoded for meeting the demands of new situations. When working with others, the more one can validate the other’s inclination to cling to the perceived safety of the familiar (it is only human to do so) at the same time as discouraging the other from getting stuck there, the more the other may feel empowered to begin creating new adaptive strategies. Applied to ourselves, accepting that more setbacks are going to occur at some point can help one to more gracefully roll with the punches. Rather than dread and avoid those steps backward, one comes to appreciate them as learning opportunities and healthy challenges to keep moving forward. When the process goes well, the journey toward progress and growth not only becomes more hopeful but also more fulfilling.