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# Learning and renewal

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## Personal renewal

**John W. Gardner**

*Even the most competent professionals face the inevitable challenge of keeping themselves fresh, energized, and motivated throughout the course of their careers. Having focused so long and so intently on the more visible forms of achievement, they often do not know how to respond when – or even to acknowledge that – they find themselves going stale. Here is some wise counsel on this sensitive topic, the fruits of many years' experience, that John Gardner shared with all of McKinsey's partners at a meeting in November 1990.*

I'M GOING to talk about self-renewal. One of your most fundamental tasks is the renewal of the organizations you serve, and that usually includes persuading the top officers to accomplish a certain amount of self-renewal. But to help you think about others is not my primary mission this morning. I want to help you think about yourselves.

I take that mission very seriously, and I've written out what I have to say because I want every sentence to hit its target. I know a good deal about the kind of work you do and how demanding it is. But I'm not going to talk about the special problems of your kind of career. I'm going to talk about some basic problems of the life cycle that will surely hit you if you're not ready for them.

I once wrote a book called *Self-Renewal* that deals with the decay and renewal of societies, organizations, and individuals. I explored the question of why civilizations die and how they sometimes renew themselves, and the puzzle of why some men and women go to seed while others remain vital all of their lives. It's the latter question that I shall deal with at this time. I know that you as an individual are not going to seed. But the person seated on your right may be in fairly serious danger.

### **Hanging on**

Not long ago, I read a splendid article on barnacles. I don't want to give the wrong impression of the focus of my reading interests.

Sometimes days go by without my reading about barnacles, much less remembering what I read. But this article had an unforgettable opening paragraph. "The barnacle," the author explained, "is confronted with an existential decision about where it's going to live. Once it decides ... it spends the rest of its life with its head cemented to a rock ... ." End of quote. For a good many of us, it comes to that.

We've all seen men and women, even ones in fortunate circumstances with responsible positions, who seem to run out of steam in midcareer.

One must be compassionate in assessing the reasons. Perhaps life just presented them with tougher problems than they could solve. It happens. Perhaps something inflicted a major wound on their confidence or their self-esteem. Perhaps they were pulled down by the hidden resentments and grievances that grow in adult life, sometimes so luxuriantly that, like tangled vines, they immobilize the victim. You've known such people – feeling secretly defeated, maybe somewhat sour and cynical, or perhaps just vaguely dispirited. Or maybe they just ran so hard for so long that somewhere along the line they forgot what it was they were running for.

I'm not talking about people who fail to get to the top in achievement. We can't all get to the top, and that isn't the point of life anyway. I'm talking about people who – no matter how busy they seem to be – have stopped learning or growing. Many of them are just going through the motions. I don't deride that. Life is hard. Just to keep on keeping on is sometimes an act of courage. But I do worry about men and women functioning far below the level of their potential.

We have to face the fact that most men and women out there in the world of work are more stale than they know, more bored than they would care to admit. Boredom is the secret ailment of large-scale organizations. Someone said to me the other day, "How can I be so bored when I'm so busy?" And I said, "Let me count the ways." Logan Pearsall Smith said that boredom can rise to the level of a mystical experience; if that's true I know some very busy middle-level executives who are among the great mystics of all time.

### **Taking stock**

We can't write off the danger of complacency, growing rigidity, imprisonment by our own comfortable habits and opinions. Look



around you. How many people whom you know well – people even younger than yourselves – are already trapped in fixed attitudes and habits. A famous French writer said, “There are people whose clocks stop at a certain point in their lives.” I could without any trouble name a half dozen national figures resident in Washington, D.C., whom you would recognize, and could tell you roughly the year their clock stopped. I won’t do it because I still have to deal with them periodically.

I’ve watched a lot of midcareer people, and Yogi Berra says you can observe a lot just by watching. I’ve concluded that most people enjoy learning and growing. And many are clearly troubled by the self-assessments of midcareer.

Such self-assessments are no great problem at your age. You’re young and moving up. The drama of your own rise is enough. But when you reach middle age, when your energies aren’t what they used to be, then you’ll begin to wonder what it all added up to, you’ll begin to look for the figure in the carpet of your life. I have some simple advice for you when you begin that process. Don’t be too hard on yourself. Look ahead. Someone said that “Life is the art of drawing without an eraser.” And above all don’t imagine that the story is over. Life has a lot of chapters.

If we are conscious of the danger of going to seed, we can resort to countervailing measures. At almost any age. You don’t need to run down like an unwound clock. And if your clock is unwound, you can wind it up again. You can stay alive in every sense of the word until you fail physically. I know some pretty successful people who feel that that just isn’t possible for them, that life has trapped them. But they don’t really know that. Life takes unexpected turns.

## **Learning**

I said in my book *Self-Renewal* that we build our own prisons and serve as our own jailkeepers. I no longer completely agree with that. I still think we’re our own jailkeepers, but I’ve concluded that our parents and the society at large have a hand in building our prisons. They create roles for us – and self-images – that hold us captive for a long time. The individual intent on self-renewal will have to deal with ghosts of the past – the memory of earlier failures, the remnants of childhood dramas and rebellions, accumulated grievances and resentments that have long outlived their cause. Sometimes people cling to the ghosts with something almost approaching pleasure – but the hampering effect on growth is

inescapable. As Jim Whitaker, who climbed Mount Everest, said, "You never conquer the mountain. You only conquer yourself."

The more I see of human lives, the more I believe the business of growing up is much longer drawn out than we pretend. If we achieve it in our 30s, even our 40s, we're doing well. To those of you who are parents of teenagers, I can only say "Sorry about that."

There's a myth that learning is for young people. But as the proverb says, "It's what you learn after you know it all that counts." The middle years are great, great learning years. Even the years past the middle years. I took on a new job after my 77th birthday – and I'm still learning.

Learn all your life. Learn from your failures. Learn from your successes. When you hit a spell of trouble, ask "What is it trying to teach me?" The lessons aren't always happy ones, but they keep coming. It isn't a bad idea to pause occasionally for an *inward* look. By midlife most of us are accomplished fugitives from ourselves.

We learn from our jobs, from our friends and families. We learn by accepting the commitments of life, by playing the roles that life hands us (not necessarily the roles we would have chosen). We learn by growing older, by suffering, by loving, by bearing with the things we can't change, by taking risks.

The things you learn in maturity aren't simple things such as acquiring information and skills. You learn not to engage in self-destructive behavior. You learn not to burn up energy in anxiety. You discover how to manage your tensions, if you have any, which you do. You learn that self-pity and resentment are among the most toxic of drugs. You find that the world loves talent but pays off on character.

You come to understand that most people are neither for you nor against you, they are thinking about themselves. You learn that no matter how hard you try to please, some people in this world are not going to love you, a lesson that is at first troubling and then really quite relaxing.

Those are things that are hard to learn early in life. As a rule you have to have picked up some mileage and some dents in your fenders before you understand. As Norman Douglas said, "There



are some things you can't learn from others. You have to pass through the fire."

You come to terms with yourself. You finally grasp what S. N. Behrman meant when he said, "At the end of every road you meet yourself." You may not get rid of all of your hang-ups, but you learn to control them to the point that you can function productively and not hurt others.

You learn the arts of mutual dependence, meeting the needs of loved ones and letting yourself need them. You can even be unaffected – a quality that often takes years to acquire. You can achieve the simplicity that lies beyond sophistication.

You come to understand your impact on others. It's interesting that even in the first year of life you learn the impact that a variety of others have on you, but as late as middle age many people have a very imperfect understanding of the impact they themselves have on others. The hostile person keeps asking, "Why are people so hard to get along with?" In some measure we create our own environment. You may not yet grasp the power of that truth to change your life.

## **Failing**

Of course failures are a part of the story too. Everyone fails. Joe Louis said, "Everyone has to figure to get beat some time." The question isn't did you fail, but did you pick yourself up and move ahead? And there is one other little question: "Did you collaborate in your own defeat?" A lot of people do. Learn not to.

One of the enemies of sound, lifelong motivation is a rather childish conception we have of the kind of concrete, describable goal toward which all of our efforts drive us. We want to believe that there is a point at which we can feel that we have arrived. We want a scoring system that tells us when we've piled up enough points to count ourselves successful.

So you scramble and sweat and climb to reach what you thought was the goal. When you get to the top you stand up and look around and chances are you feel a little empty. Maybe more than a little empty.

You wonder whether you climbed the wrong mountain.

But life isn't a mountain that has a summit. Nor is it – as some suppose – a riddle that has an answer. Nor a game that has a final score.

Life is an endless unfolding, and if we wish it to be, an endless process of self-discovery, an endless and unpredictable dialogue between our own potentialities and the life situations in which we find ourselves. By potentialities I mean not just intellectual gifts but the full range of one's capacities for learning, sensing, wondering, understanding, loving and aspiring.

Perhaps you imagine that by age 35 or 45, or even 55, you have explored those potentialities pretty fully. Don't kid yourself!

The thing you have to understand is that the capacities you actually develop to the full come out as the result of an interplay between you and life's challenges – and the challenges keep changing. Life pulls things out of you.

There's something I know about you that you may or may not know about yourself. You have within you more resources of energy than have ever been tapped, more talent than has ever been exploited, more strength than has ever been tested, more to give than you have ever given.

You know about some of the gifts that you have left undeveloped. Would you believe that you have gifts and possibilities you don't even know about? It's true. We are just beginning to recognize how even those who have had every advantage and opportunity unconsciously put a ceiling on their own growth, underestimate their potentialities, or hide from the risk that growth involves.

## **Motivation**

Now I've discussed renewal at some length, but it isn't possible to talk about renewal without touching on the subject of motivation. Someone defined horse sense as the good judgment horses have that prevents them from betting on people. But we have to bet on people – and I place my bets more often on high motivation than on any other quality except judgment. There is no perfection of techniques that will substitute for the lift of spirit and heightened performance that comes from strong motivation. The world is moved by highly-motivated people, by enthusiasts, by men and women who want something very much or believe very much.



I'm not talking about anything as narrow as ambition. After all, ambition eventually wears out and probably should. But you can keep your zest until the day you die. If I may offer you a simple maxim, "Be interested." Everyone wants to be interesting – but the vitalizing thing is to be interested. Keep a sense of curiosity. Discover new things. Care. Risk failure. Reach out.

The nature of one's personal commitments is a powerful element in renewal, so let me say a word on that subject.

I once lived in a house where I could look out of a window as I worked at my desk and observe a small herd of cattle browsing in a neighboring field. And I was struck with a thought that must have occurred to the earliest herdsman tens of thousands of years ago. You never get the impression that a cow is about to have a nervous breakdown. Or is puzzling about the meaning of life.

Humans have never mastered that kind of complacency. We are worriers and puzzlers, and we want meaning in our lives. I'm not speaking idealistically; I'm stating a plainly observable fact about men and women. It's a rare person who can go through life like a homeless alley cat, living from day to day, taking its pleasures where it can and dying unnoticed.

That isn't to say that we haven't all known a few alley cats. But it isn't the norm. It just isn't the way we're built. As Robert Louis Stevenson said, "Old or young, we're on our last cruise." We want it to mean something.

For many this life is a vale of tears; for no one is it free of pain. But we are so designed that we can cope with it if we can live in some context of meaning. Given that powerful help, we can draw on the deep springs of the human spirit, to see our suffering in the framework of all human suffering, to accept the gifts of life with thanks and endure life's indignities with dignity.

In the stable periods of history, meaning was supplied in the context of a coherent community and traditionally prescribed patterns of culture. Today you can't count on any such heritage. You have to build meaning into your life, and you build it through your commitments – whether to your religion, to an ethical order as you conceive it, to your life's work, to loved ones, to your fellow humans. Young people run around searching for identity, but it isn't handed out free any more – not in this transient, rootless, pluralistic society. Your identity is what you've committed yourself to.

It may just mean doing a better job at whatever you're doing. There are men and women who make the world better just by being the kind of people they are – and that too is a kind of commitment. They have the gift of kindness or courage or loyalty or integrity. It matters very little whether they're behind the wheel of a truck or running a country store or bringing up a family.

I must pause to say a word about my statement, "There are men and women who make the world better just by being the kind of people they are." I first wrote the sentence some years ago and it has been widely quoted. One day I was looking through a mail-order gift catalogue and it included some small ornamental bronze plaques with brief sayings on them, and one of the sayings was the one I just read to you, with my name as author. Well I was so overcome by the idea of a sentence of mine being cast in bronze that I ordered it, but then couldn't figure out what in the world to do with it. I finally sent it to a friend.

### **Frame of mind**

We tend to think of youth and the active middle years as the years of commitment. As you get a little older, you're told you've earned the right to think about yourself. But that's a deadly prescription! People of every age need commitments beyond the self, need the meaning that commitments provide. Self-preoccupation is a prison, as every self-absorbed person finally knows. Commitments to larger purposes can get you out of prison.

Another significant ingredient in motivation is one's attitude toward the future. Optimism is unfashionable today, particularly among intellectuals. Everyone makes fun of it. Someone said, "Pessimists got that way by financing optimists." But I am not pessimistic and I advise you not to be. As the fellow said, "I'd be a pessimist but it would never work."

I can tell you that, for renewal, a tough-minded optimism is best. The future is not shaped by people who don't really believe in the future. Men and women of vitality have always been prepared to bet their futures, even their lives, on ventures of unknown outcome. If they had all looked before they leaped, we would still be crouched in caves sketching animal pictures on the wall.

But I did say tough-minded optimism. High hopes that are dashed by the first failure are precisely what we don't need. We have to believe in ourselves, but we mustn't suppose that the path will be



easy. It's tough. Life is painful, and rain falls on the just. Mr Churchill was not being a pessimist when he said, "I have nothing to offer, but blood, toil, tears and sweat." He had a great deal more to offer, but as a good leader he was saying it wasn't going to be easy, and he was also saying something that all great leaders say constantly – that failure is simply a reason to strengthen resolve.

We cannot dream of a Utopia in which all arrangements are ideal and everyone is flawless. Life is tumultuous – an endless losing and regaining of balance, a continuous struggle, never an assured victory.

Nothing is ever finally safe. Every important battle is fought and re-fought. We need to develop a resilient, indomitable morale that enables us to face those realities and still strive with every ounce of energy to prevail. You may wonder if such a struggle – endless and of uncertain outcome – isn't more than humans can bear. But all of history suggests that the human spirit is well-fitted to cope with just that kind of world.

## Resilience

Remember I mentioned earlier the myth that learning is for young people. I want to give you some examples. In a piece I wrote for *Reader's Digest* not long ago I gave what seemed to me a particularly interesting true example of renewal. The man in question was 53 years old. Most of his adult life had been a losing struggle against debt and misfortune. In military service he received a battlefield injury that denied him the use of his left arm. And he was seized and held in captivity for five years. Later he held two government jobs, succeeding at neither. At 53 he was in prison – and not for the first time. There in prison, he decided to write a book, driven by Heaven knows what motive – boredom, the hope of gain, emotional release, creative impulse, who can say? And the book turned out to be one of the greatest ever written, a book that has enthralled the world for over 350 years. The prisoner was Cervantes; the book *Don Quixote*.

Another example was Pope John XXIII, a serious man who found a lot to laugh about. The son of peasant farmers, he once said, "In Italy there are three roads to poverty – drinking, gambling, and farming. My family chose the slowest of the three." When someone asked him how many people worked in the Vatican he said "Oh, about half." He was 76 years old when he was elected Pope. Through a lifetime in the bureaucracy, the spark of spirit and

imagination had remained undimmed, and when he reached the top he launched the most vigorous renewal that the Church has known in this century.

Still another example is Winston Churchill. At age 25, as a correspondent in the Boer War, he became a prisoner of war and his dramatic escape made him a national hero. Elected to Parliament at 26, he performed brilliantly, held high cabinet posts with distinction and at 37 became First Lord of the Admiralty. Then he was discredited, unjustly, I believe, by the Dardanelles expedition – the defeat at Gallipoli – and lost his Admiralty post. There followed 24 years of ups and downs.

All too often the verdict on him was “Brilliant but erratic ... not steady, not dependable.” He had only himself to blame. A friend described him as a man who jaywalked through life. He was 66 before his moment of flowering came. Someone said, “It’s all right to be a late bloomer if you don’t miss the flower show.” Churchill didn’t miss it.

Well, I won’t give you any more examples. From those I’ve given I hope it’s clear to you that the door of opportunity doesn’t really close as long as you’re reasonably healthy. And I don’t just mean opportunity for high status but opportunity to grow and enrich your life in every dimension. You just don’t know what’s ahead for you. And remember the words on the bronze plaque, “There are men and women who make the world better just by being the kind of people they are.” To be that kind of person would be worth all the years of living and learning.

## **Meaning**

Many years ago I concluded a speech with a paragraph on the meaning of life. The speech was reprinted over the years, and 15 years later that final paragraph came back to me in a rather dramatic way, really a heartbreaking way.

A man wrote to me from Colorado saying that his 20-year-old daughter had been killed in an auto accident some weeks before and that she was carrying in her billfold a paragraph from a speech of mine. He said he was grateful because the paragraph – and the fact that she kept it close to her – told him something he might not otherwise have known about her values and concerns. I can’t imagine where or how she came across the paragraph, but here it is:



*Meaning is not something you stumble across, like the answer to a riddle or the prize in a treasure hunt. Meaning is something you build into your life. You build it out of your own past, out of your affections and loyalties, out of the experience of humankind as it is passed on to you, out of your own talent and understanding, out of the things you believe in, out of the things and people you love, out of the values for which you are willing to sacrifice something. The ingredients are there. You are the only one who can put them together into that unique pattern that will be your life. Let it be a life that has dignity and meaning for you. If it does, then the particular balance of success or failure is of less account. Q*

*John Gardner, author of *Excellence* (Norton, New York, 1987) and *Self-Renewal* (Norton, New York, 1983), is the founder of Common Cause, a citizens' lobby devoted to making government more open and accountable. He is also a former US Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare. He received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964. This article is a text version of a speech delivered to all McKinsey partners at their MGM Conference in Phoenix in November 1990. Copyright © 1991 by John W. Gardner. All rights reserved.*