



The Road to Self-Renewal

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John Gardner, '33, MA '36, has always been interested in the problems of organizational renewal, but in the following article, extracted from a speech delivered to the Hawaii Executive Conference in Kona, Hawaii, in April 1993, he turns his thoughts to personal renewal. The speech is a distillation of observations garnered, as he says in his own words, from years of experience "in the nonprofit world as a foundation president, in federal government as a cabinet officer, in the military as a Marine Corps officer and later as a member of the Scientific Advisory Board of the Air Force, and in business as a director of such corporations as Shell Oil, American Airlines, New York Telephone and Time Inc." Gardner's distinguished career in public service has ranged from secretary of health, education and welfare in the Johnson administration to serving as a member of President Reagan's Task Force on Private Sector Initiatives. In 1955 Gardner became president of the Carnegie Corporation, and in 1970 he formed the advocacy group Common Cause, remaining its chairman until 1977.

It is a puzzle why some men and women go to seed, while others remain vital to the very end of their days. And why some people stop learning and growing. One must be compassionate in assessing the reasons: Perhaps life just presented them with tougher problems than they could solve. 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.

I'm talking about people who – no matter how busy they seem to be – have stopped learning or trying. Many of them are just going through the motions. I don't deride that. Life is hard. Just to keep on going is sometimes an act of courage. But I do worry about men and women at whatever age functioning below the level of their potential.

We can't write off the danger of complacency, of growing rigidity or of 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? The famous French literary historian Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve said, "There are people whose clocks stop at a certain point in their lives."

If we are conscious of the danger of going to seed, we can resort to countervailing measures. 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 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.

We build our own prisons and serve as our own jail keepers, 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 who is 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.

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 76th 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.

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 taking risks, by bearing with the things we can’t change.

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. 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 writer 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 playwright S.N. Behrman meant when he said, “At the end of every road you meet yourself.”

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.

Of course failures are a part of the story, too. Everyone fails. When Joe Louis was world heavyweight boxing champion, he 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 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 may wonder whether you climbed the wrong mountain.

But the metaphor is all wrong. 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 success as the world measures success, but the full range of one's capacities for learning, sensing, wondering, understanding, loving and aspiring.

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

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 underdeveloped. Would you believe that you have gifts and possibilities you don't even know about?

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 not 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.

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 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 anymore - 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 woman who make the world better just by being the kind of people they are. It matters very little whether they're behind the wheel of a truck or running a country store or bringing up a family.

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 beyond the self can get you out of prison.

For renewal, 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 isn'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 refought. 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.

I mentioned earlier the myth that learning is for young people. I want to give you an example. 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. 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. The book turned out to be one of the greatest ever written, a book that has enthralled the world for more than 350 years. The prisoner was Miguel de Cervantes; the book, *Don Quixote*.

I hope it's clear 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.

Many years ago I concluded a speech with a paragraph on the meaning in 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 automobile 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.

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