Shaping a Vision, Shaping a Life

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The central figure in our work at Incandescent is the individual reaching outwards in time, stretching toward a vision far beyond her grasp. From this perspective, an entrepreneur in her garage, a movement builder, and a chief executive committing to an imaginative leap regarding what her company could become are all engaged in the same human work.

Each has committed to a journey that calls to be undertaken as a whole quest, but can be advanced only in stages. This quest is impossible to fully visualize at the outset, such is its magnitude and its difficulty. Each era in the journey unlocks the conditions of the next. Approaching this journey calls for both reason and faith. Martin Luther King: “Faith is taking the first step, even when you don’t see the whole staircase.”

As I’ve explored in three recent posts on systems change, such journeys demand attention to strategy – what is the shape of the climb toward one’s ultimate vision – even as they defy planning. Strategy as a working picture of the long climb orients the individual, and gives coherence and focus to the “we” that must come together for any large undertaking to advance.

But conceptualizing the path to climb is the least of the work. The cliff face at hand often seems impassable. Upward progress stalls until one gets unstuck, finding some way to overcome the “how to” problem regarding this particular point in the ascent.

The climber who begins such a journey is never capable of completing it. The inner work mirrors and fuels the outer climb. *What is required of me? How do I become a more perfect instrument of the end I’ve committed to pursue?*

The pages of this blog represent facets of a meditation on the climber, the work of climbing and the shape of the climb. *How do I set direction and forge commitment? How do I build a team and build a larger “we”? How do I articulate what the institution I’m building is really for, and how do I make*

that our shared compass? How do I use the resources I have, and how can I get the resources I need without making promises that dilute my focus? How do I engage in this moment's work – this meeting, this rare hour of reflection – in order to advance toward my larger goals? These questions and a legion more.

But let's pause for a moment and look at this question in a different way.

My friend Stacy Palestrant and I have had the precious opportunity, through our longitudinal study China 2024, to hear the innermost reflections of almost one hundred Chinese MBA graduates in the class of 2004 as they navigate their professional choices and their careers. At the outset of the study, we conducted in-depth personal history interviews, and at the ten-year mark we sat down with each of these members to understand how their lives had unfolded. As we prepare to continue these dialogues in the final five years of the study, we've been reading back through hundreds of pages of interview transcripts and reflected on what we've learned.

Some of the members fit the paradigm of individuals on a journey up a mountain, toward a vision that animates their days and animates their lives. Many do not.

In our ten-year interview, one member, who suffered the sudden and tragic loss of a child, shared: "Actually I think tragedy helps people to grow a lot. This part is really my biggest change in the past ten years -- it's not about work. It's about a value system. It's about how you look at life, how you look at relationships. In the past, I was so focused on career. I wanted fancy things. I was always focused on being a student of markets, trying to find the best opportunities in the best companies. That's who I was. But after this tragedy, I was hammered by something larger than me and reassembled from scratch."

The climber, encountering and eventually overcoming the cliff face, proceeding onward in her long journey is a figure situated differently in time from the mother who must reassemble her world on a new foundation.

Pause again, set all these thoughts aside. Let your mind empty and just see:

> *In the Station of the Metro*
>
> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
> Petals on a wet, black bough.*

Or open Virginia Woolf's *Moments of Being* to this page, and simply hold yourself there:

> It was later. It still makes me feel warm; as if everything were ripe; humming; sunny; smelling so many smells at once; and all making a whole that even now makes me stop – as I stopped then going down to the beach; I stopped at the top to look down at the gardens. They were sunk beneath the road. The apples were on a level with one's head.

> The gardens gave off a murmur of bees; the apples were red and gold; there were also pink flowers; and grey and silver leaves. The buzz, the croon, the smell, all seemed to press voluptuously against some membrane; not to burst it; but to hum round one such a complete rapture of pleasure that I stopped, smelt; looked.

All we have is time. A central question in our lives is how to *face* time. What direction do we look and lean? How do we anchor ourselves forward, and backward, and into the marrow of now?

Consider six stances toward time, six ways of being situated.

	Past	Present	Future
Outward	Preserving	Progressing	Achieving
Inward	Recalling	Being	Becoming

The climber faces future and outward, toward *Achieving*, whether she is building a company or curing a disease. But as she looks outward at the climb, she confronts the imperative of *Progressing* – scaling today's cliff face – and through it, surrounding it, the inward work of Becoming.

"Dr. V" was the founder of Aravind, a hospital system that delivers eye care of the highest quality in the world, at vast scale, largely to the very poor, at two orders of magnitude lower cost than the "leading institutions" in the West. At the start of his journey, he looked outward from the eleven-bed hospital he founded, at the age of fifty eight, toward the dizzying ascent of the problem he was committed to solve. He asked the question of *Becoming*:

> *How was Buddha able to organize in those days a religion that millions follow.*
>
> *Who were the leaders. How were they shaped. How did the disciples of Christ spread their mission around the world.*
>
> *How do I become a perfect instrument.* **

Ezra Pound and Virginia Woolf show us, suspended in words, the inward, present light of Being. And yet Woolf's essay is called "Sketches of the Past." She unfolds for us the work of *Recalling*: bringing the past into present focus, and grounding the present in past history. She writes: "If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills – then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory."

Even the boldest look forward -- take Kennedy at Rice Stadium, September 12, 1962, telling the nation what it will take to reach the moon – grounds itself in a legacy that must be honored,

preserved and taken forward.

> William Bradford, speaking in 1630 of the founding of the Plymouth Bay Colony, said that all great and honorable actions are accompanied with great difficulties, and both must be enterprised and overcome with answerable courage.…
>
> Those who came before us made certain that this country rode the first waves of the industrial revolutions, the first waves of modern invention, and the first wave of nuclear power, and this generation does not intend to founder in the backwash of the coming age of space.

Preserving bestows honor on the examples we choose from our past. These examples then propel us forward, to honor the past through present struggle and future achievement.

There is a certain view of achievement that is slanted, bent. It looks forward from a fixed perspective, redoubling its effort when it has forgotten its aim. This is Ahab's thirst, not Gandhi's clarity.

A life's work weaves together time's directions. As Robert Grudin writes in his *Time and the Art of Living*:

> We experience isolated moments of affection and delight, and find in a few weeks that we are in love. We tell lies in order to deliver ourselves from particular emergencies, yet soon discover that we are on a generally false footing. We jot down, from day to day, individual perceptions, and we are ultimately visited by unified ideas. Yet we seldom think of the specific phenomena as parts of a coherent whole. Time plays the big arpeggios of victory and defeat, achievement, disaffection, the whole gamut; but we hear only the single tones. And in missing the incremental structure, the temporal coherence of our lives, we miss the truth about ourselves.
>
> Free men and women, on the other hand, can think across time, viewing their own lives, inclusive of past, present and future, as architectural wholes, static in mental space. They can therefore see, as others cannot, the cracks and buttresses of repeated action, the points of stress, the established framework. They are not perfect; but they are less imperfect than we by a full dimension of being.

This is the work behind our work, the work behind everyone's. It can be expressed in building a business, in an artist's line, in a nurse's care.

What might it mean to build toward the achievements that matter a thousand years out, work well beyond the scale of a single lifetime? If you were leaving the enterprise with the kernel of your life's work to others, what principles would you ask them to run it by? If you spend your working days largely in meetings and sitting at a desk "doing your own work," what does it look like to spend

those little spans of time not just effectively, but well?

From this larger vantage, so many of the questions we ask here are really about the medium of time, and how that medium can be used to shape some small part of the world -- and, in the process, shape a life. This is the human enterprise: to make of time something ours, something meaningful, something whole.

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* Ezra Pound

** Quoted in Pavithra K. Mehta and Suchitra Shenoy, *Infinite Vision*