

The Curve of Life: Embracing Change Beyond the Straight Line

As children, we're taught to revere the straight line. Spot something important? Underline it. Confused? Underline it. No answer in sight? Underline that too. Long before we understand the complexities of the world, we're already assigning power to linearity—believing that clarity, order, and meaning lie in the lines we draw straight. It's no surprise then, that this logic quietly seeps into our understanding of life itself. We begin to believe that life, too, must follow a neat, well-marked path. Ready, steady, go—onward in a single, unwavering direction.

I was in the fifth grade when I drew my first straight line. I'll be a civil servant, I decided. From that moment on, every choice bent itself around this singular ambition. One exam—the toughest in the world—and that was my chosen path. A path so linear it could be measured in coaching classes, current affairs, and unrelenting discipline. But beneath its sharp edges lay the first real curve I'd ever navigate: the curve of ambition, of purpose. It was the dream that would shape me, and one day, I hoped, help me shape policy in the world's largest democracy.

From the first gold star in school to the last applause at retirement, I had mapped it all out. Every step planned, every success accounted for. I believed that achievement was meant to follow a sequence—predictable, measurable, linear. But what happens when the line bends? When detours replace milestones? Well, no one really prepares you for that...

Personal attack, pivot, and purpose?

The year is 2016. My final year of graduation. While everyone around me is busy figuring out what comes next, I already know. I've held on tightly to my linear path. Finally, I can start preparing for the civil services exam. Graduation was the first milepost. The plan was to prepare alongside a master's degree—simple, structured, efficient. I applied to two universities: one in India, the other in England. I applied for scholarships. The idea was clear—pick one, pursue my master's, and stay focused.

I chose the university in England. Accepted the scholarship. And made the decision to study India from a global perspective. Every step, I believed, was a part of the same straight line I had drawn for myself years ago. **'The best way to predict the future is to create it.'** This quote by Peter Drucker was my B-school favourite and I truly believed that I was creating my future.

At 19, I became somewhat of an anomaly. A young woman, on track to become a civil servant, accepted into one of the world's leading universities—with a scholarship. Society watched in quiet awe. For a moment, it felt like patriarchy was losing its footing. My final year of college didn't just bring me closer to my goal, it gave that goal depth. That year, I took an elective in gender studies, and suddenly, what I wanted to change

had a name. I didn't want to shape just any policy. I wanted to shape gender-responsive, equity-driven policies that chipped away at patriarchy—deliberately, relentlessly.

Growing up in a country that has long served a system, you learn quickly what it means to be born with a vagina. You feel it in silences, in scrutiny, in ceilings. Time and again you feel that this cultural and societal constraint affects your ability to embrace life. And that's what I wanted to challenge. That's why, in many ways, I was running faster than I could—faster than I should—trying to prove that a woman could do it, and do it better. Maybe, in hindsight, I was also racing against something else: the ticking clock of what society deems the 'ideal marriageable age.' I wanted to outrun that expectation. I wanted to succeed before it could catch up. As Peter Drucker reminds us, *'Follow effective action with quiet reflection. From the quiet reflection will come even more effective action.'* Perhaps, back then, what I needed was not just to run, but to pause and reflect on the kind of life I wanted to live beyond society's ticking clocks. Because, as Nawal El Saadawi observed, *'Women's liberation is a revolution in human consciousness.'* The true race is not against time, but against the limits imposed on our very being...

So, what happens next? Life bends. Months into my postgraduation, in the heart of London's Square Mile, I was gearing up for my first semester milestone. Deadlines, debates, dissertation ideas—everything was on track. Until it wasn't.

One afternoon, out of nowhere, a sharp pain gripped my gut. I threw up. Then collapsed. The next thing I remember is waking up in a hospital bed, dazed, with doctors gently suggesting I take a step back. I was placed on remote learning for a semester. Something wasn't right. My body, once so reliable, had pulled the brakes without warning. And for the first time, I felt the ground shift beneath my perfectly planned path. Something was fishy. I just didn't know how deep it would go.

The doctors kept investigating. Time moved on. A year passed. I graduated with merit, on paper everything looked perfect—but something still felt off. My body was sending signals my ambition didn't want to hear.

I returned to India, eager to resume. But life had other plans. That's when the first real bend appeared.

'You need to step back from the civil services,' the doctors said. 'It's a gruelling process. Your body won't be able to take it. Until we find the root cause, you need to pause this dream. Think of something else.'

Just like that, the straight line I had drawn in fifth grade began to blur. As *Charles Handy* proposes in *The Second Curve*, *'the path to meaning and longevity is not an ascent but a pivot'*. That moment was the beginning of my Second Curve—a transition I did not fully understand then, but one I now recognize as a profound act of self-preservation,

reinvention, and ultimately, truth. Though triggered by an external factor, it set the stepping stone for me to make pivots in future- that weren't externally triggered by failure or crisis but out of alignment—with my values, goals, and aspirations.

Pime-time, profession, and perfect?

Stoicism soon became my companion. I found both solace and structure in a simple but powerful principle from *Focus on What Matters* by Darius Foroux: to clearly distinguish between what I could control—and what I had to release. It was time to let go of the rigid linear path I had so carefully drawn and allow it to bend, to take the curve it needed. And so, with that shift, a new chapter began. I became a columnist and a broadcast journalist—finding fresh purpose and meaning along this unexpected route.

As a broadcast journalist, I was scripting prime-time shows and shaping stories that unfolded seamlessly on screen. It was a role many envied—dynamic, high-octane, and publicly visible. But the usual societal voices echoed: 'You're a woman—how will you manage night shifts?' 'Media isn't for someone like you.' 'Who'll marry a TV name?' . Before long, I had reached my peak - producing two prime-time shows, leading national summits, writing published columns, and working alongside two of India's best-known anchors. The adrenaline of deadlines, the glamour of studio lights, the validation of visibility—everything was on the rise.

But that rise also revealed the cracks. Inside the newsroom, the relentless chase for TRPs often came at the cost of truth, empathy, and integrity. Ruthless hours, bare-bones benefits, and a profit-first culture defined the rhythm. I began to question the stories we were telling. Were we driving change—or just feeding the 24-hour cycle? Were we informing—or simply packaging spectacle?

I was still at the top—scripting hits, earning bylines, and gaining visibility. But internally, I had begun to hear what Charles Handy calls the 'early whisper' of the Second Curve. His insight is deceptively simple: the Second Curve must begin while the First still seems successful. That's what makes it so counterintuitive. And then came the harder question—the one that stayed: **Who walks away from momentum, public recognition, and a thriving career?** I knew my answer - someone who believes, like Handy, that real change begins when people come together—not for profit, but for purpose. Someone who still believes in the quiet power of collective action, of citizen organisations, of choosing meaning over momentum.

In *The Second Curve*, Charles Handy proposes that the trajectory of most lives and organizations follows an S-curve: a slow start, rapid growth, and then a plateau or decline. The real challenge, he argues, is not to wait for decline to act, but to recognize when you are at your peak, while everything still looks good—and begin investing in a

new curve. This is neither natural nor easy. As Handy writes, **‘the temptation is to stay on the first curve for too long.’**

But how do you know you’ve reached that moment?

For me, it began as a curious restlessness. I felt like a ghost in my own newsroom—present, performing, but not *alive*. I was less excited by scripting stories and more drawn to the systems behind them: Why were we telling the stories we told? Who were they really serving? Could communication itself be rethought, not just repackaged?

It wasn’t burnout. It was something deeper - I didn’t want to do more. I wanted to do better. More impactfully. This inner questioning, was my subconscious calling me toward a Second Curve—a pivot that demands vision, foresight, matching skillset, and, above all, the courage to let go before decline sets in. And courage, I learned, is not always dramatic. Sometimes, it’s quiet. Stoic, even.

Embrace, emotion, endure?

The hardest part of embracing a second curve is not stepping into the unknown. It is letting go of the known. Our attachment to success, to reputation, to identity—these can tether us to a plateau long after it stops serving us. Stoic philosophy, especially as practiced by thinkers like *Marcus Aurelius and Seneca*, offers tools for this emotional disentanglement. The Stoics remind us that everything is transient: fame, titles, careers. **‘You could leave life right now,’** Marcus writes in *Meditations*. **‘Let that determine what you do and say and think.’** In letting go of my career as a journalist, I had to mourn not just a job, but an identity. I was no longer the person behind the voice that guided millions through global headlines.

Who was I without that? And yet, it was precisely in this uncertainty that growth happened. In that very space of doubt, I found what Handy calls the **‘Golden seed’**. *‘In each one of us there exists a seed of possibility, and when we find this seed and nurture it, this seed can lead to our personal fulfilment’* – this was the turning point.

I pivoted—with a new career, a new mindset, an identified possibility, and a reimagined way of living. This was my first authentic ‘Second Curve’, one consciously chosen rather than triggered by crisis. It led me into Public Policy and Strategic Communications Consultancy; a path where my purpose and social impact finally aligned. I wrote, researched, even returned to university to study psychology—driven by a desire to understand people, systems, transformation. I was no longer producing shows, but I was producing change—gradually, quietly, systemically.

The transition from journalism to consulting nudged me to reorient not just my work but my worldview—an evolution Charles Handy deems essential in what he calls ***the second curve of management thinking***. Handy argues that much of modern management remains shackled to engineering metaphors obsessed with systems,

control, and compliance—when in fact organizations are ‘communities, not machines’. Consulting made that insight real for me. I was no longer merely a producer of content but a convener of people, ideas, and purpose. Drucker’s assertion that knowledge workers must ask **how they perform, what their values are, and where they belong** became not just reflective questions but operational imperatives.

As I moved into a managerial role, I realized leadership was not about control but about design—**a shift from doing things right to doing the right things**, as Warren Bennis, Handy’s mentor, would often emphasize. This transition demanded a new framework of intelligence: IQ for analysis, EQ for empathy, AQ for navigating adversity, and SQ—*Social Quotient*—for influencing ethically across complex networks. Handy extends Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, arguing that ‘*intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences*’ are critical to both life and work, yet are too often marginalized in traditional models of competence. My leadership practice evolved to embrace these neglected dimensions—not merely to cope, but to foster trust, initiative, and cohesion within teams. In this convergence of Handy’s social philosophy and Drucker’s managerial wisdom lies a shared truth: **leadership is less about scale and more about fit—between purpose and person, system and soul**. This became my management mantra.

This leap taught me that the second curve is not always a career switch. Sometimes it’s a mindset shift. Sometimes it’s about deepening your craft. Second curve, more often than not, is a way of living life.

Silhouettes of self?

The year is 2025, as I sit and write this essay. Early this year, I finally had a diagnosis. It took eight insightful years to arrive at one. In these years, stoic philosophies and the ‘second curve way’, as I call it, became my way of living. I learnt the art of pivoting at peak. Sometimes, people understood. Most times, they did not. Professionally, it pushed me to face harsh questions during job interviews, and personally, many accused me of being stupid or fickle-minded. But as Handy said, I learnt to challenge the *status quo* whenever I met it. As a woman, I questioned conventional wisdom—from period leaves, to promotions, to marriageable age, and to a so-called ‘suitable profession’. In Handy’s words, **I chose to be bold in shaping my own life**.

In everything I’ve done so far—or will go on to do—the intention has remained constant: to contribute to the public good. Perhaps it comes from being raised in a bureaucratic household, or by a mother who believed deeply in giving back, or a combination of both. But at the heart of that belief lies something more foundational: **self-responsibility**. You can’t contribute meaningfully to systems or society unless you first take responsibility for your own role within them. That’s where my training in psychology—Transactional Analysis became real for me. TA introduces the idea of a ‘self-contract’—an internal

agreement to take charge of your own growth, to commit to change from within. It echoed strongly when I later read Charles Handy's idea of a 'contract with ourselves,' especially in a world where institutions no longer guarantee stability or direction. Similarly, Peter Drucker, in *Managing Oneself*, writes that performance and impact begin only when we understand our strengths, values, and how we best contribute. These weren't abstract ideas—they became the foundation for how I began to see myself, before I could see anyone else.

In fact, my regular conversations with my mother—reflecting on the societal challenges she fought in her times, and then my own battles to dismantle sexism and patriarchy—are a living, breathing reminder of what Handy said: **'the pace of change in a democracy is glacial, to be measured in generations not years.'**

I have always believed that my greatest delight is debating with friends. The difference between Handy and me, perhaps, is that he prefers it at the supper table over well-supplied wine, whereas the teetotaler in me prefers it over a cup of 'kadak masala chai' (strong Indian masala tea). As David Hume put it right: **'that truth proceeds from argument among friends.'**

Personally, at this juncture, I am ready to explore what might be my next Second Curve—marriage. Approaching my thirties, I'm well aware that society isn't exactly pleased. Embracing this curve and beating the societal odds has been a challenge, but Stoic philosophies have been my anchor. For me, marriage must begin with friendship. That's why Handy's words resonate so deeply: **'Love, at its best, matures into a deep friendship... the best remedy for feelings of isolation, inadequacy or hopelessness.'** Yet I also understand his observation that **'marriage is too loaded with religious overtones for some, and partnership sounds too weak, too unemotional. I do not have the solution, only the observation that our difficulty with the language is a symptom of our changing society.'**

Handy pinpoints a key tension today: 'marriage' carries heavy traditional and religious baggage, while 'partnership' can feel transactional and detached. In an age of 'situationships' and fluid commitments, this language gap mirrors deeper societal shifts, highlighting the urgent need to rethink how we define and navigate relationships. As Drucker famously asserted in *Managing for Results*, **'Effective management is the discipline of knowing what to preserve and what to abandon'**—a principle equally essential in navigating personal and social cycles of growth and renewal.

Professionally, I am about to sign my first book deal. It is a satire on patriarchy in India. I also have a teaching job offer, and finally, I can think about taking the civil services exam, now that I have a diagnosis in place. So, from here, what would success look like? How do I look at it from the Second Curve way?

The truth is, I haven't yet peaked in my public policy consulting career. Overall, I am yet to be consumed beyond the need to survive and provide. I know my purpose is to work on public welfare—especially around gender policies but there is still work to be done. A second curve, or even a third-curve cause, to be invented, as Handy would call it. Perhaps I am still on the path of **'proper selfishness,'** as Handy explains in his book - *The Second Curve*. This means, to feel successful I have to first invest in myself, and then turn that investment into benefit beyond myself.

Life, as I know it!

My life is a culmination of second curves—some invented, some waiting to be invented. ***'The Second Curve is not about leaving the past behind, but about embracing new possibilities before the present fades'*** – I strive to live by this quote. On a personal level, starting a new curve before the old one ends means acknowledging what continues to serve while pivoting toward what's possible by mitigating the risks of stagnation and burnout. The signal to shift often arrives as a quiet restlessness—a call for introspection and intentional change. It requires emotional intelligence, resilience, and the ability to navigate ambiguity with composure and clarity.

Professionally, adopting the Second Curve mindset enables me to anticipate inflection points, lead proactive transformation, and create systems (both internal and external) that balance stability with strategic agility. As Peter Drucker aptly noted, ***'The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence—it is to act with yesterday's logic.'*** This insight anchors my approach to organizational growth: invest ahead of the curve, design for adaptability, and empower teams to embrace reinvention as a continuous practice—not a reactive fix. It's not about disruption for disruption's sake—it's about building cultures that stay future-ready by design.

Stoicism reinforces this outlook. It reminds me that while I cannot control every variable, I can shape my mindset and response. Growth, not just change, remains the objective.

The adult in me no longer highlights life in straight lines. I draw curves, more often than not, S-curves. This desk spread would testify...

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