

**From the White House Situation Room to
the Hardware Store: How Self-Discovery
Defines the Second Curve**

“It’s happening,” I read on my phone early one holiday morning. “See you at the office.”

My colleague in the National Security Council signaled to me that Vladimir Putin’s anticipated invasion of Ukraine was imminent. I hopped on my motorcycle to get to the White House. We spent that day in and out of the Situation Room finalizing preparations for how the United States and our Group of Seven (G7) allies would respond once Russian tanks rolled into Ukrainian territory. Two days later, the invasion began.

That was me in 2022 – coordinating classified deliberations with the G7 on how to prevent Russia from launching the largest land invasion since World War II. By every conventional measure, I was successful and doing important, relevant work. Yet the further I moved ahead in my field, the more I sensed something essential was missing. Now, I’m selling drill bits and cutting keys at my local hardware store, teaching meditation workshops, and consulting for startups, in a deliberate transition to my Second Curve.

Leaving the government took longer than expected – three resignation attempts to be exact – because it meant giving up status, comfort, and certainty of the tribe. Between 2016 and 2024, I served under Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden. That period of political whiplash challenged my assumptions not just about the institutions I served, but about myself.

After a period of self-discovery, I stepped off the ladder I’d spent years climbing and embraced a non-linear path defined by purpose and reinvention – the essence of the Second Curve philosophy. It required an openness to personal growth and introspection, even when it seemed unrelated to my career. My journey was reinforced by a guiding life philosophy – Classical Yoga, an ancient code of living that extends far beyond its physical form in the West – and an acceptance that my identity is not singular but made up of plural selves: professional, spiritual, creative, and more.¹

I was raised as a brown boy in a largely white Massachusetts town. To help myself fit in wherever I went, I adopted mannerisms and learned to code-switch at a young age. I could act more American in a Bostonian pub and more Indian when I visited my grandparents in Gujarat. What started out as a survival skill turned into a superpower: the ability to read rooms, make people comfortable, and traverse between worlds. But my superpower had its own kryptonite: while being hyper focused on others, I neglected to develop a strong understanding of my own needs and identity.

Code-switching helped me stay relevant in any setting, just as studying economics helped me remain relevant in a world where “the economy” shaped everything: politics,

livelihoods, and stability. Graduating high school during the Great Recession, I was driven by the belief that markets should serve people, not the other way around. Two college encounters motivated me to understand how the world *really* works: a veteran small business owner protesting the government failing hardworking people like him; and a Credit Suisse recruiter who laughed when I proclaimed my desire to learn finance to prevent another crisis.

Three externships proved Wall Street was not for me, but I developed a strong understanding about how economics and politics drive one another. When I reached Washington, D.C., for a job interview with the Department of Treasury, I was well prepared. I began my First Curve interpreting markets for senior policymakers. Each day, by 3:30AM, I was in the office speaking with investors in Asia and Europe. At 7:30AM, I'd send a one-page summary for the President's Daily Brief and head upstairs for an in-person briefing with the Under Secretary.

Within two years, I was in a motorcade en route to Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing, part of the U.S. delegation led by Treasury Secretary Jack Lew and State Secretary John Kerry for high-stakes negotiations with China. My early success drew on a skill I'd honed since childhood – code-switching – propelling me to quickly learn the D.C. vernacular and operate in political arenas.

When President Trump took office in 2017, I was an apolitical civil servant implementing U.S. economic policy toward China. He was frustrated by China's unfulfilled promises from prior administrations and pushed for a reset in the U.S.-China economic relationship toward a more punitive approach that demanded accountability. I was eager to help in the first year, but by the second, the administration's erratic decision-making had wasted my time, drained me, and squandered taxpayer dollars. Other policies clashed with my values – the Muslim ban, the response to white nationalism in Charlottesville, withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement, and moves to end citizenship pathways for migrants who arrived as children. As a representative of the U.S. government, I felt like I was speaking with someone else's voice.

I began feeling disillusioned by the institutions I once felt called to serve. Was this a sign that I was nearing a peak on my First Curve?

At a friend's urging, I sought a therapist. As our first session closed, she surfaced two deeper questions stirring inside of me beyond whether or not to leave my job: "Who am I, and what sort of man do I want to be in this world?" Her questions launched a process of self-discovery for me that I found essential to living the Second Curve philosophy.

As I grappled with those deeper questions, an unexpected moment of clarity arrived.

I traveled to India to attend the wedding of a white American friend and his Indian fiancée. Before the ceremony, I brought my three white American friends to meet my family in India and experience the country for themselves. I'd never pulled back the veil between my Indian and American selves, but on that trip I experienced what it felt like to have the American fully embrace the Indian. My friends exchanged recipes and laughs with my relatives, while the groom's family danced to Bollywood songs in Indian clothes and welcomed their new Indian community. The Americans held a curious enthusiasm towards Indian culture that I'd never known during my childhood. When the wedding ended, I returned to the States in tears, mourning that ephemeral feeling of belonging.

That became a turning point. I invested in more self-discovery and less career progression. Alongside therapy, I began consuming Buddhist dharma talks about "observing the controlling self" and "navigating uncertainty," and journaling to examine who was under my armor I'd built. I lived Rainer Rilke's words and tried to "love the questions themselves."²

I explored other career paths. I looked into the prestigious International Affairs Fellowship with the Council on Foreign Relations. I applied to graduate programs — and lost \$2,000 on a non-refundable deposit to secure my spot at Columbia, only to decide that the program wasn't a good fit. None of it felt quite right.

At a coffee shop, *The New Yorker* cover caught my eye: "January 8, 2018 Issue: A New Silk Road — China is investing billions in building pathways to Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East." A photographer had somehow transformed what was essentially my day job into art, exposing the real local impact of policies I'd spent years analyzing through stats and memos. He was shaping the public debate from an entirely different vantage point. Eager to cultivate my own voice, I contacted his studio with a proposal: a collaboration blending art and economics to tell the story of China's expanding global footprint. One year later, we secured National Geographic sponsorship for a multimedia production.

With a small project fee under my belt, I took the risk of submitting my resignation to the Treasury; I thought that if I could land one gig, surely I could land another. To my surprise, they countered with an offer: pursue the National Geographic project in my free time while temporarily serving as one of three U.S. representatives on the African Development Bank's Board of Directors. I'd never heard of Abidjan, Ivory Coast, but the arrangement offered freedom to explore my creative self and advance new work

overseas, while keeping a stable government job. I could explore two new paths before leaving the old one.³

In Abidjan, I made more progress toward answering the therapist's first question. In a book gifted to me by a colleague, the author argues that in this age of globalization, we must modernize our notion of identity as a single allegiance.⁴ I was a brown man representing the United States in a seat typically filled by white men, working alongside colleagues from 82 countries in a Black, French-speaking nation. I represented the second most powerful shareholder at one of Africa's top multilateral institutions. In that global environment, I began to appreciate the nuance of identity and began accepting myself as a multidimensional individual. During that time, I remained actively involved in *Sinomocene*, our creative project that was later showcased in exhibitions across Europe.

At this point, I'd progressed in answering the therapist's first question: who am I? By stepping into the unknown, I unexpectedly transformed the knowledge I'd gained on my First Curve into a newfound confidence in myself. With that foundation, I was ready to begin addressing the therapist's second question: what type of man do I want to be in the world?

President Biden had just been elected, and I wanted to exercise my own voice and values by stepping into a more political role. I joined the White House National Security Council as a de facto chief of staff, a role better suited to my personality because it was focused on coordination and problem-solving. Over the next year, I helped coordinate the White House's entire international economic agenda, including launching a multilateral initiative to expand high-quality infrastructure options in developing countries where China plays an influential role. I negotiated high-stakes international agreements, made nearly a dozen diplomatic visits, met several heads of state, and had a hand in shaping consequential world events that affected the lives of millions of people.

Even so, a familiar disillusionment returned in the second year. Was this the peak?

I'd ticked every box on the list I once believed defined success and was even offered the chance for a promotion by senior officials. However, I felt unfulfilled and disconnected from the impact. I didn't know what I wanted to do next. I just knew I wanted out. I tried to resign, but my Treasury colleagues instead encouraged me to take an extended leave, hoping I'd eventually return.

So I again stepped away from the government in search of more personal evolution. I reconnected with my family. I moved into my own home and started a new relationship. And I returned to India to follow the unresolved question of my identity.

Guided by an instinct that Indian knowledge systems could provide some answers, I chose to live with my cousins in Mumbai and attend a month-long Classical Yoga training at one of the oldest organized yoga centers in the world. I arrived with an intention to finally let the Indian part of my identity breathe, after quietly suffocating it for so long.

In India, I found a compass that both helped me appreciate my heritage and live the Second Curve philosophy. Classical Yoga emerged as one of India's six ancient systems of thought (Shad Darshan) around 200 BC and has since developed into a systematic approach to alleviating suffering, calming the mind's fluctuations, and discovering one's true self (Atman). This approach includes ethical restraints, personal observances, physical poses, breathing techniques, and meditation. As I studied it more deeply, I came to see how its many components – far beyond physical postures – had been woven throughout my upbringing:

- Societal duty without expectation for fruits in return (Dharma), taught by my parents;
- Ethical restraints (Yama) like non-violence (Ahimsa) embodied by my grandparents who marched alongside Mahatma Gandhi;
- Internal harmony (Antaranga Yoga) seen in my grandmother's meditation practice (Dhyana) and my grandfather's self-reflections (Svadhyaya); and
- Balanced diet (Sattvic) and mindful eating (Mitahara) that were central to my family's diagnoses of health.⁵

Motivated by this deeper connection, I committed to a daily practice: Every morning, I follow a warm glass of water with 25 minutes of yoga postures (Asana), breathing exercises (Pranayam), and concentration (Dharana). And I regularly engage in self-reflection to deepen my understanding of life, dabbling in other traditions including Stoicism, Zen, and the Jesuit order. Through my practice, I've built a sense of equanimity that keeps me moving through the inherent doubts and uncertainties of modern life.

Through Classical Yoga, I'd reconnected with another piece of my identity. Before I left India, a classmate had shared: "You're so Indian in many ways." This was at odds with the usual comments from Indians about "how American" I was. For the first time, I'd been accepted as an Indian *in India*. I was finally able to accept my Indian self.

By the time I returned to D.C. in 2023, I'd been offered a role as a senior economic advisor to Vice President Kamala Harris. My gut reaction was to leave the political realm altogether, but my mind was split. I was excited to be proximate to her but knew the work style would be the same, and my contributions to major decisions would be limited. With no clear Second Curve in sight, I accepted the job. With no clear Second Curve on the horizon, I accepted the job.

I traveled on Air Force Two, helped launch economic initiatives to increase small business growth and expand financial services to communities that had been left behind, and kept the VP updated on domestic economic conditions. But within a few months – again tired by the style of work and feeling disconnected from the impact – that familiar disillusionment returned.

It had been hard to time the peak. It had been difficult to leave. But this time I knew what to do. I needed to keep moving. I could not let comfort, my fear of leaving, or decision paralysis keep me from stepping into a new phase of life that had been calling to me since the 2016 election.

By year-end, I resigned from the U.S. government for a final time.

I came to understand that you need some idea of who you are – and who you want to become – to truly mature on your First Curve and meaningfully transition to your Second.

Early last year, I began the slow transition toward a Second Curve, motivated to pursue a more meaningful kind of growth. In *The Second Curve*, Charles Handy writes “growth should always be the means to a greater purpose...” Rather than remain bound by the narrow metrics that governed my First Curve, I adopted a more holistic measure of well-being consistent with Handy's thinking and Classical Yoga alike. In my Second Curve, I'm seeking growth across eight dimensions: Professional, physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, environmental, social, and financial.⁶ I appeared professionally and financially successful throughout my First Curve, but there were years when I was spiritually unfulfilled, creatively stagnant, socially insular, and emotionally blocked.

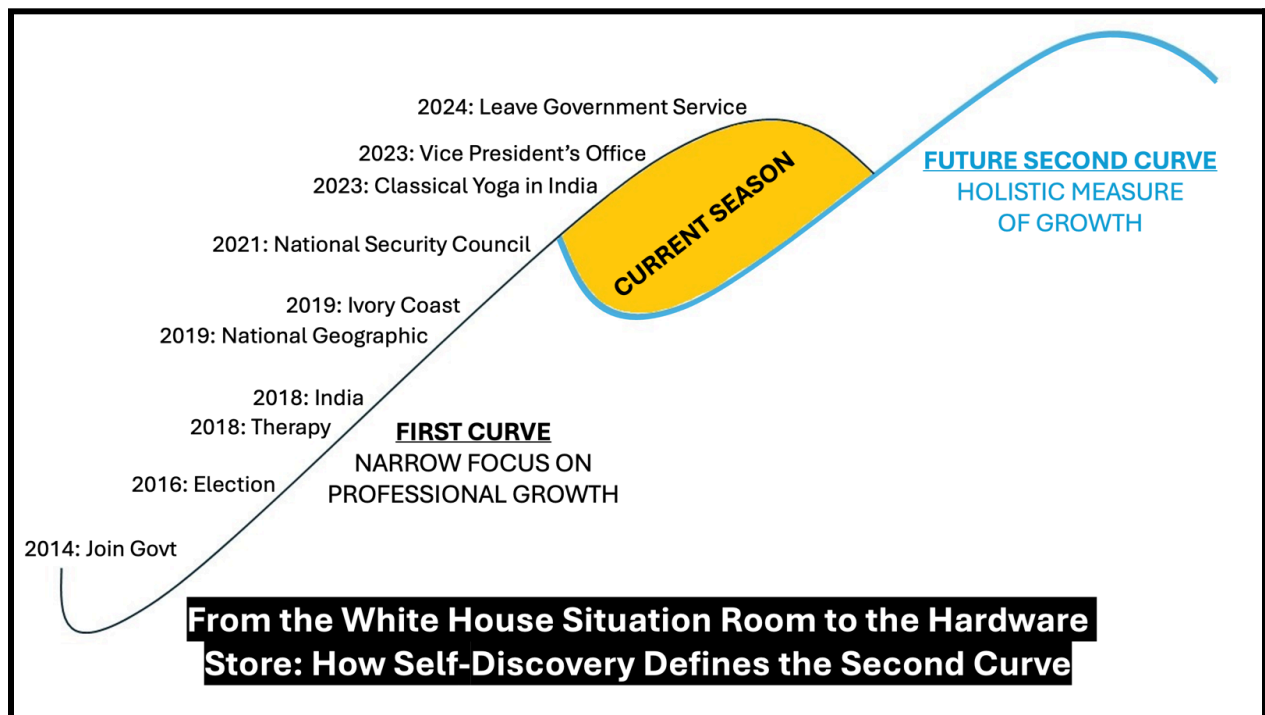
To access these other dimensions of growth, I first had to open new dimensions of myself. That was not easy. Society prefers the clean narrative – a seamless leap into a new job, neatly broadcast in an “I'm excited to announce...” post on LinkedIn. However, life tends to be more messy. In my less structured transition, I've allowed the experiences of my First Curve to marinate while exploring different constructs for my Second. I've embraced the notion of a plural self – that there are various aspects to my

identity, not just a single linear career. This liminal time has been my way of uncovering life's mystery – learning to live with uncertainty rather than rush to resolve it.

I'm "testing-and-learning"⁷ through short-term professional pursuits: corporate affairs advisor for a biotechnology company developing a vaccine to prevent fentanyl overdose; marketing consultant helping states grow American suppliers in emerging industries; deputy operations director for a national presidential campaign in Arizona; and hopefully soon, VP of global operations for a sodium-ion battery manufacturer.

Outside of these roles, I've taken up a shift at my local hardware store to nourish the emotional and social dimensions of my well-being; I'm a local mentor to a refugee family through the International Rescue Committee to satisfy my appetite for tangible service; and I've launched in-person meditation classes and begun DJing to support my spiritual and creative interests.

By "flirting with [my] possible selves," I'm learning how to manage myself⁸ and hope to improve the degree of fit between who I am and what I do in the long-run.¹



This is the foundation for my Second Curve. I'm equipped with the self-awareness of who I am, the philosophy that grounds me, and a clearer vision of who I want to become in this next season of life.

Self-discovery is the crucial catalyst for living the Second Curve philosophy. You need some understanding of who you are, and who you want to become, before you can truly peak on your First Curve and transition to a Second.

That understanding is harder to cultivate in today's world, which is marked by weaker belief systems,^{9 10 11 12} greater global volatility, and rising levels of stress, overwhelm,¹³ and decision paralysis.¹⁴ But it remains possible with three ingredients: a steady commitment to small steps toward personal growth and introspection; a guiding philosophy or framework on how to live well across life's seasons; and an acceptance that we each contain plural selves, not just a fixed identity.

I left my First Curve without a clear Second one in sight. That uncertainty has become its own teacher. In this transitional space between curves, I'm gaining a deeper sense of what I want. This isn't a cliché "eat, pray, love" moment. It's a purposeful phase to find my voice, cultivate agency, and build the conviction needed to step confidently into the next curve of my life.

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ASSISTIVE GPT PROMPTS USED

1. Is this thesis too long for my essay?

THESIS: This last part has proven the most difficult part yet. Rather than landing on a second curve, I've traveled a series of mini-curves, including numerous consulting projects, unpaid service work, and fun hobbies. Some have ridiculed this as my "eat pray love" moment while others have cautioned me this as a period of stagnancy. But, because I launched into my first curve without a true sense of self discovery, I'm engaging in a necessary period of "match quality," a term economists use to describe the degree of fit between the work someone does and who they are—their abilities and proclivities. I've come to view this as a necessary prerequisite for adopting a Second Curve philosophy.

ChatGPT said:

This is a strong and reflective thesis, but it's a bit long and layered for an essay opener—it tries to do several things at once. A more effective approach would be to streamline it to a sharper core idea that still captures your self-awareness, your transition phase, and introduces the concept of "match quality."

Here's a tightened version (about half the length) that keeps your voice but is more essay-friendly:

THESIS (edited):

This next chapter has been my hardest yet. Rather than leaping to a clear second curve, I've found myself on a series of mini-curves—consulting gigs, service work, hobbies—that some have dismissed as an "Eat Pray Love" phase. But I see it differently. Because I launched into my first curve without fully understanding myself, I'm now engaging in what economists call "match quality": testing how my work fits with who I am. I've come to believe this exploration is an essential part of adopting a true Second Curve philosophy.

This still gets across the personal struggle, the external judgment, the reframing through "match quality," and the link to the broader essay theme—but with more clarity and punch.

Would you also like a few alternative phrasings for variety? If yes, just say "yes, please."

2. How do stoicism and karma yoga overlap?

Stoicism and Karma Yoga—despite arising from different philosophical and cultural traditions (Greek and Indian, respectively)—share several core tenets that align deeply. Both emphasize right action, detachment from outcomes, self-discipline, and inner peace. Here's a breakdown of the similarities:

1. Duty and Right Action

- Stoicism: Teaches that we should act according to reason and virtue, fulfilling our duties as rational beings and members of society.
- Karma Yoga (from the *Bhagavad Gita*): Instructs practitioners to perform their dharma (duty) without attachment to success or failure.

≡ Similarity: Both encourage doing what is right because it is right—not for reward or fear of punishment.

2. Detachment from Outcomes

- Stoicism: Advocates for focusing only on what is within your control (your actions and judgments), and letting go of concern for what is outside your control (outcomes, opinions, events).
- Karma Yoga: Emphasizes *nishkama karma*—acting without attachment to the fruits of action.

≡ Similarity: Both say you should do your best, but let go of attachment to results.

3. Inner Peace and Equanimity

- Stoicism: The goal is *ataraxia* (tranquility) and *apatheia* (freedom from destructive emotions), achieved through reason and virtue.
- Karma Yoga: Seeks *equanimity* (*samata*), a balanced mind in success and failure alike.

≡ Similarity: Both value mental serenity as a sign of wisdom and spiritual maturity.

4. Self-Mastery and Discipline

- Stoicism: Practices self-control (*sophrosyne*) to live in accordance with virtue.
- Karma Yoga: Requires self-discipline (*tapas*) and mastery over desires and ego to act selflessly.

≡ Similarity: Both see inner discipline as key to spiritual growth and moral strength.

5. Universal Brotherhood and Service

- Stoicism: Promotes cosmopolitanism—the idea that all humans are part of one universal community governed by reason.
- Karma Yoga: Encourages selfless service (*seva*) to others as a path to liberation.

≡ Similarity: Both emphasize acting for the greater good, not just for oneself.

Summary Chart

Principle	Stoicism	Karma Yoga	Shared Ideal
Duty	Live according to reason & virtue	Fulfill dharma selflessly	Ethical action
Detachment	Indifference to external outcomes	Non-attachment to results	Inner freedom
Emotional Balance	Tranquility (<i>ataraxia</i>)	Equanimity (<i>samata</i>)	Peace of mind
Self-Discipline	Control passions, live wisely	Restrain ego & desires	Mastery over self
Service to Others	Cosmopolitanism & rational duty	Seva (selfless service)	Altruism and universal kinship

Let me know if you want a side-by-side comparison using actual quotes from Marcus Aurelius or the *Bhagavad Gita*—that can be a powerful way to see the overlap.

3. Should I capitalize Classical Yoga in this personal essay as I reference it as my guiding life philosophy?

ChatGPT said:

In your personal essay, capitalizing "Classical Yoga" is appropriate—especially since you're referencing it not just as a physical practice, but as a distinct philosophical system that serves as your guiding life philosophy. The capitalization signals you're referring to a formal tradition (as opposed to "yoga" as general exercise or mindfulness).

Keep it capitalized if:

- You're referencing the traditional system rooted in the Yoga Sutras or other classical Indian texts.
- You want to emphasize its role as a structured, intentional life framework.

If you mention it multiple times, you might want to clarify it briefly the first time. For example:

I adopted a more holistic measure of wellbeing grounded in Classical Yoga, the eight-limbed philosophy rooted in ancient Indian tradition.

That makes clear you're referencing a specific school of thought, not just modern yoga asana practice.

Let me know if you'd like help with a brief footnote or citation for that as well.

4. Embracing a non-linear path seems synonymous to embracing the Second Curve philosophy and its non-linear approach to life.

ChatGPT said:

Yes — you're exactly right.

“Embracing a non-linear path” is essentially shorthand for embracing the Second Curve philosophy, which Charles Handy defines as a mindset that values personal evolution, purpose, and reinvention over rigid, linear success.

In this context:

- The First Curve is linear: upward mobility, external validation, traditional success metrics.
- The Second Curve breaks that trajectory: it's about deeper meaning, plural identities, and growth across multiple dimensions (emotional, spiritual, creative, etc.).

So, saying “*I began to embrace a non-linear path*” is a clean and intuitive way to express your pivot toward the Second Curve — especially for readers unfamiliar with Handy's terminology. If you want to reinforce the connection for clarity, you could consider a small tweak like:

“...and began to embrace a non-linear path – the essence of the Second Curve philosophy.”

Or:

“...and began to embrace what Charles Handy calls the Second Curve: a non-linear path defined by purpose and reinvention.”

That way, you both show and name the philosophy, making it accessible to all readers.

5. Doesn't Handy say that exploration is part of the personal evolution

ChatGPT said:

Yes, Charles Handy does suggest that exploration is essential to personal evolution, particularly in the context of his *Second Curve* philosophy.

In *The Second Curve: Thoughts on Reinventing Society* (2015), Handy argues that we need to start a new curve before the first one peaks – whether in our careers, relationships, institutions, or personal lives. He emphasizes:

- Reinvention requires a willingness to explore. The Second Curve is about leaving behind what is familiar and venturing into the unknown, even when the current trajectory still appears successful.
- Personal evolution depends on curiosity, reflection, and risk-taking. Handy encourages individuals to ask themselves big questions about purpose and meaning – and to follow those questions even when they lead off the expected path.
- Growth is non-linear. Exploration and experimentation are not detours but integral to building a more authentic and satisfying second act.

So yes, exploration is central to Handy's concept of personal evolution – it's the bridge between recognizing the limits of the First Curve and stepping into the growth possible on the Second.