

The Courage to Change at the Right Time

My Second Curve Between Skies and Continents

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The Courage to Change at the Right Time: My Second Curve Between Skies and Continents

The Second Curve, a concept developed by Charles Handy and deeply echoed by the principles of Peter Drucker, teaches that sustainable success is not born from blind persistence, but from the courage to change before decline sets in. Drucker said: *“If you want something new, you have to stop doing something old.”* The Second Curve, to me, is that fine line between idealised desire and real action. Between what is expected by others and what pulses within us. It is the choice between being rational or faithful to our empirical self – the one who feels, who dreams, and who, at times, needs to break with convention to reach authenticity.

In theory, the Second Curve represents the intentional decision to transition into a new path before the previous one begins to decline. Handy describes it as the “reinvention curve,” a moment that requires both foresight and boldness. It is not a reactive move, but a proactive one — and that makes it uncomfortable. Many individuals and institutions resist it, hoping that past success will endure. Yet, as Handy affirms, *“The first curve is where success is built; the second is where significance is found.”*

As Handy noted in his article *Humanity at a Crossroads*, we must avoid allowing the demands of the “economic man” to dominate our full humanity, emphasising that technology must be our servant, not our master¹.

Like a C-language programme that sometimes appears correct but does not deliver what we expect, life also demands rewrites. The goal – happiness, fulfilment – may be the same for many, but the path does not need to follow common logic. My Second Curve began when, while still studying at the Higher Polytechnic Institute of Technologies and Sciences (ISPTEC) in Luanda, despite good grades and recognition, I felt out of place. I was in my homeland, but not in my purpose. The shift to Aerospace Engineering, and from Angola to Portugal, was my leap. A leap made before internal collapse, before frustration could fully consume me. As Drucker also said: *“The greatest risk is not changing – it is continuing to do the same thing.”* This leap reflects what Handy describes as the transition to a “portfolio career,” where there are no more jobs for life, but rather a series of reinventions throughout one’s professional journey. I realised, as Handy suggested, that success can become a trap if we are not brave enough to leave it behind in time.

I never wanted to study Chemical Engineering. It was a “safe” choice, suggested by external voices. Medicine even seemed interesting, but it was not what made me feel alive. I was always drawn to aviation. In secondary school, I developed a project about Angolan women piloting planes. But when I shared that dream, I heard doubt and

distrust. And I started to silence my desire. I followed fear: what if it went wrong? What if I was unsuccessful? What if I regretted it?

The first year passed. And the emptiness grew. In the second year, I had the chance of a scholarship to study in Portugal. And with it, the possibility to choose a new path. Again, the doubt: follow the dream or the safe route? But this time, I decided to listen to my own voice. What if it worked? What if I could be happy now, not only in 30 years? I chose Aerospace Engineering. And that choice changed the course of my existence.

Being afraid is entirely normal. Humans, by nature, carry internal fears – born of experiences, traumas, or of existence itself. Fear is often the uncertainty of listening to our inner voice. The doubt that pulls us between what seems real and what could be ideal. I believe fears must exist, as they often help us distinguish between right and wrong, between acting and not acting. But we cannot allow them to dictate the direction of our decisions. They are like triggers calling us to reality – not always absolute, but enough to make us reflect.

I faced many challenges – emotional, cultural, and practical. I am a Black woman from a country often labelled as underdeveloped. The Aerospace Engineering course, predominantly male, exposes the lack of representation across various levels. Sometimes, we need to see ourselves to believe we belong. And being the only dark-skinned African woman on the course, that absence of reflection was deeply felt. According to the Society of Women Engineers² (2023), women represent only 29.2% of the global STEM workforce, and in the United States, Black women account for less than 2% of engineering professionals.

I often ask myself: am I in the right place? Am I enough? Does this space belong to me? Doubt visited me daily – and fear, that silent companion, often tried to paralyse me. But I learned that fear is not the enemy. Fear is a sign. A warning that we are at the threshold of growth. Drucker said: *“The problem in our lives is not the absence of knowing what to do, but the absence of doing it.”* And: *“Whenever you see a successful business, someone, at some point, made a courageous decision.”*

Drucker acknowledged fear – but also believed that courage is acting even without guarantees. For him, the best way to overcome uncertainty was through strategic and conscious action. As he said: *“The best way to predict the future is to create it.”* In his vision of leadership, this was not just a personal motto, but a demand for action grounded in purpose.

Music is my refuge. While engineering challenges me intellectually, art reconnects me to my human essence. Artists such as Yola Semedo, Pérola, Matias Damásio and Paulo Flores help me stay anchored in who I am. Music grounds me. It is the bridge between the logic of technical reasoning and the emotion that strengthens me. My personal

philosophy pulses through verses and melodies. If a C programme can be rewritten, then I can also rewrite my path. Handy warns of the “seductions of the infosphere,” stressing that although technology offers countless possibilities, we must not let it replace our humanity, with all its sensitivities, intuitions, and imagination.

I recall a song by Angolan singer Paulo Flores, which says:

*They were childhood dreams when I was a child
My mother said to me: "My child, be careful"
But I did not know the meaning
Of every step in the dance that life reaches
Our way of being cautious
Is born of the strength of the Angolan woman
Who was comfort and shelter for the weeping and danger
For all that I say, to sing to those who love me*

These verses move me and remind me where I come from. Despite emotional challenges, homesickness for my land, my family, and friends, I remain firm. I came here with a purpose. I am charting my Second Curve, and I believe that, due to the lack of representation of African women in leadership positions – not only in the aviation sector – I can inspire others to chart their own curves. Or they will not need to: their first choices are already those that truly represent them.

Today, I dream of founding a mentorship programme for young African girls passionate about aerospace – starting in Angola and expanding to Lusophone countries. This initiative would blend technical education, storytelling and confidence-building, creating a bridge between purpose and opportunity.

I want to lead projects that involve technology, but also purpose. I believe engineering can be an instrument for social impact – and that is what drives me. Drucker emphasised that the purpose of an organisation should go beyond profit, looking to contribute to society and promote human development.

Arriving in Portugal was like landing on an unfamiliar runway. Delayed by visa issues, I missed weeks of classes and moments of integration. All groups were already formed. I was the new one, the foreigner, the different one. But I found support: generous professors, supportive colleagues. The workload is heavy, the subjects demanding, but I continue. In each class, I feel myself rebuilding.

Today, I shape my future based on what I have lived. I aim for a double degree, a master's in industrial management, electronics, or a direct doctorate. I want to be a versatile professional, combining technical knowledge with human sensitivity. I want to

lead projects that involve technology but also meaning. I believe engineering can be a tool for social change – and that is what moves me.

I have learned that living on the Second Curve also means accepting vulnerability. It means having days of doubt and continuing. It means recognising that courage is not the absence of fear – it is the decision to move forward despite it. I have accepted that the process of transformation requires patience, resilience, and faith. Faith in oneself, faith in the journey. Today, every step I take at university is an affirmation of the choice I made – and a rehearsal of the legacy I wish to leave.

Reinventing oneself in another culture is also a challenge of its own. Relearning social codes, creating an added support network, and adapting to different teaching methodologies demand humility and persistence. In Portugal, I have learned not only academic content, but how to be more patient with myself. I have learned that great achievements do not arise from haste, but from consistency. I have learned that temporary failure does not define me, and that pauses are also part of progress.

Young people like me must know that fear and doubt are normal parts of any real change. They are emotions that reveal just how significant what we are trying to do truly is. My philosophy is simple: listen to your inner voice, even when it whispers; question what they told you was impossible; and if the path is dark, go anyway – because discovery often lives there.

Other young people, especially those from backgrounds like mine, may see themselves in broken mirrors – distorted images of what they expect to be. But it is possible to piece the shards back together, create a new identity, and move forward with strength. The important thing is not to let limits imposed from outside define our internal paths. Being young, African, female and a dreamer is not a burden – it is power. Power to transform, to innovate, to break paradigms and open doors that were previously locked with cultural and social padlocks.

Institutions can support by offering more mentoring spaces, psychological support, and openness to non-standard choices. Courage needs a network, support, and inspiration. It is necessary to value real stories of transition. Apple reinvented itself with the iPhone before the iPod faded. Netflix bet on streaming before DVDs became obsolete³. These companies thrived because they embraced the Second Curve early – with clarity and courage.

A society that embraces personal changes is a society that evolves. And more: young African women, Black women, need representation to see themselves in these spaces of innovation and leadership. Change is not only individual – it is collective. By charting my Second Curve, I want to open the way for other curves that have not even begun. I want to be the image that was missing from me. I want to be a voice for those who have not yet

spoken. And, more than anything, I want every young person who reads this to realise that their story has value, that their doubts have a place, and that their dreams – no matter how unusual – deserve to be lived with intensity and faith.

Moreover, I believe that schools and universities should create programmes that encourage the transition of talent between different fields. Why cannot someone who starts in chemical engineering move to aerospace? Why not create more open educational pathways that combine human and technical skills? The future is interdisciplinary. The future is inclusive. The Second Curve, to me, is also about imagining these new possibilities – for me and for everyone.

I spent a year trying to improve my First Curve. As Drucker warned: *“The greatest risk is not changing – it is continuing to do the same thing.”* I knew what needed to change, but I was afraid. Until I realised that being average was not enough for me. I do not want to be a repetition of stories. I want to leave my own mark.

The Second Curve is a crossing. It does not begin with certainty, but with courage. And that courage, I cultivated step by step, between skies and continents. I rewrote my internal code. I learned that fear and doubt are signs that we are alive, aware, and committed to something that matters. They should not be avoided but understood. They helped me grow.

As explored by Handy¹, SWE², and Forbes³, embracing transformation is not merely a corporate strategy — it is a human imperative. The ability to pivot before decline, to empower underrepresented voices, and to reimagine identity are all dimensions of what Drucker and Handy saw as purposeful leadership.

Today I move forward with gratitude for my First Curve – it taught me what does not fulfil me. And I continue with enthusiasm for the Second – which is still being drawn, full of possibilities. May more young people have the courage to stop what does not fulfil them and start what inspires them. May they walk their own paths. May they create their own futures.

Because, as Drucker said, “The best way to predict the future is to create it.” And creating our future begins with a choice. The choice to change – at the right time.

And what if, this time, it works?

¹ Charles Handy. *Humanity at a Crossroads*. Drucker Society Europe, 2018. <https://www.druckerforum.org/retrospective/index.php?year=2018&file=2>

² Society of Women Engineers. *Women of Color in the Engineering Workplace*. 2023. <https://alltogether.swe.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Women-of-Color-in-the-Engineering-Workplace.pdf>

³ Forbes. *How Apple And Netflix Won The Innovation Race*. 2021. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2021/02/26/how-apple-and-netflix-won-the-innovation-race>

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2. Grammar and language review.
3. Narrative coherence checks.

Verification of quotations attributed to Peter Drucker, Charles Handy, and articles from the Drucker Forum.

The following types of prompts were used:

- “Revise this paragraph to improve clarity and flow.”
- “Check narrative consistency and alignment with the contest criteria.”
- “Remove personal identifiers that could compromise anonymity.”
- “Confirm accuracy and attribution of this quote from Drucker or Handy.”
- “Suggest theoretical references or Drucker Forum articles relevant to this topic.”

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