

The cave I feared to enter: How the need for a career shift altered my way of thinking

'The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek' – Joseph Campbell

1. Introduction

The famous French essayist, diarist and short story writer Anais Nin once wrote “Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one’s courage”¹. The world as we see it today has always been a platform of change and transition. What it was about 1000 years ago is not what it is today. Facets of life change on a daily, monthly and yearly basis. Humans with their intelligence and ability to adapt and transition have brought innovations to this world. Thomas Edison brought to life the electric bulb, the Wright Brothers brought to life the flying machine, Henry Ford through tenacity and the desire to change the world birthed the moving vehicle and the list goes on and on. It is a burning fire for change that has pushed the world to witness some of the greatest inventions and changes. It is that desire to change that pushes people to embrace shifts in their career and business. This essay explores the second curve philosophy and how it is key for people to embrace it. In this essay I tell my personal career shift story and what I have learned and what I propose as a model for a career shift.

2. A recollection of my childhood experiences

I have lived in Zimbabwe for the better part of my life. Actually, I have stayed in Zimbabwe for the past 31 years. I am 31 years old today. I have seen the economic situation in Zimbabwe transition from good to bad and from bad to good and from good to bad and from bad to perhaps “neutrally good”. In the year 1999, I was in pre-school. I was very young but I vividly recall some aspects of how life was: Zimbabwe had a stable economy but it was beginning to show signs of crumbling. In 1999, having electricity in the house was a norm, having taped water in the house was a norm and one Zimbabwean dollar coin was so valuable. I used to use it to buy sweets and apples and still remain with some change. However, in the year 2000 things took a grim turn. I was about to turn 7 years. I didn’t understand what inflation was but I remember prices of commodities began to rise. My mom was always complaining about the price hikes and it was the first time I slept hungry some other nights. Life changed for the worst. It became even worse as I grew older. In 2006, there were fuel shortages, money shortages, poor public services in the urban areas and massive school teacher strikes. In 2008, the main political parties in Zimbabwe joined to form what was called a *government of national unity*. With their amalgamation, the economy took a positive turn. There were no longer money shortages, standard of life for many improved significantly and public service provision became far much better. But even when life improved for many people there were still many people who fell through the cracks and remained poor. I would definitely say I was one of those kids who came from a very poor background and life didn’t really change for me. It was difficult. I am sure you are wondering why I have started by narrating my story in retrospect of my life from childhood. The uncertainty of the economy taught me to always take a risk even when things

¹ Nin, A. (1966-1977). *The Diary of Anais Nin* (7 vols.). Swallow.

seemed to be better. I have developed this mentality both in my personal life and as well in my professional life.

1.2 The comfort curve

'Comfort is the enemy of achievement' – Farrah Gray²

I would say that a lot of people today are afraid of taking that one bold step that can alter the course of their life in a completely different trajectory. I see the situation in Zimbabwe as one that is based on the idea of *survival of the fittest*. It is like the forest ecosystem where the strongest creatures survive and are at the apex of the food chain. All other weaker creatures are trampled upon and devoured. Due to the poor and unpredictable economic situation in Zimbabwe, several people have remained in a comfort loop that has made them accept the situation as it is. I would say that I was one of those people. In Zimbabwe, probably not only in Zimbabwe, *job security* is what citizens take seriously. According to ZIMSTAT (2025), there is 21.8% unemployment rate in Zimbabwe³. Some unofficial sources say that the unemployment rate in Zimbabwe is at above 50%. I have noted that in Zimbabwe, most employed people are underemployed and some receive poor salaries but they still endure because of the volatility and unpredictability of the economic situation. There is no guarantee that if you decide to quit a job you will get another job. People have adopted a more *cautious approach* which they call having *job security*. Handy argues that organisations, individuals and societies get stuck continuing along a successful path (first curve) even when the curve is peaking⁴. From my personal experience, I have seen that in Zimbabwe it is challenging to get another job once you quit the first one without getting another one. So you can imagine how difficult it is to survive. A majority of people had dreams but now most dreams have been deferred and some even abandoned completely. The comfort curve has become the norm with a large portion of Zimbabweans settling for meagre salaries that can help them survive no matter how horrible the job is or how terrible the working conditions are. I, myself, have always aspired to do two things in my life: i) to become a successful writer and ii) to become someone who helps people (Social Worker).

1.3 My Damascene Moment

'It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us' – Marianne Williamson⁵

A damascene moment is a sudden profound revelation or transformation, often involving a complete change in one's beliefs or direction in life. I love reading books a lot, especially self-development books. They open my mind to new thinking and new perceptions. I vividly recall reading the book *Eat That Frog* by Brian Tracy as I sat in my little office at work in

² Gray, F. (2015). *Comfort is the enemy of achievement*

³ Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZIMSTAT). (2025). *Labour Force Survey 2024*. Harare: ZIMSTAT.

⁴ Handy, C. (2015). *The Second Curve: Thoughts on Reinventing Society*. London: Random House Business Books, ISBN: 978-1847941329.

⁵ Williamson, M. (1992). *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course in Miracles*.

2023. I was working at Bindura University as a Social Work Lecturer. It was a hot Sunday afternoon and I was really drawn by the ideas in Brian Tracy's book. I kept reading and reading. The idea of this book is based on a metaphor of *eating a frog*. In Brian Tracy's words *eating that frog* means that one has to complete the most difficult task first before doing anything else⁶. This metaphor has a lot to do with how we as humans live today and how we operate in our workplaces. I have highlighted in the previous section that most people are comfortable with their positions because they have decided to rather take a more cautious approach to life. As I sat in the rocking office chair, I began to think about the job I was doing and the salary I was earning through the lens of Brian Tracy's ideology. I realized I was so afraid of losing my job and not making the most difficult decisions I needed to make in order to achieve what I sought to achieve. I had been working as a Lecturer and the repetitive experience of it, the lack of industry experience and the low salary I was getting made me look deep into myself whether I was doing justice to my dreams and goals. This for me was my damascene moment.

1.4 Something potentially risky

'The obstacle is the path' – Zen

In 2024, I made a decision to quit my job as a Lecturer and look for a job as a Social Worker and become a part-time writer. I knew very well that in Zimbabwe the opportunities to get a job as a Social Worker were limited. What I had noticed was that I had not much experience as a practitioner but only as a Lecturer. I needed the experience of working directly with clients rather than just read about the social work theories, methods and concepts in books. I wanted to upgrade my skills and competencies. I wanted a newer challenge in a world that is ever changing. I knew that social work in England was more sophisticated and was more organised and that it had more room for a social worker to develop their skills and knowledge. Social work in England is more recognised and more resourced than in Zimbabwe. So I registered with their board of social workers (Social Work England). I began job hunting. I applied for over 50 job openings and I only received 3 interview invitations. Among the 3, I got one job offer. I accepted the job and started the process of relocating to my new job. I knew the risk I was taking but I had made the difficult decision based on what Zimbabwe is today – volatile, fragile and unpredictable. My plan was to go to Europe and practice social work but at the same time start off my writing career. Europe offered a very conducive environment for me as a writer. In Zimbabwe, there's not much support for one who seeks to be a writer.

1.5 Critical thinking

'The more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better he or she can transform it' – Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed⁷

⁶ Tracy, B. (2007). *Eat that frog!: 21 great ways to stop procrastinating and get more done in less time* (2nd ed.). Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

⁷ Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary ed.; M. B. Ramos, Trans.). Continuum. (Original work published 1970)

The first level of taking bold steps from the shackles of a *cautious life* is to think critically about yourself and the realities that you face on a daily basis. We are living in a world whereby people cannot think for themselves. Paulo Freire talks about a banking concept of education where people as students are dehumanised and are made to think to have a dimensional educational pattern where there is only one right knowledge and no other information is valid⁸. As an alternative to the banking concept of education, Freire suggests another concept he calls problem posing education. This is education where people need to critique the world view that the world is what it is because of what it's supposed to be. For example, ever since I was born I have always wanted to be a writer but I have always been told that writing is not profitable and it will leave me poor. I have been taught in school that there is only one way to succeed in life, that is, to pick a professional degree such as becoming a lawyer, doctor, engineer or pilot. I have always mentally challenged this notion in view of the question posed by Drucker that "What is the right thing to do?"⁹ I wrote my first book and self-published it on Kindle Amazon in 2017. I can never really describe the feeling I had when my first novel went live on amazon. I felt fulfilled.

1.6 The Handy-Drucker-Freire Model (HDF MODEL)

'It is change that always provides the opportunity for the new and different' – Peter Drucker¹⁰

Stage	Peter Drucker	Paulo Freire	Charles Handy
Reflect & Question	Spot and identify what no longer works	Develop critical awareness by questioning why and also challenge assumptions.	Note when the present path is peaking by spotting the early signs
Engage and Empower Yourself	Push responsibility to those closest to action by decentralising	Include all voices through dialogue and empowerment.	Start to experiment before the fall of the first curve.
Adapt and act	Focus on opportunities, not just problems which means you need to innovate and align.	Combine reflection and action through more learning.	Upscale the second curve while running the first one and manage the change.

⁸ Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary ed.; M. B. Ramos, Trans.). Continuum. (Original work published 1970)

⁹ Drucker, P. F. (1967). *The effective executive*. New York: Harper & Row.

¹⁰ Drucker, P. F. (1985). *Innovation and entrepreneurship: Practice and principles*. Harper & Row.

1.6.1 How this model applies to a career shift

Having read through literature written by Drucker, Freire and Handy, I have come to realise that that we often walk through the cycles of our professional and personal lives covered by a confusion fog. We frequently look at what can go wrong if we step outside our comfort zone instead of what can go right if we take the risk. A common theme that radiates throughout the works of Drucker, Freire and Handy is the theme of thinking outside the box or taking an innovative life approach. I have come up with the HDF model to help others who are on the brink of taking a risk or playing it safe in life. One has to reflect on their state of life be it in business. One has to reflect and ask themselves the hard questions: Is this the career I want? In the next 3 or 4 years, will the job I'm working still be relevant? To answer these kinds of questions, Freire suggests building critical awareness by questioning and challenging assumptions¹¹. As for my case, I began to ask why I was sticking to my job as a lecturer yet I wanted to do something I was passionate about, that is becoming a social worker and a writer. To answer these questions again, Handy asserts that one has to start noticing when his current path is nearing its peak by spotting the early signs. This means being able to intelligently look past what's currently working and be able to see sustainability of it.

After reflecting and questioning the path one is taking, there is need to begin to engage others and empower yourself. We cannot live as Islands. Everyone has a mentor or someone they look up to in making decisions and getting advice. When organisations want to make drastic changes to their systems or products, they consult and hold meetings. The more minds come into the fold, the better the execution and implementation. Some people say they do not have mentors yet on a daily basis they read information written by someone who is an expert in a field they want to learn more about. Drucker suggests that an organisation or a professional should push responsibility to those closest to action by decentralising meaning that they have to make sure that they listen to others opinions when making a critical decision¹². Freire suggests that one should include all voices through dialogue, co-creation and empowerment. Indeed, there is need for one to listen to others. Consulting others is a step in the right direction as one can gather, synthesise and analyse the available advice and opinions to come up with one concrete and well thought out decision. Handy asserts that one should begin to experiment before the decline of the first curve. In Zimbabwe, it is really hard to tell someone to leave their current job and seek another one because of the economic situation that is often volatile and unpredictable. However, one has to begin to try other avenues even if they are still employed. By experimenting, Handy seems to suggest that one should take that all important first step and risk in considering what they need to do to shift their career path.

Lastly, the most important step in the change process is to act in changing your career path. According to Drucker when seeking to innovate, one should focus on opportunities, not just problems which means one needs to innovate and align with the new career transition. Often, we look at what can go wrong instead of what can go right. In the quest to change one's career, there is a tendency to overthink the possible challenges that can negatively affect how the career change goes. Through learning, one can act on the knowledge they get along the way

¹¹ Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary ed.; M. B. Ramos, Trans.). Continuum. (Original work published 1970)

¹² Drucker, P. F. (1985). *Innovation and entrepreneurship: Practice and principles*. Harper & Row.

as Freire says that one needs to combine reflection and action through more learning. As one sticks to their first career one has to slowly manage the transition. One can manage the transition by making sure that one has enough resources and advice to take on the new career.

1.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, taking the bold step to change one's career is really a daunting task because it involves a lot of thinking and factors external to the individual wishing to take the bold step. People go through life as if there is only one way to live and that there is no other way that one can live. The society has socialised people to think that they cannot achieve certain feats but the reality is there is room for critiquing the systems that have raised us and come up with ideas that can change our way of thinking. Taking a risk seems scary but remaining in one comfortable position is scarier.