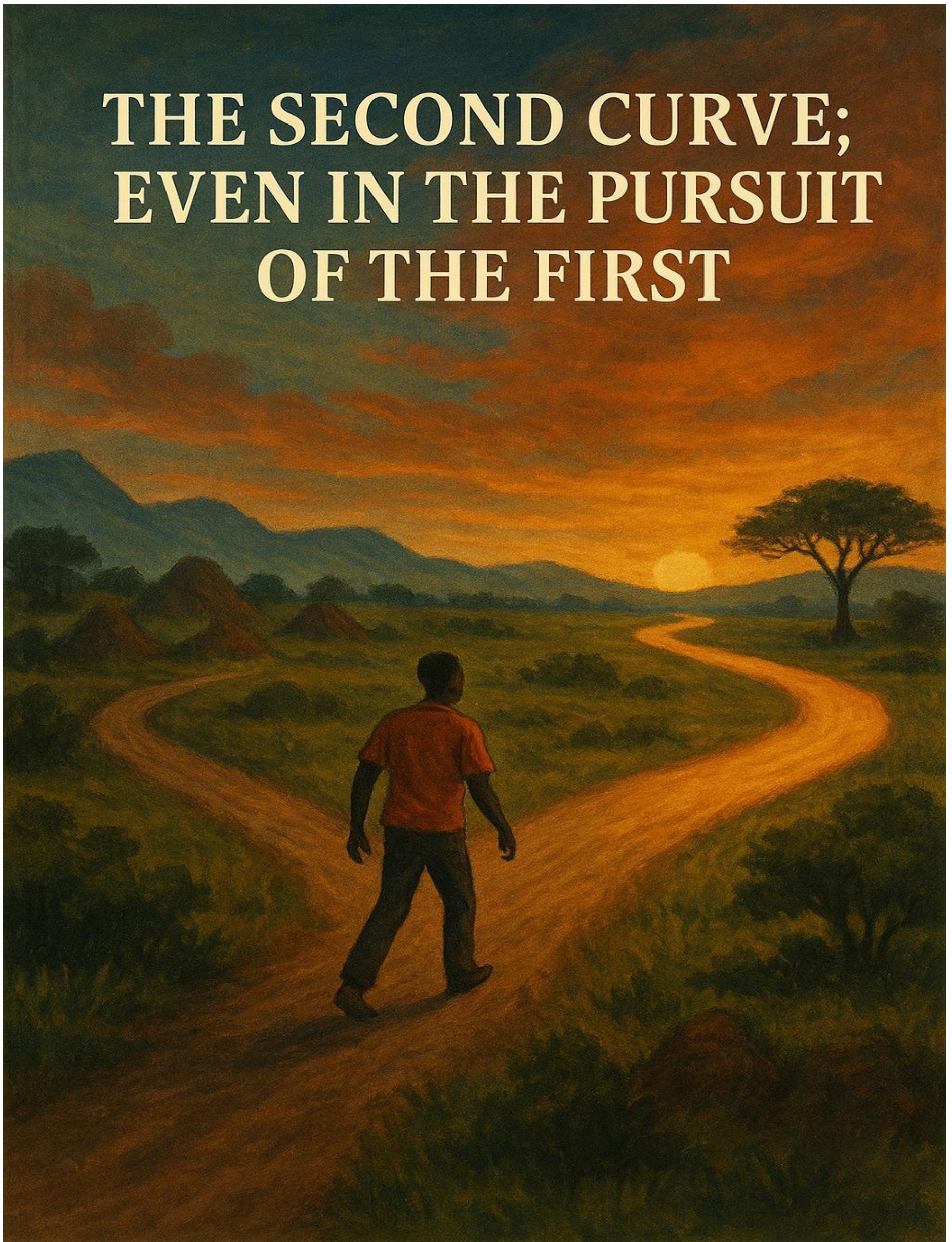


THE SECOND CURVE; EVEN IN THE PURSUIT OF THE FIRST



(2014)

It was the late summer and we Manchester united fans were already done for the season, yet again! Something was clearly not working for the same club that had won the English championship a year ago. 'Was it the new coach', my mind paced as I made my way home. Mama was very jubilant nowadays, either counting money or confirming the intake of new students. Seeing the empty look on my face, she still made to confirm certain things from me. 'I told the bursar to send you documents, hope you've put them into an excel sheet, eh Uchendu?' I assumed my reply was not necessary as she soon jumped on another call. Starting a school just before Papa's death was probably Mama's best life decision. She had become the biggest female proprietress in the entire local government and people from villages away were coming to register with her. Business was good, life was better.

In what I have come to identify as the first curve, it is imperative to state that most men do not realize they are living it... nearly like being privileged but being too into yourself that you seldom realize "I am living a pivotal period in my life". This original and initial path of success goes too easily unnoticed that people still chase it even in moments they should have begun creating paths towards their second curve (Tolan (2009). As Charles Handy (2015) calls it; the original cycle of success. The excitement of the first wave of success, the reality of the girls scout in 1970, the present for Mama and her booming school, the 1999 highlights of a certain English club and perhaps the (certain) future of the young man writing this pursuit of a first curve. (*Is there always a first curve for everyone though?*).

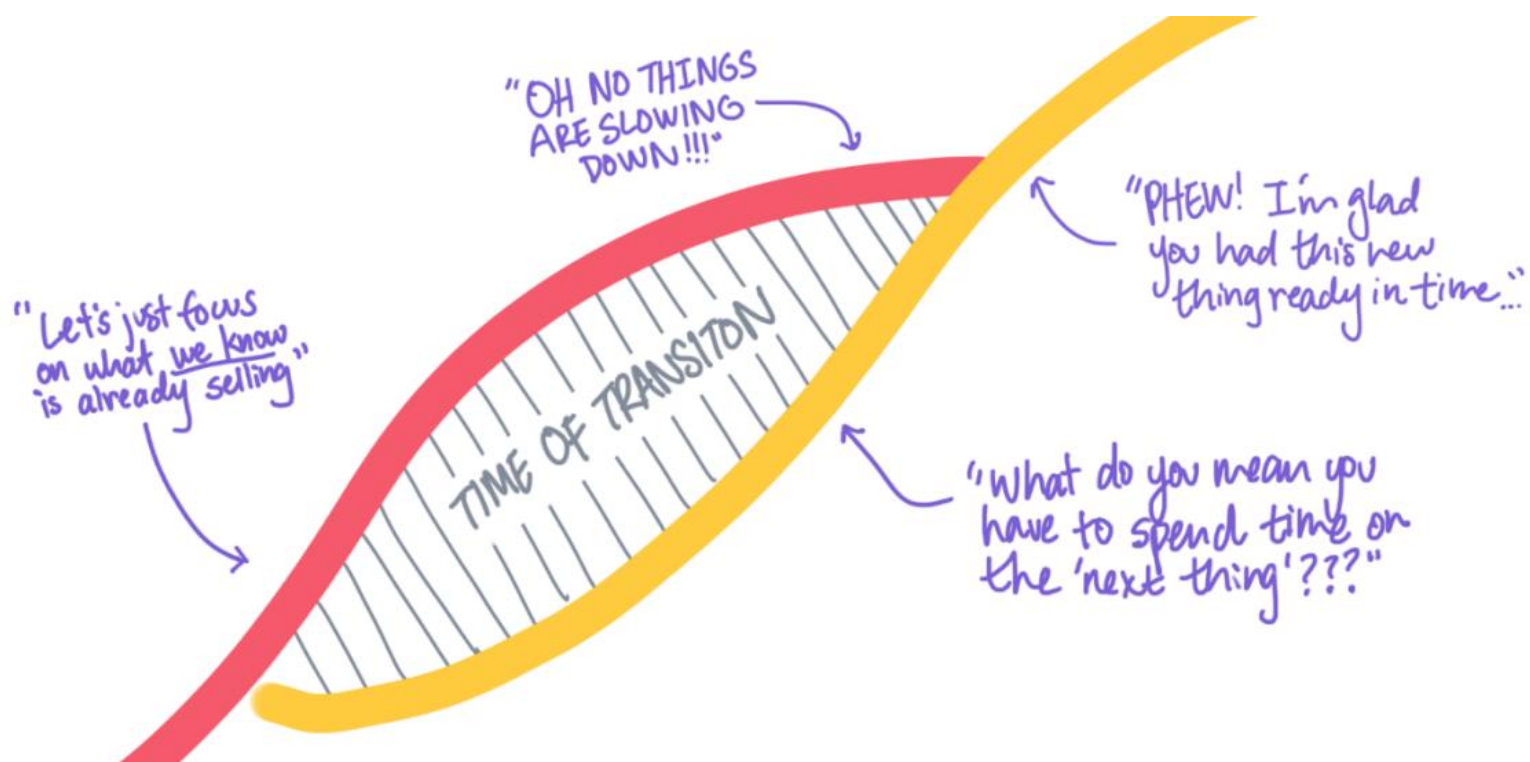


Fig 1. Life as a Series of S-Curves (Kyle Weeks, 2019)

You can explain the second curve easily to iPhone users, they're living it. Apple's Macintosh sales were plummeting when Steve Jobs returned in the late '90s. But instead of clinging to the old, he reimagined the brand with the iPhone, iPad, and iPod, a bold new curve that has kept Apple relevant. LEGO did the same, pivoting from traditional toys to digital, connecting bricks to screens. The second curve is about timely reinvention, moving before the decline sets in. My chemistry teacher, Mr. Bayo, had a way of making lessons linger; 'every reaction needs a spark, Uchendu,' he would say. 'But every spark needs something to keep it going- a catalyst.' That's what the second curve is: the catalyst. It's the moment you spot a decline before it becomes a disaster. The thing though is, it's easier to just stay up the mountain than to climb down and find a new one to climb. But the mountain doesn't care if you're ready or not. Decline is certain and it doesn't send a memo.

Yet again, *do we all, have a first curve?*

(2021)

Old Trafford had become the Theatre of Nightmares. United had just lost to Sheffield United—a team we should have beaten blindfolded. Four coaches in six years. Ferguson was long gone, and so was our winning spirit. I wondered what would have happened if he had stayed to groom someone. Maybe we wouldn't be here. Maybe Mama wouldn't be here either, watching the government roll out one free education initiative after another, snatching her students away. Mama's school was struggling. We'd whisper about finding another source of income, but those whispers never grew legs. The decline was invisible until it wasn't, and by the time it hit, it was too late. But perhaps we should have been more emphatic because from here it. Went. Downhill.

Joseph Schumpeter said, 'No matter how many carriages you link together, you'll never create a train. It's only when you leap from the carriage to the train that true growth happens.' But how do you know when to leap? And (the question) rightly so because often times defining the concept of change is relatively easy but the timing of the alteration, transformation, movement or modification to the status quo presents a considerable amount of challenge, so great that even noble men do not find the application of change easy. In Handy's thoughts (2015), any change in the current trajectory (first curve) needs to be done during the growth phase, ideally before even before stagnation happens, as chemistry explains; when energy and reaction is high. Even though it leaves little room for enjoying the success of the first curve (why not live while you can), postponing the timing of the second curve initiation would only limit its chances of success (you'll eventually not live). This failure of the second curve would hence become a result of its initial phase of low energy, unending procrastination and tremendous work and would happen in parallel with the decline phase of the first curve (Bagley, 2013).

Oprah Winfrey taught me that lesson better than any theory. In 2011, she ended her show while it was still the biggest on TV. People thought she was crazy. But she was already building OWN, her second curve. She didn't wait for the decline. She built while she still had the influence, the audience, the spark.

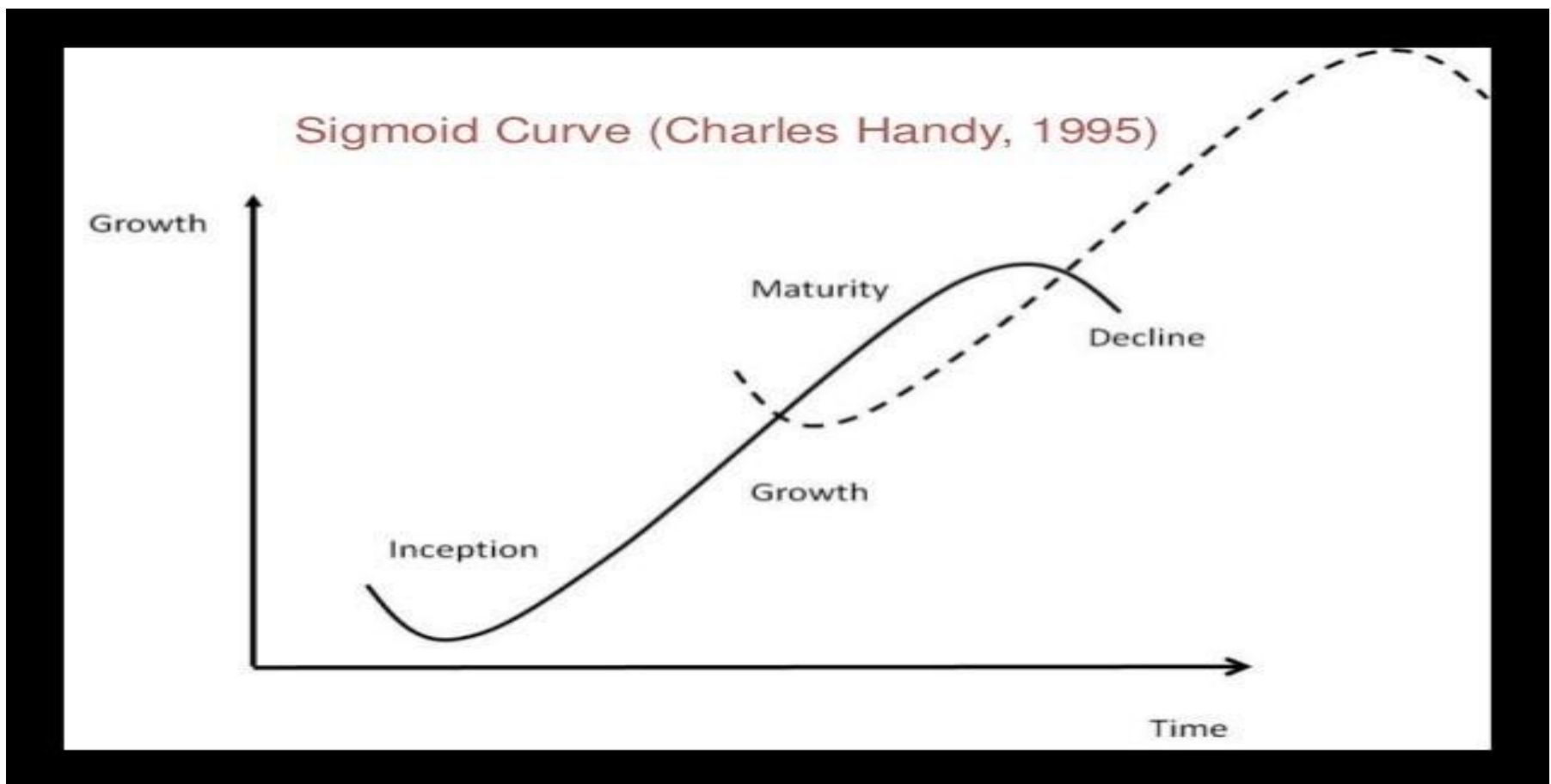


Fig 2. The Second Curve (Charles Handy, 2015)

But what if the idea of a second curve isn't in our culture? Grandpa would always say, "iwu onye igbo izizi" (you're first Igbo) and growing up was realizing we were a people who instituted our concepts and lived by our own established principles that have not just worked for us but has underlined significant growth times in the country. The idea of the second curve might come off as countercultural as I am sure Grandpa would come to agree. Growing up in a system where survival often outshines strategy, the average Nigerian (as is similar with other 3rd world countries) faces deep instability especially with erratic power supply, volatile markets, limited social safety nets and very poor infrastructure. So, to find a stable job, livelihood or business model, is to have found a diamond, something so precious that it's to not be experimented with. To put it better, the odds of failure outweigh the possibilities of success in such a high risk society. For we Igbos, we find more pride in resilience, sticking to a path and making so much success out of it that you even get named for it eventually.

I remember Grandpa was named Ichie Ogba aka eje agha (A noble man who goes to battle with nothing), because he left the village for Onitsha with nothing and ended up with one of the biggest and successful shops in the town.

The pride was the resilience and perhaps, the legacy.

The Igbo legacy which we also refer to as- the system of apprenticeship. Train – start business – grow – build legacy. A linear system that strengthens the resilience of the success in a business and keeps more persons engrossed on growing the same particular curve and ideology. The idea here being to increase the number of first curves, perhaps as a means to achieve the second curve for the main first curve benefactor in this phase. “Make money, buy more products, recruit younger kinsmen to learn the art of the business, build them shops to help them be independent in the same system and largely be appreciated for being the brain box of this unending cycle- the linear first curve (Ugwu, Njeze & Oluka, 2023).

But the principle of the second curve has its own form of resilience; the kind that teaches you to sense decline before it takes shape. To feel the subtle shift before the ground starts to crumble. To act when it still seems like standing still is safe.

The hunt begins long before the spoils of the last one are even cooked.

You have to be *aware* and *open to change* so you can *learn* and **plan strategically**.

Aware - You have to live in the present and in the moment. Paying keen attention to details especially as it concerns your business. To change effectively, it becomes imperative that you listen to the little whispers of decline, boredom, income and market shift. Awareness and preparedness lies in understanding that most times change is necessary and recognizing that success today does not guarantee success tomorrow. Success they say is simply when opportunity meets preparedness.

Openness to Change – the tea of change does not always taste sweet, if anything, it comes with a huge sense of discomfort and doubt, but much more less than before the first curve. The openness to change lies in embracing the difficulties, challenges and quagmire that comes with change. Like keeping a puppy away from its mother’s breast, so should you keep your mind from dwelling and clinging to what is already familiar. The finest of earth’s gifts comes after rigorous change, heat, refine and subsequent grit.

Learn – Even students willing to move to a higher class pass through tests, except this time it would be life dishing out the question papers. Curiosity sparks learning interest. The quest into what is trending, seeking feedback, educating yourself well enough to venture into well researched spheres and succeed. And so, my mantra at 13 years, Stay curious. In a time where change is imminent, research about ideas and don't go to hunting for a leopard with brooms.

Plan Strategically – summers with Grandpa always came with subtle lessons that weighed heavier than how easily they were spoken, Once when I had a challenge and he could see me panic, he shouted and even without knowing the challenge “*Plan, don't Panic*”. It is hugely understandable that the human response to the need of change, especially in a situation with visible signs of decline, is Panic. Panic from fear of failure, of many things but more from being handicapped to handle the present situation. At that very point (or even before), what makes you stand out would be your ability to suppress panic and plan. Ultimately, my words to my children would be “Don't abandon the first curve prematurely, instead, build the second curve while you still have the backing of the first (Plan).

Yet, at every point this question persists with me,

Do we all have a first curve?

I find it cliché to complain as an African, because perhaps that is all we do. The review into the theory of a first curve for everyone would heavily be affected by cultural, social and economic backgrounds. What is common for Peter might be only a dream for Paul. But best as Peter Drucker (2008) says it, “And it's up to you to keep yourself engaged and productive during a career that may span some 50 years”.

Let the young man in his desperation go out and hunt. If he kills the elephant, his poverty ends. If the elephant kills him, his poverty ends - Pete Edochie.

Some young men are sent to the hunt heavily equipped, while some are provided with just stones.

Some are given a map and are taught where exactly to find the elephant, while some have to rely on merely an ancestral history of success.

Some hunt on well fed stomachs, while some care less for food most likely because there isn't one.

Some get a funeral when “their poverty ends”, some are regarded as not men and women enough.

Charles Handy when he speaks of the second curve, is asking us to be cognizant of the growth cycles of things, to accept the decline phases, understand that everything has an expiry date and that it is prudent to start investing in other opportunities when your venture enters its growth phase. “An un-reinvented life leads to dullness, if not despair” (Handy, 2015).

I think about the look of despair I’ve seen in the eyes of so many young Africans, that hollow, searching gaze that asks, ‘Is there even a first curve for us here? Are we too limited to have one?’ Sometimes, I catch that same look in the mirror. Am I already in despair? A question that’s been circling in my mind since I began writing this, forcing me to look inward and confront my own doubts. But maybe that’s the point. Maybe the first curve isn’t always a meteoric rise. Maybe it’s that fleeting moment of joy from a small win even; a school competition, a game of football, a job well done. It may not look like success at first, but perhaps it’s just enough to propel us to the next phase, if we recognize it for what it is. The first curve is a moment, the second is a mindset.

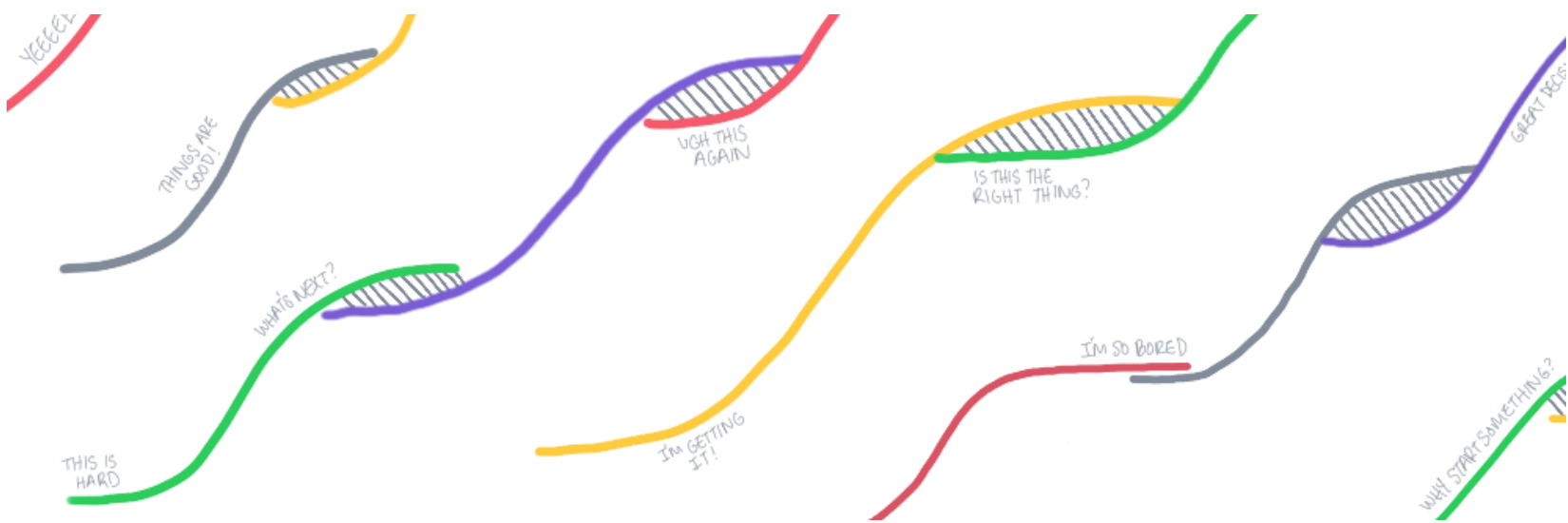


Fig 3. Life as a Series of S-Curves (Kyle Week, 2019)

(2025)

Mama eventually opened a shop, admitted defeat in the school business but too late that we had to go in pursuit of another first curve. The thing about missing the proper timing for things is that, as much as you can always peak again, it takes nearly twice the time and resources you needed for the initial curve - in a world where time can be very expensive.

I still go to work in search of my first curve... sometimes, I branch on my way back to watch a Manchester united match. Perhaps to remind myself 'the importance of the second curve'.

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