

**When the Water Boils:  
Choosing Growth Over Comfort**

## Japanese Schools

Some months ago, I was having one of my usual talks with my boyfriend when our conversation drifted toward the topic of education. I shared with him how I feel that the school system in my country doesn't really prepare children for adult life in any practical sense. We're not taught essential life skills like managing finances, cooking, fixing things, or even emotional education. So when I stepped into adulthood, I had to learn all of that from scratch—skills I believe we could've been taught during our school years. He agreed, adding that it's the same in his country.

The very next day—thanks to what people jokingly call “our phones spying on us”—a video popped up on my social media. It showed kids in a Japanese school on a regular Tuesday. I was stunned. Everything I had just wished for in Brazilian schools, they already had. These children were being taught exactly what I had longed to learn. Japan seems to have embraced an educational model that's better suited for the future. Those kids might not realize it yet, but they're already living what Charles Handy described as “The Second Curve.”

Moreover, it left me wondering why some societies evolve while others remain still, holding onto systems that no longer serve their purpose. Maybe we're afraid of questioning. Or maybe we just never stop long enough to imagine something better. But watching that video, I realized: some changes don't come from crisis—they come from vision. From the quiet decision to prepare for what's ahead, not just cope with what already is. Japan's educational system may be one example of this early transition—an investment in long-term resilience.

## The Frog in a Pot

So, why are these changes so hard? Why do we resist them, even when they seem inevitable? One answer comes to mind when I ask myself that: because it's comfortable.

As Drucker once said, “People in any organization are always attached to the obsolete.” What Drucker referred to as obsolete—what will eventually lose its value—I would translate in the present as familiar. And who isn’t attached to what feels familiar, whether consciously or not?

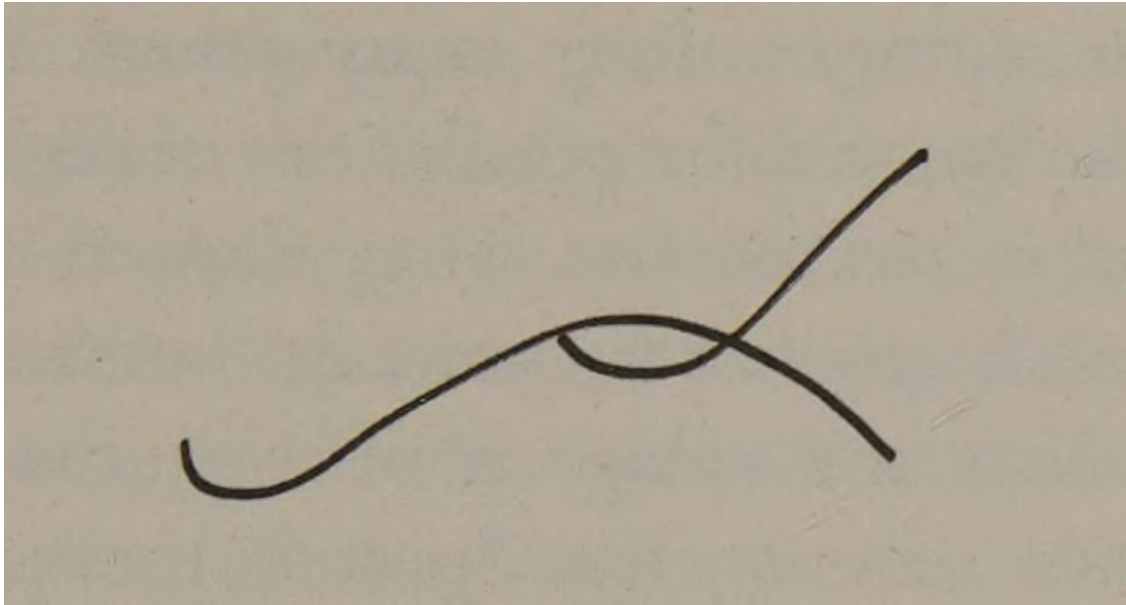
The familiar is comfortable and comfort is seductive. It gives us a false sense of safety, of permanence. It tells us, “You’re fine here. Why move?” We build routines around what we know, and slowly, the idea of change begins to feel threatening—not because the change is bad, but because it’s unknown. We convince ourselves that staying is better than risking discomfort, even if deep down we sense we’re not growing anymore. As Charles Handy once put it, “The curve of success is rarely a straight line. If you want to stay ahead, you have to jump to the next curve before the first one flattens out.” That jump, however, rarely feels urgent when we’re still comfortable.

It reminds me of a story I once heard—one that stuck with me. A frog is placed in a pot of warm water. At first, it enjoys the cozy temperature, so it stays. Slowly, the water heats up, but because the changes are gradual and the frog feels comfortable, it doesn’t jump out. Eventually, the water gets too hot—but by then, it’s too late. The heat has weakened its muscles, and the frog can no longer escape. It dies, not because it couldn’t jump, but because it waited too long.

Isn’t that how many of us treat change? We stay in familiar situations that no longer serve us, simply because they still feel “warm enough.” We wait until the discomfort becomes unbearable—only to realize we’ve lost our strength to act.

## The Second Curve as The Second Circle

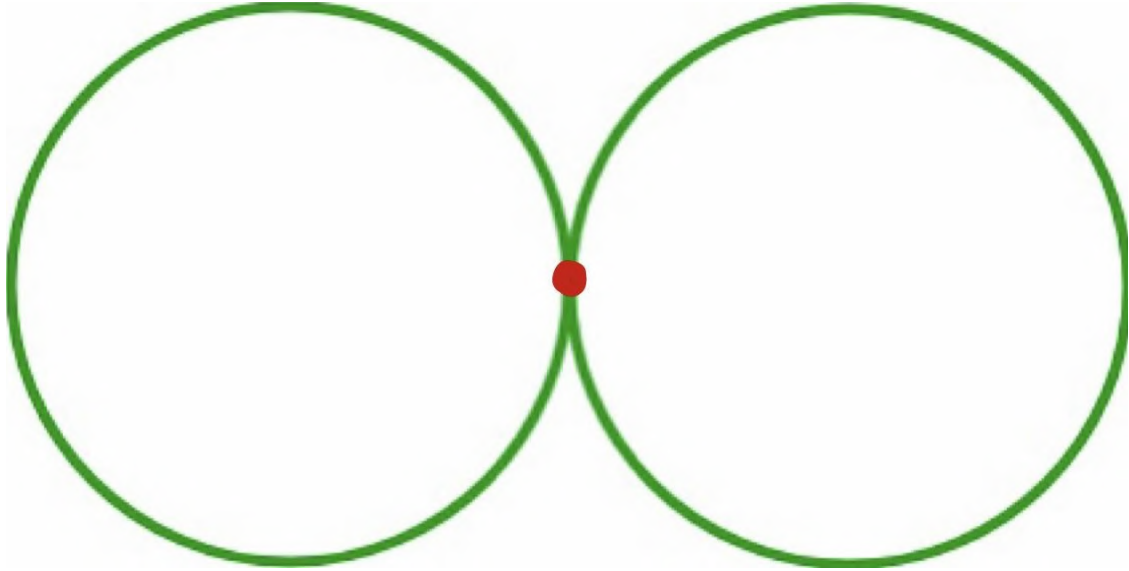
Yet, unlike the frog, we have the ability to leap—to recognize the simmering heat of stagnation and decide to jump. This leap is what Charles Handy called the Second Curve: the deliberate act of letting go of what once worked in order to embrace what might work better. To illustrate this, Handy drew two intersecting curves.



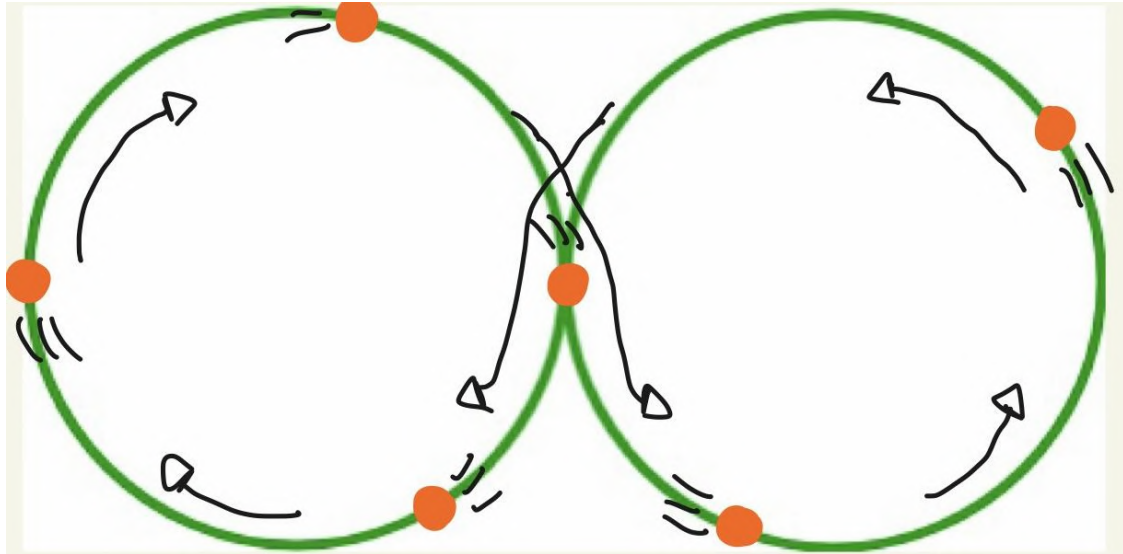
The first one rises, peaks, and eventually declines—the natural life cycle of a person, an organization, or an idea. The second begins before the first one reaches its peak, symbolizing the courage to innovate while things still seem to be going well.

In my own life, I see this crossing point as the moment I chose to question—to imagine something better, even before it exists. Writing this essay is, perhaps, part of my own leap. A small spark of courage, fueled by vision rather than urgency

In his book, Handy described this leap from one curve to another as a bold, almost abrupt transition. But in reality, I believe this shift is not always so sudden. Often, we begin to live both curves at once—still embedded in the comfort of the first while taking the initial steps into the second. I like to picture this not as two diverging lines, but as two circles that touch in a middle point.



At the intersection lies a moment of insight—an opportunity, a spark, a choice. Some decide to turn back and stay within the known rhythm of the first circle. Others begin to revolve between both, in a figure-eight-like motion, slowly shifting their center of gravity toward the second. Eventually, momentum builds, and they find themselves fully inside the new cycle. This gradual path shows us that embracing the Second Curve doesn't always require a reckless jump, but rather clarity, foresight, and the courage to hold onto an opportunity before it slips away.



### A Shared Leap: When Drucker Anticipated the Curve

Peter Drucker himself embodied this kind of transition. Long before the term Second Curve was coined, he was already practicing its essence: shifting focus before decline, building the new while the old was still strong. In the 1950s, as the industrial economy thrived, Drucker began to notice a subtle but profound shift—knowledge, not labor or capital, was becoming the most valuable resource.

He coined the term “knowledge worker” and redirected his thinking toward what he would call the “knowledge society.” Rather than abandoning the industrial model abruptly, he moved gradually—like someone stepping from one circle into another, still tethered to the past, but already orbiting the future. Just like the figure-eight movement between two touching circles, Drucker transitioned not out of urgency, but from clarity and vision. He didn’t wait for the old system to collapse—he quietly made it obsolete.

In doing so, he didn’t just follow the second curve—he helped draw its path. His story shows us that the leap to a new curve doesn’t always require risk—it can begin with a shift in perspective and the courage to follow it.

However, it is important to note that the Second Curve isn't always about companies, institutions, or society at large. Sometimes, it's about one person choosing to change. A quiet discomfort. A feeling that something no longer fits. It can mean setting a boundary, leaving a job, ending a relationship, or daring to dream of something different.

These aren't revolutions on the front page—they're revolutions of the heart. Private, invisible, deeply human. Because growth doesn't always make noise. And when someone chooses clarity over confusion, self-respect over people-pleasing, courage over comfort—that, too, is a Second Curve. And when enough of us make these personal leaps, quietly, courageously—then the world begins to change not by force, but by example.

And maybe that example doesn't have to be loud or extraordinary. Maybe it's just someone deciding to try—again.

As Charles Handy once wrote, “We cannot wait for great visions from great people, for they are in short supply. It is up to us to light our own small fires in the darkness.”

Sometimes, that fire is quiet. Just a small shift, a little courage, a choice to keep going. But it's enough to warm a new beginning.

## The Young Architects of Tomorrow

Peter Drucker always believed in the transformative power of individuals—especially the young. He didn't see them as mere inheritors of the future, but as its architects. In many ways, the Second Curve belongs to them more than to anyone else. After all, it takes vision to abandon what still seems to be working, and who better to challenge the “way things are” than those who haven't yet grown too attached to them? Youth is not only a season of life, but a state of openness—a willingness to experiment, to question, and to reimagine.

In *The Landmarks of Tomorrow* (1959), Drucker introduced the term “knowledge worker” to describe a new kind of contributor—one whose main asset is not physical strength, but the ability to think, learn, and adapt. Though he did not refer explicitly to the young, the traits he associated with knowledge work—curiosity, creativity, and continuous learning—are often strongest in youth. The Peter Drucker Challenge itself is a testament to this belief: that the courage to start a new curve can come from a young voice with a bold idea. Writing this essay, then, might just be one of my own Second Curves.

Here’s a moment where I saw the Second Curve unfold in real life—my own life, in fact. I live in Buenos Aires now, studying medicine. Like many of my classmates, I tried more than once to pursue this dream in Brazil. The system there is extremely competitive, expensive, and limited—there are many people fighting for very few spots, and the costs often make it inaccessible for most. We kept hitting walls—barriers, rejections, delays. We felt stuck. And at some point, we realized that waiting for things to change wasn’t enough. We had to change.

We chose to leave the familiar—the language, the routines, the comfort of what we knew—to step into something uncertain but necessary. It was a risk. It was a leap. But it was also the moment we stopped circling the same old path and chose to explore a new one. We were not just passive participants in a broken system—we were becoming young architects of our own future. This was a Second Curve for us—one of many, I’m sure.

## Before the Water Boils

And so, in the end, we come to the question: How do we recognize the Second Curve?

If it’s such a subtle shift—no louder than a quiet feeling or a vague sense that something isn’t right—how can we truly notice it in time?

I believe the answer begins with self-awareness. It's the silent tool that allows us to notice when something no longer nourishes us—even if it still looks good on the outside.

As the Brazilian philosopher Clóvis de Barros Filho puts it, “Self-knowledge is a condition for freedom. Without knowing who we are, we don't even know what we want.”

Self-awareness helps us identify what truly brings us peace, not just temporary comfort. It teaches us to distinguish between what's habitual and what's authentic, between what we've outgrown and what still fits. From that awareness, courage is born—not the loud, impulsive kind, but the grounded courage that comes from within. The courage to say, “This is no longer for me,” even when it still works for others. The courage to let go of something that once felt right, but no longer aligns with who we are becoming. This kind of courage doesn't appear out of nowhere—it grows from the clarity we gain when we begin to truly know ourselves.

That's why I kept thinking about the children in that Japanese classroom. They weren't just cleaning floors or cooking meals. They were learning responsibility, autonomy, and independence. They were being taught to care—for their space, their time, and for one another. In doing so, they were building something most of us only discover later in life: a relationship with themselves. Through daily practices, they were developing the seeds of self-knowledge, courage, and independence. They were learning how to live intentionally. And in a way, they were already preparing to recognize their own Second Curves before life forced them to.

Just as those children are learning to cultivate responsibility and self-awareness through their daily actions, perhaps we too can develop this consciousness. With time and intention, we can strengthen our self-knowledge to the point where we begin to recognize the early signs of our own Second Curves—the subtle shifts, the quiet discontent, the pull toward something more aligned. And whether that shift comes as a sudden leap, like Charles Handy described, or as a gentle transition between two circles—just as I once

drew it—it's not the form that matters most. What matters is having the awareness to notice, and the courage to respond, before the old curve runs its course.

Maybe that's the real power of the Second Curve—not just in what we change, but in when we choose to change it. Before the system breaks. Before the habit hardens. Before the water boils.

## References

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AI Usage Disclosure: I used Generative AI (ChatGPT by OpenAI) to brainstorm ideas, study previous essays, and explore interpretations of "The Second Curve." I also relied on the tool to help me express my arguments more clearly and polish the language to meet academic standards.