

How Projects Lose Meaning: The Dynamics of Renewal¹

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The purpose of this chapter is to provide a way to think about the dynamics of renewal that will encourage empirical investigation and reanimate projects that have stalled, turned sour, or become meaningless. Although that aspiration may sound abstract, the dynamics discussed here come out of my own experience as an academic who battles continuously with such things as a sluggish imagination, self-doubt, dead-end projects, rejection letters, low teaching ratings, indecision, blank stares, dismissive critics, a limited vocabulary, and all the other things that make scholarly work, anxious work.

What annoys me about the idea of “renewal” is that it always sounds like such a big deal. It sounds like something that should be approached in awe and spelled with capital letters and done once or twice in a lifetime when the stakes are really high. If we think of renewal that way, then we hold it at arm’s length, we fear trying to do it, we deny the need to do it in the first place, we do it almost as if we were invoking magic, we often do either too much of it or too little of it since we don’t know when to stop, we repeat everything that seemed to happen the last time we renewed since we don’t know exactly why we were successful, and we measure our success at renewal against unrealistically high standards.

It never dawns on us, for example, that under some circumstances we could simply declare ourselves renewed and move on. Or that renewal resides in the small details that lead to small wins. Or that the topic of renewal may be just another conversational gambit like the weather...and no more controllable. Or that renewal

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creates experience rather than responds to experience. Or that renewing is all we ever do. Or that the problem is not so much fresh starts and renewing, as it is fresh endings and “reolding.” We are big on beginnings, but lousy on endings, which may mean that we can’t restart something until we finish off something else, heedfully and thoroughly. “The End” may trigger the definitive infusion of energy.

Even though renewal is elusive, it lurks somewhere in these three examples.

“Marion has a son Michael, who is hyperactive. After trying various failed medications, she decided to use her deep love for him as her primary treatment. Whenever he began to lose control of his impulses, Marion would scoop him up and sit him in her lap, place his head against her chest, and rock, and rock, until, she said, he could remember who he was” (Muller, 1999, p. 151).

In December 1939, Duke Ellington enlarged the saxophone section of his orchestra from 4 men to 5 when he added Ben Webster. “When Webster joined, there was written-out music initially for only four saxophones, none for him, and he had to find a fifth note that would work, while avoiding the jealously guarded parts of the other saxophonists, who kept accosting him, “Hey, you’ve got my note!” (Hasse, 1993, p. 240). The resulting music, once Webster found the 5th note, contained some of the most glorious, rich, original chords that were ever recorded by any version of the Ellington orchestra. Both Ellington and Webster experienced fresh starts.

Warren Bennis, when he was president of the University of Cincinnati, gave an evening lecture at the Harvard School of Education. Everything came together in a superb performance. During the upbeat Q and A session after the speech, Bennis was startled when the Dean, Paul Ylvisaker asked quietly, “Warren, do you really love being president of Cincinnati?” Bennis did not have a snappy answer. He didn’t have any

answer. After an interminable silence, in a room that quieted dramatically, Bennis finally said, "I don't know." Shortly thereafter, he came to the realization that he loved being a college president but hated doing a college presidency, and resigned.

Diverse as these examples may seem, they share some interesting features. They vary in scale, but not in their structure. In each instance, something is made new again (re-new) and living is refreshed. In each case, work and living are fused. When one of these two begins to fall apart, the other one does too. Each episode involves being thrown into the middle of something unexpected. There is a sense that fragments and parts have replaced flows and wholes. Attention is flooded with questions: what's the story?, why are we doing this?, where am I? In these examples, small acts of holding, fitting, and questioning begin to restore the sense that has been lost. People seem to move away from the strictly logical and sequential, toward the intuitive (Marion's touch), the balanced (Webster's harmonically interesting notes) and, the vital (Bennis's linkage of being and doing). The movement toward resolution seems to consist of going back to earlier moments as well as going deeper, both of which seem to engage more fundamental "truths" involving relationships, harmonies, and values. The solutions feel "wise" rather than smart. But, for all their intensity, these disturbances are also bounded and relatively short-lived, partly because people continue to act. These continuing actions generate new meanings. And the participants move on to calmer parenting, more complex jazz arrangements, and more focused mentoring.

In each example, a choice that was originally meaningful and emotionally charged, gradually makes less sense and gradually builds pressure for a fresh start. Throughout this chapter I will refer to these choices as "projects." I adopt this noun to preserve the point that the diffuse entity that is being renewed consists of some

contemplated venture, conceived reflectively and appreciatively, that has some risk and uncertainty connected with it. As time passes, people may become less aware of their projects, but only until they begin to breakdown. At the point of breakdown, deliberate attention to direction appears once again. Since people tend to be conscious of projects, both when they start and when they breakdown, and since these moments are key markers in the progression of renewal, it seems preferable to conceptualize the phenomenon as if it were mainly conscious, deliberate, and effortful. When I talk about projects I will not neglect the importance of tacit knowledge. But I am more concerned with locating renewal in some story that serves as a frame of reference within which activities make more or less sense. That vessel is the project. The word “project” has obvious meaning for those who live amidst research projects, but it also has meaning for those who live amidst everyday projects of concerned coping (Dreyfuss, 1995, p. 61). My goal is to develop ideas that appeal to readers with diverse interests.

In the three examples at the beginning of this chapter, the original choices and projects might have been to wade in and cope with hyperactivity, to create original music by playing unique variations on traditional melodies, and to put into practice the very theories of leadership that one had espoused. Over time these choices feel less sensible as unanticipated consequences appear. Medications for hyperactivity fail; playing the arranged notes in the Cab Calloway orchestra (Webster’s employer just before Ellington) leaves little room for creative expression; and, doing the presidency of a college turns out to involve more than leading. These developments weaken the context of the initial choice and render it less meaningful. In extreme cases, each person is saying to him or her self, “I have no idea where I am, who I am, or what I am doing.”

Stated informally, the story of renewal starts when projects begin to lose earlier sources of energy and meaning. The attendant feelings of ennui, melancholy, and concern, may signify a need for reattachment to some of those earlier sources of energy. By reattachment I mean going back, reinstating, and reconstructing the beginnings of the project, in a more heedful manner. As people re-examine that earlier period, and see it more richly, this deeper noticing may produce deeper appreciation and deeper acceptance of the present difficulties. If that happens, then one's present living is made new again. And renewing takes place. But sometimes, deepened noticing has a different effect and the earlier decision is actually remade or updated. We see hints of this in these three examples. The earlier choice to cope with a hyperactive child through medication becomes remade as a newer choice to enfold, love, and rhythmically move that child toward calm remembering. The earlier choice to make original music by being a reactive sideman is remade as a newer choice to find a meaningful place for oneself as a proactive sideman in the challenging environment of jealous musicians and traditional chords. And the earlier choice to walk the talk of leadership is remade as the newer choice to mentor leaders in all sorts of settings rather than to model leadership in just one setting.

Stated more compactly and more formally, the story line of renewal seems to be this. As earlier projects begin to unravel and turn sour, there is the perception that activities are becoming less sensible. That perception is the result of fragmentation produced by a loss of context, ineffective sensemaking, or inattention to the world. Each of these three sources for fragments will be explored shortly. The feeling of disorder is reflected both in questions (e.g. what's the story, why are we doing this, what's wrong) and in assertions (e.g. I have no idea where I am, who I am, or what I am doing). To reduce this disorder, people need to act in ways that reconstruct context, strengthen

sensemaking, and restore attention. In the following sections I argue that renewal seems to be a story with a finite number of plausible plots and some workable tactics that shape these plots. I will discuss briefly, three different developments in any project, including scholarly ones, that seem to increase the felt need for renewal. These three storylines include, . The loss of integration and patterns,. The weakening of capacities for sensemaking,and The disconnection of preoccupations from attention.

These basic ways in which projects weaken and lose sense can be reversed by tactics such as, Listening, Writing, Goal-setting, and Dialogue.

Plot Lines in Narratives of Renewal

The question, when does renewal start, is almost as puzzling as the question, when does it end. Both questions are best answered retrospectively, which means, that the actual immersion in an episode of renewal is not clearcut. It can be difficult to distinguish episodes of renewal from ordinary setbacks, problems, hassles, and speed bumps in daily life. However, we can feel the difference even if it is tough to articulate. Episodes of renewal tend to be anchored by a context that pulls together an initial set of choices, meanings, and activities into a frame of reference that resembles a project. When projects begin, they typically make sense because they are free of “unanticipated consequences.” As the project unfolds and as these unanticipated consequences begin to pile up, questions about the wisdom of the choice, the meaning of the consequences, and the worth of the activities, also begin to build. As questions build, so too do feelings that the project might benefit from a restart, a re-direction, and/or a rethinking. As all of these forces continue to build, the phenomenon of renewal becomes easier to distinguish from everyday hassles and problems.

There are at least three ways in which meaningful projects begin to lose some of their meaning. First, the initial big picture in which everything found a place, may begin to fracture into parts, such that it becomes harder to see why the project is being continued. Second, the full set of tools mobilized for sensemaking in the initial stages of the project, may become differentially available over time, such that it becomes harder to make sense of what is happening. Third, the tight coupling between preoccupations and attention that tied the project into the current environment and gave it meaning initially, may loosen such that relevant updating seldom occurs. Each one of these unfolding plots sets in motion a series of events that seem to correspond with what people have in mind when they talk about “renewal.” There obviously are many other plots.

Projects That Lose Integration

When people initiate projects, they often do so for more reasons than they are aware of. For example, I began to puzzle over wildland firefighting crews in 1992 for many more reasons than were obvious to me at the time. Initially, I wanted to understand their work because it seemed to embody sensemaking, a small group, thinking under stress, and danger. But as I dug deeper I also began to realize----as Norman Maclean had in the book *Young Men and Fire*----that their fatalities tapped my own troubled feelings about death. Furthermore, the firefighters were the pretext to grapple with my own ill-defined feelings about macho subcultures, physical work, vicarious adventuring, the qualities of heroes, decisiveness, arrogance, doing rather than saying, respect, fictions sustained by detachment, and the eerily resonating line in Pablo Neruda’s poem that reads, “When a decent house catches fire,/instead of the fireman I summon,/an arsonist bursts on the scene,/ and that’s me.” (Weick, 1995, p. 19). Neruda’s poem titled “We are many,” affirms the many selves we have. Many of those selves are active in project

selection, although we may not realize it at the time. Thus, even though there were explicit reasons why I chose to focus on wildland firefighters when I began the project of writing the Katz-Newcomb lecture, that choice meant more to me than I could say at the time.

But those silent bases for choice were still active, meaning that my choice of the firefighter project was overdetermined. It was driven by a set of interrelated tacit and explicit hooks that, in combination, provided a meaningful frame of reference to think about firefighters directly and the human condition indirectly. Given these densely integrated relationships, a loss of either explicit or tacit meanings would likely be felt as a loss of sense and energy for the project, and as an occasion for renewal. But there is a tricky issue here. If the project makes sense because it is a meaningful whole, then efforts at renewal that focus solely on parts may be self-defeating. If people try to explicate wholes and put them into lists, or disassemble them for repair, these efforts may be destructive. Reflection changes intuitive knowing into something that is logical and stepwise and reasoned and different from the project with which people started. "An unbridled lucidity can destroy our understanding of complex matters....Deliberate conscious reflection does change the nature of knowledge: it becomes no longer tacitly held, but intellectually reasoned" (Pye, 1991, p. 112). Thus, to reflect, even if it is reflection-in-action, is to change the nature of knowing and to put the understanding of wholes out of reach.

To move away from this potential for collapse, and toward resolution, we need to deepen our respect for tacit knowing and our skills at managing it. When wholes begin to lose their coherence (i.e. when projects seem to make less sense than they used to), the strong temptation is to undertake analysis and identify the parts that are causing the

trouble. That approach may be of some help. But the help is only partial because much of the coherence in the initial project was based on tacit knowing. Tacit knowing does not take the form of separable, meaningful parts that are assembled into a whole. Instead, tacit knowing is “that which dwells in our awareness of particulars while bearing on an entity which the particulars jointly constitute” (Pye, 1991, p. 108). The knowledge in tacit knowing is relational. Particulars *bear on* an entity and that entity is *jointly constituted by* particulars. Thus, the project is founded as much on simultaneity and intuition as it is on linear sequence and intellect. The project is tied together as a whole by people who know more about that project than they can tell.

If a project begins to make less and less sense, this could mean that something is wrong with relations, tacit knowing, and intuition. Analysis won't touch any of those three. What will have more of an effect are tactics that can restore relations, strengthen and enrich intuitions, reinstate a big picture, substitute aesthetic appraisal for rational appraisal, and tightly couple the general with the specific. Many of these changes can be understood as efforts to enrich a story of what the person is up to by connecting the sub-themes and strengthening the plot line. Narrative enrichment sets multiple themes in motion, themes that develop and define one another. It is the jointly constituted motion that re-creates a meaningful project and a good story.

To return to the example of wildland firefighting, that project seemed to be running out of gas when there was little I could think of that would move beyond my initial reframing of *Young Men and Fire* (Weick, 1993). But a trip to a smokejumper base in Missoula, Montana, conversations with firefighters, free association, free writing, and mental simulation drove me deeper into themes such as “drop your tools” (Weick, 1996) and “never hand over a fire in the heat of the day” (Weick, 1998). What seems to have

happened is that deeper pursuit of these narrower slices reanimated both the explicit and tacit attractions to wildland firefighting. It was as if the complete pattern in my initial fascination had been restored and the human condition was once more visible in people trying to outrun an exploding fire. Mann Gulch once more became the representative anecdote for people everywhere who are frightened and confused. In Mann Gulch, as in life elsewhere, “Individuals who are strangers to one another are spread out, unable to communicate, unfamiliar with the terrain, in disagreement about who their leaders are, and they’re told to do something they’ve never done before, or they will die. They don’t do it. They die.” (Weick, 1999, p. 55).

Tactics that successfully accomplish such re-integration, differ across people since all of us live in different realities. So I can’t finger the one best way to reverse a loss of integration. In the section on tactics, I will mention several things, some of which help me rebuild wholes, and some of which may help others to do the same. Right now I am more concerned with suggesting a generic storyline for renewal that highlights the patterned quality of projects. In this storyline, if the pattern begins to deteriorate then people become more concerned with making the project new again. But if they try to do this by means of reflection and analysis, the problem could get worse. Reflection and analysis are blunt instruments when it comes to pattern recognition and pattern restoration. To make a loss of integration new again, requires heightened trust in tacit knowing, tying experience more richly to projects, and more deliberate use of images and words that treat complex wholes with respect.

Projects That Lose Sense

As we have just seen, any project has content. And that content is a mixture of the tacit/explicit and the intuitive/reasoned, which forms a meaningful pattern. Fluctuations in the pattern trigger attempts to restart the project.

But other storylines of renewal are possible.

Any project becomes a project, and continues to be a project, in part because it “makes sense.” And it makes sense because one or more of at least seven resources inform it. A project makes sense to a person because there is some combination of **social** validation, confirmation of important **identities** for that person, raw material that permits **retrospective** judgments of elapsed events, **cues** that enable diagnostic trial and error, updating that keeps pace with **ongoing** developments, **plausible** explanations for what is happening, and actions that **enact** events into recognizable forms. These resources can be summarized by the acronym “SIR COPE.” If we assume that the more resources committed to sensemaking, the richer the sense that will be made, and if we assume that a loss of resources is accompanied by a loss of sense, then the felt need to restart something may stem from a loss of sensemaking resources rather than from a loss of a strong narrative line. It is not the story that falls apart. Instead, it is the capability for “storying” that falls apart.

In the early stages of a project, we can safely assume that there are sufficient resources to engage and hold attention. Otherwise, there would be no focus of attention and no project. Thus, beginning makes sense, even if part of that sense consists of wishful thinking or doing something simply because it is fashionable or exists as a target of opportunity. Whatever the case, the initial sense is the product of one or more sensemaking resources. It is the fate of those resources over time that determines whether moments of renewal are needed and what those moments may consist of.

There are obvious ways in which resources can weaken. There can be a loss of social resources as when interactions decrease in frequency and consensual validation weakens (e.g. people begin to wonder if their work is accepted by others as being in the mainstream). Identity may become more insecure (e.g. people question whether they have lost their distinctive “voice” or whether they ever had a voice to begin with). Retrospect may be neutralized because the new project has accumulated relatively little history that suggests an emerging direction (e.g. one begins to read a new literature, but no themes seems to recur and the question soon becomes, what’s the story and why am I doing this?). As a sidelight, retrospect plays an interesting role in renewal. If people learn what they think by seeing what they say, then there isn’t much to see for significant stretches in some projects because not much is said. If not much is being said or seen or thought, then not much is created that could be made sensible. Earlier, we saw that “unbridled lucidity” is harmful because it undermines the restoration of wholes. But here, in a different storyline built around the loss of sensemaking processes, “unbridled lucidity” might be much more of an asset since it refreshes retrospect by supplying more raw material for it to process.

Cues that once were trustworthy, may become equivocal in the context of a newer project (e.g. the occurrence of human errors was once a trustworthy cue that accidents were likely to happen, but now those errors are treated as consequences rather than causes). The ability to keep pace with unfolding events may disappear when a person thinks of one thing too long or of too many things too fast (e.g. by the time one has written a solid contribution for the magazine “Fast Company,” the fad-makers are breathless about something else and the writing has become dated). The resource of plausibility tends not to disappear as quickly as do other features of sensemaking (e.g.

one can always be plausibly working to understand the human condition even if no one else sees it quite this way). As long as the project retains some plausibility, fresh starts can be postponed even though they may seem increasingly attractive. Finally, sense tends to decrease when there is a loss in the level of activity associated with the project (e.g. people keep thinking up clever ideas and concepts but fail to test them). If people act their way into meaning, then a high level of activity should delay the need for renewal, and a lower level hasten it.

A personal example may make this clearer. In 1969 I wrote a book called "The Social Psychology of Organizing, revised it in 1979, and it seemed natural to do a 3rd edition in 1989. But as the 80s unfolded, they did so in way that steadily pulled sensemaking resources away from this project. We moved from Cornell where the second edition was written to Texas, and from Texas to Michigan, meaning that social resources changed. We moved closer to and then away from a communication group at Texas that had provided an identity which sustained the organizing book. The evolutionary epistemology that was central to the second edition was annexed by institutional theory and population ecology during this period, which made micro evolutionary processes less plausible. My research was being enacted in the newer setting of high reliability organizations, which meant that the cues I had available for retrospect, were different from those laboratory-based cues (e.g. prisoner's dilemma, common target game, triad table) that had guided the organizing book. I was seeing more surprises, sensemaking, and improvisation, and fewer loosely coupled systems, double interacts, and assembly rules. Doing a 3rd edition because the calendar said it was time, made less sense because several sensemaking resources had disappeared or changed radically. What made more sense was to do a short article in 1989 that said in essence, I haven't learned enough to

warrant a 3rd edition, but I have re-connected with an even older project, namely, trying to understand jazz improvisation. In 1989 I was beginning to see improvisation, bricolage, and embellishment where it wouldn't be expected, in elaborate hierarchical systems such as flight operations on a carrier, air traffic control, and nuclear power generation. And 16 years after 1979, I did do a book on sensemaking that retains a flavor of the second edition.

To move back to the more general argument, when a project begins to feel senseless and flat, that may have nothing to do with content and everything to do with process. Resources for sensemaking may have weakened or disappeared. But, moves toward renewal need not be large or dramatic. They consist of small changes that refresh SIR COPE, small changes such as writing to authors of influential articles in an effort to initiate a discussion and strengthen social validation; searching autobiographies to spot newer identities that can be tried on for size; keeping more detailed records to enrich retrospective revisiting of earlier events and to suggest new cues that foreshadow significant changes; enriching the variety of verbs in one's vocabulary in order to heighten sensitivity to rates of change in ongoing events; reconceptualizing plausibility as approximations to accuracy in an effort to think more carefully about the evidence (or the lack thereof) that the project continues to be worth doing; and, allowing the computer to go dark so that one can push away from the monitor and experience the project tactually.

What is important in a story of renewal based on sensemaking processes, is that people remain alert to gradual deterioration of any of these seven components. To spot and remedy an early loss of a single component may not be a big deal nor consume much time. It truly is a "moment" of renewal. Its significance lies in the fact that it is a small change that can have large consequences. For example, once a project is underway, co-

workers may become less available for interaction, as the excitement of beginnings gives way to the tedium of middles. This is a weakening of social resources that seems trivial in the short run. But if this component is left unrepaired, the project can rapidly collapse into nonsense. Recall that in the Mann Gulch wildland fire disaster, sensemaking started to deteriorate when interactions became less frequent, and occurred among smaller numbers of people with less and less information being exchanged. Social resources, which were shaky to begin with (e.g. firefighting crew had not worked together before), were allowed to weaken even more until sensemaking became lodged in small subsets of the 15 crew members, some of whom were working at odds with one another. In the early stages of the Mann Gulch incident, the six components of the sensemaking process other than social resources were functioning adequately. The problem came when the failure to repair social resources eventually disabled the other six components. The resulting senselessness of an exploding fire left people with no remaining resources that could direct survival.

The Mann Gulch incident is an extreme example of what may happen on a much smaller scale when sensemaking processes become compromised, sense is lost, and the urgency to restart increases. It is important to reiterate that the point being made here is that renewal involves something beside an issue of content. In the case of sensemaking, the problem is not so much that the content of the story no longer coheres, but that the capability for building a sensible story has diminished. The senseless story is not a compromised whole, but a byproduct of flawed sensemaking processes. The story will continue to be a puzzle until resources improve.

Projects That Lose Attention

Many storylines of renewal involve efforts to rebalance some duality such as theory-practice, spectator-participant, superiority-inferiority, work-play, or obedience-rebellion, where one pole has come to dominate the other one. For example, Fritz Roethlisberger, in his work as a counselor at the Harvard Business School, came into contact with a large number of student clients who were sufficiently preoccupied with issues of success-failure that they couldn't focus on their studies. The interesting feature that was common among these cases is that students essentially said to themselves, if this project is not an absolute success, then it is a failure. Since this is a tough criterion to meet, most of their projects felt like failure. Roethlisberger called this form of thinking "false dichotomies" because people were treating success-failure as a contradiction rather than a contrary. When people conclude that everything that is not a success is failure, they act as if they face a duality where, if one pole is false then the other one is true. There is nothing in between. What they fail to see is that projects can be both a success and a failure or neither a success nor a failure. These additional possibilities are contraries rather than contradictions. Mistaking a contrary for a contradiction can happen with any duality (e.g. everything that is not safe is dangerous). The tragedy in all of this is that "in the thinking of such people the notion of adventure is lacking. There is little or no place for exploration and experiment. They work so hard in preventing themselves from making mistakes that they never learn anything at all" (Roethlisberger, 1968, p. 90).

Roethlisberger argued that this tendency to elaborate contraries into contradictions seemed to occur when a person's attention to self became disconnected from attention to the world. Preoccupations with the self focussed on significant personal questions and values about which people have strong feelings (Roethlisberger, 1977, p. 43). When people became obsessed with their preoccupations they ignored the current

situation and their ongoing work. With less input from the current external environment, preoccupations tended to be overelaborated. Small bits of data were elaborated into overblown significance. Thus, for example, what looked like a partial success (e.g. an invitation to “revise and resubmit” a manuscript) might be elaborated in terms of the many ways it “actually” signified failure. When Roethlisberger looked more closely at the form of thinking that accompanied false dichotomies he found that preoccupations took the form of “an overelaboration in logic of an oversimplification in fact. Instead of treating the world of fact as complex and keeping his thinking about it simple, the student tended to treat the world of fact as simple and to complicate his thinking about it. As a result he was “complicating” his life not in relation to the complexity of relations that existed in ‘matters of fact’ but in relation to an oversimplified logicization (relation of ideas) of them. The products of this kind of thinking I called ‘false dichotomies’ ” (Roethlisberger, 1977, pp. 39-40). The remedy is this. “Instead of treating the world of facts (the territory) as simple and making the map complex, one should treat the territory as complex and keep the map simple. A simple map applied to a complex territory could do wonders” (Roethlisberger, 1977, p. 139). Thus, a storyline of renewal begins with a project whose execution has an initial mix of success-failure, safety-danger, and theory-practice. Over time these dualities may become unbalanced and frozen into false dichotomies from which contraries are excluded. To renew is to restore contraries.

The ups and down of one of my own ongoing projects seem to track Roethlisberger unusually well. The very first project I undertook as a graduate student, in conjunction with Harold B. Pepinsky, was a project on the determinants of productivity. “Productivity” is an academically acceptable label for the often much more personal issue of success-failure. Interestingly, my very first publication was a theoretical piece on

impression management among seemingly productive researchers. It's obvious that I wanted to study what most preoccupied me at the time, namely the question of whether I could hack it in graduate school and what the "secret" was of being productive. The tricky part is that I often did just what Roethlisberger's clients did, namely, personalize this issue, ignore the world, and overelaborate small outcroppings of qualified successes into distinct failures. For example, my acceptable though undistinguished performance in my Masters thesis oral exam got overelaborated into a miserable failure that left me wondering if I should leave graduate school. As the failures piled up, so too did the need for renewal. In this case, renewal meant moving from overelaborated logic to simpler logic, and from simpler perceptual inputs to more complex inputs. It meant paying more attention to the world and less attention to the self in order to weaken the false dichotomy that I kept reinforcing. Over the years, my ongoing efforts to treat success-failure as a contrary rather than a contradiction, have had varying success. I have tried to articulate contraries surrounding success-failure with such ideas as the surprising virtues of doubt, the aesthetics of imperfection, the role of ignorance in wisdom, ambivalence as the optimal compromise, task enhancement as a controllable source of success, action rationality, and retrospective justification. The idea of small wins is a perfect example of the point I am making. A small win "is a concrete, complete, implemented outcome of moderate importance....Small wins are like miniature experiments that test implicit theories about resistance and opportunity and uncover both resources and barriers that were invisible before the situation was stirred up" (Weick, 1984, pp. 43-44). A small win is both a success and a failure. It is a success because something was improved. It is a failure because the something that was improved was small and not especially important considered by itself. A small win can also be seen as neither a success nor a failure, since

it is a miniature experiment that produces information rather than an evaluation. In either case, a small win is an event in the world that draws attention away from preoccupations with success-failure and toward ongoing events in the external world. The beauty of small wins is that they draw attention and action into the world, while at the same time they demonstrate that something that is not an absolute success is also not a failure either. Small wins refute false dichotomies. In doing so, they reconnect preoccupations with perceptions, they open those preoccupations to modification, and they make projects new again.

Roethlisberger is not the only person to suggest that complication and renewal are tied together. The work of William Schutz also implies that some complications encourage renewal while others discourage it. Schutz has argued that the act of understanding progresses through three stages: superficial simplicity, confused complexity, profound simplicity. In my own work I have argued that those in need of renewal should follow the advice, "complicate yourself" (Weick, 1979, p. 261). This counsel derives from the idea of requisite variety and from my interpretation that it takes complex thinking and perception to register and adapt in a complex world. Thus, if a project begins to stall and become senseless, this may be the result of a failure to update and register the complexity of the environment. To renew the project, people need to enact a more complicated conceptual scheme so that they see more of the complications that interfere with progress. But, my counsel, considered in the context of Schutz, may stop too soon. I treat complication as the end point of understanding, under the assumption that once your thinking is as complex as the environment, that's all you need. That is wrong because there are no end points. Instead, there is life beyond confused

complexity. We may call it profound simplicity, or we may call it wisdom or we may call it small wins enacted with full attention to the here and now.

To restart projects that are stalled by false dichotomies and logical overelaboration, people need to replace contradictions with contraries, cultivate a deeper appreciation of simultaneity (e.g. this project is both a success and a failure), and go for the small one. This suggests that to move in the direction of renewal is to move toward profound simplicities. And to move in this direction means that people have to connect their preoccupations more closely to what they notice and do right here and now. If the connection between attention and preoccupations weakens, then self-absorption increases and learning decreases. Projects lose their energy and their relevance. To strengthen the connection between preoccupations and attention takes perceptual enrichment and conceptual simplification. Or, as Roethlisberger puts it, it takes simple maps to navigate complex territories. But what simplicity means in this context is subtle. Simple maps have fewer contradictions but more contraries. They have fewer superficial simplifications but more that are profound. They are general-simple explanations, but those explanations also contain inaccuracies. They contain knowledge as well as ignorance. They are wise, rather than smart or dumb.

Tactics

1.

Renewal may be a big deal, but it is often accomplished by small changes that influence integration, sense, and attention. My basic assumption is that renewal is more successful when people do less, but do it more often, than when they do more, but do it less often. There is seldom a one-to-one relationship between a specific storyline and a specific remedy. More common is the case where some seemingly autonomous tactic

supplies a crucial whole or sensemaking resource or connection, that has been missing. For example, a loss of integration through inadvertent tinkering with tacit knowing, may be reversed by something read, or something heard, or something said, or something desired. To reintegrate is to become more mindful of wholes, intuitions, relations, and contexts, but the precise remedy that can produce this kind of mindfulness varies across people and situations.

Thus, the tactics to be discussed in this section represent potential means to restart any of the storylines mentioned above, as well as others not discussed. What I have tried to do so far is to suggest a finite number of ways in which projects may begin to unravel and a general set of remedies that focus on the locus of the unraveling. Thus, a loss of integration is made new again by something that affects relational sensitivity; a loss of sense is made new again by something that strengthens sensemaking; and a loss of attention is made new again by something that curbs overelaboration. The present section is a brief discussion of what those “somethings” involve. My concern now is with the pragmatics of renewal.

Renewal Through Reading

Whenever my projects stall, I read (e.g. Berlin). And I read about reading (e.g. Gass, 1999). And I read people who are skeptical about the value of reading (e.g. Schopenhauer). Reading seems to help re-new projects, regardless of how those projects have lost their vividness. For example, at various times my reading has provided an allegory that re-integrates fragments (e.g. Maclean,), a biography that reinstates possible identities that restore sensemaking (e.g. Haase,), or an analysis that reconnects preoccupations with attention (e.g. Hillman). Reading can renew because it is a form of active listening. Attentive readers hear such things as tacit knowledge that knits events

together, trusted intuitions that encourage one to duplicate the trust, conversational partners who enable one to see more clearly the thinking that is implicit in what is said, or tales of complexity that disconfirm the superficial simplicity of an either-or dichotomy.

But the reading that facilitates renewal is not just any old slacker reading. This is evident in EB White's (1954) wonderful essay on "The Last Reader," written 47 years ago. White worries over the future of reading "in these audio-visual days" where AV devices "ask no discipline of mind and...are already giving the room the languor of an opium parlor." True reading "is the work of the alert mind, is demanding, and under ideal conditions produces a sort of ecstasy." These are outcomes capable of restoring projects. These outcomes are hard to come by. "Indeed, there is very little true reading, and not nearly as much writing as one would suppose from the towering piles of pulpwood in the dooryards of paper mills. Readers and writers are scarce, as are publishers and reporters. The reports we get nowadays are those of men who have not gone to the scene of the accident, which is always farther inside one's own head than it is convenient to penetrate without galoshes" (p. 551).

To go "to the scene of the accident" in search of context and renewal, and to locate the scene of that accident deep inside one's own head, is to discover the power of imagining to re-new, and the power of reading to animate that imagining. A true reader is an armchair ethnographer, able to catch the significance of the accident scene, and to use that significance to reanimate a floundering project. The significance may reenact wholes, strengthen sensemaking, or redirect self-absorption back into the world.

To pick up a book at the moment when a project is dying may seem like the ultimate act of escape and denial. It could be that. But it could be something more. When a project shudders, the temptation is to wade in and fiddle with some parts and tweak

other ones. This temptation to meddle is antithetical to being still and listening and recapturing wholes. Reading forestalls direct meddling, quiets the chatter of logic, and redirects meddling into imagined worlds. Reading tends to stir up intuitive understanding, tacit knowing, and wisdom. It is hands-on renewal done vicariously through someone else's hands.

Renewal Through Writing

Whenever my projects stall, I also write. I write free associationally to see what relates to what and what those relationships might mean. I write voluminously in the hope that I might generate some variation that will prove to be a more attractive whole, a more sensible starting point, or a more compelling outcropping for a languishing project. I write allegorically to capture small moments that may embody more vivid summaries of ongoing projects. I write continually to find better words and clearer ways to join them that improve the wisdom, sense, and relevance of projects. I write indiscriminately in order to stumble onto themes that would not normally show up given the limits of my frames of reference. I write respectfully to get hints of the tacit knowledge that might form part of the infrastructure of events. And I write passionately to discover the "voice" that I may bring to an issue, and what the resonance in that issue may be for me.

I want to say a bit more about "voice" because it seems to figure in so many occasions of renewal. "Speaking your voice has to do with revealing what is true for you regardless of other influences that might be brought to bear" (Isaacs, 1999, p.159).

William Isaacs describes the following incident to illustrate voice. It involved his colleague, Michael Jones, who is an improvisational pianist. "Once, while playing, an older man came up to him and they began to speak. The man asked about his work and what the music was that he had just played. 'That was an arrangement of "Moon River",'

Michael said. 'No, before that' said the old man. 'That was some of my own music,' Michael replied. The man then said, 'You're wasting your time with "Moon River".' He then continued, asking Michael, 'Who will play your music if you don't do it yourself?' (Isaacs, 1999, p. 169).

Projects often begin with "one's own music", or at least a hesitant claim that one has something distinctive to contribute. But as the project unfolds, its integration or sense or connection with one's own music may begin to weaken. And with this weakening, people sometimes begin to question the distinctiveness, quality, and size of their own contribution. This is when people can become preoccupied with issues of voice and withdraw attention from the very ongoing events that could pull them out of this overelaboration (e.g. unless my idea is very good, it is very bad). Writing can take a preoccupation with voice, and reconnect it to the world, if the following description is taken seriously: "The original style is not the style which never borrows of anyone, but that which no other person is capable of reproducing" (de Chateaubriand quoted in Platt, 1989, item # 2075). People get messed up on issues of voice because they feel that imitation is antithetical to the development of voice. Since it's tough to avoid imitation when you read your way into renewal and write your way into pre-existing topics, people get stuck in preoccupations with voice. The twist is to pull together what you read in such a way that no one else can imitate your expressing. This is what Duke Ellington did when he lifted phrases from some of the solos played by his musicians and combined them in manner no other composer could imitate.

What is intriguing about unreproducible imitating is that it creates original continuities. The imitation provides the continuity, the unreproducibility provides the originality. To craft original continuities, at least in academic work, is to be engaged in

projects that are widely and durably valued. Writing sustains and restores academic projects, because the words that develop the project are words that recur in the mainstream. This is the continuity. But if those words are handled associationally, voluminously, allegorically, continually, indiscriminately, respectfully, and passionately, then the recurring words will have been rearranged into new and original phrases that point to new wholes, new sense, and new objects of attention. Those rearrangements are the essence of renewal.

Renewal Through Goal-Setting

The tactic here is straightforward, but it involves a reversal that may not be obvious. Normally, we think of present activities as a means to attain some future goal. For example, impatient MBAs plow through a business school curriculum as a means to gain future entry into fast-track positions. Currently, they find themselves tempted to short circuit MBA work in order to get on the even faster tracks (up *and* down) of dot.com firms. In either case, they still think in terms of means-ends linkages, and tolerate a miserable present because there is the promise of a much more glorious future. The whole notion of a project is permeated with the means-ends language of intentions, activities, and outcomes. Most of the examples in this chapter presume current sacrifices for future rewards and pleasure deferred until a later moment. The implied picture was much like one painted by Dorothy Parker when she said, "I hate writing, I love having written."

One tactic to create renewal is to reverse the way you think about means and ends. This insight is Roethlisberger's, and again comes from his contacts with MBA students. Recall that many of them were preoccupied with how to be successful in the future and this made it difficult for them to relate to the present. As Roethlisberger described it,

people who have excessive preoccupations with success “do not seem to have the capacity for easy, intimate, and friendly association with other people... (T)hey become enamored about words rather than the things to which words refer. As a result they have a greater facility in relating themselves to words and abstractions than to concrete events, things, and people” (1968, p. 89). Roethlisberger argues that people who are preoccupied with success ask the wrong question. They ask, “what is the secret of success” when they should be asking, “what prevents me from learning here and now?” To be overly preoccupied with the future is to be inattentive toward the present where learning and growth take place. To walk around asking, “am I a success or a failure” is a silly question in the sense that the closest you can come to answer is to say, everyone is both a success and a failure.

One way to renew an obsessive preoccupation with success, is to alter the idea that the present is a means and the future is an end. The problem with this way of thinking is that, when the future comes, then it too becomes just another present that is yet another means to yet another future. To act as if the present is nothing until we achieve success, is to take all meaning and significance out of the present. “When the future comes, it will be a present, and as we have taught ourselves to treat the present as insignificant, won’t we have to posit more and new goals, bigger and better goals to strive for-ad infinitum?” (p. 92). To avoid this fate one can treat the future as a means and the present as an end. Future goals are selected for their capability to create a meaningful and significant present, one in which growth, learning, zest, and a sense of adventure are commonplace.

What are those goals that allow for zestful living in the present? Roethlisberger admits that this is partly an unanswerable question. But he also insists that it is a better

question than the question, "what is the secret of success." It is better because it "at least implies that the satisfactions we get from the present are relative to the expectations we have and the demands we make of the present situation. It also implies that goals are not static things--like most other matters they are subject to change. It suggests that occasionally they need renovation and that they can be renovated in the direction of making the present more significant if we so choose....Lastly I think this is a better question in that it is one to which at least each person can obtain a partial answer for himself in his own experience" (1968, p. 94).

Notice, that in each of the three storylines for renewal, when a project is going well, it is not just because it is goal-driven. Projects also go well because they cohere and utilize tacit knowing, because they make sense here and now, and because preoccupations are meaningfully tied to current ongoing events. In none of these cases is the project purely instrumental to something else. Instead, it makes sense, right here and now, and continues to make sense.

A robust project contains goals that infuse the present with meaning. For example, my goal is to create a picture of renewal that will fit into Frost and Stablein's concept. But my goal is also to grasp an elusive phenomenon that annoys me and fascinates me and seems to defy articulation and is also one of the last lines of defense between despair and hope. The unrenewed life, in William James's image, may not be a life worth living. So renewal is not trivial stuff. But it retains its meaning for me, moment by moment, not because I am trying to please two editors, but because I am trying to craft meaningful phrases that evoke its nuances. In that sense, my goal is to create enthusiasm for renewal as a resource and as a topic for inquiry. And each sentence I write becomes a sensible attempt to pump up enthusiasm for renewal. In a way, I keep renewing my own quest to

grasp renewal by worrying word by word. It is conceivable that when I finish, I will have crafted a chapter, each sentence of which has been a meaningful struggle for me, but the net result of which is not what Frost and Stablein want. My meaningful early morning hours of phrase making become their senseless late night editorial nightmare. What they will have in hand is a heartfelt depiction of renewal, whose heart is unusually cerebral. The depiction is heartfelt because I took Roethlisberger seriously.

In my project to better understand renewal, some of my future goals actually served as the means to reach the present goal of meaningful moment to moment writing. Some of those future goals included discovering what I think about renewal, discovering possible order inherent in renewal, and experimenting with words, concepts, and comparisons that wrestle this tentative understanding into ideas that resonate with the experience of readers. Phrase by phrase, this project retains wholeness, sense, and a tight linkage between preoccupations and attention. I am not writing this solely to get Peter and Ralph's praise nor to get another publication for a resume. What I am writing may fail to get either one, though I would certainly be disappointed if that happened. But even if things work out, all that means is that their praise and one more line on a resume become a short-lived present, haunted by the future-oriented question, whose praise am I next aiming for?

Goals that make for an interesting here and now, forestall the unraveling of projects. Those who talk about pleasure in the process or about journeys being more significant than destinations (e.g. Cavafy's poem called 'Ithaca' in the second edition of the organizing book), understand that goals are crucial for their effect on the present rather than the future. They understand that there is more to instrumentality than meets the eye. The present is not the means to a meaningful future. Instead, the future is the

means to a meaningful present. That reversal is a tactic that slows unraveling and hastens re-raveling.

Renewal Through Dialogue

In each of the preceding three tactics, there are implicit conversations with authors (reading), colleagues (writing), and self and editors (goal-setting). These implicit conversations are openings for dialogue, but they tend to be narrowly drawn. The conversations that lie at the center of my chapter are quite different from those that lie at the center of Jane Dutton's chapter. I single out her chapter because I read it before drafting this one, because Jane and I have had an ongoing conversation about the nature of renewal for years, and because the contrasts between her chapter and this one give readers some idea of the range of options available for renewing.

The feedback I sent to Jane after I read her chapter shows something of the differences that are involved. A portion of this feedback, edited out of an e-mail message sent on 1-19-00, reads as follows: "Garden framing works uncommonly well, largely because you take it seriously throughout and nuance it. I love the heading "rarely in the garden alone." Most meaningful section for me was weeding and saying no.... Weeding is tough for those of us who love variation, richness, surprise, novelty. But too much novelty can overwhelm and be self-defeating.... I think there are interesting touchpoints between us. You work on longer projects (e.g. 6 years) than I do. You think of renewing a life. I think of moments of renewal, which occur more often. Your garden is full of people. My garden is full of books. Your relations are face to face. Mine are vicarious. You weed in order to sustain large projects. I shrink projects in order to accept more of them. We both are co-created in dialogue, but your dialogues are continuous and mine are intermittent (a little dialogue goes a long way for me). You renew by grounding yourself

in a customized barn, I renew by moving from one barn to another....and grow weary of the costs in such renewal overkill.... You know what you think when you see what they, your collaborators, say. I know what I think when I see what I say.And we both get renewed by seeing what we say to each other.”

A further contrast in our two styles of renewal, discussed in the same e-mail message, dates back to March 31, 1990, when we both were on the program at the 5th annual Texas Conference on Organizations. The conference theme was renewal. Jane had just purchased a new pair of glasses and the lenses were tinted with a faint rose color which, literally, meant that she saw the world through rose-colored glasses. The glasses I wore were reading glasses, whose lenses were ground so that I could see the small print in my notes, but nothing else. We literally held different lenses up against the world of Texas. And it is this difference that is the context for a continuation of the e-mail message to Jane about her chapter. “At the Texas conference, you saw the world through rose-colored glasses; I saw the world through close-up reading glasses, which meant that the audience that looked rose-colored to you, looked blurred to me. That has an uncanny carry over to the present. You have your renewing garden which you attend to alongside other people who are viewed by you appreciatively, supportively, as a rose-colored set of contributing companions. I have my renewing bookshelf, whose authors are blurred and who are brought to life by my projections and interpretations of what they might be saying that had never dawned on me before. Whatever tools we may drop [refers to firefighter fatalities that occur when people run from a fire but are slowed because they refuse to drop their tools], we probably should keep the rose-tinted glasses that enchant things and the reading glasses that blur things. Or perhaps, another wave of renewal will occur when you and I switch glasses. I see the rose-colored world and grow in

appreciativeness. You see a blurred world and grow in structuring.” Renewal may mean attending to which ever pole of agency or communion, we tend to neglect.

There are lots of contrasts here that could be pursued. I leave those to the reader. The point I want to make is that human relating is ground zero in renewal. In the Mann Gulch disaster, it was the partnership between Bob Sallee and Walter Rumsey that kept them from experiencing the full impact of the cosmology episode that killed the other 13 crew members. I have tried to show that projects become more puzzling when there is a decrease in their integration, sense, and attentiveness. These are not abstract possibilities. They are concrete ways in which my own projects have fallen apart. Projects unravel for lots of reasons including ignorance, self-absorption, hubris, complacency, blind conformity, and distraction. It takes a partner, with a different set of lenses, to spot these lapses, to correct blind spots, and to make things new again.

I can think of no more basic source of renewal than dialogue. My wife, Karen, has been a steady source of alternative lenses and renewing throughout all my writing. If Frost and Stablein really want to know the secrets of renewal, then my compact advice is, “everyone needs a Karen.” As in any long-lasting partnership (we were married in 1957), little rituals encrust the relationship and customize it, channel it, and stabilize it. In our case, there is a curious ritual in our dialogue, which I have tried over and over to stop, but which recurs nevertheless. Out of thin air, without any provocation, without any warning, and without any context, I find myself saying to Karen, “do you have any words?” Say what? I’m never sure what words I am searching for or want to hear or what kind of magic those words might perform. And neither is she. I suppose it’s not surprising that someone as invested in words as I am, would blurt a plea for sense by asking for any old words. Yet, if I think that any old map will do if you’re lost, then it’s not much of a

stretch to think that any old words will do if you're scared. How can I know what I think until I see what Karen says? Strange as all of this may sound, it seems to lie on top of a profound simplicity. The name of the game, triggered by my unfathomable query, "any words?", is intimacy, not content. Whatever Karen's response, there is an affirmation of contact, of connection, of struggles, of interruptions that will pass, of sense that will be restored, of co-creation, of not being alone. That is sufficient bedrock for any renewal, at least as it plays out in my life.