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JPNU Home	Table of Contents	All Issues	Order	About this Journal	<< Issue	>> Issue



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Editorial

Renewal

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Sections

- [References](#)
- [Publishing and Reprint Information](#)

- [Next article](#) in Issue
- View [print version](#) (PDF)
- [Drug links](#) from Mosby's DrugConsult
- [Genetic information](#) from OMIM
- Citation of this Article
 - View on [PubMed](#)
 - Download in [citation manager format](#)
 - Download in [Medlars format](#)
- [Related articles](#) in PubMed

A new year dawns, encouraging reflection on the past and offering fresh resolve for the coming months. With the passage of time, however, the tendency to continue in familiar patterns becomes more and more alluring. Why change what isn't broken? Why, indeed.

Systems theory taught us that to remain alive, organisms must be open enough to allow selective input to be introduced and, at the same time, permit worn, outdated material to be sloughed off. We learned that from the smallest microbe to celestial bodies, everything is interrelated to everything else. Energy never disappears; it is transformed. Consider individual lives and those of organizations and institutions as living, breathing systems and the need for renewal becomes apparent. Renewal bestows new energy, new vitality, and a chance to begin again refreshed and recharged.

Renewing oneself or an organization, institution, or profession is not easy. The lure of a steady state beckons in an otherwise chaotic world. The propensity is to stagnate, become rigid and rule-bound, and pay more attention to *how* to do something rather than *what* to do. Government bureaucracies serve as examples of rules and regulations that supersede purposes.

The way a culture views the life process suggests why and how people think about the future and the possibility of renewal. As Hudson (1999) explains, in an earlier agrarian society, cycles of life and death recurred, reinforcing belief in inherent order. Renewal was not a foreign term; indeed, renewal occurred continuously with cycles of growth and harvest repeating in a natural rhythm.

With the advent of the industrial revolution, however, a linear perspective of life emerged, and today linear thinking is the norm (Hudson, 1999). Life evolves from birth, followed by growth and development, reaches a peak—adulthood—then inevitably declines until death. The process is believed to be true for individuals, institutions, and even whole civilizations, Rome being the oft-touted example.

The differences between linear and cyclic thinking are substantial, according to Hudson (1999). Linear thinking is goal directed. When goals are met, nothing is left to do. If goals are not met, defeat and discouragement result. Regardless of the outcome of a goal-motivated activity, work, growth, and life itself eventually reach an endpoint.

Cyclic thinking, on the other hand, posits that life proceeds with cycles of growth alternating with periods of disengagement. The goal is to be, rather than to do. We are always in a state of being, whether we're actually doing anything or not. We are human *beings*, not only human doers. Growth and development are possible at any age or stage, not just in the early life of an individual or institution.

Cyclic thinking encourages renewal. Each cycle offers another opportunity to re-envision not only what we are doing but also how we are doing it. Are our actions compatible with our goals? Is there integrity between our mission and our activities?

Numerous obstacles, however, mitigate against cyclic thinking and the renewal process (Gardner, 1981). Organizational arrangements that centralize power deliver filtered information and quantitative data to power holders. Restricting information lessens opportunities for creative ideas to emerge and discourages real debate about the future. Likewise, organizations whose members are homogeneous and hold similar, narrow world views mitigate against renewal.

Cyclic thinking allows untold potentialities for the future to be considered as cycles are revisited periodically, a situation discouraged by linear thinking when decisions are made and, as we are so often fond of saying, carved in stone. This is not to imply that whatever we have been doing has to change, only that we evaluate our activities and ourselves periodically as new information comes to light. A nursing school's curriculum, for instance, would be woefully outdated if content about managed care was omitted, although many nurses practicing today can remember when managing care was what nurses did with their patients.

Conditions necessary for renewal first require believing that the future holds countless possibilities. If, instead, people believe that there is little likelihood that any one person or organization can affect the future, renewal holds scant appeal. Rather, any attempt toward renewal likely will be viewed as just one more inane task.

In addition to confidence in the potential of the future, renewal requires that pluralism be supported and dissenters protected, and that data include sensory information as well as quantitative reports (Gardner, 1981). Pluralism implies diversity in its usual meaning that racial, ethnic, and gender differences be considered, but pluralism is broader. Pluralism includes encouragement of various ideas, viewpoints, and suggestions, such as those offered by less-experienced colleagues (Sullivan, 2002). A pluralistic orientation welcomes new perspectives.

Just as pluralism encourages differences, protection for dissenters also is essential. If one's voice cannot be raised in criticism or protest, creativity is stifled and vitality diminished. We call such societies totalitarian.

Veneration of quantitative data is a product of linear-oriented thinking. Despite the recent spate of accounting irregularities, the belief that numbers reveal the whole truth still prevails. Cyclic thinking requires that sensory information, such as that found in qualitative data, be considered

as well. For example, nurse-to-patient ratios cannot fully convey the human experience that occurs in encounters between nurses and their patients.

Organizations are made up of people who themselves must commit to renewal in their own lives and their affiliated groups. Renewal offers hope in the face of disappointments or adversity. Optimism toward what can be accomplished can coexist with realism about what is possible but requires continual balancing of competing demands. Gardner (1981) suggests several areas to consider: New talent must be nurtured, but experience must not be abandoned. Individualism competes with standardization. Criticism must be encouraged but not to the extent that it discourages innovation.

Pesut (2002) discusses the importance of self-renewal, especially in light of discouraging conditions prevalent today. He encourages reflection on self-renewal to inspire motivation and confidence toward the future. "Our professional future is directly linked with our individual capacities for self-renewal," Pesut (p. 135) states.

Although removal from day-to-day activities can support reflection on renewal, it is not essential. Opportunities to evaluate the present and consider the future can be created. A commitment to the renewal process is required. Thinking must shift from striving toward an endpoint to the belief that people and organizations are in a continual state of potentiality. Endless possibilities can be contemplated.

Self-renewal and renewal of our organizations offer supportive encouragement to create a positive future for ourselves and our world. Organizations, higher education institutions, and professions as well rest in the contributions of individuals. As does their future.

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TOP

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