# Perspective

A newsletter for widening your point of view

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Issue 11

Richard Bach, in his book *Illusions*, states a handy aphorism: **Perspective – use it or lose it**. This periodical shares amongst recreation and tourism management professionals, and others, several tools and concepts which will help exercise your perspective.

This issue considers why being superfluous is potentially good, how to manage regret, why *Escherichia coli* is scarier than you thought, and how to order – and be picked up – in a restaurant. Because these are all important topics.

## Parkinson's Law

Cyril Parkinson penned the famous words, "It is a commonplace observation that work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion."[1] And it became a law (with a little 'l').

Contemporary convention suggests that he was referring only to our individual capacity for working like lightning bolts when the jolt of a deadline approaches, but gliding like sloths when there's at least a day to spare. In fact, he was more concerned about the growth of bureaucracies, which he theorised to be the result of two factors, which he also described as laws:

**The law of multiplication of subordinates:** If a civil servant thinks they are overworked, they may: resign, halve the work with a colleague, or hire subordinates. If they resign, no pension. If they share, they have a rival of equal status. If they hire, they get a raise, and, by dividing the work into several categories, have the merit of being the only person to understand the whole game.

**The law of multiplication of work:** An incoming document may be presented to official A, who decides that it falls within the province of B, who places a draft reply before C, who amends it drastically before consulting E, who asks F to deal with it. But F goes on leave at this point, handing the file over to G, who drafts a minute, which is signed by E and is returned to C, who revises the draft accordingly and lays the new version before A, who, without all those staff, would have dealt with it immediately in the first instance.

Parkinson's proof was based on the increase in the number of Royal Navy Admiralty officials between 1914 and 1928, when 2,000 staff members grew to 3,569, independently of any possible increase in their work. The Navy during that period had diminished by a third in men and two-thirds in ships, and was in fact limited by the Washington Naval Agreement of 1914. However, the clerical team had grown by 5.6% annually.

Similarly, the British Colonial Office had grown from 372 members in 1935 to 1,661 in 1954, despite Imperial decline. The annual rate of growth was around 5.9%. This limited pool of data – methinks more a coincidence than an empirical proof – suggested to Parkinson that the growth in a bureaucracy was a predictable mathematical function, based on: the number of staff seeking promotion through the appointment of subordinates, the difference between the ages of appointment and retirement, the number of hours devoted to answering minutes within a department, and the number of effective staff being administered. The result would generally give an annual growth figure of between 5.2 and 6.6%.

Parkinson concluded:

*The discovery of this formula and of the general principles upon which it is based has, of course, no emotive value. No attempt has been made to inquire whether departments ought to grow in size. Those who hold that this growth is essential to gain full employment are fully entitled to their opinion. Those who doubt the stability of an economy based upon reading each other's minutes are equally entitled to theirs. Parkinson's Law is a purely scientific discovery, inapplicable except in theory to the politics of the day. It is not the business of the botanist to eradicate the weeds. Enough for him if he can tell us just how fast they grow.*

I prefer what I'll call Neeplphut's Maxim. Neeplphut is a fictional extraterrestrial character, in appearance resembling a yellow ostrich. It was created by Jack Cohen and Ian Stewart to help explain chaos theory, using witty dialogue between Captain Arthur and the alien as a literary device.[2] Chaos theory needn't worry us here, so ignore Planck's constant and bear with me:

NEEPLPHUT*: Welcome to the Institute for Simple Systems.*

CAPTAIN ARTHUR*: It's very impressive Neeplphut. I've never seen such an enormous building! And all this incredible equipment – it's breathtaking!*

NEEPLPHUT*: Yes, I am sorry about that. It is a sign of our ignorance.*

CAPTAIN ARTHUR*: Pardon?*

NEEPLPHUT [ignoring him]*: Tell me something, Captain … just because a tiny change in Planck's constant destroys the special features of carbon that make life as we know it possible, that does not imply that very similar kinds of life cannot occur in a universe with totally different laws! I must tell the librarian at once!*

CAPTAIN ARTHUR*: Why?*

NEEPLPHUT*: These analogies are a major simplification. We can amalgamate five wings of the library, pull down two buildings, and fire ten percent of the staff. Everybody will be pleased!*

CAPTAIN ARTHUR*: Pleased? To lose their jobs?*

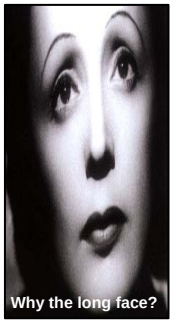
NEEPLPHUT*: Of course. That is the overriding aim of the Institute for Simple Systems. To understand something is to simplify it. Theories destroy facts, metatheories destroy theories, and so on. The*

[1] Parkinson, C. N. 1955. *Parkinson's Law*. The Economist, Nov 1955
[2] Cohen, J. & Stewart, I. 1994. *The Collapse of Chaos*. Penguin

*culmination of all that the institute stands for is to close itself down. What use is science if all it can do is complicate your view of the world? Every scientist should be trying to see the world in the simplest possible way.*

I will stretch Neeplphut's Maxim to propose that every organisation should consider, at some stage, what it would take to make itself superfluous. Not existing can be a huge measure of success. ❖

# J'avais regretté


Why the long face?

You can put a positive spin on anything. Michael Miller, an assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School reckons, "regret needn't be a garment-rending, self-flagellating emotion. Instead, it can be something to value and use."[3] And it's not a Tui advert; indeed, it's in the Harvard Business Review.

Miller states, "learning probably works best when there is an intense emotional component to it, so it could be that regret bolsters our ability to learn from experience." Perhaps he voted 'No' in the smacking referendum.

So – accentuate the positive. Use regret to improve decision-making and to clarify values. Let what happened point the way. Apparently, the most successful people are those who are resolute in the face of failure. Don't avoid risk. Choose options which will maximise your chance of reaching goals. Don't simply avoid the chance of future regret. Best of all, it's important to recognise that you're not the only idiot in the neighbourhood. Miller suggests that, on some level, we're all idiots. Misery loves company, so open up. I think that's good advice, although it's no reason to actively cultivate regret.

Laurens van der Post puts less spin on the matter. [4] Travelling in post-WWII Africa, and losing a colleague on the way, probably encouraged a more personal approach. He writes of his regrets, which were more than mere hiccups in a professional career:

*They have a habit of all massing together and presenting themselves to my senses at the most unexpected moments; waking me up at midnight, making me hesitate in my steps across a crowded street, or perhaps just making me stroke the head of a neighbour's dog with unusual tenderness.*

*When they do that it is necessary to relive them again in some way, to look at them squarely in their eyes, to take them by the hand in an avowal of a sad friendship, and say, "How are you now? Better? Is there anything more I can do for you?" and at a shake of a dark head, to reply encouragingly before continuing on one's way, "Perhaps it will be better next time. Perhaps it will pass." This does not sound much. But it is all one can do, and it helps even if it does not cure.*

I go for the deep sigh while doing the dishes. ❖

# I opened the window and

Influenza seems to be the disease of the season – that volatile mutant of the RNA world. But consider *Escherichia coli*, or *E. coli* to its friends. And we *are* its friends. In fact, we are each a little *E. coli* factory. According to John Postgate, an Emeritus Professor of Microbiology at Sussex University, we each churn out about 20 million fresh *E. coli* bacteria per day.[5] But they are not all the same.

Here's the scary news, according to Postgate. In 1994, when he was writing, there were 5 billion people. This means there were 100 billion billion new *E. coli* cells produced globally every day, and just by us.

*E. coli* has enough DNA for about 4,000 genes. (We have as many as 25,000.) Genetic mutations occur spontaneously in *E. coli* in the range of 1 per thousand to 1 per billion of new progeny. Postgate uses the rate of 1 per million for his next calculation: which is that 10 million billion *E. coli* genes mutate daily inside humanity, and since the bacteria has so few genes, every gene of its pool mutates at least 2.5 billion times per day.

The result is that our common little bacteria checks out every possible mutation by the second. Goodness knows what goes on in the gut of an ostrich, and I hope it's not contagious. ❖

# Last orders

Last orders are the least satisfying. Behavioural economist Dan Ariely has found that when a group of people select their meals in a restaurant, they make different choices when they order aloud and sequentially in comparison with when they order in secret.[6] When we order aloud, we begin a process of referential decision-making. That is, we make a choice with regard to what someone else has done. We subsume our immediate preference and start rationalising: I can't copy her. I need to be seen to be independent and daring. That choice is taken. Maybe I'll have the same as the boss. Our order is less likely to be for our favourite.

The solution is to plan your order before the wait-staff arrive, and stick to it. If you are afraid you may be swayed by others, announce your choice aloud and early.

Ariely extends the influence of comparisons on our decision-making by suggesting that if you want to meet someone (anyone) at a party, be sure to take along a friend who is less interesting and less attractive. (*Desiderata* says there's always someone.) If you go alone, there is no comparison possible. But, if you are seen to be relatively more attractive, then you are the better option. If there is no choice, there is less chance of any selection being made. You may be quite lonely, without even an unattractive friend to talk with. Sad, isn't it. Similar applies to televisions. You were quite happy with your old CRT TV until that power-hungry plasma screen appeared on your neighbour's wall, weren't you? ❖

## For Your Interest

If the number of consent applications for large-scale energy and agricultural developments is a measure of economic activity, I suspect we are in for a rapid cessation to the recession. I have possibly had my busiest 12 months, with work on two Water Conservation Orders, several hydro projects (Waitaki, Wairau, Matahina, Patea, Manapouri and Mokihinui schemes, amongst others), water augmentation and irrigation projects (such as the Waimea Plains / Lee Valley and Mackenzie schemes), some wind farms (including Mount Cass, Project Hayes and Central Wind), tourism and residential developments (Te Arai near Mangawhai and Parkins Bay in Wanaka), tourism projects (for example, the Fiordland Link Monorail and a jet boat operation on the Wilkin River) and marinas (Waikawa Bay near Picton and Bayswater in Auckland). Pure residential development planning work seems to be the only area which has declined. The near future looks similar.

I am chuffed to have been appointed to the inaugural Sir Edmund Hillary Outdoor Recreation Council with Stu Allan, Dave Bamford, Annie Dignan, Graeme Dingle and Paul Wilson. Our task is to assist Sport and Recreation NZ (SPARC) with the implementation of the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy, and, of course, to make ourselves superfluous.

[3] Miller, M.C. 2009. *Go Ahead, Have Regrets*. Harvard Business Review, April 2009

[4] van der Post, L. 1954. *Venture to the Interior*. The Vanguard Library, London

[5] Postgate, J. 1994. *The Outer Reaches of Life*. Cambridge University Press

[6] Ariely, D. 2008. *Predictably Irrational – the hidden forces that shape our decisions*. Harper Collins