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A passion for planning

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A passion for planning

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Planning. It's so very logical, sensible and rational. Is it possible to passionate about it? After all, the word "passion" has connotations of emotionality and spontaneity, almost opposite to the usual image of planning.

Well, I spend a lot of time planning. Certainly I'm committed to it, enthusiastic about it and enjoy doing it. So you could call it a passion.

Personal planning

Years ago -- back in the early 1970s, to be honest -- I was living in Sydney. I had started running to keep fit, but every day it was a struggle to feel motivated. Just postpone the run until later, or tomorrow, I said to myself. But when I did go running, it felt good.

The other thing that frustrated me was that I couldn't run to the office due to the heavy traffic and pollution. Cycling was out of the question. I started imagining an ideal situation: running to work.

Several years later, Kathy and I moved to Canberra where I had a job at the Australian National University. Time to carry out the plan. Having no car, we looked for houses close to shops, public transport, and within running distance of ANU. The result was ideal, from my point of view. I ran about 3km to the campus (and 3km to get home), efficiently combining exercise and commuting. Best of all, I had no more motivation problems. Running became commuting, something done without really thinking about it.

This became a model for personal planning: think ahead to a desired outcome, wait until a suitable opportunity arises, and then implement the plan. A key point was to plan so that my desired outcome became a routine part of my life, without much personal motivation required. You might say that the motivation was built into the planning.

I've observed how circumstances can overwhelm good intentions. I knew some environmentally oriented students who were committed to cycling. They bought a car but said they wanted to keep cycling. But driving became the easy option. So they didn't cycle nearly as often. In their personal planning, they didn't take account of how easily they would be tempted to take the easy option.

Television is another temptation. I was never a heavy watcher, but if a TV is around, I'll be tempted

to watch something, and then often later feel like I've wasted my time. So it's much better not to have one at all. Luckily Kathy was willing to do without. Again, if there's no TV set, no willpower is required to avoid watching.

I've always done a lot of reading, especially nonfiction. In the mid 1970s, I realised that I wasn't thinking enough about what I was reading. The things I was reading were really exciting and thought-provoking, such as radical education, feminism, international politics and critique of science. But instead of pausing to reflect on what I'd just read, I'd plunge into the next book.

To counter this tendency to read without much reflection, I started a habit of taking notes on every book or article that I read, including key points with page references, plus my assessment of the work. This interrupted my tendency to read, read, read and made me focus on what I was getting out of the work. Furthermore, by taking notes I understood the ideas better and built a valuable file of references.

I've made writing notes into a habit, a sort of personal rule. Although it can be taken to extremes, all in all it has served me well. By having and carrying out a plan to deal with my own tendencies, I have become more effective at doing what I want to do.

As you might have guessed, as a devotee of personal planning, I make a lot of lists covering everything from long-term projects to today's tasks. Through long practice, I've gained a sense for what I can accomplish within a given time. But like nearly everyone else I know, there are some tasks that I find easier to postpone.

I like to browse through books and articles that give tips on being efficient. Lots of these tips aren't personally relevant, but occasionally there's a gem. I came across a suggestion to deal with my reluctance to tackle certain tasks. The book said to write down all the tasks for the day or the week. Then pick out the one you're dreading the most. Do that one first! It worked for me. Often that dreaded and often-delayed task was actually easy to do. Once it was out of the way, everything else seemed easy.

I do lots of writing, and planning makes it a lot easier. I've tried various approaches and eventually found one that works well for me, including making notes, writing a bit each day and adding references later. The way that works for me will not be the best for others. The key thing, I think, is seeking to find an approach that works best for me in my situation.

One final example: setting priorities between teaching, research projects, administrative tasks, Schweik Action Wollongong, Whistleblowers Australia, etc. I use a process similar to that commonly recommended: I clarify my goals in life, evaluate my strengths and weaknesses, look at resources and obstacles and work out an overall strategy.

Does this sound like I've planned my life? Well, it's not really the case. However good my planning, there are lots of factors beyond my control. Changing jobs, getting involved in a different organisation, discovering new ideas: it's impossible to anticipate everything that will happen in a life.

For me, personal planning is satisfying. While it makes some things routine, in the long term it has opened up opportunities that I never imagined.

Social planning

An individual can make plans, but these are heavily constrained by the way society is organised. The really big benefits of planning come at a larger scale: households, organisations, neighbourhoods, cities and countries. Of course there's lots of social planning, but much of it is driven by self-interest,

as when corporations plan new products or governments plan tax systems.

Most individuals are not involved in social planning except perhaps through their jobs. Participatory planning is the exception.

Consider, for example, town planning. In Australia, this is driven by governments and private developers, with the result being the familiar energy-intensive sprawl. Other models are available. In the Netherlands, for example, cities are much more compact and there are cycle paths parallel to but separated from roads.

It's possible to imagine a community designing itself. First there are some basics. Decent housing for everyone. Satisfying work. Accessibility and support for people with disabilities. Safety, especially for children. Once the goals are established, then various options can be examined. Location of dwellings and workplaces. Communication and transport systems. Food production. It seems so sensible and so far from current reality!

Social planning can help people avoid the consequences of their own impulses. Salt - sodium chloride - provides an everyday example. It is well known that eating too much sodium is undesirable, for example contributing to high blood pressure in some people. But lots of salt is added to processed food, since people have a taste for it and, once acquiring a taste, prefer salty foods.

In nonindustrialised societies, a taste for salt is advantageous, since not much is ingested in a diet of fruits and vegetable. But with the rise of salt manufacture and processed foods, the biologically based preference for saltiness has damaging consequences. Years ago, in a group called Community Action on Science and Environment, we explored the salt issue and found out about a plan by the Finnish government to help reduce heart disease by promoting "new salt," a mixture mainly of sodium and potassium chloride, providing a better sodium-potassium balance in the diet.

The details are not important here. The basic idea is social planning. How sensible. How idealistic!

Social planning also includes social, political and economic organisation. For example, experiments have shown that power tends to corrupt. Therefore, political systems in which a few individuals at the top have a lot more power than ordinary citizens are susceptible to the corruptions of power. So how about designing a system in which the corruptions of power are minimised? One idea that appeals to me is demarchy. It is built around numerous randomly selected local groups, each one dealing with a specific function such as education, industry, transport or the arts.

Again, the details aren't important here. The key is planning. And along with this there has to be experimentation: social experimentation. After all, new products are carefully tested and trialled before mass marketing. Why not political "products"? However, there's very little experimentation with new political and economic models. This is right off the social agenda.

Social movement planning

If there were popular participation in social planning and experimentation, there might be no need for social movements. But since popular participation is the exception rather than the rule, social movements are crucial.

In social movements, there's lots of passion but not so much planning. To be precise, there's plenty of short-term planning for meetings, public statements, fund-raising, rallies and the like. But there's not so much attention given to long-term planning, including maintaining commitment, building alliances, fostering new ways of viewing the world and transforming social structures. The latest crisis usually takes priority.

There's nothing especially complicated about social movement planning. Members need to discuss their long-term goals. They need to have an understanding of the present situation, including allies, opponents, resources, opportunities and obstacles. Then they can work out a strategy to move from the present towards the desired future.

For example, one possible long-term goal is social defence: nonviolent community resistance to aggression as an alternative to military defence. It involves methods such as rallies, strikes, boycotts, fasts, sit-ins and setting up alternative institutions. Nonviolent action can be extremely powerful. For example, it was used to end apartheid in South Africa, force the resignation of Indonesian president Suharto in 1998 and bring down Serbian ruler Slobodan Milosevic in 2000. Nonviolent action training is used for many feminist, environmental and peace actions.

However, while nonviolent action is used day-to-day, there is less attention to planning a society in which nonviolent action is used instead of organised violence. A social defence system would involve widespread training in nonviolent action techniques, designing industrial production so that it can be run or shut down by workers, designing organisations that cannot easily be taken over by coercing or replacing a few people at the top, and setting up decentralised, resilient systems for communication, energy, food, water, transport and medicine. It would also involve building links with democratic grassroots movements in other countries, learning foreign languages, studying the psychology of domination and resistance, and running simulations of nonviolent resistance.

There is, thus, an enormous amount involved in planning for a nonviolent future. One road to such a future is to develop campaigns and initiatives that are both effective today and help move towards such a future. That has long been a special interest of mine. But it's not easy. I think for most people this sort of strategy development is not very exciting. There are fewer immediate psychological returns in terms of popular mobilisation or challenging of oppressors. I don't know the answer but searching for ways forward is stimulating for me.

Conclusion

Planning is not everyone's favourite activity, but it is vital. At a personal level, planning doesn't have to be constraining. Personal planning can help release extra time by reducing or eliminating low-priority activities and can help create new options by developing new skills. By planning to develop personal capacities and to investigate options, planning is not only compatible with excitement and spontaneity but actually opens up new possibilities.

At a social level, lots of planning occurs, but much of it is by elites in governments and corporations. Popular planning processes are needed, but until that is routine, social movements are vital. And social movements need to do more planning too, and to somehow make it just as exciting as everything else they do. Social alternatives do not happen spontaneously. Planning is required.

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