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**Stories for
Interactive Exploration**

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Editors

1st Edition, July 2009

Stories for Interactive Exploration

By Jack Byrd, Jr.

**Edited by Suzanne Goodney Lea
and Jeff Prudhomme**

First Edition, July 2009

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The Vietnam Veterans Memorial

The Vietnam Veterans memorial has become one of the most moving and inspirational tributes to the sacrifices of American armed forces. It was designed by Maya Lin, a 21-year-old architecture student for a project in a funerary design class. Hers was entry 1026 out of 1421 entries.

When Entry 1026 was accepted, there was national outrage over the design. It didn't fit our perception of what a war memorial should look like. It didn't depict heroic figures, as most people expected. Opponents felt that the design conveyed only shame rather than honoring the sacrifices of those who had died. Racism and sexism often colored the initial responses to the artist, a young Asian-American woman. The idea of an Asian-American designing a U.S. War Memorial was simply too much for some. Maya Lin was not even recognized in the memorial's dedication. She wasn't someone who sought controversy, and she soon tried to return to relative anonymity.

When Entry 1026 was actually built, something unexpected happened. Very soon it became the most-visited public monument in the US. Surviving veterans and family members left mementos at the wall. Throngs of visitors came to value the experience of shared remembrance and mourning for the men and women who had given their lives in the Vietnam War. Something about Maya Lin's design made this shared experience possible.

The jury of architects had many possibilities to select from. They made their selection in a "blind process" – without knowing the identity of who was behind which entry. They ended up choosing a design that has moved Americans like very few memorials have ever done. They could have selected a less controversial design. They didn't. They could very easily have convinced themselves that Entry 1026 would never be accepted by the public. They didn't. They could have tinkered with Entry 1026 to make it more acceptable. They didn't and our nation is far better off because of their courage.

Selecting among possibilities takes courage. Courage can mean taking a risk on something that pushes beyond typical conventions. Truly innovative and useful possibilities may be hard to judge precisely because they don't fit with our conventional perceptions. We can easily convince ourselves that something will never be accepted. We can strive for some imagined compromise and consensus. But there are times when we need to strip away the conventional constraints that inhibit our selection among possibilities. We need the courage to choose what we think is best not what we think will be acceptable.

What's Missing

Greg Jackson had looked forward to this day for a long time. It had been a long time since he had visited his hometown. His childhood home had been sold when his parents died, and he hadn't been back to the neighborhood since then.

As he rounded the corner to the street where he grew up, he was astonished. The neighborhood had changed. The old wood frame homes had a luster to them. Yards that once were barren now looked worthy of a golf course. The place looked perfect.

He slowed as he came near his family home. The house looked beautiful. He decided to stop and see if the current owner of the house would let him look around. The owner was very happy to give him a tour.

The house looked better than it ever had. He was delighted to see that the mantle over the fireplace looked beautiful. He had spent hours as a teenager cleaning layers of paint off of the delicate scroll work. The wood floors were polished and beautiful. He and his brother and father had put down those wood floors. His bedroom was now an office, but it too looked great.

Then they went into the backyard. The lawn was perfect and a patio had been put in. The big walnut tree was still there.

Suddenly he got a lump in his throat. Grass would never grow under the one large limb of the tree. It was always barren hard packed dirt. That's where they had a tire swing. His parents would often joke that they were raising kids, not a lawn. Even as he and his siblings grew older, neighborhood kids would still use that swing. His visit to his home had taken on a new perspective. Everything about the house and the neighborhood *looked* perfect, but it didn't seem quite right. Something was missing. It was as if all of the human touch was missing. Greg wondered to himself what memories would the current owners have of this house or this neighborhood that looked scarcely lived in.

As he drove away, he thought to himself that what was missing was just as important as what was there. To others, the missing thing probably would be seen as an imperfection, the barren part of the yard. But that's what made this house a home.

Without the human touch in the otherwise perfect structure, there is no personal connection. When we think about possibilities, we need that lived-in quality. We need to think about how real people might make themselves at home in the ideas we develop. How will they make a personal connection to the possibilities we describe? We need to worry less about finding a perfect description of an idea and think more about what might be missing: the human element that helps us to feel at home, even if that home is a bit messy.

The Old Buckets

It was a sad day that many of us have experienced. Jake Sinclair had died and his family was cleaning his home and farm before it was to be sold. For the past seven years Jake had lived on the farm alone after his wife's death. Needless to say the house was a mess.

Cleaning out the house was a challenge, but the barn was another matter all together. While the house was a mess, the barn was immaculate. You could see where Jake had his priorities.

The order and structure of the barn made the collection of old buckets a real mystery. The buckets were an assortment of milk buckets, old coffee cans, even lard buckets from times past. They were dented and most were rusty. Why were they there? Surely there must be a reason.

Later as his relatives went through a box of photographs, the mystery of the buckets was solved. There was a picture of the garden. In the rows, you could see the buckets placed near the plants.

Each of the buckets was an irrigation device. There were small pin holes in the buckets that allowed water to ease into the roots of the plants. The local climate was one of frequent afternoon thunderstorms. This type of rain wasn't really that useful because the thunderstorm was quickly followed by heat that dried out the soil. But the buckets filled up with rain water and then allowed the water to release slowly.

The buckets even added nutrients. Plants that required more iron were nourished by the water coming from the rusty buckets. While the buckets didn't look very good, they were critical to the growth of the garden.

The ideas we develop in our discussions might be like these old buckets. They may not look like much at first. Some people might see them as garbage. It might be too hard to imagine their usefulness. But if you keep exploring them, you might find they have actually have a nourishing effect. They might stimulate the growth of your thinking through show and steady development.

New ideas like the buckets may be ragged at first. But new ideas don't have to be perfect, they just need to be the starting point for longer-term development. Keep in mind that some ideas that appear ready-made for the discard pile might actually hold the key to some really useful insights.

The Blue Bags

The road rambled over rolling countryside in West Virginia. There were few houses or buildings but lots of trees. And here or there along the roadside would be a stylish looking blue bag hanging from a tree. The bags looked like those used by high end fashion retailers. The bags seemed to be hanging upside down. Few people who traveled that lonely fifty-mile section of road ever noticed them let alone wondered about them.

There was no apparent pattern to the placement of the bags. They were not evenly spaced. They were not placed near anything identifiable. They were just blue bags along the highway.

Imagine the possibilities. What was their purpose? Or did they have one? Why were they put in some places rather than other places? Why were they on one side of the road but not the other side? Or did it matter? Why were they blue and not another color? Was the color significant or just a personal choice? **Before you read on, imagine the possibilities.**

Creative possibilities spring from our imagination. They require us to disconnect from our current reality and our conventional ways of seeing things. The blue bags offer this kind of a disconnect. They caused us to think in ways we normally wouldn't. Generating possibilities requires us to diverge from conventional patterns. Possibilities don't follow a pattern or a formula just as the blue bags had no apparent pattern in their placement. Possibilities ask us to question what's really important, just as we wondered whether the color of the bags really mattered.

When you're trying to generate possibilities, you need to engage your imagination. To do this, it can help if you have a disconnect, such as the blue bags: something that doesn't fit in, something that makes you wonder, something that breaks with your routine ways of looking at the world. Once your imagination is engaged, you'll realize that it's all about creating possibilities rather than about studying the solution to a problem. What do you see as a possibility?

Playing the Game

It's a simple game. Teams of five to six persons are asked to pass three tennis balls from one person to another in the same sequence. The time to complete the task is measured. Any dropped tennis ball is a penalty of 10 seconds. The teams are challenged to cut their time in half after each attempt. The following are three case studies of actual experiences with the game.

Group 1 - Completed the first trial in 15 seconds. They were then able to reduce their time to 7 seconds on the second trial. As soon as they saw the results of their improvement, they quit.

Group 2 - Was never able to make an improvement. In fact they got worse as they continued. They argued over what should be done.

Group 3 - Looked at the game *as a game* and went from 15 seconds to 1 second in one trial.

Who were the three groups?

- Group 1 was a collection of plant managers for a major U.S. corporation.
- Group 2 was a team of senior partners in a law firm
- Group 3 was a group of children in a kindergarten class.

Think about the lessons that we can learn from the above experience.

- We tend to impose limits on ourselves. We imagine reasons why things can't happen rather than thinking of possibilities.
- We fail to challenge our perceptions of the "rules." Rules convey our sense of what will be allowed. We tend to get stuck on very narrow interpretations of what the rules might mean.
- We become complacent with some improvement without considering whether other improvements are possible.
- Our expertise and our experience may limit the way we look at issues. It's hard to have an open mind about something when our experience and expertise are challenged. By relying on our expertise, we might overlook possibilities that seem too obvious or simplistic.

The kindergarten class was able to master the challenge because the children were not bound by the accumulation of self-imposed constraints that adults place on their thinking. They had more of a beginner's mind that was open to possibilities the adults could not see. You'll need that kind of a beginner's mind when you're trying to generate possibilities. You'll need to question the rules and push beyond the limits of your preconceived ideas or beliefs about what is feasible or acceptable. And you just might wonder, how did those kids do it?

Wood Piles

Whenever my father and I would drive the backwoods of West Virginia, we would check out the wood piles that families had amassed. My father loved the heat from a wood stove, and we would spend a lot of time together chopping firewood.

For fun, we started rating wood piles. At first our rating was simply based upon the quantity of wood. But quantity alone didn't seem to tell the whole story, and from then on, well, things got a whole lot more complicated. First, we added into our rating the aesthetics of the woodpile. Some piles were very simply stacked while others were works of art (pyramids, cones, and other shapes). Next we looked at placement of the wood. Some were a distraction on the property. Others had obviously been placed by someone who had what nowadays we'd call a sense of feng shui.

For each of these rating dimensions, we developed a numerical scale. At first we used a simple 10 point scale and when we found this rating system to be too limiting, we developed a more intricate scale.

Once we had the scales developed, we would combine the various ratings into an overall rating. Basically we multiplied the ratings by each other. Each individual rating had a power index as well to reflect the importance differential. The end result was a number that told us how valuable a pile of wood was.

This was a lot of fun to do, but, of course, it was all kind of crazy. No one would give much credence to rating piles of wood. But is it really any crazier than a lot of other ratings that seem to govern our lives?

Consider how many ratings systems we have today that are just as silly. Colleges and universities are rated by inane numerical systems that are based on scales and judgments just as arbitrary as our elaborate woodpile system. So are ratings of states' economies, tax systems, judicial climates, and virtually everything you can think of. The thing is, we knew our woodpile system was an elaborate game, something to occupy our minds on long rides down country roads.

Quantification can give a false sense of insight. And like our elaborate woodpile system, it feeds on itself—leading to even more complex calculations and the desire for even more numbers. All of this complexity can get in the way of our ability to think meaningfully about the realities that confront us as a society. All these numbers can get in the way of what really counts. Quantification tends to eliminate the thought and judgment that people need to use to truly understand different situations. Quantification gives the appearance of rationality, but the very basis for doing the quantification can be largely irrational or, at least, hidden from rational examination. When it comes to thinking of public issues, what's more important: the computation of a numerical rating, or the discussion of all the non-quantifiable things that really matter most to us as citizens? What really counts when it comes to thinking about our lives as citizens?

Two Grams

The Nike Corporation had developed four new possible designs for a driver. Nike hoped that Tiger Woods would adopt one of them. With Tiger's endorsement, the driver was sure to be a top seller.

Nike arranged for Tiger to test each of the models. When the test was over, Tiger was asked for his favorite. "I like this one because it's the lightest," Tiger said.

The Nike engineers were perplexed. All of the drivers were of the same weight. But Tiger persisted that the driver he selected was lighter. To satisfy their curiosity the Nike engineers weighed each of the three drivers more precisely. To their surprise, they found that the driver that Tiger had selected was indeed lighter – by two grams. To give you an idea of what that means, that's about the weight of two regular paper clips.

Now it's likely that only an expert like Tiger could have sensed the difference in weights. Most of us, or at least your typical golfer, would never notice such a subtle distinction. We might find the same situation with experts on public policy. Experts who devote their attention to specific areas of public policy often get hung up dealing with the fine details of public policy. Only they as experts can really value these nuances just as only an extraordinary golfer like Tiger can sense two grams in the weight of a club.

As we develop public policy choices, we need to keep our focus on citizens just as citizens – not as public policy experts. Citizens will see public issues in simpler more human terms. They likely won't worry too much about fine details or subtle nuances. They'll focus more on the basic personal choices about how to approach complex policy areas. As you think about describing these policy choices for your fellow citizens, try to find ways to express these policy choices in the simplest possible human terms. Ask yourself if you're getting hung up about those two grams, or if there's a simpler way to express the basic policy choice you're describing. Remember, those two grams may make a big difference to Tiger, but not to the average person, who is likely facing more basic choices about what kind of club to use or even whether to play golf at all.

“That’s a Cat”

Think about the following question: How old is a child when he or she can recognize the difference between a cat and a dog? Most children can make this distinction at a very young age – often soon after they learn how to talk!

Now try to write down just how to distinguish between a cat and a dog. A written description of such a distinction is very hard to do. In fact, you can find flaws in almost any written description of the distinction between a cat and a dog. But you do, of course, know how to tell the difference. You have some kind of general image in mind that lets you say, “That’s a cat.”

We all carry images with us, but images are both hard to describe and yet hard to forget. It’s interesting that we tend to remember best the images and associations that we find hard to describe, but we often forget what we can convey only in words.

All of us relate to images. These images can be shaped by visual impressions of things we’ve seen. But images can also be shaped by stories, life experiences, and messages from others. Images are remembered long after words are forgotten. It really doesn’t matter that we can’t put into words the difference between a cat and a dog because we have the image that really matters.

When we describe conceptual possibilities for public policy, we need to create images for others. The precise words that we use are secondary in importance. Try to think about the images that can convey what sets a policy possibility apart from others. See if you can picture what the essence of the policy possibility really is. Is there a story that can help you picture what the possibility really means? What image or images might help a person see the basic meaning of the possibility, so they’d know it when they see it? They may not be able to define it, but they could say, “oh, that’s a cat.”

The House of the Rising Sun

Anyone who was around during the 1960s British Invasion of the American rock and roll scene knows the song “The House of the Rising Sun” as sung by the Animals. The Animals version of the song has become a rock classic.

In his book, *Chasing the Rising Sun: The Journey of an American Song*, Ted Anthony set out to uncover the history and origin of the song. What he found was a fascinating tale of how the history of this song reflected the development of our culture. While most people would attribute the song to the Animals, it is better described as “roots music.”

Anthony never did find *the* author. Rather, he suspects there was no single author. The song simply evolved from singer to singer, each adding something to the lyrics. Although his original quest was unfulfilled, Anthony found the ultimate result of his research to be even more rewarding. The song is a product of the citizenry of our nation, stretching back into the 19th century, continually passed along and enjoyed by later generations.

Creating possibilities follows a similar developmental path. They are developed by regular people like you and me. There is no one author. Everyone who takes part in the discussion contributes something, just as every new rendition of “The House of the Rising Sun” added something new. There is no pride of sole or exclusive authorship, but rather the satisfaction of sharing in a joint act of creation. The possibilities are to be shared with others. They are meant to be passed along and to stimulate new discussion. Eventually each person will view the possibilities from their own perspective, and each can reshape them as desired. Like the *Rising Sun*, the possibilities are a product of citizens for use by citizens to be passed along for new renditions and new occasions.

Vacation Authors

One of the things I enjoy most about vacations is visiting bookstores. I have the time to explore new authors. I often find myself taking virtually every book off of the shelf and reading the fly leaf.

It's something about the relaxation of a vacation that stimulates my appetite for books that I would not normally consider. I'll often arrive home with 50 or more books, more than I can reasonably read as I return to work.

As I finish a book and look over the books to be read, I have a tendency to return to the familiar authors that I know I will enjoy. The promising, but unfamiliar, books that I bought on vacation tend to remain on the shelf unread.

Then for some reason, I decide to take one of these books from the shelf and read it. More often than not, I become engrossed in the new author. Often these new authors make me think in ways that my more familiar authors do not.

When you begin to think of generating possibilities, you might tend to think of typical or conventional ideas, like gravitating toward familiar authors. We all get comfortable with certain ways of thinking. We assume that only certain possibilities are viable simply because they are familiar to us. But this is a time to explore new perspectives. It's time for a vacation. Try thinking of your sanctuary discussions as something like that vacation trip to the bookstore, a time to pick up ideas you might not otherwise take the time to explore. There might be ideas from an earlier discussion that seemed promising but perhaps a bit too wild or out of the ordinary. Those new or unusual ideas are on the shelf waiting to be explored. This is a time to take some of those unfamiliar or unusual ideas off of the shelf and try them out. You're likely to find that you'll begin to develop some exciting new perspectives and insights, things you'd never have discovered if you only stayed with your "familiar authors."

Miss Jones' Children

Miss Jones was in her 90's. In her assisted living apartment, she was surrounded by drawings that she had made of her kindergarten classes over her 50 year career. She loved to remember her children.

Miss Jones was an artist. It had been her custom to draw a montage of each class. She explained her approach this way: "I try to capture more than just a likeness of each child. My drawings reflect my vision of them as individuals. The drawings reflect hope. You'll see that I'm not specific in my caricatures. For example, I don't picture them as firemen, teachers, or athletes. What I try to capture are the qualities that make each of them special. These are the qualities that they will have forever."

"I try to reflect these qualities in their eyes, in the expressions on their face, in the positioning of their mouth, and in other ways that seem important to me. I don't have a formula for my drawings. I draw what seems important to me. I never let their family circumstances or other reality shape my drawing of them. What I'm doing is drawing possibilities."

Possibilities are about hope for the future. They are developed from thoughtful observations of what might be. They are not meant to be a "design" of what should be. They are not meant to be an accurate portrait of the way things are. Possibilities are subtle in their presentation. They are not meant to be a roadmap. But there is something real about them: Miss Jones' drawings sprang from the hope she saw in each child's face, not from studying their biographies or family situations. Each person viewing a possibility can make his or her own interpretation of where it might lead. Over time possibilities can develop into more specific concepts, but for now they are simply expressions of hope, like the hope that shines through the drawings of Miss Jones' children.

The Discourtesy Call

Professor Taylor was in the middle of his lecture when he heard a cell phone ring. He hated cell phones and would have banned them from his class if possible. They were a real annoyance. In the large classes he taught, you could count on a cell phone going off in just about every class.

Normally a student would hurriedly turn off the phone. But that didn't happen today. The student answered the phone. Taylor was furious. When the student's face broke out into a large grin, Taylor could feel his temper boil. He interrupted his lecture and asked the student to see him after class.

Once class was over, Taylor confronted the student: "You showed a complete lack of respect for me and your classmates today. How can you explain your lack of common courtesy?"

"I'm sorry," responded the student. "Normally I have the phone set to just buzz, but I forgot to turn off the ringer."

"But you made it even more disrespectful by taking the call. Seeing that smile on your face told me the call couldn't be urgent."

The student responded in a voice that was choked with emotion. As his eyes teared up he said, "My six-year old sister has been in a coma for three weeks. She had a bad fall and she wasn't responding to treatment. The call was to tell me she had just come out of the coma. Her first words were asking about me..." At that point, the student broke down.

Taylor was taken aback. He muttered his apologies and left the classroom.

Overlooking alternative perspectives can lead us to misread situations. Of course, Professor Taylor was justifiably annoyed by cell phone interruptions in the past. But it also led him to misread this situation. There are many different perspectives from which to view any event, experience, or possibility. Often our first impressions can be unduly limiting. They shut out other perspectives. These first impressions grow out of our own experiences. They're shaped by our values and our culture. But we have to remember that there are other perspectives that are not so obvious to us, perhaps even hidden from us as we rush to judgment. These other perspectives are just as valid as our own. In fact, as Professor Taylor found out, these other perspectives sometimes provide the key to understanding a situation.

Think about this as you explore the consequences of possibilities. It's vital that you try to move past your initial impressions and view them from multiple perspectives. Those perspectives may represent differences in culture, personal beliefs, or life experiences so different from our own. Remember, the perspective that may so easily be dismissed or that may so readily stir us to anger may also be the perspective of a young man learning of his sister's return to life.

Expertise and Insight

The firm of Seavers/ Austin is one of the top architectural firms in the nation. Their specialty is the design of educational facilities. One of their marketing strategies was to take prospective clients on site visits to completed projects to show off their impressive designs. These visits were a very effective way to showcase the expertise of the firm.

One such visit was to a campus where Seavers/ Austin had designed a new academic structure containing classrooms, offices, and labs. The building's appearance was stunning.

The visit occurred while classes were in session, which meant they only viewed the classrooms when they were empty, during breaks between classes. As they were leaving one classroom, however, the professor invited them to stay. "This is a freshman engineering class and my students are interested in structures," the teacher commented. "Would you mind if the class asked you about your design?"

Mike Jenkins, the representative of Seavers/ Austin was delighted. What a great way to showcase their design!

To start things off, a student seated in the back of the room asked, "Whenever you sit in the back of the room, you can't see the entire screen when a PowerPoint presentation is being given. Did you consider the projection sight lines in your design?"

Jenkins was floored. They never thought about where a projector would need to be placed. He responded, "That's a good question. But, you always need to make trade-offs in any design. I'm sure our architects thought about the projector but they were constrained by other factors."

Next, a student to the side of the room asked, "The overhead lighting is directional, which is good if you are sitting right under the lights. But you can see that there are five rows of seats in here and only three rows of lights. Could you tell us your thinking behind your choice of lighting?"

By this point, Jenkins wanted to get out of the room as quickly as possible. What followed were a series of additional questions all in the same vein. The students' questions reflected their experiences as users of the space that Seavers/ Austin had designed, and they were embarrassing to Seavers/ Austin. The final question was the clincher: "Could you tell me if you ever had any actual students work with you on your design?"

What was meant to be a marketing showcase for Seavers/ Austin turned out to be a disaster. Grace Baxter, the client representative concluded the visit with her

comments: "I'm impressed with the professional expertise of Seavers/Austin, but expertise alone isn't what we need. We also need the insight of the user."

Professionals tend to view issues based on their expertise and as filtered through the lenses of their specialization. In many cases, these professionals don't have to live with the consequences of their expert judgments. They don't have to take into account the actual experiences of those who use the things they design. But the practical insights born from everyday life were precisely what the professionals from Seavers/Austin needed.

When it comes to thinking about public concerns, about policy possibilities and their consequences, the perspective of professional expertise is not good enough on its own. You need to take into account the perspective of the user, the lived experiences of citizens. Practical insights, the kind of wisdom you can get from life experiences, may not be rooted in scholarship, but they are just as critical in the exploration of possibilities and their consequences. Ordinary citizens may not have specialized training on an area of public concern, but they can offer the practical insights that come from experience. Both expertise and practical insight are needed in addressing the complex concerns our society faces today, but we have to make sure that the perspective of expertise does not close off the insights of the user.

Comden and Green

Betty Comden and Adolph Green met in the late 1930's. They were both aspiring Broadway actors but had little success. They decided to form their own troupe and joined up with another aspiring actor, Judy Holliday, to create and perform their own productions.

Comden and Green discovered they had a talent for writing song lyrics. Soon their acting careers were over, and Comden and Green set off on a career journey that has led to some of America's most enduring music.

Some of their lyrics include:

- Singin' in the Rain
- New York, New York
- Just in Time
- The Party's Over
- Make Someone Happy
- Lonely Town

Their partnership lasted for nearly 70 years until the death of Adolph Green in 2002.

Over the years of creative collaboration, Comden and Green rarely had serious disagreements about their work. One might wonder how two people could create such memorable lyrics. Which one of them was bold enough to suggest the first words of the song? How did they respond to each other when something didn't seem right? When did they know they were done?

One more thing to think about: they often wrote the lyrics before they knew the melody of the song.

Developing possibilities is not that different from what Comden and Green did. You have to start somewhere. The person who starts has to be comfortable that others will respond in a collegial fashion. The collaborative process needs creators, and builders, and those who are good at doing the touch-up work. You can always tweak an idea and make it better, but the creative process also needs to have a closure.

You may not know the "melody" when you start. Creating possibilities is an interactive process that eventually connects some basic beliefs, values, or themes ("the lyrics") with various ways of embodying these ("the melody"). You probably won't know how it will all come together, and, just like Comden and Green, you don't need to know this in advance to be successful at creating your own possibilities.

The Bottle Dilemma

Asa Candler was a pharmacist and drug store owner when he had the opportunity to buy the rights to a tonic that went by the name of Coca-Cola. For years, Coca-Cola was sold as a fountain drink. Candler didn't believe there was a market for a bottled drink.

In 1899, Candler gave in to some entrepreneurs from Chattanooga, Tennessee who convinced him that Coca-Cola would sell in bottles. Candler essentially gave away the rights to bottle the drink (selling them for a dollar) as long as the bottlers bought the syrup from him.

The Chattanooga bottle experiment was a success and people from other states came to Candler asking for bottling rights. Again Candler virtually gave away the rights as long as they purchased the syrup from him.

Over the years, the bottling companies have become enormously successful. At first blush, the consequences of Candler's actions in giving away the bottling rights looked to be one of our nation's greatest business blunders. Candler could have sold the rights for a large amount of money. He didn't. In the process, he created a vast network of entrepreneurial success stories. And as the bottling companies succeeded so did Coca-Cola. Candler could have kept the bottling rights. He didn't. And in the process, he created partners rather than competitors. What looked like disastrous consequences of Candler's decision have been recognized as one of the primary reasons for Coca-Cola's long-term success.

Consequences are not always what they seem at first glance. There can be a vast difference between short-term and long-term consequences. You might feel certain that you can predict how things will unfold. But honestly, it's hard to imagine that Candler's decision to give up the short-term gains of selling his bottling rights would have appeared to be anything other than folly. Yet this short-term folly was the key to Coca-Cola's success. You might assume that there will be a continuous development along a predictable path between the immediate consequences and long-term consequences. But reality can intervene. Consequences are never static. They change as reactions to them change. When you think about consequences for policy possibilities, remember that, at best, all you can do is to explore some of these diverging pathways of what *might* happen rather than making firm predictions of what *will* happen. So try thinking differently. Remember that the very thing that seems to be certain folly might very well turn out to be a stroke of genius.

Hopeless in Chemistry

Chemistry 100 is a course for students who are not ready for the “fully-loaded” Chemistry course. The course focuses on basic concepts that students will need in their future courses. For years, the course had disastrous results. Over half of the students taking the course did not receive the C (or better) they needed to go on in Chemistry.

The University tried a number of corrective actions. It created special learning centers, but students failed to attend. It required failing students to take seminars in study skills. These had no measurable impact. It gave students chances to recover from bad grades. Grades didn’t get better.

As a last resort, they hired a professor whose primary assignment was to teach. His classroom was a combination of presentation and workshop learning center. He graded his own papers and saw where students were having problems. Everything in the class was focused on learning. Students were given assignments that they saw as being relevant. Difficult points were emphasized over again until there was mastery. Students who needed help stayed after class.

The results were remarkable. The grades turned around within one semester. Even more impressive was the fact that these students’ grades in subsequent higher-level Chemistry classes improved. The Chemistry faculty applauded the university for recruiting better students. The common faculty observation was: “When you get better students, you get better results.”

We tend to look at the challenges we face by focusing on corrective actions. We let the problem occur, and then we try to devise ways to deal with the problem. Almost every public issue is approached in this fashion. The first approaches to the failures in Chemistry were corrective as well.

We fail to approach many problematic issues with a preventive mindset. The new professor in Chemistry had this mindset. He attempted to prevent poor academic performance through concerned and targeted teaching, course strategy, and student motivation. The goal was to prevent failures from becoming an issue that had to be corrected.

When you think about possibilities for public policy, you should also try to think of them with prevention in mind. Too often we only focus on correction, on dealing with problems at a late stage rather than exploring their origins and heading them off. While such preventive possibilities are often more challenging to imagine, they are often the only meaningful way for us to successfully address the challenges we confront.

Coffee Can Answers

The Dean's Office had a leak in the ceiling. The Physical Plant sent two employees to fix the problem. After spending a half-hour looking into the ceiling panel, they gave their initial diagnosis: "It looks like we have some work to do. We may be a while."

They called their supervisor to report in. After a brief conversation, the call ended. "Our supervisor wants to look over the job."

In 15 minutes, the supervisor arrived and he looked up into the ceiling panel. He called his staff outside the office. A few minutes later, the employees returned to the job. In less than 10 minutes, they announced they had fixed the problem.

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Two weeks later, the leak returned. The Physical Plant was called again. This time a different pair of employees arrived. They removed the ceiling panel. Their diagnosis was quick to make: "We found your problem. The coffee can is full. We'll just empty it. You could just check on it whenever there is a rainy day."

Now, think about how often we use figurative "coffee cans" as answers to the problems we face. These coffee can answers don't look at the systemic issues that are at the root cause of our concerns. They're stopgap measures that might deal with some of the immediate symptoms, but they do little to address the underlying issues. When you begin to generate possibilities, try instead to develop possibilities that address those more complex underlying issues.

As you develop these possibilities, ask yourself: Have you addressed the real questions at the heart of the issue or are you just reaching for another coffee can answer?

Bench Strength

The game was a rout almost from the start. It was early in the basketball season when higher-level teams play what are called “buy-in” games. These are games where lower level teams from smaller divisions are guaranteed a fixed amount of money for playing the game. The lower level teams know they have little chance of winning, but the payout for playing the game can often fund a significant part of their athletic program.

This game had around five minutes to go. The coach of the winning team decided to remove most of the players and substitute players that were deep on the bench. These guys deserved some time in a real game. They had worked hard in practice, and they might not have many more opportunities to play once conference games started.

The new players on the floor were almost comical at first. Many of them were playing out of position. All of them wanted to get in the score book in a positive way. And then something happened. One of the bench players called the team together. What was said in that impromptu huddle was unclear, but the bench players started playing with efficiency as a team. At times they looked better than the starting five.

From that moment on, the bench team became a regular contributor to every game. They would come into the game as a team, and often their energy and team skills would turn a deficit into a lead.

At the end of the season, the coach paid tribute to his bench. “This season taught me that you’ll never know how important those late moments can be in an early season game. I thought I had seen all that I needed to see from my team. The fans had left the arena, and the coaching staff was thinking ahead to tougher games. But I learned something that I’ll never forget. You need to keep yourself open to new ideas about your team even when the game appears to be over.”

The development of ideas can mimic the flow of a runaway basketball game. In most group settings, there is a flurry of ideas early in the generation process. There is a quick accumulation of ideas that seem to have merit. After a while the idea production wanes and most new ideas are simply modifications of previous ideas. The roster seems to be set. The game seems to be over. But if the group takes a time out, calls on its reserves, and regroups its efforts, some interesting new ideas can be generated. The process of developing ideas never really stops as long as people keep an open mind. Don’t close off late developments just because you think the game is already over.

Barbara McClintock

Barbara was a geneticist who did much of her work with maize. Because maize has a far longer generational cycle than *E coli* bacteria (the subject of most genetic research at the time), McClintock's work took longer to develop than that of her contemporaries. She also developed insights that others did not.

Her work on gene regulation challenged the beliefs of many leading scientists. She saw things that they didn't. The negative reactions to her work were so severe that she quit publishing the results of her work. She continued her studies but was generally ignored by her peers.

Ten years after she quit publishing her work, her discoveries were confirmed by others. Her work finally achieved the recognition it deserved. Thirty years after her initial discoveries, she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine.

Many of the most promising genetic advances in medicine have their origins in McClintock's work. McClintock's work was a true breakthrough. Her belief in her ideas was a lesson for everyone. How many of us would continue our work when others doubted us so much? How many of us would keep the faith that eventually our ideas would prevail? How many of us could keep working with the optimistic spirit necessary for gaining new insights? How many of us could resist the temptation of devolving into bitterness at the rejection of others?

Developing insights and generating possibilities requires a kind of faith or trust in the value of the ideas that are developed. These insights and possibilities need the support of persons who believe in their value – and who believe in the value of this exercise. Such support often has to last through prolonged periods of disappointment. You have to have a kind of optimism to stay open to new possibilities and to generate new insights. You've got to be determined but also realistic, strong willed but not bitter. Even when others have given up or mock you for your efforts, you have to believe in the value of generating new insights.

