Purposive Drift:
Making it up as we go along

By Richard Oliver

When you were growing up,

did anyone suggest

that making it up as you go along was a sensible strategy

for navigating your life?

I doubt it.

And that is where a paradox lies, for when I look around me

and look back in history too,

what I mostly see

are people improvising their way through their lives.

Some doing it with grace and skill.

Some, frankly making a bit of a mess of it.

Some simply getting by as best they can.

The same can be seen for many businesses and other organisations.

So why did nobody tell us that this is how it is?

Why didn't anybody give us any tips and tricks for living

by the seat of our pants?

Why did nobody provide us with a framework for doing it better?

Take a look around you. How many people do you know who actually buy in to living their lives like a project plan?

At this point I could launch into a long critique of what Max Weber called bureaucratic rationality[i] or what others, including myself, call machine thinking. But that would miss the point of what I am trying to do in this manifesto. My point is to build a case that making up it as you go along can be a realistic, practical and reasonable way of navigating our way through the contingencies and opportunities that life presents.

There are three things I hope to achieve here.

The first is to speak to those of you who recognise that you do make it up as you go along, but feel a little uncomfortable, perhaps even guilty, that you do, and to tell you that it is OK. As a general strategy, this makes sense. Maybe you could look at how you do it. Maybe there are ways you could do it more artfully. But as a way of being, it's fine.

I speak to you first, because navigating your life this way can feel lonely. If you are like me, you may feel as if you are part of a minority. We are not.

In a much earlier version of this manifesto, I wrote, "We are in danger of forgetting how to be human. Trapped in a world of targets, to do lists, life goals, spreadsheet projections, business and career objectives, deadlines, quality time, visions and values statements, time management methods, and, above all, being busy, busy, busy, we risk losing the pleasures of just being human." And went on to talk about a small minority of us risking ridicule by opposing this way of doing things. Then, pausing to think about what to write next, I thought, this is nonsense.

It is true that many of the large institutions that we interact with—sometimes collide with—seem to operate with this kind of machine thinking. It is true that many people find themselves working ludicrously long hours. It is true that many experience much of their working lives as if they were working within a remorseless, demanding machine. It is true that many people find themselves being trapped into being busy, busy, busy.

Just because we invented machines doesn't mean we have to live like them.

But take a look around you. How many people do you know who actually buy in to living their lives like a project plan? I suspect that the few who do will mostly be those people politicking their way up the corporate or organisational ladder. For the rest of us, the organisational machine may be the place we make our bread, even the place where we try to do good work, but not the place whose bureaucratic values we live by.

For this is the dirty little secret that nobody told us. We are the majority. Always have been. Always will be. And you should take some comfort and some strength from that.

The second thing I want to achieve in this manifesto is to persuade more people to pay attention to the phenomenon of making it up as we go along. It is a neglected area of study. Thinking quickly, I can only remember a small number of people who have engaged with it. There are those whose book titles speak for themselves: Jay Ogilvy's *Living Without a Goal*[ii] and Mary Catherine Bateson's *Composing a Life*[iii] . There are others, such as Jane Jacobs from whom I borrowed the "drift"[iv] in my title from her advocacy of "aesthetic drift," and John Chris Jones who explained that there are two kinds of purpose, the purpose of getting a result and "...the purpose of carrying on, of keeping the process going, just as one may breathe so as to continue breathing?"[v], which supplies the purpose in the title.

Going back to my adolescence, there is Pierre-Auguste Renoir, who seemed to live a very productive life, filled with what the French call bonheur, whose 'cork' theory of life laid the early seeds of my thinking: ".. the 'cork' you remember...You go along with the current...Those who want to go against it are either lunatics or conceited; or what is worse 'destroyers'. You swing the tiller over to the right or left from time to time, but always in the direction of the current."[vi]

And from a more recent discovery: Geoffrey Vickers, a war hero, establishment figure and one of the most profound cybernetic thinkers of our time, says, "The meaning of stability is likely to remain obscured in Western cultures until they rediscover the fact that life consists of experiencing relation-ships, rather than seeking goals or 'ends'.[vii]

Or to take a much younger, more contemporary figure, Jason Fried of 37signals advised young software developers in a keynote speech: "Make it up as you go along. You're in a much better place to make a decision when you're in it, than when you're planning." Challenged by a questioner, who argued that the 'no-planning' notion was a nice utopian vision, but not practical in larger develop-ment worlds, he replied, "I think it is more utopian to think you can plan everything in advance." [viii]

But these are a few quiet voices drowned out by the clamour and noise of the advocates of machine thinking in varying guises. Some may even sound quite hippy-dippy, others are more nakedly instrumental, but all share the same underlying idea that life can be bullied into shape.

Max Weber believed that such modes of thinking had become so ingrained in us all that they formed a hard immutable shell shaping our every action and thought. "No machinery in the world functions so precisely as this apparatus of men and, moreover, so cheaply....Rational calculation...reduces every worker to a cog in this bureaucratic machine and, seeing himself in this light, he will merely ask how to transform himself into a somewhat bigger cog . . .. "ix

If you listen to our parents, our teachers, career advisers and all those other figures of experience we may turn to when young to seek advice and guidance, you might think he was right. Virtually all will give us the same advice, to define our goals, to make plans to achieve them, to put off present pleasures in order to achieve future satisfactions, which, somehow, are always just over the horizon. This despite the fact that few of them have actually lived their lives this way. Remember, we are the majority.

We need a language of the human. A language that recognises that life is more open, much messier, more ambiguous, more complex, more mysterious, more surprising, and filled with more possibilities for good or for ill.

Turning to the bookshelves or seminars we find a very similar picture. Much about goal-setting, planning our future, prioritising our actions, splitting up time—little about listening to the rhythms of life, improvising positive outcomes or simply enjoying what is happening now.

Why does this matter? It matters because we are a majority and should have a language to describe how we actually live as opposed to the language of the powerful, who think they know how we should live, should fit in, should behave in the way they want. The problem, for them, with us making it up as we go along, is that it is harder to control, harder to direct, harder to predict.

The language of the machine is the language of the powerful and those who would be powerful. We need a language of the human. A language that recognises that life is more open, much messier, more ambiguous, more complex, more mysterious, more surprising, and filled with more possibilities for good or for ill, than the rationality of the machine allows.

And why do we need such a language? We can observe that some people, some businesses, some organisations make it up as they go along more artfully than others. This, I suggest, is no accident. They have succeeded in being more artful because they have learned to be artful.

Purposive Drift might sound like a contradiction. But in that contradiction there is perhaps a fruitful tension, a pull between the focused attention of being on purpose and the random surprises and unexpected places that drifting can take you to.

So how can the rest of us become more accomplished in composing our lives? How can we learn to do it better? Of course, we learn in all sorts of different ways, but being able to talk to others and talk to ourselves is one of the most important. But to talk, of course, needs a language, a set of concepts we can use that draws our attention to certain phenomenon and lets us make sense of what we experience.

This is why I hope to persuade some of you to pay more attention to the phenomenon of making it up as we go along. To look at what we are actually doing when we do it well, when we do it badly or when we do it indifferently. To give us a vocabulary so that we can name the elements of what we do in the same sort of way that machine thinkers can name "goals," "plans" and so on. That way we can talk about what we do, if only as an internal conversation, and make more sense of how and why we behave as we do and, if we deem it necessary, change how we do it.

Which brings me to the third thing I hope to achieve in this manifesto. It is one thing to urge others to develop a new language, quite another to do so oneself. So then the rest of this manifesto is my tentative step towards finding a way to talk about making it up as we go along, which shows it to be a realistic, practical and reasonable way of navigating our way through the contingencies and opportunities that life presents.

The vehicle I have chosen to use to do this is an idea I call Purposive Drift, which is one approach to making it up as you go along. Purposive Drift might sound like a contradiction and maybe in one sense it is. But in that contradiction there is perhaps a fruitful tension, a pull between the focused attention of being on purpose and the random surprises and unexpected places that drifting can take you to.

So please feel free to drift through the fragments that follow, taking hold of the bits that make sense and resonate with you and passing by the stuff that doesn't.

JUST BECAUSE WE INVENTED MACHINES DOESN'T MEAN WE HAVE TO LIVE LIKE THEM.

Let's begin with a success story. Human beings lived as hunter-gatherers for tens of thousands of years before we invented machines. During that time we moved, according to the most plausible theories, from the savannahs of Africa to occupy a whole range of very different environments all over the world. This early, but lengthy, period could be characterised as being comprised of the first knowledge-based societies, for everything we needed to survive was based on developing an intimate, detailed knowledge of the new environments we moved into.

How did we develop that knowledge? By making it up as we went along! By using human curiosity, imagination, invention and our ability to improvise to discover what worked and what didn't, what could help sustain life and what threatened it. In short, by interacting with and learning from the worlds we inhabit and then inventing ways to preserve and disseminate that knowledge to following generations.

So far as we know, human beings are the only creatures conscious of our fragility. To counter this sense of vulnerability, machine thinking promises a world of predictability, of certainty.

To put this period of our story in some perspective, Jared Diamond estimates that, "If the history of the human race began at midnight, then we would now be almost at the end of our first day. We lived as hunter-gatherers for nearly the whole of that day, from midnight through dawn, noon, and sunset. Finally, at 11:54 p.m., we adopted agriculture."[x] And, remember it was only after the invention of agriculture that we invented machines and the mode of thinking that treated people and the organisations that they worked in as if they were machines.

Looking at it this way, the world of machine thinking can be seen as a very recent experiment, with the jury still out on its usefulness as a model for human well-being. Perhaps, if we want some clues to living gracefully, a look back at the rather longer experiment in human living would be a more fruitful area to explore.

THE MYTH OF THE MACHINE[xi]

So what is the attraction of machine thinking? Why has it become such a dominating mode of thought? I know I promised earlier not to launch into a critique of bureaucratic rationality, but perhaps a few words would be useful before we move on.

So far as we know, human beings are the only creatures conscious of our fragility. To counter this sense of vulnerability, machine thinking promises a world of predictability, of certainty. Everything can be spelled out explicitly. Everything can be described and specified. It is a world where knowledge gives us control.

Writing at the time of Napoleon, Laplace, one of the great machine thinkers, summed up this dream. He argued that if we could develop an intelligence great enough to know all that made up the universe and the rules governing their behaviour, everything would become precisely predictable. As he put it in rather more complex language:

"Given for one instant an intelligence which could comprehend all the forces by which nature is animated and the respective situation of the beings who compose it—an intelligence sufficiently vast to submit these data to analysis—it would embrace in the same formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the lightest atom; for it, nothing would be uncertain and the future, as the past, would be present before its eyes."[xii]

Thankfully, scientific inquiry has demonstrated what many of us knew experientially, that the level of predictability that Laplace and the machine thinkers aspire to is, in principle, and certainly in practice, impossible.

Machines need attention and maintenance if they are to function as they should. Left alone, neglected, all machines lose their constraints and malfunction or breakdown.

But still in our public discourse we talk as if this level of predictability was realistic and sensible. Stafford Beer, the cybernetician, explains it like this:

"This is because our education is planned around detailed analysis: we do not (we learn) really understand things unless we can specify their infrastructure. ...'Know where you are going, and organise to get there' could be the motto foisted on to us—and on to our firms. And yet we cannot know the future, we have only rough ideas as to what we or our firms want, and we do not understand our environment well enough to manipulate events with certitude."[xiii]

The final irony, as the engineers and mechanics who actually work with real machines know, is that real machines need attention and maintenance if they are to function as they should. Left alone, neglected, all machines lose their constraints and malfunction or breakdown. The Laplacian machine of perfect predictability is a fantasy, an illusion, an ideal that exists only in the imagination.

Machine-like organisations are even more of a fantasy. Unlike real machines they depend upon people moving outside the constraints of the system to keep the system functioning, because the simplicity of the machine model never matches the complexity of either the internal ecology of an organisation or the wider ecology the organisation interacts with. Bureaucratic organisations need our ability to make it up as we go along in order to maintain the illusion of their perfect rationality and efficiency.

THE WORLD IS FILLED WITH MORE POSSIBILITIES THAN WE CAN IMAGINE

I'd like to ask you to try a small experiment some time. Find a familiar street, preferably one you have walked down many times before. Walk it again, but this time consciously look for some thing you haven't noticed before. If you are like me, I expect you will be surprised at how many new things you see. Some will be new, new things where something has changed since you last walked that way—a house has been painted or extended, someone has replanted their garden, the pavement that has been fixed. But the things that startle me most are the things that have always been there, but I never noticed before, the intricate pattern of brickwork on a house wall or the distant view through a gap in the buildings I hadn't seen on my earlier trips.

The world is a place of incredible variety, rich in the potential for new experiences, a whole canvas of the unfamiliar and unknown, filled with possibilities for change.

If you are really impatient and are reading this in a familiar place, you can try the same experiment by just looking around you searching for what you haven't noticed before. This one is a bit harder and the things you notice usually a bit smaller, but invariably with some attention and effort, aspects of the familiar will be new to you.

I raise this point for two reasons. The first is that this experiment is a kind of window on the wider world. If we can see so many things that we hadn't noticed, didn't know about, within the very narrow confines of our experiment, imagine the whole world that way. It is a place of incredible variety, rich in the potential for new experiences, a whole canvas of the unfamiliar and unknown, filled with possibilities for change.

The second is that what is curious is that to shift our view from the expected, the familiar, the known, we almost have to trick ourselves into looking with fresh eyes. There are, of course, good reasons for this. If we were to be constantly aware of the new and unexpected, it would be hard to get on with the business of daily life. But we can become so bathed in the reassuringly familiar that we become blind to difference and walk our way through life like automata, guided only by our habits.

Those of us who aspire to a life of Purposive Drift, try to cultivate habits of mind that allow us, from time to time, to seek experiences that reveal opportunities for well-being that lie outside our immediate context or sit concealed and unnoticed within the pattern of our everyday lives. Habits of mind

that encourage us to think of our lives as a series of experiments that provide valuable information about what we like and what we don't, what we value and what we shun, and what we want and what we don't. Valuable information that informs how we make it up as we go along and takes account of the richness and variety of the world in which we live.

IT'S HARD TO PREDICT, ESPECIALLY THE FUTURE

Actually, on a day-to-day basis, it's not so hard. We make thousands of predictions every day and most of them are right, and if they are not, we generally swiftly correct them. As Jeff Hawkins explains:

"Every time you put your foot down while you are walking, your brain predicts when your foot will stop moving and how much 'give' the material you step in will have. If you have ever missed a step on flight of stairs, you know how quickly you realize something is wrong. You lower your foot and the moment it 'passes through' the anticipated stair tread you know you are in trouble. The foot doesn't feel anything, but your brain made a prediction and the prediction was not met. A computer-driven robot would blissfully fall over, not realizing that anything was amiss, while you would know as your foot continues for even a fraction of an inch beyond the spot where your brain expected it to stop." [xiv]

So if making predictions is so commonplace, why do I sound as if I am against having goals and making plans to reach them? The answer is that I am not. Right now I am trying to achieve a goal— writing this manifesto. I know I have a deadline to produce a first draft, so I am planning to complete it by then. I am working to a rough set of headings to guide the work, so I have a sort of process to achieve my goal and accompanying plan. What I do have a problem with is plans and goals that are carried out mechanically.

Plans, goals, formal processes and targets can be blinkers blinding us to the valuable information that is generated by the actions we take to implement them. Information that simply isn't available until that action has been taken. For example, the actions I have taken so far to write this manifesto have changed the form and content of what I am writing now. The act of writing, thinking about what I am going to write, and reading what I have written has changed, in some cases quite radically, what I originally thought this manifesto was going to be like.

At present my goal remains the same, to complete this before the deadline. But the goal is not sacrosanct. The actions I am taking to achieve this goal might generate new information that means I might change the goal. I could decide, reading through what I have written, that my whole premise is misconceived and drop the whole project. I could realise that the whole thing would be better as a book. Or my wider context could change, for example, if the phone rang and somebody offered me an interesting, well-paying project that started tomorrow. And so on, and so on. Of course if you

A goal should only remain the same if the information developed in working towards it confirms that it is still a good idea.

are reading, this it will be clear that the goal did in fact remain the same. The point is that it should only remain the same if the information developed in working towards it confirms that it is still a good idea.

The point I am making here is that Purposive Drift is not a haphazard, random process. In some respects it could be seen as a more rigourous process than setting a goal and rigidly following

a plan to achieve it. It is more rigourous because it takes account of our ignorance about the future and recognises that the only way we can get the information we need to act reasonably is by taking actions and evaluating the consequences of those actions.

WE ARE MORE IGNORANT THAN WE KNOW

Basil Bernstein, a sociologist who thought deeply about language and education once wrote:

"[T]he ultimate mystery of the subject is revealed very late in the educational life. By the ultimate mystery of the subject I mean its potential for creating new realities. It is also the case, and this is important, that the ultimate mystery of the subject is not coherence, but incoherence: not order, but disorder, not the known, but the unknown." [xv]

He, of course, was talking about academic subjects, but from the time I first read it many years ago I felt it had a much wider application. A sense that has been reinforced by many years of experience and reflection. Life is filled with mysteries. There is much that is unknown. There are many things that we are ignorant about. This is hardly surprising given our inability to make accurate and precise predictions about the future except within very narrowly prescribed circumstances and very short-term time spans, like putting one foot in front of another.

To those who lust after certainty, Bernstein's words will seem threatening. As he goes on to say in this passage:

"As this mystery ...is revealed very late in the educational life—and then only to a select few who have shown the signs of successful socialization—then only the few experience in their bones the notion that knowledge is permeable, that its orderings are provisional, that the dialectic of knowledge is closure and openness. For the many, socialization into knowledge is socialization into order, the existing order, into the experience that the world's educational knowledge is impermeable." [xvi]

Again, I believe the words have a wider application to the whole way we are brought up and the way that the world is presented to us by the various adults in whose care we learn about what it is to be human. It is here, perhaps, that there is a difference between Purposive Drift and other forms of making it up as you go along.

I talked earlier about how we are the majority, that most of us, if you look closely enough, make it up as we go along. Where Purposive Drift may differ as a strategy is that it accepts "that the ultimate mystery of" life "is not coherence, but incoherence: not order, but disorder, not the known, but the unknown" and welcomes "its potential for creating new realities".

In the brave new world of bureaucratic rationality, the answers "I don't know" or "I don't know yet" are perceived as signs of incompetence or irresponsibility.

Many other forms of making it up as you go along are constrained by the belief that the world is a given, that it is coherent, ordered and impermeable. A view that makes making it up as you go along a question of working within how things are, rather than how they might be.

The practice of Purposive Drift on the other hand is one of probing the world to find out how it works, what is changing and seeking to create new contexts for well-being. A strategy that embraces and celebrates uncertainty and ambiguity as opportunities to create new realities and to provide interesting surprises.

WE MAY BE SMARTER THAN WE THINK

In the brave new world of bureaucratic rationality, the answers "I don't know" or "I don't know yet" are perceived as signs of incompetence or irresponsibility. We are supposed to know the answers to things like what we are planning to do next year or how we are going to tackle a new project in detail and to be able to specify explicitly what and how we are going to do what we do.

As you will probably have gathered by now, my take on this is that, except for the most routine matters, "I don't know" or "I don't know yet" can be the most realistic, responsible and reasonable answers. They indicate that we are aware that we need more information that can only come with the passing of more time, or as the result of taking action or by events outside our control unfolding.

While I was pondering what next to write in this section, by one of those curious bits of serendipity that happen too frequently to be accidental, I went to a blog I very rarely visit. There I found a piece by Michael Beirut, a partner in Pentagram, an influential design consultancy, which captured the essence of what I wanted to talk about here. In it he said:

"The other day I was looking at a proposal for a project I finished a few months ago. The result, by my measure and by the client's, was successful. But guess what? The process I so reassuringly put forward at the outset had almost nothing to do with the way the project actually went. What would happen, I wonder, if I actually told the truth about what happens in a design process?

It might go something like this:

When I do a design project, I begin by listening carefully to you as you talk about your problem and read whatever background material I can find that relates to the issues you face. If you're lucky, I have also accidentally acquired some firsthand experience with your situation. Somewhere along the way an idea for the design pops into my head from out of the blue. I can't really explain that part; it's like magic. Sometimes it even happens before you have a chance to tell me that much about your problem!..." [xvii]

There were three things that interested me about this find.

The first was how common this double descriptor is. There is the official version that sounds very systematic and rational and then the real version, which sounds much messier and more chaotic. Now you might not be surprised to hear such a thing from Michael Beirut, who is a graphic designer. After all, many of you are likely to see that as an airy-fairy, arty kind of activity where that kind of mess and chaos is to be expected. But I have heard very similar double descriptors from engineers, scientists, doctors and business people, who you might imagine to be very hard-headed.

Within the machine thinking frame only our conscious mind is deemed capable of being reasonable.

The second is that this is yet another confirmation of my sense that often the kind of machine thinking and practice I talked about earlier is a reassuring fiction promulgated to maintain a sense of security and certainty, but is only sustained by people actually doing things in a different way.

But it is the third aspect of Beirut's remarks that interest me most. The bit when he talks about the "magic". For a very important part of Purposive Drift is about trying to create the conditions where the magic can happen.

This is another reason why we need to develop a language to deal with making it up as we go along. For we do seem to be forced into using words like "magic" or "intution" or "gut feeling" to describe phenomena that are clearly reasonable, but not experienced in a conscious, explicit way. In part this comes from the dichotomy we make between the conscious and the unconscious or non-conscious.

Within the machine thinking frame only our conscious mind is deemed capable of being reasonable. Those activities of mind where we only know that they have happened, but not how they happened, is portrayed as somehow being beyond reason.

The problem with this kind of tacit intelligence is that it takes place in what in cybernetics is refered to as a black box. We can certainly identify the outputs, the brilliant idea that comes to us in the shower, the sentences that express what we have been struggling to say that come into our head once we move from the key board and do something else, and all the other results of what we tend to describe as magic or intuition. We can, even sometimes, describe some tricks and tips that encourage the magic to happen. But, since we don't know how it happens, what is going inside the black box, it seems to fall outside the realms of control and planning.

Now, given what I have talked about earlier in the manifesto, it may sound as if what I am urging is to abandon explicit, conscious reasoning and just to embrace the mysteries of the magic. This is not the case. Just as we know that we can make mistakes in our conscious, explicit reasoning, our intuition (or however we would like to describe it) can be equally misleading. The very

If…we can allow the tacit reasoning to happen and apply that knowledge to our lives and actions, we may find that we are smarter than we think, even though we may be more ignorant than we know.

intelligences we developed in our decades of hunter-gathering can lead us into making serious errors of judgement. It is well known, for example, that we attach greater significance to exceptional events, such as a terrorist attack than we do to more mundane, but much more common threats, such as the risks we run driving to the shops or working in our kitchen.

Luckily, psychologists have identified many of the circumstances where our tacit reasoning can mislead us and, potentially, by applying explicit knowledge and reasoning we may be able to counter such tendencies. So what I am arguing for here is that by acknowledging that as well as our ability to reason consciously, we also have the ability to reason tacitly, we may act more intelligently. We may be able to make it up as we go along more effectively. If we try to understand the circum-stances where we can allow the tacit reasoning to happen and apply that knowledge to our lives and actions, we may find that we are smarter than we think, even though we may be more ignorant than we know.

WHERE IS THE COMPASS POINT?

One of the people who e-mailed me about my short proposal for this manifesto raised two possible objections to my idea of Purposive Drift, which were, "planning ahead helps survival and those who forget history are doomed to repeat it." I would add a third, "Without goals and plans, how can we know how we are doing?" I think all three objections raise the wider question about Purposive Drift: "Where is the compass point?"

It is this point I would like to begin to answer, and through exploring it, I believe I will answer both my e-mailer's two objections and the third that I raised.

I start with an axiom of Purposive Drift: all living things aspire to states of well-being. This is the case from the simplest single cell organism to us, the most complex living thing yet evolved, so far as we know. We don't always succeed. But this is what we strive for.

People do the best they can to attain states of well-being within the constraints and opportunities of the circumstances they find themselves in.

At a straightforward biological level we have developed very sophisticated regulatory systems in our attempts to maintain states of well-being. For example, we maintain a more or less constant body temperature. When the external temperature drops too low, we get clear signals that this is the case and as a first line of defence start shivering and raising the hairs on our body to counter the effect.

I believe that we have developed similar sophisticated regulatory systems in terms of our wider sense of well-being. While we may not be aware that this is what we are doing, our life work consists of identifying, maintaining, extending and amplifying our states of well-being. Or as Geoffrey Vickers puts it:

"Human life is a tissue of relationships with the physical world and with other people. The object of policy at every level is to preserve and increase the relations we value and to exclude or reduce the relations we hate. But these 'goods' cannot be simply accumulated, like packets on a supermarket's shelves. They are systematically related; some require each other; some exclude each other; nearly all compete with each other for limited resources, especially time and attention which are, of all resources, the least expansible. … In trying to make life 'good', we are seeking not to accumulate 'goods' but to impose on the flux of affairs a form which will yield what seems the most acceptable combination of the goods within our reach. Thus the good life to which we aspire, at every level, is a work of art and like every work of art is achieved by selecting, and therefore also rejecting what is incompatible with the chosen form."[xviii]

Now, when we look around us and see the choices that some other people are making, we may find it hard to believe that what they are doing is striving towards states of well-being. Is that what the crack addict is doing? Is that what someone trapped in a job they hate is doing? We may even wonder looking at our own lives, whether that is what we are doing?

My answer would be that however bizarre it may seem, the answer is yes. For we have very little, or in some cases no choice, of the contexts we operate in. For the crack addict, the high from a hit and the moment of relief from the anxiety of the rest of her life may seem the best state of well-being she can aspire to within the possibilities she believes she can realistically attain within her context.

It is a curious fact about human beings that we seem to have an enormous capacity to ignore and over-ride the signals we give ourselves that something is going wrong....

Luck, or if you prefer contingency, plays a much greater role in our lives than we sometimes imagine. A fact the more fortunate among us should ponder before we congratulate ourselves on our virtue. In other words, what I am arguing here is that people do the best they can to attain states of well-being within the constraints and opportunities of the circumstances they find themselves in.

However, 'the best they can' doesn't necessarily mean the most effective or most artful. While there may be many reasons for this, I suspect an important one is a failure to take heed of what their own internal regulatory systems are telling them. It is a curious fact about human beings that we seem to have an enormous capacity to ignore and over-ride the signals we give ourselves that something is going wrong, that what we are doing is undermining our capabilities for well-being.

Steve Jobs gave an interesting description during a Commencement address at Stanford University of a trick he uses to listen to what his internal regulatory systems are telling him:

"When I was 17, I read a quote that went something like: "If you live each day as if it was your last, someday you'll most certainly be right." It made an impression on me, and since then, for the past 33 years, I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself: "If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?" And whenever the answer has been "No" for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something." [xix]

The sole focus on a set of external and largely arbitrary measures can interfere with our ability to take heed of what I believe is our compass point—our sense of well-being.

So to return to the objections to Purposive Drift I raised at the beginning of this section. Of course, imagining our futures and the consequences of our actions is important for our survival. Learning from the past, our own and others, gives us valuable information about what our states of well-being may be, and, perhaps, some hints about how we might attain them. But the argument, "Without goals and plans, how can we know how we are doing?" can be misleading. The sole focus on a set of external and largely arbitrary measures can interfere with our ability to take heed of what I believe is our compass point—our sense of well-being. That is our measure of how we are doing and whether as an individual, a larger group, or an organisation, we ignore those signals from that touchstone at our peril.

THE TRIALECTICS OF PURPOSIVE DRIFT

Over the years I have been trying to articulate my vision of Purposive Drift, I have found fragments (a paragraph in a book or an article, a conversation, an observation from life) that have been like a light suddenly illuminating a dark corner, where before I could only see a dim shape. It seemed to be a process of cumulative recognition rather than discovery. Examples of Purposive Drift and explanations of how people did it seem to be all around us, only largely shrouded in darkness, waiting for someone to shine a light on what was already there. One such illuminating fragment was in an article by Michael Skapinke in the *FT*:

"In his study of long-living companies, Mr de Geus found they had several common characteristics. One was that they were cohesive, with a strong sense of identity. The second was that they were sensitive to their environment. 'As wars, depressions, technologies and political changes surged and ebbed around them, they always seemed to excel at keeping their feelers out, tuned to whatever was going on.' [xx]

I seized on this passage with glee. The dynamic it described of a strong sense of identity tuned to whatever was going on in their environment seemed to me at the time a clear description of the dynamic of Purposive Drift. A dialectic of identity and environment or, as I preferred to think of it, a dialect of values and context.

For awhile I was quite happy with this formulation. But later on I began to feel that while it was a good enough description, there was something missing. It was while I was doing some work for a small British software company that I began to see what this was.

This company was over thirty years old. It had begun its life building simulations of industries and a game where participants, people from industry and government, could see the impact of their actions on the environment. It then became a pioneer in computer animation. Following that, it then

moved into developing very powerful database and indexing systems, particularly suited to dealing with large numbers of discrete objects, such as items in a museum or archive.

Now at one level, this looked like an odd trajectory, with not much in common with the different activities it dealt with over time. However, there was a common thread that ran through its history. A core value, something that was crucial to the company's sense of well-being, was that its people liked working on hard computing problems. Its history could be described as a constant scanning of their context to find niches where they could satisfy this value and remain profitable. As their context changed, they changed, but retained the key values that gave them their sense of identity.

But, there was something else going on as well. As they moved through their trajectory from niche to niche, they were also building up their repertoire of competencies—the things they could do. Their developing repertoire of competencies not only meant that they could do more things; it also gave them the ability to see new opportunities as they arose. For example, the rise of the internet and the growth of the World Wide Web, which for many similar companies posed a serious threat, was a change of context that they accommodated with relative ease.

So now, I began to see the central dynamic of Purposive Drift as a trialectical relationship, rather than the dialectical relationship I had seen before. In this trialectical relationship between values, competencies and contexts, the key task, for those of us pursuing Purposive Drift, is to cultivate an awareness of the interactions between them, to be sensitive to any incongruities that may arise and when they do to seek to resolve them.

IN CONCLUSION

So how does this help, in any practical way, the readers I addressed in the introduction, who may believe that their form of making it up as they go along is close to my idea of Purposive Drift and want to do it better?

In terms of practical advise, the simple message is to pay attention to your values—those things that you believe contribute to your states of well-being, your competencies—the things that you can do, and your context—your world, or as I prefer to think of it, the networks you operate in and interact with and the relationship between your values, your competencies and your context.

However, I would also throw in a caveat here. While it's certainly worth reflecting on what you value and what your competencies are from time to time, most of us are pretty bad at doing both. It is just one of those things we find very hard to do. As Geoffrey Vickers put it, "Learning what to want is the most radical, the most painful and the most creative art of life." [xxi]

What is generally more productive is to focus on your context and your interactions with it. Here, if you listen carefully, the compass point of your sense of well-being will give you the information you need to know about both what you value and the competencies you can bring to bear.

In those moments when you step back to reflect on any one of the contexts you operate in, whether that is your work, your family life or any of the other clusters of contexts that make up your world, a useful trick is to focus on three questions:

Is there anything in my context I can change to make it more likely to contribute to my sense of well-being? Is there anything in my interactions with my context I can change to make it more likely to contribute to my sense of well-being? Do I need to move from this context to another that is more likely to contribute to my sense of well-being?

Pausing every so often to ponder those three questions, while it may not yield definitive answers, will surprisingly often generate experiments to try, ideas to test, and insights that illuminate. But in the end, it all comes down to taking action and seeing what happens. It is through our actions that we gain the necessary information to know what to try next. And so on and so on. In other words by making it up as you go along.

So to return to what I set out to do in the introduction.

I hope that those of you who recognise that you do make it up as you go along, but feel a little uncomfortable that you do, will now feel a little more confident that your strategy can be a perfectly reasonable, responsible and realistic approach to life.

I hope too that I have persuaded some of you that it is worth paying more attention to the phenomenon of making it up as we go along as a significant, but too often neglected, part of human life.

Finally, I hope my very tentative steps to finding a way of talking about making it up as we go along and my variant, Purposive Drift, offers at least the first steps towards creating a language that will help us do it better.

Footnotes

i I must confess that until relatively recently my knowledge of Max Weber was based on references to his work in other people's books. Like many people I assumed that he was an advocate of bureaucratic rationality. It was only after a number of long conversations with my nephew Will Oliver, who had made a close reading of his work and then some internet browsing of extracts from his texts that I realised that, in fact, he was a very strong critic, who was describing what he was cricitising.

ii James Ogilvy, *Living without a Goal: Finding the Freedom to Live a Creative and Innovative Life*, Currency Doubleday, 1995 ISBN 0385417993

iii Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Life*, Grove Press, 2001, ISBN 0802138047

iv Jane Jacobs, *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*, Penguin Books, 1984, pp221

v J.Christopher Jones, *Essays in Design*, John Wiley & Sons, 1984, pp162

vi Jean Renoir, *Renoir: My Father*, Collins, 1962, pp72

vii Geoffrey Vickers, *Freedom in a Rocking Boat: Changing Values in an Unstable Society*, Pelican Books, 1972, pp128

viii You can listen to Jason Fried's keynote speech at http://server1.sxsw.com/2006/coverage/SXSW06. INT.20060311.Opening.Remarks.mp3

ix I was persuaded by Will Oliver that "a hard immutable shell" reflects Weber's meaning more accurately than the more frequently used translation, "the iron cage" of bureaucratic rationality. The longer quote is from http://www.faculty.rsu.edu/~felwell/ Theorists/Weber/Whome.htm#words under the heading "On Bureaucracy"

x Jared Diamond "The worst mistake in the history of the human race - adoption of agriculture". Discover. May 1987. FindArticles.com. 12 Oct. 2006. http:// www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1511/is_v8/ ai_4790861

xi When I was very young I read Lewis Mumford's *Myth of the Machine*. What made a deep impression on me was his suggestion that the first machines were groups of people, such as work gangs. This was something that has resonated in my thinking ever since. Unfortunately I can't give a precise reference because the earliest publication date for one of his Myths of the Machine I have been able to find is 1967 and I'm sure I read it before then. However, I am sure that any one of his books with The Myth of the Machine in the title, will pick up on this theme.

xii http://www.lclark.edu/~olsen/summ2006/chaos/ LaPlace.html

xiii Stafford Beer, *Brain of the Firm*, second edition, John Wiley 1981, pp53, ISBN 0471276871

xiv Jeff Hawkins with Sandra Blakeslee, *On Intelligence*, Owl Books, 2004, pp91 ISBN 0805078533

xv Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control*, Paladin, 1973, pp240-241

xvi ibid

xvii Beirut http://www.designobserver.com/ar- chives/017485.html

xviii Geoffrey Vickers, *Freedom in a Rocking Boat: Changing Values in an Unstable Society*, Pelican Books, 1972, pp125-126

xix http://news-service.stanford.edu/news/2005/ june15/jobs-061505.html

xx Michael Skapinker: "Long live IBM", *FT*, December 14 2004 http://www.ft.com/cms/s/a91d28a2-4dfa- 11d9-9351-00000e2511c8.html

xxi Geoffrey Vickers, *Freedom in a Rocking Boat: Changing Values in an Unstable Society*, Pelican Books, 1972, pp76

info

BUY THE BOOK
For more details or to buy a copy of Richard Oliver's *Understanding Hypermedia 2.000: Multimedia Origins, Internet Futures* click here.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Oliver is probably best known for the three books he co-authored with Bob Cotton, *Understanding Hypermedia*, *The Cyberspace Lexicon* and *Understanding Hypermedia 2.000*. He makes his living as a writer, researcher, consultant and visiting lecturer. He lives in Crouch End, London, UK, with his wife, Mimi, son, Ben, and Ben's partner Joanna. He tries his best to live a life of Purposive Drift, which, as he says, "May not make you rich or famous, but certainly gives you an interesting and stimulating life."

Website: www.purposivedrift.net
Email: roliver@eudemony.demon.co.uk

ABOUT CHANGETHIS

ChangeThis is a vehicle, not a publisher. We make it easy for big ideas to spread. While the authors we work with are responsible for their own work, they don't necessarily agree with everything available in ChangeThis format. But you knew that already.

ChangeThis is supported by the love and tender care of 800-CEO-READ. Visit us at our main site www.800ceoread.com or at our daily blog http://800ceoread.com/blog/.

DOWNLOAD THIS

This manifesto is available from http://changethis.com/31.06.PurposiveDrift

SEND THIS

To pass along this manifesto to others, go to http://changethis.com/31.06.PurposiveDrift/email

SUBSCRIBE

Learn about our latest manifestos as soon as they are available. Sign up for our free newsletter and be notified by email. http://changethis.com/subscribe

info

BORN ON DATE

This document was created on February 6, 2007 and is based on the best
information available at that time. To check for updates, please click here to visit
http://changethis.com/31.06.PurposiveDrift.

Cover image from http://www.istockphoto.com

WHAT YOU CAN DO

You are given the unlimited right to print this manifesto and to distribute it electronically (via
email, your website, or any other means). You can print out pages and put them in your favorite coffee
shop's windows or your doctor's waiting room. You can transcribe the author's words onto the
sidewalk, or you can hand out copies to everyone you meet. You may not alter this manifesto in any
way, though, and you may not charge for it.