



Is Progress Possible?

Gerald Sindell

I believe in progress.

I believe that our contribution to the progress of civilization is a good measure of how well we have used our lives.

Humankind has had writing for about 13,000 years. Books got pretty cheap around 600 years ago when Gutenberg created movable type. The Internet has made access to good ideas almost free for billions of people. So why aren't the vast majority of us happy and healthy by now? Where is progress?

Each of us is endowed with a sense of purpose. If we don't yet know exactly what that purpose is, we experience that absence in the form of a hungry feeling in our gut that tells us we are meant to do something worthwhile. If we have discovered that purpose, we experience it as an urgency to fulfill our potential.

For those of us that ignore that hunger, we are likely to live lives of quiet desperation, as Henry David Thoreau put it, scribbling away in his rough cabin next to Walden Pond, where he had gone to strip away all the unessentials and discover what he was going to contribute to improve the human condition.

Each of us is unique. Even identical twins are soon differentiating themselves from each other. The chance that any two people in the entire history of the human race could be the same is virtually zero. And since none of us can be like any others, in discovering ourselves we also discover what we have to contribute. Each person has their own special qualities, thoughts, caring, sense of humor, imagination and vision that has the potential to enrich the lives of others.

All we need to do is figure out who we are.

A few of us will be blessed by deep self-knowledge when we're still young. We will know early on that we were meant to play the piano, rocket into space, cook, paint, or heal, and we will stay on the path of achievement that will give us a head start in fulfilling our potential in the world, and our contribution to progress.

The rest of us will be interested in all the fascinating possibilities that the world offers, and be more concerned with exploring what's outside of us. But there will come a time when that hungry, gnawing feeling becomes too strong to resist, and we will know that it's time to unravel our destinies.

Fortunately, for those of us who have done a little exploring, we now have clues about ourselves. What, after all our experiences, did we notice that we're good at? What held our attention? Most importantly, what do we see that no one else sees?

Alongside the priceless gift of our uniqueness, we have been given a perfect matching gift—the ability to think things through, to solve problems, make new discoveries, to create new ideas, new art, and new inventions that will make the world a better place.

Most of us have a difficult time when we need to think through complex and open-ended challenges. I have discovered a series of questions that, if we work through them carefully and thoroughly, will help us to think at our highest level. I've distilled these questions down to just 11. I found an old English word for 11, *endleofon*, and given that name to this body of questions.

Here are the 11 questions we need to answer in order to be comfortable that we've done the best thinking we possibly can. Here they are:

The Endleofon:

1. Distinctions

What is new here? What are the new distinctions you have made that no one has seen before?

All new ideas are the result of making new distinctions. When we see something that no one else has seen, we are truly thinking and creating. The fundamental work of expressing our uniqueness, and driving progress, is making new distinctions and sharing our discoveries with others so their lives may be improved or enriched.

2. Identity

Who am I?

Before we can create anything that is an authentic reflection of ourselves and of our desire to contribute to the world, we must understand who we are. We must discover our identity, the part of us that is immutable, the fingerprint of our soul. We can express our identity by asking ourselves, "What am I driven to do in this world?"

3. Implications

Where do your ideas lead if taken to their extreme? In other words, what are their implications? Do your ideas agree with each other, forming a coherent whole, or is there conflict between your ideas? Can that conflict be resolved?

Even ideas that appear simple on the surface will have implications if applied elsewhere. Only by testing our ideas in a wide range of contexts can we discover if they are really what we mean, or whether we must continue to refine our thinking. For instance, if we express the notion that everyone should always obey the law, how do we justify the American Revolution? And if we discover there are exceptions to our beliefs, those exceptions can help us refine what we actually believe.

4. Testing

What would prove your theories wrong? If you can describe the right test, your thinking and discoveries will be more readily accepted.

We are, of course, free to assert anything we want. Our intended users, though, will often ask for some reasonable validation that what we are asserting is also true. The adoption of ideas will be greatly advanced if we can also offer an appropriate test that would show whether our assertions are true or not. For instance, if we assert that high school students don't learn well until after 11:00 A.M., it would be valuable if we would also show how this has already been proven in the past, or could be tested in the future. If we can't figure out a convincing test, our ideas will be relegated to the scrap-heap of pure conjecture.

5. Precedent

Which thinkers and what ideas provide your precedents? Are you clear as to how you fit into the great conversation of ideas?

Mortimer Adler described the history of thought in Western Civilization as being a Great Conversation. When we think, innovate, and problem solve, we are automatically entering into dialogue with all of those who preceded us whether we are aware of it or not, so it would be valuable to find the leading work, both current and of previous generations, that has addressed the challenges that we are addressing. If we don't, we risk appearing to be not well-informed. If we do discover our precedents, we will be much clearer about what is unique in our own thinking.

6. Need

Who needs your knowledge? If you are working to solve the problems of a narrow group, can you find others who would benefit from the same solutions? The second group might be larger than your initial target audience.

Most of us innovate in order to address an immediate audience that we know has a clear and urgent need for what we are creating. It is frequently worthwhile to step back for a moment and ask if our work would benefit a wider group of people than just our imagined core. If it turns out that we have a much larger potential audience that would benefit from our work, it might be worthwhile to include their needs as we develop our creations so that our work has the greatest possible impact on progress.

7. Foundation

*Is your thinking so new that it might represent a new body of law that can stand alone?
If so, can you identify your underlying principles, and how they work together?*

Not every discovery can, or ought to, re-order the universe. But, once in a while, we might realize that we are defining a new field or a completely new way of organizing some area of thought. If we can discover the core underlying principles in our work, we might add great value for our users.

8. Completion

Have you decided what the boundaries of your innovation are, and what it will take to be complete in and of itself?

Whether you are addressing your user's desire to raise healthy chickens or communicate over the Web, it is generally preferable to provide your user with a one-box solution for their needs. If you cannot provide everything they will need, then you should consider providing the smallest possible list of the essential sources they will need.

9. Connection

Once you know your target users, have you thought about what kind of communication will make it easiest for them to hear you? Have you structured your solution in a way that will make it most easily grasped by your intended user, as opposed to the way you might logically organize your innovation for yourself to employ?

Most of us start out developing our creations focused on what we have discovered and all the things our innovations can accomplish. Your users, generally, simply want to put your innovation to work. It is helpful if creators can imagine several of their typical users, and do everything possible to lessen the learning curve for each of them.

10. Impact

Three years from now, if your innovation is successful, what will have changed in the world because of your work?

This question gets to the heart of why you're innovating in the first place. Another way of getting to the same core question is asking yourself—if you had never lived, and what you knew to be true had never been used by the world, what would have been lost? The answer to this question often takes the form of, “I want people to know, or be able to...” and whatever follows contains the essential part of your message, or your contribution.

We can also ask ourselves, is there in existence something that already provides a solution equal to what you are working on? If so, you haven't yet made the distinctions that you need to. On the other hand, if it would require a much more complex, or expensive, or dangerous solution to accomplish what your innovation does, then you know you are creating something of value.

11. Advocacy

At first, only you can be a brilliant advocate for what you are creating. Have you crafted the language, metaphors, stories, test results and endorsements that will help others quickly and accurately understand the significance of what you have created?

If we ask others to take the first pass at defining us, we run the overwhelming risk that they will get it wrong. We need to be brilliant at characterizing what we have created, so that others can easily grasp the value of what is new here. Great creators are also great advocates for their work, which enhances the likelihood of reaching the audience that will benefit from it.

If we believe in progress, that human suffering can be diminished and human knowledge increased, then we ought to become impatient.

What is progress? It's when things get better for the average person in a society. It's when people generally feel more optimistic, when health care is better for the entire population. Progress is achieved when life expectancy increases, child mortality goes down, literacy goes up, democracy works better, people can find meaningful work, and the world progresses toward justice and peace.

Some historians, like Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) believed that human progress was cyclical, as demonstrated by the rise and fall of one great civilization after another. But I believe that even when civilizations fade, some knowledge persists and can be rediscovered. We may also be in a genuinely new age, when a great loss of knowledge (such as took place when the Library at Alexandria was burned and triggered the Dark Ages) would be difficult to bring about, short of nuclear war and nuclear winter.

Diffusion. If we believe in progress, that human suffering can be diminished and human knowledge increased, then we ought to become impatient. If we know how to do things better, why doesn't that knowledge spread faster? Why does ignorance, superstition, and evil behavior persist?

If you are now driven to move the world forward, now that you know who you are and what you're driven to contribute, diffusion of knowledge becomes the greatest challenge. If you're a scientist, then there's good news: science is built on rapid adoption of new knowledge. Demonstrate a better technique for cornea surgery at a convention in Rome, provide good short and longer term outcome data, and within a few short years, eye surgeons throughout the world will have adopted your breakthrough and will be improving the vision of their patients.

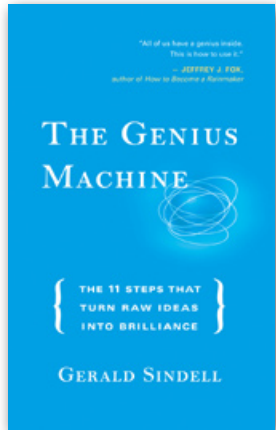
But if your new distinctions are in a softer science, where it's more difficult to demonstrate progress, or if what you have to offer benefits people who are not searching for improvement in their lives because they don't know improvement is even possible, then the progress you offer will be difficult to introduce.

So here's the great challenge to progress, especially outside of the sciences: the speed of acceptance of progress depends on the ability of the intended user to recognize the value of any improvement. You may have invented a water filter that will end dysentery throughout the world, but changing a well, or a pump, or the way a village handles its water, may be too hard for too many people, or too expensive, or the relationship of your solution to their suffering may even be too difficult to grasp.

Ultimately, the hindrance to progress may simply be ignorance. If someone cannot understand the nature of your improvement, or has no way on which to make an intelligent judgment regarding your improvement, there will be no acceptance and no moving forward.

The greatest challenge to innovation, then, may not be in our creativity, in our ability to solve problems or find better ways to do things. The ultimate challenge will always be to find the means of communication so that those people who would benefit from our work can recognize that the difficulty of adoption is worth the value to their lives.

The reduction of ignorance opens the door to progress. Diminishing ignorance is our ultimate challenge. 📖



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gerald Sindell is the author of *The Genius Machine: The Eleven Steps That Turn Raw Ideas into Brilliance*, being released in May 2009. Whether breakthroughs developed in direct partnership with leading professional services organizations such as Accenture (on the first 3D realtime interactive simulation, Simplementation) or developing the ideas that thought leaders like Dean Brenner of The Latimer Group bring to key clients like United Technologies, the ripple effect of better ideas in the marketplace of ideas means that Thought Leaders Intl. clients are changing the world every day. From GE to State Farm, Alcoa to InBev, Yahoo! to Booz Allen, our clients provide thought leadership that improves lives. You can learn more at thoughtleadersintl.com.

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