

Chapter 1 Preconditions for a Rebirth

This book is about the rise of the next renaissance generation—the RenGen—an emerging stratum of enlightened individuals who are hungry for innovative ideas and ways to express them. It also refers to a cultural movement that is being created by the confluence of art, science, education, popular entertainment, and business. The Renaissance of the 15th century was a flowering of civilization—a “rebirth” of art, scientific invention, culture, and humanity itself. However, the moment right before birth is often a dangerous and complicated one. Our world today has reached a critical turning point. The passage into a better and brighter time will demand individuals and organizations that possess a force of creativity powerful enough to challenge the status quo, disrupt the marketplace, and transform society.

renaissance: a movement or period of robust creative and intellectual activity that is associated with a rebirth of civilization.

generation: a group of individuals born and living contemporaneously in a span of consecutive years, whose length approximates the span of a phase of life that is approximately 22 to 30 years.

RenGen explores the conditions that are giving rise to a generation on the verge of a second renaissance. Years into the knowledge economy, the context in which we live our daily lives is no longer a twilight zone of change. Who we are and what we care about is taking shape with an emerging set of imperatives, products, behaviors, and ambitions. After decades of hearing the mantra that life is all about change—a daily flood of circumstances impossible to navigate—it seems risky to be definitive about the larger patterns that are emerging. However, after spending two years researching our situation, I am convinced that we need to prepare ourselves for our evolution into a renaissance generation, a RenGen.

Comparing the flowering of the European Renaissance with the one emerging today reveals one essential difference: the speed of time. It took Western civilization from 1300 to 1500 to reach the point of “high Renaissance,” the pinnacle of the age. Our renaissance is gearing up faster and will likely be shorter, lasting perhaps less than 30 years, a length of time experts consider “a generation.”

Our downward direction has been well chronicled. In 1970, Alvin Toffler established a genre of futurist nonfiction with his seminal book, “Future Shock.” What followed was a welter of doomsday discourse. Today, many of us need no further convincing that the only given in life is an endless storm of change. As we search for effective strategies to make our way in a fractured, warp-speed world, this book makes one truth clear: We are sloughing off the old skin that defined us as unenlightened people, and becoming a society preparing for a second renaissance. The evidence of it surrounds us, but most telling is the presence of the five preconditions that prepare a civilization for a renaissance.

Before sitting down to write this book, I had to group findings to see the patterns. I wanted to plot the process that leads up to a transformation as profound as a renaissance. But the differences between two civilizations separated by eight centuries are so great that I instead focused on the catalytic conditions that share certain similarities. These five conditions are described in the following sections.

1. Death Comes First

The origins of the first great renaissance were steeped in conflict and waste. At the dawn of the 14th century, Rome, having suffered one of many devastating fires, was in ruins. A long line of emperors had replaced the Republic, ruling with utter disregard for the collective will of the people. The economy was in shambles. In 1330, plague swept across Europe. The chaos of war, economic degradation, large-scale death by a mysterious infection, and political corruption were forces that triggered a process of transformation catalyzed by an equally powerful force: the human imperative to invent ways to survive.

2. The Rise of the Beautiful Mind

Original ideas come from someplace. Scientists who have researched the phenomenon have found that the creative process involves the firing of neurons in search of something—usually a solution. Ideas begin with a hunt through our memory to reference something we already understand. We search our minds for something I call a “potential inspiration for new ground,” or PING. Consider the following example drawn from recent brain research. If I put in front of you an object that you have never seen before, you will search your memory’s storehouse of knowledge. “Where else have I seen something like this?” you ask yourself. If you can’t find an answer, you will keep PINGing. You may even begin to invent a meaning for the unexpected, or fuse a known object with things you are already familiar with for new inspiration. You are creating meaning to either relieve the uncomfortable dissonance, or you may simply be inspired by the unexpected, and this will trigger other iterations you can apply to a current problem. This is how we generate new ideas. The richer the storehouse of images and memory we have to PING against, the more combinations of answers and solutions we can conjure.

The beautiful mind is the gestalt of the RenGen. In the ideal state of a renaissance, culture operates at a heightened level of mental capacity. Hence, knowledge and information are powerful currency. As a society is presented with unprecedented problems it can no longer ignore, people begin searching for solutions. Those who have built large storehouses of information and show a facility for PINGing will be highly valuable.

3. The Collaborative Context

A renaissance is panoramic—it is an interlude of heightened context—not just a well-decorated setting where things happen. Instead, the context is itself an organizing system from which social customs and meaning radiate. The rule of a renaissance is that context is important—in particular because it allows collaboration to occur. Collaboration is the way work gets done for the RenGen. Our conventional idea about creativity is that it is the domain of the artist. And when we think of artists, we typically think of rugged

individualists like Jackson Pollock, working away alone for hours in his studio. In truth, the Renaissance master Michelangelo assembled a large team of specialists to paint the Sistine Chapel. The very scale of the work undertaken—not to mention the amount of experimentation necessary—demanded the collective talents of many specialists.

Our belief that creativity is the domain of artists also turns out to be a myth. There are many types of people who populate the creative context, such as master patrons, planners, expressives, auteurs, to name a few, and the more diverse the skill base, the more innovative the results.

4. Catalytic People

I traveled across the United States and parts of Europe in search of insights for this book. As with any journey, after awhile, the trees in the forest all look the same. People stand out, though. So, too, for the RenGen. There are specific personality types who animate the renaissance context, and I will take you back and forth across time periods so you can meet the personalities that drive a period of rebirth. Some of these people boldly lead the way, while others are like catalytic enzymes that nurture the changes to come.

5. A Facilitating Medium

A renaissance must have a facilitating medium that carries the flow of ideas and information. It is meaningless to attain knowledge if you lack the means to apply and disseminate it. It is meaningless to receive inspiration without a means to express it. The facilitating medium serves both needs. The Roman Empire left behind an important gift to Western civilization: a vast network of roads that stretched across borders from Northern England to Mesopotamia, thereby connecting people to a larger world. Today, we have the Internet, which has had a gale-force impact on our culture.

Social Indicators Point to Rebirth

While the preconditions prepare the soil for a renaissance, social trends are proof that seeds are taking root. Next, we will address the evidence of that. Keep in mind that the following trends have been germinating over time and they are springing from grassroots activity—an indication that they'll have more staying power than fads that are typically driven from the top down.

The Will to Be Reborn

This desire to “make me new again” drives everything from Botox to evangelism. For many, the imagined life encountered in all creative expression is a platform for what psychologist Abraham Maslow called “peak experiences,” in which people discover new aspects of their potential only dreamed of before. The people we studied described being open to more possibilities and feeling rejuvenated or reborn when they created or experienced art, for example. Still others described the thrill of creating practical inventions to address social or mechanical challenges. The Italian Renaissance was marked by the same fervor for new ideas and explorations that led to scientific discoveries, not to mention masterworks of art that now symbolize Western civilization.

Polarization and Fusion

Renaissance people lived in an insecure world of religious factionalism, war, surprise attacks, and assassinations. You only need to skim the headlines to see that we, too, are experiencing the above. Given the multiplicity of threats that swarm around us, the typical person must strive to make sense of the world in order to function. There is also the overwhelming number of choices to make every day that add complexity. Hence, people create shortcuts by fusing disparate ideas into a single thing they can hold in their imaginations. Whether it be the fusion of science and art or mysticism and organized religion, renaissance people are adept at fusion. What cannot be fused may be polarized onto the margins.

The Exaltation of Roots

Scholars agree that one of the defining aspects of the Renaissance is the fascination with the iconography and traditions of the past. A renaissance is not to be confused with a revolution; a renaissance builds on the bedrock of what came before. So, too, in our common culture there exists a palpable need to embrace aspects of our beliefs and customs that give us substance. Take, for example, the outpouring of emotion that followed the death of Pope John Paul II, who was laid to rest in St. Peter's Basilica, one of the most notable structures of the High Renaissance. Ardent and lapsed Catholics alike followed the story, which was front-page news in most cities, as did people of many faiths around the world, in part because the papacy is a direct link to traditional roots.

Emphasis on Visual and Aural Representation of Ideas and Information

Symbols, costumes, statues, icons, logos, and pictures become the predominant form of expression. They are a language. As the exchange of ideas happens more fluidly in a renaissance and the geographies expand to reach a broader swath of people in distant lands, it is essential for communication to move from the specific to the universal to be understood. Written and spoken languages are specific, while visuals are universal. As the Renaissance swept across Europe, ideas could be represented in art, architecture, and everyday designs for clothing and household goods.

A Respect for Learning

A renaissance brings about a heightened appreciation for education. This is more about the aggressive exchange of ideas than the specious type of "seat learning" many of us grew up with. Knowledge becomes more accessible to the common man, and authoritarian experts are replaced by all forms of apprenticeship and collaborative exchanges among everyday people. The Renaissance saw the rise of home tutors. These were scholars and writers hired by the rising merchant class and nobles alike to teach their children the lessons of the ancient Greeks, as well as basic literacy skills. Today, there is an increased emphasis on learning; whether it is facilitated by the Internet or delivered conventionally, learning is a priority. So much so that we call ourselves the "knowledge" society, and managers in organizations are shifting their approach to deal with the new "knowledge worker."

Rise of the Second Cities

Renaissance periods take root in urban settings where the context is richest. Energy and resources are focused on an intensive interchange of ideas. Innovation can occur as a

matter of daily life. Often—because death must come before rebirth—there is a dying off of the older cities or an exodus of talent, and new loci for creativity rise up.

Elevation of Human Potential

Some form of humanism is present within the context of a rebirth. Enlightenment and understanding are the business of everyman, not just the elites. It is up to the individual person to attain enlightenment, but each is fundamentally capable. The Renaissance was transformed spiritually and intellectually by humanism, which, in a nutshell, was a spirit of inquiry that held confidence in the ability of human beings to distinguish for themselves between truth and falsehood. Today, in the United States, we have a well-developed sense of self-reliance. We believe in our ability to take action to improve our communities, schools, physical well-being, and emotional states. Step into any bookstore and you will see an entire canon of self-help texts lining the walls.

A New Order

The confluence of these factors, made more complex by the number of choices we face each day—from toothpaste to mortgages—cries out for a new order. How else will we keep it all straight? Unlike the linear, progressive ways of planning and executing new projects that came before, the RenGen is finding a new approach for managing complexity: the collage. Collage is the defining art form of the 21st century. The more people we interviewed, the more culture we observed, the more it became clear that collage is a metaphor for the RenGen. It captures the essence of the RenGen aesthetic. Collage is unpretentious, collaborative, interdisciplinary, recyclable, and flexible enough to be co-created. And it is even a way of seeing how existing elements can fit with new ones to form unique things. Later in the book we will explore “collage theory” as a process for arriving at new solutions.

As you read this book, please keep one thing in mind: Our worldwide situation holds tremendous potential. In a world poisoned by a century of progress at any price, it is easy to look around and believe we are in a freefall—socially, culturally, economically, and environmentally. But civilizations have cycles. This phase of the cycle has been trailing downward for some time. We are becoming aware that the environment and our survival in it are interconnected in perilous ways. We are becoming aware that the ideology and misplaced foreign policy of one country can fuel factionalism and terrorism in others. We are becoming aware that world financial markets are linked and interdependent in ways they never have been before. This is a point of crisis—a crisis that exists because people fear what will happen next. The values people once held dear, whether those are religious or civic values, gave them hope. Values of efficiency and profitability have yet to offer reasonable replacements. We are now witnessing the massing of culture, one based on new ideals seeking vigorous expression.

It is time to ask ourselves: What should we expect?

This book points the way to what lies beyond fear: a shift toward enlightenment that is dramatically changing the society in which we live and work. I am aiming here to help people who are now a part of the knowledge economy to recognize and understand the sea change that is occurring in their cities, their communities, and the markets they serve.

In understanding RenGen—as a segment of the population and as a cultural phenomenon—individuals and organizations can commit their talents, products, and services more profitably and purposefully to a society on the brink of a rebirth.