

A window on personal reinvention

We can learn a great deal from those artists who are sufficiently self-aware to understand their own reinvention dynamics and who are also willing to share their secrets with the world. One such artist is the enigmatic musician/artist known as Bill Nelson. Nelson was the leader of the seventies art school band Be-Bop Deluxe, and performed in a variety of other groups, including collaborations with David Bowie and David Sylvian. More recently he has gained a cult following as an avant-garde musician. Nelson is an artist who has continuously pushed the boundaries of the rock paradigm. As such, he has had immense influence on acts such as The Darkness and Big Country, but his popular appeal has been rather less dramatic.

It is rare for artists to open themselves up to the world of scrutiny. Nelson has risked this in his online diary and in his 2004 book *Diary of a Hyperdreamer*. Over the page are his principles for personal reinvention, originally written as a precursor to producing a new album.



Notice how relevant Bill Nelson's list of principles are to anyone considering their own reinvention or trying to help a business stop repeating its past.

Erasing the past

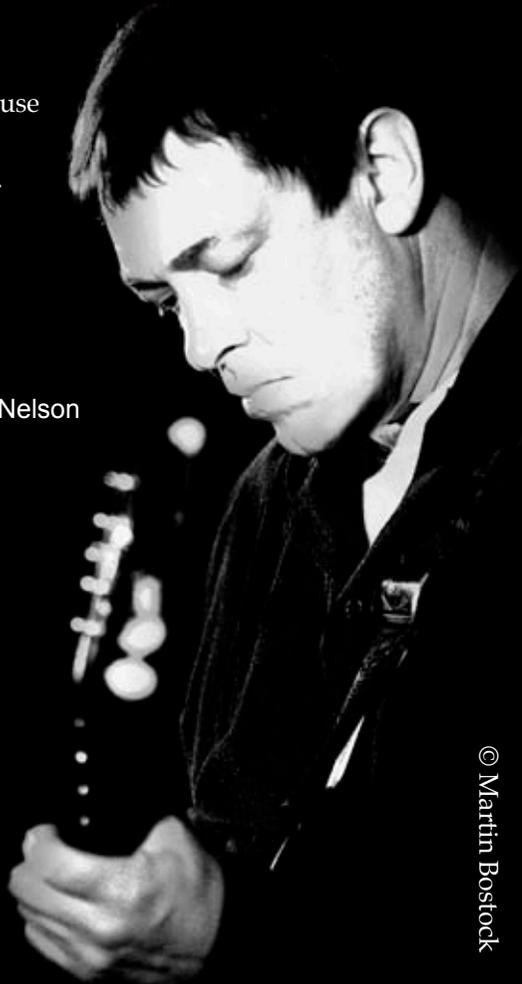
Radiohead's album *Kid A* is a good example of bold reinvention in an industry that encourages repetition. Faced with an enormous success from their previous album *OK Computer*, they might have been tempted to rewrite this album. Instead they adopted a completely different approach.

There are previous echoes of this bold behaviour in the form of Pink Floyd's follow-up to *Dark Side of the Moon*.

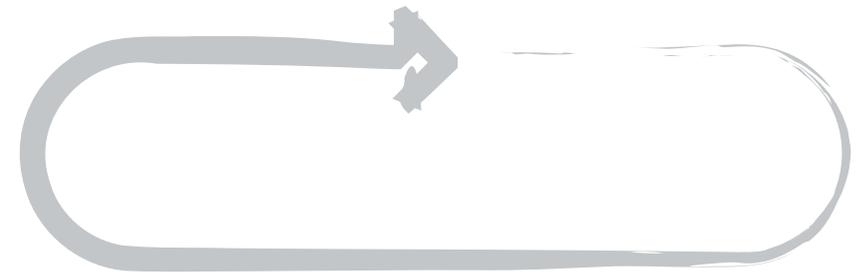
Bill Nelson's principles for reinvention

1. Be afraid of neither the future nor the past but make a mark on the moment.
2. Do not give in to the temptation to elicit favour.
3. Resist the obvious but embrace it when it becomes perverse to do so.
4. When gazing in the mirror, look for the artist rather than the guitarist.
5. Build a bridge between melody and dissonance.
6. Do not be afraid of the 'off' switch.
7. Hang no hopes or importance on your actions.
8. Act only when there are no alternatives to stasis.
9. When no words appear, refuse to sing.
10. Ignore all extraneous noise.
11. Cease to seduce.
12. Trust the muse, she always knows best.

Source: *Dreamsville* – the Bill Nelson Website (www.billnelson.com)



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John Maynard Keynes on reinvention, learning and unlearning:

'The difficulty lies, not in the new ideas, but in escaping the old ones ...'

Lou Reed on learning:

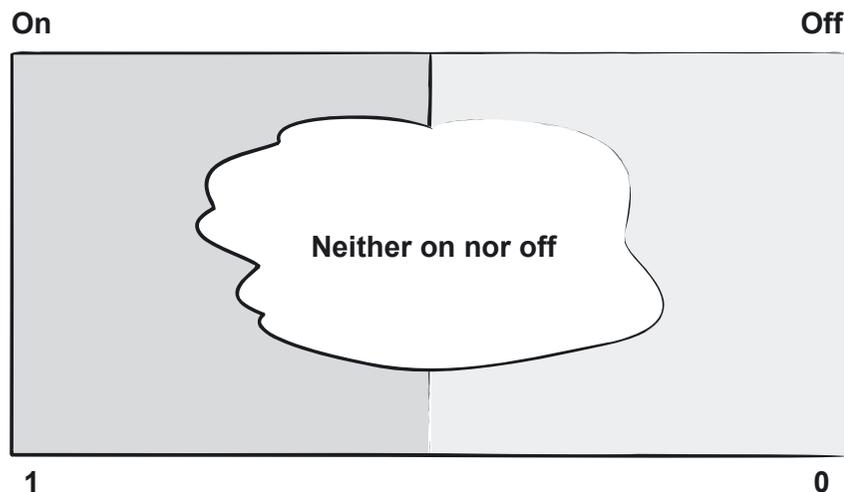
'Half my mind is taken up with old Rock'n'Roll lyrics rather than what I learned at school.'

Nelson's reinvention principles applied

Bill Nelson's personal wisdom translates well into a business context. In making 'a mark on the moment', we need to find a unique position that can be sustained for longer than our competitors can. However, we have to do better than best if we are talking unique and sustainable for longer than others can manage. As I write, Pfizer face this problem as the world's number-one healthcare company. Where can you go when you are number one? There is always the danger that complacency will set in.

When we are about to do something new, 'trust the muse' means that we focus on intuition rather than rely on existing research. Because we live in a world that is drowning in data, we tend to downplay intuition. Recall the Cornflake Girl story on page 52.

Acting 'only when there are no alternatives to stasis' reminds us to examine all alternatives before making a decision on critical issues. This is not a recipe for not making decisions! Examining alternatives requires us to synthesise options, to bring alternatives together that will produce better options rather than compromises. This requires the use of *and/also* thinking rather than *on/off* thinking.



Many complex decisions are not 'shall I or shan't I?' and it does not pay to treat them in this simplistic way. Under pressure there is a great tendency to make binary *on/off* decisions; it is this tendency that separates professionals from amateurs, sheep from goats, leaders from managers.

Not-only-but-also thinking

Some simple decision making in business uses *either/or (on/off)* thinking. This could be thought of as 'digital' in the way that a light switch is either on or off.

Most problems are not so clear-cut, and require an 'on the one hand/on the other hand' approach, and this requires *and/also* thinking. This could be thought of as 'analogue', in the way that a dimmer switch offers a range of lighting options.

Analogue thinking requires a *synthesis* of alternative choices in order to come up with resolution.

Bart Kosko compared digital versus analogue approaches to life in his work on fuzzy thinking. Put simply:

Digital	Analogue
A or not A	A and not A
Exact	Partial
On/off	Continuum
Either/or	And/also

The comic geniuses Peter Cook and Dudley Moore summed this up in the title of their famous TV series, *Not Only But Also*.

The following example shows how analogue decisions can be superior to digital ones.

A company sold a product exclusively to one customer. Wanting to grow, the company decided to sell to other customers in the same market. The exclusive customer threatened to cease trading if this happened. One of the company's senior sales managers offered the customer a price advantage for two years and the transfer of exclusivity to a related product. They accepted this. Three years later, business in the sector had doubled and business with the exclusive customer had grown by 40 per cent. Prior to this analogue decision, the sales manager had been given the digital instruction to 'JFDI' (Just Forget your stupid idea and Do It) by a director. If he had acted 'digitally' they would have lost their loyal customer, and suffered any damage that might have ensued.

Nelson's reinvention principles applied

'Refuse to sing when no words appear' would be a good lesson for many businesses to learn. Why do most songs have to have lyrics? Why do most websites have to have text? Why do most businesses have departments they don't need? And so on.

Nelson's 'off' switch is curious. What could it mean in business terms? Is this the ultimate distinction between art and business? Many businesses would be better off if they were to adopt this principle of stopping doing what is no longer wanted or needed rather than carrying on regardless. There is often an irresistible temptation to continue in the face of compelling evidence of the need to do something different. Kodak recently experienced this with the death of conventional film processing. Had they chosen to notice the trend some years back, they might have been in a better position to respond to market changes.

'When gazing in the mirror, look for the artist rather than the guitarist' relates to the business of making good choices. What implicit or explicit criteria do you or your business use to assess temptations? Do you have a clear idea of the difference between the 'artist' (who you are and why you are on Planet Earth) and the 'guitarist' (what you do for a living, to keep yourself occupied, and so on)? Is there a link between *who* and *what*?

Leaders need to constantly refer themselves back to the vital questions, 'What business am I really in? and 'What is this business here for?' They then devise a strategy that connects what is done to the higher purpose, rather than a series of disconnected expedient moves.

In the ever-changing age we live in, it is wise, having established a clear strategy, to build in the capacity to be flexible. A strategy is not a fixed plan, but one that responds to the realities and pace of change of the business cycle. Nelson's 'build a bridge between melody and dissonance' equates to the need to balance stability with new ventures that spoil the balance sheet in the short-term.



Bill Nelson may be considered to be mostly an inventor in so far as he has refused to consider what some of his audience wants in his reinvention. A consequence of this is that he has succeeded at reinventing himself, but at the cost of losing some of his following. However, his reinvention principles are highly transferable. Look further at Bill Nelson's list and consider the effects of your own reinvention on your relationships. We shall next follow the career of a reinvention master who took his following with him.

Too many cooks ...

Mother was preparing the ham joint. Before she put it in the oven, she cut the end off. Her young daughter asked, 'Mummy, why do you always cut the end off the ham joint?' Mother said, 'I've no idea, darling. Now run along and play.'

Not satisfied, the little girl turned to her grandmother and asked her the same question. Her grandmother smiled and said, 'Well, my dear, in my day we used to have a small oven.'

