

Noah, Floods, Creative Destruction and Your Career

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

One of the most important stories in the Bible, from the book of Genesis, is the story of the flood. According to this story, God looked down upon the Earth and became angry at what he perceived to be mankind's sins. He regretted creating people and decided that they all needed to be destroyed. In reviewing the Earth, however, God noticed that Noah was someone who was blameless and he told Noah that in seven days he would make it rain for forty days and forty nights. God told Noah that this rain would cause a giant flood. God instructed Noah to build an ark that was large enough to hold himself, his wife, his three sons and their wives, and a male and female of every type of animal that existed. With these animals, Noah would be able to replenish the Earth after the flood.

This story is part of Western religious tradition and my purpose here is not to debate the truth of this story - indeed, a myriad of interpretations have been given to this story in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Instead, what is most interesting about this story, is the importance of the "flood" and how the concept of a "flood" and "renewal" has shaped the thinking of so many people and cultures throughout the world. According to a 1996 book by Norman Cohn, *Noah's Flood: The Genesis Story in Western Thought*, around 300 cultures throughout the world have flood stories and they are almost all similar to the story in Genesis. Flood stories that are very similar to the Noah story are also prevalent in many other cultures. For example, one of the earliest flood stories is from Sumeria from around 1600 BC and is almost identical to the story of Noah.

The idea of a "flood" is a very powerful metaphor in our lives and careers for starting over, washing away the past, and beginning again at zero. We sometimes need a fresh start and to clean away the past. We all do and there is a certain happiness and "rebirth" that comes about when this happens. There's nothing more important for many of us than a fresh start. I think it's for this reason that stories of "floods" are so prevalent in so many cultures: the idea of a fresh start gives us hope.

One of the most miraculous changes I ever witnessed in a human being was my own mother. For years, she lived in Detroit in a small house in a pretty insular neighborhood. She'd been in an on-and-off relationship with the same man for the past 20 years that was very tumultuous. The home was run down and she was quite unhappy for the most part. Over the years, she had many terrible experiences in the home and it was full of a lot of bad memories for her. One day, her house was taken over by the bank and with mine and my sister's help, she moved to be closer to my sister in Rochester, New York. I moved her into a small [retirement](#) community and she set up a completely new life. Within weeks, she quit smoking, which was something she'd done for the past 40 years. She started exercising every day. She made numerous friends. Her appearance began to change and she started to look much younger and happier. She became a nicer person and took more interest in her children and the world around her. She's a completely different person and very happy now. All of this has come about from simply picking up and starting in a different location. This happened to her in her 60s and the change I witnessed was nothing short of miraculous.

"If she hadn't moved, she'd be dead by now," my sister told me one day. The more I thought about this, the more I realized it was true. What saved my mother's life was a complete and massive change in venue from where she'd been living.

I remember another person I know who'd been in a terrible relationship for several decades. One day, their mate died and after the funeral, someone I knew remarked that the person was now completely different. "I looked outside and I saw the sun for the first time in years," they said. While this seems like a pretty harsh sort of statement to make about someone, the idea is that when a profound change comes into your life, you end up being better for it. Sometimes a profound change is the most beneficial thing for you.

Losing a job is a profound change. It's like a flood coming over your life. You have no idea what the world will be like after the flood.

There is a real case to be made to simply start over and stop doing something when we're not having any success, not enjoying ourselves, or not doing well at a given task. In fact, many of us toil for years and years doing something that we're not good at and don't enjoy. Arguably, the greatest and most beneficial thing that can happen to many of us is to lose our jobs or to be forced into doing something completely new. If you're in a position where you've lost a job, or you believe that you may be about to lose a job, this may actually be one of the best things that could possibly happen to you. The ability to start over and start something from scratch gives you an opportunity to rebuild your career and life.

In the 1940s, the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter came up with the term "creative destruction" to describe something that is the backbone of all of capitalism. In capitalist societies, old forms of value creation are continually being destroyed by new ones that are more efficient and preferred. This is how "life" in capitalism progresses. For example:

- Someone may start out [manufacturing](#) shoes by hand and have a business doing this.
- Another person may come along and figure out how to manufacture better shoes cheaper and faster, and put the first person out of business.
- Then another person may come along with a machine to manufacture shoes and put the second person out of business.
- A fourth person may come along with an even better machine and put the third person out of business.

Creative destruction occurs in numerous ways:

- New sources of labor
- New markets
- New ways of organizing or managing

- New equipment
- New methods of marketing and advertising
- New methods of [transportation](#)
- New ways of producing products
- New products that are more effective than previous products

This creative destruction process continually occurs in all businesses and in all economic environments. When a growing industry or business is successful, it attracts the attention of others. After some time, a company may begin to rest on its laurels. When this occurs, the company stops innovating or slows down its innovation. The company stops attracting customers at the same rate because it's stopped creating value. Its focus is now on the status quo. Companies in this position may try and attract people to them through legislation or marketing tactics or by offering less for more to increase profit. Slowly (or sometimes quickly) the company goes into a downward spiral as the best talent leaves and customers go to other companies.

Companies that once dominated and were the chief innovators in various industries, such as Kodak, have seen their dominance fall and profits go away as rivals have manufactured digital camera products. However, just as Kodak has been undone by various innovators, the companies who have replaced Kodak face the exact same sort of threat. Other modern examples include people getting their news online. Online news is leading to the destruction of traditional newspapers. Innovation and destruction is a cycle that occurs in all companies and across all industries. Creative destruction is something that's also very painful for the people affected by it. Workers who are replaced by machines are likely to lose their jobs. In the current economic environment, for example, newspapers seemingly cannot lay people off or let them go fast enough. People don't like losing their jobs. While a continually innovating economy can create opportunities for people to participate in newer and more productive enterprises, it can also cause a tremendous amount of pain in the short term.

The cycle of creative destruction is something that's also relevant to your career and where you are going. Just as companies are forced to innovate and are destroyed by innovation and outside forces in the economy, your [career and job](#) are continually under threat from outside forces and innovation within your own employer. Your life is the same way. Your life can stagnate and start withering away. When they are growing, companies tend to hire people very quickly and without a lot of regard to costs. As the growth of companies slows down, they look for ways to cut costs and save money. Machines may be introduced into the work place to save money. Moreover, jobs will be eliminated directly and certain functions may even be eliminated so the company brings in higher profits. When this happens, your job and your career may actually be at risk.

Your goal in your life is to be in the position "after the flood" when the destruction over and new growth is occurring. You want to be on the side of new growth. Cycles always occur and the most important one involves new growth and opportunity. Every new cycle starts when someone does something a new way creates value. When new things emerge, there's a lot of excitement and companies grow. Word eventually catches on that there's a new way of doing things that's profitable. People are drawn to opportunity. The best people and resources flock to this new way. The growth stage is where the most opportunities lie.

This process is repeated all over the world, not just in companies, but in our careers and lives. Your goal needs to be to find where the opportunities are, where growth has taken hold, and where things are moving upward. You also need to do the exact same thing with your life--you need to do everything within your power to ensure the structures and ways of doing things aren't outdated and ineffective for you. Your goal in life should be to be happy and to continually grow in all things you do.

THE LESSON

Change is the most beneficial thing that can happen to you. Starting from scratch gives you the opportunity to rebuild your life and career in the manner you see fit. You must find where there's upward movement and where opportunities are being created, and ensure your own structures and ways of operating are effective and relevant to you. Orient your life towards happiness and growth in everything you do.