

THE SECOND BRIEF · CHAPTER TWELVE

Life at the Edges

Chapter Twelve of The Second Brief

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THE LICENCE

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Chapter Twelve of The Second Brief. The whole book, with every chapter, is at business.hautelumiere.life/library/the-second-brief (DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989141).

A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

This work is offered for education and leadership development. It is not legal, financial, accounting, investment, medical or psychological advice; take the advice of a qualified professional who knows your circumstances. Companies and events are described from the public record as the author understands it; characterisations are the author's analysis. Examples are illustrative, and no particular outcome is promised to any reader.

ABSTRACT

John Fullerton's sixth principle of regenerative capitalism is the one with a landscape in it. He calls it Edge Effect Abundance , and he explains it with a salt marsh: Creativity and abundance flourish synergistically at the "edges" of systems, where the bonds holding the dominant pattern in place are weakest. For example, there is an abundance of interdependent life in salt marshes where a river meets the ocean. Ecologists have long observed that boundaries between habitats, a forest's edge, an estuary, a hedgerow, often hold more species than the habitats on either side. Fullerton's paper uses the observation as a principle for economies: the most innovation happens where different systems meet, and the work of regeneration is often work "across edges".

CHAPTER TWELVE

Life at the Edges

Where the river meets the sea

John Fullerton's sixth principle of regenerative capitalism is the one with a landscape in it. He calls it *Edge Effect Abundance*, and he explains it with a salt marsh:

> *Creativity and abundance flourish synergistically at the "edges" of systems, where the bonds holding the dominant pattern in place are weakest. For example, there is an abundance of interdependent life in salt marshes where a river meets the ocean.*[55]

Ecologists have long observed that boundaries between habitats, a forest's edge, an estuary, a hedgerow, often hold more species than the habitats on either side. Fullerton's paper uses the observation as a principle for economies: the most innovation happens where different systems meet, and the work of regeneration is often work "across edges".[55]

This closing chapter takes him at his word. The chapters before it (chapter 2 on origins, 3 on critique, 4 on the living-systems reading, 5 to 7 on worked cases, 8 to 11 on practice) stayed mostly inside one idea. Regeneration, practised seriously, runs straight into other questions: how large an economy can grow, who governs what is shared, who owns a firm long enough to keep a promise, and how the gain from doing things better is divided. Each of those has a companion book of its own in *Ecstatic Economics*. Here they meet at the edge.

The ceiling: the doughnut

The third chapter reported Willi Haas and colleagues' measurement that only about four of the sixty-two gigatonnes of material processed by the world economy in 2005 came round again, and that the continued growth of the stock of buildings and infrastructure was one of the main reasons. That finding raises a question no single firm can answer: how much growth the biosphere can carry.

Santa Anna's book takes this up through Kate Raworth's *Doughnut Economics*, describing her figure as a ring with "the social foundation" on the inside and "the ecological ceiling" on the outside, the space between them being where humanity can thrive "without destroying the conditions for thriving."[56] The companion

book on the doughnut (*The Standing Forest*) reads Raworth and Herman Daly's steady-state economics in full.

For a regenerative practitioner, the join is concrete. A firm's circular loop, however well designed, sits inside an economy that may still be overshooting its ceiling. Zink and Geyer's rebound effect, from the third chapter, is the mechanism by which a local improvement can feed global growth. So the regenerative firm needs to know not only that its loop closes but whether its business model depends on selling ever more units. Nancy Bocken and colleagues, in a widely cited 2016 article on product design and business models for a circular economy, distinguish strategies that *slow* resource loops, by making things last longer, from those that *close* them, by recovering materials.[57] The doughnut's ceiling is an argument for preferring the first wherever there is a choice.

On Monday: look at the revenue model, not just the material flows. Does the business earn more when its products last longer, or less? If less, the loop is working against the model, and the model is the thing to redesign.

The governance: the commons

Many of the stocks a regenerative firm chooses to watch are not owned by anyone. The café's gardens in the fifth chapter belonged to their growers, but the soil health of a region, a river, a fishery or the skills of a local workforce are shared. Elinor Ostrom's life's work showed that such commons are often governed well by the people who use them, under specific conditions. The companion book on the commons (*The Pasture Was Never Empty*) sets out her eight design principles.

Santa Anna's book draws the connection in its account of what all its alternatives share. Of the three features it names, the third is distributed agency, power spread to "worker-owners, to commons members, to community currency participants, to steward-owned enterprises", and it insists that this is "not ideological … but structural".[58] The fourth chapter in this book turned the same principle into a question about who in an organisation can act on what they see.

On Monday: for the stock you chose, name everyone else who depends on it. A firm that wants a river to improve is one of many users. The regenerative move is often to join, or start, the group of users who govern it together, rather than to act alone and wonder why nothing changes.

The owner: patient capital

The hardest question a regenerative plan faces is not technical. It is whether the firm will still be run for the same purpose in ten years. A founder can make a commitment; a new owner can undo it in a quarter.

Santa Anna's book names this directly as the *exit problem* and describes steward ownership, the structure used by Bosch and Zeiss among others, in which a company's profits serve its mission and it cannot simply be sold to the highest bidder:

> *Steward ownership locks the mission into the legal structure of the enterprise*[59]

The book is also clear about the wider point. Regeneration, it argues, rests on a different logic of value, one that recognises that "the most durable forms of wealth are generated by increasing the health of the whole rather than maximizing the returns to any single part."[60] A firm whose owners are measured only on the return to their own part will find that logic hard to keep. The companion book on patient capital (*The Long Clock*) takes this up through Colin Mayer's work on corporate purpose and the evidence on short-termism.

On Monday: ask what would happen to the regenerative commitments if the firm were sold. If the answer is *they would end*, the commitments rest on a person rather than a structure. Writing them into governing documents, supplier contracts or purpose clauses is slower than a pledge and lasts longer.

The gain: sharing what is found

The last join is the one this house works on most directly. When a firm finds a better way to run, a loop closed, a waste stream turned into a supply, a skill developed that cuts errors, a gain appears. The question of who shares in it decides whether the people who found it will look for the next one.

The companion book on gainsharing (*The Gain Was Always Shared*) sets out the history and the evidence, from Joseph Scanlon's plans of the 1930s onward, for sharing productivity gains with the people who produce them. The regenerative reading adds one thing. In a circulation, a gain that flows only to one part narrows the vessels elsewhere. The café's training decision in the fifth chapter worked because the baker who learned the dough had a longer contract to show for it.

In his notes, Santa Anna puts the business case in a sentence that frames this whole book:

> *The companies that will thrive in the next economy aren't asking 'How can we do less harm?' but 'How can we design systems that improve ecological and human wellbeing with every transaction?'*[61]

For organisations that want to find where the gain is in their own operations and share in it fairly, that is the conversation Ammanuel Santa Anna and Luminous Prosperity have with leaders, and it begins at hautelumiere.life.

On Monday: for the last improvement your organisation made, write down who found it and what they received. If the answer is *nothing*, the next improvement is less likely to be found.

Monday, in one place

The chapters have produced their tools and a number of Monday points. Gathered, for a leader:

1. Write the verb (reduce, sustain or regenerate) at the top of the next significant proposal.
2. Choose one stock the organisation depends on and does not own, and describe its condition so that someone outside could check it.
3. Keep the Three-Column Ledger for one month.
4. Draw the Metabolism Map with the people who do the work.
5. Put the next circular plan through the Leak and Rebound Test before it is funded.
6. Run the Waste-Is-Food Inventory and arrange one exchange.
7. Check whether the revenue model rewards products that last.
8. Name the other users of the stock you chose.
9. Ask what happens to the commitments if the firm is sold.
10. Ask who found the last gain and what they received.

For a household, the same list works with smaller words. Choose the verb for the next large purchase. Watch one stock: the house, the garden, the health of the people in it. Keep the ledger for a month. Notice what leaves. Find one neighbour who wants something you throw away. Prefer the thing that lasts.

The household version deserves a further sentence, because it is easy to treat it as the junior partner. Most of the material flows Haas and colleagues measured pass, sooner or later, through a home. A household that buys for longevity, mends before it replaces and passes things on whole is working the slow loop that Bocken and colleagues identify as the more valuable one. It does not need a strategy. It needs a habit, kept for long enough to become ordinary.

None of the ten needs capital. All of them need attention, which is scarcest in a bad year, the year in which, the third chapter warned, circular projects are cut. That is the reason the plan below is written into weeks rather than left as a list.

The questions a board should ask

For a leader who reports to a board, or a board member who wants to know whether a regenerative commitment is real, the book reduces to six questions. Each can be answered in a paragraph, and the quality of the answers says more than any sustainability report.

Which verb? Of the organisation's significant projects this year, which are meant to reduce harm, which to sustain a level, and which to leave something in better condition? A board that hears *regenerate* for everything is hearing a slogan.

Which stock? Name the stocks the organisation depends on and does not own, and describe the condition of at least one of them now, in terms an outsider could check. A board that cannot get this answer has a commitment without an object.

Which loop? For the circular initiatives, which are repair or life extension, which are exchanges with neighbours, and which are material recovery? The third chapter's evidence suggests the order of preference, and the proportion of each in the plan is a quick test of its seriousness.

What does it displace? For each circular product or service, what does it replace, and how is that known? This is the rebound question, and it is the one most often left unasked.

What happens on sale? If the organisation changed hands next year, which commitments would survive because they are in its governing documents and contracts, and which would end because they rest on one person?

Who shares the gain? When an improvement is found, who found it and what did they receive? A board that wants its people to keep finding the next one should know the answer.

None of these questions requires a new reporting framework. They can be put at the next meeting. What they require is a willingness to hear *not measured* as an honest answer rather than a failure, because that answer is where measurement begins.

The whole, read as one living system

Step back from the separate chapters and the book has been describing a single organism at four scales. At the smallest it is a household deciding whether to mend a coat. Then a café deciding where its coffee grounds go. Then a carpet maker deciding what its factories burn, and a town of seventeen firms deciding what to do with one another's steam. At the largest it is the world economy that Haas and colleagues measured, in which four gigatonnes of sixty-two come round again. The same three questions apply at every scale, and that is the strongest evidence this book can offer that they are the right ones: what is the stock, what is flowing, and what condition is the stock left in.

Read as a living system, each scale is nested in the next. A household's loops sit inside a town's. A café's exchange with a market garden sits inside a region's soil. A firm's circular product sits inside an economy that may still be growing past its ceiling. The living-systems word for this is *holarchy*, a whole that is also a part, and its practical meaning is plain. No scale can be regenerative on its own. A household that mends everything inside an economy that rewards throwing things away is swimming upstream. A firm that closes its loop inside a market that rewards selling more units is working against its own revenue model, as the doughnut section above observed. And a national policy that rewards circularity cannot reach the café unless the café's owner has an afternoon to draw the map.

So the work moves in two directions at once. Upwards, every practitioner who has made a loop close at their own scale becomes evidence for the scale above, and a voice in it: the café's owner, asked by the town what would help, can say exactly what would. Downwards, every change at a larger scale, a rule about take-back, a public procurement standard, an owner who will not sell the mission, makes the smaller loops easier to keep. Neither direction is enough alone. The edge-effect principle that opens this chapter is the reason the two meet where they do. The most life is found where the household meets the shop, where the shop meets the farm, where the firm meets the town, because that is where what one system discards becomes what the next one needs.

The somatic reading from chapter 3 belongs here too, because it is the part of the organism that decides whether the rest of it moves. Santa Anna's book says it in a single line: "Before economics is a science, it is a felt experience."[63] A board that experiences the second brief as a threat will cut it in the first bad quarter, whatever the spreadsheet says. A household that experiences mending as a sign of hardship will stop as soon as it can afford to. The chapters on hard conversations and on the household were written for this reason. The arguments matter. The state of the people hearing them matters as much, and a regenerative practice that ignores the second will keep losing to the first brief at exactly the moment it is needed.

What, finally, is the organism for? The book's answer, quoted in chapter 4, is that a business exists to increase the vitality of the systems it participates in. Read across the whole of this book, the same sentence applies to a household, a town and an economy. Each is a metabolism. Each takes in, transforms and gives out. And each can be judged by the question Boulding asked of his capsule in 1966: not how much passed through it this year, but what condition its stocks are in, and whether the crew knows.

What remains open

A fair close says what this book has not shown. It has not shown that regenerative firms outperform conventional ones on average; the research to show that, with good controls, does not yet exist in a form this book would rely on. It has not resolved the definitional problem the third chapter described, only offered a defence against it: define by outcome and name the stock. And it has not answered the doughnut's question about growth, which is larger than any firm.

What it has shown is that the regenerative brief is old, specific and workable. Its origins run back to Boulding's capsule in 1966. Its most careful modern statement, Fullerton's, is cautious about what it claims. Its critics are right about the leaks and the rebound, and their critiques sharpen the practice rather than ending it. Its living-systems reading, in Santa Anna's book and the Luminous 100, turns into five plain questions. And at the scale of a single café, it produces modest, checkable results without new money.

Santa Anna's book states the distinction at the heart of it as plainly as anyone has:

> *A sustainable farm minimizes soil depletion. A regenerative farm builds topsoil — increasing the fertility of the land year over year.*[62]

The companion books in *Ecstatic Economics* take up the questions this one opened. The companion book on complexity (*The Economy That Keeps Becoming*) is a good companion for anyone who found the third chapter's warnings about unintended effects persuasive. And the house's PESTLE paper at hautelumiere.life is a sound instrument for reading the regulatory and market pressures that will make the second brief easier or harder to keep in a given industry.

Where the river meets the sea, the water is neither fresh nor salt, and the marsh grass holds the silt that both of them bring.

The Tool: The Ninety-Day Regeneration Plan

One page, kept by the person who owns the plan, with a short review at the end of each month. It gathers four of this book's tools, from chapters 2 to 5, into a sequence. It is written for a small or mid-sized organisation; a household can use the same weeks with fewer people.

The plan- Organisation or household: __- Owner of this plan: _ · *start date: - The stock we depend on and do not own, chosen to watch: - Its condition at the start, described so someone outside could check: - The other people and organisations that depend on the same stock: ___*

Weeks 1 to 4 · See it

WEEK	TASK	TOOL	WHO	DONE (DATE)
1	Write the verb on every proposal in progress	Chapter 2	owner	
1–4	Keep the Three-Column Ledger	Chapter 2	owner + one other	
2	Draw the Metabolism Map	Chapter 4	three to six people who do the work	
3	Run the Waste-Is-Food Inventory, part 1 (one week of noticing)	Chapter 5	everyone, briefly	
4	Inventory parts 2 and 3: calls to possible users, higher loop first	Chapter 5	one person	

End of month 1 review (one hour)- Blanks remaining on the map: __- Lines on the ledger that say *worse* in Column 3: _- *Possible exchanges found: - The one change chosen from the map: · owner ___*

Weeks 5 to 8 · Test it

WEEK	TASK	TOOL	WHO	DONE (DATE)
5	Put the chosen change and the best exchange through the Leak and Rebound Test	Chapter 3	owner + one sceptic	
5	Write down what each will displace, and how that will be checked	Chapter 3, question 4	owner	
6	Arrange one exchange only; write it into a rota, schedule or contract	Chapter 5, part 4	one person	
6	Start the chosen change; write it into a routine, not a project	Chapter 3, question 6	its owner	
7–8	Keep the ledger; note anything that surprises	Chapter 2	owner	

End of month 2 review (one hour)- Is the exchange running? __ · what does the other party say it gives them? _- *Is the change running? · has anything been displaced, or only added?* ___

Weeks 9 to 12 · Join it

WEEK	TASK	WHO	DONE (DATE)
9	Check the revenue model: do we earn more when things last longer, or less?	owner + finance	
10	Contact one other user of the chosen stock; ask what they are doing about it	owner	
11	Ask what happens to these commitments if the organisation is sold or the owner leaves; write the answer down	owner	
12	For the gains found this quarter, record who found them and what they received	owner	

End of quarter (two hours)- Condition of the chosen stock now, and how we know (or *not measured*, if not): __- Ledger: lines that moved from *worse* or *same* to *better*: _- *Financial line for the quarter (revenue or income less costs), compared with the previous quarter: - Exchanges running: · changes running: - What we now believe about our organisation that we did not believe in week 1: - The next stock, exchange or change for the next ninety days:* ___

How to keep it honest. Add nothing until the first exchange and the first change have run for a month. Write *not measured* wherever that is true. Keep the first quarter's page beside the second. The difference between them is the evidence a published study cannot provide for your organisation, which is the only one you run.

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