

Sharing in the Costs of Growth

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During my visits to the conference groups and workshops, I had a feeling that developmental this and that (e.g., Perry's Scheme, whatever *that* might be) had been pushed onto people a bit these three days. In one group, a person suddenly broke into the conversation to say, "I don't know what's going on! I wish I knew what this conference was all about. All I'm doing is sitting wondering all the time whether I should sell my house. I shouldn't worry so about such a thing. My parents bought and sold lots of houses when I was young and never thought anything about it. I don't see why I'm so upset about it, but I am. And I can't seem to see how this fits into the Perry Scheme."

I am not about to fit such an experience into anything, much less the Perry Scheme. However, I want to put that experience up on the shelf, for a minute, because I think it may help us to understand something important about development, no matter whose scheme one uses to look at development—something we have not mentioned at this conference.

First, let me review three or four of those little discoveries of the obvious that we all make in life. When we first come into this world, it is obvious that there are authorities and that they know what they are doing, or at least so it seems. They tell us what to do and what not to do, and so they know what they are doing. That is discovery 1.

Discovery 2 is that they do not know what they are doing after all. And since they do not seem to know what they are doing and do not have all the answers, we think, "Hurray! As soon as I can

get out from under their tyranny I'm free, and any opinion is as good as any other, mine included."

Discovery 3 is that when I get out from under their tyranny I walk smack into a plate-glass wall and find that I am still subject to a tyranny, not of *they*, but of *fact*. And in that tyranny of reality I discover that, although there are a lot of differences of opinion among reasonable people, not every opinion is as good as any other, including some which I have that are no good at all. And then I have to get to work and start thinking about all these things. I think about various ways in which very reasonable people disagree very reasonably in wide areas. For instance, I am told that all the Euclidian geometry I learned was just a nice little game with its own rules. Of course, one can be right or wrong within the rules of Euclidian geometry, but the chances that Euclidian geometry conforms to anything in this universe, I am now told, are only about one in three billion; there are other geometries that have a better probability of conforming to something in the universe. I also find that in such important matters as religion very reasonable people disagree very intensely. I examine various religions and I find that some of them have as much claim to be more than superstition as anything I believe. Suddenly I realize that it is a little questionable to go around killing other people to the glory of the particular god I believe in. So I have discovered the obvious 3.

Then I make one more discovery, another obvious one, that I am faced with the challenge of affirming myself and my life as a person. Given so many differences of opinion among reasonable people, differences which reason alone cannot resolve, I see that I can never be sure I am making the "right" decisions in life. And yet I must decide. Oh, I have been told never to make a wrong decision lest I regret it all my life, but now I see I have no protection against regret. Unless I am going to weasel out of really living, I must choose what I believe in and own the consequences, and never know what lay down the roads I did not take. I have discovered what Robert Frost meant, and what it means to commit.

Why have I just rehearsed these four obvious discoveries? There has been all this talk at this conference about the Perry Scheme, and if some of you are in doubt about what it is—that is it. I mean,

students reported to us about making these discoveries, and that is what the Perry Scheme is, nothing more. It took thirty of us, listening to students for fifteen years to make these obvious discoveries, and then we looked at each other and said, "Fifteen years for *this*?"

So the next questions are, "What's so good about advancing along such a series of discoveries (or any other scheme of development we have been considering)? Why should we educators devote ourselves to promoting discoveries like that? Why should we push or entice or seduce people to go along with discoveries like that?" I know of one reason, and that is that since the world is, indeed, complicated, it is better to have a matching set of complicated ideas to deal with it than to try to use a simple idea that does not fit. Perhaps something more can be said for these discoveries, however. One is that by a considerable study of the different ways in which reasonable people see things, we are put in the position to learn that the most valuable of all the qualities of maturity of which Doug Heath talked this morning is compassion.

I am not about to expand on the social utility of compassion. I want to ask some special questions about this conference: "If development is all so obvious, then *why is it so hard*? If it's all that simple and all that obvious, then what in the world are we here for? Why is it so hard to grow? Why is it even harder to help *other* people grow? What have we been talking about for three days?"

Over the past several months, some of the staff in our little office have been asking students about how they learn. We just ask, "Tell us about how you experience learning." The usual response is, "You mean *really* learning?" There seems to be a distinction between "just" learning and "really" learning, which is what the students want to talk about. "Really" learning invariably refers to experiences in which one sees the world and oneself in a new and broader light—in short, to those very discoveries that mark the major steps into maturity I have been talking about.

I want to share with you the response of a young woman, a freshman. She said that so far she had been just learning more things at Harvard—"kind of flat"—and that the last time she had really learned was back in high school. She had a social science teacher whom she admired and he introduced to the class one of

the Ames experiments with the revolving window. (You know it: There is this odd-shaped window that revolves on an axis and you see it revolve and you *know* it revolves; but then the lighting is changed and the window does not revolve; it oscillates from side to side, and you *know* it oscillates; and then the lighting is changed back and there the window is, revolving.) She said her teacher looked around and said to no one in particular, "So what do you make of *that*?" and no one said anything. "And all of a sudden I *saw*. I mean I saw how much we bring with us to our perception of things, how much we construct our worlds. And I realized that if this was true of windows, how about people? parents? myself, too? The whole world opened up to me, sort of, how everybody makes their own meanings, how different things can look in a different light, so to speak."

She then went on to say how the same experiment had been demonstrated at Harvard as just one more gimmick of perceptual illusion. The interviewer, bored with this complaint, brought her back to that moment in high school: "How did you feel then?" "Oh it was awful. I mean, my world was shattered. I guess it's sort of naive to use a word like this here, but it was like I lost my innocence. I mean nothing could ever be for sure—like it seems—I mean, again."

Our interviewer then asked, "How come you stayed with it instead of just laughing it off and forgetting it?"

"Oh, that was because of the teacher! You see, I trusted him, and I knew he knew. I mean, we didn't talk about it really, but he just looked at me and I knew he knew—what I'd learned—and what I'd lost! I guess because he knew what I'd lost, I could stay with what I'd seen."

So what I am talking about is something that we have left out in our talk of promoting development: What do we do about the house we leave when we go to a new place? When we leave the way we saw the world, in which everything was just so and just as we thought, and we see it all differently, we move into a world where all of what was solid and known is crumbling. And the new is untried. What do we do about the house we just sold out of? What do we do about the old simple world? It may be a great joy to discover a new and more complex way of thinking and seeing,

but what do we do about all the hopes that we had invested and experienced in those simpler terms? When we leave those terms behind, are we to leave hope, too?

Does the teacher have a responsibility here, not only to promote growth and development, but to help people to do something with the losses?

I want to go back to the words: "Because he knew what I'd lost, I could stay with what I'd seen." If a loss has been known, if a pain of mine has been known and shared by somebody, if somebody has been aware of one of my pains, then I can go on. I can let that pain die in some way and go on to reinvest the hope. (Not that I ever really get entirely over it, you understand. What happens to the wounds of the past? Theodore Reik was asked that question, you remember. He said, "Well, they ache in bad weather.") But still, if these things have been known and shared, then somehow it is possible for me to do a strange thing called grieving, which I do not pretend to understand. It seems all right to let it hurt.

But if it is not allowed to grieve or to hurt, I have to deny the truth to have my chin up. If my loss has never "lived," socially, then I must keep it alive myself, protect it like a responsibility, even. Then I do not know why it is that I get stuck. It comes to me as a sort of theorem, that when you have taken one step in development, you cannot take another until you have grieved the losses of the first. I wonder how that hypothesis would look in testing. Jessie Taft, who was a therapist, wrote, "The therapist becomes the repository of the outworn self." So too, this teacher of social sciences became the repository of this young woman's innocence.

What about the losses in what we have been calling "career development"? In good times, when there is a world of plenty out there, students can be butcher, baker, candlestick maker; they can be anything. All they have to do is choose. It feels like a narrowing down. It feels as if you are losing all the other selves that you could have been. So I have always wanted to write vocational theory all over again; not about how you choose what you are going to do, but about how you give up all the other selves you are not going to be.

Nowadays, of course, fewer of those opportunities are available out there. So, in the last few years, we have had a different kind of feeling, one of desperation. In order to make it in this competitive world everything becomes contingent on what I do right now. It is an unbroken chain. If I slip any place, I have had it. My whole life rests on this one sentence that I am trying to write, so I cannot finish the sentence.

I do not know what to say about grieving and the teaching of grieving, because I do not understand it. I know it goes by waves. I know that when you take yourself off someplace, and say, "Now I will face this, and grieve," nothing happens. But when you open up a bureau drawer and see something there that reminds you of something, then you have had it. I do not understand it, but I know that we do not allow it enough in our culture and we do not have the legitimizing rituals for the experience; therefore our people cannot grow well. They have to leave parts of themselves behind. Although I do not know how to teach people how to grieve, I have found that the teacher or counselor can make it clear that the pain is legitimate.

Such, then, is surely our responsibility: to stay, as it were, with the student's past and to the very extent that we invite the student to grow beyond it. It is a challenging task. Yet, just as our students can tell us why the obvious is so difficult (were we only to listen), so they may also tell us how we can help them to learn that the pain of growth is not a shame of youth that separates them from us.

I am reminded of a privileged moment I was given recently. A young woman had given me a lovely time all year. This woman, a freshman, is very accomplished; she was the president of her class in school and captain of the swimming team, and she had straight As in one of the most challenging schools in the country. But something was all wrong at college. She came to see me, we chatted, and she worked things out. I found that it was not only my privilege but my duty to enjoy her and to appreciate the trip she gave me on the roller coaster of adolescence. It was marvelous and sometimes very painful, but always somehow beautiful. Of course, she sometimes scared me by carrying too much sail. But I was enjoying it; I knew who I was supposed to be—the good uncle who

listened. Then there came a day when she seemed profoundly moved, so I fastened my seatbelt. She had decided to transfer, she said, and she was feeling sad about leaving friends she had taken so long to make. There was a pause. Then she said, "Yesterday I was walking to class, and all of a sudden it came over me, that my days are numbered." I did my best not to stir. She looked at me. "Then it came to me that these days with you are numbered, too. Like, there comes a time when you have to move over and make room for others who need the time more." And then I thought of her as an older sister with her four younger sisters. And I said, "Well, gee, yeh, I know. And I've been thinking how I'll miss you." And she said, "Oh, really? Have you been thinking that way, too?" And so she just kept looking at me. It was one of those silences that went on for about fifteen minutes. About every five minutes or so she said softly, "Yes." Now I realized that she was a bright person and was putting things together. One of the things she was looking at was a guy whose days also were numbered, and by a lot smaller number than hers, and she looked me right in the eye for a long time. After a long time we got up. Somehow I decided it was time to say something, and I heard my voice say, "Growing is so bitter, so *bittersweet*."

I did not hear the condescension in that remark until too late, and my inner critic turned on me in fury. "There you go, ruining the most beautiful moments again with your sappy platitudes." Well, I have learned that when I have made a mistake I am not the best person to try picking up the pieces, so I bit my tongue and waited. She looked at me without wavering and said gently, "And *bittersweet* for you, too." With that she touched my hand and left.

I have been finding that growing at this conference is bitter, *bittersweet*, and if I may let that young woman speak for all of us, I think she would say, gently, "And for you, too."