

-IN GRAVE DANGER OF GROWING-  
OBSERVATIONS ON THE PROCESS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Charles Seashore, Washington, D.C. June, 1975

Over the Past fifteen years, I have had the opportunity to write a fair number of proposals, brochures, evaluation reports, and just plain propaganda about professional development programs in the behavioral sciences. This paper is designed to be an antidote for some of these past sins as it has become abundantly clear that none of my previous efforts had much to say about what I now believe to be some fairly predictable parts of the process. For instance, I don't ever recall having written anything that would have helped a potential student understand the likelihood of his spending far more energy on survival than on growth. My enthusiasm for describing program resources seems to have left little space to advise on the high probability that you would have to reexamine, renegotiate, or just plain retreat from most of the significant relationships in your life in the process of gaining credentials to help others. I wish I had allowed a few lines to provide candidates with a moderate degree of informed consent that growth and regression just might be intertwined in such a way that one step forward might require several steps backward. And, perhaps, most of all, I would have wanted to include a long section for those with spouses, partners, and children that, although they filled out the application as an individual, they actually were enrolling their family in a change program which would likely provoke a wild and motley set of weird and delightful, but sometimes tortuous assortment of experiences.

The opportunity to be centrally involved in a variety of intensive professional programs in clinical psychology, psychiatry, family practice in medicine, and experimental group training has led me to a conclusion which I still would like to resist, forge or distort. Perhaps you get the gist of the conclusion despite my resistance, if I share with you three different ways I have found to express it depending on my mood and the circumstances in which I find myself.

1. The difficulties of students are remarkably similar despite dramatic differences faculty, program designs or resources to conduct the program.
2. A humanistic process of professional development is a contradiction in terms.
3. Professional development is a big pain in the ass, especially if you are only a relative of the person participating in the program.

The sections that follow are variations on this theme, and, hopefully, will communicate some of the thoughts I have on why the process is so perilous and what we might try to do if the temporary roadblocks, minefields, quicksand fields, and unidentified chasms are taken as givens along with the opportunities, delights, and oases along the way. In particular, I would like to speak to issues of special concern to those who are pursuing their development by returning to programs after a period of time as a practicing professional, or a lengthy break from formal academic work. Very frequently this also involves those who have married, had children, or become separated, widowed, or divorced. In current educational jargon, these are the "non-traditional" students.

## In Grave Danger of Growing

It is my feeling that the family experience of participants is a critical factor in the definition of the professional development process.

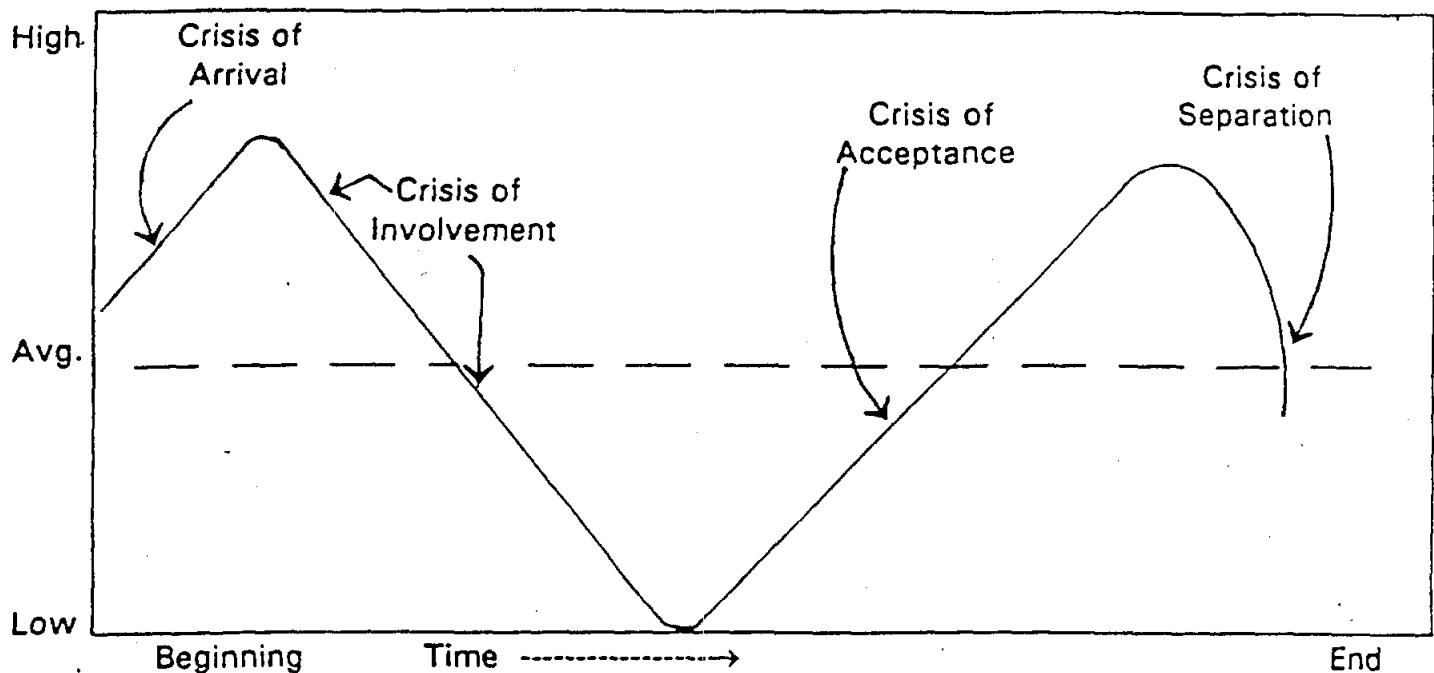
### Some Likely Event in Professional Development Programs

1. A fair number of persons who have been functioning quite competently in work, family, and social settings will experience periods of being de-skilled, incompetent, emotionally out of commission, or just plain confused after entering the program.
2. Most students will experience levels of stress and anxiety that effectively block any significant learning during phases of the program regarded as critical by the faculty.
3. One or more of the students, regardless of the selection pool or the selection method, will be identified as deviant enough to promote a process of scapegoating which will come to an end only through termination or graduation.
4. Feelings of isolation, being misunderstood, being used and/or abused, will be equally common among students, faculty, and program administrators.
5. Attempts to clear things up generally- don't.
6. Learning how to better use oneself in the helping process is likely to change one's basis for self-esteem, and alter what it is one values in oneself or others. This produces a significant amount of conflict among those who liked you for what you were, not for what you are becoming.
7. Students and faculty look for opportunities to continue practicing things they already do well and try, usually in vain, to ignore opportunities to develop new competencies.
8. Students report feelings of anger, depression, resentment, envy, and irrelevance among family and close friends because of their participation in the program.
9. Participants often report that they are investing at least several times the amount of energy in the program than they expected to.
10. There seems to be a significant discrepancy between what was expected and what is found, including
  - finding a few things that you did expect
  - finding a lot of things you didn't expect but really like
  - finding some things you didn't expect and are sure you don't need
  - not finding quite a few things you did expect and can't believe are not there
11. Significant numbers of students find themselves willing to make compromises in what they will tolerate in others and themselves, in settling for less than what they think they are due, and in staying protected rather than risk.
12. Participants will generally find some of their most valuable experiences and learning in situations which have not been planned or designed for that purpose.

The list of items above is obviously a mixed bag and is intended only to be illustrative. It also leaves out equal time for the events which are particularly satisfying, rewarding, and easily accessible in the programs. But, in any case, I end up with the question in my mind—"What is it in these programs that promotes the kind of strange goings on that are mentioned above?" Perhaps what follows will help.

### Forces Promoting Crazy in Professional Development Programs

1. The program as Parent: For persons who have, one way or another, managed to extricate themselves from the status of student after the seemingly endless sequence from pre-school through graduate school, returning to student status has got to be a 'bummer'. The evaluative aspect alone may be enough to trigger those unresolved issues of one's childhood without adding the rather unsettling experience of being assigned eight or ten siblings with whom you are supposed to have some unspecified form of interdependence for a couple of years.
2. The Program as Lover: The investment of energy, the opportunity for intense human encounters and relationships, and the seductiveness of the program as a place to explore issues of deep personal concern, provide a near fatal combination for the well-being of those who are used to a heavy share of the students' time, attention, and caring. The paranoia producing possibilities of evening and weekend programs, intense reports of experience - it is difficult - if not impossible to comprehend - and the things that are now left undone at home that used to always be done, is frightening. Partners, children, and intimate friends are often confused, angered, or envious in the face of this intrusive and elusive something that has stolen their dear one away. In the process, these close friends and family are also forced to re-experience some ways that they had become dependent upon the partner turned student, and thus face up to the discombobulating notion that they might have to grow and change, too-- all because of that crazy program. The student must learn to divide energy between program demands and coping with changes on the home front. And the awareness of the student that significant, or even slight, changes in one's own style, create powerful waves in the systems of which they are a part, can often be a depressing experience.
3. The Program as a Source of Role Models: The intensity of contact usually generated with peers, with faculty, and with practitioners in the field, at the minimum, invites one to consider getting out of one's own rut and explore someone else's rut. This process of trying on different futures, of engaging with new heroes and heroines, and testing out different ways of defining oneself in an atmosphere geared to thinking of one's potential, invites the revaluing of what you have been doing and how you see the people around you. As one sorts through different role models, it is rare if you end up with one which you can move toward without experiencing the same trauma that goes with a first ride on a bicycle. Uncertainty, fear of failure, and demonstrated incompetence the first few times around may, perhaps, serve no other purpose than to heighten one's own ambivalence about growth, and raise in Broadway-size letters, the message: "WHO NEEDS THIS?"
4. The program as a Mini-Life Cycle: As if guided by unreachable and unaccountable outside forces, the program may also induce a natural cycle affecting the morale of its members simply because it has a beginning, middle and end. Illustrative of this phenomena is the Menninger Morale Curve which indicates a general developmental trend for morale in groups that follows the pattern shown in Figure I below:



Typical Morale Changes in Group During Life Cycle

The curve summarizes the observations over a wide variety of programs starting with Peace Corps Training Camps and the two-year Peace Corps field experience. It simply states that there is likely to be a periodic change in the morale and feeling of group members over time due to four kinds of "crises" inherent in group development. Initially, morale tends to be somewhat elevated due to the hopes, expectations, and dreams of those who have expended considerable time, money and energy to gain entrance. As the realities of the program become clear, including the limitations of staff, the difficulties among ones peers, the limited resources, etc., the crisis of involvement produces the rather shocking and depressing skid which seems as though there may be no other way out than the trap door at the bottom. A reasonably well functioning group can, however, manage to pull itself out by accepting the givens, mobilizing their energy, and "getting it together". The final downturn is produced by the approaching end of the group and the inevitable separation. This curve, which may hold not only for the time span of the program, but for sub-parts, such as semesters, short-term workshops, or even specific meetings, has a way of blocking or distorting the often held view of the rational student or faculty member that acquisition of skills will proceed on some sort of straight-line basis. The willingness to risk, the need for support from others, and the capacity to assimilate new information are but a few of the factors that are affected by the morale level of an individual student.

The Student as a Person in Grave Danger of Growing:

For some students, the decision to participate in an intensive program of professional development over a year or two is the result of an awareness of their need for radical change in some critical aspects of their lives. They have already become dissatisfied with work, with life-style and family dynamics, or with their own capacity for enjoyment and satisfaction with other people. Entry into the program may simply be an acknowledgment that they are aware of their own need for change and their desire to direct it through some structure such as the

program. For others, it is only after they enter the program that the implications of what they have done becomes clear--that they are involved in a process where there are strong supports for throwing everything up for grabs and seeing how it falls back into place. At the minimum, they will experience a lot of difficulty in keeping their professional skill development from spilling over into the other significant aspects of their lives. In short, they become aware that they are "in grave danger of growing." The potential costs of change can begin to exert a significant counter-force to the glib notion that growth is desirable or at least satisfying.

Growing in this context may mean becoming vulnerable. And quite frequently, this results in students experiencing demands for competence at just the same time that they are ungluing and reviewing some of the major support systems in their lives. Trying to thread one's way through a program so as to balance the challenges and supports for oneself can be an exhausting and lonely task. Especially, if the faculty are committed to your growth. To say nothing of the perils of getting "help" from your peers.

#### Implications for the Design of Professional Development Programs:

My awareness of the paradox of growth-- that I am trying to learn at times when I may be tinkering with the very relationships which give me the security to risk--has led me to re-examine some of my assumptions about what ought to be provided in a well-designed program.

1. Informed Consent: Students need to have access to information which helps them look at some of the ways in which professional skill and competence development are linked to personal growth and the relationships around family and close friends. Specifically, they need to have some help in assessing whether they have the time or resources or inclination to risk opening up Pandora's Box or their own can of worms.

#### Implications for the Design of Professional Development Programs:

2. Faculty Awareness: If the faculty is aware and appreciative of the multiple agendas which students are likely to have during the course of the program, they are likely to build in the necessary flexibility so that students can effectively deal with the issues that are before them and not get trapped being out of step in a lock-step curriculum.
3. Available Support System: Students will be going through a good many transitions, and if the program is really effective, so will the faculty. Multiple outlets are needed for getting support so that you are not begging for it from the very aspect of the program that is designed to challenge you. Peer support, access to counseling and therapy, opportunities to communicate and influence the system, and time to withdraw and disengage are a few examples of supportive mechanisms that need to be built into our programs.
4. Appreciation and Tolerance for Craziess: I think it is inevitable that people are going to do a fair number of goofy things in the course of stretching their own capacities to understand and help other human beings. To somehow be able to separate the occasional from the chronic, the developmental from the stunting, the fun from the destructive, are important skills given the tendency in organizations for those in power to have low tolerance for the crazy behavior of those with less clout.

5. Supports for Growth Among the Student's Family and Friends: It is clear that those around the student will be major potential contributors to the student's well-being and probably be challenged to grow by some of the changes in the student. From the selection process, to information that is disseminated, to opportunities for involvement or acquaintance with the realities of the program, there are many spots to involve those who are close to the student if they are interested. In a small pilot experience with the NTL Institute, it was clear that the readiness and capacity of interns to take advantage of program opportunities increased as they got things settled in the family area.
6. Realistic but High Expectations for Professional Competence: It is my experience that a lack or low expectations for performance in professional development programs also lowers the degree to which the Program will contribute to effective personal development outside the occupational setting. While high expectations may be stress-producing, it also seems to build the respect and pride which make the whole exercise worth enduring.

The opportunities for messing things up obviously abound on the part of everyone involved in the professional development enterprise. To respect the mature and competent adult part of another person at the same time that you invite them to live in a structure that supports regression in many subtle and not-so-subtle ways, is a reasonably demanding task. If, at the close of a program, a participant reflects that he is not now sure that he wants what he yearned for, that may reflect no more than the similarity of the process of professional development with that of therapy.

The theme that I have tried to weave through this paper is one that I deeply believe that professional development in the fields touching on therapy and growth involves most students in intense explorations of themselves and their relationships that are closest to them; that it requires a delicate balance between support and challenge to wed this identity formation process (and its implications for those close-by) to the development of performance skills and role competence; it takes a little thought and lots of opportunity to communicate, and it requires concentration of time and energy on the conflicts and resistances which influence whether or not we are willing to take the risk of putting ourselves "in grave danger of growing" and allowing others around us to have that same opportunity.

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