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The Challenge and Test of Our Values: An Essay of Collective Experience

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Departing from a specific experience at the 1998 POD conference, the values of the organization—most specifically and directly the “valuing of people”—were challenged and put to the test of whether or not we genuinely and sincerely strive to actualize our values. This situation is generalizable to our daily professional and personal lives, and the essay invites readers’ reflection through an examination of our values in combination with the story. The challenge continues, and the test is not finished.

This is an essay arising from experience, which is not an uncommon stimulus for what in the parlance of literature is called the *personal essay*. However, a personal essay is not what we expect to find in a professional publication such as *To Improve the Academy*.

Therefore, I invite readers to join me in stretching our understanding of the genre of “essay” and to consider these words to have arisen not just from *my* experience but also from *our* experience—that of several hundred members of The POD Network. And via this printed word, what was *my* and *our* experience also becomes the experience of *every reader*. Thus, what is offered here is no longer a personal essay; rather it is a professional and collective essay. By accident of circumstance, I happen to be the individual verbalizing these thoughts on “A Challenge and Test of Our Values,” but the experience is that of each of us—whether directly or indirectly. It is a two-fold event consisting of two phases: 1) that which

was actually experienced, which constitutes *the story*, and 2) that which we experience in continuing reflection.

The story began at the 1998 POD conference, where I gave an opening plenary address before the pre-conference events started. Several months before this time, I had chosen the general topic of values. My intent was to provide opportunity for participants, as well as myself, to reflect upon the values of our organization and our embodiment and living of those values. The reason I chose this particular topic was a quite personal one. I believe very strongly that it is incumbent upon us as human beings to examine our values through reflection. Values underlie our actions, and reflection allows us to assess the degree of congruence between the values we purport to espouse and our actions. To seek harmony between values and actions is to lead the examined life, which should be the hallmark of a serious professional and of a thoughtful human being.

Due to an unexpected turn of events at the 1998 POD conference, a challenge to our values was placed before us and provided us opportunity to test those values. Before we continue the story, let us consider the unexpected challenge and the test within an organizational context.

THE ESSENCE OF AN ORGANIZATION

An organization is the creation by human beings of a collective structure—a collaborative act, a necessary response to the existence and phenomenon of society. Any organization exists because we will it to exist. It is a societal structure, which we design to serve our purposes. That means that the organization changes as we change and reflects what we are, have been, and want to become.

Keeping this foundation in mind, let's think of The POD Network in specific. It was born in the early 70s in response to a newly recognized need within the societal structure of higher education. More specifically, it was the outgrowth of the feeling of a small number of dedicated individuals who felt that we needed new ways to promote a culture of development—both for faculty and administrators as well as for institutions themselves and their internal structures—in order to respond more effectively to what higher education needed to become. One such new way was to create an association, a collective—a connected group of people working collaboratively to build a professional community with a purpose in mind. This purpose was to promote a spirit of professional development within higher education more vigorously than had existed

before. The need for an organization had been recognized; it was therefore “willed” to exist by a collaborative act.

THE FOUNDATION OF THE ORGANIZATION

It is with intent that I do not use the term *mission statement* in the above heading, for regrettably it is probably true for most of us that we do not get very excited about reading a mission statement. (I don’t want to lose readers in the middle of this essay!) Yet, it is also true that an effective organization must have a mission statement of some sort, even though it might be called something else, such as “goals statement” or “purpose.” Such a statement of general purpose becomes the foundation of the organization; it is the stimulus of the organizational act and organizational action.

And so POD has a mission statement. Indeed, we have the long version of the mission statement and the short version, both of which have been revised over the years. The current statement was accepted in 1991, and it is here that we should find expression of our core organizational values. In reviewing the POD mission statement, three sentences stand out as most directly reflecting our values.

- The POD Network “fosters human development in higher education through faculty, instructional, and organizational development.”
- “POD believes that people have value, as individuals and as members of groups.”
- “Lifelong, holistic, personal, and professional learning, growth, and change for the higher education community” is central to POD’s philosophy.

What values are reflected here? I asked participants in the plenary session at the conference to identify the values they found expressed in the POD mission statement, and the most frequently occurring words or phrases are listed below. They present an encapsulation of our organizational mission.

- 1) Lifelong, holistic human development
- 2) Growth
- 3) Valuing people
- 4) Positive change
- 5) Collaboration
- 6) Learning

The critical question, however, is what we do with these values, and to answer this question we must take a reflective stance.

THE REFLECTIVE STANCE

It is our organizational business to reflect. Readers alert to language usage will note in that sentence the absence of a preposition and an object for the preposition. I did not write “reflect upon + a noun,” rather simply “to reflect.” If our business is indeed faculty, instructional, and organizational development as we say it is, an inherent part of that business is reflection. Without reflection, growth and development will certainly occur, for change is a constant. However, in the absence of reflection to provide guidance, the growth and development we desire as human beings may be chaotic, accidental, unattractive, ineffective, stunted—or any other number of metaphorically appropriate adjectives that portray unguided growth. For the purpose of this *collective essay of experience* it is now time to complete the verb with its expected preposition and an object: *reflect upon* [preposition] *these values* [object of the preposition].

I think many of us probably believe that our society finds itself in a time of seeking to re-form or re-articulate values that, I hope, all would agree can be placed on the side of “that which is universally good.” Such values include justice, fairness, and diversity, which includes the noble goal of valuing and respecting all persons, and we offer challenge to such values as racism and sexism. But there are among us those who lived the 60s, and I think, historically, we can point to that decade as the time within our lifetimes when we really began stirring up our values stew. Indeed, if we find what’s happening around us today discomfiting, thinking about recent history might bring a bit of comfort—our dilemmas are not new ones.

As one who started professionally in the 60s, I look back upon that time as an exciting period. It forced us to begin re-examining our values, albeit often in painful, disturbing, and sometimes terribly destructive and hurtful ways. However, I think we have emerged healthier for that—whether we think of our society at large, the context of higher education, or what touches our lives personally and individually—healthier simply in that we are willing to examine and sometimes to challenge our values. We can talk about things today that only slightly over three decades ago were hardly ever expressed in public ways by our collective conscience.

The process begun in the 60s is certainly not finished. Kicking and

screaming as a society, we entered an era of values foment, which is ongoing. As professionals working in faculty, instructional, and organizational development, we know and experience on a daily basis the powerful force of our individual and collective values and beliefs. We experience them as motivation of everyday actions, and to bring awareness of values to the surface, out in the open, is very healthy—in my opinion.

Other voices from our organizational past have also invited us to reflect upon our values as did, for example, Bill Bergquist, one of the “founding fathers” of POD. He presented a plenary address at the 1994 conference and commented as follows:

I propose that when we examine organizational values . . . we are looking at “tacit knowledge.” We know that these values are present and profoundly influence our life and our attitudes regarding the organization in which we work, yet these values are often not directly known to us. In other words, these values often remain “unconscious.” They serve as tacitly-held templates against which we measure the “rightness” and “wrongness” of behaviors in our organization and the extent to which things have changed in our organization (Bergquist, 1994, p. 353).

Thus do we seek self-knowledge, which is seldom easy but is always imperative as we delve more deeply into that which is our humanness. The pain of this search in combination with the discovery of beauty in the searching experience itself has been exquisitely expressed by the poet Kahlil Gibran (1923/1991), who wrote as follows in *The Prophet*:

And a man said, Speak to us of Self-Knowledge,
And he answered, saying:
Your hearts know in silence the secrets of the days and the nights.
But your ears thirst for the sound of your heart's knowledge.
You would know in words that which you have always known in
thought.
You would touch with your fingers the naked body of your
dreams.
Say not, “I have found the truth,” but rather, “I have found a
truth.”
Say not, “I have found the path of the soul.” Say rather, “I have
met the soul walking upon my path.”

For the soul walks upon all paths.
The soul walks not upon a line, neither does it grow like a reed.
The soul unfolds itself, like a lotus of countless petals (pp. 54-55).

The words of the poet can comfort us and perhaps even ennoble us as we confront the glaring realities of the difficulty of assessing and re-forming our values—this is the challenge and the test.

THE CHALLENGE AND THE TEST

In our mission statement, we officially claim that we believe all people “have value,” we seek to “foster human development,” and we strive to “promote change.” That’s what we say, but do we live by those values? That is the challenge before us, and our recent collective experience provided us with the opportunity to test ourselves. Returning to this experience through our reflection allows us to test ourselves over and over again.

At the 1998 POD conference, a publicly made remark, not by a member of POD, was understood as a denigration of a particular group of persons or, stated very directly, a racial slur. There was no immediately evident audience reaction to the comment, and it was not challenged until the conclusion of the public presentation after which there was no opportunity for public and collective discussion.

This was start of *the experience*, the start of *the story*. However, its importance goes far beyond that moment, for the substance of the particular situation is generalized every time we hear comments—or, sadly, perhaps even make such comments ourselves—that promote or reflect the stereotyping of any group of persons, thereby de-valuing them.

The first part of the two-part test question placed before us is *whether or not the silence of the immediate moment negated our purported “valuing of all persons as individuals and groups,”* and this value is absolutely foundational to all of our other statements of value as an organization and as faculty and instructional development professionals. If we do not live by that value, we are professional hypocrites.

However, I do not believe we can answer the test question of negation of our purported values with a simple “yes” or “no.” All persons present were conspirators in the silence of the moment, and various perspectives emerged as we discussed the experience later. Many persons expressed their feeling of paralyzing shock and dismay. Others indicated they felt a sense of disabling shame. Some persons sitting in the back could not hear

the speakers clearly and did not realize what had been said. Perhaps there were those who succumbed to the expectation we have of polite behaviors in a public setting. And we must also be fully honest and admit that, regrettably, there may indeed have been some who felt a sense of indifference. Whatever the complexity of feelings and reactions may have been, we will not be able to explain them fully despite our strong and almost overwhelming desire to do so. As we continue to keep the perspective of generalization of the situation, we must then also transfer the reflection of this complexity to other similar situations or experiences.

The second part of the test question is *whether or not we seek to affirm striving to live by our foundational values*; and this means that we must take action reflecting affirmation. In the setting of this particular experience, we did so by instituting a “difficult dialogue” as quickly as possible, whereby we came together as a community of members to discuss our feelings and reactions and concerns, taking advantage of what several called “a teachable moment.” Emotions were very intense—irritation, anger, shame, confusion, hurt, pain, guilt, and also indifference. I believe the willingness, however, to engage in this difficult dialogue was indeed an affirmation of our willingness as a community to strive for living our stated values. Moreover, this process also embodied the value of fostering human development and change—critical to the POD mission and to the process of promoting faculty, instructional, and organizational development.

Our difficult dialogue yielded discussion and many written comments, some of which are very moving.¹ The following are some selected examples of comments.

- I will live forever with the profound shame that I sat in a state of paralytic shock and did nothing to challenge such a racist statement.
- Many of us are first-timers and wondered what kind of place or group this is.
- We’re here out of a sense of concern and solidarity but find ourselves making many assumptions about intention and feelings on either side.
- Thanks for doing this session instead of pretending it didn’t happen.
- This becomes a valuable learning lesson. For example, how do we advise faculty to handle [similar] situations in class.
- We all make mistakes, but we need to apologize and make amends.

- I am hurt! I am concerned! I am disappointed! I am ashamed to be here! But what happened today can only be a good thing for the future of POD and faculty development.

Another three of the many comments invite us to move to the important perspective of overview.

- How can we, as an organization and as individuals, create an environment that empowers us to respond to statements that hurt, shock, confuse, or befuddle us?
- We thank you for allowing us to have this difficult dialogue. All of us have been confronted with similar situations on our campuses and often respond with silence.
- Perhaps this will in-spirit us to respond in a more helpful, constructive way.

FINISHING THE TEST

Not surprisingly, we were not done with the challenge to, and test of, our values when we completed the difficult dialogue of this experience, for the dialogue continued both formally and informally throughout the conference and even electronically afterwards on a related topic. All of these conversations were inspired by our passions in moving ways, and I hope that they continue in the minds and hearts of each conference participant and also of each reader of this “essay of collective experience.”

We were not done with the test at the conclusion of the electronic dialogue, for this test will never be finished, just as a story—any and every story—is never really finished because it has unending application to who we are and how we live. That is the essence of *story* and the essence of any human experience—the particular experience reflects a general set of experiences, and the generalization includes that which had been particularized. Through the sharing of *story*, a metaphorical expression of our experiences, we allow ourselves to grow in individual and collective human richness and depth of understanding.

CONCLUSION

If we accept this experience as a challenge and a test and if we also believe that our response was indeed an affirmation of our organizational striving to live by our values, then I believe we have responded to a call strongly sounded by Parker Palmer, the well-known scholar of teaching,

who has emerged as almost a spiritual guide for our discussions about teaching and learning. In this situation, we were indeed teaching each other and learning with each other. Palmer's comments speak powerfully to the importance of maintaining a perspective of reflection upon our values and translating that reflection into action. Valuing people means respecting them, and this is the concern he expressed. I find his words both discouraging and frightening, but they present a strong call to us for action. While his context is the university, his thoughts apply to our organization and to our individual lives as well.

Imagine how it would transform academic life if everyone involved practiced simple respect. I don't think there are many places where people feel less respected than on university campuses. The university is a place that has learned to grant respect to only a few things: the texts, the experts, and those who win in competition. We don't grant respect to students who are stumbling and failing. We don't grant respect to tentative and heartfelt ways of being in the world, where a person can't quite think of the right word—or any word at all. We don't grant respect to silence and wonder. We don't grant it to voices outside our tight little circle, let alone to the voiceless things of the world.

Why? Because academia is a culture of fear. We are afraid of hearing something that would challenge and change us. . . . we don't want to hear those voices. We carefully wall ourselves off, by means of systematic disrespect, from all those things that might challenge us, break us, open us (1998, p. B12).

I would conjecture that many of us probably agree with these statements to varying degrees of intensity. Was this what happened at the POD conference? Did we allow or suffer the promotion of the "culture of fear"? Or did we begin the difficult and ongoing process of destroying this culture?

If we accept Palmer's description, if we find within our society of higher education or our organization (or our hearts) a culture of fear, then that culture certainly negates all that higher education purports to be. It destroys the very essence of what any level of education should be about. It may be that this culture, which Palmer describes as one of *fear*, is indeed even more than that. At times it may be a culture of anger, intolerance, dishonesty with self and others, arrogance and egotism, or inappropriate and damning judgment of others who are different than we are.

Perhaps I speak strongly, but I would consider a culture with such

attributes to be even worse than a *culture of fear*—if one can speak relatively in this regard. Can anything be worse than *fear*? A *culture of fear* with its tentacle-like spreading negativism—whether intentional or non-intentional—becomes a *culture of destruction of others*. I believe such a culture would be the negation of our humanness. There is a powerful line in the famous 19th-century drama *Faust* by the German author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. This line is spoken by Mephisto, the devil figure in the drama, and he says, “Ich bin der Geist, der stets verneint,” which translates as, “I am the spirit which always negates.” Mephisto does not win in this drama, but the battle with the “Geist, der stets verneint” is never over.

I hope and I believe that each of the members of The POD Network in the context of daily work—with the values we espouse—will vigorously and enthusiastically seek to bring down this culture of fear or any and all aspects of a culture of negation through our work in faculty, instructional, and organizational development.

If we value others, if we cherish the concepts of human growth and development as well as the promotion of positive change, then fear and negation have no place among us or around us—as individuals or as a collective, a community of caring professionals.

ENDNOTE

¹A complete copy of all written comments is available from the author upon request.

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