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Change as the Convergence of Energies: Using the Lens of Postmodern Thinking to Examine Change in Higher Education

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Linda Wesson and Jeanne Carr

Postmodern thought, in particular dynamic systems theory, offers explanations for the profound era in which we live. Defining myself as an educational leader with a postmodern visionary perspective, I have deconstructed a change effort in higher education to demonstrate the developmental process that took place within me when I acted as an educational change agent. As part of this story, I have added the voice of an executive coach, who volunteered her services to the university and worked with me during the second semester of this change effort. This effort is analogous to a river that is constantly churning, moving, and changing from moment to moment as tributaries converge, debris is dredged up, and small pieces of silt and sand shape and re-shape themselves.

Today, it is increasingly rare for a human to get a first look at data about the world. Even our telescopes are often operated remotely with computer sensors....[Perception] James Bailey (1996, p. 137)

Like the convergence of the tributaries of a river, and like the mighty Mississippi River that depends on the confluences of some 250 tributaries, this story is a tale of an urban university situated on the Mississippi River whose vision and mission were challenged by the turmoil in an Educational Leadership Department, which selected me as the Department Chair. One year later as I reflect and write about my first year at this university, I clearly see that I have been a searcher on a journey that is guided, although not determined, by my perceptions within the dynamic and often chaotic systems present in the world of academia. I deconstruct this story with the hope that this telling and re-telling will help educate others and myself about the complexities found in difficult change efforts and the kinds of leadership behaviors that facilitate that change and those kinds of behaviors that actually obstruct the change.

Since this is a story of my struggle to see the incongruence between the leadership behavior which I exhibited when I found myself in a very stressful leadership role and my belief system as a postmodern visionary, let us first examine

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my postmodern visionary belief system which has evolved over a lifetime of experiences as a teacher, principal, researcher, and leader in higher education.

Visionary Postmodernity Examined

I consider myself a visionary postmodernist. This is a term that Weaver and I have conceptualized and used for purposes of interpreting educational phenomena (Wesson & Weaver, 2002). From the purposely-elusive term, postmodern, we explain visionary postmodernists first by focusing on the perspectives of others that we would also label visionary postmodernists. The choice and explanation of this group undoubtedly tells more about our protocols of interpretation and reading than the authors we cite and co-opt for our purposes.

Included in this group that we call visionary postmodernists are curriculum theorists like Doll (1993) and Slattery (1995); literary critics such as Hayles (1990) and Herrnstein-Smith (1997); cultural critics like Haraway (1997) and Fiske (1993); feminists such as Brown (1995) and hooks (1989); physicists like Prigogine (1996); computer scientists like Bailey (1996); organizational theorists such as Wheatley (1992); and historians like Poster (1995, 1997). Although each theorist is in the process of constructing

visions of a postmodern world, their visions do not situate themselves as grand illusions that rival those of early laissez faire capitalists like Adam Smith and utopian socialists like Karl Marx. Instead they offer perspectives and alternative messages as frameworks for constructing a future. Visionary postmodernists see these alternative perspectives as hopeful ways to address the deep crisis of modernity. Although they share some of the skepticism of more critical and, sometimes, pessimistic postmodernists such as Jameson (1994), Baudrillard (1994), McLaren (1995), and Giroux (1994), they think it is possible to create alternatives to modernity which allow us to re-think our relationships not only with each other but with the environment, religion, science, economics, and culture.

As a visionary postmodernist, I now look to the postmodern interpretations of society and particularly the application of dynamic systems theory to reconfigure the notion of success as a construct of an imagined reality. Through the study (Wesson & Hauschildt, 1997) of the work of theorists (Bernstein, 1992; Haraway, 1991, 1997; Hayles, 1990, 1991; Wheatley, 1992), I understand the tension between that which has been accepted in the modern world as reality and what is considered to be reality in many sciences. I resonate with Tarnas (1991), who traces the history of the Western mind and explains reality in the postmodern era in this way:

> In virtually all contemporary disciplines, it is recognized that the prodigious complexity, subtlety, and multivalence of reality far transcend the grasp of any one intellectual approach, and that only a committed openness to the interplay of many perspectives can meet the extraordinary challenges of the postmodern era. (p. 404)

Since almost every intellectual discipline is reconsidering and redefining the epistemological context of its field, the individual is becoming more able to look at reality in less constricted ways. I am able to appreciate the interplay of the imagination, the "power and the complexity of the unconscious" (Tarnas, 1991, p. 405), and the intellectual position that "reality itself tends to unfold in response to the particular symbolic framework and set of assumptions that are employed by each individual and each society" (Tarnas, 1991, p. 406). From these postmodern perspectives, I have concluded that the world we attempt to know and remake is, in a very real sense, elicited by the frame of references and assumptions that we have internalized. I know that intellectually, but my behavior, in this leadership role, often did not reflect these beliefs.

The Role of Department Chair: Program Development

I began my new position as department chair in the fall of 2001. I was hired to address the complexity of a Leadership Department that was riddled with dilemmas that had a life of their own and that were taking the department away from the mission and goals of the university. Some pertinent facts: Before I was hired and during my first year as chair, both internal and external complaints

had been filed in the department, at one point with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. An internal investigation of the department by the Affirmative Action Office was taking place during the first months of my tenure, and a workplace harassment complaint was initiated in January. As a corollary to a report from the Affirmative Action Office, I received a letter from the President charging me with the responsibility of creating a more civil climate in the department and promoting cooperation among the faculty.

These were difficult circumstances for a new chair, but I had held a similar position at another university and I was excited about coming home to the region of my birth, where I had family, life-long friends, and an affinity for the problems of the region. I had spent much of my thirty-year career as a teacher and high school principal in the region and had researched educational issues associated with the area. I felt qualified and ready for the challenges. With this optimism, I began the first semester focusing on program development and asking for the cooperation of the department faculty to move ahead to accomplish goals that had been placed on the "back burner," waiting for new leadership. Faculty, including two other new hires, were cautiously willing to move forward with the program development, and during the first semester of my tenure, the faculty worked to craft a new master's program in educational leadership. All agreed the department needed to set priorities and that a program development focus should come first and then interpersonal issues should be addressed with the help of consultants during the second semester. Although there was success in writing an innovative masters program, cliques, which were evident to me through emails and phone calls even before I arrived on campus, began to coalesce around sensitive issues, and some faculty began to shut off discussion that differed from their point of view. Tension, which I had tried to hold in check, began to build and working relations among faculty deteriorated. By the beginning of second semester another EEOC complaint of workplace harassment was filed. Given the advantage of time and reflection, I now see that I was very task-oriented and did not give enough attention to the interpersonal difficulties that were developing between faculty and within myself. By this time I felt guilty; I had let people down; I was alone; I felt responsible for everyone's behavior. It was clear that I was acting out of assumptions that came out of my childhood, not out of a postmodern paradigm, but it took the help of an executive coach for me to "see" that only as people are willing to examine their belief systems and the projections that come out of these beliefs can dialogue, healing, and trust take place. Now let's hear from the executive coach, who was able to help me on this journey.

Department Leadership:
An Executive Coach's Perspective

Initiating—How Our Relationship Began
My first contact with the University of Memphis began when I heard the newly-appointed President of the university speak at the regular weekly

meeting of the Rotary Club. Her message was that "you can't have a strong city unless you have a strong city university, and, that you can't have a strong city university unless the city supports you" resonated strongly with me. The University, as well as the entire public education system in the state, was experiencing a budget crisis of unparalleled proportions. I resolved immediately to take action to support this inspiring leader.

I had many reasons to want to support the new President; as the first female president of this large, urban University, I wanted her to be "wildly successful." I believed and agreed with her compelling message. I wanted the experience of coaching in the educational sector. And most important to me, I wanted to give something back to the area and make a significant difference.

I wrote a personal note to the President offering my services as an executive coach for her or for one of her senior-level administrators. Within a few weeks she contacted me to say that she had a department chair who had actually requested coaching when she was hired, but the University was unable to meet her needs because of the previously mentioned budgetary restraints. When I agreed to take on the assignment, the President told me that I would hear shortly from the department chair. My phone rang less than ten minutes later.

Contracting—How We Established Our Partnership

I came to the initial meeting with the department chair planning to explore her desired outcomes for the coaching experience. Within the first few minutes I realized that we would not be able to accomplish that objective. I found a woman in turmoil and "stretched to the breaking point." Her conversation was unfocused. It was immediately clear to me that she exhibited all the symptoms of someone experiencing a high level of stress. As coaches, we are trained to meet our clients where they are, so I just let her "spill her guts" and gave up all hope of following my agenda.

The department chair portrayed herself as a "hero" who would overcome any obstacle in her way and do whatever it took to be successful. During our get-acquainted session my task was to understand her point of view. I focused all my energy on trying to be an active, engaged listener and responding with empathy to her concerns, while showing respect and building trust. During that session one of my biggest challenges was separating her personal from her professional issues.

When I asked the chair whether she had encountered other similar experiences in her professional career, she admitted that she had—and talked about them as well. I took a bold step for an initial session and suggested that perhaps she found herself once again in this situation because she still needed to learn her "life lesson." I have learned that people and situations continue to come into our lives—often with increasing intensity and harsher consequences—until we learn the lessons we are supposed to learn. I suggested that she was pushing and trying too hard to make things happen her way, and she was taking too much responsibility for the actions of others.

At the next session, we spent considerable time exploring the chair's "life lesson." I requested that she take off her cumbersome "suit of armor" and explore her need to be the hero and have things her way. I recommended that she read *The Four Agreements* by Don Miguel Ruiz and begin to explore books about the Enneagram. We spent the next several sessions talking about one of *The Four Agreements*—"don't take anything personally" and how this related to her situation in the Department of Leadership. She demonstrated understanding and accepted that actions by faculty members were not necessarily because of her. What others were thinking, saying and doing was a projection of their perceptions and their realities, not the perceptions and realities of the department chair.

Additionally, she "devoured" one of the several Enneagram books that I recommended.

> The modern Enneagram of personality type has been synthesized from many different spiritual and religious traditions.... It concerns itself with one element that is fundamental to all spiritual paths—self-knowledge.... It also sheds light clearly and nonjudgmentally on the aspects of our lives that are dark and unfree. (Riso & Hudson, 1999, pp. 9-10)

She was an eager student, a quick study, and identified her Enneagram Type almost immediately. This provided an important framework in our early discussions and helped her better understand the role she was playing.

Reacting to Circumstances—Moving from Hero to Victim

After several coaching sessions and under increasing stress, she retreated from her role of hero and took on a new role of victim. I observed a noticeable and startling change in her appearance, demeanor, and behavior. Gone was the belief and assumption that she could by sheer willpower fix anything. In its place was a person who exhibited many of the same traits and behaviors as the victim of a playground bully. Significantly, she was questioning her own leadership capabilities and effectiveness. I saw a transformation from hero to victim.

Alarmed by this "unhealthy" shift, I focused my coaching on how to survive and manage when she found herself in situations where she felt bullied and abused by faculty. I helped write a survival script, outlined steps to follow, and practiced role-playing. Once she felt comfortable with her new survival "tools," we moved on to discuss the importance of her being congruent and consistent in her leadership beliefs and behaviors.

Waking Up—Changing a Belief System

My challenge now became one of reframing how the department chair saw herself. She was not a *hero*, for in that role she was unable to influence or rescue the disruptive staff. She was not a *victim*, for in that role she would be of no help to anyone. It was important for her to own and be responsible for resolving the real issues.

We used some common symbols to help her see and understand what was going on around and inside her. "Monkeys" helped her understand that she was much too willing to accept everyone else's "monkeys" on her own already over-burdened shoulders. "Glasses" helped her see that she was able to take off her lenses, reframe what she was seeing, and put on new glasses in order to promote 20/20 vision.

Through my coaching, she began to understand how her internal beliefs and assumptions were causing characteristic patterns of behavior. Breakthroughs in her thoughts and actions led to new, more effective behaviors. When she realized that she was not responsible for or the cause of other people's behavior, she understood that she did not need to respond to every demand made of her by faculty members. She had choices in how to respond to these demands. She could refuse to accept someone else's "monkeys" or refer them to a higher-level administration official. It seemed as though she had started to wear a new pair of glasses.

Taking Positive Action—Moving from Victim to Advocate

Coaching discussions then centered on how to be an effective *advocate* and *leader*. The chair and I met individually with the President to keep her informed about our progress and assess her level of support. In addition to bringing her up-to-date, I needed to gain historical perspective on the Department of Leadership, and the actions, reactions or no actions that had occurred. I understood that the current situation was a problem that had been observed, studied and analyzed by many people over an extended period of time. Additionally, the President made it clear to me that she was committed to the Department of Leadership and most importantly, to this leader. I knew that her support was critical to beginning a process to resolve the situation.

The commitment of the President focused our coaching sessions on clarifying issues, building support, and taking action with upper administration and the faculty. We formatted specific actions to be taken. She met with the Acting Dean of the College of Education to transfer the appropriate "monkeys" from her back to his and gauge his level of support. She met with four former department chairs to learn from their experiences and gain their perspective on the situation. She met with the provost to state her position and ask for his help. And finally, she met with the Department of Leadership faculty to refocus their work on program development and to express her support for them.

She began to see clearly her role as an *advocate*—an advocate for all faculty members, the students, the university, local educators, and for the community. She understood how important it was to be an advocate for herself, and she willingly assumed a new role. Her progress was steady, but not always smooth. Sometimes she took a step "backward" only to take several steps forward. Her mindset and perceptions had changed and she continued to take effective action. Our coaching sessions began to focus on strategic planning and removing barriers, both real and perceived.

Going "Inside"—Understanding the Coaching Process

The coaching process focused on making an *internal shift* in the department chair's attitudes, beliefs, and needs. In the beginning, I tried to help her understand her unique frame of reference and how it was different from those around her; how this frame of reference led her to take certain actions, have certain reactions or take no action; how her actions determined the quality of her relationships; and how these relationships determined the outcome of the situation.

Once she began to perceive people and situations differently, she took more effective actions, developed quality relationships and worked at producing different outcomes. It is this resulting "transformation" that is the subject of this paper. She was able to make this transformation by:

- Believing in herself
- Owning her issues
- Committing to action
- Finding supporters
- Taking effective action
- Setting mutually-beneficial goals
- Being open to feedback and reframing
- Gaining support
- Building trust
- Developing herself

The department chair's ongoing "journey" is both professional and personal. As coaches, we encourage and support our clients taking both journeys simultaneously. Almost always, they testify to becoming more congruent, more authentic, and more integrated through the coaching process. And in fact, this client frequently commented on this integration and her "calling" to this university.

Department Leadership:
From the Chair's Perspective

I understood that assuming the chair's position was a challenging undertaking and an "outside" voice would be helpful in "seeing" and "re-seeing" the department dilemmas. During my interview for the chair position, I asked for an executive coach. The coach helped me sort, piece by piece, and re-see the dilemmas even though she did not use the academic language of the postmodern theorists. Without her help, it would have taken longer to "see" and "re-see" my own behavior and the behavior of others.

Leader as Hero

Although I did not consciously see myself as a "hero" with the responsibility to "fix" the department, I now see that I did play that role. I actively listened to the voice of the faculty, but, I wanted, as one faculty member insightfully told me in a faculty meeting, "to put a bandage on the problems of the past."

First semester, I took a short-sighted view of success by working with the faculty to write grants and re-design the master's program, without attempting to "take the bandage off," expose the wound, and look for ways to heal. I saw success in preserving relationships between and among the faculty without examining difficult issues. The faculty and I shied away from these deeper and more difficult issues affecting the working relationships in the department. I now see that this behavior actually sustains dysfunctional behavior for all those involved. I took the easy way out, but the underlying issues inevitably rose again and again.

Leader as Victim

The flip-side of hero is victim; if you take too much responsibility for other's dilemmas, the dilemmas become yours. You become the victim. In this paper, oppression is the condition created by an imposition of power. In order to have an oppressive condition, someone has to be oppressed, to receive power as imposed in some way. "Oppression received" focuses concern on persons outside and involves the acceptance by a victim of physically, mentally, or unconsciously imposed power. In some instances, such as physical assault, a victim literally has no opportunity to exert a counter-power, thus "acceptance" is forced and alternative options are not available (Wesson & Hauschildt, 1997).

The perception of oneself as a victim assumes powerlessness as a mindset and thus prevents any proactive search for agency or personal control. A victim responds rather than acts. An "academic victim," psychologically trapped and ideologically controlled, blames the institution and other faculty members for the ramifications of feeling oppressed rather than reexamining why, when, and how one is believing in and accepting control (Wesson & Hauschildt, 1997). I did not recognize these patterns in myself, and so I did not allow myself to develop alternative actions that could have changed my feelings of powerlessness into "power defused" or "power with." The executive coach helped me go "inside" myself.

Leader as Activist

I became aware that I had to interrupt, reexamine, and reinvent thoughts and actions that kept me trapped in oppressive ways of living, As the executive coach began to challenge my assumptions and to push rationalizations of choices and behaviors, I was able to search for patterned behaviors that occur before reflective thought and extended analysis can interrupt/disrupt the action. These dialogues with the executive coach were conversational and flexible rather than structured; as such, they were open to Freire's notion of dialoguing as a search for personal knowledge that is continuously reshaped by new knowledge and experiences (Polanyi, 1958). During this process, I learned to own my issues and not feel responsible for other person's behaviors and the projections that came out of their belief systems.

I now more fully understood the power of the unconscious and the interplay of the unconscious and reality as the unconscious unfolds in response to a

particular set of assumptions that are employed by each person. I knew more clearly that the world we attempt to know and remake is in a very real sense projectively elicited by the frame of references and assumptions that we have internalized. I also knew that it was very difficult, particularly under stress, not to fall back on scripted behaviors that are deeply imbedded within the psyche and that are attached to past ideas of success; i.e., over working, out performing, volunteering more, and accepting more responsibility.

Concluding Remarks

For the postmodern visionary leader, learning is an inclusive act that displaces beliefs about what is appropriate to learn and how learning takes place. We all learn from experiences, both individually and collectively. Postmodern, in this sense, is a pathway to democratic notions of knowledge formation. In the department, we were all learners, we were all being disrupted by experiences and the confluence of our energies. Like the Mississippi River with its merging tributaries, all energies come together to shape and reshape our ideas about what it means to be a department, and what it means to be a member of that department, a part of a college of education, and a unit in a university. When we are open to possibilities that come from experiencing life in this way, we are like the river, never the same from one moment to the next, always moving, differentiating, churning, merging, and emerging sometimes with clarity and sometimes with the residuals of the past still clinging to the present moment.

> Things falling apart is a kind of testing and also a kind of healing. We think that the point is to pass the test or to overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don't really get solved. They come together and they fall apart. Then they come together again and fall apart again. It's just like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for joy. (Chödrön, 1997, p. 8)

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