

"I'M GOING THROUGH THESE CHANGES"

A Course in Adult Development

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In the summer of 1976, while browsing through my favorite bookstore, I came across Gail Sheehy's *Passages—Predictable Crises in Adult Life*. The book leaf says:

"The years between 18 and 50 are the center of life, a time of growth and opportunity. But until now no guide had existed to help us understand the mysterious process by which we become adults . . . yet what Gesell and Spock did for children hasn't been done for us adults. Whenever psychologists do address themselves to adult life, it is in terms of its 'problems'—rarely from the perspective of continuing changes throughout the life cycle. But now a new concept of adult development has begun to emerge."¹

In 1976 that statement seemed quite accurate. Sheehy's book was delving into new territory. Her book excited me. What could be more interesting than finding out about yourself? Besides, I had just begun teaching for the human services program at Western Washington University and it seemed that a course on adult development would be quite appropriate. I had been attracted to working for the Human Services Program because its students were older and they came into the classroom with life and work experience. The program only hired

professionals, like me, who had had experience as a "practitioner" in human services, as well as an advanced degree. A major emphasis of the program for both faculty and students has been the integration of theory and practice.

The faculty operates out of the adult learning model which carries a different set of assumptions than traditional "pedagogy." According to this model, an important assumption is that an adult comes into an educational activity largely because he is experiencing *some inadequacy in coping with current life problems*.² It is this assumption, in particular, that made offering a course on adult development seem so appropriate. With an average student age of 33, our students reflect movement through adult turning points. Most of them are re-entering school because of changes in the patterns of their lives. Many students are recently divorced, some widowed. Many of the male students served in Viet Nam. Many of them talk of feeling that there seemed to be something missing in their lives. In essence, they are reflecting the internal shifts occurring in their personal values.

A course on adult development, it seemed to me, could help students understand what was going on in their lives. They could see that what they were feeling and thinking was a common phenomenon, rather than a symptom of some kind of sickness. In addition, by understanding their changes and sharing them with other students, they would build a support network within the program. Exploring the area of adult development might help them to free the energy they needed to learn and study—and it would certainly help them in future work with adults. The course, *Adult Development*, became the second in a three-course series on human development; the other two being *Child Development*, and *Aging*. The course has been offered in the winter quarter, which is a wonderful time of transition in Washington State. January through March is a metaphorical turning point. In January it is dark and rainy, by March it is light and warm with flowers and trees bursting into bloom. There is a move from darkness to light, from dormancy to life.

In designing the course, I decided to emphasize three areas. The first area is that adult developmental

stages are defined and identified differently than those of childhood, adolescence, and aging. The others are change and turning points, and symbolism and ritual as facilitators of change. Development in children is usually equated with physiological change. The psychological tasks of aging also involve physiological change—the process of deterioration. The developmental tasks of adulthood are different. The changes are not physical—they are emotional and are centered on philosophical and value changes that occur through one's interaction with society and constant redefinition of "self." It often takes us our first 30 years to become a self, and then we find that we don't like how we've defined our life. We then go through the struggle of choosing either to remain the same or make necessary changes in our life to fit how we want to be. Gail Sheehy's book was the first to identify the stages with their particular developmental issues. The most popular one has been the 30s crisis, but each decade has its conflict. It is important, too, to know that unlike physiological change we can choose to make changes or not. If we choose to make change we can become more alive and develop a clearer sense of the options available to us. If we choose not to, we become less—we calcify.

Needless to say, experiencing these turning points can be exciting, frightening and depressing. It depends on how we view the situation we're in and our options. To encourage students to explore change thoughtfully and enthusiastically, it is important to design an environment for learning which encourages trust, interesting learning projects and stimulating reading and assignments. Theory and life are to be examined and integrated. Interaction and exchange of feelings between students, and between students and instructor are to be emphasized.

The stages and turning points of adult life are real, and they are unique although predictable. I feel that intellectual knowledge of them is not enough. There is a need to feel them, and to free ourselves from debilitating blinders and dysfunctional behaviors. For students who are learning to work with people, it seems to be a far more powerful learning process to integrate this knowledge into their repertoire of skills by having worked through some of these turning points and "goodbyes" in their lives.

I feel that it is crucial in our culture to reintegrate the symbolic and the metaphorical into daily life. The science fiction description of zombie-like, chemical-ingesting masses seems far-fetched to me, but if we lose our sense of the magical and the spiritual we are more vulnerable. People can radiate a sense of self and a connectedness to the world around them when they have a sense of their connectedness to themselves. For this reason I have included the use of rituals and symbols in the course.

In my work with adults I have kept traditional lecturing to a minimum. I enjoy creating learning situations where students learn from integration of content material (short lectures, texts, discussion) with experiential exercises done in class. These exercises are done in small groups and often include artwork, music, movement and journal writing. Learning is by doing. Wholistic learning theory has provided a burgeoning base for the type of learning environments I create. The wholistic approach states that people learn in different ways and that both the right and left hemispheres of the brain are involved in the learning process. This means that both the intuitive and the logical parts of the mind are engaged in the active process of learning. Crucial, too, is the relationship between the student and the instructor. To learn one must be in a receptive, relaxed and trusting

state. Much of this is created by the instructor and there needs to be congruence between the conscious and unconscious messages of the instructor to the student.

Perhaps some of my approach to teaching comes from the fact that I was trained to be a mental health professional rather than an academician. Before I entered the university system I had worked extensively as a psychotherapist with severely disturbed children. I found working with children very enjoyable, especially when we used art forms as vehicles of expression. Children could so readily tap into understanding their feelings when they were drawing a picture or when they were creating a story with dolls. I later employed these methods with adults in therapy settings and found that they worked. Psychodrama and role-playing also helped adults get in touch with their feelings, and thereby facilitated their self-understanding. It seems natural, looking at it now, to see why I use dramatic and artistic modes in the classroom. It is my early training and experience that also allows me to be comfortable with students expressing deep feelings in a classroom setting. It is vital for someone who works with people to be aware of his own feelings and his reactions to other people who are sharing those feelings.

The adult development course is offered for three credits. It meets all day for three Saturdays, and two evening sessions that are three hours in length. The bulk of the course material is covered during the Saturday sessions. The first evening meeting is for orientation and syllabus review. The second evening session is for evaluation and class wrap-up. The course goals are (1) to present and critically examine some of the current and traditional research in adult developmental theory, which includes the works of

Erik Erikson, Carl Jung, Gail Sheehy, Daniel Levinson and Maggie Scarf; (2) to provide the opportunity for students to make connections between theory and practical application; (3) to examine the interrelationships in the self between change processes and strategies, turning points and adult growth, and (4) to review the experiences and projects done for the class and how "adult development" applies to human services work.

In the first evening meeting the syllabus is reviewed after students and instructor have begun to get acquainted through a self-disclosure exercise. In this exercise, students are asked to share some things about themselves that will help other class members know who they are. Their disclosure should be as pertinent to their lives as possible. To model the requested behavior, I usually go first. The purpose of this exercise is to begin the process of group building and intimacy that is important in the coursework.

During the first Saturday class I present a lecture on developmental stages, including a historical context and current theories. The class then divides into small groups in which they share photo-montages of their lives which they have been asked to bring to class. They are asked to choose photos that reflect the adult developmental stages they've gone through. What makes the montages so exciting for students is that they represent actual events, people, and feelings. To construct these montages students must have an understanding of adult stages and turning points. Finding and organizing the photos activates their memory and helps them recall feelings and events from their past. This enriches their understanding of their current life. This process, by itself, is powerful.

Sharing the montages escalates the learning process. Talking about one's life in a supportive environment is exciting. Everyone in the small group

develops a profound sense of the other students' lives. A richness of variety and similarity is shared. Connections are made. The adage that a picture is worth a thousand words is true.

At the end of the class session, all the montages are lined up. Spread around the room are people's lives, reflecting different ages, races, fashions, economics, and lifestyles.

The second Saturday class begins with a brief slide show, with taped musical accompaniment, using the theme, "Seasons of Our Lives." Before the slide show begins, a poem is read that focuses on the theme. The slides selected reflect love, anger, fun, confusion, family, aloneness, nature, old people, children, babies, couples, and single people in different contexts. The background music is a composite of popular songs and classical music and includes Bach's *Canon in D*, Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, Janis Ian singing *When We Were Seventeen*, the Beatles, and James Taylor.

Immediately after the slide show, students are asked to write in their journals whatever the slides and music may have evoked for them. The journals, then, become personalized places for thoughts, connections and feelings and become bridges for integrating learnings. They provide the place for students to see the richness of their own experiences and just how experience and creativity facilitate their growth.

A lecture on change in adult life and the implications of turning points follows. Stanley Kelleman describes "turning points" as:

"... emotional journeys. They are life's upswellings . . . and a new way is emerging; they are rites of passage in life. They are the intersections and intensifications of new encounters, new images, new impulses, catalyzing, brewing riches, charging the atmosphere. They are the roots of new directions and self formation. They are the shapers of our bodies."³

After the lecture, students are asked to list the beginnings and endings of their lives. When it is completed, they break into small groups to discuss their lists and answer the question: "What do you need to become, change, give up, or let go of, to complete your turning point?"

At the close of the second Saturday, a brief lecture on ritual is given. The content emphasizes the need in our culture to redevelop meaningful ritual. Ritual and symbolism have become discounted. Joseph Campbell recently stated that a major difficulty in American culture is that folk ideas and myth are not incorporated into the culture. People are left without a mythology and without a symbolic life. When this occurs, the culture dies. Most older cultures—Greece, China, India—have a mythology that puts the purpose of a person's life into a symbolic context. I believe that Americans also need to develop symbols and myths.⁴

The third Saturday is designed to be a day of celebration and ritual. I describe ritual as a vehicle for giving form and substance to inner psychological processes. Effective rituals provide a safe and protected space where strong emotion can be expressed, contained and transformed. The transformation helps prepare the way for further change and for coping with new ways of being. Students are asked to design a ritual using symbolic processes. Their rituals may be private, for a few participants, or for the entire class. They may use music, poetry, role play, costume, flowers, whatever. Some of the rituals that have been performed include a young man creating a goodbye ritual for a relationship that had just ended; a woman ritualizing her acknowledgement of passing into middle age; a mother ritualizing the changes that had occurred in her relationships with her children, and a woman ritualizing her divorce.

The final Saturday class emphasizes ritual and the moving

from darkness to light. It is a time for celebration. Usually I bring fresh daffodils to class and give them to everyone. Students are asked to wear special clothes and bring food for a potluck lunch. This year one woman baked a special butterfly cake. The butterfly symbolized the metamorphosis we were all experiencing.

The books I have used for this course have changed each time it has been offered. Since *Passages* was published in 1976, a number of books have appeared that provide excellent material. Daniel Levinson's *Seasons of a Man's Life* and Maggie Scarf's *Unfinished Business* have provided the most recent theoretical base. Scarf describes how women's physiology and psychology often make her tasks different from a man's. A major focus for her is the high incidence of depression in women. Levinson looks at the developmental tasks men face. Sam Keen's *Beginning Without End* has been used as a "case study." Keen uses the seasonal metaphor to describe a major turning point in his life—divorce after twenty years of marriage. His book is rich; filled with poems, ponderings and allegorical stories.

Grading student work in this type of class can be difficult! I have developed grading criteria that define what is expected for C-level work and for A/B-level work. C-level work includes the montage and active participation in class activities; A/B-level work demonstrates a more sophisticated understanding on a theoretical and application plane. Evaluating learning is not a cut-and-dried process. Learning is not just demonstrated in a good paper—and I always make it clear to students that a good paper does not mean an immediate A, nor does a less-developed paper necessarily mean that one won't get an A. The grade takes into consideration the total learning experience of the student.



During the last evening class, students evaluate the course and share comments on various ways that they have been affected. "I had time to think about and to actually do and make change." "You have to be in a place where you're willing to look at yourself." "I liked hearing how other people handled stages and problems in their lives. This was an aspect of problemsolving that was helpful." "Closeness developed among class members and that's important." "I felt the lack of ritual in my life. The only ritual that occurred was when I left the family for marriage. This is a 'high tech' society where ritual is discounted." "I liked the encouragement to return to the symbolic." "I really found myself identifying with the women Scarf wrote about." "I found myself underlining every page of Scarf."

The Adult Development class has been very popular. It meets the needs and interests of the adult learner. It has been a place where connections about one's life occur and where these connections serve the purpose of learning about self and others. Adult students have responded with great excitement and pleasure to using photos, rituals and other symbolic processes. They say it has enriched their lives. And, it seems that enrichment, excitement, and aliveness are what learning is about.

Footnotes

- ¹Sheehy, Gail. *Passages—Predictable Crises in Adult Life*, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976.
- ²Knowles, Malcolm. *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*, 2nd edition, Houston, Texas: Gulf Publishing, 1978, pp. 55-59.
- ³Kelleman, Stanley. *Living Your Dying*, New York: Random House, p. 21.
- ⁴Campbell, Joseph. "Psyche and Symbol," a lecture, Seattle, Washington, February 28, 1981.

References

- Marjorie Fiske. *Middle Age—The Prime of Life?*, Willemstad, Curacao: Multimedia Publications, 1979.
- Sam Keen. *Beginning Without End*, New York: Harper & Row, 1975.
- Daniel Levinson, et al. *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978.
- Maggie Scarf. *Unfinished Business: Pressure Points in the Lives of Women*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1980.
- Stephen A. Tobin. "Saying Goodbye," in *Gestalt Is*, John O. Stevens, editor. Moab, Utah: Real People Press, 1975.

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