
PERSPECTIVES

Presidential Address 1998—A Personal Odyssey: The Story Behind the Story

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The real voyage of discovery consists not of seeing new lands but in seeing with new eyes.—*Marcel Proust*

In this address I share a “voyage of discovery” as collectively we think about why we entered the field of mental retardation, and why we have stayed. For each of us, it has been a personal odyssey, and each of us has a story to tell as to how we got involved in the field and why we have stayed. In this presentation, I want to go beyond our personal stories and share with you five common themes I have gleaned from a number of my colleagues who are both “thinkers and doers” in the field of mental retardation. After sharing those five themes, I will discuss major personality characteristics of these persons, concluding with a brief discussion of the implications that these themes and personality characteristics have for ourselves, the field, and our association. I hope that you will see yourself in their odysseys and your personality characteristics in theirs. For me, their odyssey has been my odyssey and, to a very large degree, their personality characteristics are mine.

A person making a presidential address has two choices. One is to summarize the state of the field and the association. I hope that I have done this through my Presidential Columns in *News and Notes*. In case you have missed those columns, I will simply paraphrase a good friend and former AAMR President Bill Kiernan (1996), who stated in his AAMR Presidential Address 2 years ago that we have come a long way, but are not there yet. Indeed, we still have considerable work to do to truly see:

- Adequate financial and political support for research and prevention
- An informed and accepting public
- An organization that responds successfully to the challenges and opportunities provided by

the three Cs of today's world: consumers, change, and competition

- Full inclusion and an enhanced quality of life for persons with disabilities

As important as these issues are, I have chosen the second option: to discuss with you the state of our members, asking us to do what another good friend and former AAMR President Jack Stark (1992) suggested in his presidential address 5 years ago, to talk more personally as we pursue jointly “a personal odyssey [and the] story behind the story.” This second option was reinforced by my rereading of George Washington's farewell address given in 1796. Washington's objective was to speak directly to the American people and

offer to your solemn contemplation and to recommend to your frequent review some sentiments which are the result of much reflection, and which appear to me all important to the permanency of your happiness as a people. (quoted in Spalding, 1996, p. 66)

The original idea for this presentation came from a simple question I asked myself one day: How did I get into this field, and why did I stay? As with any simple question, the answer became complex. The more I thought about my personal odyssey, the more apparent it became that each of us has a unique story to tell about how we got to where we are. As a scientist, however, I added an additional question: Are there some general themes found in all odysseys, and, if so, what implications might these universal themes have for ourselves, the field, and our association?

I approached the task by following the three basic elements of scientific thinking (Brinton, 1965). First, I started with a conceptual scheme that suggested we enter the field purposefully because of strong motivation and many opportunities to succeed. Second, I hunted for a suitable supply of facts by interviewing 25 persons from throughout the world whom I consider to

be "leaders and doers" in the field of mental retardation. Finally, I used logic and intuition to find common themes and personality characteristics.

As I interviewed these persons and analyzed their responses to my questions, it became very apparent to me that I was experiencing the power of stories. Stories have the ability to create community, help us see through the eyes of other people, and show us the consequences of our actions (Sanders, 1997). I also had the pleasure of reading during this time McPherson's (1997) excellent book on the Civil War. This book was based on an analysis of 25,000 letters and 250 diaries from men on both sides of the conflict. In reading these stories, I was impressed by the fact that these Civil War soldiers were motivated by duty and honor, religious faith, and their firm belief in the cause for which they fought: the principles of liberty, freedom, and justice. I kept asking myself the question, Is this also true of those of us who during the last 3 decades have been involved in a significant movement in human history. A joint effort to make things better for those who historically have been considered *less*? As I share my respondents' stories with you, I think that you will agree with the fundamental truth of the following three statements. The first was made by Thomas Carlyle more than 150 years ago. He said that "history is the essence of innumerable biographies." The second is Jean Renoir's famous dictum that "everyone has their reasons." The third is the anonymous statement that, "every memory has a dream in it."

Let us begin understanding the personal odysseys of the respondents by looking at their demographics. Eight were female, 17 male. The primary occupations included administration (8), teaching/education (10), research (8), and clinical/habilitation services (5). The countries represented in the sample were 1 each from Australia, Belgium, Canada, Finland, and Spain; 2 from the Republic of China; and 18 from the United States. Their highest academic degrees included high school diploma (3), BA (2), MA (4), MD (1), JD (1), and PhD (14).

Common Themes

At the heart of the personal odysseys of these 25 persons were the following five themes: chance events got us here, opportunities hooked us, others supported our efforts, incentives kept us, and odysseys are interactive and involve change.

Theme 1: Chance Events Got Us Here

The central thesis of the first theme is that chance events play a prominent role in shaping the course of our lives. More than one respondent mentioned, for example, that "it just happened." In fact, only 3 of the 25 (12%) responded that they had planned to get into the field. So how did they get into the field? The majority entered the field through a job opportunity (16), experience (e.g., volunteering or internship) (7), or a graduate school offering (6). To show just how fortuitous and "chancy" these events were, note the following: One respondent walked into the wrong graduate office and found that money was available in the field of rehabilitation; another retrieved a brochure from his advisor's wastepaper basket. Most had little fore-knowledge of the field of mental retardation, stating frequently that they "had not a clue" of what the field really involved. Others responded that "I was never trained to do what I do" but that "this was something that I had to do." Common to each of these chance events was a sentiment expressed by one respondent:

In short, each of these "accidents" made for opportunities to give service to others—a reminder that it is not the "accidents" of our lives that are important but rather how each person turns such accidents into opportunities.

The psychological literature (e.g., Bandura, 1982; Miller, 1983; Pepitone & Saffiotti, 1997) on chance events tells us that some chance encounters touch people only lightly, others leave more lasting effects, and still others determine the course of one's life. Why? Again, the literature is quite clear: The impact of chance events is due to personal susceptibilities, which in turn are related to personal attributes and experiences. Respondents were asked about their interests prior to entering the field of mental retardation. Again, there was considerable agreement among the respondents: Most wanted to improve services/interventions (15), help others generally (10), teach (9), or do research (7).

Thus, chance events got us here; but our respondents were primed to be hooked by these opportunities, which is also consistent with the literature on career decision-making. This literature suggests strongly that (a) success-strivers work hard at finding the places and times at which they are most likely to have lucky accidents (Seligman, 1981); chance factors may create possibilities for influence, but it is per-

sonal planning and ability acting on those factors that make them meaningful (Salomone & Slaney, 1981), and (c) chance encounters can be energizers of decisions only if the person is sensitive to their meaning (Roe & Baruch, 1967).

These findings remind me of Pasteur's famous remark that "chance favors the prepared mind." They also indicate that people have at least some control over the chance encounters and events in their lives and, more importantly, control over how to interpret and react to those encounters and events. I found that these 25 respondents knew how to convert chance events into excellent opportunities to excel and succeed—an observation that leads to the second theme.

Theme 2: Opportunities Hooked Us

It is not surprising that each of the respondents was an entrepreneur in his or her own right. In a general sense, each took advantage of the opportunities afforded and were reinforced for their efforts. As Bandura (1982) stated:

The course that human behavior follows is substantially influenced by the effect it produces. Hence, the internal and external rewards that come from opportunities play a crucial role in determining whether chance encounters have a significant impact. (p. 752)

One respondent expressed this notion well when he said,

Chance events gave me the opportunity, but my risk-taking nature and the reinforcement from my colleagues allowed me to convert that opportunity to what I am currently doing in research and service delivery.

What were these opportunities that allowed people to "get hooked"? Most sought additional training (12), and others had the opportunity to conduct research (10), apply their ideas or techniques (10), start new programs (7), teach (6), or become an advocate (5). Four aspects of these opportunities stood out. The first was *the opportunity to associate*. For example, one respondent noted that,

One of the main factors in my never ending motivation is the direct contacts I have with self-advocates and families. They become real friends, and they taught me a lot about the difference between research objects and persons who are willing to participate in research projects.

A second aspect of these opportunities was *the opportunity for additional training*. For example In 1979 I had no intention of continuing my PhD. But in 1981, research funds were very scarce, and in the

competition to hold my place in our research group, I agreed to go back for my PhD. I was thus selected over another person vying to keep her job. The advantage to the research group was that my credentials would help them get new grants, and I could eventually serve as a principal investigator.

A third aspect of these opportunities was that they were *frequently the result of one person*. One respondent mentioned, for example, that, "My opportunities were largely the result of one man and his associates who invested in new teachers and researchers. This encouraged me to 'buy into the field'."

Finally, these *opportunities allowed for advancement*. As one colleague stated,

At that time [middle to late 1970s], I perceived there to be considerable opportunities for research funding. Plus, there were not many developmental researchers who were in the field of mental retardation. I saw MR/DD as a field where there were opportunities for junior scholars to advance rapidly.

Thus, opportunities hooked our respondents and allowed them to take advantage of the exciting changes that were occurring in the field during the 1970s and early 1980s. The opportunities also provided the reinforcement and utility that come from colleagues, additional training, and advancement. Note also, however, that others supported their efforts.

Theme 3: Others Supported Our Efforts

The branching power of fortuitous encounters is most graphically revealed when a chance incident permanently alters the course of peoples' lives by bringing them into an entirely new circle of associates (Bandura, 1982). This, in turn, leads to increased satisfaction, involvement, and friendships. Who were these supporters, and what type of support did they provide? Most were peers or colleagues (16) or self-advocates and families (14); a few were teachers and mentors (6) or an organization (4).

The types of support provided were, as one might predict (Schalock, 1995), *emotional*, which typically involved the expression of interest and concern; *appraisal*, which involved helping these respondents evaluate their goals, plan effective strategies, and provide feedback; *informational*, which included providing advice about how to handle problems and situations; and *instrumental*, which frequently involved providing material aid and services.

Part of the supports came from people and part from organizations, such as AAMR. Note

the importance of support provided by colleagues in the following respondent's response:

As an aside, my high school class elected me 'Trail Blazer.' Little did they know that the prediction would come true. I have truly had the chance to blaze new trails throughout my career, and it has been most satisfying.

Feedback from long-term respected friends and colleagues has been helpful and quite rewarding. It has kept me involved and interested on a day-to-day basis. It has been my good fortune to know many smart, energetic, interesting and kind people who work in this field. This had made a difference—soaring with eagles has been rewarding and satisfying.

Note also the support given by organizations, such as AAMR:

AAMR reflected my personal belief that it could be done and that you could make a difference. It also provided me with an opportunity to contribute and was a wonderful foundation from which to work.

In the end, people join a crusade or movement and commit their time and resources to it because they find meaning, value, and a sense of accomplishment from their association. This was certainly true of the 25 respondents. To quote Block (1992), "we serve when we build capability in others by supporting ownership and choice at every level" (p. 40); but we also join that crusade or movement because there is some incentive for doing so.

Theme 4: Incentives Kept Us

Psychologists tell us that human behavior is governed in part by value preferences and partly by self-evaluative standards. *Value preferences* govern the extent to which social encounters shape the course of personal development; *self-evaluative standards* are a source of guidance that give people direction in their lives and allow them to derive satisfaction from what they do. The most frequent incentives cited by the respondents included internal satisfaction (19), followed by creative outlets for ideas (17), making changes (16), receiving recognition (13), and associating with colleagues (10). Listen to some of the major incentives that kept our respondents in the field:

- To know why is more important than to know how.
- A very big incentive came from the opportunities I had to meet the major players in

the MR/DD field at AAMR meetings. For me, this was probably the Number 1 incentive to staying in the field:

- The most valued incentive is the realization that a considerable number of students with disabilities I taught now have better opportunities as a result of my personal involvement. Equally important is the knowledge that I have influenced many undergraduate and postgraduate students to become better teachers and/or researchers. I am also proud that I have had some influence on policy developments, both state and nationally from my advocacy and research initiatives. The building of small researcher teams has also been most gratifying. I guess the greatest reward all teachers dream about is the knowledge that you have helped all your students (irrespective of their talents) create a better life for themselves and for those they come into contact with.
- If I can save people the 5 years that it took me to become comfortable in speaking out as a self-advocate, then it is time well spent.
- Overall, the feedback and rewards I have received working in the field have been immensely gratifying. Early in my career, they probably were more immediately tangible (job security and benefits and the immediate satisfaction of working directly with individuals). Later, they became more abstract, but perhaps more fundamental. Now, for example, I am more excited by ideas and by efforts to achieve conceptual understanding of the research areas that interest me. My work now is probably influencing many more people than it did early in my career, but it happens in a less obvious, slower developing way (e.g., influences on systems and the osmosis of ideas) that turns out to be actually more rewarding than the earlier reinforcers.

Note that both value preferences and self-evaluative standards are reflected in these quotes regarding incentives. Note also, especially in the last quote, the fact that incentives—as with odysseys—change over time as we interact with a constantly changing environment.

Theme 5: Odysseys Are Interactive and Involve Change

Human development results from the reciprocal relationship between individuals and their environments. Bronfenbrenner (1977), for example, stressed that human development is a

progressive mutual accommodation . . . between a growing human and the changing immediate environments in which he lives . . . as well as the larger social contexts in which the settings are embedded. (p. 514)

Analysis of the 25 respondents' stories confirmed that the branching power of chance encounters depends upon reciprocal relationships and progressive mutual accommodations that occur within constantly changing social contexts. These components, however, come into play at particular decision points that are influenced significantly by the strength of one's initial commitment, opportunities available, the feedback we receive, the amount of risk we are willing to take, and our receptivity to change (Cabral & Salomone, 1990; Gergen, 1977; Krumboltz, Mitchell, & Jones, 1976; Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1983). Note the dynamics of these reciprocal relationships in the following response.

Had I accepted other, more prestigious offers in 1964, I might have ended up becoming an educational bureaucrat. Again in 1973 I was tempted to move into educational administration, but the opportunity to become involved in research in a time of great excitement in special education in the mid-1970s was too seductive. Deep down, despite my not inconsiderable teaching talents, I felt quite ignorant of answers to so many problems special educators faced. I also had a keen sense of the injustice and of the negative attitudes which surrounded people with disabilities.

I trust that you will agree that these five themes—chance events got us here, opportunities hooked us, others supported our efforts, incentives kept us, and odysseys are interactive and involve change—reflect your odyssey and mine. Amazingly, they also reflect the odyssey of Thomas Jefferson, whose words provide this year's AAMR Conference theme, "In Pursuit of Life, Liberty, and Happiness."

Two excellent books on the history and character of Thomas Jefferson have been published recently. Ellis's (1996) book, which won the 1997 National Book Award for nonfiction, and Ambrose's (1996) volume give us considerable insight into the themes of Jefferson's personal odyssey. In reading these two books, I was struck with the parallels between Jefferson and the issues and challenges that he faced and the issues and challenges faced by our 25 respondents. For example, *chance* events got Jefferson to the Continental Congress and his role in writing the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson was not elected to the original delegation to the Continental Congress in 1774 because he was not considered a sufficiently

prominent figure to be included with the likes of George Washington and Patrick Henry. Jefferson's recent biographer stated that Jefferson "entered into national politics by the side door" (Ellis, 1996, p. 30) because he was appointed to replace a colleague who had more important things to do.

Opportunities also hooked Jefferson. He was an excellent writer who shunned public speaking. In large part, he was selected to write the Declaration because John Adams and the other delegates had what they considered to be more important things to do. Interestingly, "no one at the time regarded the drafting of the Declaration as a major responsibility of honor" (Ellis, 1996, p. 49).

Also, Jefferson was a visionary and dreamer of how things ought to be and was *supported* by the likes of John Adams. His writing was both an incentive and a vehicle for him to express his hope "in the future, to live for mankind as I have heretofore lived for myself" (Ambrose, 1996, p. 31). To that end, Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence in a matter of a few days. The most famous section of the Declaration, which has become the most quoted statement of human rights in recorded history, went through the Continental Congress without comment and with only one very minor change. These are, in all probability, the best-known 58 words in American history:

We hold these truths to be self evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain [inherent and] inalienable Rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

Finally, Jefferson's *odyssey was interactive and involved change*. He found himself in a discordant situation: a slave owner who hated slavery, living in a country that wanted to be free and to expand. His career was characterized by conflicts over the solitude of his mountain home that he loved and his desire and quest for public service. Thus, throughout his distinguished career, he moved among reciprocal relationships and changing social contexts as he attempted to end slavery and expand the boundaries of our country.

Thus, Thomas Jefferson's personal odyssey involved the same five themes as yours and mine. But is there more? Is there still a "story behind the story"? Yes, there is, and it is in the form of personality characteristics that are also

common to persons who are “thinkers and doers” in the field of mental retardation. It is to that issue—common personality characteristics among our 25 respondents—that I now wish to focus our thinking.

Common Personality Characteristics

Psychologists (such as McCrae & Costa, 1987, 1990) tell us that there are five major personality characteristics that explain much of one’s behavior: neuroticism, extroversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. After analyzing our 25 respondents’ stories, I would like to suggest my “Big Five” personality characteristics of those who are “thinkers and doers” in the field of mental retardation. They include resourceful, person-centered, real change leaders, integrated, and optimistic.

Resourceful

Our respondents were like the early Greeks and remind me of Homer and his odyssey. Homer, the great 6th century BC poet, gave us the word *odyssey*. No person better reflects resourcefulness than Odysseus in Homer’s *Odyssey*. This epic tells the story of how Odysseus, at the end of the Trojan War, returned from Troy to his home in Ithaca. Even for the crafty Odysseus, who had devised the Trojan horse to sneak Greeks into Troy, it was not an easy journey. He lost his fleet of ships, and all of his companions died. The trip, beset by delays, errors, whims of the gods, foul weather, seduction by women, and the willfulness of his ship mates, took 10 years; and when he finally got home, Odysseus had the ugly problem of facing a large gang of his wife’s rowdy suitors. But he succeeded, as did our 25 respondents. How?

- His strength lay in his resourcefulness. He knew how to augment his rapidly dwindling resources by forging informal links to other people across organizational lines. He bootlegged, persuaded, threatened, cajoled, and even begged.
- He rarely lost sight of his goal. He made management by objectives work because he was obsessed with the idea of getting home, and this sustained him for 10 years and allowed him to overcome the most alluring distractions and barriers.

Person-Centered

Our respondents were also Renaissance people, who could both appreciate the value of the person and simplify the goals that jointly we have for individuals with disabilities: to increase their independence, productivity, and community integration. The Renaissance glorified the individual’s personal needs and aspirations. Time and again, Renaissance man changed his institutions and challenged commonly held beliefs. Renaissance man emerged from the gloomy backdrop of the Middle Ages as an individualist and humanist who placed a new emphasis on individuals and their place in the universe. Renaissance man celebrated the power of will. Petrarach, the 14th century Italian poet and classical scholar who became known as the “father of the Renaissance” put it well when he stated, “It is better to will the good than to know the truth” (cited in Clemens & Mayer, 1987, p. 87). Renaissance man became truly independent. He was, indeed, the first entrepreneur, relying not on religion, organization, or any outside force for guidance, but exclusively on his remarkable savvy, wile, and talent—traits very characteristic of our respondents.

In addition, our respondents had another person-centered trait: They could express their goals clearly and simply. These person-centered people were indeed like Henry David Thoreau, the 19th century American author and student of nature and persons who understood the value of simplification. His famous essay *Walden* is a celebration of the art of simplifying—the story of a man who went into the woods to, as he put it, “live deliberately, to confront only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach.” To each of us, Thoreau had but one recommendation: simplify.

Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest person has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases, he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumbnail (quoted in Clemens & Mayer, 1987, p. 174).

Real Change Leader

Each respondent’s personal odyssey involved a continuous search for meaning, understanding, and purpose. The 25 respondents were visionaries who also brought about significant change. They were real change leaders (Katzen-

bach, 1996) with a number of characteristics. First, they believed in synergy or creative cooperation, which is the notion that "1 + 1 = 3." Through the principles of high trust and high cooperation, they were able to get people to think and do things beyond their wildest imaginations. Second, they recognized the importance of communication, advocacy, teamwork, brainstorming, and action. Third, they had analytical skills that allowed them to break down problems, generate and test hypotheses, and gather and synthesize information. Fourth, they were entrepreneurs who understood their environments and created management and service options, built coalitions of support, and persisted.

Change, however, came at a price: As one colleague stated, "Innovations are dangerous for those who try to change routines." Not everyone succeeded in bringing about all the change they desired. Many faced the reality that "we have learned to create the small exceptions that can change the lives of hundreds, but we have yet to learn how to change the lives of thousands" (Schorr, 1997, p. xiii).

Integrated

The assumptions we make about people are influenced by our values, which in turn influence our practices (Prilleltensky, 1997). What impressed me the most about our respondents was their ability to integrate their values, assumptions, and practices and then act. Throughout their stories were examples of how they (a) promoted human diversity and self-determination of individuals and of marginalized groups; (b) viewed knowledge as a tool for action, stressing that the good life is based on ideas of personal control and that a good society is based on rights and entitlements; (c) defined problems in terms of risk and disempowering conditions; (c) based their interventions on proactive strategies; and (d) promoted human diversity and self-determination of individuals and of marginalized groups.

In addition, our respondents forged a new approach to professional practice. They understood professions and "professionalism" in terms of societal functions as opposed to a set of educational criteria (Rice, 1997). To quote Schorr (1997):

This new practice has emerged, more programmatically than ideologically, from many disciplinary origins, often in opposition to professional traditions. The touch-

stones of the new practice are new professional skills, new professional norms, new power relationships, and a new mind-set about what it means to be a professional. Far from "coddling" their clients . . . the new professionals aid persons . . . to take greater control over their own lives. (p. 12)

By integrating their values, assumptions, and practices, our respondents both experienced and allowed others to have successful personal odysseys and to experience what George Bernard Shaw so astutely noted: "[the] essence of freedom is to be able to choose the line of greatest advantage instead of yielding to the path of least resistance."

Optimistic

The 25 respondents were also optimistic; they felt strongly that things could be better. They would agree with the legendary builder James Rouse, whose favorite saying was "Whatever ought to be, can be" (quoted in Schorr, 1997, p. 301). They were optimistic about a number of things. First, they believed that dreams could be lived out. As one self-advocate expressed, "They had a dream for me, and now I have a dream for myself." Second, they felt that they could form a partnership with all stakeholders. Our respondents saw clearly that bringing about change and forging a new approach to policies and practices involve working with consumers, service providers, and traditional professionals. Third, they were optimistic that an individual can lead the way. In the words of one respondent, "If you don't know any better, you will go with the flow." They knew better in that they appreciated the potential of people, the power of environments to change peoples' lives and the quality of their lives, the ability of new professional relations to make a difference in the lives of persons, the power of multiple solutions, that multiple and interrelated problems require multiple and interrelated solutions, and the power of results and their analysis as well as how important research and evaluation are in today's world.

There was also a downside to their optimism. Many respondents discussed the frustration they feel about overregulation and the current shift from creativity to "regulativity." Others described their frustration about getting further removed from the field and direct service and having to jump through more hoops; their becoming less focused and having to deal with a system that does not reward the risk taker

or rule buster the way it once did; and their fear that many in the field have lost sight of the need to find opportunities, experiences, and environments that allow people to be more independent, productive, and community integrated. They also mentioned the proliferation of the "re" words (e.g., *re-energize*, *re-use*, *re-engineer*, *redesign*, *re-organize*) and what these "re" words say about where we are and where we want to go.

Apart from these frustrations, however, the respondents—and that includes you and me—are still optimistic, believing that there are no problems, only opportunities to excel and succeed. It is to those opportunities to excel and succeed that I now turn our attention as we jointly think about what implications these five themes and five personality characteristics have for ourselves, the field, and our association.

Implications for the Field

In a word, we are all dreamers and behind every memory is a dream. As stated so well by Lopez (1986):

One of the oldest dreams of mankind is to find a dignity that might include all living things. And one of the greatest of human longings must be to bring such dignity to one's own dreams, for each to find his or her own life exemplary in some way. (p. 405)

In the final section of this article, the implications for the field of our personal odysseys and our collective stories are highlighted. Here I suggest that there are five implications based on the previously described common themes and personality characteristics: (a) reach out and identify people who feel that they can make a difference, (b) provide opportunities for these persons, (c) rethink the role that incentives play in this field, (d) align with the future, and (e) share our common vision.

Reach Out

We need to reach out to everyone who has a dream that things can be better and that they can make a difference in the lives of people with and without disabilities. Indeed, the world is changing, and with the changes come opportunities to promote human diversity and self-determination of individuals and marginalized groups, believe that knowledge is a tool for action and that the good life (and one of quality) is based on the ideas of personal control and rights, define problems in terms of risks and disempowering conditions, and approach prob-

lem-solving and interventions proactively from the person's perspective.

These opportunities are still available to "hook" new persons to the field and provide them with opportunities once they are here; but these opportunities require leadership. Thus, I propose that we reach out to ourselves and others and encourage each of us to be a leader of the future. And what is a leader? The major characteristics that we should instill in ourselves and others include the following: leaders do not wait; leaders have their heads in the clouds and their feet on the ground; leaders know that shared values make a difference and you cannot do it alone; leaders realize that the legacy you leave is the life you lead; and leaders need to stay on the crest of the wave of change, reinventing themselves as they go (Hesselbein, Goldsmith, & Beckhard, 1996).

Provide Opportunities

People have control over how to interpret and react to chance encounters and convert them into excellent opportunities to excel and succeed. This control does not just happen; rather, it requires at least three personal resources.

First, is the perception of *self-efficacy*, which is the belief that one can perform behaviors that lead to expected outcomes. Psychologists (e.g., Bandura, 1986, 1993) have shown that when self-efficacy is high, individuals feel confident that they can bring about change. Conversely, when self-efficacy is low, individuals worry that change may be beyond their ability. Thus, we need to foster the feeling of self-efficacy in individuals by reinforcing their actions and encouraging them to act on their dreams.

Second, as a resource one needs to succeed. We must continue to support—individually and as an organization—the development and expression of self-advocacy and the resources, skills, and competencies of direct service professionals so that they too can succeed. Let us not forget the importance of communication, thinking, and information-processing skills. Equally important, let us not overlook the critical importance of "focus and flow skills" that allow one to understand products and services, customers, competitive advantage, setting performance goals and standards, evaluating performance standards, and linking desired performance to specific strategies (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

Third, as a resource one needs to be self-directed and have a strong internal locus of control. The concept of *locus of control* refers to the degree to which people perceive a causal relationship between their efforts and environmental change (Rotter, 1966). People strive to reach their goals not so much because of the nature of the goals, or even a strong internal desire to reach them, but because of their expectation that such strivings will be successful. Internally controlled persons believe that they are the master of their fate and the painter of their picture of life. Thus, we need to support self-direction among all of our constituencies.

Therefore, we should provide opportunities and support to enable people to feel confident that they can bring about change, develop those competencies that permit people to succeed, and reinforce the generalized expectancy that effort will lead to successful outcomes. We also need to reinforce internal feelings of mastery and control, which provide people with significant incentives.

Rethink Incentives

We need to rethink the role that incentives play in our lives. Incentives result from the outcomes of what we do, not the precursors. Thus, we need to ask not only why do people enter the field, but more importantly, why do they stay? It may be that chance events get people into the field, but my strong conviction is that we stay and remain motivated because we find internal satisfaction in what we do, creative outlets for our ideas, and opportunities to associate with colleagues and friends. Of far more importance is that we stay because we see that what we do makes a difference.

And we have made a difference. Note the following significant shifts that have occurred during the last decade that should increase our incentives to do more:

- Services to supports
- Programming to opportunity development
- Passive to active consumer roles
- Process to outcomes
- The individual to the environment
- Research questions to policy evaluation
- A deficiency to a growth model
- Dependency to interdependency
- Normalization to quality

Align With the Future

The dawn of a New Millennium, which is the grandest measure we have to human time, permits us to think about history and the fact that we must adjust continually to changing conditions. We are currently experiencing simultaneous revolutions in technology, politics, economics, and demographics that are resulting in new political, social, and economic environments that are global, networked, based on information, decentralized, and specialized. As we respond to the challenges posed by these revolutions and become aligned with the future, I am reminded of two of my favorite and insightful quotes attributed to Yogi Berra: "If YOU don't know where you are going, you will end up somewhere else" and "When you come to a fork in the road, take it."

Just as our personal odysseys have been interactive and involved change, we need to remember that the same is true of organizations. In this time of rapid change embracing the future, how might AAMR align itself successfully with a future characterized by simultaneous revolutions in technology, politics, economics, and demographics? I suggest that in our future odyssey, we need to distinguish between timeless core values and enduring purpose (which we do not want to change) from our operating practices and business strategies, which should be changing constantly in response to a changing world (Collins & Porras, 1997). Thus, let us think jointly about planning guidelines and preserving values.

Planning guidelines. In aligning ourselves with the future, we should embark on a serious cross-fertilization centered around three key questions: Who are our primary customers and consumers? What are our principal products and services? How should we be organized to plan and preserve? Seeking answers to these three questions will involve major efforts over the next 3 years as jointly we work with the AAMR Future Vision Committee in strategic planning and management. This will be an exciting time in the history of AAMR and reminds me of the wise advice (of 2,500 years ago) from Thucydides: "The bravest are surely those who have the clearest vision of what is before them, glory and danger alike, and yet notwithstanding, go out to meet it."

What guidelines might we use in this planning effort?" I would suggest we consider seriously the following:

- Embrace the future by being both visionary and a leader.
- Be responsive to—and supportive of—our primary customers.
- Be a learning organization that has vision, encourages dialogue, does systems thinking, is growth oriented, and is willing to change.
- Be clock builders, not time keepers.
- Preserve the core values and stimulate progress.

Preserving core values. Planning within the guidelines just discussed should not occur in a vacuum, and in our rush to embrace the future and adapt successfully to it, we should not overlook the sage advice given by Aesop: "Beware, lest you lose the substance by grasping at the shadow." Therefore, throughout the planning and change processes, I hope that we preserve the core values that have guided this organization over the last 122 years. At risk of being too simplistic, I suggest that these core values include a historical commitment to:

- Supporting our constituencies, including persons working in the field, persons with mental retardation and closely related conditions, and those who advocate for both
- An ideology that reflects an underlying belief that the rights and conditions of all persons can be improved
- A sense of belonging to something special and ongoing
- The belief that good enough never is, combined with a continual process of relentless self improvements directed at doing better and better
- An understanding that knowledge is power, combined with a commitment to increasing peoples' knowledge, understanding, and skills

Share Our Common Vision

One of my favorite quotes is from the Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset, who reminds us that "human life is a constant preoccupation with the future." In thinking about the theme of this conference, "In Pursuit of Life, Liberty, and Happiness" and our futures, each of us should consider this basic question: "What vision of the future do I have?" Is it one of dependent, nonproductive, and segregated environments or one of interdependence, pro-

ductivity, and community integration? Is it one of Middle or Dark Ages mentality or one of the Enlightenment and the Renaissance? Is it one of ignorance and fear or one of knowledge based on research and evaluation? Is it one of hopelessness and despair or one of optimism and positive anticipation? Is it one of a dynamic, ever-changing organization that is responsive to its membership or is it an organization that is recalcitrant and resistive to change and innovation?

There is no doubt about my answers to these questions. My view of the future for the field of mental retardation—including its workers and AAMR—is that the future is bright. It is one

- Where we can all make a difference in the lives of service recipients and providers alike
- Where we understand the causes of mental retardation better and how to ameliorate its effects
- Where public attitudes and public policies are more enlightened
- Where each of us will have increased opportunities to pursue successfully life, liberty, and happiness
- Where our organization continues to be responsive and proactive

Thus, we end as we began. Each of us has a story to tell about our involvement in the field of mental retardation. For some of us, our entry was accidental; for others, more planned; and for still others, maybe fate. Although the roles that we have played have differed, our commonality is profound. For what we discovered once we got into the field is that we have been able to make a significant difference in our own lives, as well as the lives of others. That has been our odyssey and that truly is the story behind the story.

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