

## RISK AND RENEWAL

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Stephen R. Covey's final two "habits" are "*synergize*" and "*sharpening the saw.*" In this, the third of a three-part series based on Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, we will think again about the work and life of the campus minister with emphasis on those concepts.

### Habit 6: Synergy

The verb, synergize, is one I do not like. The concept, however, is powerful and important, although more touted than explored. Synergy is the principle that *the whole is greater than the sum of its parts*. Covey continues to emphasize, "...the relationship which the parts have to each other is a part in and of itself. It is not only a part, but the *most catalytic, the most empowering, the most unifying and the most exciting part*. [Italics mine]"

One of my *major* discoveries as I work in the "real world" of hospital management and fragmentation is that almost everything in our work culture pushes us toward not-synergy, toward independence and isolation! I wish that the institution were unique in this regard, that this hospital were different . . . . The fact is that *our American culture* and much of our traditional management push us toward competition as *the norm* in most of life and

encourage us to depend on ourselves rather than on others -- including the "community" we talk about so much in our religious circles.

In our churches we often hear enough talk about "community" -- with little of its presence -- to inoculate us from its actuality. The fact is that many [dare I say most?] of us do not know significant community, either in our churches or in our homes. [A tangent to explore some day: is it possible that one of the reasons so many students seem "stuck" in the more immature stages of faith development that few of them have actually experienced the real community necessary to grow faith into an owned and integrated life dimension?] Few of us know real community -- yet here is the man labeled by *USA Today* "the hottest self-improvement consultant to hit U. S. business since Dale Carnegie" advocating the work-term which *is* real community-in-action.

Let me underline again a caveat which I used in an earlier article in this series: I am *not* a "Covey-ite." Thus far in my life and thought, I am not willing to identify completely with *any* "school" or guru. Several writers have been significant mentors in my professional and personal growth, however. C. S. Lewis, Paul Tournier and -- to a lesser degree, Parker Palmer and Scott Peck -- continue to be my teachers. Peter Senge, Edward deBono and Peter Drucker push me each time I discipline myself to encounter

them through their work. Not because he is “hot,” but because Stephen R. Covey somehow connects my deeply held values with everyday living, this man, too, has become a point of self-evaluation and an important stimulus toward growth for me. I was talking about Covey just the other day with a “high-powered” consultant working with the hospital here in developing a strategic plan. We concurred that his ideas and concepts are pivotal for what we want to do, how we want to work, and the models we would like to set for those who learn from us. To put into effect Covey’s “7 habits” is not easy, however -- *and “operationalization” of his admonition to “synergize” is perhaps the most difficult!*

I am convinced that only in this work style can the greatest power of a group be unleashed. This is an interesting illustration of our tendency in academia to “talk about something and think we have actually done it!” We campus ministers especially “talk the talk” here [and in the parallel construct, “community”] but sometimes have great difficulty in “walking the talk.” Practice sufficient to form the “synergizing habit” is unusual. A habit, you remember, can be developed at the intersection of knowledge, skill and desire. When one knows in an experiential way about synergy, the desire to participate in its power is almost immediate; learning the skill to “synergize” is the key. “Something in the air,” almost, seems to keep us from it.

Here in the hospital, for example, we talk a lot about "teams" -- but we regularly have the usual committee meetings with the usual turf-protectionism, the usual "chair-ism," and the usual failure to build on each other's contribution. In one of the team manuals which I have used a great deal recently, an author suggests that it is strange how five or seven people, each with an IQ of much over 160, can work together for six months -- and devise a product or come up with a solution which has "an IQ of 35!" "Everybody talks about He'ben ain't going there..." and certainly everybody who talks about synergy "ain't getting it..."

Let me deviate for a moment from my "charge" to mirror and focus Covey's thought for use by campus ministers. Think with me about why I suggested earlier that "our culture" is one reason why synergy and community are difficult for Americans to embody. In crisis -- when one is dying or critically ill, when one has been fired, when we are powerless *and realize it* -- we allow others to support us and help us. Usually, however, our culture's "eleventh commandment" is "every tub must sit on its own bottom." We -- in middle class white America, especially -- are taught to discount those who are not independent. Self-sufficiency is our cynosure [as is "youth," by the way -- which may be even more foolish]. We "see" the results of "chemistry" on a basketball or other real team occasionally; we "know" the theoretical value of interdependence. A Dennis Rodman makes the necessary and

unique contribution of rebounding for a superior team: his value is not measured in points scored. Yet, in most of our school -- and, later, our work -- life it seems almost "wrong" or "un-American" to function in any way other than individualistically. Could it be that individualism, nurtured on the frontier, has been woven with other important and singly true "strands" of our common life -- including emphasis on individual religious experience and the value of a capitalistic mind-set -- to foster a "less-than-true" attitude toward self, others and real community?

Enough! ...but worth thinking about. My challenge to small groups of students and campus ministers: reread the Bible -- especially the New Testament, if you want to cut off our faith-flower from its roots -- with an openness to its assumptions about *families* and *communities*, *partnerships* and *church*.

Synergy is risky! That may be one reason why it is so seldom cultivated. All parties in this adventure may and probably will change -- and you never know exactly the shape of a synergistic result! Suppose two or more people are in actual conversation, understanding and being understood; they are guided by the common thought, "How can each of us benefit?" It is possible for them to generate exceptional power and vision -- but no one can be certain what the process will actually produce, where the journey will lead. Synergy is risky because the outcome is unknown. [In our more traditional expressions of evangelism, true

dialog is not possible -- because understanding the other's point of view might actually make the "evangelist" do the changing, "but for the grace of God." Down deep, those who must depend on themselves have little real trust in that grace, I am afraid.]

Synergy is risky, also, because efficiency must be forgotten. For the time being; in the short term. There is a great deal of "TIME capital" invested "up front" when people begin the long journey toward the high trust/high commitment dialog which is necessary for real synergy.

No one in a synergy-producing relationship is really "in control" . . . a significant risk! This, in itself, is one reason that few are willing to embark on this particular journey: the risk is too great; most of us are unwilling to give up control -- or at least the struggle *for* control.

I am aware that some will say, "We have too many important lessons to teach the students with whom we work; this is much too theoretical and not solidly enough based on the Bible." If we limit the discussion to work and the business world, maybe. . . but let me push you to explore for yourself this theorem: *real community cannot develop among persons who term themselves "Christians" in the absence of the principle of synergy!* Are not the bases of risk noted above -- uncertain outcome, sublimation of efficiency to quality of interaction, and willingness to relinquish control -- elements of "faithing" and "loving" and trust?

## **An Interesting Book**

As we begin to trust one another, defenses begin to crumble. It is scary; it is risky. A 1994 book which is stimulating conversation and self-examination among staff in our hospital is entitled, *Dealing with People You Can't Stand*. The sub-title is, "How to Bring Out the Best in People at Their Worst." One of the reasons that the book appealed to me early is that these "naturopathic physicians" have built their work on some assumptions about self and others which "fit" with my Christian (and, I hope, a Biblical) perspective on persons... It pushes for deep understanding of others; it seems to spring from a "reading" of others' hearts which reminds me a little bit of Jesus at work.

Do you remember the old adage, "There is so much good in the worst of us and so much bad in the best of us that it ill behooves any of us to criticize the rest of us"? Read the book; I think you will find that it takes very seriously both the evil and the good, both the positive *and* the negative, both the mature and the immature in all of us -- and helps to focus on the larger task of love-respect-hope which may be close to our working expression of "trusting God in others," but, *it is risky!*

## **Either/Or?**

Another dimension in which our culture and Covey's

emphasis seem almost mutually exclusive can be found in the implied debate about whether or not life is either/or! Our English language pushes us toward making comparisons, but we as choosing growing "God-imagined" creatures do not have to function in that manner: in spite of the analytical value of comparative thinking, in spite of fact that "for every 'yes' there must be a corresponding 'no'" in any actual choice-making, either/or thinking is not the most productive way of life itself. The "yes-and" dialog of mutuality is usually more affirming and productive in the work world than the "no-but" debate of competition.

Out of security and self-worth. . . it is possible to value our differences. Persons with that level of maturity can slow down enough to understand, can see the need for creation beyond the obvious, can develop the will and skill to risk synergy! Covey says something at this juncture which is self-obvious [but often forgotten in our individualistic culture]:

*"when we're left to our own experiences,  
we constantly suffer from a shortage of data."*

There is no way around that fact. Yet, in the institution where I now work and in most other locations in which people have responsibility, few live that reality. My perspective -- however clear -- is only partial! How, other than to discipline myself for work in dialog, can I regularly remind myself of that truth?



## **Two People Can Disagree and Both Be Right!**

Like the blind men and the elephant, each of us "sees" a fraction of the whole; we teach each other; two people, much like our two eyes, provide stereoscopic vision in which the real depth of a circumstance or an experience can be brought into focus. This begins, however, with one person's conscious and sincere valuing of the other's viewpoint!

Who in our world is solidly equipped to risk the type of respect for another which thinks win/win (habit 4), risks the time it takes to seek first to understand, (habit 5) and then, in a disciplined way, risks the adventure of synergy? My contention is that this can be, if we see it as important, a significant side benefit of Christian faithing. I wonder sometimes if Covey's "7 habits" can, in fact, be actualized at all except in one who lives in the quiet knowledge of God's caring, whose security is rooted in being held "in the hollow of God's palm," and who is discovering in day-to-day living that nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus!

### **Habit 7: Sharpening the Saw**

Covey calls this section of his book, "Principles of Balanced Self-Renewal. Picture this scene: a man is deep in the woods cutting down a tree. You stop and watch. He has all his

tools, but somehow seems excessively tired. "Is he a novice?" you ask; no, he is an experienced woodsman. Sweat pours from his body; his face is red. "How long have you been working on that tree?" you ask. He looks up, but does not stop. "Over five hours -- and I am really tired!" You are puzzled. "Have you taken time to sharpen your saw?" His reply is sharp: "That's stupid! I have no time! I am too busy. I must cut down this tree!"

On Covey's diagram of the 7 habits, this one encircles everything else: self-renewal holds it all together! Throughout the book the author has talked about the balance between production and careful nurture of the production capability. His shorthand is "balance in P/PC." This is the place where I see many folk, many who are committed Christians, having real difficulty: this is personal PC. Perhaps it is a generation gap, but many in my generation had urged upon them a version of "Christianity" which tended to negate the value of oneself, to discount the individual, to make us feel that we were not worth time invested or energy spent. Alexander Miller, in an old book, speaks of not "taking one's pulse" too regularly. That makes sense: we must not spend too much time in checking up on ourselves! Occasional "pulse taking," however, occasional "check-ups" are necessary. That is part of sabbath: placing oneself in harmony with the Source -- whom we have come to know as the God who made self known in Jesus Christ!

Each of us lives in an intertwining of four natures, says

Covey: physical, spiritual, mental and social/emotional. Most religions, philosophies and psychologies in some way emphasize all of the four. Self-renewal involves consistent, wise regular exercise of all four elements of life. But -- in the midst of pressurized work, demanding schedule, aggressive boss, heavy responsibility, innumerable requests or demands -- only the person independent enough to *choose* this essential Quadrant II endeavor will remain effective.

Y O U -- your love, your skill, your insight, your perspective, your hope, your time, your relationships -- Y O U are the single most valuable instrument you have. ["God has no hands but your hands..." You remember those lines...] Your joy, your peace, your contribution, your effectiveness are dependent on your taking care of YOU. A study of the principle of "sabbath" and its possible integration into modern life may be one of the most instructional efforts we can make with our students. Covey deals with the "natures" in his attempt to point toward the principle of self-renewal.

*Physically*, at least good nutrition and exercise. . . Most of us already know more about nutrition than we have chosen to practice. Most of us eat more than our bodies need. Discipline is the difficult action here. Some of us have become obsessed with how and what we eat and how we look -- trust may be the difficult action for these individuals.

Exercise is important. We all know that. Not one of us who is "out" in the work world has the time -- not to exercise regularly. Covey has written carefully here about the goals of endurance, flexibility and strength. There are myriad ways to develop and keep this balance. Regular and disciplined cultivation of your body is basic saw-sharpening.

*Spiritually*, integration of personal values into work-life and cultivation of who you are as God's creature and co-creator. . .

Religious activities, commandments or disciplines are *not*, in themselves, cultivation of the spiritual life. They can and often do help; they often are aids and resources; check Colossians 2:20 - 23.

Again, our culture pushes us toward doing; we are an active people. There are doing dimensions of faith; that is not the issue here. Those of us in helping professions, pathetically, are often most caught up in guilt-driven or salvation-seeking doing rather than the most solid foundation of being. Remember the essential "in Christ" dimensions which we appreciated in Paul before we realized that his attitudes toward women, etc. were culture-bound?

*Mentally*. . . Watch your TV hours. Years ago, in my first campus responsibility, I was accused of being narrow-minded when I warned a group of freshmen about the all-night card games. Only one or two of them could understand that I was concerned, not about the cards, but about the *number of hours* they invested in that way. TV can be valuable -- for occasional escape, for learning, for

good laughter -- in moderation. Watch your TV hours!

*One* goal is always valuable: developing your ability to "stand outside" yourself and look carefully at what you are thinking and doing. It is called *objectivity* and is a combination of mental and emotional maturity.

Broad reading, careful listening, honest writing (usually for your own eyes only), quality planning . . . all of these develop your mental "muscles." Covey's challenge -- are you ready for a reiteration of Sunday School? -- to each of his readers is to invest *one hour each day, every day* in physical, spiritual and mental cultivation. This is the way toward "daily private victory," as he terms it. These are the "sharpening" of personal vision, leadership and management. This is the cultivation of the essential interior you.

*Socially and emotionally.* . . . In this dimension of renewal, you are placing habits 4, 5 and 6 in external focus. Our lives are interior and personal and private -- in part. We also need exercise and healthy development of our relationships with others.

Let me here re-emphasize what has been a thread throughout Covey's narrative: at core, our own personal inner sense of security is the foundation for effectiveness. Self-esteem grows only from personal integrity. None of the techniques or disciplines taught in the popular success literature provides appropriate roots for self-esteem. Says Covey:

Peace of mind comes when your life is in harmony with true principles and values and in no other way. (p. 298)

...but *effective interdependent living* also nourishes deep security. Your work, your exploration of "a different option," your understanding of another viewpoint *all* cultivate *you*.

Whether or not we expend designated time in attempting to teach "our students" these core concerns for life with integrity and consequent effectiveness, there is no way that our own lives -- with or without this type of integrity -- do not become the models for students with whom we work and worship. My hope is that some of you who read these paragraphs will feel called to include this type of practical life/work orientation in the standard fare of BSUs and other Christian student groups with whom you serve. If that occurs, great; if not, my prayer is that your life will have this type of authentic "ring" as you move among young people.

### **Service to Others**

Beyond your work, anonymous and perhaps mundane service to others grows you. Busy people often forget this. Peter Drucker, in his powerful book, *Managing the Nonprofit Organization*, suggests to busy nonprofit executives, "Go find a place to volunteer!" Hans Selye, in his classic work on stress, says:

a long, healthy, and happy life is the result of making contributions, of having meaningful projects that are

personally exciting and contribute to and bless the lives of others. (quoted in Covey, p. 299)

This is one of the significant values of the type of mission endeavors for which BSU is known. Each of us has stories of our students who have served, witnessed, made a difference in the lives of others -- and themselves grown more during that service that we thought possible!

Believing in others. . . is not a work style practiced regularly in many organizations. It is lived out less consistently in our Christian work communities than Christ might desire. In that sense, we might be wise to learn the basic "conflict management" techniques taught now throughout the business world because a core ingredient in these courses is ALWAYS belief in others, or -- in more traditional terms, trusting the Lord in others! Goethe's words, though dated and now considered sexist, are powerful and profoundly true:

Treat a man as he is and he will remain as he is. Treat a man as he can and should be and he will become as he can and should be. (quoted by Covey, p. 301)

All four dimensions in one's inner life grow or are truncated *together*. In the same way, life -- your life -- is always intertwined with others and is, in fact, a fabric woven of (at least) *all* the threads we have noted in these three articles.

## Growth as a Whole Person

My son is taking, for the second time, the CPA exam. A friend asked the other day whether or not an individual could pass one section and not have to take that part of the exam again. I do not know. I failed parts of my Ph.D. written exams and repeated only that area. But one thing is certain: the maturing individual, the one who is growing himself or herself from dependence through independence toward interdependence, *does have to develop all of the elements* of effectiveness together, does have to cultivate the “habits” in concert! The first three -- “be proactive,” “begin with the end in mind,” and “put first things first” -- seem to me to “flow” naturally together. In my experience, they can move one toward independence. These may be the chronological first -- and thus the most important for students as they grow beyond home. For most -- well, at least many -- of us who are campus ministers, the growing toward interdependence is our “battlefield.” We who are well indoctrinated in the culture of academia -- and, I say hesitantly and almost with apology, in the culture of the church -- will find that “think win/win,” “seek first to understand, then to be understood,” and “synergize” are more difficult to live.

Perhaps the place to begin is with the 7th habit, “sharpen the saw.” Join me in the prayer that Covey’s thoughts can be used by God to make us more effective “Christ-persons,” teachers and growers toward Life as He promises.