Essay 6
Bolstering a Career: The Supports and Satisfactions of Networking
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As a teenager in Seattle, I worked in my family’s insurance agency and became a licensed insurance salesperson, but the family business became the first road not taken. In college I instead pursued a premed program—majoring in chemistry, minoring in biology, and working three summers on wards and in the emergency room of Seattle’s county hospital. After taking the Medical College Admissions Test and half-completing my medical school applications, I never mailed them in, having wearied of pepper ing at slides and watching doctors pore over X-rays.

What, then, could be my vocation? Perhaps a college professor? But what could I profess? Looking back on my first 3 years of college, I recalled enjoying only one psychology course. So I took several more, applied to graduate schools without even a psychology minor, and, partly by engaging 40 small groups in discussing story called Enjoying my only psychology course. So I took several more, applied to graduate schools without even a psychology minor, and, partly

When I arrived to begin Iowa’s graduate program in 1964, having declared my interest in personality, my advisor explained that their one major was in personality, my advisor explained that their one faculty member in personality had just left: “So we’ve put you in social psychology.” And that is how I became a social psychologist.

During my 2nd year, I assisted my advisor, Sidney Arenson (here begins my networking), by engaging 40 small groups in discussing story problems that assessed risk taking. We replicated the phenomenon of increased risk taking by groups, dubbed the “risk shift,” and before long the college teacher wannabe had, to his surprise, also become a research psychologist. Moreover, the research mutated unpredictably—from risky shift, to a broader group polarization phenomenon, to studies of the subtle influence on one’s own opinions of mere exposure to others’ opinions.

Such is the adventure of life. You can’t know your future, I tell students. Your interests on entering college will likely change during college and will change again during your working life. And that is why a broad education for an unpredictable future—a liberal education—serves most students better than does a focused vocational education.

As I began my teaching at Hope College, I also continued doing experiments and was able to make some modest contributions to the understanding of group influence, which led to an invitation to join 7 other Americans and 16 Europeans at a 1978 group research symposium in a German castle. As we entered the seminar room the 1st day, I found myself seated near two heroes of my field, Irving Janis, of “groupthink” fame, and Ivan Steiner, author of many books and articles. During the breaks and on some outings, I enjoyed getting to know them, and when we all returned to the United States both showed me great kindness. Irving Janis brought me to speak at Yale (a scary experience for a person from a then little-known Midwestern college) and hosted me at a dinner in his home.

Several months later, Ivan Steiner received a phone call from McGraw Hill’s psychology editor, wondering whether he could recommend someone to work on developing a new social psychology text. When my phone rang a short while later, on that January day in 1979, I couldn’t have been more surprised by the invitation to consider textbook writing. I thought it an outlandish idea, especially for a relative unknown such as myself. However, the editor persisted, over many calls, and I eventually decided that by writing the textbook I would, at least, learn more about my discipline.

From that networking came a book (now, over 25 years later, in its 8th edition) and a whole new career (note again the unpredictability of life, thanks to what Albert Bandura has noted is the life-shaping power of chance encounters). Developing that text led to an invitation to write an introductory psychology text (another shocking idea when first proposed). And all the reading and reporting for those texts then led to opportunities to contribute to the public understanding of psychological science through magazine articles, general audience trade books—on happiness, social change, hearing loss, intuition, and sexual orientation—and nearly 600 media contacts and interviews related to these topics. None of this would have transpired without networking.

I began the work with little confidence in my writing ability (I recall English composition being my lowest college grade). So I sought the help of others by reading helpful writing manuals and by seeking out an even more helpful Hope College colleague, poet-essayist Jack Rill. Jack closely edited some 5,000 of my manuscript pages while patiently teaching me what it means to develop a voice, to order words to maximize punch, to write with rhythm. The lesson this experience taught me is that it pays to have enough self-confidence to risk undertaking a project and enough self-doubt (i.e., “defensive pessimism”) to think you’ll fail if you don’t focus your efforts and network with others.

Indeed, two heads are often better than one, as famed creative teams such as Watson and Crick and psychology’s own Kahneman and Tversky illustrate. Many of us working together are often smarter than any of us working alone. I suspect I speak for all my text author colleagues in at times feeling slightly embarrassed by people who are too impressed with what we seem to have written, as if we just sat down and wrote it. In
fact, what’s delivered is the end product of a collaborative effort involving countless expert consultants, reviewers, and multiple editors. If it is true that “whoever walks with the wise becomes wise,” then text authors are wiser for all the wisdom and advice we receive from our expert colleagues.

Networking enabled my becoming an author and improved my skill and content, but it also has become a result of authoring. My work connects me with all sorts of interesting people and occasionally enables me to connect them with one another. Within the past day, as I write, I have helped link one colleague to a foundation that has also connected me with lots of people, pointed an inquiring ABC Primetime Live producer to five other professional colleagues, and reciprocated the help of a fellow author by assisting her with her new trade book manuscript. Writing *The Pursuit of Happiness* led to my connecting with the growing positive psychology movement, which Marty Seligman has effectively facilitated by aggressively bringing together early-career and senior scholars through networking opportunities.

Networking may sound best-suited to outgoing, self-confident, assertive people. Perhaps it is. However, as one who is a tad shy about hobnobbing with our distinguished colleagues at conventions and still not confident enough to call and interview them, I am especially grateful for e-mail. With time, my comfort in reaching out to them has grown. My colleagues, I’ve learned, are nearly always happy to answer questions, send papers, and read and critique drafts of what I’ve said about their work.

In my experience, people in psychology are overwhelmingly kind, positive, and supportive—and so are many people outside of psychology. I recently e-mailed kudos to a well-known writer (whom I recalled having briefly met) in response to one of his *New York Times* op-ed essays. I also dared to share with him a kindred-spirited draft essay of my own. In reply, he suggested how I might better focus it. When I did, he then, with my blessing, shared the revision with the new editor of the *Los Angeles Times* op-ed page. Voila! The essay appeared shortly thereafter. Such are the benefits of electronic networking.

Another way to reach out to people is with reprint request cards. I send a few hundred each year, mostly requesting published articles that I’ve spotted in *Current Contents in the Behavioral Sciences*, a wonderful but expensive little periodical that provides the contents pages of all English-language psychology and psychiatry periodicals. When this comes to me on our department routing, I just initial any article I’d like a copy of and, using the author addresses provided with each issue, a department assistant makes out the request card. Often, respondents include their other pertinent work as well.

Finally, for those of us who need to vacuum up information from all corners of psychology, numerous resources can assist us in sifting and identifying interesting and important new information. The British Psychological Society, the American Psychological Association, the American Psychological Society, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science all offer publications, conferences, press releases, research digests, or e-mail networks that inform us of developments outside our specialty area, as, occasionally, do quality public news sources, such as the *New York Times* and *Scientific American*, and news sources that feed these and other periodicals.

The lesson I have learned from all the supportive networking, and even from critiques and rejection, is this: Be open to others’ ideas and advice. Listen to criticism. But if you have a vision, hold to it. Keep your eye on the goal. You and your life’s work will be the better for it.