

## Our Profession at a Crossroads

### Closing Keynote Speech

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Marlene Wilson

*"Today, loving change, tumult, even chaos is a prerequisite for survival, let alone success."* This rather startling statement was made by Tom Peters, in his book *Thriving on Chaos* (he goes on in that same book to warn that constant change requires that we dramatically increase our capacity to accept disruption).

Robert Fulghum, in his just-released book, *Uh-oh*, uses his wonderful sense of humor to illustrate much the same point:

*"Uh-oh" . . . is a frame of mind. A philosophy.*

*It says to expect the unexpected, and also expect to be able to deal with it as it happens most of the time. "Uh-oh" people seem not only to expect surprise, but they count on it, as if surprise were a dimension of vitality.*

*"Uh-oh" embraces "here we go again" and "now what?" and "you never can tell what's going to happen next" and "so much for Plan A" and "hang on, we're coming to a tunnel" and "no sweat" and "tomorrow's another day" and "you can't unscramble an egg" and "a hundred years from now it won't make any difference."*

*"Uh-oh" is more than a momentary reaction to small problems. "Uh-oh" is an attitude—a perspective on the universe. It is part of an equation that summarizes my view of the conditions of existence:*

*"UH-HUH" + "OH-WOW" + "UH-OH" + "OH, GOD" = "AH-HAH!"*

And Maya Angelou, the renowned Black poetess, author, actress and philosopher, adds this bit of wisdom: "To survive is important, to thrive is elegant."

If these statements are true (and I believe they are), it may help explain why it's very likely that almost everyone in this audience has been to a workshop or seminar, read a book or heard a speech during the past year that had one of the following as a major theme:

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Marlene Wilson, President, Volunteer Management Associates, is internationally known as one of the foremost authorities and dynamic trainers in the field of volunteer management. She is the author of four books on volunteerism and volunteer management. Her first book, *The Effective Management of Volunteer Programs*, is the best-selling book in the field, with over 100,000 copies sold. Her latest book, *You Can Make a Difference!* received the 1991 Benjamin Franklin Award for Best Self-Help Book. In 1982 she received the Distinguished Member Award from the Association for Volunteer Administration, and in 1989, received an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. A former editor-in-chief of *Volunteer Administration*, Ms. Wilson has served as faculty director of the Volunteer Management Program for the University of Colorado since 1972.

- Managing change effectively
- Moving into the new century
- Living creatively in a changing world  
(or the latest and hottest)
- Paradigm shifts

This is not only appropriate, but necessary for our personal and professional growth and sanity—since we are living at a time when all aspects of life for persons, organizations, and society as a whole are changing more rapidly and more dramatically than at any other time in the history of the world—and it's all happening simultaneously. It's no wonder we feel overwhelmed much of the time!

It is at this very point of great need to understand this new world and acquire new skills to deal with it, that I would issue a word of caution. Let's not fall into that well-known American trap . . . *the quick fix!* All you have to do is walk into any bookstore and the shelves are already bulging with "how to" manuals filled with jargon and simple formulas guaranteed to make us instant experts at managing change.

The reality is *change is hard* . . . make no mistake about it! Carl Sandberg once observed: "Life is like an onion. You peel it off one layer at a time, and sometimes you weep."

Change does include, by necessity, disruptions, death of what has been and therefore grieving. It's vital that we not trivialize or romanticize it. Probably the reality for most of us—(instead of Peter's challenge to love change) is more apt to be what one sage observed: "No one likes change but a wet baby."

How can we move from dreading change to loving it—or at least dealing creatively with it?

The first step, in my opinion, is recognizing that although change is indeed hard—it can also provide opportunities for enormous hopefulness and growth.

Gail Sheehy, in her book, *Passages*, observed:

*With each passage from one stage of human growth to the next, we, too, must shed a protective structure. We are left exposed and vulnerable—but also yeasty and embryonic again, capable of stretching in ways we hadn't known before.*

So, I would suggest our challenge, both personally and professionally, is how to confront the realities of a constantly changing world as *pragmatic optimists* (or optimistic pragmatists) as opposed to being either Pollyannas or Eyors.

May we in this profession join the ranks of the new breed of leaders that Stephen Covey speaks about in his widely respected book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. He states:

*Leaders today are seeking deeper, more substantive solutions—they are tired of glitzy quick fixes and superficial answers (aspirins and Band-Aids). Instead, they want to solve the chronic underlying problems and focus on the principles that bring long-term results.*

And so we come to one of the major crossroads for this profession of volunteer administration—I believe that we must be willing to move beyond information and even knowledge into wisdom.

We have been engaged in the vital process of establishing and defining this profession for the past 30 years. We are young in terms of being a profession and have had to invest enormous energy in these necessary developmental tasks. I'm sure it is hard for those of you who have been volunteer administrators for less than 10 to 15 years to realize how far we've come in such a relatively short time.

Max Depree, in his book, *Leadership Is an Art*, has a chapter on tribal storytelling in which he states:

*Every family, every college, every corporation, every institution needs tribal storytellers. The penalty for failing to listen is to lose one's history, one's historical context, one's binding values. . . . People will begin to forget who they are.*

Alex Haley called these people "griots," oral historians, and said they bring the generations close and give everyone a valuable sense of identity, interaction and belonging.

So . . . since I'm one of the oldest tribal storytellers still around in our profession, let me share a bit of our history with the newcomers. (It's especially important today, when we face the challenge of some large and glitzy campaigns that seem to indicate that volunteerism has just been discovered—that it's a *new* phenomenon!)

Just a few milestones: AVA was founded 30 years ago by Miriam Karlins (and at first was called AAVSC—American Association of Volunteer Services Coordinators). At that time, it was primarily made up of volunteer coordinators in mental health and hospitals, because these were the only organizations to have them. In 1971, the organization opened up to volunteer administrators from all types of agencies and organizations. Now we have 1800 members in AVA and literally thousands of other volunteer directors and coordinators who have not joined our association. To estimate the number is impossible for there are now 489,882 charitable organizations listed by the IRS and there are also volunteer directors in governmental agencies and corporations. The numbers are indeed staggering!

In the past 20 years this profession has not only grown in size, but in status. Our goal has been to *be* professional in what we do and, *slowly*, the job descriptions, salaries and status of our members are beginning to reflect this.

Here's an example of how far we've come: In 1970, the Census Bureau and Department of Labor classified our work in the "Miscellaneous Clerical" category. Thanks to the monumental efforts of Hat Naylor, one of our founding mothers and mentor to many of us, we are now recognized as *professionals* by those organizations.

The story I remember that sums it up best was an incident at a conference held at Michigan State University in the mid-70's, sponsored by Hat Naylor and NCVA—on the topic of education for volunteer administrators. We were picketed by a carpenters' union, and we had to break through the picket line to get into the assembly hall. We were called "scabs" and several other choice epithets—and it was *extremely* upsetting to us "nice folks who just like to help others"! The picketers then marched into the hall and took over the mike—and we all sat there horrified. (It seems some volunteers had built some homes for elderly people in Florida and these carpenters said volunteers, therefore, took jobs away from people and they were upset!) Finally, a hand went up in the audience and a voice asked if they were open to questions. When the spokesman said yes, the person said: "Are all of you who came here tonight being paid to do this?" The answer was—"Of course not!" "Then," she said, "You are all volunteers. You happen to volunteer for a cause you believe in—and so do we!" The picketers laid down the mike and quietly left the room. That person was Susan Ellis—who was attending her first conference on volunteerism at the time.

(By the way—during that same period, I was also picketed and heckled by Women's Lib a few times—that was when they took a national stance against volunteerism, saying "it exploited women." This stance was later reversed and they staffed their whole national office with volunteers.) Things were definitely never boring in those days!

Yes, we've come a long way . . . but we still have miles to go on this one!

The first book for our field was written in 1967 by Harriet Naylor: *Volunteers Today: Finding, Training and Working With Them*. In the early 70's, Ivan Scheier wrote two books about volunteers in court settings and Eva Schindler Rainman and Ron Lippitt wrote *The Volunteer Community*. It was in 1976 that I wrote my first book, *The Effective Management of Volunteer Programs* (which I self-published because the publishers said there was no market for it that they could identify. How wrong they were . . . for we've sold over 100,000 copies). So, for the first ten years of this field, you could carry the entire library of volunteer management literature in one small briefcase.

Where are we now? Have you checked out our resource room? (If not, why not?) We have entire catalogs full of our own literature (books, magazines, newsletters) written by and for our profession. This is one of the criteria for being a profession, and we have met it well.

(We still need more books—especially those that will take us beyond the “how to’s.”)

Before 1972, there was no generic training available in this field. (A few large voluntary organizations such as Red Cross, Girl Scouts, and Junior League had training, but it was for their own constituents.) In 1972, Ivan Scheier and I worked to begin the University of Colorado’s Volunteer Management Program—and in the 20 years it has been running, we estimate over 3,000 volunteer administrators have been through that program alone.

*Where are we now?* There are literally hundreds of events held every year at local, state, provincial, and national levels to learn the competencies of our profession. The problem has become choosing the ones which fit your needs and budget. What a nice problem to have! And we are keeping up with this wonderful age of technology—and offering training by audio and video tapes as well.

It is also an important development that AVA provides a certification process to verify when we have acquired those competencies that make us truly professional.

Yes—the work of these past 20 to 30 years has been necessary, important and well done. We now have access to the information, knowledge and tools and techniques needed by our profession and we should celebrate that accomplishment together!

So, this is the road that has led us to this place and this time in our history where we have arrived at that crossroads I mentioned earlier—*are we now willing and ready to begin to move beyond just more information and knowledge into wisdom?*

T.S. Eliot asked the question so poignantly: “Where is the life we have lost in living? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”

*What do I mean by wisdom?* In its simplest form I would say:

- Wisdom deals with the “why” questions; knowledge and information deal with the “what and how.”
- Wisdom deals with future implications; information and knowledge tend to concentrate on the present.
- Wisdom deals with principles and values (paradigms); knowledge and information deal with practices.
- Wisdom seeks to understand the questions; knowledge and information look for the answers.
- Wisdom is going deeper; knowledge and information tend to just keep getting broader.

It would seem clear it is not a choice of either/or . . . but a need for both that will help our profession choose that fork in the road that will allow us to be viable and valuable in a changing world. It will help us move out of the developmental stage of an emerging profession into the influential stage of a maturing profession.

Robert Frost, in his classic poem, *The Road Not Taken*, depicts the challenge so poignantly:

*Two roads diverged into a yellow wood,  
and sorry I could not travel both  
and being one traveler, long I stood  
and looked down one as far as I could  
to where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then I took the other, just as fair,  
and having perhaps the better claim,  
because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
though as for that the passing there  
had worn them really about the same,*

*and both that morning equally lay  
in leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh  
somewhere ages and ages hence:  
two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
and that has made all the difference.*

One important question for us to ask at this crossroads is: "What should our unique contribution be—what is the unique calling we've said yes to in this profession?" I think Harriet Naylor said it best in a speech she made to this very group in 1974: "If doctors are concerned with health and lawyers with justice as their ideal, then I believe our profession is concerned with freedom of choice . . . I believe freedom is our responsibility."

This is what I mean by wisdom, knowing the *why* behind all we do. Is this still what we believe our profession is about—being the guardians of democracy and free choice for all people? That we protect and extend the precious right of service to *all* our citizens regardless of race, age, sex, or religious beliefs? If so—we have a contribution to make not only to this country but to all the emerging democracies around the world.

If we take the other fork in the road that we could so easily take at this juncture—that of maintaining what we have gained, of continuing to just get better at doing the same things, of concentrating on knowledge at the expense of wisdom—we are in deep jeopardy in my opinion.

Max Depree talks about the trap of "entropy" that any organization can fall into—and he says everything has a tendency to deteriorate. He's simply referring to the danger of getting into ruts—and as someone once observed, *the only difference between a rut and a grave is how deep it is.*

We are passing through the critical "middle-aged" slump in this profession. It's at this stage it would be far too easy to become "settled and satisfied." Gail Sheehy states, regarding middle age:

*If we confront ourselves in the middle passage and find a renewal of purpose around which we are eager to build—this might well be the best years, but if one has refused to bridge through mid-life transition then the sense of staleness will calcify into resignation.*

This is important information for us as persons—as well as organizations. Stephen Covey recommends we each do our own life mission statements at least every decade (not goals and objectives—but *mission*): what is our reason for being?

I just celebrated my 60th birthday this year and the 15th anniversary of my company, VMA. These milestones made this seem like an appropriate time for me to re-examine my own life mission. Here is what I came up with for me as I'm determined to avoid the trap of entropy as a person!

- *To stay centered*—to do that I must remember *my center* is my spiritual life. My challenge is to keep experiencing God as mystery and never try to shrink Him/Her to fit into my own limitations, but to keep questioning and exploring as long as I live.
- *To keep learning, growing, and changing in all aspects of my life*—to stop growing is to die!
- *To be gentle*—with myself, with others, and with the earth.
- *To be joyful and thankful*—for the incredible gifts of life, large and small—and to share that joy.

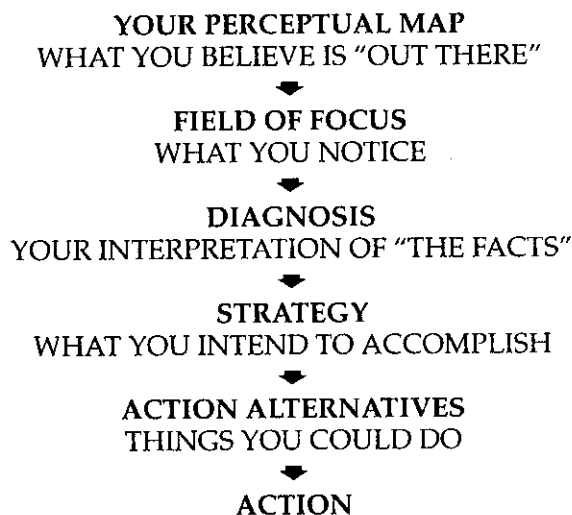
- *To value relationships with my family and friends above all else*—this means investing energy and time to lovingly nurture them and to learn when to give and when to receive—and be able to do both with equal grace.
- *To stay healthy and whole*—by consciously nurturing my mind, body and soul. (As Richard Foster said in his book *Simplicity*, “Trim gently in the right places.”)
- *To be doing work that I love—and that matters*—both to me and others. It must contribute to the health and well-being of the world in some way.
- *To play more*—and let my over-disciplined child within be free to romp in this new period of my life.
- *To value and treasure all my past roles in life—and to be open and eagerly willing to risk possible new roles—especially that of “crone-in-training.”*

Perhaps I’d best pause and say a word about what I mean by “crone.” What I don’t mean is Webster’s definition: “A withered, witchlike old lady.” What I *do* mean is the concept of crone that comes from mythology and Jungian psychology: “the truth-teller at the crossroads,” the wise woman who has gone through her many crossroads of life and has reached a place of conscious surrender where her ego demands are no longer relevant. She is not indifferent or withdrawn but is totally present. She can be who she is and live her naked truth—and is therefore like a tuning fork in her environment. So—being a crone-in-training seems like a worthwhile goal at my age and stage of life. It should keep me challenged for the rest of my life!

Another crossroad for our profession I’d like to suggest has to do with determining if, in fact, it is time for us to consider some basic *paradigm shifts*. Let’s spend a few moments examining what that means. I’ve learned whenever any new terms become accepted jargon, it’s easy, but often false to assume we all know what the terms mean. Here are some definitions of “paradigm”: the lens through which we see the world; our perceptual map of reality; the belief system into which we fit our experiences—it filters our incoming data (“I wouldn’t have seen it if I hadn’t believed it”).

We often distort data to fit our own paradigms. As Stephen Covey says: “If we want to make significant quantum change, we need to work on our basic paradigms.”

One of the most useful models I’ve seen in bringing this idea into practical application was in an article by John Scherer entitled “The Change Process: A Matter of Belief,” in the *Journal of Religion and the Applied Behavior Sciences* (Winter 1987):



May I suggest a few paradigm shifts for us to consider in this profession?

From connectors of needs and resources . . . to guardians of free choice and freedom.

From administrators . . . to enablers of citizen participation . . . community resource mobilizers . . . America's talent scouts.

From a reactive, low power profession . . . to a proactive, highly influential profession.

From transfusion technicians providing new blood (volunteers) to ailing agencies . . . to surgeons—specializing in heart transplants.

From the attitude that volunteer administration is a dead-end job . . . to it is a career becoming ever more essential to nations in distress.

From "Lone Rangers" and the most dedicated "doers" in the world . . . to collaborative team-building experts in our own departments, organizations and in the community.

From maintaining status quo . . . to becoming "creativity consultants" seeking out those volunteers who can bring in *new* solutions to the enormous problems our communities face.

From comforting the afflicted . . . to also afflicting the comfortable when necessary.

So, we have not one choice at this crossroads, but many. Sheehy tells us, "More than anything else, it is our own view of ourselves that determines the richness or paucity of the middle years."

May I close with an observation and a challenge? *The observation:* There are indeed many paradigms to choose from—and for most of us it will be a combination of several. We must remember how important those choices are—for each one of us, for the lens through which we see our profession will determine how others see us.

*The challenge:* It is my honest conviction that never before have our organizations, our communities and our nation needed what we do and what we know more desperately. And never before have we been as well prepared to deliver it.

So . . . I would suggest that we stand at the foot of an awesome mountain and there are three roads to choose from:

- to return back down the long and difficult, but safe and familiar path that brought us here (entropy);
- to take the path that circles the mountain; or
- to check our gear, add some high altitude equipment and new mountain-climbing skills, renew our energy and begin to scale that mountain before us, tackling the greatest challenge we've faced yet.

**Which will it be? The choice is ours . . . and the time is *now!***