

My “F” in Life: a tribute to Jerry B. Harvey

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Abstract

This article examines the legacy and impact of Jerry B. Harvey on the field of organizational behavior in general, and on the author specifically. After a cursory review of some of Harvey’s most well-known and controversial writings, or “meditations” as he called them, the author recounts a very personal episode with Harvey during his time as a doctoral student at George Washington University. A detailed account of the exchange between teacher and student is provided, and the broader implications of this experience are explored.

Keywords

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In August 2015, we lost one of the most insightful and enigmatic thinkers in the fields of organizational behavior and management, Dr. Jerry B. Harvey. Jerry, a clinically licensed social psychologist, had a profound impact on me during my time at George Washington University (GW) some 20 years ago. In fact, his theories, models, and frameworks (“meditations” or “sermons” as he called them) still influence me today. The purpose of this article is to recount a very personal exchange with Jerry during my time as his doctoral student and to examine and discuss the broader implications of his approach with me for others who may be in dire need of a reality check in the form of a very healthy dose of self-awareness.

Those of us lucky enough to have known and worked with Jerry soon realized that he was a walking contradiction. He was fiercely intelligent, but spoke with a slow, deliberate, Texas drawl. He was a “Bible-thumping Southern Baptist” (his words), but also irreverent as he examined spiritual issues such as “The Organizational Dynamics of the Last Supper and Why Judas Was Not a Traitor” in one chapter, and made the analogy between leading change and passing gas or “Tooting Your Own Horn” in church, in another.

Jerry referred to business organizations as “Phrog Farms” yet he was in constant demand from business leaders to consult and give keynote addresses. He reminded us that when we get stabbed in the back, “Our Fingerprints Are Usually on the Knife.” He claimed it was both destructive and immoral to give someone objective feedback, but ethical to have “Prayers of Communication” with them. He condemned the “Tragedy of the No-Nonsense Manager” and stated time and again that leadership creates loneliness, which then leads to “anaclitic depression” and, if not remedied, a shorter life. He compared managers who participate in RIFs to Adolf Eichmann, and encouraged “Future Managers to Cheat.” And of course, his classic “The Abilene Paradox” is a dry, funny, and insightful reminder that it is our “inability to manage agreement, not conflict, that is the single most pressing issue of modern organizations.” Not surprisingly, Jerry’s work remains just as relevant today as when he first published it. From the production of a new 2nd edition of “The Abilene Paradox” with CRM Learning, their “All Time Best Seller” to the application of his work for board governance (see “The Director’s Manual”), his timeless meditations on the human condition still are resonant today.

To say that Jerry practiced tough love would be an understatement. He once told me during a rather heated exchange that he didn’t care if I stayed in the doctoral program or left, musing aloud that the upside of my departure would mean “one less damn dissertation to read.” After reading the first draft of my qualifying exam, he wondered aloud “how in God’s name” I had been admitted to the OB&D doctoral program at GW, but then sent me a note after I had formally submitted it for grading telling me that it was the “best damn exam I’ve read in my 25-plus years at GW” and suggested that I “hang that sucker on the wall” to remind myself of the quality of work I was capable of doing. And yet through all of the apparent contradictions, there was love and encouragement behind his approach, and a reminder to always push myself outside of my comfort zone; to think with more rigor, to write with greater precision, and to have the courage to ask and seek the answers to big and often painful questions about life and purpose.

Looking back now 20-plus years later, I have relayed “My ‘F’ in Life” story to over one thousand MBA students and to countless participants in leadership programs that I have facilitated. I retell this story not only to illustrate the dysfunction of dependency, but also to model the vulnerability I am often asking them to engage in. I find over and over again that this story resonates with so many others in a “me too” sort of way, whether they relate to me or to my ex-wife. Many students and participants applaud Jerry’s insight,

courage, and candor, and often ask me “was he really that direct?” For those of you lucky enough to have known Jerry, you know the answer to that question is a resounding “yes.”

When I attended Jerry’s funeral, I introduced myself to his wife Beth. I told her my name and that I lived and taught at Queens University in Charlotte, North Carolina, and before I could finish my sentence, she asked, “Oh, you, you’re Jerry’s ‘F in Life’ student, right?” She said that Jerry had printed my blog and posted it on his home office wall, and that he never missed an opportunity to show it to a friend or family member. Jerry may be gone, but it is my sincere hope that his legacy will not only survive, but thrive. In a world that has turned into sound bites, social media updates, and tweets, we need his existential musings and provocative sermons now more than ever. Here is how Jerry B. Harvey introduced me to the painful but ultimately transformational mistress – Self-Awareness.

My “F” in Life

I was 27 years old when I began the doctoral program in organizational behavior and development (OB&D) at George Washington University. It was 1996 and I was a freshly minted graduate with a master’s degree in psychology and management. I was going to study under the great Dr. Jerry B. Harvey, famed author of “The Abilene Paradox.” I was beyond excited. And, I was going through a divorce.

My first class in the program was a group dynamics course with Dr. Harvey, and it was unlike any class I had taken before. Students wrote poems, performed songs, and played musical instruments to illustrate their understanding of the theoretical models of small group behavior and change. Since I was too scared and insecure to actually do something creative, I decided to write a paper about my divorce and the dysfunction of dependency.

During our last class meeting, Dr. Harvey returned the final project grades to the class with one exception, mine. In front of the entire class, staring at me over the top of his glasses, he said, “William, son, you’re going to need to come see me for your grade.”

Not good. Oh well, I thought, at least I flunked out early in the program before too much time, energy, and money had been spent.

The next day I went to see Dr. Harvey. I knocked on his office door and he had his back to me reading the Bible. Without looking up he pointed to the empty chair in front of his desk. I took my seat nervously and fidgeted while he finished reading chapter and verse, literally. Rubbing his eyes and sighing, he turned to me and said, “Well, William, what do we need to talk about?” Clearing my throat, I responded that I was there to talk about my paper. “Wrong,” he said.

Surprised at his blunt retort, I quickly reassessed the purpose of the meeting and struggled to respond. Well then, I must be here to talk about my experience in the class, right?

This response both irritated and amused Jerry. “Son,” he said, “let me be very clear with you. I don’t give a shit about your experience in my class.” At that point, I was at a total loss and unsure of how to proceed. “We’re going to try this one more time, William, before I fail you. Son, what are we here to talk about?” At that point, I figured I really had nothing left to lose, so I let my guard down and replied that I was there to talk about my divorce. Grinning just a bit, he said, “I’ll give you a B- on that response. Son, we’re here to talk about you.” Okay, I thought, let’s just get this over with so I can take my lumps and beat the commuter traffic back to my local watering hole in Northern Virginia, which I suspected I might need a little more than usual tonight.

“So tell me, how the hell did all of this happen?” Dr. Harvey asked. Assuming “this” meant my divorce, I proceeded to tell my version of the events discussed in my paper. I won’t bother you with the details, but suffice to say I blamed my ex for changing, being overly needy and dependent, not having or expressing her own views and opinions, relying on me to solve all of her problems and make all the decisions, and for not growing with me. Dr. Harvey listened intently, nodding occasionally and grimacing frequently.

When I finished with my version of what had happened, Dr. Harvey said he was very sorry. He also said he would be praying for my ex. And, he said he was ready to “pray” with me. It is important to note that he thought “feedback” was both destructive and immoral because it required the participants to treat each other as objects, breaking the very humanity that bonds us together. As such, he was clear that he was not going to give me feedback; we were going to pray together.

“William,” he said, “I’ve got good news and bad news for you. The good news is that you made an ‘A’ on the paper. It’s well-researched, thoughtful, and well-written.” He proceeded to explain to me the difference between intellectually and emotionally “knowing” concepts, asserting that I both cognitively and affectively understood the dysfunction of dependency. That meant, according to Dr. Harvey, one day I could teach it.

At this point in the conversation, my arrogance and ego kicked in. I remember sitting in Jerry’s office, now puffed up a bit, thinking that the reason he had called me in to see him was so he could provide me with this glowing feedback without embarrassing the other doctoral students, most of whom were more senior than me. Here, I was, 27 years old, studying at the feet of the master in my field, receiving kudos from him and an “A” on my very first effort. I actually began to look around his office and think, “this would fit me just fine. When he retires, this might just be my professional home.” I’m quite sure that Jerry

could see my pride beginning to swell, and he must have taken great pleasure in the fact that he was setting me up for the real purpose of our meeting.

As if he could read my mind, he cleared his throat. “But,” he continued, there’s bad news too. The bad news is that I’m giving you an “F” in life. Son, I am of the professional opinion that the only thing more dysfunctional than a codependent, which is your soon-to-be-ex-wife, is a pro-dependent, which is you. You created this dynamic. I bet you had to make every decision. I suspect you had to solve every problem. I bet you had to have the last word in every argument. And, I bet you were always *right*. Now you want me to feel sorry for you, but I don’t. Not at all. I feel sorry for her.

I turned white and felt sick to my stomach. In the span of a few seconds, I went from feeling extreme pride to experiencing a pain and ache that I still feel to this day. He also expressed to me in very direct, very colorful language how much he resented me thinking that I could come into his office and manipulate him into feeling sorry for me. He not only made the point that it angered him that I had tried to do that, he also strongly suggested that I avoid ever trying to do that to him in the future.

He then proceeded to tell me if I really wanted to learn something during my time at GW, and do the rest of the world a big favor, I should spend the next four years figuring out why I did that to her. His final words to me that day were along the lines of

William, I’m going to level with you; I doubt very seriously you’re going to graduate from this program. You’ve gone through life never getting out of third gear, and you’ll never get past me unless you’re in overdrive, if you even have an overdrive. And, to make matters worse, you have a South Carolina “chip” on your shoulder that will make it virtually impossible for you to be truly open and receptive to the prayers I plan to have with you in the coming years. But, if you will spend whatever time you have in this program figuring out why the hell you did that to her, you’ll get your money’s worth out of the program whether you graduate or not.

And with that comment, he turned his back to me, opened up his Bible, and continued reading. I drove home that night very upset, and spent that evening thinking about what a hypocrite the “great” Dr. Harvey had turned out to be. Claiming to be a Christian, telling me he would pray for me, and then when I was my most vulnerable, cutting me to the quick and pouring metaphorical salt on my wide open wound. I told myself he didn’t know anything about me or my situation. No, I decided Dr. Harvey was not only rude and cold, he was factually wrong.

That night I went out and had a few drinks and a huge pity party for myself, talking with friends who validated my opinion and told me he was wrong. They got it. They felt sorry for me. And even though that

was what I wanted to hear, I knew deep down that Jerry had pinpointed something about me that I couldn't stop thinking about, and that this new, painful insight wasn't about to go away quietly. The next morning I woke up and something magical – dare I say *transformational* – happened. As I looked into the mirror with tired, bloodshot eyes staring back at me, I said out loud, “He’s right.” You see, I had to admit that Dr. Harvey, although my professor and acquaintance for only a few months, knew me very well. In fact, and this is what really hurt, he knew me better than I knew myself. I had created this dysfunction. It was my fault, and many had suffered. That was a bitter pill to swallow, but I did. And in that moment of personal responsibility and acceptance, I felt awake. I did not feel good or at peace, but I felt aware and wide awake for the first time.

That experience started me on this path of research and practice into human growth and development. I later came to the conclusion that the *Personal Transformation Cycle* has three key components: vulnerability, responsibility, and forgiveness. During this time, I had experienced vulnerability and responsibility. Identifying and experiencing the third element – forgiveness – was sadly a much later discovery for me.

Implications for prayers of communication with others

Years later, while reflecting on this exchange with me, Jerry said that it was really my first and only “test” with him. He commented that if I had responded with defensiveness or denial, he would have been “through with me.” While this story may or may not interest you, most people do tend to remember it. And for many, it resonates in a pretty powerful “me too” sort of way. But, I think there are some key lessons that can and should be taken from this exchange and help inform our approach to mentoring and coaching others, whether students, colleagues, or clients. In light of seeing feedback in this way, I believe there are some key elements that we can apply with others in our lives, and they follow:

(1)

A “prayer of communication” is a gift

Jerry could have treated me differently that day, and I thank God he didn't. But at the time of our exchange, his feedback really hurt. And it hurt because it was spot-on and the first time someone had shined some light on my Shadow. He saw that I was sad and broken, and he saw that I was also very vulnerable. He could have put his arm around me and told me to “hang in there” and that everything would be fine, but he didn't do that. Instead, he assumed that I could take the truth. He did not assume I would be defensive or upset. From that, I have come to believe that when we sugarcoat the truth or provide gentle feedback to another person, we actually dishonor them. The ultimate expression of love and respect for another is to honor them with candid, direct feedback, which can be a wonderful gift bearing transformational fruit.

(2)

You are responsible for what you say, not for how the other person responds

To be clear, Jerry really didn't care how I felt or responded to him. I believe that it really made no difference to him whether I owned it or denied it, other than it would determine whether or not he would work with me. So many times we believe the quality of our feedback to another is based on how they respond, but I think that is misguided. Someone may have a very positive response to a watered-down and sugarcoated version of the truth, and it may be very ineffective. Likewise, someone else may have a very negative response to our direct feedback, but it was what needed to be said. I believe when we can separate ourselves from someone else's reaction, we then liberate ourselves to be agents of candor and direct feedback, a prayer of communication, which is the ultimate way to honor another person.

(3)

Personal growth and transformation can come only when we have the courage to face our Shadow

Knowing that Jerry was a big fan of Carl Jung, I suspect he knew the only way for me to truly grow and actualize my potential was to face my own darkness. Although so many of us want to "make a fresh start" and to "move forward," we often find ourselves in a pattern of repeating behaviors and outcomes. Jung was clear that there was no such thing as Fate, only Shadows that, when unmet or unexamined, patiently wait to thwart our best intention and lead us right back to the place we so desperately tried to avoid. Jung famously said that we "meet our destiny on the road we took to avoid it." I believe that even though it is painful and uncomfortable, introducing someone to his or her Shadow is the only way to facilitate true growth and lasting change. Jerry took this opportunity to confront me with my Shadow, and I believe that he did this to provide an opportunity for me to take the responsibility and initiative to break this dysfunctional cycle. Jung also said "... to confront someone with his Shadow is to show him his own light." I now realize that even though this confrontation was painful, it was ultimately an act that respected me and my ability to respond appropriately to this insight.

In the 20-plus years since this encounter with Jerry, I have retold this story many times, hoping that others who may be on the wrong path, with their destiny lurking around the next bend, can make the necessary changes to take responsibility for their lives, and liberate themselves to live into their ultimate potential. Feedback is indeed a gift. And even though the exchange with Jerry was very painful, it was ultimately the most precious thing anyone has ever given me. I don't think I realized it at the time, but over the years, I have grown to understand the method to his madness.

A month before Jerry passed away, we traded emails. He let me know that he wasn't doing well, but that he had the "My 'F' in Life" blog printed and posted above his desk. When I told him how much he had

meant to me, his response was classic Jerry Harvey:

William, for God's sake you should know by now that I take no credit for any growth you may have experienced during your time with me, nor any blame for future regression.

Rest in Peace, Dr. Harvey. I suspect your musings and prayers of communication are keeping your new Heavenly neighbors on their toes, and in stitches.

Notes on Contributor

William L Sparks serves as the *Dennis Thompson Chair of Leadership* at the McColl School of Business at Queens University of Charlotte, where he is a tenured professor of Business and Behavioral Sciences. He also serves as a visiting professor of International Management with Franklin College in Lugano, Switzerland. In 2008, he founded the McColl School's M.S. in Organization Development (MSOD) Program and served as the director until 2013. He received the Fuqua Distinguished Educator Award for excellence in teaching at Queens in 2003 and 2005 and was awarded the inaugural McColl School Leadership in Teaching Award in 2009. While on mini-leave from Queens, he served as the global vice president of Talent with EnPro Industries, a \$1.5B global manufacturing company, from 2015 to 2016. In this role, he is responsible for the leadership development, learning, and talent initiatives across the company. Will has published numerous research papers and book chapters and has contributed articles to The Charlotte Observer and the Charlotte Business Journal. He is the co-author (with Peter Browning) of the book "The Director's Manual: A Framework for Board Governance" (2016) and the author of the forthcoming book "Actualized Leadership: Meeting Your Shadow & Maximizing Your Potential" (2017), both published by Wiley. He holds a BA in Psychology and Philosophy from Winthrop University, and an MA in Industrial/Organizational Psychology and Human Resource Management from Appalachian State University. He completed his PhD in Organizational Behavior and Development under the direction of Jerry B Harvey from The George Washington University's School of Business and Public Management, ^{AQ2} where his research focused on group dynamics, organizational culture, and leadership.

Disclosure statement

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