**Navigating the Channel of Life**

A Model of Adult Development in Organizations



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Imagine a human life, your life or mine, as a person in a little “sunfish” sailboat, a one-person, one-sail boat with a rudder to keep the boat steady and straight and a tiller at the stern for steering. One skilled sailor can handle this spry little boat. Further imagine a river flowing into a long narrow bay opening out onto the ocean. Childhood is like the river—the current of the river carries the little boat along, sheltered by the banks from very much wind (though, of course, not completely). Human development of a certain amount comes naturally. Of course, we hear of stories of childhood shipwrecks, but normally, with a little bit of skill and luck, the boat makes it down the river and out onto the bay.[[1]](#footnote-1) The bay I am thinking of looks something like the San Francisco Bay, as I spent 11 years in that area during and after college.

 But the narrative of this little model changes a great deal when the boat floats out onto the bay, for at this point, life is no longer about “Sail, sail, sail your boat, gently down a stream,” and, as any thoughtful and honest adult will recognize, life is not “but a dream.”

 I imagine the task of adult development to be the task of taking that little sunfish up the bay, against the sometimes fierce but always steady headwind of adversity, uncertainty, scarcity, and entropy, and out into the open waters of the ocean. This is nearly a Sisyphean task, as progress must be made *against the wind*. There is no coasting or gentle progress with the tides.

 On the other hand, the wind, while providing resistance to direct progress, also provides motive force for the little sailboat. In fact, without wind the little boat would literally be dead in the water. (And without adversity, uncertainty, scarcity or entropy, we would have little impetus to grow and develop.) But, in the hands of an able sailor, this trim little boat can make great progress indeed. So the boatsperson, you or I, puts hand to the tiller, hoists in the sail, and sets off in what is called a “tack”, traversing a course roughly 45º off of straight into the wind.

 So we move along, clearly making progress. We feel the wind in our face, but it is not a discouraging drag on our demeanor, but the exhilarating wind of speed, the evidence of progress. At this point in our lives, we tend to over-extrapolate. “At this rate of speed, I’ll be out of the bay and into ocean waters in no time.” It doesn’t help that the myth of rapid progress is reinforced in every bookstore display, every personal interest magazine cover story, nearly every commercial advertisement to come before our eyes. (In other words, just because someone becomes a millionaire before age 30 does not mean that that person is mature, wise, generous, or grounded, as we are reminded daily in the news about professional athletes’ misbehavior. No, that person’s development has simply become more complex. But in the analogy, he or she still occupies a little sunfish of a sailboat and must find the means to pay attention to sailing it.)

 But at some point, inevitably, the trim little boat of our life begins to risk running out of open water. The boat’s hull is not deep, but it is still possible to run it aground. The bay is not infinitely wide, and so the first real test of our sailing skill comes when we need to “come around,” or to take a different tack. This happens when what was working for us, helping us make headway, no longer is working, and in fact is getting us into trouble. Often, the success we have experienced in this previous tack now works to our disadvantage—we think we should be able to continue making progress without major adjustment. Yet at this point, in order to make progress we must turn straight into the wind and head back, 90º around from the direction we had been going. When this happens, a number of other things happen: 1) we stop making any forward progress, 2) it looks like we are facing the wind head on, 3) our sail flaps, momentarily useless while the boat is coming around, 4) we despair of ever feeling that great feeling of progress again.

 All this happens, *indeed must happen*, for progress up the bay toward the ocean to be possible. This turn, however, is a jolt, and feels disorienting, even discouraging. The distant landmark we had fixed in our sights as an indicator of our progress is no longer in our field of vision. If progress had been equated with moving in a Northwesterly direction, then to begin to move in a Northeasterly direction may seem like going squarely the wrong way.

 But of course, if we were able to take a bird’s eye view of our life’s course and its tacks and turns, we would see that this kind of zig-zag progress is, in fact, the only way to navigate the channel of the bay to make it out into open water. But this kind of perspective is rare, and no GPS satellite service exists for help navigating the turns of one’s life. So, often we fail to take a new tack until the old one is clearly no longer working, after we have run aground, lost all momentum, and are now confused about how to make progress. This is called a crisis, whether of faith, or of midlife, or of psychological distress due to scheduled or unscheduled life strains.[[2]](#footnote-2)

 In this model, life is a complex interplay between growth (steady progress in the same direction) and development (involving some kind of crisis, insight or discontinuity, leading one to decide to take a different tack). Levinson’s theory of seasons of adulthood describes these broad seasons as characterized by longer periods of continuity of life structure interspersed between shorter transition stages, at which point discontinuity often interrupts and new life structures emerge.[[3]](#footnote-3)

 Finally, in this picture of life, growth and development, the goal is to reach the ocean, the ultimate in open water, which represents achieving one’s life’s purpose. It is the accomplishment of the final stage of any theory of adult development—achieving wisdom, self-actualization, the discovery and consummation of one’s destiny. We all endeavor to steer our little crafts out into the ocean, but few manage this feat. Most get run aground along the way or lose hope and cease the effort.

**Personal Agents of Development**

I identify three dichotomies, or axes, providing motive impulse for growth and development, dealing fundamentally with God (or the Ultimate, however conceived), other people, and ourselves:

* **God or Transcendent Reality:** Whether or not there is an actual deity in the picture is, of course, decidedly important to the individual, but I argue that even for the irreligious person these tacks need to be negotiated somehow: faith and hope versus dissatisfaction and disillusionment.
	+ *Faith and Hope.* Faith is quite obviously a force that produces growth and development. It can lead people toward ethical behavior, discipline, generosity, sacrificial love. None of these artifacts of maturity are inevitable, of course, by virtue of some intellectual embrace of a religious system. But deep faith can provide the motivation and direction to produce discipline and humility to develop and grow. Appendix 1 contains a model of stages of faith that is a synthesis of several models, taken from Brian McLaren’s postmodern apologetic, *Finding Faith*.[[4]](#footnote-4)
	+ *Dissatisfaction and Disillusionment.* Without dissatisfaction, it is easy to become complacent and for faith itself to become stagnant. Disillusionment occurs because, in fact, we have been believing an illusion of some kind. (I say this as man who believes deeply—I have sincerely believed many things over the course of my life that I no longer believe, but my faith is deeper and my confidence in God more solid. It is just that I consider that I have had to discard certain illusions along the way.) Disillusionment has a bad reputation in the world of faith. In fact, disillusionment is a sign of growth because *illusions aren’t real*. As we discard childish simplifications of the world for models of greater nuance, disillusionment is often the pathway to deeper faith. But it often doesn’t feel like it at the time.
* **Others:** The pathway to relational growth involves holding twin realities in tension: the experience of community, commonality, and affiliation versus “the beloved,” uniqueness and separation.
	+ *Community*. Peer pressure is a force for development, whether in the academic life of a graduate student in a lab, the social life of a fraternity pledge, or the competitive experience of the new class of associate consultants in a firm. Loevinger talks about the conformist stage, when group expectations become determinative for individual behavior.[[5]](#footnote-5) When I was in the eighth grade, I signed up to take a language class because my (academically inclined) friends were doing it, with no prior interest in the language myself. Community can get us to study French, travel out of our comfort zone, or apply ourselves to learning the skills that will help the team. Community, first experienced in a healthy family but then in a peer group, is also the place where the fundamentals of communication and relational health are learned: generosity and hospitality, mutuality and grace. These experiences ideally prepare a young adult for the later decisions that come regarding Ericson’s stages of intimacy and generativity.
	+ *The Beloved.* Yet at some point the *many* often must give way to the *one*—a group of friends is traded for a special friend, and a group of housemates is traded for a partner, ideally for life. Obviously, the decision to marry—with all the obligations and privileges that confers—can be a tremendously developmental one. The choice to couple off can feel like a one-way move away from peer friendships and community, but in fact the couple’s relationship is stronger if they can learn eventually to move out of the separation of the oneness of marriage back into a community of friends, in which their oneness is welcome.
* **Self:** Any model of development must take into account the individual’s coming to terms with his or her own sense of self, through both the discovery of giftedness and success as well as learning to appropriately deal with limitations and failure.
	+ *Success.* The upward climb of achievement through the disciplined honing of skills and development of giftedness, with the success that that so often brings, is a powerful motive force for adult development. The carrot of being recognized in your job, with attendant bonuses and promotions, can often (though not always) produce the fortitude and impulse to conquer addiction and squash distraction.
	+ *Failure.* And yet, everything that goes up must come down, and human nature will out. So at some point, our failures catch up with us. This is not like the announcement we hear when we board a plane, “In the unlikely event of a water landing…” While that tragic event is statistically remote, our failures and limitations catching up to us is inevitable. And thus begins another tack in our journey, if we choose to accept it by accepting them: the pathway to growth involves humility, laying down our defenses, being able to say to ourselves, “I may never grow up to be a rock star,” and being able to say to our detractors, “It’s even worse than you think!” John Maxwell turned his attention to the role of failure in the development of leaders in his recent *Failing Forward: Turning Mistakes into Stepping Stones for Success.* “*The difference between average people and achieving people is their perception of and response to failure.* Nothing else has the same kind of impact on people’s ability to achieve and to accomplish whatever their minds and hearts desire.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Each of these pairs describes points on an axis from open-ended and abundant to closed-ended and narrow: faith is open-ended, an upward look, while disillusionment is a shrinking and narrowing. Community and affiliation is open-ended—the more the merrier. The choice of a single “beloved” is not open-ended; in fact, it is a closing off of options: “Forsaking all others, till we are parted by death.” And development of skills and talents seems like a hopeful, open-ended process, securing success all the way along. But embracing limitations and facing failure is, well, so limiting. Each of these upward paths is matched by a downward move. Or back in my model, the left-ward tacks of faith, community, and success are correlated with rightward tacks of disillusionment, separation, and failure. But progress is not made unless both tacks are used in a back and forth fashion.

 These three axes or pairs of agents interact, in my model, in the following way: as a young adult pulls into the bay from the mouth of the river, this young woman takes a leftward tack (just for simplicity’s sake) toward the more open-ended of each of these three axes: she tacks toward faith, community, and success. But at some point, she runs aground, and the combination of things she used before no longer works. Perhaps she is disillusioned because her pastor, from whom she had received her childhood faith, had an affair with the church organist. Or she hears from her friend from home that she is sleeping with her boyfriend and wondering why that could be so wrong. She then begins to tack back across the bay toward the other side—this new strategy, disillusionment in this case, begins to force her to ask questions of her faith she has never bothered to ask. While this is a painful process for her mother to watch (if she’s even allowed to see it) it is actually part of the growth process for this young woman.

The danger for the young woman is that she could now easily run aground on the opposite side of the bay. Disillusionment is deceptively toxic—it can provoke growth in faith, but it can also derail it. So in my model, there are dangerous shoals on either side of the channel of the bay, upon which the little boat of our lives may easily run aground and be damaged if we aren’t careful to come about at the proper time. Table 1 describes the crises associated with each tack of the boat of life, assuming that the boat is not brought around out of the way of danger in a timely fashion.

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| **Table 1. Navigational Crises in Adult Life** |
| **Tack** | **Dangerous shoals if we go too far:** |
| 1a) Faith and hope | Stagnant and/or immature faith |
| 1b) Dissatisfaction and disillusionment | Cynicism and despair |
| 2a) Community and affiliation | Inability to forge depth; fear of intimacy and/or commitment |
| 2b) The Beloved and separation | Stifling and clingy relationship; co-dependency, isolation |
| 3a) Development of giftedness and success | “I am what I do”; a fear of failure and death; rejection of suffering, inability to come to terms with loss and grief; meaninglessness and shallowness |
| 3b) Embracing limitations and facing failure | Poor self-image and self-pity; purposelessness. |

 Faith is a developmental pathway, but if taken too far, without a corrective tack, it can lead to stagnation and immaturity. Disillusionment is also a developmental pathway, but if taken too far, it can lead to cynicism and despair. Community is a tool for development, but if made an absolute value, can lead to an inability to embrace intimacy and commitment. Marriage is also a pathway for development, but can lead to a stifling, stultifying and retrograde relationship (or series of similar failed relationships), if not tempered with a tack back toward community and affiliation. Development of giftedness is clearly a pathway toward growth and development, both professional and personal, but if not tempered with a realistic appraisal of one’s own limitations and failures, it can lead to an inordinate fear of failure, or of being found out as a failure. And finally, embracing limitations and facing failure can also yield developmental fruit, but if the reverse tack of gift development and experiencing some recognizable success is not taken, then the person will wallow in self-pity and may come to feel like life has no real purpose. Figure 1 illustrates this model graphically.



**Figure 1. Navigational Model for Adult Development**

For further illustration of the model, let me expand with more examples of lives run aground on the rocky shoals:

* *A “cocooning” process that never ends.* The intimate relationship or even the family never comes out of its relational home base enough to develop friendships, community and support. Relational growth is stifled—ultimately the central relationship may be doomed either to stagnation or worse. In the community in which I live, some people have big houses, holding lots of stuff, but the children spend their days on their computer or other electronic games, material needs sated but starved for relationship.
* *Single women on IVCF staff.* The community value is so high, and the other open-ended tacks (faith, skills and success) run so long, that at a certain age these women look around them and realize they haven’t paid enough attention to the desire they feel to be married one day. With their weekends scheduled for ministry, not romance, they just simply aren’t available to someone who might even be interested. At some point, they begin to face the fact that they may have unwittingly chosen a celibate life. This can then cause a larger crisis of faith and disillusionment.
* *The successful narcissist*. This person has never faced his or her own failure or limitations, and has an abiding sense of personal power and importance. While experiencing success in some areas of life, the narcissist is in a larger sense a failure, having run aground on the shores of insecurity and fear of failure.

*“*Notwithstanding his occasional illusions of omnipotence, the narcissist depends on others to validate his self-esteem. He cannot live without an admiring audience. His apparent freedom from family ties and institutional constraints does not free him to stand alone or to glory in his individuality. On the contrary, it contributes to his insecurity, which he can overcome only by seeing his ‘grandiose self” reflected in the attentions of others, or by attaching himself to those who radiate celebrity, power, and charisma. For the narcissist, the world is a mirror.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

This model synthesizes the stages models (in a sequential process) with the non-stage crises model: crises are defined as a time when what was working for us no longer does—we need to take a different tack. In Levinson this is reflected in the transition stages: early adult, age 30, mid-life, late adult transitions. Perhaps it would be fair to acknowledge that a single tack may not generate a crisis, but the conflation of two or more tacks (turns necessitated by the approach of dangerous shoals) would likely measure as a crisis: a failure in marriage could produce alienation and a move toward community, disillusionment in faith prompting a turn to God, and coming to terms with limitations and failures. Of course, the crisis could instead produce stagnation, a grounding of the boat in the shallows.

 I think the model of life in a boat, navigable but also subject to the vicissitudes of wind and weather, is a pretty accurate description of how life goes. M. Scott Peck says it this way:

“Life is difficult.

This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult—once we truly understand and accept it—then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.” [[8]](#footnote-8)

Peck goes on to state, “Discipline is the basic set of tools we require to solve life’s problems. Without discipline we can solve nothing. With only some discipline we can solve only some problems. With total discipline we can solve all problems.”[[9]](#footnote-9) It perhaps seems a little simplistic to equate all of life to a problem set assignment; indeed life is not fair and some things that happen to us (say the early death of a beloved son) can not be neatly summed up as a “problem.” The developmental theories talk about stresses and crises in life and the developmental potential (for good or ill) in these events. While it may be possible to weather a tragedy like the death of a child, it seems simplistic to talk about it as a problem needing to be solved. It is more like a storm needing to be survived. It is survivable, but not without impact. It may even produce growth and development, but surely not gladly chosen. Yet Peck’s insight, the seminal insight of his bestseller*, The Road Less Traveled*, is crucial for anyone attempting to understand adult development in general or their own developmental path in particular.

**Organizational Agents of Influence**

In this model I also define three organizational agents of influence affecting human growth and development. These three agents are like the personal agents, in that they represent contrasting values held in tension. In the model, the boat is an individual’s life. The developmental organization doesn’t take different tacks at different times, but it creates an environment whereby the individual employees of the organization are encouraged and empowered to take the appropriate tacks at appropriate times—therefore both values, or their organizational manifestations, need to be held in tension.

 Ultimately, the organizational culture is the place where the developmental organization will be established. Certain supervisors or co-workers can have deep impact in the lives of people around them. “Effective managers manage themselves and the people they work with so that both the organization and the people profit from their presence.”[[10]](#footnote-10) However, unless developmental management is coherent with the organizational culture, that impact will be anomalous and short-lived.

* **Transcendent Purpose:** The company has a stated mission or purpose statement that is coherently applied and validated throughout the organization. This generates employee loyalty and a willingness to offer loyal critique, which the organization embraces because of its higher commitment to its purpose. This agent correlates to the first of the three personal agents: literally it is having an organization you can believe in.
	+ *Open-ended value: Integrity.* The integrity of an organization is, in part, the coherence between what it says is important and what, by measure of its practices, it actually demonstrates to be of importance. A company lacking such integrity produces cynics out of even the most naïve and hopeful of new employees. Without a credible claim to the loyalty and heart-felt commitment of its employees, a company will tend toward a policy-rich management of its employees’ baser motivations, churning out rule after rule to try to get employees to do what they would only do with a shared, internalized motivational framework. On the other hand, a company with demonstrated integrated commitment to its worthy transcendent purpose will find its employees full of faith in its leadership and able to summon up supernatural effort toward the fulfillment of its destiny, enriching the company’s employees *and* other stakeholders.
	+ *Closed-ended value: loyal critique and rigorous self-evaluation.* The company one can believe in must not be above critique, but must actively seek out loyal evaluative feedback from its employees, as well as being willing to listen to others in its ecology (shareholders, customers, regulatory agencies, NGOs). Supervisors seek out feedback from subordinates regarding their own and their unit’s performance, with no tendency to shoot the messenger of bad tidings.
* **Relational Health:** The organization neither undermines self-initiative through enforced conformity nor isolates people through competition and jealousy. Stephen Covey tells the story of the manager who wanted to encourage teamwork in his organization but motivated aggressive sales through a competitive race for one of his managers to win a trip to Bermuda. Pointing out the inconsistency of message, Covey summarizes, “One manager’s success meant failure for the other managers.” Covey’s public victory disciplines serve the relational dimension of the organizational agents of development: Think Win/Win; Seek First to Understand, then to be Understood; and Synergize.[[11]](#footnote-11) This provides the organizational support for the second axis of personal agents of development, that of relationship with others.
	+ *Open-ended value: Teamwork.* A team is a group of people who must work together to accomplish a common purpose. Often people are grouped into “teams” when they either 1) have no need to work together, or 2) have no common purpose. But a developmental organization doesn’t simply have Thursday evening volleyball or off-site creative brainstorming sessions, but gives people real experiences where their perspectives are valued and their contributions are recognized as critical to the overall success of the project. This is the enactment of Covey’s sixth habit, Synergize. This will require honest communication about process breakdowns, and reconciliation and forgiveness (even perhaps using that word!) between colleagues and teammates.
	+ *Closed-ended value: Submission and servanthood.* Not all team experiences involve ready consensus and every team member’s full self-actualization through a harmonious synergy of creative talent and impulses. “We typically seek first to be understood. Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply. They’re either speaking or preparing to speak. They’re filtering everything through their own paradigms…”[[12]](#footnote-12) Servanthood in a team setting begins with what Covey calls “empathic listening,” where the goal isn’t to win the argument but to deeply understand others on the team. Submission continues when, at the end of the brainstorming session, decisions get made and not everyone gets their way. In a developmental organization, teammates don’t leave the room uncommitted to the decisions that went contrary to their preferences. Rather, they submit to the team’s agreed-upon process and serve the purposes of the team. With relational health as an organizational culture asset, tendencies toward passive aggression or resistance from below can be addressed quickly, either bringing the effected employee back into alignment or, if necessary, removing that person from the team. In the developmental organization, an employee readily acknowledges the many benefits he or she receives from participation on the team, so it is possible to guide this employee back to productive ways of relating to the team because the employee is so motivated to remain.
* **Authentic Competence:** The firm expects from its employees excellence and supports it. Yet the firm also demands and models authentic facing up to weakness and respects it when this happens. This is the institutional support for the third axis, that of the self. The organization provides arenas and opportunities for employees to grow and develop, while expecting that people will make mistakes and own up to them. In *Bringing Out the Best in People*, Alan Loy McGinnis writes his management rules for helping others excel: “Rule 3: Establish High Standards for Excellence.” “Rule 4: Create an Environment where failure is not fatal.”[[13]](#footnote-13)
	+ *Open-ended value: Excellence and Initiative.* In a competitive culture, with high costs of failure, an organization can motivate deceit, cover-ups, overstatements of success and a disregard for the hard facts of failure. This is fatal to an organization let alone its developmental culture. (Hence the notorious and massively costly corporate-finance scandals of the past few years.) Even well-meaning and basically honest employees will not develop in such an environment; in fact they probably won’t have the political skills to survive in the organization. But when an organization values excellence, trains for it, expects it, but doesn’t penalize failure arbitrarily (knowing that failure brings a certain amount of unavoidable, intrinsic disincentive), then people can develop and be seen to be developing (i.e., growing in some professional way in which they obviously hadn’t already achieved excellence).
	+ *Closed-ended value: Humility.* Every capable young employee, well along on his or her first long “skill and success” tack, will eventually come to the end of that first wonderful ride. If that person, faced with a personal or professional disappointment, can look up and into the organization and see people who themselves have failed, have learned from it, and can tell the story without being trite or dismissive (i.e., tell it vulnerably yet without maudlin self-pity), then that young and capable employee might very well embrace his or her own “limitation and failure” tack with confidence that, in the end, fundamental life lessons are ripe for the picking. With models of humility (people who are truly models and yet who are remarkably humble), and an organization that doesn’t shy away from honoring them, the developing young employee will be better able to navigate his or her own craft away from the rocky shore of the fear of failure and the self-deception and duplicity that that fear fosters.

Each of these organizational values maps elegantly onto the appropriate personal agent value from the previous list. Organizational *integrity* correlates to *faith*, while *openness to critique* correlates to *disillusionment and dissatisfaction*. An organization that has both integrity and is not brittle in the face of critique can actually foster an environment where one’s faith development is no threat to organizational participation, and vice versa. (In other words, it would be easy to imagine an organization in which a lack of integrity produced cynicism that made personal integrity, let alone faith, more difficult for the employee, while at the same time made organizational critique costly to the employee. This would not be a developmental context or a hopeful place to remain for the employee.) Likewise, *teamwork* correlates to *community* and each mutually supports the characteristics needed to thrive and grow—organizational forms of teamwork develop skills that can deepen personal experiences of community, and vice versa. *Submission and servanthood* correlate to the unique relationship with *the Beloved*—as the choice will need to be made, repeatedly and unendingly, to submit one’s own preferences and wishes for the sake of one’s beloved. And, quite obviously, *excellence and initiative* and *humility* correspond with *success* and *failure*, and the fostering of the one in organizational life will lead to an achievement and an acceptance of the other in personal life, and vice versa.

Let us consider a few examples of organizational agents of development working properly or breaking down.

* Often an apparent conflict emerges between employee development and concern for the bottom line: employee development is more costly in the short term, and perhaps developed employees will no longer be satisfied in the positions in which they have served. This can, of course, serve the larger organization, but individual managers may need to find replacements as people develop skills that create dissatisfaction in their current positions. But in organizations where, despite lofty mission statements, the most important value is quarterly income (i.e., short-term profit), the long-term development of staff is simply not seen as profitable. This line of thinking was debunked in a recent Harvard Business Review article:

“Managers are always claiming, ‘People are our most important asset.’ But deep down, they can’t shake the feeling that employees are costs. Big costs. And they treat them that way. Quarterly earnings off? Cut the perks, rein in training, and downsize. This strategy may increase earnings in the short term, but it’s myopic. Recent studies suggest that layoffs actually destroy shareholder value. And our research shows that treating employees like the assets they are—by investing in development—boosts returns over the long term.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

In an organization with more deeply held transcendent goals, employee development is consistent with these goals, and it becomes normative, with a payoff for employees and for shareholders alike.

* In Hal Rosenbluth’s iconoclastic *The Customer Comes Second,* he tells the story of his travel agency in which employees, not customers, were his top priority. Employees were required to attend “mandatory” training sessions, but there was no need for an enforcement mechanism, because these were highly popular. His company grew to have one of the highest customer satisfaction ratings in the industry, not, as he says, by putting the customer first, but by emphasizing the importance of an excellent and developing workforce. “Only when people know what it feels like to be first in someone else’s eyes can they sincerely share that feeling with others. We’re not saying choose your people over your customers. We’re saying focus on your people *because* of your customers. That way everybody wins.”[[15]](#footnote-15)
* When stated higher goals and unstated operational priorities do not align, the organization develops a dysfunctional system that makes truth, organizational or personal, an endangered species. Ironically, this is the more powerful when the organization has a lofty mission, as is the case with non-profit organizations in general and Christian ministries in particular.

“The organization becomes the addictive substance for its employees when the employees become hooked on the promise of the mission and choose not to look at how the system is really operating. The organization becomes an addictive substance when its actions are excused because it has a lofty mission. We have found an inverse correlation between the loftiness of the mission and the congruence between stated and unstated goals. When this lack of congruence exists, it is more probable that the organization will enter in to a rigid denial system with concomitant grandiosity.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

One of the most painful organizational experiences of my life in IVCF has to do with precisely such an addiction, which was destructive in the lives of a several dozen employees with whom I had supervisory oversight. I didn’t quickly see the destructive nature, though I too was caught in its web of deception, perpetrated over several years by a direct supervisee of my own.

* Many books have been written on the organizational value and practice of teamwork. In one of the recent best, a simple fable exploring team life, Patrick Lencioni writes of the five dysfunctions of a team: 1) absence of trust, leading to invulnerability; 2) fear of conflict, leading to artificial harmony; 3) lack of commitment, leading to ambiguity; 4) avoidance of accountability, leading to low standards; and 5) inattention to results, leading to a focus on status and ego.[[17]](#footnote-17) The first two of these are addressed by the open-ended value of teamwork in my model, while the next two (commitment and accountability) are addressed by the alternate values of submission and servanthood. One of the most egregious ways these dysfunctions manifest is when a team supposedly comes to consensus but the team members fail to live by it because, essentially, they personally disagreed with the decision. Another way is that team members fail to press for consensus because none of them can commit to an alternative that they personally don’t favor. An organization in which employees operate with the discipline of functioning teams, including a willingness to submit to the choice of colleagues and peers, will likely perform well in the marketplace as well as contribute to a developmental outcome for individual employees.
* In their book detailing the results of in-depth interviews by the Gallup organization of over 80,000 managers in over 400 companies, Buckingham and Coffman talk about the “revolutionary” insight from their study of “the world’s greatest managers”.

“Conventional wisdom encourages you to think [that] anyone can be anything they want to be if they just try hard enough. Indeed, as a manager it is your duty to direct those changes. Devise rules and policies to control your employees’ unruly inclinations. Teach them skills and competencies to fill in the traits they lack… Great managers reject this out of hand. They remember … that each individual is true to his unique nature. They recognize that each person is motivated differently, that each person has his own way of thinking and his own style of relating to others…. But they don’t bemoan these differences and try to grind them down. Instead they *capitalize* on them. They try to help each person become *more* and *more* of who he already is.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Developmental managers focus on the positive, on the areas of strength and giftedness, encouraging supervisees to grow and develop excellence in those areas, rather than simply focusing on weaknesses and grinding away at the need to improve in areas that may never become strengths.

* Finally, in another recent blockbuster, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins speaks of a “Level 5 Leader” who seems to break the mold of the larger-than-life CEO who by dint of ego and aggressive forcefulness is able to get their companies to perform well. Collins studied companies that experienced an inflection point in their upward trajectory in the market, making the transition from “good to great”. One of the central ingredients in such a transformation was having a “level 5 leader” at the helm.

“Level 5 Executive: Builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will… Level 5 leaders channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company. It’s not that Level 5 leaders have no ego or self-interest. Indeed, they are incredibly ambitious—*but their ambition is first and foremost for the institution, not themselves*.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

**Stages of Development**

At this point I will address the question of stages of development in a human life. I have already outlined three different stages in my simple model: childhood, characterized by a gentle drift down a benign stream; most of adulthood, characterized by the need to actively navigate the wind, water, and shoreline out of the bay toward the ocean; and finally culmination, self-actualization or wisdom, conceived of as the (relatively rare) emergence of the boat out into the open waters of a fulfilled life.

 However, it must be obvious to the reader that the second stage is the one that captivates my interest for the purposes of this paper and my current position with IVCF. I take the position, consonant with the perspective of the instructors of the class, that Erickson’s Theory of Psychosocial Development is largely accurate. I am not at all trying to displace that theory or its rich and relevant insights. I am, however, trying to build a pragmatic model that might yield implications for self-knowledge and guidance of others in this process. I have identified, in Table 2 below, these broad navigational challenges with the most advanced of Erickson’s stages: Erickson’s industry and identity stages (IV and V) map to the success/failure growth in understanding of the self; intimacy and generativity stages (VI and VII) map to the relational components of community and intimacy; and wisdom stage (VIII) maps to the issue of faith and hope. These, of course, do not perfectly line up. Indeed, I think some of each navigational challenge (God, Others, Myself) can be found at each stage throughout Erickson’s model.

One implication of these broad identifications would be to extend the model to a timeline and a staged sense of chronological priority. Erickson’s model, therefore, would imply that the navigational challenges would roughly follow this pattern: Myself (stages IV and V), then Others (stages VI and VII), then God (stage VIII). Yet I do not see this in my experience, either in my own life or in the lives of students and staff with whom I have worked. Rather, I’d like to make a few observations, based on my reflection on the interviews taken as well as my own experience.

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| **Table 2. The Navigational Model of Adult Development** |
| **View of** | **God** | **Others** | **Myself** |
| Tack to the left: open-ended | Faith and hope | Community, commonality, abundance and affiliation | Gift development and success |
| Tack to the right: closed-ended | Dissatisfaction and disillusionment | Belovedness and chosenness; uniqueness and separation | Limitations, failure and suffering |
| The dangerous left bank | Stagnant and/or immature faith | Inability to forge depth; fear of intimacy | “I am what I do”; fear of failure (death); rejection of suffering; meaninglessness, shallowness |
| The dangerous right bank | Cynicism and despair | Stifling and clingy relationship; co-dependency, isolation. | Poor self-image, self-pity. Purposelessness |
| Vector | Soul | Emotions | Will |
| Theological virtue | Faith | Love | Hope |
| Erikson’s stages | Wisdom | Intimacy, generativity | Industry, identity |
| Organizational Values | Transcendent Purpose | Relational Health  | Authentic Competence |
| Open-ended values | Integrity | Teamwork | Excellence and Initiative |
| Closed-ended values | Loyal critique and self-evaluation | Servanthood and submission | Humility |
| Organizational leadership disciplines | Listening skills, empowerment | Conflict management & reconciliation | Skills training and talent management |

1. Instead of sequential stages, or discrete enumerable crises, this model views *six distinct tacks*, as detailed earlier in Table 1, none of which need trigger a crisis, though any or all of which may provoke crises that result in major life structure change. As well, any of these successful and stable tacks may be altered by a crisis of scheduled or unscheduled life events such as marriage, becoming a parent, a job change or geographic move, or any stressful unchosen life change such as death of a family member, divorce or job loss. The power of this model, then, is its flexibility. I don’t have any theoretical or experiential basis to give more structure to these six tacks than that I have already given, other than what follows. For example, I don’t theorize that these tacks proceed in a person’s life in some normative order—indeed I suspect that each person’s life course back and forth across the bay is more like a fingerprint than an Olympics downhill slalom course: unique for everyone. But while providing flexibility, this model still offers some guidance to the one who recognizes that they need to make, or are already in the process of making, a disruptive course change, a tack back to the other side of the bay: 1) Don’t panic—that change that you view as a detour away from your life’s progress was inevitable. If it didn’t happen now it would need to happen soon. Welcome it (thank God for it), and learn what you need to learn in the midst of it. You will soon see that indeed this new tack involves making progress as well. 2) Don’t give up or be tempted to regain what was lost by turning back. Eventually, this tack will end, but if you end it prematurely, you will find yourself back on this tack again soon anyway. 3) Give yourself to navigating this tack as well as you are able. Find a new horizon point, a point newly in the distance on which you can focus your energies, toward which you can steer your craft.
2. I theorize that the open-ended tack of each pair of axes, in most cases, needs to be taken first, for successful navigation of life’s challenges.
* For example, people will have a better, healthier relational history if they develop in the area of community before they try to negotiate the potentially treacherous path of intimacy. Ideally, an emerging adult has his or her experience of a healthy family dynamic on which to build further experiences of community. (And biologically, the experience of the community of the family precedes the experience of coupling.) However, in IVCF ministry to college students, we often find that students’ home experiences are far from ideal. IVCF staff often must encourage students to postpone their natural tendency to want to pursue their “beloved” for the sake of building or rebuilding healthy relational patterns and resources through community. These resources are necessary for success negotiating the more intricate challenge of intimacy.
* Likewise, I believe it is necessary to experience success before failure. As one of my senior staff interviewees said, “For the sake of growth, failure cannot be beat. But without success, people cannot keep going.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Admittedly failure offers great developmental opportunities. Yet failure without tacks and turns back into success can easily rob one of the belief in one’s own ability to navigate into the headwinds of adulthood, and can cause the individual to become discouraged to the point of abandonment of the little craft—suicide, dropout, or escape. As an example, one of the costs of aggressive affirmative action is that it places some students who are not prepared for success into academic environments that will not easily afford them what they need to keep at it. The result—predictably enough—is a much higher dropout rate among such students.
* Finally, I believe that a move toward faith is natural and developmental for people starting out in life. If parents encourage children, they naturally find a comfortable faith and the hope that that faith affords. Eventually, this “childlike” faith will be challenged, repeatedly, but that first initial move toward faith makes the other efforts of development possible. I have observed that many children of deeply believing parents who have become young adults rejecting faith have struggled to make progress in relational and vocational areas of their lives as well. At some point, they veered from the early faith of their families and didn’t easily negotiate that first disillusionment. This seems to have inhibited development in other areas of their lives. A recent study noted in the Washington Post puts it this way:

“Late last year, a commission convened by Dartmouth Medical School, among others, studied years of research on kids, including brain-imaging studies, and concluded that young people who are religious are better off in significant ways than their secular peers. They are less likely than nonbelievers to smoke and drink and more likely to eat well; less likely to commit crimes and more likely to wear seat belts; less likely to be depressed and more likely to be satisfied with their families and school. ‘Religion has a unique net effect on adolescents above and beyond factors like race, parental education and family income,’ says Brad Wilcox, a University of Virginia sociologist and panel member. Poor children who are religious will do better than poor children who are not religious, he adds—and in some cases better than nonreligious middle-class children.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

While the focus of this study is on adult development, it seems clear that a legacy of faith and not cynicism coming out of the teen years is going to provide a much stronger foundation for development in all areas of life. The surprising part of this study is the extent to which faith swamps other factors such as socioeconomic background as a predictor of success in life.

1. As an employee in a ministry organization such as IVCF, it can be very threatening to deal with a tack in one’s faith, coming up against some disillusionment or disappointment that makes it difficult to feel that one is a leader, a model, an appropriate representative of a life of faith. I mentioned the tendency, when sailing one’s little craft, to measure progress by approach to some distant landmark on the shore. That landmark might be a person, idealized in the mind of the individual staffworker, by whose mental simplification this landmark person is conceived of in unapproachable terms. Of course, the little boat will eventually need to tack back across the bay, moving away from this ideal. Yet, unless the staff person is able to recognize that this model was deficient in some way (and therefore did not represent an ultimate goal), growth and development for the staff person can feel like a repudiation of the values and ideals previously embraced, resulting in confusion and shame.
2. Resources in one area (theological, relational or personal) can engender successful turns in another: faith and community can make failure more instructive and less likely to derail. The inverse is postulated as a corollary: failure to successfully navigate the turn and new tack in one area can rob resources from other areas and make a major life crisis more likely.
1. “Loevinger suggests that virtually all adults move successfully through the first three stages. Some then get stuck at the self-protective stage, while others move on to the conformist stage and no further. Most adults, however, reach at least the transition that she calls the self-aware level, and many go beyond this to the conscientious stage or further.” Helen L. Bee, The Journey of Adulthood (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2000), p39. In my own reflection on the state of childhood around the world, I am reminded that my theory of adult development, indeed arguably any theory that we have looked at, is probably helpfully descriptive only of Western or economically developed societies. For many children in global poverty, the boat slipping gently down the stream is very far from an accurate picture of their blighted lives. I don’t deal with this darker side of life in this model or paper, though it weighs on me in my ethical choices in life. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Helen L. Bee, *Journey of Adulthood*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2000), p50. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid*, p44. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Brian McLaren, *Finding Faith: A Self-Discovery Guide for Your Spiritual Quest*. (Zondervan, 1999), p66-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bee, *op.cit,* p39. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. John Maxwell, *Failing Forward* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), p2, emphasis his. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kets de Vries*, Leaders, Fools and Impostors*, (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1993), p21: epigraph from Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (Norton, 1979). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), p15. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid*, p16. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kenneth Blanchard and Spencer Johnson, *The One Minute Manager* (New York: William Morrow, 1982), p15. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibid*, p239. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Alan Loy McGinnis, *Bringing Out the Best in People* (Minneapolis: Augsberg, 1985), p56, p71. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Laurie Bassi and Daniel McMurrer, “Human Capital: How’s Your Return on People?” *Harvard Business Review*, March 2004, p18. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Hal Rosenbluth, *The Customer Comes Second*, (New York: William Morrow, 1992), p25. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Anne Wilson Schaef and Diane Fassel, *The Addictive Organization*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), p123. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), p188-190. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, *First, Break all the Rules* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), p56-57. Ironically, this is the same insight that forms the foundation of other bestsellers that long pre-date the Gallup organization results, for example *The One Minute Manager* (1982) and *Bringing Out the Best in People* (1985): managers should “Help people reach their full potential [by] catching them doing something right”[Blanchard]. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (NY: HarperCollins, 2001), p20-21. The first four levels, in Collin’s framework, are “*Level 1: Highly Capable Individual:* Makes productive contributions through talent, knowledge, skills, and good work habits. *Level 2: Contributing Team Member:* Contributes individual capabilities to the achievement of group objectives and works effectively with others in a group setting. *Level 3: Competent Manager*: Organizes people and resources toward the effective and efficient pursuit of predetermined objectives. *Level 4: Effective Leader:* Catalyzes commitment to and vigorous pursuit of a clear and compelling vision, stimulating higher performance standards.” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Actually, this was the comment that, together with my reflection on several other interview narratives that supported the observation, sparked the seminal insight of this paper. Hence it is worth noting more completely: Jason Jensen, Director of the Pacific Region, said this after reflecting on his own experience and that of some of his younger staff. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Laura Sessions Stepp, “An Inspired Strategy: Is Religion a Tonic for Kids? You Better Believe It, Say Teens and Scholars” *Washington Post*, Sunday, March 21, 2004; Page D01 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)