Coaching to a Las Vegas State of Mind

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Several months ago, one of us [WB] was watching a DVD recording of the inaugural concert given at the Smith Center for the Performing Arts in Las Vegas. It was a lovely concert, with performances ranging from Classical music to Broadway and Country-Western. The Smith Center appears to be a lovely center and it is dedicated to the people "who actually live in Las Vegas." This statement by the Master of Ceremonies was followed by the statement: "People actually live here!" The audience responded with what seemed like nervous laughter—a chord of reality mixed with fantasy seemed to be struck.

So people really inhabit the city of Las Vegas. They work in Las Vegas. Their children attend school and the families play in parks, attend church services, and shop for food at local supermarkets. Yet, they often make their living working in the fantasy world of Las Vegas and recognize that other people come to Las Vegas to escape their own family obligations (or bring their family along with them to meet shared fantasies). These visitors don't want to play in parks or attend church services or shop in the supermarkets of Las Vegas. These men and women want to live for brief periods of time in faux communities—Paris (with a replica of the Eiffel Tower) or Rome (with a major collection of art and a fountain to boot).

The Simulacra of Las Vegas

Several decades ago, Robert Bellah and his colleagues (1985) wrote about lifestyle enclaves in America. This enclave might be a short term but frequently reoccurring gathering of the weekend car club (for Porsche owners or Model T owners). It might instead be an enduring community of like-minded people (often from a single demographic group) such as a Mobile Home park for retired middle-class folks or a condominium complex exclusively for the 20 something singles.

Las Vegas is a different kind of life-style enclave. It is a series of temporary communities that are each built around a specific illusion. Sometimes called by a very fancy name (*simulacrum)*, each of these temporary communities of illusion is an elaborately constructed representation (in distorted form) of a

real community somewhere else in the world or somewhere else represented in a movie or TV program. More formally, a simulacrum is a representation of some other structure or environment. This representation is often a smaller or simpler version of the other structure or environment. Classic examples of a simulacrum are the Main Street in Disneyland (a smaller, simplified and cleaned up version of a fantasized small town Main Street in 19th Century America). Many years prior to the opening of Disneyland, Knotts Berry Farm offered a simulacrum of a fantasized Fropntier town (straight out of the Western flicks of the 1940s and 50s). Legoland in Southern California offers a more contemporary version of the simulacrum. Reduced-size versions of many structures have been built out of Lego blocks for the visitor's amusement and edification.

Las Vegas offers many adult versions of these simulacra. The massive assemblage of fantasized worlds In Las Vegas puts all of the theme parks to shame. Given these many fantasized worlds in Las Vegas, one wonders if even those who live in this desert city can avoid the intermixing of reality and fantasy. Is the Smith Center for the Performing Arts dedicated to yet another intermixing of multiple realities—the intermixing of various art forms and the creation of new worlds in the theater. Is the Smith Center simply the place where those living in Las Vegas escape for their own dose of make-believe?

We propose that there is something even deeper operating here. The Las Vegas state of mind isn't just about adult escape. Las Vegas is often represented as the premier (and perhaps first) exemplification of what is now called a *postmodern* perspective on life. This perspective plays out in the arts through the intermixing of reality and illusion, and through the intermixing of different genres, styles and narratives. It also plays out in the physical and behavioral sciences in the exploration of complex systems, chaotic systems and multiple (often contradictory) identities. As Walt Anderson, one of the primary observers of and commentators on the postmodern perspective, noted many years ago in the title of one of his books: "reality isn't what it used to be." (Anderson, 1990). It is now a mixture of multiple socially constructed realities and narratives about reality. Another book that Anderson edited is entitled *The Truth About Truth*. It is filled with essays about how elusive truth and reality are in our postmodern world – or at least in postmodern place such as Las Vegas.

So, what does Las Vegas represent in terms of a "state of mind"? To what extent does postmodern Las Vegas pervade our lives even when we are living and working somewhere far removed from this fantasy world in the desert? And what are the implications for those of us who do professional coaching when we are confronted with this state of mind in our clients (or find ourselves living at least temporarily in this state of mind)? In attempting to answer these questions we will turn first to the challenges faced by

those of us who have been alive for many years and confronted reality prior to the advent of the computer or at least the advent and dominance of social media. We are the people who are sometimes called the "digital immigrants" (because we entered this new world from another place and time). We will then turn to the Las Vegas state of mind as it exists in the lives and perspectives of younger men and women—those who are the "digital natives" (having lived all of their life with computer-based technologies and now dwell in the world of social media). While most professional coaching is now being done with the digital immigrants, we are likely to find more coaching in the future being done with the digital natives. Even more importantly, these young men and women will become the new leaders (if they are not already starting up and leading high tech companies). Furthermore, they are the next generation of professional coaches.

Redesigning Plato's Cave: Multiple Identities and Multiple Realities

During the 1990s, Ken Gergen wrote a book that was in many ways quite prophetic: *The Saturated Self* (Gergen, 2000: Revised Edition). Gergen identified challenges we face in defining who we really are. Traditionally, our personal identity was defined by the family of birth and the community in which we were raised. As Tevye notes in the musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*, it is all about tradition! Our place in the world is pre-assigned and we live within the boundaries of a specific place and time. The struggle for Tevye concerns the desire of his daughters to break out of these boundaries—particularly in their choice of husbands. Gergen is suggesting that not only are there fewer pre-assigned identities (at least in most Western societies), there also are a massive number of alternative identities from which to choose. Given the inundation of advertisements via many different media, we don't know which identity to choose. Are we going to be the most interesting man in the world or the glamorous but troubled teen-age star? At a more mundane level, are we going to be the corporate accountant or independent store owner? What about the trade-off between a life devoted to family and a life devoted to career—we certainly see appeals to both priorities on our TV and computer screens. We are saturated with alternative identities and must try repeatedly to discern which of these identities is authentic or at least aligned with our decisions and actions.

We want to take Gergen's analysis a little bit further and relate it to the Las Vegas state of mind. Specifically, we are going to make use of a very old allegory: Plato's cave. We will suggest what it is like to live in this cave and then we will redesign the cave to make it (from our perspective) more closely

aligned with the Las Vegas state of mind—and frankly with the life most of us are now leading and, in particular, the lives being led by the men and women we coach.

Living in the Cave I: Observing the Shadows

One of the earliest and still most poignant allegories concerning the relationship between reality and fantasy is that offer by Plato regarding the dwelling of human beings in a cave. Plato suggests that we all live in an epistemological cave that has an opening through which the sun shines. Living in Plato's cave we see only the shadows on the wall created by entities moving outside the cave that block the rays of the sun. We don't see the real world that exists outside the cave, but only representations on the wall of the cave.

Would Plato be particularly inclined to reinforce his allegory of the cave if he visited Las Vegas? While his Greek attire would be acceptable in Las Vegas (as is many other adornments of the human body), he probably would be disturbed regarding what he sees and witnessed and would, in our opinion, describe it as a cave (once he began to understand what is happening around him in this much different world of the 21st Century). When in Las Vegas we are obviously not in Paris. Rather we dwell and participate in a representation of Paris: a Parisian landscape is wrapped around a faux Eiffel tower. The one "true" experience in this make-believe Paris is culinary in nature: the restaurants offer delicious food that is cooked by chefs imported from (or at least trained) in Paris.

Is the Las Vegas state of mind similarly wrapped up in manufactured realities? When in a Las Vegas state of mind do we move from one faux reality (simulacrum) to another and believe that somehow we are experiencing reality rather than a shadow on the wall? Do the reality shows on TV capture the essence of this confusion between reality and fantasy? Are we enthralled with these TV shows and with Las Vegas precisely because they are safely at a distance from reality? As coaches do we play any role in encouraging our clients to distinguish between reality and fantasy – or do we play it safe and become part of the Las Vegas landscape for our clients?

Living in the Case II: Observing Selective Shadows

We would suggest that the contemporary world is even more complicated than Plato suggested with regard to reality and fantasy. Part of the opening to the cave is selectively blocked out. As a result, the shadow is only part of what *could* appear on the wall. Our sense of reality is selective, both because we don't want to see it all (or are unable to see it all in terms of our cognitive and affective capacity) and

because other members of our society (who also live in the cave) have the capacity or authority to select what does and does not enter the cave from outside. For example, CNN news in the United States is quite different from the CNN news that appears elsewhere in the world. Al-Jazerra is disconcerting for many Americans in large part because information conveyed over this news station is quite different (and quite a bit more extensive) than what is presented on most American networks--particularly with regard to international news.

As coaches, are we ever to play the role of de-selector? Do we ever encourage alternative perspectives? Do we ever share information with our client that they usually do not receive (such as feedback from their co-workers)? Do we link our clients with alternative sources of insight regarding the world (cave) in which we all live? Many years ago, the Nobel Prize winning scientist, Michael Polanyi (1969), wrote about the important of focusing on that *from which* we attend rather than that *to which we attend*. On the one hand, he was referring to our own internal state: we tend to be highly influenced as we take in information from the outside world by our own internal state. Recent studies in neurobiology tend to confirm Polanyi's perspective. This shift in attention, however, also refers to our analysis of the outside information itself: we should look not just at the content of the messages we receive from the outside world, but also at the sources of this content. Who is selecting what images are allowed to enter the cave and be projected on the wall? Why are some images selected while others are blocked? As coaches, are we in the business of assisting our clients with Polanyi's shift in attention?

Living in the Cave III: Listening to Interpretations of the Shadows

We wish to push Plato's allegory of the cave even further. In the world of 21st Century epistemology, we are not actually observing the shadow on the cave wall. Rather we are listening to or watching someone else comment on the shadow and its meaning. Or we see a replay of specific shadow images and then hear or read the interpretation. It seems that most of us tend to prefer listening to the comments and observing replay of the shadow (or parts of the shadow) rather than observing the actual shadow (let alone leave the cave and observe the real world in operation). For example, most of us living in the United States do not have sufficient time available to watch the full congressional sessions and hearings of the US Senate or House of Representatives. Or, quite frankly, we probably are not sufficiently interested to set aside this time. Only the "news junkies" are inclined to observe the full shadow of congressional proceedings that are broadcasted in most instances on CSPAN.

We no longer even read an evening newspaper (which in most cases is now out of business). Our news comes in brief sound and video bites on a cable news station that is highly politicized (either left or right wing) or our news comes from the bits of information contained on the Internet (these bits often being just as biases as those offered on the cable channels). While the news has always been biased in most countries in the world, we now find that there is very little news. Rather, there is an abundance of interpretation and a minimization of information.

As coaches, do we collude in the emphasis on interpretation? Are we often helping our clients make some sense of their world (images on the wall of the cave) by offering our own analysis? Are we sufficiently arrogant to believe that our clients need not experience the real world in its raw form (outside the cave) or even experience the shadow on the wall without our interpretative intervention? What is it that our clients are asking for in the coaching relationship? Interpretation and analysis? Or do our client want us to encourage direct experience? Are we to offer support as our clients experience the real world and receive unvarnished and full-spectrum feedback from their environment?

Living in the Cave IV: Listening to and Observing Multiple Shadows

Can it get even more challenging in the cave? Can we add more complexity with regard to Plato's allegory? Living in a postmodern world that resembles Las Vegas, perhaps we are actually living in a cave that has multiple openings. There may be multiple shadows on the wall of the cave, each shadow being a partial image of the outside world (with the image being selectively blocked at each opening). Furthermore, there may be multiple interpretations of each partial shadow being projected on the wall in front of us (and to our side and even behind us). What a remarkable cave this would be – a bit like traveling down one of the major boulevards in Las Vegas surrounded by glittering casinos, with each one encouraging us to enter their own unique fantastic reality.

It would seem that the openings in this postmodern cave may even be coming and going. One closes down while another one opens up. In Las Vegas, we can travel down streets that once were filled with prosperous casinos. In most cases, there are now only empty lots, the casinos having been torn down. When visiting Las Vegas we want something new. Not the same old thing. Not the traditions (other than the faux traditions of a recreated Paris or Rome). As coaches, do we ever encourage our clients to hold on to the old or to value continuity with the past? Or do we watch with our clients as the old is torn down and the new is created (often at great expense)? Are we always in the business of innovation and change?

This venture into Plato's cave and our redesign of this cave provokes many coaching questions. These questions inevitably surface organizational and leadership challenges and deeply personal concerns regarding integrity, trust and honesty. We will address these challenges shortly. However, it would be short-sighted of us not to also recognize the opportunities that this redesigned cave offers us. The multiplicity of Las Vegas can be a source of not just great excitement and entertainment, but also personal insight and inspiration.

Opportunities: Multiple Sources of Illumination

Robert Kegan (1994, p. 50) offers an optimistic perspective—or at least hope—with regard to the challenge of Las Vegas multiplicity. He presents this perspective through use of a lovely metaphor regarding sources of light:

> If five lamps are lit in a large living room, how many sources of light are there? We might say that there are five sources of light. Perhaps the maker of each lamp, genuinely committed to bringing us into the light, will be partial to his own and bid us to come to that source. Or at best, some generous spirit of eclectic relativism may obtain, and the lap-makers may concede that there is a benefit to our being exposed to each of the lamps, each separate source having little to do with the other except that, like the food groups of a well-balanced diet, each has a partial contribution to make to a well-rounded, beneficial whole. But quite a different answer to the question of how many sources of light there are in the room is possible—namely, that there is only one source. All five lamps work because they are plugged into sockets drawing power from the home's electrical system. In this view, each lamp is neither a contender for the best source of light nor a mere part of a whole. And if the lamp-maker's mission is not first of all to bring us to the light of his particular lamp but to bring us to the light of this single source, then he can delight equally in the way his particular lamp makes use of this source and in the way other lamps he would never think to create do also. His relationship to the other lamp-makers is neither rivalrous nor laissez-faire, but co-conspiratorial: the lamp-makers breathe together.

This metaphor is particularly appropriate when applied to our analysis of the Las Vegas state of mind, given that Las Vegas is not only the city of light—with many sources of light setting this city ablaze—but also because there is one source for all this light: the Hoover Dam. Las Vegas exists in the middle of the desert because of its proximity to this great dam and power generating facility. In fact, the town of Las Vegas and the beginning of the gambling tradition in Las Vegas was established as the temporary

residence of workers who were building the Hoover Dam during the Great Depression of the 1930s in the United States.

Frans Johansson (2004) is another, somewhat more contemporary, advocate of multiplicity's benefits. Deriving his analysis from the cultural history of Florence Italy during the Renaissance (the *Medici Effect*), Johansson offers many examples of how diverse perspectives and disciplines can productively intersect and converge to create highly innovative and valuable ideas and products. Having offered these persuasive examples, Johansson (2004, pp. 97-98) goes on to present a couple of reasons for the power of the Intersection of perspectives and ideas (the Medici Effect):

> Why is the intersection of disciplines or cultures such a vibrant place for creativity? . . . It increases the chances that an idea will be good because it brings together very different concepts from very different fields. . . [T]here is another, stronger, reason for its power. When you connect two separate fields, you also set off an exponential increase of unique concept combinations, a veritable explosion of ideas. Or, to put it succinctly, if being productive is the best strategy to innovate, then the Intersection is the best place to innovate.

As coaches, are we in the business of helping our clients find these points of Intersection? Do we help our clients identify underlying unification in their life and organization? Is our job in part to help our clients find some underlying theme, pattern or personal identity while living in a postmodern, Las Vegas? Do we help our clients find creativity in a cave with multiple and shifting openings, complex images on the wall and a cacophony of interpretations? Are we trying to help our clients realize the Medici Effect – and turn Las Vegas into the Renaissance of 16th and 17th Century Florence?

Challenges: In Over our Heads

While Kegan's unified source of illumination and Johannson's Medici Effect are inspiring and worth pondering as a coach and as an organizational leader, it is also important to identify the challenges being faced while living in the Las Vegas state of mind. These challenges exist at several different levels. At one level, as Gergen has noted, the challenge concerns our own coherent sense of self. Carol Gilligan (Gilligan, 1990; Brown and Gilligan, 1992), who is one of the leading researchers on the lifespan development of women, writes about the splitting that occurs in the lives of young women during their pre-adolescent years. There is one "self" that is the "good girl" who does and thinks what society expects. There is another "self" that relates to what the young woman actually thinks and feels (and

would like to do). In an interview with Charlie Rose, Gilligan speculates that this splitting many occur even earlier in the lives of young men.

Is this splitting a recent phenomenon among young women and men, or is it simply becoming more evident given reduction in the pressures for young people to conform to societal expectations (at least in many parts of the world)? If nothing else, we would suggest that this splitting is likely to be wide spread in a postmodern cave with multiple openings that are often shifting. As Kegan suggests, the challenge is to retain some sense of coherence and discover the underlying unifying source (perhaps what exists outside the cave). How hard is it for any of us to retain this coherence? Are we in the same position as those in younger generations with regard to our simultaneous embracing of a real self and one or more alternative selves? Do we emulate the strip in Las Vegas with its multiple attractions and simulacrums? Are we often in our own personal Las Vegas state of mind?

William Perry (1970) offers an even more detailed description of the challenging postmodern world we face. He suggests that most of us move through several stages of cognitive development and epistemological sophistication as we mature. As young men and women we tend to view our world in a *dualistic* fashion: there is a reality that can be discerned and there is one right answer to the complex questions we are asked. Those in authority can be trusted to reveal the truth. There are also those people who are inherently evil or stupid, and they are not to be trusted. There are indeed people with white hats and black hats. Our job is to determine which color hat they are wearing.

While many people spend most, if not all, their life viewing the world from this dualistic perspective, there are often events or people who disrupt this simplistic frame. We discover that there are multiple sources of credible information and multiple sources of potentially valid interpretation of this information. It is not clear what is true or what is real. According to Perry, the initial response to this disconfirmation is often a sense of betrayal. We were told by people we trust and respect that the world is to be seen in one way. Suddenly we see that this might not be the case. Given that there is no one right answer, then any answer will do. This is what Perry identifies as the *multiplistic* perspective. In many ways, it is simply another form of dualism: if there is no one truth or reality than there must be no truths and no realities! Certainly the challenge of living in a postmodern cave would suggest that the multiplistic perspective is justifiable. If there are multiple openings that are always shifting and if we can't even see the shadows on the wall but must rely on interpretations and replays, then why should we ever trust anything that we experience in this cave. The world is composed of nothing but expedient

story-telling and fake versions of the real world: those with the power are allowed to define what is real and important.

Perry proposes that this multiplistic stage is common among young adults who are first exposed to a world that is expanding in size and complexity – they are seeing the multiple images on the wall of their cave. This sense of betrayal is likely to remain if the young adult is provided with minimal support and finds very little that is to be trusted in the world. We certainly see an abundance of multiplicity in our current world – along with the dualistic perspective. Perry is optimistic, however, with regard to the capacity and willingness of many adults to move beyond multiplicity, especially if they are fortune enough to live in a supportive and trusting environment. Perry suggests that this transition is to a *relativistic* perspective. We now see that within a specific community there are certain accepted standards with regard to truth and reality. We can appreciate the fact that other communities adhere to different standards than our own. While adhering to a relativistic perspective, we are likely to avoid making any value judgments regarding competing versions of the truth. We live in the cave and sit back to witness (perhaps even savor) the multiple images on the wall and multiple interpretations of these images. We go to Las Vegas and enjoy the sites, living vicariously and with enthusiasm in each of the simulacra.

Unfortunately, we can't live forever in this suspended state of relativism. As mature and responsible adults we have to make decisions and take actions. Perry identifies this fourth perspective as *commitment-in-relativism*. We recognize that there are alternative standards operating in various communities, but also recognize the need to pick a specific standard and base our life around this standard. We might change our standard over time and might be able to live in a different community and embrace their standard while living there, but come back to our base of commitment. Perry notes that this fourth perspective will look very much like dualism to other people (who are themselves dualists or multiplists). After all, if one is making commitments, then isn't this deciding that there is a right and wrong answer and a truth that is stable and confirmable? The ongoing challenge of those with a commitment in relativism perspective is to recognize that this misunderstanding will often occur and that a clearly articulated rationale must be offered to other people for the decisions being made and actions taken.

William Perry offers yet another insight that is particularly poignant for those who are coaching clients moving from one of these perspectives to another one. Perry suggests that this movement inevitably involves a grieving process. One is, in essence, moving from one sense of self and one sense of the world

in which we live, to another self and another sense of the world. In moving from dualism to multiplicity we are losing some of our innocence, while the movement from multiplicity to relativism requires the abandonment of irresponsibility. We must now seek to understand and appreciate other communities and recognize that there are standards with regard to truth and reality—even if there is not one absolute standard. Finally, in the movement from relativism to commitment in relativism we are grieving the loss of freedom. We must now make hard decisions, knowing that there are several (perhaps many) good choices that could be made. We must take action in a world that does not yield easy answer or offer us assurance that we are doing the right thing for the right reason. Perry would probably suggest that professional coaches are in the business, at least partially, of assisting their clients through this grieving process and helping their clients recognize the value inherent in one of the more mature perspectives. This valuing of relativism and particularly commitment in relativism may be particularly important for those clients who are operating in a leadership position. They must make particularly difficult decisions and take particularly challenging actions in a world that looks a lot like Las Vegas.

Finally, we find a related analysis of postmodern challenges offered by Kegan—the same author we cited earlier about the opportunity for multiple sources of illumination being brought together in lighting a room. Kegan (1994, p. 185) suggests that the relativistic perspective, when engaged to make decisions and take action, is indeed quite challenging:

> When we look into this collection of expectations for success at work we discover that each actually demands something more than particular behavior or skill. Each is a claim on our minds for a way of knowing. Each amounts to a slightly different way of demanding or expecting a single capacity for psychological authority. This capacity . . . represents a qualitatively more complex system for organizing experience than the mental operations that create values, beliefs, convictions, generalizations, ideals, abstractions, interpersonal loyalty, and intrapersonal states of mind.
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> It is qualitatively more complex because it takes all of these as objects or elements of its system, rather than as the system itself; it does not identity with them but views them as parts of a new whole. This new whole is an ideology, an internal identity, a self-authorship that can coordinate, integrate, act upon, or invent values, beliefs, convictions, generalizations, ideals, abstractions, interpersonal loyalties, and intrapersonal states. It is no longer authored by t he, it authors them and thereby achieves a personal authority. Despite the surface differences

between the various work expectations, they require a common underlying capacity, a common order of consciousness.

Thus, when visiting or living in Las Vegas, one needs not just temporary states of mind that shift when visiting (or working in) in each of the city's simulacra. Effective engagement in Las Vegas (and sanity in this community of multiplicity) requires a broader integrating sense of self and a broad system-based appreciation of the contributions being made by each part (each simulacrum) to the whole (the full Las Vegas experience). We would suggest that a similar cognitive and affective challenge awaits all men and women who seek to lead the complex organizations of the 21st Century and who seek out (or should seek out) professional coaching assistance. As Kegan notes, we are often "in over our heads" and could use some coaching.

Alone Together: Social Media and Identity

Las Vegas is not the only center of simulacra in the United States. We can also point to both Orange County (California) and Orlando (Florida) which are the sites of not only the Disney kingdoms, but also a variety of other "theme parks). One of the theme parks that most poignantly exemplifies the mixing of reality and fantasy is located near Disneyworld in Florida. It is the Animal Kingdom. When the Animal Kingdom opened in Orlando it drew patrons to behold the wonders of nature. They presented real live animals, and much to their amazement people were dissatisfied with the real. They did not get to experience all the stereotyped motions and sounds that they expected. It turns out that reality was not quite that exciting as they wanted it to be. With the genuine article not meeting their expectations, they clamored for artificial animals that would be more "life like."

Fleeing to fantasy is nothing new; books have provided this sort of escape for ages. However, something is different today—especially for young people who are part of the "digital native" generation (rather than those of us who are "digital immigrants" or even "digital recalcitrants"). As a young person develops, identity is always in competition with the imaginary: the me I wish I were. In recent decades a cascade of digitally-based social media has created new challenges that the world has never known, challenges that form a lot of questions about how identity development will be affected as a result. It appears that psychosocial development and social media are impacting on each other to create new concerns for identity development today.

The noted psychologist, Erik Erikson, proposed that "a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential" (1968, p. 96), occurs at eight different stages of a developing person's life. In each stage an individual either achieves or fails to achieve resolution in working through the conflict presented. He proposed that each stage has a specific goal to be achieved: trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity, intimacy, generativity, and integrity. He also saw that each goal if not attained would typically result in a respective undesirable psychosocial effect: mistrust, shame, guilt, inferiority, role-confusion, isolation, stagnation, and despair. While each life stage has a main psychosocial focus, he did not believe these things to be attained and then settled once and for all. Rather he saw life in motion and realized that these goals fluctuate and reappear throughout development. Erikson believed that:

> Identity development is an inherent component of emerging adulthood and there appears to be considerable overlap with the social tasks of adolescence. According to Erikson (1968), identity formation begins when the usefulness of identification ends. Taking on characteristics of others no longer provides satisfaction; the individual experiences a desire to shape his or her world in unique ways. Identity formation begins with a synthesis of childhood skills, beliefs, and identifications into a coherent, unique whole that provides continuity with the past and direction for the future (Sokol, 2009, p.)

What Erikson suggests is that the developmental task of adolescents begins when a young person goes beyond competent imitation of others and moves into a world of crafting their repertoire of experience into one synthesized whole that is uniquely *them*. This is no small feat. The challenges today are making the task more difficult still. It is hard to be young adult living in a Las Vegas world.

Digitally-Based Identity Formation

One of the major challenges to development today is the sheer volume of experience made available by our electronically networked culture. The rate at which the virtual content around us changes is astonishing, presenting a very difficult challenge to assimilate experiences into a meaningful identity. Sherry Turkle, of Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), has done extensive research on the subject of the psychological impact that computer technology has on people. Her research began in the late 70's as the personal computer was developing. Continuing her research to the present day, she has gained a wealth of knowledge on the subject. She describes the problem well: "Today's teenagers…grew up networked, sometimes receiving their first cell phone as early as eight. Their story

offers a clear view of how technology reshapes identity because identity is at the center of adolescent life" (Turkle, 2011, p.169). Turkle's research has led her to believe that technology is having a serious impact on the identity stage of development. She joins with Kegan and Johansson in her belief that it is creating space for identity exploration and innovation that has never existed before in history: "Beyond all of this, connectivity offers new possibilities for experimenting with identity and, particularly in adolescents, the sense of free space, what Erik Erikson called a moratorium" (2011, p.203).

She sees both good and bad possibilities for the use of the new digital innovations. Commenting on Erikson's identity stage she says, "This is a time relatively consequence free for doing what adolescents need to do: fall in and out of love with people and ideas. Real life does not always provide this kind of space, but the internet does." Turkle (2011, p.152-153) continues to describe why this is significant:

> We don't get all developmental tasks done at age-appropriate times—or even necessarily get them done at all. We move on and use the materials we have to do the best we can at each point in our lives. We rework unresolved issues and seek out missed experiences. The internet provides new spaces in which we can do this, no matter how imperfectly, throughout our lives. So, adults as well as adolescents use it to explore identity).

In this way, Turkle suggests that the internet and networking capabilities that are available to us today have tremendous benefit that they can offer to work out developmental tasks that the world has never seen. However, the good offered comes with its fair share of risk. One of the major dangers of the internet is that it is always there. One of the hallmarks of growing up has always been independence, being able to function alone. However, if the internet is always on, "we are together even when we are alone" (Turkle, 2011, p.169). She goes on to say:

> The network's effects on today's young people are paradoxical. Networking makes it easier to play with identity (for example, by experimenting with an avatar that is interestingly different from you) but harder to leave the past behind, because the Internet is forever. The network facilitates separation (a cell phone allows greater freedoms) but also inhibits it (a parent is always on tap). Teenagers turn away from the "real-time" demands of the telephone [or a person across the table from them] and disappear into role-playing games they describe as "communities" and "worlds."

The irony that she describes is thick. The real seems to be pivoting in its priority placement with the contrived. Young people choose between life before their eyes and life behind their screen. This is certainly the scene that Turkle is describing, but it's more serious than an issue of priority.

The Protean Man

Both Turkle and developmental psychologist James Fowler reference the work of Robert Jay Lifton, a student of Erik Erickson's, as they consider the malleability of adolescents today. Lifton diverged from Erikson in his view about the nature of the mature self. While Erikson saw a fairly stable self in maturity, Lifton saw a mature self that was instead, *protean*. Lifton pulled the term out of Greek mythology. Proteus, was a minor god who was able to change shape with ease. Lifton said, "But what he did find difficult and what he would not do unless seized and chained, was to commit himself to a single form, a form most his own" (Lifton, 1971, p.319). In this view of maturity, the self is "fluid and many-sided, can embrace and modify ideas and ideologies. It flourishes when presented with things diverse, disconnected, and global" (Turkle, p.179).

Much as Kegan suggests in his metaphor regarding the multiple (yet ultimately single) source of lumination, Lifton promotes and remains optimistic about the capacity to hold and integrate multiple sources of information. Lifton's Protean Man thrives in Las Vegas. In alignment with Kegan, Fowler sees Lifton's protean self as a useful model for understanding the developing self in a sea of environmental flux and complexity. He ties the need for such a theory to the unprecedented change in physical mobility, electronic telecommunications, and the internet:

> The internet offers an extraordinary variety of niches in cyberspace where one can create virtual personas, shape virtual games and ventures, and bring to vivid life the most sublime, ambitious, or destructive imaginations of the heart….Making these created spaces accessible...can reshape consciousness and reframe patterns of ordinariness" (Fowler, 2000, p. 4).

However, as Turkle points out, even from the grave Erikson disagrees that the protean self is a reasonable conception of maturity:

> Publicly, Erikson's expressed approval of Lifton's work, but after Erikson's death in 1994, Lifton asked the Erikson family if he might have the books he had personally inscribed and presented to his teacher. The family agreed; the books were returned. In his personal copy of Lifton's The Protean Self, Erikson had written extensive marginal notes. When he came to the phrase,

> "protean man," Erikson had scrawled "protean boy?" Erikson could not accept that successful maturation would not result in something solid. By Erikson's standards, the selves formed in cacophony of online spaces are not protean but juvenile (Turkle, 2011, p. 179).

Turkle takes this conclusion to the next step and believes that the network, more than merely arresting development, tempts the developing person into narcissistic ways of relating to the world.

Editing Ones Identity

Elaborating on the developmental concerns for today in a chapter entitled, No Need to Call, Turkle highlights several concerns about the texting culture. With communication as it stands, the phone call has been placed in a new category: emergencies only. One sixteen year old said, "The phone, it's awkward. I don't see the point. Too much just recap and sharing feelings. With a text…I can answer on my own time. I can respond. I can ignore it. So it really works with my mood. I'm not bound to anything, no commitment…I have control over the conversation and also more control over what I say" (Turkle, 2011, p.190). Interview after interview in the research demonstrated the same sort of responses. The raw moments, where no editorial buffer is afforded, are avoided whenever possible. This may explain the phenomena when so many sit across from each other while looking down at their phones for a majority of the time they are "together." It is a retreat to a safer place. The internet is a place where identity can be edited; a conversation is not. One interviewee, who Turkle called Audree, said, "In texting, you get your main points off; you can really control when you want the conversation to start and end." Audree went on to explain that phone calls are not like that because they take skill to end, "when you have no real reason to leave…It's not like there is a reason. You just want to. I don't know how to do that. *I don't want to learn*." Turkle applies the problem to identity development saying, "Feeling unthreatened when someone wants to end a conversation may seem a small thing, but it is not. It calls upon a sense of self-worth; one needs to be at a place where Audrey has not arrived" (2011, p. 191).

One of the most poignant insights in Turkle's research has to do with an online "virtual place" called Second Life (rather than a game, it is a recreation of family, lovers, friends and occupation). Second Life reveals there is a troublesome twist that is creeping into the concept of identity. Turkle recounts the story of a gentleman named Pete who uses second life to escape the mundane in order to create the world that he wishes he had online. Escape is nothing new to society. Obviously, Las Vegas thrives on escape. This is the deeper sense of a Las Vegan state of mind. What is new is the fact that now multiple

lives can be lived simultaneously, not only in time but in space as well. While holding a phone in one hand and pushing his child on the swing with another, Pete engages both lives at the same time. This simultaneity is unprecedented in history. Pete says, "Second life gives me a better relationship than I have in real life. This is where I feel most *myself.* Jade accepts *who I am*" (Turkle, 2011, p.159). Turkle's response highlights the shortcomings of this kind of identity conception: "The ironies are apparent: an avatar who has never seen or spoken to him in person and to whom he appears in a body nothing like his own seems, to him, most accepting of his truest self" (2011, p.159). We become our own simulacraz through our multiple avatars. The potential outcome for identity in the postmodern era is that the glimmering lure of the imaginary will blind people to the actual achievement of true identity in the real.

Conclusions

Clearly we are awash with a number of developmental challenges today that have never been known before. While cultures throughout the ages have always experienced dramatic change there is something new about our time. Never before in history have there been so many opportunities available for a person to be something they are not. While there are many potentials, there are many challenges as well. These are the things for us to consider as we move forward: "To move forward together—as a generation together—we are called upon to embrace the complexities of our situation. We have invented inspiring and enhancing technologies, and yet we have allowed them to diminish us (Turkle, 2011, p.295). The challenge today is to see how these technologies can be used to aid rather than hinder healthy development and to trace out the implications of technological trends with regard to the formation of personal identity and the changing nature of professional coaching. We must learn how to curb the trend and learn how to live creatively and productively in our own Las Vegas so that, as Shakespeare warned, we are not consumed by that which we are nourished by.

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