

CHANGES FOR THE BETTER: A NEW JOB...AND MORE LATIHAN GUIDANCE

On my first day at my new job, I innocently walked into my classroom to find it full of parents, all waiting to see this new teacher. At my last school, parents were kept out of the school “except by appointment only” so this was a surprise. Here they were very much a part of the school’s life. At first, I found this nerve-racking but it did not take long for me to discover they were harmless enough and, in fact, in many instances they were unusually supportive and genuinely interested, by and large, in their children’s education. Later, I was to find some real friends from these people and- eventually- my third wife! I had a real honeymoon period at this school: it was friendly, enjoyable and clearly doing well by its children. I suppose the first thing I had to learn was to begin to relate more to the school as a community of parents and other adults, in their many varieties, rather than just to children.

After my first morning’s experience of a classroom of adults rather than children, then came the first school public event: the Harvest Assembly. This, again, was unlike all the others that I had been involved in. The hall was packed, with not even standing room left, and all of a sudden I heard my name being mentioned in the Head’s welcome to the parents and this was followed by thunderous applause. Then it hit me: I was expected to get up and say something intelligible to all these people! I mumbled something and sat down as quickly as I could- the applause remained loud and welcoming. I had got through that! I was soon to meet many similarly challenging public situations that were to demand much more from me. In fact, I was soon to feel that many of my personality weaknesses were to be ruthlessly exposed by this job and this I found, in many instances, to be agonisingly difficult. These have to come a little later in my story...Let me enjoy the memory of my honeymoon period just a little longer!

All this time my latihans were continuing to provide me with interest (to say the least!) adventure, guidance and, occasionally, really helpful insight. It seemed important (and still does) to be often reminded not to get an over-inflated view of myself. Sometimes this was made clear in the latihan itself. For example, one latihan at Barnet with about 12 men gave me the odd sensation of having very tiny hands and I understood that I was but a child in Subud. On another occasion, I went to a latihan at Southend where one young man spent the entire

time singing what to me was an incredibly beautiful song. It literally reduced me to tears it was so moving and by the end I just felt completely “unworthy.” It was as if I had been allowed a glimpse of heaven without really being anywhere near ready for it!

Other latihans seemed to be urging me to be things I felt I definitely wasn't! At one point, about this time, I felt that the latihan was “picking me up emotionally and urging me to stand up straight;” another gave me the image of a “weeble” which was a popular children's toy of the time (my daughter had a whole toy miniature playground of them). These were little egg-shaped, colourful characters designed to keep returning to the upright position no matter how you knocked them around: I felt I should be like one of those!

Other latihans had the same theme, it seemed, making me feel that I needed to be more independent: more responsible for my own life. It was as if I should take more command of things- back came the image of the ship- I felt I should take more control and steer my life “through the rocky waters, out to the open sea, there to find the New World.” At this time I could not say what the “rocky waters” were but, alas, that was all too soon to become clear to me...

Latihan at this time seemed to urge me to avoid being swayed so violently by “upsurges of emotion”; to try to accept criticism, dislike, things like hostility and even embarrassment (all of which I was to experience) and, more, to resist the wish in me to run away from difficulties and actually to try instead to simply “endure emotional negativity”! I felt it was important at this time not to let people “get inside me” but instead to try to remain psychologically independent of them. This seemed strange advice at the time as I was enjoying so many people sharing this new and Subud life of mine. The latihan often left me feeling that I should be prepared to stand more alone and I have to say that latihans on my own at this time left me feeling more my own person, dependent on no-one- a rather novel experience for me! This feeling was soon to be sorely tested in my life but for the moment it was simply experienced in and immediately after the latihan.

Then came one memorable time when the latihan shocked me with the realisation that I suffered from cowardice which led me to keep my opinions etc to myself when I knew they were different from the people around me: I would do this because I did not want to cause any ill-feeling and wanted to be liked by all and sundry. I immediately recognised the truth of this and felt a wave of shame

for it. I felt the latihan was saying to me that I should be true to what life had made, and brought to me even if it was so different. This single insight was probably to bring me more difficulties with Subud folk later than any other but repeated testing over the years with a number of different people was to repeat the message over and over again, especially on those many occasions when I myself would have preferred a quiet, unchallenging atmosphere. I was to learn that harmony at the cost of “truth” or authenticity was not really worth having—certainly not in the long term.

It was certainly clear to me at this time that after 30+ years of being alive, the latihan was suddenly demanding a growth in my personality. Things that I had not recognised as a part of me were becoming all too clear, either in the latihan or in my thoughts immediately after. At first, a lot of these ideas related to my new job which came to demand changes in me in order for me to simply survive. “Be unafraid” to be on “show” and “take a lead” the latihan seemed to say. “Organise, and cope with the outer world more confidently. Put yourself more out there even in the face of criticism or dislike. Be prepared to make mistakes, to lose face or even the approval of others. Be true to yourself; accept yourself as having both “good” and “bad” qualities. You cannot wait until you are perfect before you act.” The effect was to make me re-think my whole approach to life and to strive to be more effective outwardly. It was clearly not right for me to be a shy introvert hiding away somewhere! Often, that is what I would have preferred!

Fortunately, these ideas were not allowed to just remain in my head. Things started to make sense when the Head of my school suddenly announced that she was to retire early. Now I was to be thrown into more responsibility at the school than I could ever have expected so soon after becoming Deputy Head. I was now going to be involved in the whole school community in a completely different way. It became my job to organise a huge retirement “do” involving just about the whole of the local Education Community and people all over the world who had a connection with the school since the Head had arrived there: over 30 years ago. This became the biggest community event that the school had known in years. Just about everyone who had known her came and I was at the centre of its organisation. I can remember, even now, the real pleasure I felt as I stood up on the school stage and gave a confident speech to a hall full of parents, Education Officials, dignitaries of various sorts from the local community and beyond. By the end I felt as if I had been at the school a life-

time myself! I had been introduced to people from so many different walks of life and I got to feel that I knew the school's history as much as anyone possibly could. I was no longer just the new boy!

A whole host of new challenges were just around the corner for me but for the moment school had "stretched" me as a person, made me more confident with different sorts of people and given me the unexpected satisfaction of giving my retiring boss a "wonderful day the she would never be able to forget." I am sure that the latihan had been advising, guiding and prompting me from within all the time. With its help I had been propelled into the foreground of school life and by the end of my first year there I had been "on show" in ways that scared the life out of me: giving speeches to adults, teaching demonstration lessons to various groups of people and I had even been a Sports Day commentator with my voice being projected across the little town all one afternoon!

School had certainly plunged me into the deep end of my feelings of lack of confidence, weakness and inadequacy and I had survived! I began my first summer holidays with a real sense of achievement and amazement at what had happened in such a short time. If I *still* had any doubts about the latihan being able to be so obviously involved in one's daily life and in developing one's personality for the better, future events at school and in my personal life were soon going to dispel them utterly...For the moment, I was enjoying my children, growing as a person for all to see at school and continuing to feel the benefits, in both actions and understanding, of the latihan.

Sometimes this understanding was purely subjective and not related to present, or future events, at all. During one memorable latihan at this time something of the significance for me of the tragic death of my father was made clear to me. My father had drowned when I was six years old and ever since I could remember I had denied that it had any serious effect on me! I was to learn more about this from latihans every so often but in this one I learnt of one very surprising effect: my father's early death had affected me somewhat deeply because it meant the "loss" of my mother! What a surprising insight this was and it took me a while to see how true this had been. After being at home all day with my mother while my father worked, now my mother had to leave me often with members of her own family while she, as single parent, had to go out to work! I have many memories of staying with my grandparents at their crowded house and missing my absent mother so much, especially after she met the man who was to become my step-father...Then I saw, too, that my father's

death clearly caused me to lose confidence. There was no doubt about this as it suddenly hit me towards the end of this latihan that the Christmas before my father's death I was given a lead role in the school play: I was a king (I remember now standing in a suit of armour my mother had made for me out of silver milk bottle tops!) and I had lots of words to learn. A year later I had to be "hidden" at the back in the crowd so that I could go to the toilet as and when I needed! All this came as a shock to me: I could not believe I had not seen this before! How wrong I had been when friends asked me about this awful thing and I said time and time again: "No, I can honestly say I do not think my father's death had any great effect on me at all!"

The latihan had clearly shown me that it could act as some kind of deep therapy- and for free! It could give more understanding of one's character and weaknesses and even give the strength to do something about them. I had already gained a lot in confidence and was much more effective now as a leader in my school, although I knew there was still a long way to go with this. I was also experiencing latihan that gave me times of emotional comfort, of a feeling of psychological wholeness and feeling of general "all-rightness" that I had never experienced before. A solitary latihan at this time made me clearly aware that one should not, as I had too often done, try to hide one's personality from the world; rather one should express it. At the same time one should not expect everyone to love it, or even like it (again, something I had spent too much time seeking!) One's personality truly seemed like a GIFT to the world- but not everyone would want that particular gift! All this seemed to give a healthy and realistic place to personality. It did not deny it or demand unattainable perfection. It simply stated the truth about it and allowed it its rightful place. This helped me enormously.

As well as giving me surprising insights and even understanding, I was still getting those latihan that seemed inexplicably negative. These were latihan that showed my weaknesses or current difficulties in graphic form, sometimes in images that intrigued me. After one latihan I felt as if I had been dragged through barbed wire and my face was horribly scratched. I wrote after: "I feel so exposed; as if I can hardly cope!" After another latihan I felt "like a seal washed up on the shore- can I get back into the water or fend for myself on land?" It was a question that was not answered until another strange development was soon going to take my life by surprise...