GOING THROUGH CUSTOMS

My goal is to make it a little easier to expand our comfort zone, in part by describing my own struggles, in part by exploring what helped others to grow. Above all, I hope to convey the adventure of where the process can lead. For example, after taking a plane to Moscow, I once anxiously opened my suitcase for an already stern-looking customs official, revealing forty copies of a new book, *Citizen Summitry.*

This was in late 1985, an uneasy time in that totalitarian state. Almost nobody then foresaw that the Cold War would ever end. In April of that year, the nuclear power station at Chernobyl had exploded. (The plant was located in Ukraine, then a province of the USSR). In October, the Reykjavik summit meeting between Gorbachev and Reagan, in Iceland, had ended abruptly. It was not a good time to be bringing a cache of books into a closed country. There in the entry area of Sheremetyevo International Airport, the customs inspector called over his uniformed boss.

Fortunately, the book, which I had co-edited, contained thanks to the Vice-President of the Soviet Academy of Sciences plus some Soviet contributions that he had helped us to obtain, plus a dramatic ink drawing of a TV "space-bridge" between Moscow and San Francisco. After looking at all this, the colonel smiled and said, "I understand your country, my country, peace," and he waved me in. An interviewer and crew from All-Soviet TV were waiting for me, perhaps because of the novelty of a Westerner who was neither a Cold Warrior nor a "useful idiot," to use, as I did in the interview, Lenin's pungent term for a Westerner who could be trusted to parrot the party line. In contrast, my co-editor Don Carlson and I had invited various Soviets to envision, together with Americans, the end of the Cold War between us (or at least that very dangerous version of it).

In one sense, this book is about how I got to that place. Although the wake-up calls in my early forties felt dismal at the time, they gave me the opportunity to venture outside my comfort zone and adopt a profession that kept initiating me into new worlds. Unlike the work on the Cold War, most of these worlds were not political, but they prepared me for at least a small role in helping to meet a challenge that seemed impossible.

What I want to do is illustrate the process, in at least one life, of successively enlarging a comfort zone. The process can bring value beyond anything imagined in advance, but it usually involves a stage of awkwardness, uncertainty, confusion.

For example, I had reached early middle age with a well-defined comfort zone, and probably would have stayed safely inside it if not for a series of shocks. These events freed me to develop a new career and thus the opportunity of a second chance, after

having happily taught, directed research, and been a well-paid consultant and co-author of a book (*Sanctions for Evil: Sources of Social Destructiveness*).

Many people suffer worse shock. For example, I did not have a serious illness, an addiction, loss of a fortune, or a devastating accident. But a moderate loss can, with luck and a helpful attitude, lead to unexpected gains.

A LITTLE OUTSIDE

At the foundation where I worked within the decade of this brief memoir, one of my colleagues responded to a proposal by saying, gently, "that's a little outside my comfort zone." She spoke the way that aghast but courteous people in the South initially seem to agree that we "might could" do something, actually meaning, however, "we could go that way if we didn't have a much better idea. The phrase "comfort zone" started me thinking about the areas we all define where we know how to act and can more or less succeed. At the foundation starting in 1984 we had the single goal of trying to help end the Cold War as it then existed, which required, as my thoughtful colleague knew, operating often in gray areas or in activities that we didn't know would work.

Almost all of the stories in this book are drawn from little more than a decade of my life, 1981-92. After a transition, they tell of being drawn into worlds unknown to me, sometimes with skepticism or reluctance, and then of finding, inside these worlds, treasures that I'd never even imagined. This is an adventure story, of discovering some of the hidden worlds that exist all around us, ordinarily never entered or even seen. I illustrate this process with some stories almost entirely from my forties, but it's as much about other people as about me; about mentors, friends, co-workers. (Some of the units carry the story outside the chronological order of this book, after which the next unit returns to that order.)

A few words of context and gratitude: I began adult life with huge advantages. a childhood with a close family in the suburbs of New York City, education at Harvard College and other "elite" institutions, a fellowship for travel abroad, a loving, bright, and adventurous wife who'd graduated from the same university.

Later, after the transition described here, I overheard a former college roommate trying to answer a question from his son, "what does Craig do?" Fumbling for an answer, this distinguished professor was vague but kind: "he helps people." He was referring to my early work as a "book creation coach."

What I want to describe is the passage from initial confusion and resistance to the discovery of worlds of which I probably would have remained unaware, had I not been asked to "help" And I want to celebrate some of the unsung heroes with whom I had the good fortune to work.

FOR WHOM?

Within a given level of genetic endowment, it is curiosity and the habit of learning that determine working intelligence. If one can identify more with finding out than with knowing, if one can live with the anxiety of not having mastered something (yet), he or she can make full use of whatever mental powers that person has.

I love the story of a child telling his father about a success. The parent congratulates him and adds, "be sure to tell me also about enterprises at which you fail." His point was that if we always succeed, we may not be exploring widely enough. This father was teaching a kind of courage, which is not fearlessness, but deliberate persistence in the face of natural anxiety.

My dad's mother, a frontier schoolteacher, often said, "well, I've never heard that before," almost as if to doubt the credentials of the unfamiliar. As a young person, I thought, "what kind of a life is it in which any novelty is worthy of comment, as if everything otherwise is familiar?" When I grew up, I wanted to be a person who said, "Do I know? Not yet. Tell me about it. Show me. Help me do it."

So this is a book about learning, not so much mastering the details of a known sphere, which of course is necessary, as of entering new spheres, of exploring, As an adolescent I began to notice that many discoveries are made by people for whom the field of discovery is a second field. (To mention only one example, the discovery of the structure of DNA.) As a young adult, I noticed that some firms have succeeded in part by deliberately mixing people up and encouraging conversations between disparate kinds of experts. A tiny minority of these encounters led to basic and perhaps very profitable discoveries. (Apple and Google know this, as do many firms in information technology)

"Openness to experience" is almost the opposite of "authoritarian personality," a concept described by one of my mentors, the psychologist Nevitt Sanford. (With colleagues, he wrote the book of that name.) He was not a traditional thinker. After one long meeting in his office, about starting a new school within what had thus far been solely a research institute, the champion of this proposal suggested appointing a feasibility committee. It would report in six months. Nevitt said, "we might could do that or," and here he drew on his pipe and blew a smoke ring, "we could start the school tomorrow morning."

He and I wrote the prospectus before dinner and the next day he and other leading psychologists and psychotherapists phoned colleagues in colleges, described the prospectus, and asked them to tell their best seniors about it. We had the first applications within a few days. More than forty years later, the Wright Institute is accredited and widely known in its field.

Openness to experience is related to "absorption," which can be defined as total attention. Though it comes from a separate research tradition, "flow" is related to attending totally, to forgetting everything other than the immediate challenge, which might be climbing a rock face, performing brain surgery, or playing Jazz. This kind of absorption is self-guided and serves as its own reward, or as some psychologists say, it's "autotelic"

COLLAPSE AND TRANSITION

In my case, I was helped by two factors, first by a collapse of the life that I had developed, then by a series of good, not to say wonderful, new kinds of experience. I don't want anyone to suffer a collapse, which may have been necessary in my case. (I am told that in Alcoholics Anonymous, many new recruits come only when they have reached "rock bottom.") I didn't have any of the obvious addictions, except perhaps to what I knew, at various stages, as normality. Which, however, may be a strong fixation.

The collapse can be briefly told in the first chapter, while the second shows some of the values by which I was guided in building a new kind of life. Then the rest of the book is about venturing beyond my comfort zone and thus discovering worlds that I did not know existed and, looking back, am happy that I was initiated into.

The transition, however, can feel startling. While living in North Africa, I once visited ruins of a Roman city in the desert, an ancient city that looked as if it had just been evacuated, intact but lonely. Nobody was on the ancient streets. People were elsewhere, in the nearby contemporary city of Souk-el-Arba in the west of Tunisia. I wandered into a dark stone Roman house (no windows), and was reflecting on a civilization that assumed it would never die. Here I was, alone in the ruins.

As my eyes began to adjust to the murk inside the windowless building, I was startled by the sound of something dropped, then by the realization that there were other people in the large room, men in robes, two horizontal circular millstones, and a donkey that would pull a pole and thus turn the top stone. A man was dropping olives through a hole in the stone. I was doubly startled, not only because I had assumed I was alone, but also because the scene could have existed in the bible pictures that I'd studied as a child in Sunday school

I greeted the men in the few words of the local language that I then knew, and they mumbled back, almost as if I belonged there. After a few moments, as calmly as possible, I left and walked back to the car and the world that I knew but filled with curiosity about the life that I had glimpsed and about which I learned more during a year in North Africa.

Many of us stumble or venture out of an established comfort zone once, but this is a book about enlarging your comfort zone as a style of life. Finding a comfort zone is a tremendous achievement. With luck, your partner is there, your work, your very identity. The trouble is, the zone may become a little boring or constrained. You may be reminded of other parts not yet developed. Then you have a choice of making the best of your present condition, or, while respecting others, enlarging your comfort zone. You put yourself in new situations, you enter unfamiliar worlds, you learn a broader view.

Along the way, I give as much attention to some of the amazing people whom I met on this path, with some of whom I had the honor of working. They were typically people who grew out of one career into another, people who paid attention to more than one field, people who sought to serve, people who took on challenges said to be impossible. I'm sure that I missed a lot of what these people had to teach, but I learned what I could and try to pass along the lessons here.

BEYOND MERITOCRACY

In the meritocracy, we learn to build a resume and to enter a monoculture of success. One of my early mentors, the sociologist David Riesman, weary of all the Cold War talk about the need for leaders to avoid a "failure of nerve," inverted the phrase and praised the "nerve of failure," the willingness to try something even if it might fail. Why? Because it might succeed in a surprising way, and because if it failed you would have to learn resilience. In some cases, as I would discover, the difficult and uncertain effort was inescapable because, if it failed, nothing else would matter.

I want to celebrate the willingness to pass through recurrent periods of initiation, those times when we feel like stumbling in dense fog through a field of birch saplings. Everything is white and we realize we are lost, almost clueless. Perhaps we hear some ambiguous sounds. Then, sometimes, the sun breaks through, and we can see how to get to the brook that we have heard. But for a while we stumble, with no guarantees that the fog will ever lift. The very good news is that once we learn how to tolerate uncertainty, we can have the opportunity to discover something new, possibly wonderful, beyond our dreams.

And who knows? The future may throw us into a fog, in which case the best preparation would be the experience of having entered the fog voluntarily and thriving.