MARGINALITY AS LIFE STYLE

Many of us live in the margins of education—that is, on the fringes of academic departments and programs. I am writing to recommend marginality as a style of living within institutions of our society for the members of the experiential learning community. Such an intentional lifestyle provides positive benefits: leverage for change, flexibility for furthering learning, sanity, freedoms to run risks, openness to new possibilities, and a concept of work that sees jobs and professions as vehicles for expressing one's life and values, rather than the source of identity or meaning. Career becomes doing what, in your judgment, needs to be done.

In order to make these recommendations with clarity I need to "set the record straight." I have to say first what I do not mean. By marginality, I do not mean "being of little value or of no consequence, or not counting for much." I know that the word "marginal" sounds to many people like a cop-out or justification for one's failure to make it big in this society. That is not what I have in mind.

Let's look at some of the dictionary definitions of "marginal" to see what positive clues they might provide for our understanding. Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary offers a number of definitions that suggest positive dimensions to marginality—for example, "being written or printed in the margin of a page or sheet." To me this connotes high visibility, the role of the critic, a source of creative suggestions for change. Or, consider this: "of, relating to, or situated at the margin or border—occupying the borderland of a relatively stable territorial or cultural area." This suggests to me a frontier existence, being on the cutting edge, exploring new territory or options. Or, how about "characterized by the incorporation of habits and values from two divergent cultures and by incomplete assimilation in either"? This rings of having the best of both worlds, of being selective about what one "buys into" or what one makes one's own. It speaks of the exercise of judgment and the intentional development of a life consistent with the best one experiences. Finally, think about this one: "located at the fringes of consciousness—living with dreams and visions and fantasies without which the people perish!"

This general exploration should give you a feel for the range of possibilities of marginality as a life-style. Let's get specific. Why do I recommend it? I've tried it. I like it. It fits my attitudinal disposition, and I'm intrigued by it as a responsible way to live. I want to examine it with greater specificity, not to persuade readers to make it their own, but to encourage others to develop their own brand of intentionality in shaping their professional and personal lives. What does it mean to be marginal? I spent twenty years in the campus ministry and was on the edge of two worlds—that of the Church and that of the University. I was "in" them both but not "of" either one. That is, I was a misfit in both. People had difficulty putting a label on me that would allow them to put me easily in one of their boxes. Since I couldn't be "pigeonholed" and didn't fit their stereotypes, I had greater freedom than the regular members of the university—freedom to call together people from various disciplines and strata and to organize ac-

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Activities around issues and problems that were beyond the scope of any one discipline or department. I could be a catalyst because my activities were not prescribed by my rank, status, or assigned role within the university and because my freedom of action was not circumscribed by my acceptance of someone else's preconceived notion of what was appropriate behavior for me. The structure of the university—organized as it is by disciplines and departments in order to facilitate research—creates significant power vacuums in critical areas of the life of the institution and of the mind. People who are not totally wed to the system, and therefore not limited by it, can fill this vacuum creatively and therefore serve as agents of change and development. When I became an assistant professor, I continued to act on the basis of marginality.

Experiential educators certainly have the opportunity for thriving in the margins. Our situations seldom encourage us to aspire to the traditional positions of power and decision making within the bureaucratic structures of our institutions. I would advocate for myself, the avoidance of such positions because of my sense of how things get accomplished in bureaucratic institutions and what happens to people who acquire such power and authority. Rather than pursuing opportunities for the exercise of power, we ought to develop consciously the informal power network based on influence, friendship, the identification of and collaboration with opinion shapers, the power of persuasion, and action. In many institutions things often do not happen simply because no one takes the initiative to make them happen. As a "noncompany" person you are free to be an advocate for the mission rather than the maintenance of the status quo of the institution.

Being willing to be marginal when it comes to having traditional power also means you can set your own agenda or priorities and focus your energies on what you feel is important, such as furthering learning and facilitating students' initiative and responsibility for their own learning, rather than being satisfied to be merely a disseminator of knowledge as a subject matter authority.

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And about sanity? Being marginal means being realistic enough about the society we live in to know that no institution or career in its current form will provide us with lifelong occupational satisfaction. We must remain open to new options and never allow ourselves to be identified in a final way with a particular occupation or profession as it is currently practiced. We need to be open to new ways of expressing our values and life commitments at every stage in our lives. Becoming too closely tied to or identified with a particular institution can be stifling and destructive of creative response. Being in, but not of, an institution means being free to respond to new options and move on.

How can one be marginal? It is a question of attitude. I do believe that a minimal prerequisite is that a person be intentional about his or her life. That is, you have to be willing to figure out what is important to you and how you are going to live your life as an expression of those values. This means being reflective about life and consciously working at consistency—trying to make sure your actions express your beliefs and not simply mirror the values of the society or those around you. It also means you probably can't do it alone. The pressures toward conformity in our society are too great. As experiential educators, we need each other and the mutual support of like-minded travelers, wanderers, pilgrims, and sojourners.

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MARGINALITY AS LIFE STYLE

I want to begin with a quotation from a non-famous American from Louisville, Ky., who nonetheless has some keen personal insights. Reflecting on her life, as older folks tend to do, she said, "I'd like to make more mistakes next time. I'd relax. I would limber up. I would be sillier than I have been this trip. I would take fewer things seriously. I would take more chances. I would climb more mountains and swim more rivers. I would eat more ice cream and less beans. I would perhaps have more actual troubles, but I'd have fewer imaginary ones. You see, I'm one of those people who live sensibly and sanely hour after hour, day after day. Oh, I've had my moments, and if I had it to do over again, I'd have more of them. In fact, I'd try to have nothing else. Just moments, one after another, instead of living so many years ahead of each day. I've been one of those persons who never goes anywhere without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a raincoat and a parachute. If I had to do it again, I would travel lighter than I have. If I had my life to live over, I would start barefoot earlier in the spring and stay that way later in the fall. I would go to more dances. I would ride more merry-go-rounds. I would pick more daisies."

One of the hidden messages in her reflections is, "If life isn't going to slip through your fingers like sand, you've got to be intentional." And I agree with her. If we don't want to lose our lives before we find them, we've got to take charge. We've got to be intentional about how we spend our lives. They are the only ones we have. Once they are gone, they are gone. The other message, I think, in her ruminations is, "It's not too late to become intentional about life--it's very difficult, but not too late."
If we are going to try to be intentional about our lives, and I want to make a case for intentionality today, there are several things we need to be aware of. One of these is the tendency we all have to go with the flow—to not take charge of our lives—to respond to life as it comes at us, trying to keep both feet firmly planted under us, maintain our balance, absorb the shocks and move on, responding to each new thing or event that hits us as best we can. We take the helter-skelter of daily happenings in, fit them into our scheme of things as best we can and keep moving, readying ourselves for the next uninvited and unexpected on-slaught. Being intentional, --taking the initiative to make things happen, is, for most of us, not our style. And for good reason!!! We've learned our K-12 lessons all too well. In fact, we've learned them so well, we not only never forget them, those learnings have taken control of our lives and have us programmed to respond to all situations in a similar way.

We know (i.e., have engrained in our being through our schooling) that if you want to get on in this world, just do what you are told!!! Three things we have learned. 1) Wait until the teacher (boss, staff, children, spouse, ) tells you what to do before you begin.

2) Find out how to get an A. That is, find out what he/she wants and do it. Don't waste "time" being curious or using your inquiring mind. Don't spin your wheels, just keep your mind in neutral until she says go. Then go like hell, looking neither to the left or the right at any distraction, no matter how novel or interesting. And

3) Don't worry about learning. Concentrate on getting certified. Education is the one thing Americans are willing to pay for and not get.

So, those are some of the attitudinal dispositions we are up against when we seek to take charge of our own lives. Right away we are headed up-stream, going against the
grain. Consequently, most of us face life with a "wait and see" posture, a defensive, protective stance instead of a pro-active one. There are some exceptions, and we are probably among them. I'm reminded of Wendell Berry's poem, "The Contrariness of the Mad Farmer."

I am done with apologies. If contrariness is my inheritance and destiny, so be it. If it is my mission to go in at exits and come out at entrances, so be it. I have planted by the stars in defiance of the experts, and tilled somewhat by incantation and by singing, and reaped, as I knew, by luck and Heaven's favor, in spite of the best advice. If I have been caught so often laughing at funerals, that was because I knew the dead were already slipping away, preparing a comeback, and can I help it? And if at weddings I have gritted and gnashed my teeth, it is because I knew where the bridegroom had sunk his manhood, and knew it would not be resurrected by a piece of cake. "Dance," they told me, and I stood still, and while they stood quiet in line at the gate of the Kingdom, I danced. "Pray," they said, and I laughed, covering myself in the earth's brightnesses, and then stole off gray into the midst of a revel, and prayed like an orphan. When they said, "I know that my Redeemer liveth,"
I told them, "He's dead." And when they told me,
"God is dead," I answered, "He goes fishing every day
in the Kentucky River. I see Him often."
When they asked me would I like to contribute
I said no, and when they had collected
more than they needed, I gave them as much as I had.
When they asked me to join them I wouldn't,
and then went off by myself and did more
than they would have asked. "Well, then," they said
"go and organize the International Brotherhood
of Contraries," and I said, "Did you finish killing
everybody who was against peace?" So be it.
Going against men, I have heard at times a deep harmony
thrumming in the mixture, and when they ask me what
I say I don't know. It is not the only or the easiest
way to come to the truth. It is one way."

There are some of us who are by nature contrary, and
There are probably a higher percentage of Mad Farmers in this
room than elsewhere in the American scene, but it is not always a
comfortable style and frequently needs shoring up, as we all know.

Well back to the main theme - the need for intentionally

There are other things we are up against if we would be
intentional besides our own tendencies to drift, respond, and go
with the flow. There is the predominate world view of our
industrial society which probably runs counter to what most of us
would be (as experiential educators) advocates for. This industrial
world view is a powerful and prevailing wind, hard to stand against, to say nothing of walking into it. It is not unlike the principalities and powers of darkness we sometimes sense as out there. Here is a brief description of that predominate world view that dominates our society: "The overriding goal in life is material progress. Much emphasis is placed on conspicuous consumption; the "good life" is dependent upon having enough money to buy access to life's pleasures and to avoid life's discomforts. Identity is defined by material possessions and social position: by what you do, not by what you value. Identity is thought to be either static or only slowly changing. The individual is defined by his or her body and is ultimately separate and alone. The universe is viewed as material and largely lifeless; it is proper for us, the living, to exploit the lifeless universe for our own ends. Much emphasis is placed on self-serving behavior (get as much for myself as I can while giving no more than is required in return."

"Cutthroat competition" prevails; compete against others; strive to "make a killing." There is a "lifeboat ethic" in global relations. The welfare of the whole is left to the workings of the "free" market and/or federal bureaucracy. There is a high level of dependency upon experts and specialists. Much emphasis is on autonomy and mobility."

By contrast, most of us would give allegiance to another world view partially described by Duane Elgin in Voluntary Simplicity. Here is how he describes that alternative world view. "The central intention in life is that of keeping both the material and spiritual aspects of life in harmony and balance. Much emphasis is placed on
conservation and frugality—using only as much as is needed. A satisfying life arises with balanced growth in cooperation with others. Identity is revealed in the process of living; identity is experienced as fluid, being born anew in each moment. The individual is experienced as both a unique and an inseparable part of the larger universe; who "we" are is not limited to our physical existence. The universe is experienced as a vast living organism; it is appropriate to act in ways that honor the preciousness and integrity of all life. Much emphasis is placed on life-serving behavior (give as much of myself to life as I am able and ask in return no more than I require.) "Fair competition" prevails; co-operate with others; intend to earn a living. There is a "spaceship earth ethic" in global relations. Each person takes responsibility for the well being of the whole and directly participates in promoting the overall welfare. Much emphasis is placed on becoming more self-reliant and self-governing. Much emphasis is on connectedness and community."

The end effect of the industrial world view is succintly summarized by Jacques Ellul, a French Protestant lay theologian and attorney writing in Money and Power. He says, "We must recognize the truth in Karl Marx's observation that money, in the capitalist system, leads to alienation. One of the results of capitalism that we see developing throughout the nineteenth century is the subservience of Being to having...The subservience of being to having is not a by-product, something that might not have happened, a result that could be eliminated by a better organization of capitalism. To the contrary, it is the inevitable consequence of capitalism, for there is no other possibility when making money becomes the purpose of life."

"The work ethic (that work is virtuous because it produces money) obviously leads to the subordination of being to having. Any other possibility would require us to dethrone money, give economic activity a smaller role, put the brakes on technological progress,
and bring personal and spiritual life to the forefront—in other words, to destroy capitalism."—Similar thing could also be said about modern socialism—in an industrial society.

So, if you are going to be intentional about your life style and if your values are what I think they are because of your commitment (to experiential learning and education,) you are up against some very tough customers. The other thing that is clear to me is that intentionality, if you are going to go to the trouble to do anything about it, will only happen if it is focused by your values—by what you hold to be most important and worthy of the investment of your life. Most jobs, in and of themselves, do not directly meet the criteria of being worthy of the investment of your life.

Tom Green, a philosopher of Education at Syracuse University, in a book published some years ago entitled, Work, Leisure and the American Schools, makes a case for distinguishing between jobs and a work. He does a careful analytical study following Hannah Arendt's excellent analysis in the The Human Condition. Jobs, for Tom Green, as with labor for Hannah Arendt, are the ever recurring, routinized tasks of life which continually need to be done over and over again to survive: the shopping, cooking, washing up, cleaning, laundry, the work of the assembly line, the administrative duties laid on us by the agency or institution for which we work, the nitty gritty, nuts and bolts stuff that has to be done just to keep the show on the road and the ship afloat. These activities require no display of judgment, style or a sense of craft. Tom's thesis is that in our society fewer and fewer people are able to find employment which is any more than a job—"a mere method of providing for material needs." Few people, Dr. Green holds, are able to find in their employment a work worthy of the investment of their lives. My sense is that this is not necessarily true for us but we will escape this fate only if we take charge rather than allow others to set our agendas for us. This requires two things:
1. Clarity of intention—having an overarching purpose or principle with which to shape your life and your work. This requires no clarity of intention if we are to live by our values rather than by someone else's agenda.

2. Adopting a life style of marginality.

Before we go on we are going to take a break and shift from a banking mode of learning to an experiential one. Please take the 3×5 card you received when you came in and write two things on the front of it: 1. something you do that you view as labor or job and 2. what you consider to be your life work. Now turn it over and describe on the back briefly the last time you said "no" to your employer, boss, colleagues or spouse when you were asked to do something, because, in the light of your "work," it seemed like a waste of time and energy or counterproductive. Now share the three things you have written with someone across the table from you. If you can't think of any answers to these questions, talk about why.

And now, a word about marginality as an appropriate life style. In order to make my points with clarity I need to "set the record straight." I have to say first what I do not mean. By marginality I do not mean "being of little value or of no consequence, or not counting for much." I know that the word "marginal" is used by many people to describe those who have failed to make it in this society or people who are not very productive or who have been denied opportunities. That is not what I have in mind.

Let's look at some of the dictionary definitions of "marginal" to see what positive clues they may provide for our understanding. Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary offers a number of definitions that suggest positive dimensions to marginality. For example, one definition of "marginal" is "being written or printed in the margin of a page or sheet of paper." To me this connotes high visibility, the role of the critic, a source of creative suggestions for change. Or consider this, "of, relating to, or situated at the margin or border—occupying the borderland of a relatively stable territorial or
This suggests to me a frontier existence, being on the cutting edge, exploring new territory or options. Or, how about, "characterized by the incorporation of habits and values from two divergent cultures and by incomplete assimilation in either."? This rings of having the best of both worlds, of being selective about what one "buys into" or what one makes one's own. It speaks of the exercise of judgment and the intentional development of a life consistent with the best one experiences. Finally, think about this one: "located at the fringe of consciousness"—living with dreams and visions and fantasies without which the people perish!

This general exploration should give you a feel for the range of possibilities of marginality as a life-style. But, let's get specific. Why do I recommend it? I've tried it. I like it. It fits my attitudinal disposition, and I'm intrigued by it as a responsible way to live. I want to examine it with greater specificity, not to persuade you to make it your own, but to encourage you to develop your own brand of intentionality in shaping your professional and personal lives.

What does it mean to be marginal? I spent twenty years in the campus ministry and was on the edge of two worlds—that of the Church and that of the University. I was "in" them both but not "of" either one. That is, I was a misfit in both. People had difficulty putting a label on me that would allow them to put me easily in one of their boxes. Since I couldn't be "pigeonholed" and didn't fit their stereotypes, I had greater freedom than the regular members of the university—freedom to call together people from various disciplines, departments and strata of the University and to organize activities around issues and problems that were beyond the scope of any one discipline or department. I could be a catalyst because my activities were not prescribed by my rank, status, or assigned role within the university and because my freedom of action was not circumscribed by my acceptance of someone else's preconceived notion of what was
appropriate behavior for me. The structure of the University, organized as it is by disciplines and departments in order to facilitate research, creates significant power vacuums in critical areas of the life of the institution and of the mind. People who are not totally wed to the system, and therefore not limited by it, can fill these vacuums creatively and therefore serve as agents of change and development. When I became an assistant professor responsible for an off-campus cross cultural learning program I was still marginal, as you can well imagine. I did not have an academic discipline to give me credibility, or a departmental base to give me a meaningful place in the scheme of things and I continued to act on the basis of marginality.

Experiential educators certainly have the opportunity for thriving on the margins. Our situations seldom encourage us to aspire to the traditional positions of power and decision making within the bureaucratic structures of our institutions. I would advocate, for myself, the avoidance of such positions because of my sense of how things get accomplished in bureaucratic institutions and what happens to people who acquire such power and authority. Rather than pursuing opportunities for the exercise of power, we ought to develop consciously an informal power network based on influence, friendship, the identification of and collaboration with opinion shapers; the power of persuasion and action. In many institutions things often do not happen simply because no one takes the initiative to make them happen. As a marginal or "non-company" person you are free to be an advocate for the mission rather than the maintenance of the institution.

Being willing to be marginal when it comes to having traditional power also means you can set your own agenda or priorities and focus your energies on what you feel is important, such as furthering learning and facilitating students taking initiative and responsibility for their own learning.
And about sanity? Being marginal means being realistic enough about the society we live in to know that no institution or career in its current form will provide us with lifelong occupational satisfaction. We must remain open to new options and never allow ourselves to be identified in a final way with a particular occupation or profession as it is currently practiced. We need to be open to new ways of expressing our values and life commitments at every stage of our lives. Becoming too closely tied to or identified with a particular institution can be stifling and destructive of creative response. Being in, but not of, an institution means being free to respond to new options and move on.

Well, in part, I think one can be marginal. It is a question of attitude. I do believe that a minimal prerequisite is that a person be intentional about his or her life. That is, you have to be willing to figure out what is important to you and how you are going to live your life as an expression of those values. This means being reflective about life and consciously working at consistency—trying to make sure your actions express your beliefs and not simply mirror the values of the society or of those around you.

I have a perception of reality I would like to test out with you. I think most of us work in institutional settings in which we serve many different publics: students, parents, the dean, department chairperson, or principal, our fellow faculty members, people who provide placement opportunities, as well as wives, husbands, children. All of these people have different understandings and expectations of what we should be doing. We are caught in the vortex of very strong, conflicting and often competing claims on our time and energy. This is especially true if we are carrying part-time responsibilities for two or more programs. Such situations often seem designed to tear people asunder or at least to totally debilitate us so that we feel pulled in so many directions that we often end up doing very little on our own initiative. We tend to wait and see and to respond to the initiative or perceived expectations of others. I sense this to be a
potentially destructive climate of considerable magnitude. The only way to counter its destructive character is to take charge of it by identifying some organizing principle for your life and work. That is, for you to decide what it is that you want to invest your life in: what overarching purpose you have which can bring order out of the chaos of your situation. Once you decide that, then the tasks which you have been given can become what they should be, instruments for the accomplishment of your "life-work." As a professional educator you may see your "life work" as that of empowering people to take charge of their own lives and education. With that as an organizing principle you then have a basis for deciding what to say "yes" to and what to say "no" to among the claims and expectations laid upon you by the many people you are involved with. Such action gives you freedom to develop your own agenda, see and use the present job as an instrument to further your primary purpose, take initiative to do what is important to you and power to take a stand and defend your choices. In short, it provides you with the means to take charge of your own life. Without clarity of purpose we become pawns of those whom we feel we need to please.

Once we clarify what it is we are willing to commit ourselves to, whether it is the empowerment of people, or encouraging people to understand career as lifestyle rather than job, or developing servant leaders, or preserving our eco-system, then the question of how we can best do that leads to the consideration of "marginality" as a strategy. Whether we seek to serve at the margins or at the centers of power in our society and its institutions depends on what we hope to accomplish, and I would add, how we function best as persons. I have found "marginality" a useful lifestyle in working for changes in higher education and society--changes that enable students, young and older to take charge of their own education and lives in a creative way. I recommend it to you for thoughtful consideration.
I have also experienced the company of experiential educators as a strong community of sustenance and support for a lifestyle of marginality so I leave you with this quote from Thomas Merton:

"And so I stand among you as one who offers a small message of hope, that first, there are always people who dare to seek on the margin of society, and who are not dependent on social acceptance, not dependent on social routine, and prefer a kind of free-floating existence under a state of risk. And among these people, if they are faithful to their own calling, to their vocation, and to their own message from God, communication on the deepest level is possible. And the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are."