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A Time of Redefinition

By Thomas J. Harvey

With the simple truism, "Life is difficult!" Scott Peck opens his best seller, *The Road Less Traveled*. He suggests that difficulty is a universal – and a very important – reality. In the course of a lifetime, every person must deal with it. In fact, how we deal with difficulty may be an important measure of how much satisfaction we find in life.

Peck outlines two of the most common *ineffective* ways many of us deal with difficulties.

At the one extreme is what he calls the "neurotic" approach. Those using this approach feel guilty and say "I'm sorry" when a problem is presented, even if they were not responsible for causing the problem. While regretted, the difficulty is not dealt with. At the other extreme is the "character disorder." The person taking this approach immediately blames someone else for the problem at hand. What these two very different approaches have in common, Peck points out, is that neither one solves the problem.

As I reflect on the nonprofit, human service sector today, I find that Peck's observation about life being difficult applies. Nonprofit leaders and their organizations are dealing with unprecedented difficulties which go to the heart of the sector's identity, its effectiveness, and its status within modern society.

And the challenge for organizations involves avoiding the temptation to deal with difficulty with solely regret or blame. The difficulties must be adequately addressed if the voluntary human service sector is to continue to play a vital role in this society.

The prevailing difficulty facing the nonprofit, human service sector today lies in the ambiguity of its expected role at the present time. This lack of a clearly defined role is emerging from a variety of sources, which are primarily, but not exclusively, external to the sector. Thus the difficulties facing the nonprofit sector must be addressed both on a sector-wide level and in dialogue with the marketplace and the government sectors.

This will not be easy. The nonprofit sector is not a monolithic reality. And it is not organized or structured to deal in concert with macro issues. The sector includes a range of organizations differing in size, scale, and scope – from the largest and most powerful universities and foundations to the smallest and least funded neighborhood organizations – thousands of which have sprung up during the past two decades. With such diversity, it is increasingly difficult to have a clear set of public policies that can be applied uniformly to nonprofits to assure accountability to the overall good of society.

Beyond the philosophic issues of this explosion of nonprofits, there are very

practical concerns. More organizations mean more overhead. Duplication of effort means dollars are diverted from program to competing management structures. The explosive growth of the sector also puts new burdens on the donors who must confront an array of choices. At first blush, to have the freedom of so many choices sounds very democratic. Perhaps. But it also means that competing causes must put more and more resources into marketing themselves to hold or grow in market share, which works against those organizations that may have creative programs, but do not have the resources, the name recognition, or the donor base to market themselves effectively. For the largest and best known agencies, there is also a danger. In such a competitive climate, there is a tendency to view the donor as the primary client to the detriment of

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