From the Navy to Sociology

Dear Editor,

The call for papers on role models and mentors led me to reflect on these issues in my career as both a student and professor. A good college education exposes the student to many new concepts, insights, and professors. Under such circumstances it is not surprising that a significantly large proportion of those students make one or more changes in their major field by the time they graduate. Such a change can be quite consequential, and the student frequently feels the need for consultation before deciding on it. It is in such instances that the college professor can render service as a sensitive and responsive listener. Because I had been such a student I was able, on numerous occasions, to be similarly helpful to my students. In fact, by my very presence, I served as a role model for these young people.

In October of 1948, I completed a six-year enlistment in the United States Navy and accepted an honorable discharge. This was not an easy move because I had risen through the ranks quickly and had obtained the job classification of "assistant to the navigator on small ocean-going vessels," with a high, noncommissioned rank. About two months earlier, my commanding officer had called me to his cabin and told me that if I would "ship over" he would recommend my promotion to chief petty officer which, at that time, was essentially the highest enlisted rating. I loved my job and was respected for it, and now that it was peacetime, I could look forward to a secure future; however, I declined the offer.

Both personal and ethical considerations impelled me to leave the service and, as the old-timers had warned me, the transition to civilian life was not easy. Three years after the end of World War II, I was no longer looked upon as a hero; for many people, veterans were regarded as a problem. As I had been instructed to do, I went to the state employment office for assistance in finding work. Whatever job listing I inquired about, I was told either that I was over-qualified or under-qualified. I ultimately concluded that the personnel at that office didn't particularly care about me. The longer I kept coming in each week to collect my 20 dollars, the more secure their job was.

During my military service, I had acquired a wife and child and with only 20 dollars a week coming in, I knew that my mustering-out pay wouldn't last long. I searched the want-ads and found myself a job as a service station attendant. Before the war, I had spent one year in college and I hoped to eventually return. The GI Bill would pay for me to complete my college education, but I didn't feel ready for that step just yet. First it was necessary to make the adjustment to civilian life; I had to come to terms with who I was and what I would do with my life.

Finally, in the fall of 1950, I enrolled as a sophomore at City College of San Francisco (a community college). I also changed jobs, driving a taxi at night and attending classes in the daytime. Ten years earlier, when I first started college, I had been primarily in an engineering curriculum. On the basis of that information the Veterans Administration, which was now paying for my education, designated me as a physical science major. At the time though, my ultimate vocational goals were a bit vague, so I enrolled in courses that would satisfy the elective requirements for graduation. One of the required courses was Political Science 101: Introduction to American Government.

I had always been interested in civic affairs and the working of government, so it was not surprising that at the end of that class I frequently found myself engaged in discussion with Mr. Slosberg, the instructor. When we realized one day that my next class and his office were both on the other side of the campus, he suggested that we walk over together and continue the conversation.

My last year and a half in the Navy had been aboard a small cargo ship providing logistic support to the native populations on the many small islands of Micronesia. In the course of that experience I had become fascinated with those people and their culture. In fact, disillusionment over the extent to which American trusteeship over Micronesia was undermining their culture and their economy was one of the factors in my decision to leave the service; I didn't want to cooperate in such a policy. Inevitably at some point, my military experience became part of the conversation between Mr. Slosberg and me, and at one point he remarked, "I wish I had your experience in my field." This started

a whole new train of thought. At the end of that year I moved back to New York, transferring to Hofstra College in New York. I was still identified as a physical science major, but the encouragement I had felt from those conversations was having an effect.

I felt then that I had to learn as much as I could about social, cultural, and ethnic diversity and put that knowledge to work, somehow, in the interest of better understanding among people. Soon after enrolling at Hofstra, I petitioned the Veterans Administration to change my major to social sciences. My petition, supported by a letter from my former political science instructor, was successful. I earned a BA in sociology and went on to Columbia University, where, along with my master's degree in sociology, I was awarded the Certificate of the East Asian Institute. I was still in graduate school when I accepted a position as a sociology professor and for the next 47 years, in one way or another, I was employed in the field of higher education; 28 of those years were spent in two-year colleges. I found teaching in two-year colleges particularly rewarding because, in my opinion, it is there that you find many students with a particular need for a sympathetic ear and a few wise words of encouragement, students much like I was in 1950. I feel that I performed that function many times during my teaching career. My unique combination of experience and education, at the same time, facilitated my active participation in significant civil rights, civil liberties, and anti-war actions.

Most high schools do not include sociology in their curricula. Most college students enroll in introductory sociology courses either out of curiosity or to fulfill an elective requirement. When I first started teaching sociology I was frequently asked, "Why do I have to take this course?" or "What good is this going to do me?" It wasn't long before I routinely included, in my opening day presentation, a statement to the effect that in any human endeavor it is important to understand the social forces that shape the attitudes and behaviors of the people with whom you are dealing. I also presented social structure as a dynamic entity, constantly adjusting to an evolving world.

I always told my students that I was there for them and that they could come to me with questions; many did. Inevitably, some of those students had begun to perceive new career possibili-

ties and were looking for encouragement. In responding to them I always tried to provide a responsible balance between encouragement and reality. On the whole, I would say that the results have been rewarding.

It is indeed rewarding to have contact with former students in later years and to have them acknowledge that I was instrumental in helping them decide on a career. By chance I have met some and some have sought me out. Among them are at least two professional sociologists, three social caseworkers, a children's protection worker, and several elementary and high school teachers. My greatest satisfaction, however, derives from a number of students whom I first encountered when they enrolled in a course or two for the purpose of upgrading their skills to qualify for a promotion on the job and who then decided to go on to earn a degree and change their entire outlook. Teaching and mentoring provides considerable satisfaction.

Sincerely,

F. Lincoln Grahlfs

F. Lincoln Grahlfs, PhD*, was born in 1922 in New York City, making the transition from adolescence to adulthood in the military. Since his retirement from the University of Wisconsin Colleges from which he is emeritus, Dr. Grahlfs has devoted a major part of his time and effort in the interest of peace and nuclear disarmament. He is currently vice-commander of the National Association of Atomic Veterans. Dr. Grahlfs can be reached at flg17@sbcglobal.net.*

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My Peace Movement Mentors: 1961

Dear Editor,

This issue's focus led me to recall my major ego ideals, role models, and mentors in becoming a committed anti-war activist. I am inclined to think that "ego ideals" are simply projections, perhaps fantasies of one's identity. I hope psychohistorians will know how to interpret what follows.