Down From the North Country
Gary Latham

In the 1770s, my ancestors, loyal to King George III, emigrated from Massachusetts to Nova Scotia. In 1950, my father, believing that it was now safe for him and his family to do so, became the first member of our clan to return to the U.S. Before going back to Massachusetts, it was preordained by family and knowledgeable friends that I would return to Nova Scotia to attend Dalhousie University. I did so in 1963 following a critical incident that had occurred the previous year.

Another promotion for my father resulted in us moving in my senior year of high school to another city. While washing dishes in the back of a restaurant, a 19 year-old waiter observed that I was no longer fun to be around. After pouring out my heart regarding the girl I had been forced to leave behind, he suggested that I major in psychology when I entered university. That was the first I had heard of this discipline. In moments, he differentiated clinical psychology from psychiatry. In moments, I knew that this was what I wanted to pursue for the rest of my life.

The majority of the psychology courses at Dal included laboratories. In my first laboratory course, my new girlfriend received 19/25 on her laboratory report with the comment: Congratulations, highest grade in class. Stunned, as I had helped her prepare the report, I waited in anticipation for my grade. Imagine my chagrin when I read 21/25 minus 4 points for poor penmanship. Immediately I raced to my professor, Dr. Beach, demanding that my rightful grade be restored. After I patiently explained to him the importance of grades for gaining admission to a graduate psychology department, he patiently replied that I should improve my legibility. Exasperated, I informed him of the impossibility of me doing so at my age. This frustrating man then had the gall to ask me, a third-year student, to define psychology. In my attempt to educate him, I explained that it is the science of behavior. Without looking up at me from his chair, he then laconically requested me to tell him what psychologists do. Doubly exasperated, I informed him that psychologists predict, explain, and, and, and; damn it, Dr. Beach had just allowed me to hang myself in his presence. Well, changing behavior is not easy, I blustered. He agreed. The grade stood.

While unimpressed by my attempt to improve my penmanship, Dr. Beach was impressed by my creativity, including my ability to entice my fraternity brothers to serve as participants in my experiments. At the end of my third year, I became, I believe, the first undergraduate student at Dal to become a research assistant. This was the second critical incident that advanced my career toward psychology.

Dr. Beach was a former Rhodes Scholar, a World War II hero, a boxer, and the director of the Clinical Psychology program. I loved him. We did research and subsequently published a paper on the importance of awareness versus unawareness in the conditioning of the galvanic skin response. My distant interactions with his clinical clients, however, led to the third critical incident.

An article appeared on my desk in Dr. Beachs laboratory, an article on job satisfaction and performance by two people named Brayfield and Crockett. I read it. Immediately, I ran into the office: Dr. Beach, I want to be an industrial psychologist. He looked at me long and hard before replying that it was time for me to return to the U.S. There was no I-O psychology program in Canada in that time period. Walking in the hallway from a psychology class, I noticed a description of the I-O program at Georgia Tech. That was the fourth critical incident.

Fall, 1967 I was among Techs six graduate students.

Georgia Tech embraced the scientistpractitioner model. The majority of the faculty had served in the military as psychologists during World War II and/or had worked in industry. They taught us how psychology could make a difference in organizational settings. Their focus was on individual differences and ways of measuring and then influencing the criterion. Our heroes

included **Marv Dunnette,** John Flanagan, Edwin Ghiselli, and **Paul Thayer.** My mentor was Bill Ronan, who had studied under Flanagan. My thesis was based on the critical incident technique.

In 1968, the American Pulpwood Association (the other APA) requested Dr. Ronans services to help them identify ways to measure and then improve the productivity of pulpwood producers in the South. He agreed to be a consultant on condition that I was hired as a research assistant. I was elated, particularly when APA (the other one) agreed with Dr. Ronan that my work for them should allow sufficient rigor to serve as my masters thesis. In 1969, I passed my oral defense at Tech and then presented my findings to a panel of 12 executives from APAs sponsor companies (e.g., Georgia Kraft, International Paper, Owens-Illinois, Union Comp). When I finished my presentation, they asked me where I planned to go next. As it was 11:55 am, I told them I was going home for lunch. Seeing several eyes roll in response to my comment, I was relieved to be informed that I should leave the room. Before going very far, I was summoned back in. To my astonishment, the executives offered me the position of staff psychologist, in addition to lunch. This was the fifth critical incident in my now budding career.

Georgia Tech instilled in me the belief that research and theory are invaluable frameworks for practice. Hence one Saturday I drove to the Tech library to peruse the psychological abstracts for ways to increase pulpwood producer productivity. Serendipity struck in the form of a sixth critical incident. There was a series of abstracts that described laboratory experiments by a newly minted PhD which showed that a person who has a specific high goal solves more arithmetic problems, makes more words out of scrambled letters, creates more toys out of plastic bricks than do people who are urged to do their best. I quickly telephoned Dr. Ronan who was still working for us as a consultant. In a factor analysis of survey data, we too had found that crews who set specific high goals have higher productivity than those who dont. Yet that finding had not captured our attention until that day in the library. Dr. Ronan, I said excitedly, Locke says .

In that time period, I read the journals primarily for practice rather than scholarship. In doing so, I stumbled upon two names that suddenly appeared again and again, Yukl and Wexley. Realizing from my reading of the literature that my knowledge was limited, I decided I should return to school.

Not much older than I, **Gary Yukl** and **Ken Wexley** shared and enhanced my love of application as well as the need for theory. Ken, a PhD from the University of Tennessee, strengthened my knowledge acquired at Georgia Tech. He would alternately enter a seminar in the role of a VP of B.F. Goodrich, an HR person seeking a knowledgeable consultant, or as a critic of our field. As Dr. Wexley, he drilled into us the necessity of publishing; he inspired in us the goal to become a Fellow. My association with Gary, however, was a seventh critical incident. A graduate of Berkeley, it was Gary who opened my eyes to the O in our field. Within the year, Rensis Likert and **Ed Lawler** were added to my list of heroes. The newly published book by Campbell, Dunnette, Lawler, and Weick that Yukl assigned to us became my bible. But most of all I continued to read everything by Ed Locke. Gary encouraged me to write to him. To my delight, Ed responded.

Before I completed my PhD, the eighth critical incident occurred. Unknown to me, since leaving APA, Weyerhaeuser Company had been tracking my progress. They telephoned me in the fall of my second year to ask me to come as their first staff psychologist. When I explained that I could not do so because I had yet to do my doctoral dissertation, they countered with the promise that they would provide me the resources (resources?? Wow!) to do it with them on any subject I wished. I accepted without further hesitation. I accepted without stating that I had yet to pass my comprehensive examinations.

The written examinations were passed with relative ease. The oral examination was a different matter. Explain how training is directly based on learning theory commanded Dr. Wexley. I did. Give another example. I did. Give another example, I did. Now the thought occurred to me that if Wexley continued to pursue this matter, I might run out of examples. He did; I did.

Yukl stared at the ceiling. Another faculty member noted that a new book had appeared on the Greening of America. He wanted to know how the book would affect my work when I went to Weyerhaeuser. I didnt know. Yukl stared at the ceiling. Wexley jumped back in regarding an article published a year or so earlier by **Abe Korman.** He wanted my assessment of it. I sputtered that I did indeed recall the article as I honestly had read it. I simply could not recall at that instant what Abe had written. Yukl stared at the ceiling. Hours passed. Weyerhaeuser had informed me that I was to be there by June 15th or not to come. The reason why eludes me to this day.

The day of my oral examination the plane from Cleveland left at 5 p.m. for Seattle. With legs wobbling I left the oral examination room. The graduate students waiting outside to wish me well remained respectfully silent when they saw me emerge crestfallen. As my career opportunity of a life-time was passing me by, the door to the examination room flew open. Wexley strode down the hall, stopped to congratulate me with a wide grin, and then kept on going. Other faculty were equally congratulatory. Yukl, the last to emerge, walked slowly. Incredulous, I asked him how I could possibly have passed my orals. His response still rings in my ears: I didnt know the answers to many of those questions either.

So what did I take from all of this? Three things. First, I tried not to get bogged down by borders either geographic or conceptual. Second, I discovered that people are watching you even when you think they are not. Finally, I came to realize that few things are more satisfying, effective, or enduring than relationships with supportive mentors.