A Leadership Perspective:

One Year After Becoming Chair of a Department

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The appointment of a new chair of a department of psychiatry ushers in a period of major transition for the appointee; the department's faculty; the chairs, faculty, and administrators of other departments; and the school at large. The residents, students, and staff members in the department can also be expected to react in a variety of ways and in widely divergent degrees to the realities and fantasies that come with the arrival of a new chair.

The overt and covert power structure and lines of authority almost always change to some degree with the arrival of a new chair. Some degree of reorganization or realignment also is associated with the arrival of a new chair. This may arouse hopes for advancement as well as concerns about being bypassed by other faculty. The chair often will bring along new faculty or recruit people into key positions. These new faculty may be viewed as the "favorites," and this may arouse envy, jealousy, fears, and other reactions in the department.

I will review the major reactions that I, as well as many of the faculty, residents, and staff, experienced during my first year as a new chair. Many of these experiences resonate with reports I have received from other chairs about their initial year in that position. This article is not intended to be comprehensive but to report on frequent reactions that I and others have observed during this usually stressful but, hopefully, also exciting year of transition.

HUMOR AS AN INDICATOR OF SOME INITIAL REACTIONS TO A NEW CHAIR

In thinking back over my first year of being chair of a department of psychiatry, I repeatedly found myself thinking of two jokes. As Freud wrote a number of years ago, there is a strong relationship between the jokes that an individual remembers and finds funny (or not) and what that individual thinks or is experiencing, at least unconsciously (1). I was told these jokes by two chairs and then...
found myself repeating them to others in the context of discussing my new position, so they may contain some generalizable truths about new chairs and other senior administrators. Any psychodynamically oriented psychiatrist will be able to see a number of the reasons, perhaps including some I have not thought of myself, why these particular stories repeatedly came to my consciousness during that year. Please try not to analyze my psyche too much from these, at least not until you have walked a year in a chair’s or other senior administrator’s moccasins.

The first story, as applied to my arrival as the new chair at Jefferson, is that a number of people in the department, after hearing about my previous contributions, idealized me and expected me to immediately do great things. An equal or greater number of people in the department had heard the same things about me but decided to expect the worst or to degrade me. In any case, shortly after my arrival, a group of residents invited me for a picnic lunch by one of the local rivers, the Schuylkill. When I arrived, the residents said, “We have heard great things about you, now let’s see you walk on the water.” I decided to be “one of the guys” and that the worst that could happen would be getting my shoes a little wet. So I stepped out onto the water. Much to my and the residents’ amazement, the water supported my weight, and I was able to walk across the river and back again on the water. Upon returning to the near bank, the residents and I gleefully returned to the Jefferson campus to tell the story. The next day, the headline on the front page of the Jefferson newspaper read: “New Psychiatry Chair, Dr. Thompson, Arrives from Colorado, Fails to Swim Schuylkill River.”

The second joke which frequently came to mind during my first year as chair has similar themes. Supposedly, a world-renowned violinist went to a northern city to play a concert in January. After he arrived, there was a huge blizzard, leaving new snow several feet deep. Arrangements were made for a large snowplow to pick the violinist up at his hotel, take him to the concert hall, and to wait for him by the stage door to return him to the hotel after the performance. At concert time he walked out onto the stage, and there were only four people who had made it through the snow and were sitting in the audience. Two in the back were preoccupied talking to each other; one was next to a side aisle reading a book; but a very large, intimidating looking man was sitting right in the middle of the front row. The violinist said to his audience, “Since you came out in this terrible blizzard, I would be pleased to have the snowplow that is waiting for me take you back to my hotel, I will buy you a drink or a cup of coffee and we can talk, then the snowplow can take you safely home.” While the other three considered the offer, the large man in the center of the front row became quite angry and said to the violinist, “No way, buddy. I came out in this stuff and I am not going anywhere until I hear you sing.”

A number of common themes are apparent in these jokes. Certainly one theme is the hope or expectation of a person doing something that is wonderful, grandiose, or impossible. Another may be a hope to be, or to be associated with, the “best in the world.” However, another just as powerful theme is that, regardless of how good you may be, or what wonderful or miraculous accomplishments you may be able to achieve, from someone’s perspective you will be viewed as a major disappointment or outright failure. The above themes reflect some of the major issues that I have observed within myself, my department, and my school since becoming a new chair.

HOPES THAT THE NEW CHAIR WILL "RIGHT PAST WRONGS"

Some faculty members felt, probably justifiably, that they had not been treated fairly in the past. Who has? However, when a new chair arrives, some will hope, con-