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Article



Vonnegut Meets Rumi: The Karass Hypothesis

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In this paper we present a novel way of understanding the experience of successful language acquisition and even life success. We hesitate to call our ideas and explanations “hypotheses”; at this stage they are mere “conjectures,” clearly not yet ready to undergo the scrutiny that respectable hypotheses need to experience. Our hope is that this discussion will lead to hypothesis-testing and real progress.

Familiarity with two related hypotheses will help us understand the concepts better:

The Path Hypothesis

To our knowledge, one of the earliest mentions of the Path Hypothesis was first stated by the 13th century Persian philosopher Rumi (Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī): “Everyone has been made for some particular work, and the desire for that work has been put in every heart.” This means we are each supposed to be doing different tasks, and we each develop different abilities that allow us to do these tasks.

There are two important corollaries of the Path Hypothesis: (1) We learn best when we are on our path, when we are doing our “particular work.” (2) The learning that we do when we are on our path is pleasant and efficient. It is not considered to be “work.” In other words, when we are on our path, we feel that we are doing what we are supposed to be doing. Gloria Steinem was on her path when she wrote, “Writing is the only thing, when I do it, I don’t feel I should be doing something else” (as cited in Mullen-Brown, 2022).

Pleasant, and often more than pleasant: Ralph Nader was asked about his work schedule: “It’s pretty much all the time ... but I enjoy it so much ... the definition of work tends to imply a drag, a chore, something you would rather not be doing. I don’t see it that way. It’s a joy” (Interview with David Frost, Oct 21, 1995). The work or path is, in the words of Pablo Picasso, “the ultimate seduction” (Chandler, 1988). Chandler describes famous people who found their Path: “who fell in love with their work ... and achieved success doing what they wanted to do” (Early, 2013).

The desire for one’s particular work is often felt very strongly: We suspect that many of us will agree with this statement: “The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails whereon my soul is grooved to run” (Melville, 1922). Mark Twain also has been quoted saying: “The two most important days of your life: The day you are born and the day you find out why.” In our opinion, this means the day you discover your path.

It can take a long time to discover your path... The authors of this paper (further referred to with their initials as SK for Stephen Krashen and NA for Nooshan Ashtari) describe their own cases in *“The Path Hypothesis and Becoming Polyglots”* (Ashtari and Krashen, forthcoming). Both of their paths involve a deep commitment to language acquisition, teaching, and research, but neither of them had originally planned their lives and careers that way. SK had no interest in his family’s heritage language (he can speak it now, but that is another story), and was a poor student in high school French; he deserved to fail French, but his kind teacher noticed that his grades in other classes were satisfactory, and he agreed to give him a passing grade on the condition that he never take another French class at that school. SK happily agreed. NA also had no interest in other languages while she was growing up. In fact, during her childhood she always thought it was very strange to spend so much time learning a new language and moving one’s mouth differently just to say the exact same concepts in different languages. Of course, as she grew older she understood how wrong she was.

The Day SK Discovered His Path:

Following the (excellent) advice of his mother (and profiting from the financial support of his father), after one year of college SK went on a summer bicycle trip, organized by the Youth Hostel Association. The cyclists rode through part of the UK, went down the Rhine Valley, and ended their adventure in Germany, where they stayed at a Youth Hostel, the last stop on their adventure. Sitting near SK and his travel companions at dinner, was a young man who comfortably

conversed with SK and his travel companions in English, with other travelers in French, and still others in German. SK was astonished and decided that he wanted to be able to do that. The summer travel schedule ended a few days later. As soon as SK could, he was on a train to Paris, where he enrolled in French classes. This was over 50 years ago. SK has been on the second language acquisition path ever since, without a thought of changing paths.

The Day NA Discovered Her Path:

NA also had no interest in other languages while she was growing up other than going through what was required for her education. In fact, up until the first years of college she was always adamant that she was going to become an electrical engineer and do her Master's and PhD in aerospace engineering and become an astronaut and pilot as secondary professions. However, immigrating to an English-speaking country pushed her into the direction of acquiring English as well as sparking her interest to acquire more languages and learn about other cultures. In addition, seeing the struggles that non-native English-speaking immigrants face on a daily basis proved to NA that there is so much that needs to be done to help immigrants and language acquirers to have better resources and treatments which eventually led her to pursue her higher education in languages, linguistics/applied linguistics, teacher training and research.

How you know you have found your path: When you chose to work on problems that you find difficult NOT to think about (From Bela Bollobas, Advice to a young mathematician).

The Value and Even Necessity of Paths

The human race needs a diversity of talents and skills to survive. "If we were all more or less alike, humans would grow into narrowly specialized organisms. It would be difficult for us to adapt to changing conditions ..." (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993, p. 23). Society as a whole profits from a diversity of talents and skills, but not within each individual. Contrary to popular opinion, it is not all-around versatility within the individual that helps the human race: It is individual specialization that contributes to the well-being of the society. We do not demand that physicians know a great deal about astronomy, or that auto-mechanics be experts in food preparation. SCHOOL should help you find your path. "Schools ... should be the place for [young people] to experience and experiment with different options and decide what we want to pursue later" (Yung, 2009).

The Karass Hypothesis

In his novel *Cat's Cradle*, Kurt Vonnegut introduced the term "karass," a term that promises to be very useful, capturing a concept that until then had not been mentioned. A karass, according to Vonnegut (1963), is a group of people bound together by a common mission, "a team that does God's Will without ever discovering what they are doing" (p.1). In terms of the Path Hypothesis, a Karass is a group of people on the same or similar paths. A karass is formed when those on the same or on similar paths help each other. When you are a member of a Karass, you can participate in the work "that has been put in your heart," with the cooperation and help of others with similar desires.

We suspect that karass membership is an important driving force in general in making progress. Ideally, classes should be karass meetings, and school should be a convenient place to interact with other members of your Karass, rather than

a competitive arena that artificially creates winners and losers (“grading on a curve”). Despite the emphasis on grades and achievement and the goal of being

“at the top of your class”, we have found quite often that students sometimes eagerly help each other in school, and not always within the confines of a class. And the cooperation is not limited to student interaction, nor is it limited to one age group. Below, we present a few examples, one involving a beginning and an advanced graduate student, another involving two beginning faculty members, both new PhDs, and third involving students, faculty and outside help.

Case I: SK and EP

SK was a new graduate student at UCLA, doing a statistical analysis using a computer in a university library. He was doing an ordinary correlation, and a fellow student (further referred to as EP) noticed it. They discussed the procedure and EP suggested that a better test in this case was multiple regression, which SK did not know about. At this time, more than 40 years ago, “multivariate” analysis was not used as frequently as it is today. EP explained why multiple regression was a better choice and showed SK how to do it. EP explained the procedure and rationale quite well and SK was not only convinced, but enthusiastic with his new understanding of multivariate analysis. EP and SK met several times, and EP even gave SK a copy of a book (used) on multivariate analysis. It was obvious to SK that EP felt this interaction was important, that it profited SK’s research but also the field of language acquisition. SK helped others with the same information several times over the next two decades. This was a karass activity, helping others along their path.

Case 2: Genie

This unforgettable interaction began in the Linguistics Reading Room, a place on the UCLA campus where students and faculty could find the recent journals. Adjoining the Reading Room were faculty offices, and one was the office of Prof. Victoria Fromkin. One afternoon, Prof. Fromkin burst in the Reading Room, clearly excited and deeply concerned, and she felt the need to tell someone why. Only two students were there at the time, SK and fortunately, as we will see, Susan Curtiss, whose interest was child language acquisition.

Prof. Fromkin had just been on the phone with David Rigler, at that time Chief Psychologist at Children's Hospital in Los Angeles. Drs. Rigler and Fromkin had been discussing the case of “Genie”, a child who, because of parental cruelty, had been brutally confined and did not develop normal speech. Susan Curtiss and SK discussed the case with Prof. Fromkin, who called Dr. Rigler and asked him to join the discussion. They discussed the case with Dr. Rigler, and Susan Curtiss and SK were suddenly part of the research team. Over the next few years the team met with Dr. Rigler and Genie herself, and co-authored several professional papers.

We focus here on the Karass elements. At no time was the discussion about anything but Genie, and the papers were dedicated to the research that would deepen our understanding of Genie and what could be done to help her. At no time was the slightest trace of jealousy present. Susan Curtiss, in fact, wrote her doctoral dissertation about her work with Genie, and it was published as a book. The entire team was very pleased with this, because it was dedicated to the goal of the Karass, the well-being of Genie.

Case 3: NA and SK

The separate paths NA and SK were on first accidentally crossed around 2011-2012 when NA had recently fully immigrated to the US to pursue her graduate studies in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics. During her first year in her Master's program, NA wrote a paper on "*Non-Native Speech and Feedback: The Relationship between Non-Native Speakers' Production and Native Speakers' Reaction*" and sent it to an academic journal that one of her professors had suggested. NA had no idea who the reviewers of her paper would be, SK happened to be one of the reviewers of the paper who ended up supporting the concepts discussed in the paper. The assumption and probability was that it would be highly unlikely for SK and NA to interact directly again. However, several years later SK visited Florida and became the keynote speaker at a conference organized by NA's university where they first met in person and discussed various common research interests briefly with no expectations of possible collaborations or further conversations.

As fate or the works of Karass would have it, some years later NA graduated from her doctoral program and got hired at the University of Southern California (USC), the main university where SK taught and did research for decades before his retirement. NA moved back to Los Angeles, California for the job and sent a formal email to SK about the coincidence of working in the same university. At the time the email was sent, SK was coincidentally close to the USC campus collecting copies of James Crawford's book, "*Educating English Learners: Language Diversity in the Classroom*" in a nearby publishing house. SK replied back that he was near campus, he had some spare copies of the book to give away and could meet up quickly before heading back. Coincidentally, NA was on her first day on campus that day collecting her university ID and badge to be able to enter the buildings before her classes officially began that semester. SK and NA met again briefly over coffee (SK's all-time favorite drink) on campus at USC. During that conversation NA shared her enthusiasm for a book she had just finished reading about the Iranian Physicist Professor Mahmoud Hessabi and how he acquired German by reading "short and simple books" in German. NA and SK eventually published a short paper on this topic and how it supported current research and theory titled *The Power of "Short and Simple Books": How Mahmoud Hessabi Acquired German* (Ashtari & Krashen, 2020).

Since that time, SK and NA have co-authored over a dozen scholarly papers, presented together at over 40 conferences, and have discussed several more papers and presentations, including this one on the Karass Hypothesis. As noted earlier, all the cases of Karass relationships were situated in the university. None took place as a result of formal instruction in classes, suggesting that the university situation promotes Karass business, to the advantage of academic progress for all.

Karass Hypothesis and Second Language Acquisition

In Krashen and Ashtari (2024), we proposed that accent is a marker of "club membership", of belonging to a certain group or "karass," a group of people with similar identities, goals, and values. We suggested that we acquire different accents very well, and can acquire and use these accents throughout life. We are, however, either consciously or subconsciously reluctant to use them if we do not consider ourselves to be full members of the karass that uses it. We present here evidence that suggests that we can lower our "output filter" when we are confidently acting as karass members, discussing "karass business" with members of our karass (Ashtari, 2024).

When this happens, we feel more like true members of the group. We present here four cases of this kind:

Case 1: About 30 years ago, SK was in Paris having coffee with a researcher from the Sorbonne. SK's daughter, then a teenager who had been taking French classes in school, was there with him. SK and the Sorbonne professor discussed their research in French in a coffee shop, with SK's daughter listening to the conversation. When the coffee meeting was over, she said to SK: "Dad, I had no idea you spoke French so well." She had heard SK speak French many times before this, but she was surprised by his fluency and accent at that meeting. Explanation: SK and the Sorbonne professor were discussing karass business. SK felt like he was with a member of his karass.

Case 2: SK visited Budapest about 25 years ago to give some presentations. While there, he met world-famous polyglot Lomb Kato and they had several long conversations about language acquisition and multilingualism. SK's wife and daughter were visiting Europe and also met Dr. Lomb. Dr. Lomb had tea with Dr. Krashen's wife and daughter and conversed easily in English. Dr. Lomb remarked to Dr. Krashen, however, that she felt her English was better when she was alone with him, as compared to when she was with his family members, even though she said she felt very comfortable with them. When Drs. Krashen and Lomb were alone, they discussed karass business. Given such a small sample, we can only conjecture, but it may be that the crucial factor was the topic, karass business, language and language acquisition, and the conversation was with other members of the karass.

Case 3: As part of the obligatory K-12 school curricula NA had to take Arabic classes when she was in middle school and high school in her native country of Iran. She would often feel overly anxious during those initial experiences with Arabic as a foreign language and would not do as well in language classes as she did in other courses such as mathematics and physics which at the time she found much more interesting. In fact, she never enjoyed foreign language classes in school which led her to believe that she would never be successful in speaking other languages. However, after taking EFL classes after school hours in an informal language institute that valued the students' interests and did not emphasize grades and testing, NA found joy and purpose in acquiring foreign languages. She had found her path and karass members with her colleagues and students after she started teaching in the same language institute only a few months after she started taking classes with them as a student herself.

Case 4: A few years later NA immigrated to the US and witnessed the difficulties non-native English speakers face on a daily basis as they struggle with a new language, culture, and living environment. She realized that part of her path was to help immigrants and language acquirers along their paths. NA also found that her accent in English would fluctuate based on the interactions she had with different people. If she was having conversations with those she considered as her Karass members, she would feel much more comfortable with the affective filter being lowered and the conversations running more smoothly. However, if she felt she was being judged or excluded, her language use and accent would differ. In both cases, the affective filter and karass business were at work.

Conclusion

The Karass Hypothesis presented in this paper aims to discuss how people on similar paths might come together in life to solve problems not only for themselves, but for others as well. Those who have found their path then try to find a way to use their talent, knowledge, and resources to reduce the suffering of others. Similar circumstances can also happen when it comes to second language acquisition and use as in the cases that we explored above.

We wrote up our conclusions for the Karass and Path Hypotheses as follows:

1. Find your path, purpose or passion in life (Our own paths involved acquiring languages, teaching and researching how this is done. It is important to note that unfortunately this does not mean that finding one's path or even pursuing one's path in life can be an easy, straightforward task. They can be easier for some people and much more challenging for others, however, the power of the pursuit should not be diminished regardless of the outcome .SK and NA's life circumstances and pursuit of their paths have for instance been drastically different at all stages, however, neither gave up on their paths along the way).
2. Enhance skills, increase knowledge, do more research and work along your path (Our paths included taking classes and acquiring several different languages, reading for pleasure in a variety of languages, teaching and doing research studies).
3. Find Karassmates or people who share similar paths and goals to help humanity move forward in your specialized areas.
4. Give it away and share the results with colleagues and the rest of the world so that we all can move forward and build on each other's work while solving life problems one step at a time.

After writing an earlier draft of this paper, we discovered that unknown to us, our conclusions had been stated by others and phrased in similar ways. In fact, in a paper published in 2014, the wording was nearly identical to our wording: "The purpose of life is to discover your gift, the work of life is to develop it, the meaning of life is to give it away" a quote attributed to David Viscott, a psychiatrist who hosted a radio talk show. The quote appeared in the Chattanooga Times Free Press in 1997.

NOTE: Quote Investigator provided other versions, published from 1993 to 2006 in various publications that were also similar to ours. Similar conclusions in different fields by unrelated individuals across diverse time spans can be attributed to the strength of an idea, or provide more grounds for researching such hypotheses further, as we hope will happen with both the Path Hypothesis and the Karass Hypothesis described in this paper.

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