

CONTRIBUTION

I believe that listening from beyond ourselves is not something we can learn to do. It is a natural result of increasing mindfulness or a sudden insight into the nature of reality. However, we can prevent ourselves from feeling the nature of the cathedral. We can watch in awe without noticing that that nature is not something outside ourselves, it is something we are part of. We can also remove the obstacles that lie between us and our capacity to perceive the larger whole that we are part of, as it unfolds. Awareness about our leadership journey is like clearing the path towards awareness of the whole. On the way to playing the macro-violin in the cathedral of Chartres there are many small steps to understanding ourselves better and subsequently understanding reality. In the meantime we become less occupied with the maintenance of all the pressing images of our identity, and at the same time we notice that what we do and do not do, what we think and do not think, is much more important than we imagined. It has an impact. We participate in the unfolding of evolution whatever we choose to contribute or withhold. We know that, to a great extent, it is our choice to live our life and our leadership the way we do. But we also realize that as individuals we can change the world, no matter how small that change might be. We can make a difference. But how do we know what counts?

A couple of years ago I had a visitor staying in my home. He was a businessman from India who for most of his career was very successfully involved in the construction industry in India. He was an engineer by training and had been managing several building companies in major Indian cities. In the second half of his career, he consciously decided to change his business model – he handed over all his companies to his son, sold other parts and also sold most

of his real estate. He kept what he needed to keep the family going and pursued one of his earlier dreams – to create farms on which plants for natural diversity and plants for agricultural production would be mixed in a way that benefited both the commercial harvest and the people who lived and worked on the farm. He had a little cottage on one of his farms where he could spend time meditating. His farm workers knew that the profits they generated were saved for the purchase of new farms and, to a larger extent, were donated to meditation centres. He himself meditated and taught in his tradition in India and other parts of the world. When he sat in my living room he explained to me:

The first half of your life you spend exploring the world and yourself. You take in and take in; the world serves your own growth. The second half of your life you spend giving back and you do this for the rest of your life. You serve the world and you serve people. It is important not to miss that turning point. So what is your contribution? What do you serve?

I did not have an instant answer to his question and it took a few moments before I realized that he did not expect one. When we begin to sense that our leadership contribution needs to be reconsidered, a question like this strikes us like a sudden uncomfortable memory. We are pushed beyond our comfort zone. We have enough demands placed on us; we do not need more. Our first emotional reaction is to defend what we do and why we do not do anything else. Our second reaction is to find a more rational explanation of how we actually do serve. We find ways of justifying our engagement in the world the way it is. We tell ourselves all the little ways in which we actually do serve the world. Our third reaction is to doubt ourselves. What difference can we make anyway other than what we do already, probably even trying hard to satisfy our own

and others' needs and live up to our own and others' expectations? Who are we to make a difference? Our fourth reaction is to doubt the question. Why would it make a difference, if we served the world? It is fine for some people but we do not need to be among them. Not everybody needs to be altruistic. This might apply to some but not to all. The world is not an ideal place and we have to accept this as a fact. So why us?

The question remained in my mind for years. As with all questions that aim directly at the heart, it became a constant reminder of my journey. It took a year or two before I was finally prepared to grow slowly into an answer. If we allow that to happen, such questions reach our heart. We know when we set out on our journey that this is what we intuitively wanted to do – serve the world. We might have become far more realistic, much more sensible, and slightly more cynical. But we sense the underlying quest. The purpose of our early intention was to do something for the benefit of humankind. The history of our journey shows that we were concerned. There had been times when we believed we could make a difference. We needed to grow and mature; we discovered the world and tested ourselves. Life took us to many internal and external places. But now, the time has come to say *Yes* to the commitment of living in answer to that question – *what is my contribution to a more sustainable world?* The underlying search for meaning will lead us back to our quest. We hold essentially human values. There is a thread throughout our leadership journey that is never completely lost. When we develop our capacity to transcend experiences and make sense of them, we do increase our ability to listen to the cathedral's sound. Making sense of experience does not require finding out what caused what and why something happened; there is no need to look for a hidden plan or a predictive path, because there is none. I do *not* believe in a singular purpose, our purpose. There is nothing pre-designed. Nobody has taken charge other than we ourselves.

In as much as our leadership journey is unique, it could also have taken a different direction if there had been a different combination of choice and encounter. We do have unique gifts, but how we apply them is not laid out before us. The range of possibilities is manifold, undetermined and endless.

It makes no sense to wait for a call. We might never hear it. When we see other people seemingly following a call, it should not bother us. Our path might be different. We have choices, and we can reconsider our contribution every day. We do not need a sudden awakening, a once-and-for-all clarity. For many of us, redefining our leadership contribution is a road to freedom travelled slowly. In the beginning, there is vagueness because we don't know how things will be different from the way they are today. There is hesitation because we have built a life that we do not want to dismantle. We probably do not need to. We can take one step at a time. There is no need for radical change. We can slowly grow into a more profound leadership contribution. Once our heart is committed and our intention is revived, we will find the means for our own maturation.

I have invited you to track the history of your leadership journey because it is important to understand what form of contribution we have made so far, what our pattern of enabling and our pattern of preventing ourselves from serving the world to our full potential has been. I believe it is important to understand the role of the mind in structuring and evaluating experience. The process of generating deeper awareness about ourselves, about interdependence and reciprocity, and ultimately the nature of reality is a prerequisite for contributing to wholeness rather than fragmentation. You might have begun to accept that straightforward paths are the exceptions and your leadership journey meanders. You might have discovered the cure that is awareness. When our mind begins to gain freedom from being simply reactionary, we can overcome the patterns that limit us. The freer the mind, the more it turns toward the whole. It

encompasses experience with compassion, not only other people's experience but also our own, and it gradually realizes that our most ingrained habit, the attachment to ourselves and the images we create around the self, is likely to limit our contribution to life. Transcending experience and becoming more aware makes our place in the world become more relative, less grand, less assertive, but more responsive. With rising awareness we feel more at home in the Universe, realizing that we are not alone and that we are part of a collective journey. We can actually integrate all experiences and the fragmented parts of ourselves. Understanding that our fears are mirrors of fragmentation helps to bring the underlying forces that are informing and influencing our leadership journey to the surface. We find our voice in a more authentic way and we are led into our true potential to contribute. Finding our particular rhythm becomes a helpful inner space for our generative capacity. It is healing when we can embrace our early intention without disregarding it for its naivety. We can see the essentially human values it held and can integrate it into our future contribution in a mature way.

Walter has worked for a large pharmaceutical company in the United States for a long time. As a deeply religious person, his life and leadership journey has been inspired by deeper values. However, the reality in the company didn't always match his inner need for value-based leadership. Recently he became a diversity manager and more confident to do what he really wanted to do:

If I had to define what I've wanted to bring into the world at different times it is a resounding shout that says, 'Hey, let's slow down for just a minute and look around. Shouldn't we be spending more thought and energy on understanding the elements of human connectedness (or lack thereof)? Isn't it people who make things happen? Isn't it possible that we could all benefit from understanding each other better and

appreciating what we each have to share? Aside from our cultural, ethnic, religious and gender differences, could we benefit by exploring how much commonality we have in what really matters in life (i. e. our loved ones, security/safety, having what we need to sustain and enhance life, getting along, creating new opportunities, providing opportunities for our children, etc.) even though we may choose to express these wants/needs in different ways?

The result of all the changes in our transformative process can be a shift in the inner ground from which we lead. This might happen so subtly that we do not notice it at the time. Uncovering our own humanity is a road with no final destination but progressive clarity. When our inner field changes, we will notice changes in the outer field. Different things happen, we meet different people. Our driving force will become the intention to serve rather than a need for recognition. We might reconnect with passion nourished by compassion for the world and humankind; we will hold our commitment as a feeling of freedom of responsibility, in the awareness of the inseparability of choice and necessity. We might gradually cultivate reflection in action, knowing that the space inside us is not really separate from the outside world.



A Glimpse into Theory: Identity and Accountability

An important feature of living systems is that they continuously try to create a dynamic balance between the two tendencies of self-assertion and integration. Overemphasis of one and neglect of the other leads to imbalance, usually endangering the system in one way or another (Capra, 1996, p. 9). Self-interest, in this view, is not morally bad. It is a

healthy aspect of the maintenance of systems. Only when it is not contained and modified in dialogue with others, or other levels of the whole, does it become detrimental to others, the whole, and eventually itself. Hence, a dynamic balance in nature always works as a balance between self-interest and interests beyond the self (Sahtouris & Lovelock, 2000, p. 280). We live with the construct of our separate self because we can perceive the form and matter of our individuality. Indeed, we do have a history that is different from somebody else's history, and a composition of mind structured by our personal experience in its particular form (Fleischmann, 1999, p. 133). But any worship of the doctrine of the soul, a particular purpose for us or our need to respond to a call is probably illusive and prevents us from paying attention to a larger context. The emphasis is not on our particular call and purpose, but on being able to sense both the requirements and the possibilities of the larger whole and attend to it. In her discussions on the illusion of self, Joanna Macy quotes Ralph Wendell Burhoe: 'A comprehensive view reveals no such thing as a personal self-actualization apart from a self's role or the self's niche in a larger ecosystem of civilization and biosphere. The vision of an independent self to be fulfilled is a lethal mirage ... Our civilization has failed the individual in failing to infuse him with an understanding of the larger dimension of self as the servant of ... a larger ecosystem' (in Macy, 1991a). Although our path is at no point predetermined and choice is always open to us, we are inseparable from the world and our function in the larger ecosystem. Our leadership journey can thus never be value-free, the 'how' of being a leader can never be independent from the 'what'. In such a perspective, the over-emphasis on individuality and the exclusive insistence

on free will is as illusive as the construct of 'self'. All of it exists, but as part of an interconnected nature of reality. The notion of accountability or responsibility in the understanding of identity is often related to a humanly created societal or religious or political set of values, which in themselves are changeable and intertwined with history and the respective mindset. One would expect that a system's view on identity or even a biological view would reveal no such issues as values: nature seems to be value-free. And yet, a glimpse into chaos theory suggests that most of our actions might matter more than we are aware of. Through this kind of lens one would see life, and subsequently human life, as a combination of free choice and lawful determinacy. 'In each moment, our personal life also contains this union of choice and necessity. Though we often feel buffeted by capricious forces, disarray is illusory, and within even the storm is a downdraft of coherence.' (Fleischmann, 1999, p. 127). This does not mean that each of our action's antecedents and consequences can be mapped out in a clear line of cause and effects, but we seem to participate by our action at every moment in an invisible network of cause and effect, not knowing how we affect this network by what we do or don't do. 'Our choices remain our own, within the context of the unhinged and multifarious events of the world, and each of our choices will instantly begin to travel down the lines of cause and effect ... There exists indeterminacy, choice, but our actions organize pre-existing disarray into magnetic fields of effects. All moments and spaces of freedom are contiguous with vectors of consequence.' (ibid., p. 128).

The impacts of our choices affect us reciprocally, directly or indirectly, in this time or other times. The gift of the human condition is that we can become aware of our choices. When

we accept this reciprocal connection between our ‘being’, our self or identity and our action in the world, the issue of responsibility and accountability as a leader is not just a noble gesture, a compliance with a moral or normative demand, it becomes a pragmatic necessity (Macy 1991b). At first glance this idea is uncomfortable – such a view on identity and responsibility seems to be morally coloured, open to interpretation about what it is that is to be done ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. And indeed, there is considerable evidence in human history of the arrival and departure of values and moral conduct in accordance with prevailing epistemology and ontology. The Buddhist view of causation is different. It suggests a form of accountability towards the life process that cannot be captured by values or moral prescriptions. In Buddhist theory, this is captured by the concept of *karma* (often misunderstood as determination causing fatalism) that provides an understanding of accountability. In broad terms, one could say that karma describes the origin of our identity and personality – a constantly changing and, while changed, partly maintained pattern of forces, mental and bodily actions, beliefs, values, feelings, predispositions and reactions, a constant becoming in an intertwined flow of action and reaction (Fleischmann, 1999, p. 114), a product of the causal process determined by both our own unchangeable history and our new choices. The notion of causality provides a challenging insight into the process of life (Macy, 1991a, p. 170). The real treasure in the concept of karma lies in the insight into the interdependence between choice and necessity. Buddha’s insight into the causality of the process of becoming reveals that overcoming our ignorance towards this process of causation leads to the ability to make choices that influence the very process of

causation: karma can be changed and so that changes our future karma. The antecedent of choice is intention and motivation. In Buddhist theory, intention as a volition of the mind is seen as very important and choice as a result of it is valued as having such determinative effect that ‘... the opportunity provided by human existence is considered in the Buddhist view to be incomparably precious ... only the human being can affect experience by choice. The power to determine one’s fate is the prerogative of the human realm; and given the astronomical number of other forms of life, this human opportunity is extraordinarily rare and valuable’ (Macy, 1991a, p. 173).

If identity is the construct of past action and thought, it is at the same time the engine of intention, motivation and choice of present and future action and thinking. We cannot predict the outcome of each of our choices and actions, but we can become aware and increasingly predictive about the results of our continuous efforts in a certain direction. ‘Freedom is the presence, not the absence, of constraints that give ongoing impact and importance to our choices.’ (Fleischmann, 1999, p. 129). While nobody can alter previously made choices and their effects, human identity remains a choice-maker in constant flux. It is affected by the past, but, through increasing awareness, it can also break free from the past.

Even though it might happen in small steps, we can influence the course of our own and the world’s evolution. Mindfulness lies at the centre of our growing ability to be attentive to what needs doing. I believe that we all have a natural tendency to serve the world. We might not be constantly aware of this, but when we come across a purpose that seems to be worth pursuing, we act on it with a dif-

ferent kind of energy. Our heart engages and we feel more whole. Many change programmes in companies are based on aligning people with a goal that is made worth achieving. They tap into this natural desire to be part of a larger purpose. It is known that people who see meaning in their organizational endeavours work and lead with more inner resourcefulness. But if what we serve is not big enough, not really aligned with our heart or too short-sighted for our heart's intuition, we will perform well, possibly commit, but our hearts won't be in it.

When Gerard began to track important features of his leadership journey he noticed that for certain periods of his career he felt a profound emptiness, although he performed well in the company according to all standards:

If I look at the work environment and I ask myself, whom did I serve, it was myself, absolutely myself. I was doing this or that, because I had been asked to do it, and I was doing a good job, but it was not for the sake of doing a good job that would help others, it was because it would put me in a very good light and it would help me progress. So that was very prevalent – myself. Also the team members I worked closely with were acting quite similarly. Whatever the business unit was doing, I wasn't really serving that at all. However, I was definitely paying lip-service to it. I designed a strategy for the business unit, but it was truly lip-service, and ultimately I became very uneasy not being able to serve the larger context. Because I didn't want to serve my boss and my boss's boss, because I knew they were only serving themselves. There was no way that I could align with that. If what I serve is not big enough I lack passion.

Real service needs the engagement of the heart. It also needs an open and self-reflective identity. Expansion of the humility that naturally

results from mindfulness is the basis of a serving contribution that serves the world as well as ourselves. If our outer service and our inner development of awareness are misaligned, our contribution might be far from beneficial in the long run. We can come to the rational conclusion that we want to redefine our leadership contribution and map out our path towards more sustainable leadership action. But if we have not tracked our own path and understood the patterns that hold our identity in place, we might move into the new with the old strings still attached. The new course might then lack the clarity we long for or we might begin to be and act differently with no resonance from our surroundings. If you consider redefining your leadership contribution the past needs to be resolved – not overcome, not cleared, but understood, accepted and valued. *Without genuine compassion for yourself and the detours you took on your road you will not be able to act from the deeper field within that resonates with the whole.* Leading in favour of humankind and a sustainable world requires our own humanity. We become more human as we become more mindful of who we are and how we have come to be. When we become compassionate we cannot *not* radiate who we are – it flows by itself.

As with other aspects of your journey, there is a pattern to your questioning your leadership contribution that is worth noticing. The shift in your heart comes in small steps. The cases in which leaders suddenly break with the past and start on something new that engages their heart and their willingness to serve are rare. For most of us there is already a history of reconsidering our contribution that we may have ignored for some time. It shows itself in repetitive thoughts or feelings that we want to engage in something that lies too far away from our current reality, or we do not know what to do to make it happen. It shows itself in an idea we have that we might not have told anybody because we are afraid of being ridiculed. It shows itself in our insecurity about our capacity to contribute.

Mandy's deeper intention has always been about voice, her own and others'. This deeper desire to heal through voice has accompanied her throughout her leadership journey and has unconsciously informed many of her choices:

If you had asked me what I would do if there were no constraints on me and I could freely choose, I knew what I would do. I asked myself this a number of times. I know it. But it would take a lot of guts for me to say it and do it. I would go a thousand different ways to find people who might be interested in allowing me to help in places where there is deep conflict or there is real pain in the world, or where people are driven apart by difficult history like in Northern Ireland. I have hardly ever talked about this wish of mine; I hardly ever gave voice to this, because I think who am I to help here? But if you asked not whether I would feel capable, but what I wanted to do, that's what I wanted to do. It would, for example, be working with children who had been torn away from their family, or disenfranchised people. It would be about allowing those voices to be 'up and out' so that they could find the space where it is acceptable for all the voices to have their say. This could be places where there is deep political unrest, deep social unrest or injustice. It would be a place where there is deep pain and where people have lost the ability to make sense of each other. It would not be about making money. It would be about helping other people to speak for themselves. It is not that I hold the belief that this is all that is needed, I know there is much more to it. But what I wanted to contribute is something that has to do with voice and tone. I have held the picture that where there is deep pain and deep division, and a sense of futility about the way forward, there is something about the nature of voice and tone

that is healing as opposed to divisive. I don't know what to do with this insight, but that is what I would want to do.

There is a red thread running throughout our leadership journey. It connects our early intention with the quest of our heart, the way we chart our leadership journey and our slow and contemplative response to the question of what we would do if we had no constraints, no financial obligations. The further away the response is from what we are doing today, the louder the invitation to think and track our journey. We remember this – the world did not necessarily embrace our early intention. We got blocked, people did not understand, we learned to tuck it away and become more 'realistic'. The same might happen to the response to the question of what we would do if we had no constraints. This time it is not only the world that that might laugh at us. We have internalized the impossibility of our intention's implementation. We do not even talk about it. We lack trust in our ability to manifest our contribution. We know it is simply impossible to implement because the circumstances do not allow it. But I believe it is worth holding on to – not that we can expect to implement it exactly the way it is held in our mind. But if we feel our heart's longing combined with what we feel needs doing in the world, this is an indicator of the depth of our potential contribution. It is time to accept that it is there and to attend to it. This does not mean that we need to change our life radically between today and tomorrow. It means that we consciously decide to let our intention mature. We do not need to give it a predefined form. It might never take on the exact manifestation we have in mind. But we can create a space for it to ripen over time. When we get to the essence of it we can begin to ask different question – *how would we lead, if we were led by our intention? What would change?*

Samson still lives in Ethiopia and his country is still governed by forces that do not allow much opposition. Life under such cir-

cumstances is unpredictable, security and peace are volatile, but he has not given up on his belief that the world can become a different place. Time and his professional work allowed him to experience that connecting beyond the limitations of one nation can be a gateway to world consciousness:

If money was not an issue I would devote myself more and more to understanding the world and to writing down my observations. Do you remember when we had our dialogue in Chipping Camden, in the middle of England, around the idea of forming sustainable patterns in the world that would work? Do you remember how I, noticeably from Ethiopia, said: ‘I belong here in England as much as I belong in Ethiopia. We might not be aware of it but we all belong. We are all in the same boat. Do we feel that? And what would change if we did?’ I would like to know more about it and there would be something I would do workwise to put this in writing. This is what I would do.

Rethinking your contribution can take time. It is not something that reveals itself in an instant. But if you are prepared to listen, you will find thoughts, ideas, desires and dreams. They all have something familiar. You do not re-invent yourself – you are reconnecting with your own story. Attending to this requires courage. It requires courage to track your journey and face your potentials and your limitations, and courage to venture into the unknown and to look at your fears. There is no guarantee of success. You will not know how the world will respond to your revised contribution. You will need perseverance. Do not be surprised if you face vagueness for a long time. Redefining your leadership contribution is a process of maturation. It cannot be forced. Its character and speed is different for each of us. What I am suggesting is that it is worthwhile for

each of us to ponder the question: what is my contribution to what needs doing in the world? How do I want to live that contribution considering my unique potential and what the world needs?

When Edith finally decided to settle in South Africa, she had found the place where she thought her experience and her longing to contribute could crystallize in a way that would support the transformation of the country. Her choice reflected the consistent quest for equality and tolerance she had felt throughout her leadership journey. She created a foundation in support of black businesswomen:

What I am doing now, is taking small steps. To be honest, sometimes I would love to be militant, and break rules, stand on the podium and really fire people up and reach the masses on women's rights. My focus is and always has been on respect for women. If women's energy does not become a more active part of the world's course, the nurturing is missing, healing is missing, and so is laughter. I think women need to take a leadership role to get the balance right.

Edith found a way of integrating her experience in international business with her desire to foster women and to contribute to the healing of a fragmented society. But what sounded straightforward to begin with has turned into a long journey. Edith needed the perseverance, patience and clarity of vision that she had trained herself in when she was in the world of international telecommunication businesses. Her experience there was of utmost importance for the redefinition of her contribution. Although she moved contexts, she did not need to abandon her skills:

For me, having this vision of making a different contribution meant that I was in a place that was no longer good enough.

And then came the time of turmoil and struggle, the search for and loss of orientation. I always had an image that helped me – I thought of a kind of friction area, of which one part is the familiar one I am willing to leave, and the other part is a no-man’s-land, a scary place to go. When you are in between, there are all the old habits that anchor you in the old world but the vision and the passion are in the new world – there is a strong energy that pulls you towards the new, even if large parts of it are unknown to you. If one has courage and curiosity, one can win the inner battle; if one is fearful, one will certainly fail. Then the actual intention gets compromised and suppressed.

Intention creates energy fields. It organizes life. It creates order in our path, it attracts people and opportunities. When we neglect our deeper intention it withers and we fall short of our potential. We might not need grand visions; in fact, we sometimes prevent ourselves from changing by building visions that are so grand that we are overwhelmed by their presence. We cannot expect that our intention will always be crystal clear. But we know that we have come closer to ourselves when the voices outside of us become less influential, less forceful. The cost of non-compliance with the demands of the world we have constructed for ourselves becomes less important. When we have come to know our own story, we are more able to sustain our new-found confidence. We gain an inner freedom from conventions, from the need for recognition, and from structures that have restricted us. We begin to dance to our own tune, which is the tune of a larger underlying story. *In this story, tending the common is not an additional voluntary service, but the deeper meaning of our being here.*

It is not that Philele did not enjoy his influential position in the South African government. He felt fully accountable to the course his

ministry was going to take. But there was something about the use of status he observed among his colleagues that he deeply disliked. He noticed how the seduction of power and material wealth trapped people in their egos and drew a lot of energy away from the actual task – serving the communities. He also felt how he slowly became removed from the direct support for people; how his status began to draw dividing lines between him and the people on the ground. He noticed how his old passion resurfaced – empowering people. Finally he began to experiment with entering new settings that allowed him to develop different aspects of his leadership identity. In addition to his managerial task he began to facilitate leadership development courses:

I tend to want to revolve around concrete help for people to improve their lives and one of the things is this work of facilitating these courses around actually very practical issues. It is quite refreshing to find myself interacting with people and seeing how they organize their lives and I contribute resources, the value of the network that I have. Sometimes I can help in resolving what may be almost impossible for them to resolve themselves because they may not be properly linked to what they need. I find myself enjoying that sort of work when I can contribute to improving people's lives. It links to my old question of justice. This work of facilitating, helping others to work among themselves more effectively, is the kind of work that I really enjoy and would like to do more of.

When internal volition moves you towards redefining your leadership contribution, the hardest thing to accept is that it might take time before this finds a form with which you feel entirely at home. There might be people for whom the redefined contribution is clear from the start, but there may be many more of us for whom

a search with an unpredictable outcome begins. Expect vagueness in the beginning. Something that has been lying dormant cannot take shape quickly. A learning process is starting, which takes its own particular course. The most important inner attitude on the new journey is twofold – to be open to learning and new encounters, and to be willing to try something out knowing it might not be the final answer.

When I stopped working for a large development cooperation company I did so because I had known for a considerable amount of time that my contribution had been lost at a certain point. I had had a remarkable career in the company with opportunities I considered fortunate – until I hit the resistance of a new superior who I perceived as intending to subtly but noticeably tame my free spirit. I tried various ways to win back lost ground and one part of me wanted to stay in the company, very much attracted by the financial security it had to offer. It took me almost two years before I finally knew that I had to leave to revive my heart's desire. When I had almost made up my mind and begun to plan my exit, I was offered work I could only dream of at a company in the United States. It felt very much as if life was supporting my move. Not only did the new contract enable me to quit my old job, but at the centre of my new work were all the values that I had so desperately tried to integrate into my previous job. It felt as if I had found my destination – a family of like-minded people. But life offers opportunities and moves on. Only a year later I realized that what had felt like home was not *my* home. Rather, it was an important stage in a process of unknown outcome. I was grateful to have experienced this time, in which many foundations for my future work were laid. But it was not the destination; it equipped me to begin the search for my real leadership contribution.

Redefining your leadership contribution does not free you from the messiness of life. But it encourages you to accept messiness

as part of the journey. In the beginning there is often loneliness, particularly when you live or work in an environment where you cannot talk about the process of change within you or feel that people would begin to understand the significance of questioning your leadership contribution. So solitude is an unavoidable feature of the process. You might feel like you're living in a desert or that you've been born into the wrong family. The feeling of alienation is widespread among leaders who begin to search for a more meaningful contribution. It often helps to talk to entirely different people about what is happening. It might help to get a coach who understands leadership beyond its performance aspect. Above all, it helps to accept the solitude as part of the process.

On a deeper level, you might not be alone – many more leaders, even those around you who you cannot imagine might understand your journey, have a deeper intention to contribute. But they might be at a different stage of their journey. That is where reconnecting with your young leadership story and your deeper initial intention is important. It gives you the thread you can hold onto in times of doubt and difficulty. You need to place your trust in this storyline to be able to try out a new path, a new behaviour, a new activity, without the immediate fear of failure. Disappointments are part of the deal. Expect them without giving them too much weight. You are on a learning road. The redefinition of your leadership contribution will be built from successes and failures. Life has its own way of teaching.

When Lesley went through a strange encounter in which her team challenged her leadership capabilities (as a team leader in organizational change), she knew she had to leave the multinational bank and find a new path. She asked for a sabbatical during which she worked part-time in a young consultancy company that espoused the very values she had been missing in the bank – a dialogic way of shaping the future in organizations. This was at the core of her

deepest intention – helping people find a voice when they don't have a voice:

What I have always found very attractive is something around advocacy, ensuring that people get heard, people who are affected by big organizations and government. It is about preventing unfairness from happening. I don't yet know what it is that I will do on my new path, I can't hunt it down. I need to try things out and see what comes next, and find the balance between my active search and waiting for it to emerge – the place where I can apply my skills in a different form. Dialogue work attracts me because through dialogue people can be heard, and can express their thoughts, concerns and aspirations. This can help a group of people move into a more meaningful expression of their potential.

Lesley finally helped to build the consultancy, only to learn over time that the espoused values of her colleagues were not always the lived values. A year later she left the company very disappointed when she had realized it was not her new home. It had been an invaluable experience for her journey, a remarkable learning step enriching her ability to create settings in businesses in which people could open up to deeper questions. But she had to move on, faithful to her journey. Equipped with such experience she continued the search towards redefining her leadership contribution.

You can embark on the process of redefining your leadership contribution within the professional setting you are working in or by leaving it, taking time off and reshaping your professional path. Probably the most common feature is that enlightenment, clarity and fulfilment do not arrive immediately. On the contrary, we might need to put up with the arduous work of gradually gaining clarity about the form and shape of our future contribution. This

might sound disheartening. We might believe that because we have needed so much courage to break the old patterns, reconnect with our intention and actually take the first steps into the unknown, that we deserve a positive response from life and other people. We need encouragement. I believe when we listen attentively, we receive it. It is a matter of being alert not only to the loud feedback life is providing but to the many subtle undertones, friendly remarks, supportive questions, and shy encouragements.

When Gerard left the multinational company, giving up splendid career opportunities for a one-year sabbatical, he heard the annoying rumour that something in his performance must have caused the company to make him leave – this was the only way some colleagues could cope with his challenging move. But many fellow leaders came to him privately, not only to wish him well, but to express their wish they had the courage to do the same.

There is always encouragement – we simply need to hear it and take it seriously. And we need to take our heart's desire seriously. Waiting for the great call might trap us in our ego's desire to be chosen. It is fine to battle with the vagueness of our new journey – this means we are happily on our way. We can keep track of our feelings of meaninglessness and our deeper desire to contribute. We can notice that success, power and money are sometimes fake substitutes for what we are really looking for – the sense of participating in the evolutionary process in a way that helps, furthers life and brings about a more sustainable future for all. When we begin to redefine our leadership contribution, it is worth holding onto our ideals – not so tightly that they cannot be shaped by experience, but tightly enough not to be tossed around in the storms of an unknown path. Gradually, we will become confident that we can grow into our larger potential. With all our gifts and experience, we do have the capacity to manifest possibilities of life that would otherwise not come into being. Our choices count. We can

influence the manifestation of reality. Life is transitory, but in no way meaningless. There are infinite possibilities in every moment, many of which never actualize. The evolutionary process depends on our choices, and on our growing awareness about our capacity to enact life-sustaining possibilities.

Doris started a promising career at one of the largest German car manufactures. With a brilliant university business degree behind her, and fluent in English, French and German, her ambition for an accelerated career path was supported by her superiors. At the age of 27, their faith in her abilities paid off – she managed a satellite marketing department of the company in the US very successfully. When she moved to her next job back in her home country, obstacles suddenly began to crop up. Her boss resented that her abilities were more recognized in the hierarchy above him than his own. He began to block her path. Doris found her way out of the crisis, but did not feel the same satisfaction in her job anymore. Doubts set in. There seemed to be more to life than careers and cars. She felt a loss of orientation and an absence of meaning. Slowly she began the search for her new contribution. She discovered that there was a whole world out there she had rarely had access to – people working towards a better future in developing countries. Finally, she negotiated a sabbatical and volunteered to work on UN development projects. New contacts opened up new opportunities and everything seemed to click into place when a large donor agency offered her a post designed to foster co-operation between development aid and private companies' engagement in developing countries. She happily agreed to take the post, only to experience the most difficult year of her professional life. With all her fresh enthusiasm and brilliant ideas, she hit an entirely different organizational culture. Nobody had warned her about the staff's misgivings about private companies in development projects. Her inability to influence the situation

positively contradicted the professional experience she had had in business. She battled her way through, but it gradually became clear that this was not the fulfilment she had hoped for. She knew that the actual content of her new direction was correct. Even though her old identity attracted her because it seemed to promise easier rewards, she decided to remain faithful to her new direction. When the contract at the donor agency came to an end she did not ask for a renewal, but decided to freelance in the area in which she had begun to develop her special competency: partnerships for sustainable development. Again, life responded to her heart's desire. She found like-minded people and began to build a new organization.

When we feel our heart calling we must act on it. Nothing undermines our deeper intention more than the continual postponement of decisive action. When we feed our own inertia and reticence we drain the life force embedded in our deeper intention. There is a time to wait while things come into being and there is a time to act. Knowing the difference can be developed by tracking our journey, reconnecting with our early journey and testing our new path. We need to make moves without a safety net. This is often easier said than done. But I believe that even when we depend on our secure income there are moves to make that can ensure the engagement of our heart and faithfulness to our intention.

What makes Diane stay in the multinational company is the vision she had no matter how far it seemed, of coming closer to the work she actually wanted to do:

If I was independently wealthy, the type of work I would be doing is almost what I do now, probably not exactly in the area that I am in, but in principle the type of work that I am doing now. I see a tremendous need, specifically in large corporations, to become more aware of their responsibility in

the world. I want to help people to see how they are part of a large connected system. Connection and accountability – that is work that attracts me and always has.

Redefining our leadership journey does not always mean that we need to leave our jobs or break with our current career path. It may mean a simple adjustment. More and more companies are calling for people who bring in experiences that can help those companies to build their roles as corporate citizens. The nature and tradition of large companies may inherently treat such people ambivalently. But with the growing concern for humanity's future, the opportunities for developing responsible business action will also grow. No matter how many setbacks there are to issues of poverty reduction and sustainability for our planet, slowly but surely the role of businesses will have to change, and governments will become more responsive learning entities. No contribution to a more sustainable world is too small.

Lucia had her doubts about some of the leaders in her company, but she thoroughly believed that no matter how the history of the company had developed there was potential to become a responsible global citizen:

I want to serve an organization not an individual. But then 'the organization', what does that mean? Does that mean shareholders' values? Of course, it doesn't. So for me the step beyond organization is society. In my case, the challenge is fascinating and at the same time frightening. How can we solve the paradox of providing mobility, transport, heat, light and everything else, power and electricity, and provide that to society without polluting or destroying the environment? It would need developing a socioeconomic position of the company far beyond what has been the case in the past.

Hydrocarbons are normally found in developing countries with sometimes corrupt governments and a very, very needy poor population, and how do we resolve that? There are massive kinds of things that I can feel I can contribute to. And there are small steps to be taken collectively. That to me is really exciting. Ultimately, when we get this right we serve society.

When we redefine our leadership contribution within an existing career path, we will be attracted to the old ways of generating success and rewards. It helps to observe how this happens and whether it supports the new contribution or delays it. The new path needs attention. If we neglect it and continue to thrive on the old, we prevent our heart's engagement. It takes courage to risk a working pattern of success or a promise of power and influence. But the redefinition of our leadership contribution requires nourishment and nurturing. We need to fence in our search for a new contribution like we would a small plant. This way it can grow in peace and become resilient enough to weather the first storms. It is important to bear in mind that the first steps on a new path are always experimental and should be viewed that way. If we expect the first change to be the final destination, we will encounter severe periods of disappointment. We might not be able to avoid disappointment anyway. Remember – the world did not respond with excitement to our early intention. This might happen again. But we do not need to feed into our own disappointment by nourishing our sense of grandiosity or idealizing people who seem to be enlightened already. We are all human. We can walk a path together and learn through feedback. Humility is the best companion of all.

When we begin walking a new path it is tremendously helpful to understand our own storyline. We have come to be the way we are in a certain way and this has affected how we made sense of our

experiences. If we know our patterns we know they will accompany us while we slowly begin to change them, even if only by observing them. Sometimes old patterns hold us in place. We abuse our body and mind by overworking. We avoid reflection. We hide from real commitment because we believe that it would constrain our freedom. We are not saints and we will not become saints as a result of redefining our leadership journey. Reconnecting with our early intention means we simply follow our natural tendency – to serve life by applying our unique abilities. No matter what stage we are at in life, we have matured through experience and can use that to foster our new path. We notice that something has shifted internally when the hesitation is over. We can then accept that rethinking our leadership contribution will not have a predictable outcome. There is no fixed solution to what is inherently designed as a learning process. We might get better at adjusting to what is needed. But we cannot attach a timeframe to it. The road becomes visible in front of us, but we cannot see beyond the horizon. There is one clear indication marking an internal shift – when there is *no longer anxiety about succeeding*. When this happens we walk the path with increasing inner serenity. This doesn't mean that we won't face difficulties – there will be times when we do not know how to continue. But our inner ground of leading has shifted. This is the moment when fear of failure is not a guiding force anymore, because failure is just one aspect of the learning process. Because we have reconciled with our own journey we do not need to block out the feedback life and people are giving us. This is fertile ground for sustainability leadership. We enter the great dance with no need to hold tightly to what we have begun to do and no need to defend who we believe we are. We can listen from beyond ourselves. When the inner ground of our leadership contribution shifts, fears seem to disappear. The inner focus of serving seems to lessen the need to assert the self. As a result we feel more at ease, and more at home

in the world. Leading from this inner ground is not about radiating greatness and excelling over others or getting recognition and reward. It is not even the superficial enjoyment of influence. It is the humble experience of gladness at being able to contribute.

The meaning of power changes and so does the role of influence. Both aspects are important. There is no hope of leading towards a more sustainable world if we do not bring our influence to bear. But influence does not serve our own feelings of greatness anymore. It serves a purpose beyond ourselves and when we have laid out a network of feedback, we have at least taken serious steps to welcome learning.

Mandy summarized the essence of this inner attitude:

When I am really holding myself in a clear commitment to serving life and others, my awareness and connection to life is much deeper and much stronger. All of the worry about what to do next just disappears.

When we generate deeper awareness about ourselves, about interdependence and reciprocity, we understand more about the nature of reality. In the transcendence of our experiences we gain more inner freedom and overcome our own limiting patterns. This helps us on the new path. The freer the mind the more it becomes concerned with the whole.

As the shifting ground inside us becomes more stable, we begin to see reality in a different way. Where before we saw people competing with us or people we never really understood, we now begin to see other people's journeys. One of the most striking realizations is that we are not travelling alone. We sense the innumerable fellow travellers with quests, intentions that live and get lost and are found again, and a deep unanswered desire to serve humanity. We notice the profound discrepancies between people's deeper desires and the

more visible level of corporate action. We see performance orientation disconnected from the heart, the rigidity and constraints in the focus on shareholder values only and the internal politics in organizations as journeys that have gone astray. We do not know how many faces conceal similar longings, the same unanswered questions, or a like-minded journey. This is probably the most common feature – when we decide to change our journey towards more meaningful contribution our urge to come home grows. This can take many different forms. As we reconnect with our storyline and become more and more who we really are, less fragmented, less tortured by the defence of a certain identity, we feel the need to connect and reconnect on many different levels. For some of us the desire to reconnect with our inner core, often reflected in where we are coming from, might have a geographical dimension.

When Gerard took a year off he went back with his wife and two children to the place in France where they had lived before he had begun to frequently change jobs and, subsequently, places, as part of his career within the multinational company. The familiar feeling of being close to nature that was at the very core of his early journey helped him to access the deeper layers of his personality: the longing for harmony that had been buried under his career advancements.

As my ideas about my future contribution gradually took shape and I knew that I would begin to build an institute dedicated to sustainability leadership, I quite rationally considered Berlin to be a good location to establish the Institute. I talked to many people to get their views on this, until I finally knew that, apart from all the strategic considerations, there was a part of me that wanted to be home. It took time to listen to the longing, but I finally found myself settling not more than a few kilometres away from the place where I had my early dreams. Only now I had crossed the now non-existent border and had found my place in the river landscape so familiar to my heart in what had formerly been East Germany.

Redefining your leadership contribution is also a journey home. Such journeys are inspired by longing. This doesn't mean that everyone needs to move or settle in the place of their upbringing. There are different ways of finding home. But the search for a place that feels like home, be it geographical, mental or community-related, is inadvertently part of the journey. It helps to be aware of this. At this point, we search for company, for like-minded people or communities of action that we can join.

Mandy realized that even though her consultancy practice was going well, the constant sense of loneliness was a sore point in her journey. She had learned to accept it, but also knew that deep inside her there was a longing for a form of home that would enhance her and other people's journeys:

I wish I could form a community over time that would create place and space for people to pursue and share their journeys and identify certain similar patterns and similar volitions in the way they want to engage in the world. I wonder how such communities form, how much they need a fixed shape or a strong purpose and intent. I wish I could be part of enabling that without necessarily wanting to have it my way. The desire to be part of a community is a much more important part of my leadership now. I want to be part of creating it, but also be part of serving it, attentive to what comes through that community and be able to allow it to change, whatever direction it seeks to take.

When this point in the journey is reached, a whole new set of questions opens up. They all relate to the theme of leading in conjunction with others. What is my own contribution and what is that of others? How do we interrelate? If the ground from which I lead has shifted, how will it reflect in the collective? What is my role in

collectively leading towards more sustainable action in the world? How can I lead within an organization or among other people with the intention to contribute to a more sustainable world?

This is more than a desire to belong. It is the realization that we are part of a collective space, that we do not bring forth life alone. Hence we can make conscious choices about how and with whom we may want to co-create more consciously. The search for a collective space into which we can bring our gifts is important. I would like to encourage you not to neglect this urge or play it down. Human consciousness has a way of popping up at different places at the same time without obvious connection. Hence it is worth looking out for who is doing what in the areas we feel we might be able to contribute more. Modern technology offers the greatest opportunities for finding out what is going on. But only actual meetings with other people make a difference. It is the person-to-person encounter that changes our thinking and our path. There is no substitute. Conversational encounters bring our individual development back into the world of interdependence where leading is a collective endeavour. While our mind has changed and we search for more suitable outer action, we will experience both inspiration and disillusionment as ingredients of our new leadership contribution. Again, it is useful to know that we are longing for home because as much as this leads us in the right direction, it can also trap us into illusionary expectations. We might join up with a community of people only to experience a harsh landing in reality. People are not perfect. We might find bigotry, espoused but not lived values, betrayal, mistrust or intrigues. It is important to consider that such experiences of disappointment can partly be the result of our own projections. Because we needed to find a new home, we might have idealized people. But human beings are imperfect, sometimes unaware of their impact, ignorant of what they cause. The more we reconcile with our own limitations and with the

meandering of our path, the more serene we can be in the light of other people's imperfections. The less we need to cling to a certain image of our identity, the less we will suffer from disappointment. We will know when a home is not a home, when we have to move on and find a more suitable collective endeavour for our redefined leadership contribution. But we will gradually gain the resilience we need to follow our intention. We might find the golden mean between compassion, humility, vision and decisiveness.

As we move towards our new contribution, we need to re-assemble our leadership experiences. Leading for the common good requires that we influence the course of life. We need to apply our leadership capabilities. No past experience needs to be lost. It can all be used. But with the shifted ground from which we lead, different questions emerge – how will we know when we contribute to wholeness? How do we know what will be sustainable?



A Glimpse into Theory: Life Enhancing Centres


The quest for understanding the world as one great whole expressing itself in the vast variety of life is as old as humankind and has often been the subject of religious, philosophical and natural science studies. Particularly, views on the relationship between human beings and nature have evolved through many different paradigms: one such view – which we have all grown up with and internalized to a great extent – was the scientific view on life as isolated, broken down into fragments, in order to understand how it works. The result is the presence of many mechanistic models describing reality. None of these models or paradigms is wrong, but more and more people argue that such a limited approach to the vastness of life not only excludes a broader

view, but is not life-enhancing. We're almost used to a lifeless mechanical reality that we struggle to influence to make it obey to our rules. We are not always successful with this attempt to create the world according to our calculations. Mechanics serve their purpose and are indispensable in many aspects of technological development. But despite all recent ambitious attempts, we cannot create life. It creates itself, while we observe, contribute, but we're never entirely in charge. The architect Christopher Alexander suggests a different worldview – one in which nature's tendency to create wholeness is at the centre. In this view, whatever reality we look at has differing degrees of life-enhancing harmony – the infinite possibilities of structures and their combination have an effect on the world – they nourish life or drain it. We all know this without scientific evidence – when we are happy, what makes us calm, when our heart resonates, when we feel most connected with life, when our humanity expands and when it shrinks. We are intrinsically linked to the order of life within us and around us. We are constantly being created by this order as much as we participate in creating this order. Christopher Alexander encourages us to start observing closely which of these structures within and without are furthering our sense of aliveness and which are diminishing it. We can take this further and ask ourselves when the order we are creating is life-enhancing or life-draining. We can begin to see ourselves as a centre – a structure made of many internal centres and in itself a centre among centres. The scientist and philosopher Alan Watts reminds us that actually experiencing this as a fact is a cornerstone for different action in the world based on a deeper understanding of life. 'Theoretically, many scientists know that the individual is not a skin-encapsulated ego but

an organism-environment field. The organism itself is a point at which the field is 'focused', so that each individual is a unique expression of the behaviour of the whole field, which is ultimately the universe itself. But to know this theoretically is not to feel it to be so' (Impromptu lecture for the Social Relations Colloquium at Harvard University on April 12th, 1963).

Our feeling of being alive, whether it is the experience of connectedness, a deeper insight, or the sight of natural or cultural beauty is a function of a pattern of wholeness. Our heart responds to this wholeness in a pattern, a structure, an order, an encounter, an experience – our own internal order resonates with what we see and experience. We feel nourished, supported by life, empowered. If we don't have this feeling for a long time we get drained, fall sick, or become nasty. Life originates from wholeness.

For Christopher Alexander, the key to wholeness is an interdependent and recursive pattern of centres. 'It is useful to understand, from the beginning, that all systems in the world gain their life, in some fashion, from the cooperation and interaction of the living centres they contain, always in a bootstrap configuration, which allows one centre to be propped up by another, so that each one ignites a spark in the one it helps, and that mutual helping creates life in the whole' (Alexander, 2002, p. 134). Initially we might not know how we can contribute to wholeness, but our deeper intention is a sufficient guide for the journey at the beginning. It might even be the very expression of the life-enhancing wholeness we are looking for now. Over time, and with observation, our ability to sense life-enhancing wholeness and appropriate being and action to support it will grow.



Probably the most important indication of profound change is the way we see our own leadership contribution as part of a larger movement towards sustainability in the world. We do need to serve our own growth in the sense that we need to enhance our own potential to contribute. But with a redefined leadership contribution the focus has shifted as our own maturation is embedded in what we aspire to serve. We do not need to enjoy our own greatness, we do not thrive on resonance with our own identity, and neither do we feel dependent on our own success or afraid of our failure. The shift might be so subtle that it is not evident to other people. With more emphasis on enhancing each other's potential we look differently at the creation of life. We can actually support each other's journeys and as we do so we might gradually notice that our own journey grows stronger. Connectivity and interdependence are no longer theoretical constructs. They have a direct bearing on the way we perceive change in our own lives and in our endeavour to lead. Building resonance becomes the cornerstone of our way of influencing. We might have been leading in this way all along – creating relationships, enhancing authenticity in people, listening for what wants to emerge, listening to people, looking for common ground, being open, engaging, creating shared meaning, living empathy. But now the context is different. We are less fragmented and have become more stable in following our path. When we begin to see our part in the evolutionary process we might realize more clearly that leading takes place collectively. This does not free us from taking a stand and knowing where we want to go – but it equips us to stay in dialogue with ourselves, with others and with life.

Reflections:

If you were led by your intention to create wholeness, how would you lead?

What is the pattern of your questioning your leadership contribution?

When do you feel whole? Can you track the history of this feeling?

If you were absolutely true to yourself, what would the next steps on your leadership journey be?

When you lead something in conjunction with others, what makes the collective endeavour successful?