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Practices of a Well Differentiated Leader

In *Democracy in America*, written a century after the Mayflower Compact, Alexis de Tocqueville observed a uniquely American trait of voluntarily responding to the needs of neighbors and community and was astonished by the ways in which Americans used voluntary action for the common good. He wondered about the possibility of the tyranny of the majority and seemed more concerned about another trait which he thought could eventually undermine the Nation's civic health and vitality and endanger the very existence of democracy. That trait was individualism, and a tightrope tension exists to this day between it and the common good.

De Tocqueville eloquently expressed his fear that it could lead to a citizenry that was wrapped up in the solitude of their own hearts¹.

The language of individualism is deeply embedded in our culture and is perceived as a prized "right" by most Americans. When de Tocqueville wrote *Democracy in America* this fierce streak of

individualism was tempered by the “second languages” of religion and civic engagement, both of which are in decline. Religious conviction and civic virtue are sources of tradition and social mores, what Robert Bellah called “habits of the heart.”² These habits united individuals, created strong bonds of community, and fostered a deep sense of mutual responsibility and commitment to one another.

Civic engagement creates the networks and norms for the development of cohesive, inclusive communities capable of providing a quality of life that is considerate of individual interests and the common good. These networks create social capital that help to build and sustain civic trust. The effectiveness of leadership to address complex social problems is directly linked to the capacity to foster such relationship and connection.

In addition to Bellah’s work, Robert Putnam’s “Bowling Alone”³ and Robert Reich’s “Secession of the Successful”⁴ also document the decline of civic participation and the erosion of the connections that Tocqueville observed. They show that the struggle to live up to the promises and potential of democracy must not be delegated or confined to political debate; it must be a part of the canon of leadership development. It is the work of your leadership, your voices,

¹ Alexis deTocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Book II., Chapter Two, Bantam Dell, 1835.

² Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, *Habits of the Heart, Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, University of Berkeley, and Los Angeles, 1985.

³ Robert N. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital*, Simon and Schuster, 2000.

⁴ Robert B. Reich, “Secession of the Successful,” *New York Times*, January 20, 1991.

and your practices whether as executives, scholars, academics, researchers, practitioners, or any combination of these that is so consequential for the future.

The time in which we live is one of the very few periods that has instigated genuinely new epochs in human thought, according to religion scholar, Huston Smith⁵. The revolutionary inventiveness, and the degree and pace of change is less about events or episodes and more about wide, sweeping, deep transitions. The change is of such rapidity, complexity, power, and immediacy, that comprehending and communicating what it all means seems overwhelming.

And yet, this is exactly what we are called to do in this time.

We are called to read reality truthfully and to respond responsibly. It is a moral and ethical imperative of leadership, one that requires the ability to lead and manage change, to understand systems, and to engage in the discipline of inner work.

Historical caverns are always unsettling; the current one is disturbing yet full of possibilities. This is a time of change in which the level and impact of complexity and emotionality evoke creativity and innovation while also testing our resilience and the individual and collective capacity to cope.

⁵ Huston Smith, *Beyond the Post Modern Mind, The Place of Meaning in a Global Civilization*, Quest Books, Theological Publishing House; Wheaton, Illinois, 1989, 2003.

Years ago, while reading The New Yorker magazine, I discovered a cartoon that showed Charles Dickens sitting across from his London publisher and editor who is holding a thick manuscript (“A Tale of Two Cities”) and peering over his reading glasses with a look of deep consternation. The caption reads: “Look Mr. Dickens, it’s either the best of times or the worst of times, but it can’t be both.” This cartoon humorously captures the ways in which we can view reality as two contrasting, mutually exclusive choices; it is the kind of thinking that divides reality into either/or, good/bad, positive /negative categories.

Dualistic views of reality contribute to an oversimplification of society’s complex issues and problems, problems that psychologist Jeffery Conklin describes as “wicked,” problems designated as unsolvable in any immediate context, whose solutions will be accepted as “good enough for now,” i.e., climate change, incivility, poverty,

violence, a growing wealth gap, economic disparity, and uncertainty, and you could add more.⁶

Conklin found that when wicked problems intersect with complexity fragmentation results. Dualistic thinking only makes the problem worse. It is leadership with an ability to hold contrasting views of reality and competing and conflicting ideas together long enough to be able to read reality truthfully that can help a system achieve shared understanding and shared commitment, the antidotes to fragmentation.

Leaders must also be able to manage and lead change.

I have found Kurt Lewin's three phase change model and Ronald Lippett's adaptation of it to be very useful in my work with leaders managing and leading change. The work and writings of John Kotter and William Bridges are examples of contemporary adaptations of the model. The phases are Ending, the No Zone (what we call The Gap), and the New Beginning. The cycle is poetically described in T.S. Eliot's

⁶ Jeffery Conklin, "Wicked Problems and Social Complexity," Cognexis Institute, <http://Cognexis.org>; this paper is Chapter I of *Dialogue Mapping: Building Shared Understanding*

Four Quartets: "What we call the beginning is often the end and to make an end is to make a beginning, The end is where we start from."

The end is where leaders start from.

Leading change entails getting others to leave the familiar and move to a place of uncertainty, anxiety.

Every change is a separation, a leaving, a call (or in some cases a push) into new territory that brings with it fear and excitement, hope and anxiety, a caldron of mixed emotions. It sounds chaotic, a term that has become pejorative in our culture. However, in Greek creation myths, chaos is also the pure potential from which all things and all beings emerged. It is the place of both potential obstacles and infinite possibilities.

William Bridges author, psychologist, and expert on transitions, says:

“Chaos is not a mess, but rather it is the primal state of pure energy to which we return for every true new beginning.”⁷”

One of the reasons 75 % of change initiatives fail is because leaders consciously or unconsciously avoid or rush through The Gap and avoid the emotional laden work that must be done in it.

Leaders of change must also understand systems and the relationship to leadership. Murray Bowen, a father of systems theory, found that any system that has chronic high anxiety, be it family, corporation, healthcare, government, higher education, loses the ability to cope with change. When the larger society is simultaneously overwhelmed by the intensity, degree and speed of change, and the institutions and/or individuals traditionally used to absorb or bind off society's anxiety are no longer available or functional the effect is gradual emotional and societal/system regression and a loss of resilience.

⁷ William Bridges, *Transitions, Making Sense of Life's Changes*, p.119, Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1980.

Highly anxious systems have intense reactivity to events and people, and avoid tackling fundamental change through behaviors such as herding, groupthink, scapegoating, blaming, and quick fixes.

The author of *A Failure of Nerve*⁸, Ed Friedman's reading is that what we are experiencing is deeper and different from the more familiar, acute anxiety experienced over specific issues. It is diffuse and enveloping, precipitating "a regressive emotional process." Without well-defined leadership chronically anxious systems breed weak or no self and are prone to autocratic leadership and totalitarian governance.

We need leaders with the ability to see the interconnectedness and interdependence between individual self-interests and the interests of the larger community. Aristotle taught that the nature of a morally good person could not be determined without an examination of the social conditions necessary to develop and sustain morally good people. Enlightened citizens were seen as helping to create and

⁸ Edward Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve, Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, Seabury Books, Church Publishing, NY, 2007.

perpetuate the good society by understanding the connection between individual character and the health of a society.

We must cultivate these capacities through a form of leadership education that connects and integrates the personal and the professional realms of our lives. Without well-differentiated leadership, what will be created are systems that reduce the capacity to be decisive; that discourage open and honest expression; that disparage the truth; encourage playing it safe, where no firm stands are taken; where boundaries between people are tenuous or non-existent and people own problems and responsibilities that do not belong to them.

In addition to reading reality truthfully, leading and managing change and understanding systems the discipline of inner work of leadership must be an integral part of the study, development, and practice of leadership.

Inner work is the ability to reach deep within oneself, to reconnect intellect and spirit, and link the capacity to care with a commitment to

responsible action. This is the urgent work of leadership, the work that will build the capacity to move through this turbulent "time of no longer and time of not yet"⁹ in ways that will result in healthy, connected, ethically centered individuals, organizations, and communities.

It is in this in-between time, the time of no longer and the time of not yet where the emotional strength, stamina, resiliency, and yes, the character of a leader are most needed.

The skills needed to successfully lead is not a tips and tools approach; a very different approach to leadership development is needed; one that values and integrates technical and adaptive skills with the ability to engage in inner and outer work; one that comprehends that leaders must have self-knowledge and the capacity to recognize and extricate themselves from relational binds and emotional triangles in a system while remaining a non-anxious presence. Leaders must have the power of endurance in crisis; the self-regulation necessary for dealing with the normal reactive sabotage; and most important have the

⁹ Ki ThoughtBridge description of The Gap, from "The Integrated Model of Leadership©," 2006.

consciousness of factors within their own being that create or contribute to obstacles.

This reorientation to the self of a leader in leadership development is a paradigm shift that changes the criteria for determining what information is important to teach. The criteria should include content that addresses the *leader's capacity to avoid being regulated by the emotional processes* in systems.

The leader is the first among equals in a network that is a connection of parts, a collaboration of people working flexibly and creatively together, who understand their interconnectedness and shared responsibility to contribute to and affect something bigger than themselves. In this paradigm leadership is exercised and authorized through cooperation and power *with* rather than competition and power *over*. Authority emanates from the being of the leader, not just their doing; and it is not accorded solely based on position and status;

but rather gained because of the leader's authenticity, integrity, and trustworthiness.

The notion of a well-differentiated leader is not familiar in the lexicon of leadership. Ed Friedman expresses the importance of well-developed and self-differentiated leadership and writes that this "is not only critical to effective leadership, it is precisely the leadership characteristic that is most likely to promote the kind of community that preserves the self of its members and preserves the integrity of organizations."¹⁰ The integrity of the leader promotes the integrity of the system.

Leadership is a matter of character, the outward expression of moral virtue and spiritual strength as well as the competent display of technical expertise and adaptive skills.

The disciplined practice of inner work is what powerfully forms and informs a leader's character. The ability to honestly encounter the self and move to deeper levels of self-understanding is what equips leaders to deal with wicked problems and to motivate and mobilize others to work on them. The times call for the restoration of trust and

the healing of deep divisions and those who have done their inner work will be better equipped to lead others in doing so.

At the 2020, International Leadership Association Conference, Otto Scharmer, Senior Lecturer in the MIT Sloan School of Management shared a sobering reading of reality when he said we are “in a post-truth, post-democracy, post- humanity era in which there is an assault on science, increased polarization, and growing fanaticism.” His response to these counter evolutionary forces is to be an unrelenting advocate and educator urging leaders to have the courage to challenge the status quo, to value the wisdom of elders and those closest to the problems being tackled, to have the courage to honor their heart’s calling, to act from conviction, and to exercise conscious action, and I would add to not get “wrapped up in the solitude of their own hearts.”

“We must delight in each other, make others conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body.”

¹⁰ Friedman, P. 165.

Some believe these simple, yet powerful words spoken by John Winthrop in 1630 on the deck of a ship in Massachusetts Bay are irrelevant in 2022. I believe otherwise. They offer a vision of hope for a new beginning, hope for a new nation waiting to be created. I imagine the words bobbing along in the waves, splashing into the shore, and seeping deeply into the soil and soul of what has become and can be America.

As Craig Dykstra, retired Vice-President of Religion at the Lilly Endowment reminded me, "leadership demands vision in two senses. It requires perception and foresight. What is crucial is that both forms be marked by clarity and charity rather than self-defensive fantasy. Vision requires not just technical expertise, but moral virtue and even spiritual strength. And that is why those who think leadership is a matter of character are exactly right."¹¹

We are the inheritors of a vision and whether it becomes a fantasy or a reality will be determined by many factors several of which I have

¹¹ Speech delivered Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Parishes Annual Conference in St. Louis February 22, 2008

shared with you – the capacity to read reality truthfully, the ability to manage and lead change, the knowledge and skill in systems and practicing the discipline of inner work.

As you continue in a lifelong journey of learning and leading, pursuing the work to which you have been called, may you be the trust holders of this vision and leaders of its fulfillment in all that you do and all that you are.

Thank you.