

The Development of Leaders: What Being More Conscious Means

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"Your job is to find what the world is trying to be."

William Stafford

The turbulence of a new or modern way of life that challenges an older, established understanding of reality has become a truism. The dynamic is often expressed in terms of the speed and scale of change. For example, more than 65% of all individuals who ever lived to be 65 or older in the history of the world are alive today (Lietaer & Belgin 23). Over the last 200 years, there has been a rapid escalation of economic development resulting in about 15% of the world's population achieving a degree of prosperity that eclipses any standard of comparison in the past. In the next 20 to 30 years more than 50% of the people on the planet could achieve a similar degree of prosperity (Spence 4-5). And yet behind this fascination with change are some disturbing questions, how well attuned are we to the currents and rhythms of life? Do we know how to attend to them consistent with the conditions of mutuality and reciprocity?

Being new or modern does not naturally equate to any particular notion of goodness, progress, or development. That is a judgment which requires a more holistic view. As the founder of analytical psychology, Carl Jung, noted, the speed of change is not without cost:

The definiteness and directedness of the conscious mind are extremely important acquisitions which humanity has bought at a very heavy sacrifice, and which in turn have rendered humanity the highest service [...] Civilized life today demands concentrated, directed conscious functioning, and this entails the risk of considerable disassociation from the unconscious. (CW 8:135, 139)

The development of ego consciousness is what Jung means by a "concentrated, directed conscious functioning." The balance of ego consciousness with those aspects of human nature or psyche that remain unconscious, has tilted in favor of what serves a technologically advanced society. And to be clear, for Jung and many western philosophers, psychologists, and scientists, ego consciousness divides or separates subject from object - the "I" from other. And yet within that orientation, exploring the spectrum of consciousness includes what is unconscious. Mindful awareness, the capacity to access different states of consciousness - the gaps between thoughts - is a practice often associated with meditation, but not limited to that. Why mindful awareness is important begins with understanding the cost of a highly directed conscious process in service to our modern way of life. According to Jung, "the quality of directedness makes for the inhibition or exclusion of all those psychic elements which appear to be, or really are, incompatible with it" (CW 8:136).

In other words, ego consciousness determines what is rational and that bias is generally based upon what is familiar and not what could inform consciousness from the unconscious and the transrational. The result is a paradigm of rationality constructed to reinforce what is consistent with it. As one psychiatrist notes, "living in a particular society conditions us to maintain a state of consciousness acceptable to its consensus" (Nelson, 23).

To talk about paradigms is to reference a pattern or structure of thought (worldview) that guides the way a group of people make meaning of their experiences. As an example, Vine Deloria, Jr., a Sioux Native American and a noted scholar of American Indian legal, political, and religious studies, made the following comparison between Western culture's paradigm of reality (its myth of creation) and native culture:

In this [Western] tradition, humans are created last after all other creatures and are given the privilege of naming, thereby gaining ascendancy over all other beings. [...] Having been created in and initially confined to the Garden, humans come to view the natural world as a hostile environment [...] Although they appear to suffer a common fate with man, other animals and beings are not envisioned as helpers but as slaves or competitors. There is therefore a fundamental separation or dreadful alienation between man and other creatures from the very beginning. For Western people, the fall represents alienation from the earth itself. [...]

In contrast to the Western myth and practice, Sioux stories of their cosmology do not grant humans any special status. All beings are regarded as equals in the presence of the Great Mysterious. In the Sioux belief, man is also created last, but not as the ultimate achievement. According to William Powers:

For whites, humans were the last to inhabit the earth, and are therefore a crowning glory of all that preceded them. For the Lakota, humans were the last, and that makes them newest, youngest, and most ignorant.

The Sioux thus looked to other forms of life to take their cues on how to live in the world. (99-100, 115).

These are two very different ways of perceiving reality, which have enormous implications. If we apply a simple principle – perspective becomes more difficult the more *unusual* the event we encounter – the possibility exists that something is invisible to us because we have no means for knowing it. Another way to say this is we experience the world not as it is but as it is filtered for us by our worldview and the language we use to make our experiences visible (known) to others. This is what is meant by consensual reality. Inherent in any worldview are a set of values and assumptions that are often unconscious. A group of people's collective response to change is a function of their worldview. When the unusualness of change exceeds the limits of their set of filters to make sense of it within the language they use, then change is unforeseen.

Charles Handy describes change which has no collective precedent as discontinuous, because the continuity to the past has been broken. He illustrates his point with a story of the Peruvian Indians when they first saw the sails of their Spanish invaders on the horizon (9). They assumed the sails to be a freak of the weather and went about their lives as normal. There was no concept of sailing ships within their set of experiences, and therefore, no words to describe them. And while their world was about to change in ways they could not imagine, the story doesn't end there. Discontinuous change continues to play out with consequences that, essentially, have turned the tables on invaders of all stripes, wherever they landed. Their exceptionalism became linked to an ideal of materialism that has led modern civilization on a path destructive to its own habitat (alienation from the earth coming full circle). In a report by the Swiss Re Institute, "a fifth of countries worldwide are at risk from ecosystem collapse as biodiversity declines" (September 2020). And destruction of wildlife habitats by urbanization and deforestation has been directly linked to the emergence of pandemics such as COVID-19 (Wiebers & Feigin).

Leaders, like the people they serve, face the inevitable need of "outgrowing" their understanding of the world when their worldview is no longer sufficient to the challenges they face. Initially, they may deny that anything is wrong or needs to change (like the Peruvian Indians, and now, like the adherents of competitive consumption which undergirds the demands for incessant economic and technological growth). Alternatively, they may acknowledge that something is wrong if it means it is someone else's problem. Eventually, they may accept their need to do something, and while the admission of personal responsibility for action is commendable, there is a tendency to merely reinforce what is known with all of the underlying assumptions intact. A classic example is undertaking organizational restructuring when something much larger or fundamental needs to be addressed that exists outside of their scope of understanding.

To explore beyond a leader's current meaning-making framework is to examine the underlying beliefs and assumptions held at an unconscious level. In our example above, a leader may have "a moment of clarity" in the recognition that their existing paradigm of reality is part of the problem. As Albert Einstein noted in rebuking past nationalistic attitudes towards war after the development of nuclear weapons, "a new type of thinking is essential if mankind is to survive" (*New York Times Magazine*, 1946). The same now applies to the health of the earth-life system.

It can be a disorienting experience to realize one's identity has been built upon a foundation that is on a destructive course, but it can also be a catalytic event leading to a new kind of inquiry. Alfred North Whitehead noted, "mankind is driven forward by dim apprehensions of things too obscure for its existing language" (Pirsig 133). The boundary to the unconscious is a demarcation of the unexplored, and as more risks to the sustainability of a current way of life arise, so increases the evolutionary impulse to bridge current practices through examining what is inhibited or excluded below the surface of modern civilization's story of prosperity.

In roles working between the lessons of the past and a future that is rushing towards us, leaders must operate in the gray space of emergent perspective. Rather than viewing their particular orientation as a superior apprehension, they face the challenge of suspending belief in order to simultaneously hold different worldviews that can clash like fault lines. In this space much is risked, as it can be extremely destabilizing to question core assumptions, but the alternative is repression that only leads to greater fragility. And yet, as William Wordsworth suggests, in his poem, *Expostulation & Reply*, there is a way to create that space which is counter intuitive to ego consciousness:

"Why, William, on that old grey stone,
Thus for the length of half a day,
Why, William, sit you thus alone,
And dream your time away? [...]"

To me my good friend Matthew spake,
And thus I made reply:

"The eye--it cannot choose but see;
We cannot bid the ear be still;
Our bodies feel, where'er they be,
Against or with our will.

"Nor less I deem that there are Powers
Which of themselves our minds impress;
That we can feed this mind of ours
In a wise passiveness.

"Think you, 'mid all this mighty sum
Of things for ever speaking,
That nothing of itself will come,
But we must still be seeking?"

"--Then ask not wherefore, here, alone,
Conversing as I may,
I sit upon this old grey stone,
And dream my time away."

A dream is a communion with nature whose experience some refer to as supernatural, but alternatively, is just another term folded into a wider understanding of the natural. In Jung's work, *Civilization in Transition*, he describes the dream:

as a little hidden door in the innermost and most secret recesses of the psyche, opening into that cosmic night which was psyche long before there was any ego-consciousness, and which will remain psyche no matter how far our ego-consciousness may extend [...] All consciousness separates; but in

dreams we put on the likeness of that more universal, truer, more eternal man dwelling in the darkness of primordial night. There he is still the whole, and the whole is in him, indistinguishable from nature and bare of all egohood (CW 10:304f).

While dreams are personal, they can also access a knowing that is "indistinguishable from nature and bare of all egohood." This personal connection with nature, as Wordsworth spoke to, is a pathway to the transpersonal and the guidance it provides in moving from what "is merely empty space to one person, a place to another" (MacFarlane, 29). In other words, what was invisible is now inhabited.

In a multi-year study of individuals who have had long-term practices of exploring the spectrum of consciousness through meditation, dreams, breathwork and yoga, moments of silence, awe and gratitude (alone or with others in nature, with art and music), and other practices, the common theme is knowledge building through mindful awareness. Their goal was to become "more conscious [...] being more aware, being more awake" (Danielson 32). They chose to revisit the storylines they had created about themselves and the world at large. What that meant, practically, was exploring and modifying their mental filters, assumptions, beliefs to know themselves, as one participant noted, "without all of the baggage we have accumulated in this life" (Danielson 41). How that has shaped them and their relationship with others was a critical finding of the study, as a brief flavor of the language used by a few of the participants indicates:

When I get into a state where fear enters, I can now let go. I am conscious of a quiet or a peace that is present behind my ego.

Margaret

We operate across a spectrum of consciousness where every level has its work and we each have our purpose. You move to the work of the next level when the questions become nagging.

Peter

I am beyond the curiosity or interest in exploring the role of our minds in our experience of ourselves and others, to now having a firm conviction that we create the world around us with our thoughts. My work is like a prayer for me, whenever I face a new project and I don't know how to approach it I reach inside and wait for a visual to come to me. I am much more at peace with myself.

Olivia

I see my life as full of possibility. The question for me is can I open up to the possibilities? Can I see things in a different way? I am now walking my journey in a way I once only intellectually understood - staying in the moment. I can recognize when I have stepped out of the moment, but I know I have a choice of moving back into the moment.

Helen

The perpetual unfolding of life, with its unfathomable depth of possibility, is the attitude they reflect in their willingness to examine what others would describe as illogical. Curiosity is a factor, but more important is a willingness to face one's fears. For the people in this study, the honesty by which they shared their fears, traumas, and subsequent healing was startling. It takes courage to confront what has been unconscious, hidden, repressed, denied, rejected, hated, and feared, but no new thing is truly possible otherwise. Too often what is strange, different, and labeled with the tag "other" is shamed by behaviors of derision, dismissal, and exclusion. This is a reaction that shrinks the world, and what is true of the world around us is true within ourselves, as Jung noted, 'the capacity for inner dialogue is a touchstone for outer objectivity' (CW 8:187).

The practice of inner dialogue, built over time, resulted in a presence of awareness which can be characterized as an unchanging silence within – the state of openness to what wants to be expressed through us (individually and collectively).

I have a sense that things lead where they are meant to – the sense that I had to learn certain things before other opportunities emerged.

Lyle

I always had a strong presence of guidance [which has been experienced as] a sense of grace most of my life. Rather than struggling with my choices, I have felt guided to go through the open doors the universe has provided me.

Deborah

The feeling of the higher self being present never leaves.

Carl

To inhabit what was previously invisible is transformative in the sense of what it means to be alive. Initially, I experienced my interactions with these leaders as a joyfulness that was often playful and humorous. But behind that playfulness was a compassion for the suffering that follows mindlessness and insensitivity towards oneself and others. I recognized both this inner joy and compassion in what Thich Nhat Hahn refers to as the "interbeing" nature of life. To step into the transpersonal opens up pathways of connection and communion with all living things and the wonder and awe that flows from this expanded state of Self.

And yet, what these leaders offer in terms of a wider perspective for those who are not familiar with transpersonal awareness is both a gift and a challenge. The gift is an aliveness that becomes mutual. How others experience themselves in the presence of these leaders is noteworthy because of the creative, stimulating energy that emerges. The challenge occurs in the awareness that the playbook of leadership we have grown up with is no longer fit for purpose. On the one hand, leaders are responsible to their stakeholders. On the other hand, there are the requirements of a holistic orientation to life in the broadest terms. The synthesis of these responsibilities is what wholeness requires. However, integration is not a rational process, because the result is a reversal of a logic that could not have been

possible before – a mystery “beyond human solution,” to quote John Henry Cardinal Newman (323). Regardless of the context, there is a responsibility that comes with the gifts given to those called to step through the skin of the world and journey into “the darkness of primordial night.” It is a personal leadership challenge required for “finding what the world is trying to be,” as William Stafford wrote in his poem *Vocation*.

One such leader who speaks openly about how this challenge manifested in his life, is Federico Faggin, the inventor of the microprocessor and co-founder and former CEO & Chairman of Synaptic. In his autobiography, *Silicon*, Federico tells of a time where many of his dreams had come true. He had been successful in technology and business. He was wealthy enough never to have to work again, and most importantly, he had a family he deeply loved. “What more could I wish for?” he writes.

It was then that a crisis hit me. Just when I was at the height of my success, I got in touch with a deep dissatisfaction brooding inside me. I realized that I was unhappy but pretended not to be, because I was preventing myself from experiencing my despair. I lived hiding in an artificial cocoon that I had constructed to shield myself from feeling my deepest and most genuine feelings. [...] I had reached a stage of quiet desperation and almost felt dead inside; wondering, *what do I live for?* And at the same time I felt compelled to maintain a facade, given my responsibilities as a husband, father, and head of a promising company involving the wellbeing of many people. [...] so I asked for help. I prayed, not verbally and not even consciously, searching for answers to my fundamental questions: “What is the meaning of my life? Is death the end of everything?” (158-159)

Federico's deep listening in that desperate place where his life seemed utterly meaningless, led him to “perceive at the very depth of [his] consciousness a weak but persistent *point of light* against a dark background” (159). Like those in my study, the asking for help is the beginning of their relationship with inner guidance - an awareness reaching out to an ego that has not yet inhabited what was perceived to be empty space.

The point of light was but an intimation for Federico of the Great Mysterious within the world and within himself, as he discovered in the following description from his story:

In December of 1990, while I was with my family at Lake Tahoe during the Christmas holidays, I woke up around midnight to drink a glass of water. I poured iced water from the kitchen refrigerator and moved to the adjacent living room to lazily look at the now dark and mysterious lake while sipping the refreshing water. When I went back to bed and tried to fall asleep again, I felt a powerful rush of energy emerge from my chest like nothing I had ever felt before and could not even imagine possible. The feeling was love, but a love so intense and so incredibly fulfilling that it surpassed any other notions

I had about love. [...] Then suddenly that light exploded. It filled the room and expanded to embrace the entire universe with the same white brilliance. I knew then, without a shadow of doubt, that this was the substance from which all that exists is made. This is what created the universe out of itself. [...] My relationship with the world had always been as a separate observer perceiving the universe as outside myself and disconnected from me. What made this event astonishing was its impossible perspective because I was *both* the experiencer *and* the experience. I was simultaneously the observer of the world and the world. I was the world observing itself! I was concurrently *knowing* that the world is made of a substance that feels like love, and that I *am* that substance! (159-160)

I have included this extended excerpt for two reasons. First, as unusual as this experience was for Federico, it was not an "impossible perspective," just an unknown one because it was invisible to him through the lens of his paradigm of reality. This is a lesson shared among the leaders in my study and the many others whom I have interacted in workshops or conversations exploring the landscape of consciousness just beyond the assumptions we carry about reality. It often begins with a dream, a meditation, a walk amongst the sights, sounds, and smells of nature to access those "psychic elements" that tell us of our connection to all that has come before us. In Jung's language, it is a process of development through a collective unconscious that weaves our lives together in ways that point beyond the illusion of separation.

Second, the straightforward way in which Federico speaks of the inner work he has undergone demonstrates a high degree of personal objectivity. But beyond that, he discovered a level of extraordinary care and compassion that was always present behind his life, and through his turning inward, he could acknowledge what he looks like without all of the baggage he had accumulated in his life. As one participant in my study noted, it is "learning to accept the healings wherever and whenever they are offered" (Danielson 89). And further, it is the way of compassion and acquiring a similar regard for the suffering of others. As agents in helping others take their next step, leaders are catalyst in creating the conditions for that to happen. The means to do that is being present with others in similitude with the experience of extraordinary care that lies behind life itself. It is what I understand William James to mean in his reference to "spiritual vitality" as "a shifting of the emotional centre towards loving and harmonious affections, towards 'yes, yes,' and away from 'no,' where the claims of the non-ego are concerned" (193-94). The claims of the non-ego originate in the love that Federico experienced and of which we are all made.

The vocation of leadership, as I have suggested in this paper, has its practice and rituals of healing, necessary for their own end, but also necessary for the difficult conversations that challenge the paradigm of exceptionalism that has formed in the world. As a poet, William Stafford explored these patterns of thought and called out

the aggression that undergirds such a worldview. In *A Ritual to Read to Each Other*, Stafford writes:

If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the
world
and following the wrong god home we may miss
our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break [...]

And so I appeal to a voice, to something
shadowy;
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should
consider--
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the
dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to
sleep;
the signals we give--yes or no, or maybe--
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

The "appeal to a voice," as Stafford notes, lies within the "point of light against a dark background," as Federico experienced. To be aware of that voice, to explore it and build one's relationship with it is the beginning of inner guidance. The maturing of that relationship, through the compassion and healings offered to oneself and others, makes mutuality visible. Maybe this is the curriculum required for leaders today, to build a relationship with the "claims of the non-ego" to make visible the interdependencies of life and their implications for the choices we make together.

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