

PAMPHLET 18

HOPE

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On May 18, 1980, after 123 years of silence, Mount St. Helens erupted violently and triggered one of the world's largest landslides. During the avalanche more than 1,300 feet of the mountain's top cascaded into the Toutle River Valley below. The blast killed all above-ground wildlife in the 150,000 acres of forest that was destroyed.

I felt stunned as I looked at the barren, ash-covered landscape surrounding Mount St. Helens. I thought, "This must be what the aftermath of an atomic war would look like." The destruction overwhelmed the senses. But nature demonstrated her resilience almost immediately. Natural revegetation was visible within a month of the eruption. The bracken fern, sprouting from surviving underground root systems, pushed its way relentlessly through 6 inches of coarse ash and triumphantly broke through to the sun. Fish and wildlife returned quickly.

Thousands of Rocky Mountain and Roosevelt elk now roam the plains created by the mudflow. Without the forests shading the mountain's flanks, grass grows abundantly. Food is plentiful, yet predators are few. Shrub-like cottonwood, red alder, and willow saplings cling to the hillsides. Wildflowers of red fireweed and blue lupine thrive. Cleansed by destruction, nature began again. Mount St. Helens is a story of resilience and rejuvenation and a chronicle of hope.

In Pamphlet 17 (*The Times In Which We Live*) I wrote of the creative transformation taking place in the world and in our organizations. At times the destruction of the old order makes the present seem hopeless and the future dark. We feel discouraged and want to give up. Like the bracken fern that had to fight its way through 6 inches of coarse ash before it emerged into the sunlight, we must remember that light follows darkness, and we must remain mindful that most of what is good in life is accomplished by the tired and discouraged.

The temptations to slide into hopelessness are many. First, the foreboding sense of imminent ecological collapse brought about by the mechanistic worldview and its metaphors. This worldview provided justification for the exploitation of nature that materialism, industrialization, and unchecked appetite and greed demanded.

This thinking generated the arms race, the population explosion, the greenhouse effect, and the extinction of species of animals and plants at a rate 1,000 times faster than at any time in the past 65 million years. This philosophy of life pollutes the air and water making both open sewers, destroys the rain forest at the rate of 1 1/2 acres a second, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and floats homeless waste filled barges in the ocean. The destruction of forests endangers almost half of the 235 species of primates. Another 20 percent approach threatened status. This worldview produces drying seas, topsoil loss, and spreading deserts.

The beliefs of this worldview alienate people from themselves, from each other, and from nature and foster addiction to substances and processes. Thousands of diverse cultures have been destroyed or homogenized. The sustainability of life as we know it **is** threatened. The threat **is** real. We know this is true even as we continue our addictive consumption of the life that sustains us and hope passively for magical solutions.

The same lifeless beliefs led to the creation of the modern organization. The machine became the principle agent of change, and factories and workers adapted themselves to the efficient working of things mechanical. Conformity became the first rule of organizations. Obedience was the only quality required of a worker. Creativity and “aliveness” were exchanged for routine and control as “leaders” failed to ask the question Dr. Frankenstein’s creation asked of him, “Did you ever consider the consequences of your actions?”

Organizations often appear fit on the surface but are unhealthy beneath the superficial and die a premature death never reaching their potential. Their insidious and progressive sickness is experienced as burnout, work stress, programs of the month, struggles for power and control, and the cynicism, alienation, and resignation that come from a work environment that stifles human energy, creativity, imagination, and life itself.

Many in our paternalistic workplaces drift into a chronic hopeless and helpless victim routine consumed with self-pity as they accept dehumanizing treatment and collude with the leaders and practices they

condemn. Childlike and passive, they await a hero to rescue them. Their indifference leads to psychological death. The machine model of organizations is destructive to human beings and is not sustainable in today's marketplace. We know this is true. Yet many of us cling desperately to the illusion of security provided by that which is rewarding and familiar. We deny what is real as we endeavor to make what is unreal work.

Finally, technology threatens to depersonalize our lives and increase our ultimate loneliness. Many in organizations no longer know how to talk to other people. They have lost their natural ability to connect with others. They hide in their offices and communicate across rigid boundaries (real or imagined) by fax, memo, e-mail, and voice-mail. Technology has become an excuse for alienation, separation, and an escape from responsibility. This separation and anesthetization from others cannot continue if we want to realize our potential and want our organizations to be sustainable. We know this is true, and we long for community even as many of us perpetuate the loss of humanity in our workplaces.

To see the truth, we must see the bad as well as the good. But we must not become absorbed with the destruction around us or we will lose hope. Our hopelessness will make us kindred to those who are lifeless and will help bring about that which we fear. Like at Mount St. Helens, growth emerges continually around us and gives us hope. I watch the people of Nicaragua and Honduras, after the devastation of Hurricane Mitch, come together and begin to rebuild their lives and countries. Closer to home I visited a client for a "checkup" a year after working with them on relationship issues. I ask them to, "tell me what has happened in the past year that you feel good about." For the next hour employee after employee tells story after story of healthy and productive relationships--between teams, co-workers, and manager and employees. The group is also achieving record performance levels. Each of us can see similar encouraging growth, at all levels, if we look for it.

Hopefulness is each person's responsibility. No matter our circumstances, we have a choice. None of us knows if our next action will tip the balance (see Pamphlet 4: *The Myth of the Hundredth Monkey*). Each of us can choose to envision a future for ourselves that is different or better than the present. Each of us can choose to engage with others who can help us become hopeful. Each of us can develop the strength to move steadily to our envisioned future doing what we can along the way to model for others the change we wish to bring about in the world.

The passive among us need to take the willpower they use to hang onto their sense of entitlement and transform it to a determination and commitment to take responsibility for saving themselves from destructive patterns and from their own narcissistic self-indulgence. Then the walking dead will come alive with a new vibrancy and strength. They will fill the vacuum of competence that exists in our organizations. As their confidence in their ability to figure out how to reach new destinations grows, they will become hopeful, ready for greater challenges. If your workplace does not allow you to be hopeful, you should leave and let the organization die. Likewise leaders should expel the few parasites in all enterprises who live without hope and infect others with their despair.

Hope is not the Pollyanna-like expectation of quick-fixes or magical change that predominates thinking in many organizations. **True hope is action oriented--not illusion oriented.** Active hope inspires and energizes the will to overcome obstacles. Hope provides the impetus to begin new journeys. A vision for a different future is joined with the inner strength to move to that envisioned future figuring out alternative “hows” along the way. Hope without action cannot endure.

Research shows that hopeful people (compared with lower-hope people) have more goals for themselves, set more difficult goals, and are more successful in achieving their goals. The hopeful are happier, cope better, and suffer less distress. They recover better from injury, and suffer less job burnout. Hopeful people are optimistic, see themselves as being in control of their lives, and think of themselves as problem solvers. Low-hope people find relationships (key to successful and sustainable organizations) difficult to begin and sustain.

The job of leaders is to keep hope alive and to create conditions for hopefulness in organizations. Leaders must have a vision for themselves and must involve employees in a collaborative effort to establish and achieve challenging and attainable goals. Those employees eager to contribute their energy and creativity lose hope when the leader or a small group of executives go off on their own to create “vision.” Often we think that the goal of change in organizations is to make people happy. Forget about happiness. Create conditions and expectations for goal attainment and happiness will be an outcome for most.

Leaders manage transitions and the tension that exists between what is and what can be. The leaders of hopeful organizations spend time with

employees to build trust, to learn, and to communicate. In this time together, people talk to one another, and they listen to one another. People need to talk--especially in times of crisis and change. If organizations are to change, people must talk to one another much more than most are doing today. Tearing down the barriers of isolation, passivity, and hopelessness is difficult, painful, and frightening at first, but real leaders understand that authentic relationships are the key to hopeful and sustainable organizations.

The *Weltanschauung* of control and predictability has depleted itself of active hope. Those who cling to such a view of life are themselves becoming increasingly hopeless. An ecological worldview focuses on the natural dynamics of life and is filled with the hope of new possibilities. As we shift our focus from holding onto the unsustainable to new potential brought forth by new beliefs and new understanding of life, new hope emerges: The hope of creativity, of authenticity and diversity, and the hope of community. **Hope comes from a new story.**