

PAMPHLET 73

PERSONAL LEADERSHIP: THE CALL TO NOBILITY

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A recent speech to educators:

Good Morning

Ten years ago I resigned from the Star Tribune Newspaper at the peak of my success as a leader. For the previous 4-years, I had led a nationally recognized change process in a 4,500 employee business unit at the Tribune. Within 15 months of its inception this work became a nationally recognized success story. Business guru Tom Peters wrote about our work, people from a variety of industries visited to observe our self-managed work teams, and we were invited to speak about self-managed teams, partnership with organized labor, and culture change at conferences around the country.

At the beginning of the change effort, I was excited because I had the opportunity to “change” a large organization. Little did I know how much it would change me. This experience opened my eyes and my heart to the vast untapped human potential in our organizations and institutions and taught me new ways to lead people to accomplish inspiring objectives.

I left the newspaper because I had experienced both the best and the worst of organizational life in a brief period of time. Each opened me to new possibilities for my life.

I was inspired by the potential and possibilities I saw for our lives in organizations. I realized that we had created our organizations to be mediocre and, therefore, we could change them to be great. I wanted to reflect on my experiences at the Star Tribune and to study the deep dynamics of change, human development, and leadership for the 21st century. I did that in my Ph.D. program that I completed in 1997 at age 52.

I also saw the dark side of organizational life. I saw how leaders of change are often misunderstood, marginalized, and scapegoated. I also realized how change agents themselves can better manage relationships and communicate their intentions to those threatened by their leadership.

In leaving the newspaper, I felt called to understand more deeply the shadow side of leaders and of organizations and to be a voice that tells the truth about the dark side of leadership. I wanted to be a voice for change in how we work, lead, and follow in our organizations. I do that in my consulting work and in my monthly essays on life, leadership, and change.

I also left the Star Tribune because I wanted to live with more authenticity in all areas of my life and I wanted to take the *Hero's journey* that Joseph Campbell wrote about in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. I wanted to see if the spiritual principles Campbell wrote about were real and I wanted to see what I might become. I would be my own learning laboratory. What an exciting and frightening prospect that was.

It took me two years to create a vision for my life that provided the courage to leave. On my last day at the Star Tribune, David Cox, the CEO of Cowles Media, told a large group that I had changed the company forever. I don't know about that. I do know that my experience at the Star Tribune changed me forever. As I left the Tribune that day, I was scared and excited. I voiced a silent prayer as I began what for me has been an incredible personal journey that continues today. More about my journey later.

This morning I want to talk to you about our personal responsibility to take our own leadership journeys and provide leadership in a world in desperate need of authenticity and courageous action. Real leadership is not about perks, power, or celebrity. Real leadership is about responsibility—as I think you know.

First, I would like to set the context of leadership today.

We do live in interesting times. We live in a time of great creative chaos, confusion, and global transformation of the human condition—transformation to what we cannot know for creativity is unpredictable and the outcome is born of the struggle.

Our world, at all levels, is undergoing a fundamental creative reordering necessary for sustainability. The deeper creative process we are in has complex and organic underlying patterns of

violence, disruption, and death and, at the same time, creativity, synthesis, and integration. In such chaos, our institutions flounder and seem unable to solve the problems of today. International crisis after crisis threatens our way of life.

We live in a time when one only has to read the daily newspaper or watch CNN for an hour to see endless expressions of wickedness, tragedy, and corruption and the fear, despair, horror, and insanity in our world and, tragically, even in our schools. These realities trigger deep personal fears and anxieties of betrayal, insecurity, hopelessness, helplessness, and even death.

With so much destruction it can be difficult to see new growth emerge. It is close by, and we need to notice it, nurture it, and be grateful for it. Recently I attended a fifth and sixth grade violin concert. The children renewed my hope for this world. I felt inspired by the pride, passion, innocence, excitement, enthusiasm, and good feeling of the event. The two classes demonstrated how much children can learn and improve their performance in one year. They demonstrated how fast change can happen when people make commitments. I now go to more fifth and sixth grade concerts and watch less CNN.

We watch and perhaps participate as the planet struggles in the early stages of many simultaneous movements—many, if not most, are fighting for authenticity and the human spirit. Technology connects people globally in new and powerful ways. Together the movements form a whole and will bring forth a world vastly different than today. All people, organizations, and institutions are impacted by these global dynamics. None are unique; this chaos is an upheaval of the human condition and transcends the fragmented subject matter of bounded institutions.

Chaos—order without predictability, creativity in process, the place between the breakdown of the old and the formation of the new--will come to order through creative self-organization—the spontaneous emergence of order from disorder. The question is: *What order will emerge.*

We may be entering a new *dark ages of the soul* or a new *renaissance of relationships* or something in-between. No one knows. What a great opportunity we have to shape our future and what a challenging time it is to be a leader.

The bravest amongst us—locally and globally--in our institutions and our organizations--including our schools--will step boldly into

the mystery of life with no preconceived solutions and will create the future—learning and adapting as they proceed. They will take the best of the old and merge it with the new to create sustainable new enterprises. We may soon look back on our world and our institutions—including our schools—and wonder how we could have been so primitive.

Our traditional model of leadership looks for the *hero* to lead us in times of chaos and crisis. In his book *Leadership* James MacGregor Burns described heroic leadership as a relationship between leader and follower in which followers place great faith, often unfounded, in the heroes ability to overcome obstacles and crises. The followers avoid personal responsibility by projecting their fears, aggressions, and aspirations onto the hero as a symbolic solution to the conflict inherent in transformation.

Heroic leadership is to be distinguished from *The Hero's Journey* I mentioned earlier. The Hero's Journey expands the spirit of the traveler and of those impacted by the *Hero*. Heroic leadership, on the other hand, ultimately diminishes the spirit of the leader and the follower.

The heroic model of leadership, born of another time and set of circumstances, flounders, doomed to fail in a chaotic world for no one person can have the energy, talent, skills, and knowledge to bring a desired order to such chaos in our institutional and organizational worlds. How stressful it must be to be a heroic leader who has to pretend to have all the answers in such a complex world. How it diminishes our spirits to look for heroes to do our work for us. (I can only wish California and Arnold Schwarzenegger well.)

Instead of looking for heroic leaders to save us, each of us needs to be a hero or heroine. The call today asks for courageous and authentic people to connect with one another, to convene others, and to welcome and honor diversity to bring form to the creative potential of the times in which we live.

Why authenticity and courage now? Because only by freeing the mental, emotional, and spiritual potentials within us and connecting our energy with that of others can we overcome darker forces within humankind and create the light that is possible for all people in this world.

AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity is the expression of our beliefs into action--the intrapersonal congruency of ideas and behaviors—personally, professionally, and organizationally.

Authenticity is not the norm in our society or in our organizations.

My friend, the late Bob Terry, wrote in *Authentic Leadership*:

Authenticity is speaking, however dimly, to more and more of us, calling us to recognize the pervasiveness of the new inauthenticity. Something is not right and we sense that what is not right is expressing itself in many forms, from global issues to personal concerns. We have an intuitive sense of disconnection from the very institutions and people we believe we should be connected with.

Let me tell you a story of authenticity in an organization:

I consulted with a department in a company in Maine. They had been through lots of difficult changes in their operations. The manager had driven the change. People were mad. One said, “I went to the doctor. I wished for cancer. Not because I wanted to be sick. But because I didn’t want to go to work.”

I met with the group. The room was tense as the meeting began. An employee expressed his anger about how the changes had been handled—with no regard for the emotional and physical impact on employees. The room got tenser. People looked at the manager. He looked at the group, hesitated, and said, “I had no idea how my behavior had impacted each of you. I am so sorry.”

The room went silence. Privately, I felt relieved. I knew that this authentic moment would change the whole dynamic of the meeting. I also knew that this manager would never be the same.

The meeting went on for two hours and we enjoyed a wonderful exchange of authentic emotion, thoughts, and ideas. The connection was electric and healing.

Two years later I met with the group again. I knew generally that things had gone well but didn’t know much beyond that. I asked the people to go around the room and tell me what had gone on since we were last together. For two hours they told story after story about how relationships among them and with the manager had improved—I hadn’t asked them to talk about relationships. I felt inspired by how things had changed. Oh, by the way, the manager

had been promoted and the department was setting records for customer service.

Authenticity is important personally because we have an inherent drive to be who we are and to fulfill our potentials. Blocking that drive leaves us incomplete. The people in Maine wanted to express all of who they were. They wanted to contribute. They wanted to feel valued, involved, and informed.

Authenticity is important to leadership because in times of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty people will only follow those who ring true. The people in Maine were saying “NO” to leadership that ignored the emotional and spiritual within them.

No matter how humble our role, we can lead and contribute to our interconnected life by simply being more of who we are and sharing who we are with others. Each life lived with courage and authenticity contributes to the optimization of the whole of the living system we call humankind. Each authentic life inspires hope, trust, faith, and courage. In an interconnected world the distinctions between leaders and followers blur. We can all lead and we can all follow. In a time of such profound transformation, we each have a responsibility to lead.

Danah Zohar wrote in the book *Quantum Self*

There are no messiahs. There is nobody here to act but us. There is nobody to act for us, nobody to “save” us. We are the messiah. The job of transforming ourselves and saving the world is down to us.

We may not feel up to the task of living authentically and acting with courage. Owner Charles Howard said in *Seabiscuit*: “Our horse is too small. Our jockey’s too big. Our trainer’s too old. And I’m too dumb to know the difference!”

I’ve done my best work when I was too dumb to know what I couldn’t do.

THE CALL

The *Leader’s Journey* begins with the *call to adventure*. Our call to adventure is the dark side of our planet, our institutions and organizations, our leadership, and our selves.

I invite each of you to begin a new journey in your life or to take an adventure already begun to a new level—the journey to live a more authentic life, and to be a more courageous leader so that you can make your unique contribution to life and to a world in profound need of authentic contribution. I invite you to begin a new journey to find meaning, wisdom, and to return to the idealism that you began your careers with. I invite you to live, love, and lead as you think “it should be.” I invite you to help others to do the same. Bob Terry asked about the leadership journey: “Are you ready for it, prepared to do it, and courageous enough to make it happen?”

Of course you are because authenticity is the natural way of life.

The stakes are high:

To prepare our children to save the world for future generations and to serve all of the life that makes the Earth home offers a noble purpose.

My colleague Michael Ayers told me about a comment a Somali immigrant made in his class this past summer. Essentially, the student said that it was broad public education that made America such a powerful country. In his country, only a small minority can afford to get an education, with the consequences that a vast natural resource—brain power—goes untapped. Michael realized that if we consider the brains and hearts of the children as a renewable resource, then those involved in education have an enormous opportunity and responsibility literally for the future of the planet.

The only requirement to begin this leadership journey is a brave heart, a curious mind, an authentic soul, and a commitment to take the journey of a lifetime.

THE JOURNEY

The longer I am involved with change—personally and professionally—the truer Gandhi’s advice rings to me: *You must be the change you wish to see in the world.* So our journeys begin within us. Often personal journeys are born of tragedy and/or heartbreak. But it doesn’t have to be that way. We can step intentionally into our potential and move toward our visions motivated not by pain and fear but by our idealism about what is right and what is possible.

Some fundamental questions to ask begin the shift of mind needed

to change how we see life:

1. Who is the authentic me? What do I value, what do I believe in, and what am I willing to suffer for?

What were my noble intentions when I entered my profession?
What am I good at, what are my natural talents, and how do I use them to serve humankind. What am I not good at, what are my blind spots, and how do I compensate for them.

2. How do I impact those around me? How do I impact the spirit of others—family, friends, colleagues, those who work for me, and the students I teach. How do I project my own dark side? What am I doing to create a friendly and protective environment for the creative women and men around me? It takes courage to ask this question.

3. How do I collude with the diminishment of my spirit?

Rosa Parks was afraid when she sat at the front of the bus that day in 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama.

But one day she said no.

She wouldn't stand so a white person could sit.

Her feet were tired.

Her soul was tired.

She had enough.

She would no longer live a divided life.

She would not collaborate any more with those who would deny her humanity.

She didn't care what they did to her.

She was going to sit down.

And a movement began.

All movements, large or small, begin with one person's moment of authenticity.

What do I need to say "no" to?

4. What price am I willing to pay for my authenticity and my dignity?
Am I willing to be criticized? Ostracized? Lose my job? Our freedom does not come without cost.

5. How do I care for my self? Have I grown rigid and inflexible?
Have I grown fearful? Are my habits fixed?

The late author and activist John Gardner wrote: "Our capacity for

renewal is what summons us to greatness.”

I can choose to stay receptive, curious, eager, unafraid, and willing to experiment. I can choose to take time for solitude, reflection, and renewal. I can choose to treat myself with respect.

6. What am I called to in this life?

Steven Bishop was diagnosed with ALS—Lou Gehrig’s disease in his 30’s. The life expectancy for ALS victims is 2-5 years. Steven said, “I never asked WHY ME? Instead I decided to ask, WHAT’S THE MOST MEANINGFUL WAY WE CAN SPEND WHATEVER TIME I HAVE LEFT?”

Today Steven Bishop works to increase ALS awareness. Despite his physical condition, Steven Bishop said, “I’ve honestly never been happier. We’ve never lived our lives this fully before. I’ve been given the chance to truly appreciate my life while I’m still living it.” You see, Steven Bishop knows he is going to die. He is no longer afraid to live fully. Who amongst us wishes to die unloved or with their possibilities unrealized? What is the legacy I want to leave—the legacy that will reflect my highest ideals? What am I called to do? What call am I refusing?

I will work on my answers to these and other questions for the rest of my life. While I do, I need to take action.

What bold personal actions can I take as I go on my journey? What choices can I make that will connect with the choices of others and change the world?

1. I can learn to live authentically in all areas of my life. I can think, and find my answers within my own mind and heart instead of following blindly others who have their own agendas. I can question the “givens” of my life. I can return to the noble intentions and idealism that brought me into my profession. It is through our renewed idealism that we will transform our families, schools, organizations, institutions, and world.

In “Seabiscuit” trainer Tom Smith says of Seabiscuit: “They got him so screwed up running in circles; he’s forgotten what he was born to do...he just needs to learn to be a horse again.” Many of us have been running in circles for a long time and need to learn again to be who we are.

2. I can choose to act courageously from my deepest values. New awareness means that I have to act on that awareness or lie to

myself. I can become a truth-teller and not participate in lies that diminish me. I can reward truth-tellers around me even when their “truth” hurts my feelings.

Parker Palmer wrote, “Where do people find the courage to live divided no more when they know they will be punished for it? They have come to understand that no punishment anyone might inflict on them could possibly be worse than the punishment they inflict on themselves by conspiring in their own diminishment.”

3. I can reach out and connect with others like me. Those people are out there and feel as isolated as I often do. I can create my own community of diverse and like-minded people of all ages and backgrounds. I can form intimate relationships with nature and with others.

4. I can go within and search the shadows of my heart and root out my own sloth, denial, cynicism, and irresponsibility and stop projecting the worst of myself onto others. I need to do battle with fear, blame, narcissism, conformity, helplessness, hopelessness, entitlement, and “victimitis” and cast them from my emotional repertoire. We need to do this with ourselves first and then we need to confront these destructive forces in others and in our organizations.

As leaders we have a special responsibility to look within. Leadership is noble work. Leaders affect the lives and spirits of others. We want to do good, not harm. We need to self-examine all the time.

5. I can engage my chosen injustice. I find my purpose in life when I use the best of myself to do battle with my chosen inhumanity. I can re-direct my natural aggression and fight the many abuses of spirit and help others feel significant as together we elevate humanity. How important it is to make everyone feel valued and significant as the recent tragedy in Cold Spring, Minnesota so sadly demonstrates.

Peter Koestenbaum, author of *Leadership: The Inner Side of Greatness*, wrote: “In standing up to evil, leaders are made.”

6. I can embrace accountability—it works wonders. My journey to authenticity is me holding myself accountable to contribute to life itself, to the whole, to the common good. On an organizational level, I become a servant leader committed to doing what is right in service of our shared purpose regardless of the impact on my self. I

also hold others accountable for the things I hold myself accountable for.

Powerful forces in organizations pull us to mediocrity. They are the lazy, the immature, the selfish, the narcissistic, and the entitled. People grow in organizations where honesty is valued and where integrity and truth telling are expected and rewarded. Leaders confront people who are dishonest, manipulative, irresponsible, disingenuous, and/or passive/aggressive. We need to stand up to mediocrity and dysfunction in all its forms.

7. I can begin to learn anew. Arnold Toynbee said, "Civilization is a movement...and not a condition, a voyage and not a harbor." And so it is with our lives—they are voyages and journeys to renewal not stagnation and decline. We must teach ourselves and our young people to be life-long learners who can adapt over and over again to rapid change. Leadership is a body of knowledge and wisdom just as the subject matters you teach are. Today we need to be students of leadership for today leadership is authentic action and that is what life is about. We need to go deeper in our learning and learn to apply new knowledge to the nuts and bolts operations of our organizations.

I want to warn you. A courageous journey of personal and leadership development is no quick-fix and, therefore, not a popular course of change. Nobility has nothing to do with ease. If it was easy, everyone would have done it already. There are no quick-fixes and the search for them can be every bit as addictive as alcohol or drugs.

Such a journey of self-discovery is the hard work of leadership. Perhaps as difficult as anything a human being will do in life--as a person, leader, or follower. This personal development requires the courage of a pioneer, the honesty of a child, the imagination of an artist, and the confidence of the naïve, and often begins from deep despair.

I don't know where your journey will take you. I've been on my personal, spiritual, and leadership journey for many years. Externally it has taken me from the United States Secret Service to the depths of alcoholism at age 28 to almost 30 years of sobriety. It has taken me from delivering newspapers for a living at age 30 to a senior leadership position at the Star Tribune Newspaper 18 years later. Upon leaving the Star Tribune my journey took me to a Ph.D. at age 52 and a new career as a consultant and writer. I've learned new skills and suffered the humiliations of the novice.

My journey took me from a 35 year marriage, to divorce, to 14 months of work, photography, and renewal in the San Juan Mountains of Colorado and then to Fargo/Moorhead and my recent marriage and the intimacy sought for a lifetime. I am slowly learning how to live.

You don't have to make such physical and relationship changes in your life to take this journey to authenticity. The biggest part of the journey is within and we can do that wherever we are and a step at a time. Such a journey promises loss, sacrifice, uncertainty, and requires that we learn anew. Outcomes are not guaranteed.

Internally, my Journey has taken me to many places unexpected. I've faced perils, challenges, and obstacles I did not expect or plan for. So will you. I've journeyed into darkness. My knees buckled a few times. I've questioned my God, my faith, and my judgment. I often feel scared and inadequate. I've had to dig deep within myself often to find courage in the face of overwhelming fear and anxiety. Your journey will be similar in the dynamics and unique in the details. Some of you will leave your profession. Some will leave the classroom. Some will go back to the classroom. Some will find ways for personal renewal. Others will help change the systems in your life that suffocate you. All will serve humanity if you live authentically.

Why would we want to do this hard and risky work? Because we want to be truly human, we want meaning in our lives, because we want a sustainable and safe world for all of our children, and because the world's work is unfinished and this is the work that the times call for. Because we want our lives to make a difference.

Along with difficulties our journeys also offer freedom, responsibility, and accountability at new levels, courage before unknown, undiscovered talents realized, and contributions we did not expect ourselves to make. Our journeys offer connection with ourselves, others, and the natural world not experienced before.

Such a journey toward our authenticity allows us to experience our possibilities, free choice, and the dignity of an authentic life lived fully. People who take such heroic journeys become truly human. Scott Peck wrote about such people: "they are wise and aware; they enjoy life with gusto, yet face and accept death; they not only work productively but creatively, and they obviously love their fellow human beings, whom they lead with a dignity of both intent and result."

That sounds like Parker Palmer's description of great teachers: "Great teachers have presence, passion, personal identification with their subjects, concern for students, a certain largeness of mind and heart. They are, in a word, "whole" people—though the very fact of their wholeness may make them appear eccentric in a society where wholeness is hardly the norm!"

The outcome of this hard work is a shift of thinking, understanding, feeling, being, and behaving that is internalized and endures. Then, for leaders, instead of relying on mindless, mechanical formulas for meaningless change, aware leaders will be in a position to utilize their wisdom, maturity, and judgment to do the appropriate thing, in the right way, at the right time, to fit the unique reality of their organization.

This journey within is the personal intellectual, psychological, and spiritual shift of consciousness people must make if they want to teach the lessons learned to others and to lead our institutions through the chaos of the times to life renewed.

CONCLUSION

An executive friend wrote:

My fear is that I will fail to save myself from the destruction.

My prayer is for the strength to persevere until truth can bloom.

My prayer is for a warrior's heart and a holy man's compassion.

My prayer is to be a witness to truth prevailing in our world.

I hope that we will take our organizations and institutions and make them things of beauty that we are proud to be a part of. It is within our power to do so. We made things the way they are, and we can change them.

To destroy and then create our organizations, we must first care and make our caring count for something great. We must settle for nothing less than leaders who care and exude character and maturity as they rebel against the beliefs and models that no longer work. We must settle for nothing less from ourselves.

Like my executive friend my prayer—for you and for me—is for a warrior's heart and a holy man's compassion and the courage to say no to any diminishment of your spirit.

I salute you, wish you well, and thank you for your noble work.

Thank you.