

Experiencing Leadership

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In my graduate school days I was asked to write a paper exploring my own philosophy of leadership. In it, I explored my discoveries about the emergence of leadership in our social systems and, in particular, leadership in generative communities.

Re-reading the article recently, I noticed that I'd been viewing leadership from the perspective of 'what it is' and 'how to do it'. I was influenced by the leading thinkers of the time, who were publishing books faster than I could read them. I seemed unaware that I was content to know about leadership rather than more deeply explore my experience with it. I imagine I was keeping good company with many of my classmates.

As I began this new article my inquiry was: where have I evolved in my exploration of leadership?

I notice that I've shifted from exploring leadership 'out there' to seeking opportunities to find it 'in here'. At the individual level I am intent on bringing to consciousness the beliefs that intricately flow into my actions. I've learned to let go of assumptions that are constraining me in exchange for the energy that emerges when I create shared meaning with others. I try to be aware of my learning edge and recognize the times when it is necessary to take a deep breath and move into it. And, I've learned to appreciate the small surprises that come from all of the above.

I am more intentional about what my body communicates and how my breathing acts as a mirror for my emotions. I have greater respect for my body as a visible source of knowledge about my habits and patterns—and how my body brings those habits and patterns to work every day. Five years ago I certainly wasn't thinking about the mind-body connection as being an important dimension of leadership!

At the collective level, I have new awareness of the moments when I am in the presence of leadership. I try to 'catch it' and engage others as it is emerging. I see how leadership is seeded in the networks of conversation that create shared meaning, common purpose, and collective action.

The Center for Creative Leadership's Bill Drath uses an ocean metaphor to connect the individual and collective. He says that often in thinking about leadership we are like persons standing on the shore, captivated by the dancing, sparkling whitecaps on the ocean and entirely missing the deep blue sea. The whitecaps are real enough, but their source lies within the action of the ocean itself.

More often now, I disengage from conversations about leaders, leadership and leadership development which disregard the broader framework of human development—and what it means to work toward becoming a more conscious human being. I continue to appreciate Erik Erikson's Eight Stages of Man, and his assumption that when individuals are able to resolve each of life's psychosocial crises with a healthy balance, those who lived a full life can end on a note of 'integrity vs. despair'.

Leadership within the context of human development is entering mainstream conversations, as evidenced in an article tucked away in the business section of our national newspaper. In a paragraph that seemed resonant with the mid-life movement into Erikson's stage of 'generativity vs. stagnation' the author stated that the "stronger leaders had been able to make the transition from what has been called 'the first adulthood' to the 'second adulthood'". He described the first adulthood as being about building one's ego with a focus on the external world, while the second adulthood is about the inward journey. "It's a journey to find greater personal meaning, come to grips with the fact that we aren't going to live forever, take greater responsibility for our actions, and recognize that the answers must come from within".

I see other men and women joining me in mid-life, living and working in ways that expand their generative capacity. We're making choices that lead us to experiences that are both life affirming and larger than ourselves. For me this has meant making difficult decisions about how I can maintain an authentic presence, make new commitments to others and myself, and as I mentioned in my earlier article, stay focused on 'seven generations to come'.

I've become comfortable with what I know and have moved far past the need to know. Reality is created in every moment. Every now and then I get a glimpse of myself just being. It's only a moment, and it seems full of possibility. And for now, that is enough.