

Contemplative Dimensions of Leadership- Posted May 29, 2011 on "The Meditative Life," a blog for *Psychology Today*.

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Last week I came together for the third time with a remarkable group of around twenty leading academics from Boston area universities who teach leadership courses for those working in business, government, education and NGOs. At our first two meetings we had spoken together about the real and potential contributions of mindfulness to leadership and leadership education. We heard from each other about efforts to integrate contemplative exercises into courses on leadership, and also learned about the opening of a new Center for Mindful Leadership. For our third meeting the founder of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, Jon Kabat Zinn, who is a member of our group, kindly consented to lead a three-hour retreat and conversation on contemplation and leadership. On the morning of our meeting I sent around a letter concerning our theme. Rather than change it, I thought it would be better to invite you into the question concerning the contemplative dimensions of leadership.

Dear Friends,

I woke up this morning thinking of our gathering concerning contemplative dimensions of leadership, grateful for Jon's willingness to lead our afternoon session, and also pleased that many of you are able to participate. Several of you sent regrets, and we hope you will be able to come to the next session.

If I might presume on your patience, I would like to share a few thoughts concerning the contemplative dimensions of leadership drawn from my own experience. Many of you are far more expert in this area than I, but I write as much as a stimulus to others as to voice my own perspective.

This afternoon Jon will lead us in mindfulness practice that will focus on "the primacy of awareness and the quality of one's attending." In my own experience, the quality of attention we are able to bring to a given situation allows the present moment to open up and enfold into itself the possible future as well as the trajectory of the past. Perhaps it is the special characteristic of contemplation that it allows us to suspend and sustain complex and even contradictory elements which makes it so valuable. The difficult situation, or even a crisis, is met with poise and clarity if we have again and again found our way to stillness and attention. Complexity is not prematurely reduced, and a way forward that might have been unnoticed or unimagined emerges. Of silence Thomas Carlyle wrote, "Silence is the element in which great things fashion

themselves together, that at length they may emerge, full-formed and majestic, into the daylight of life, which they are thenceforth to rule" (Sartor Resartus Bk III, Ch. III). Repeatedly I experience the fecundity of silence, of sustained stillness. It is not inaction, but an inward extension of the self, done in mindful awareness, whose fruits are the insights of science and the creative inflorescence of the arts, as well as leadership in society and business.

Contemplation is also traditionally the place of self-knowledge; yet ironically the repeated practice of self-discovery encourages us to look beyond ourselves. We learn to value more highly the remarkable capacities of our colleagues at the hand of self-knowledge, and we vividly experience that every enterprise is made up of the astounding, sustained, and competent co-working of many, many others for a common purpose. Mindful awareness can help me locate myself within that larger whole, and aid me in contributing according to my talents, skills, and understandings.

Finally, contemplation is a means of awakening. Profound change seldom happens through a centrally driven strategic planning process. The truly great societal and economic transformations occurred because someone was awake, profoundly awake. I think of it as peripheral planning, in which one needs to be truly aware of the time in which one lives, moment by moment, and the opportunity each moment affords. Each encounter, every conversation, can be the occasion for a teaching or learning, for an initiative or collaboration. Leading, therefore, is also about being awake. And so we must, as Thoreau said, "learn to reawaken ourselves and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep." The new, that is to say the dawn, is to be expected, it will appear. New insights and profound change will arise, if we are awake to what approaches from the periphery.

Arthur

Director of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society

Professor of Physics, Amherst College