

POISONING THE RIVER

Life under threat



A healthy river teems with vitality, offering abundant life, as long as we respect it. But when it is diminished, poisoned, and threatened by neglect, over-exploitation and abuse, it degenerates and even becomes deadly. We see leadership heading the same way in many parts of our world. Degenerate leadership is becoming normalized—something we are supposed to accept as natural or inevitable—with careless leaders promoting unjust, self-serving, and intentionally harmful ends. In this chapter we focus on what diminishes or poisons leadership, and look at some ways of responding to the stress this causes.

LEADERSHIP FOR LIFE IN THE FACE OF DEATH

The word “river” usually brings to mind healthy images of water flowing below tree-lined banks, fish darting around, children swimming, people relaxing, or perhaps waterfalls worth pictures. They are life-giving, but ... they can also kill. Our dear colleague Steve De Gruchy, who would have written for this guide, died in flooded rapids while tubing with his son in February, 2010. We wonder what he would have said about rivers as a metaphor for leadership. We know that his last words to his son were: “Go on without me, I’ll be alright!” Maybe that’s about right in terms of counsel.

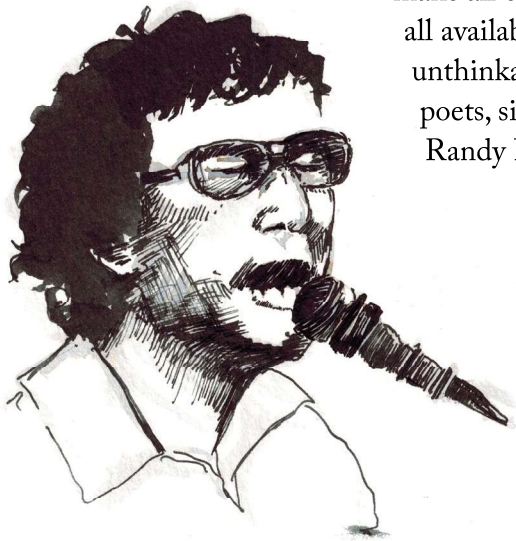
In 1969 the Cuyahoga River caught fire in downtown Cleveland, burning bridges and buildings all along its bank. Enough oil and poison had been dumped into it to burn. This weirdly iconic incident ignited the modern environmental movement in the United States. It was at least the 18th time the river flamed, and not the worst, but something about the moment gave power to the idea. People of every political view agreed that rivers should not catch fire. Today the river is still far from its natural flow but forty-four kinds of fish are back in the improving waters.

Cuyahoga means ‘twisted’. Like its name, it is witness to the long, twisting nature of change in complex community systems. Generative leadership never happens at the beginning of any process. It always engages a river of history already in motion, carrying what flows down out of the surrounding social watershed. Most social phenomena are shaped through currents that have carved their banks over many generations. Even the tiny and relatively young Cuyahoga dodges its way around hills formed by the last glaciers, only 10 thousand years ago. The mighty ones such as the Zambezi, Congo, Niger or Mississippi flow in much deeper ancient channels.

What can we learn here? What flows in or around us are the social realities of the places we work in and live in. To pay serious attention to these realities, with humility, is the first lesson for generative leaders.

We also learn that while you cannot change gravity, or the direction of the river, we can stop poison from entering the stream. Poison is not gravity; it is not inevitable. Once it is in the water, it must flow out and away. So, it does not have to flow in, but if it does, the forces of nature can help it flow out. A generative leader sees the poison that flows through an organization or community but treats it as a living phenomenon, pays attention to all that connects to it, and helps the system find its way of cleaning and healing itself.

The Cuyahoga shows the complexity of this, but also the healing possibilities resulting from people who form a common bond, illuminated by science about problems and pathways. Taking them on we become part of the living system of the social watershed, keenly sensitive to what is uphill that affects us and what is downhill that affects the next. The key generative step is to make all of that conscious, to bring it to mind and then to action, using all available tools to raise and change consciousness. For long it was unthinkable that the Cuyahoga would be anything but toxic. But then poets, singers, preachers and eventually politicians found their voice, like Randy Newman, who sang,



*Cleveland city of light city of magic
Cleveland city of light you're calling me
Cleveland, even now I can remember
'Cause the Cuyahoga River
Goes smokin' through my dreams*

A whole generation of people began the change. Generative leadership isn't something a single person called "leader" does to a group of people called "followers." Generative leadership isn't the list of tricks and techniques one applies to a system, organization or network to make it do something against the forces of social gravity. It can't perform unnatural acts. And it can't get adults to do things they aren't willing to do. But generative leaders can work with gravity to let the poison flow out. With eyes wide open, one who is part of the system can help the social possibilities become conscious, choose-able and do-able.

*One group's poison
that serves up daily
dread, is another
group's profit and
daily bread*

It would be a happier and shorter story if generative leaders only had to deal with rocks and water.

But social poisons are not so natural. One

group's poison that serves up daily dread is another group's profit and daily bread. The Cuyahoga burned because factories were built on its banks; toxic effluent could simply be dumped and left as someone else's problem. Nobody thought of the river as anything other than as God's gift of gravity.

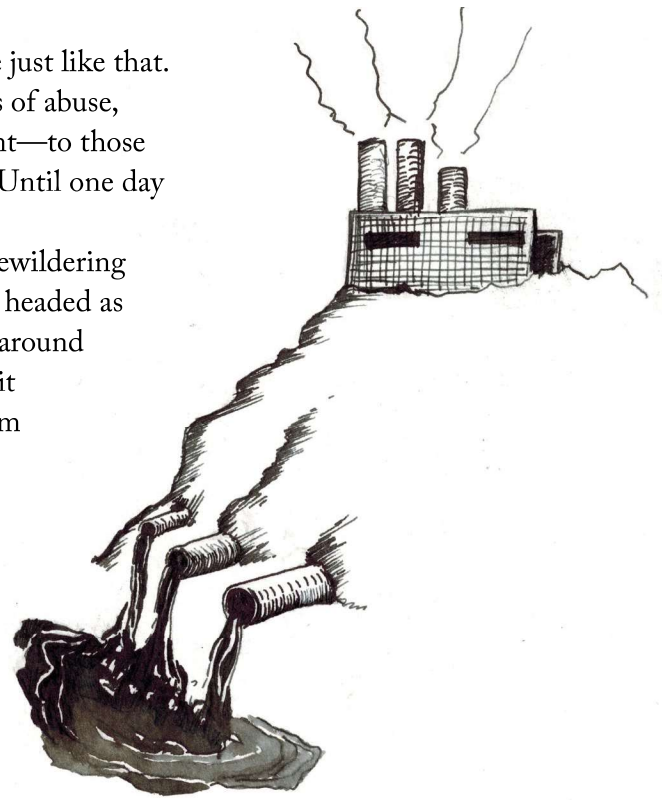


Social problems of a more subtle, yet deadly, nature are just like that. Privileges, like river banks, hold in place the easy patterns of abuse, domination, and extraction that seem naturally convenient—to those benefiting from the relationship. How could it be other? Until one day the river burns.

We stand on the bank watching as our beautiful and bewildering world burns, shaking our heads, wondering where we are headed as a planet, as a people, as a species. We cringe as we see all around us unbridled profiteering and the inequality and poverty it spawns, the awful and endless wars, climate change, racism and bigotry, the choking pollution.... We know that these are not isolated things but deeply intertwined consequences of a chaotic global economic and political system. We are worried. Many of us are in despair, immobilized by the seeming impossibility of doing anything about this.

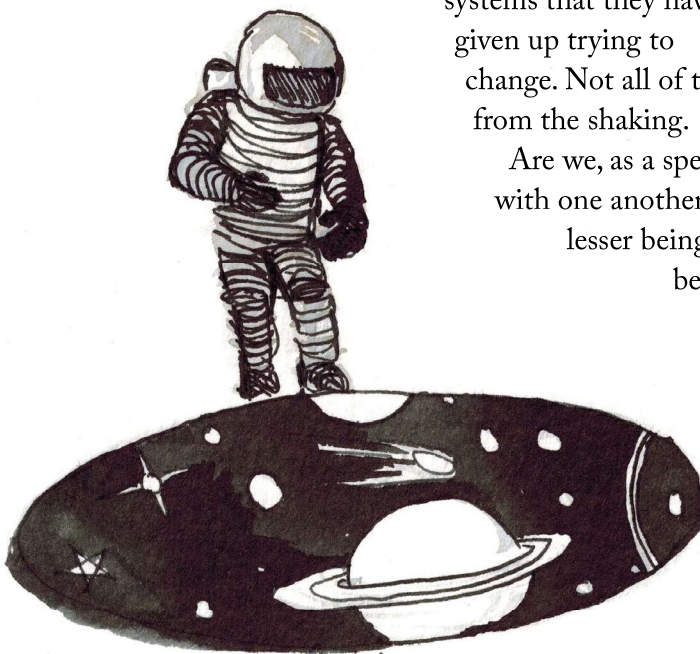
Our democratic political systems, better labeled *democracy*, which we once hoped would enable peace, justice and prosperity for all, have become illogical and dysfunctional, rupturing the social fabric that brings us together as civilized human beings. Through ingenious manipulation, our social media has quite simply deceived the public into voting for scoundrels. If we do vote it is often for those politicians we dislike or distrust the least. We look to our national and global leaders for answers, for hope that they can see what we see and are working together on a plan, but what we see is a gallery of fools playing to the markets and the fears of the voters, seemingly in the thrall of broken economic and political systems that they have given up trying to change. Not all of them, but so many that our heads are hurting from the shaking.

Are we, as a species, incapable of living peacefully and equitably with one another, despite our differences and diversity? Are we lesser beings than we have imagined, uncaring of those beyond our families, tribes or nations. Are we, in our DNA, competitive and aggressive creatures who must win or lose, whose highest purpose on earth is to make money, consume stuff and pursue pleasure, regardless of the long-term consequences for the planet and future generations? If we take our cue from the leaders of the world today, it would appear so.

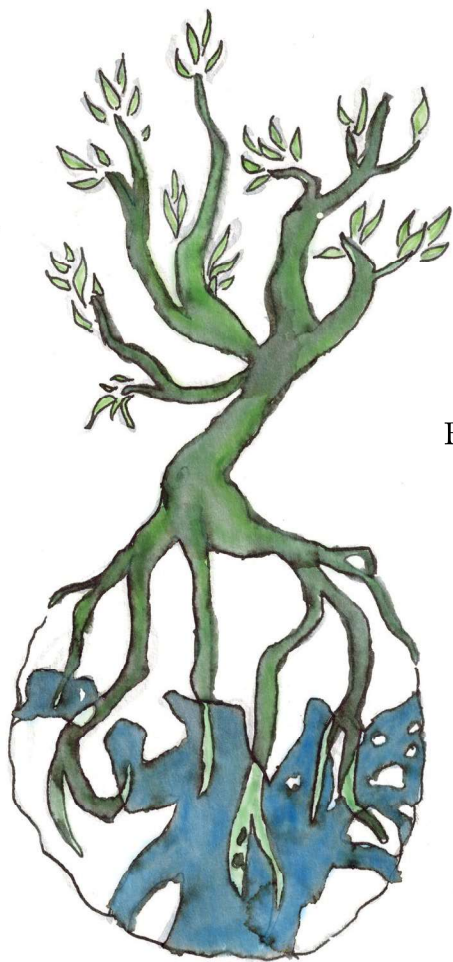


"According to Oxfam's analysis, last year 26 people owned the same wealth as the 3.8 billion people who make up the poorest half of humanity, down from 43 people the year before."

- Public Good or Private Wealth
Oxfam Briefing Paper, January 2019[1]



*There is only one
river in which
we all live, from
which we all drink*



Let's look a little deeper. What really lies behind the behaviour of our national and global leaders? Is it greed or fear or love of power? It may be. Perhaps they are greedier, more fearful or lustful of power than most – but they are human after all and who knows, if we took their places we may soon become like them. But this cannot explain the sheer wanton immorality of what they do, the compromises and deals they make to preserve a system that they and we know is driving us over a cliff!

What we see behind all these “qualities” is something far scarier: *a deep and dangerous cynicism about life itself, a carelessness for life, for each other, a disregard for our extraordinary human capacities for love, for creativity, for the joy of family and community, for the bountiful magnificence of earth and nature.*

If Steve De Gruchy reminded us with his death that rivers are dangerous, he also taught us that we all live downstream: *There is only one river in which we all live, from which we all drink.*

ON NOT BEING OVERCOME

The community of thought and practice that finds voice in the Barefoot Collective is a network of networks, extending far and deeply into neighborhoods trying to create their way to lives of decency. It is the nature of these networks to be widely dispersed, highly particular and different, yet resonating to very similar dynamics.

Nothing is more common than the distress we feel by the overarching rip tide pulling our work back into the deep and cold water of injustice. Our best efforts seem so often to be minor, overwhelmed by the powerful currents. Even those of us working in relative safety and privilege can read the data and do the math that mocks our hopeful scenarios.

We are not comforted by happy chirps of optimism.

We cannot trust a counsel from someone who does not seem to understand the tragic caughtness of our stuck processes.

We do not wish a way of leadership rooted in naiveté unlikely to survive the first hard winds.

We don't want to just feel better; we wish to do better.





Here the great traditions guide us in a way counter to the happy technologists of our day. The great traditions were all born of suffering, seeking a way to pass through and not just around the things that happen in life that stop and break us; the child in pain, the young dad with cancer, the village swept by flood. The traditions offer up the tools of lament that invite us into the depth of the experiences of grief and loss. And then they invite us to move through them and onto the work of life that lies beyond. Not all of us may share those traditions, but we all sense the wisdom of not hurrying past the negative, especially if we wish to serve the positive, the works of mercy and justice.

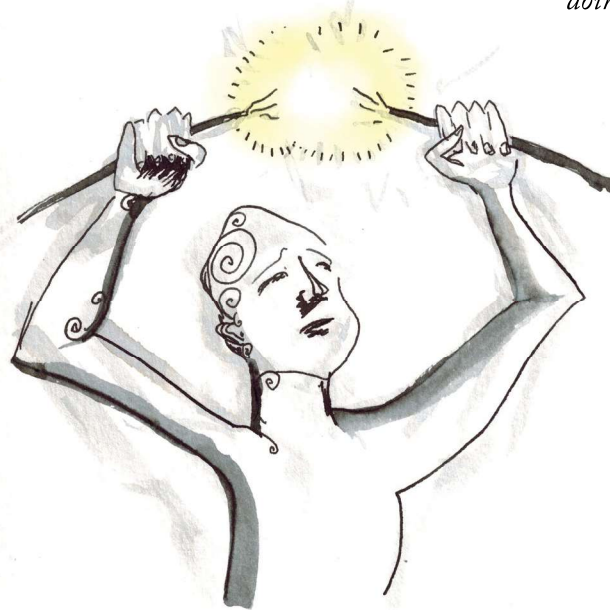
All humans are part of the same conscious species, but not all in the same way. The hope, then, is to move toward a common consciousness about what matters most. The generative leadership that holds the hope of the future may be caught, contained and held tight in systems and by things they cannot control, but their consciousness can reach across the cold waters.

In the early 1980s during the height of the South African Apartheid state's attempt to secure the divide between Blacks and Whites, a cartoon strip in a local paper pictured an alien spacecraft landing in a white suburban garden in Sea Point, Cape Town. Confronting the black gardener, the alien says: "Take me to your leader!" The gardener raises his arm and points across the sea to Robben Island where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned.

Mandela was a "heroic" leader, but that's not the point. What he represented and we look up to was *our* humanity, our deep and abiding *capacity for leadership*, visible in him but, as he himself saw and said, present as potential in every one of us who is human.

Our astonishing imaginations and ingenuity, our capacity for compassion and kindness, for cooperation and co-creativity, and *for*

doing the right thing, is locked up somewhere across an expanse, yearning for release. Despite the years of hurt done to him and many of his people, the hope he called forth lay there. In us.



*In each of us is a deep
and abiding capacity
for leadership*



RELEASING ENERGY THROUGH LAMENT

A lament or lamentation is a passionate expression of grief, often found in music, poetry or song form. It can also be a part of a formal mourning process, and may result in wailing, moaning or crying. Lamentation dates way back to the earliest centuries and crosses almost all cultures.

It was part of the blues in the US South: songs of slaves and then freed slaves and poor sharecroppers of all colours in the mean Delta who sang to rid their souls of pain from unremitting stress of discrimination, violence, injustice, then poverty, while still tolling away in horrendous circumstances. In all the holy texts, lamentation is a way to release pain, “with a witness” to make the ritual more potent and useful.

WE FEEL IT ...

We know that our world needs healing. During our first Writeshop for this Barefoot Guide, we held our own lamentation ceremony.

Many recent events had happened to shake our hearts and souls. 60 people were killed and over 400 wounded by a systematic psychopathic shooting at a concert in Las Vegas; in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, Irma and then Maria, friends still hadn't heard after weeks from parents living high in the mountains of Puerto Rico; one of us heard that three medical colleagues in Nicaragua had drowned in their car trying to reach a community in need during a storm; another that family members of three different friends had committed suicide in the last month; and still another that 30 young people from their town had died from opioid abuse in the previous months.

And so we gathered together around a large fire under a bright moon surrounded by the Fynbos of the mountainside near Cape Town in South Africa, sang songs of lamentation, and spoke our sorrows into the fire.

In too many places, we see increasing hostility and divides among political parties and groups, hate crimes, corrupt high level leadership, a widespread move away from public integrity in favour of lies and worse, and megalomaniac national leaders tweeting like insipid school boys when the stakes are nuclear.

Such things bear down upon us. They build cumulative trauma, sorrow and grief across the world. Besides anything else, we need healing rituals to release that grief, sorrow and pain.

Offering a lamentation ritual to communities that have suffered these traumas is important, as none are immune. Families, individuals and communities need a way to absorb these tragedies and find a way to release that sorrow, grief, and painful energy.

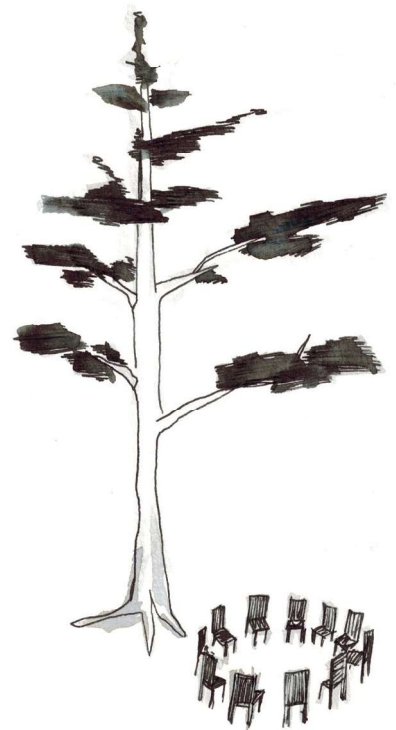


Lament is *not* complaining or passively mourning anything. It's releasing the energy that is otherwise blocked or repressed so that we can act again, but now with deeper insight and greater sensitivity.

Here ritual helps. It offers "safe containers" for allowing our hurt and our hope to be expressed openly with others. It unblocks the trauma and gives us energy to go forward. When done well it can play a valuable role in sustaining the generative powers of leadership. It requires sensitivity, being aware that people have different ways of dealing with hurt and anticipating hope, without peer or social pressure.

There are many ways to create a container for a lamentation ritual. It may include but doesn't have to include aspects of any structured religion but it needs to be a comfortable space for all who are there.

What could a Community of Practice around Lamentation Rituals look like?



CREATING A LAMENTATION RITUAL

Here are some ideas and basic elements that any local group could use to create their own rituals. Many cultures have very strong traditions in this area, as do most structured religions. One could incorporate elements of all these groups without being locked into any one tradition or structure.

Fit it to the setting and make sure it's appropriate to the group present yet still as inclusive as possible. Honour all who are present and let each participate as they wish—don't exert any social pressure to conform. Create it together, make it local, meeting culture and context.

SOME "MINIMUM SPECIFICATIONS" FOR RITUALS OF LAMENT

SETTING – Outside in nature may be best, but wherever it is, it should be a neutral space, not one that sets people apart. It should go beyond any particular faiths so that all will be welcome, including those of no particular faith tradition.

MUSIC – Use it for contemplation. The group could sit or stand in a circle to signify unity, and think or pray about the sorrows/grief/tragedies they wish to release while the music plays. All should be silent (though crying or wailing may happen). If you use songs, try ones that evoke grief or sorrow and can be universally understood. Here's one example of a song of sorrow, "Too Many Martyrs," by Phil Ochs, a 1960's civil rights activist.



Too Many Martyrs

(For Medgar Evers)

*Too many martyrs and
too many dead
Too many lies, too many
empty words were said
Too many times for too
many angry men
Oh, let it never be again.*

NAMING THE PAIN – Create a time for calling out the names of those lost or hurt or the events themselves in some way, naming the trauma or grief.

AT-ONE-MENT – Use some iconic, sensory way of becoming at “one with” one another spiritually, like drumming, chanting, wailing, etc., with a focus on allowing time for this to happen.

MOVEMENT AND DANCE – A way to allow people literally to “get it out of their system” and release emotion (a version of “gnashing of teeth and ripping our garments”) is to use bodily movements like free dance or movement in a circle.

LETTING GO – Build in a moment where people could bring an iconic symbol of someone or something they lost to “bury” and release or burn or let go of in some other way. Even a wish or a prayer or a statement can be written on a piece of paper and buried or burned.

HOPE/REBIRTH/RESURRECTION – This is a time for participants to commit to undertake some task in their life or work to commemorate loss and grief, a way of “going forward” (such as leading a similar lamentation ritual in their own neighbourhood or group, reach out to a family with a loss, etc.). This time could include music, walking in a circle at the end, passing the peace, whatever signifies solidarity and instills hope.

BENEDICTION – A blessing from someone in the group, or a poem, (e.g., Maya Angelou’s *Still I Rise*), followed by a last piece of motivating music to reflect moving forward.

CELEBRATION – This could be in the form of sharing a meal together, creating a group artwork, expressing gratitude, etc.



POST-RITUAL STEPS – A Lamentation Ritual can’t be just a “one-off” event; it’s not any kind of “easy solution.” Sorrow often bubbles up in surprising ways and times. It’s an ongoing process to which the group could commit themselves through further communication and interaction around shared goals. Any meaningful lamentation ritual should release energy that is now ready to be released into the world. For example, participants may decide to do something about better mental health or combatting substance abuse, sharing ways of helping build resiliency in communities, confronting corruption and the misuse of power at local level, doing advocacy work about ill-treated children, joining in initiatives around climate change, or any number of possibilities that will be determined by their context.

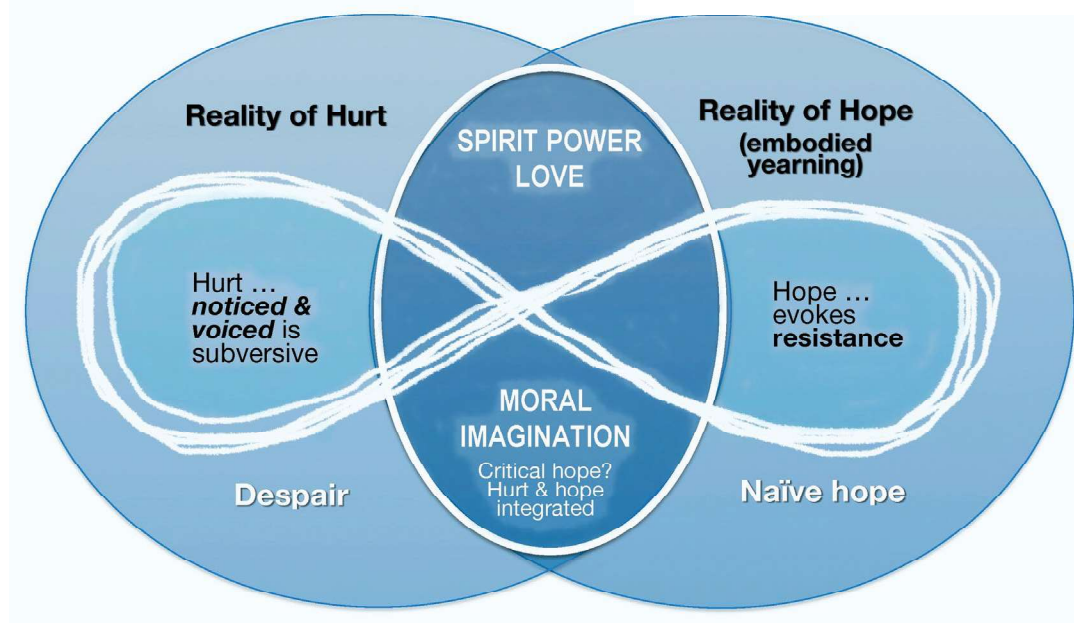
INTEGRATING HURT AND HOPE

Power for Social Action

We know from experience that hurt and hope are not separate parts of our life. They flow into and affect each other. Both are real. We can try to ignore them. Or live only in hurt, which is merely despair; or only in hope, which is simply naïve.

If we pay attention, however, we notice that *unjust or unfair hurt*, when it is noticed and voiced, becomes subversive. It shows up what is going on and asks for action. We also notice that *hope evokes resistance*. It no longer accepts that things as they are, have to stay as they are.

A generative leader will pay attention to both hurt and hope together, recognizing that they can be integrated into meaningful action that is capable of reducing the reality of hurt and unleashing the power of hope. Here's a diagram that helps us visualize this dynamic relationship of hurt and hope in any actions we take.



(Based on the work of Walter Brueggemann)

Our action takes place as a *lemniscate movement*—two loops that continually move back and forth between two centres. One centre is hurt which, suppressed, produces despair, but when noticed and voiced, is subversive and able to help us see where change is needed, whether in our organizations or communities or even our families. The other centre is hope, which, treated as mere optimism, is naïve, but when rooted in reality, evokes change in what needs to change or resistance to what prevents it.

We flow in and out of these realities, gathering energy and motion as we grasp and pay attention to the space between the overlapping realities of hurt and hope (the centre of the diagram). It's what happens in this middle space that is most crucial. It's here that people experience themselves in the midst of hurt, brutality, confusion or potential despair but also as able to find sparks (even bonfires!) of hope, connection and joy.

This is what animates them. This is the place of power and agency. What fuels and guides us is our moral imagination—our capacity to take responsibility for our hurt *and* hope to see what is in the world, what ought to be in the world, and to choose to act accordingly.

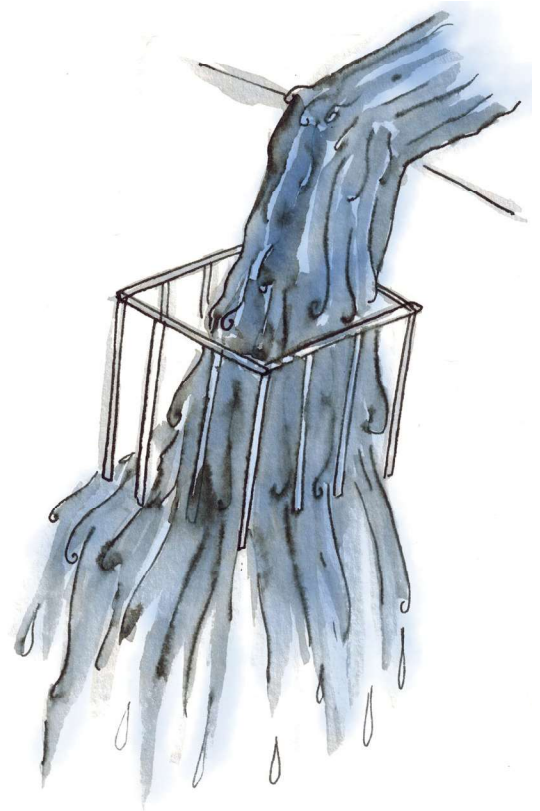
Becoming fully aware of this is important for a generative leader. It enables us to foster awareness, in ourselves, in other people, in communities, and in larger systems, of the power that exists in that centre, the “both-and” space. It helps us make this powerful space visible. When people are able fully to be aware of how both hurt and hope are operating in their experience and when they have the freedom and space to name them and draw on them in their work, there is agency and there is power.

FAILING FORWARD TOGETHER AT THE INTERSECTION OF HURT AND HOPE

Some things that poison the river of our life together involve systemic, structural forces and patterns of power. They often feel beyond what we can tackle.

Yet, just as supposedly hard riverbanks are always changing with the force of the flow, we know these forces and patterns are all a consequence of human actions. They are not impossible to change with other kinds of human action.

Leaders have a choice about why they lead and what for. They too can poison the river depending on how they act and with what intention. Just as the life of a river can be suppressed by canalizing it in concrete, so too leadership can be exercised to “colonize”—impose suffocating control over—the spaces that are necessary for life to emerge. Such a *corruption of leadership* can permeate even the ‘do-good’ industries or projects and programmes that end up really *complicit* in the professionalization and abstraction that canalizes life.



We are all capable of being complicit in many ways, of practicing what we can call *degenerative leadership*, when we fail to acknowledge and own our entanglement in the structures and patterns of power that diminish or harm the life that strives to emerge. Generative leadership does not shy away from probing the extent to which this may be the case in anything it does.

Generative leaders recognize that it is more likely than not that we will fall back on poor leadership behaviours or make mistakes--and build in ways to course correct. They are not afraid to acknowledge failure, and embrace it as a natural part of growth. They see failing forward as a norm, both in their leadership and in their work.

Somava, one of our authors, has thought about this a lot. Here she shares her story and some insights that help to think about this productively ...

THOUGHTS ON 'FAILING FORWARD'

Over the last six months, my entire life has been upended, turned inside out, revealed to be my worst nightmare—one I have been staving off for over a decade. My heart feels betrayed and broken—by a person I knew better than to trust yet chose to put my faith in over and over again, because of my stick-with-it-ness—my cherished belief that there is always a solution, that you don't give up on people, that if you're strong enough and brave enough and creative enough and persistent enough, you will find a solution.

At its heart, I realized that although I teach about failing forward fast, and embrace it in my work, I had failed to embrace this practice in my own life—and as a result, had tolerated putting my child and myself in a situation that was harmful for us for over a decade, trying out solution after solution against all hope. It took a profound life-threatening crisis to finally make me realize that I was fighting for someone and something I never had the power to heal.

Those of us who are activists and change agents are prone to hope. We are, at our best, resilient when faced with adversity. We get right back up when we're knocked down, find the creative solution, garner the forces. In leading change, my strength has always come from being

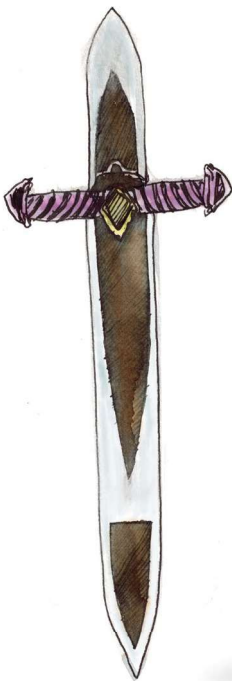
like water—I can almost always see a way through, around, over or under the problem. I am creative, strategic, able to see processes rise and emerge; I can almost always reframe a situation to a place of possibility, no matter how difficult. It is one of my gifts, part of what makes me a generative leader.

The sword edge of the gift that I am learning is that I sometimes stay in situations that are bad for me for far too long because I believe I can create a new possibility. In business school, they teach you that you should know your BATNA before you go into a negotiation—your *best alternative to a negotiated agreement* (BATNA). Once you go below your BATNA, you should walk away because there is a better alternative. I have often gone below my BATNA at great harm to myself personally and professionally—to continue to advance an initiative toward its goals.

At times, this has paid off. It has helped to keep a transformation going long enough for it to take deep root—roots that cannot easily be destroyed, resulting in deep sustainability. At times, it has led me to let go of things too late—often at great cost to myself.



*Sometimes you
simply have to let
go of something!*



How do we know when to persevere, when to learn fast and fail forward, and when to declare failure and move on?

Here are just a few practical tips:

If you're wondering about whether or not you should persevere, whether you should accept that you have failed and should now move on, then you probably need to consider it seriously. Because we are predisposed to not giving up easily, we need to pay extra attention when our inner teacher—that voice inside us—begins to speak up about this.



If you keep hitting your head against the same problem over and over again and all that's happening is that you are getting a bleeding and bruised head, then you almost certainly need to step back and consider a different approach.

If you feel yourself disappearing—if you are losing who you are or worse, what you believe in, as you try to accommodate to the situation—then you need to step back and question the situation.

If you have a sense of “déjà vu” about the situation—it looks uncomfortably familiar to a different scenario you were in that you don't want to repeat—then you probably need to take a step back. We tend to repeat our mistakes.

If you feel like you are lost and don't know where you are in the process anymore—then you probably need to go back up to the mountaintop to get a clearer view.

