



Who Will Lead From Here: One Way Forward

By Debra Loftus, Ph.D.

The Scene.

Visiting the Christkindlmarkt in downtown Chicago after client meetings one day last week, I rested on a bench seat. I watched as bratwursts, potato pancakes and strudel were purchased and consumed in massive quantities around me.

Then an elderly woman asked if she could sit with me while her friends shopped.

As we passed some time together, she inquired as to whether I'd encountered the demonstrators who were protesting the Mayor's speech to the City Council nearby, calling for his resignation after the release

of a video showing a young black man being shot 16 times by a Chicago police officer.

"No," I replied. "But I haven't missed the constant presence of helicopters overhead today."

We both looked up at the hulking figures in the sky.

She sighed heavily. "I don't know what to make of society anymore. Terrorists, police brutality, mass shootings...there seems to be so much hatred and anger everywhere."

"Who's going to lead us through it all?" she went on, a note of despair in her voice.

Opposites I can't profess to have a clear answer to her question. I sometimes sit in her metaphorical seat, feeling that uncertainty and despair.

I'm an optimist by nature. I believe in the inherent goodness in man- and womankind. I trust human systems' abilities to self-organize and create powerful solutions to deeply entrenched problems, having seen it in action repeatedly. I observe breathtaking demonstrations of emergent leadership every day.

Yet I sometimes feel overwhelmed by the number of complex societal issues facing us, too. And I join in the fear that I feel around me, like I did for a few minutes on that bench earlier today.

Then I remembered how my day began.

Early Morning Workout

I hit the treadmill at an ungodly hour that morning. Looking for some distraction as the miles crawled by, I selected a new podcast to listen to: Jon Kabat-Zinn (Professor Emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and founder of their Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Healthcare and Society) being interviewed for an "On Being" Podcast back in 2012.

At that time, the economic meltdown was the cause of a similar amount of hand-wringing and fear-drenched asking of questions. Consistent with the topics usually covered in the "On Being" series, the interviewer asked Jon Kabat-Zinn about the role that mindfulness has in the midst of difficult times.

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While I'm a devotee and advocate of mindfulness, I'm repeating his words not to urge more people to meditate (although that would be terrific). Rather, I think his words help to point the way forward from here for all of us, meditators and non-meditators, leaders and non-leaders alike.

Here is a close paraphrase of a meta-observation he made:

All of us, to some degree and each of us to a unique degree, is being called upon to find out who we really are and to live that authentically, in the service of this world. Not just for our own small-minded gain or benefit. And I see that happening on a very, very vast scale.

I think it's part of a much larger phenomenon from where maybe as a species, because of all the crises we're facing, we are in some sense tapping into that deep human capacity for waking up at the last moment and doing something right.

His words resonated so deeply with me that I listened to them at least 5 times (awkwardly retracing the same passage on my iPhone controls while still running. Treadmill safety was NOT being observed).

Holding the Tension of Opposites

See, here's the thing: at the same time that I'm finding myself sitting in this metaphorical seat of fear and concern, I've also been having a remarkable series of strikingly similar experiences of sitting with individual leaders as they describe wanting to act from a new

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level of self-discovery, of authenticity, that stuns me.

I'm losing count of the number of times various clients have said something along the lines of: "I've never said this aloud before but this is what I've always known to be true about myself...how do I use that to lead?"

The repetition of this experience, and the coaching conversation

it elicits, has begun to feel like a deeply meaningful convergence of some sort, an awakening. Much like Jon Kabat-Zinn described.

One Way Forward

I suppose it's naïve of me to suggest that Jon Kabat-Zinn described THE way forward, based on the organic human system movements he was experiencing on a "very, very vast scale". So instead I'll propose this is ONE way forward.

Come, sit on the metaphorical bench with me for a moment. Let me ask you a question.

What could be created if we each harnessed our deepest sense of who we really are and then we lived that out authentically, *in service* of what is going on in the world at this very moment?



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