

Radical Root

By Dean Elias

So what happened to me in/through the workshop devoted to “Radical Leadership”? I was struck first by how deeply rooted the workshop was in the ethos and perspective that inform the Institute as a whole. I’d say that someone is authentic when s/he acts on her own authority, is the author of her own life. The key then is stripping to the core to be sure that one’s life flows from what is natural and human. Radical means root, or even deeply rooted, so in the context we’re exploring, being authentic might be defined as flowing from one’s own deepest sources, from one’s root. So a program devoted to radical leadership seems a natural expression of an Institute devoted to authentic leadership – being the author of a life that is natural and human.

The poet e e cummings framed the issue of being the author of your life as being, what else, an artist, a poet. “If you wish to follow, even at a distance, the poet’s calling (and here, as always, I speak from my own totally biased and entirely personal point of view) you’ve got to come out of the measurable doing universe into the immeasurable house of being. I am quite aware that, wherever our so-called civilization has slithered, there’s every reward and no punishment for unbeing. But if poetry is your goal, you’ve got to forget all about punishments and all about rewards and all about self-styled obligations and duties and responsibilities etcetera ad infinitum and remember one thing only: that it’s you – nobody else – who determine your destiny and decide your fate. Nobody else can be alive for you; nor can you be alive for anyone else. Toms can be Dicks and Dicks can be Harrys, but none of them can ever be you. There’s the artist’s responsibility; and the most awful responsibility on earth. If you can take it, take it – and be. If you can’t, cheer up and go about other people’s business; and do (or undo) till you drop.”

Now the heart of the matter in cummings’s vision seems akin to the heart of the matter as presented in Geoff [Crinean] and Meg [Wheatley]’s workshop – cultivating courage or bravery to be fully human. I can imagine no quality more important when imagining what it takes to face, see, and engage the complexity and tragedy of our world.

But this isn’t “leadership” in any way that resonates with what I (admittedly an “academic”) understand as leadership. It defines the path of warriorship or the “path of bravery” as Geoff and Meg put it. Leadership (as I understand it) deals with engaging the process of change, informed by a mutual and shared vision, through processes of influence rather than coercion. In this day and age in the U.S. – an environment of polarization,

strategies of attack, incredible greed, catering to the very rich, and, internationally, a reliance on violence – leadership so understood is a precious and rare commodity, and dearly needed. To provide leadership in such an environment requires courage, bravery — being a warrior in the language of our workshop.

At the root of the issue of leadership in my country, then, is courage to be, to let our core humanity emerge, and from such a place, have the additional courage to undertake the practice of leadership on behalf of the common good. Being a warrior (in the sense that Shambhala means) seems a prerequisite to exercising leadership.

I am in the business of teaching “leadership,” and my approach to this business has been influenced radically (if I can use the word in this context). I will do my best to illuminate the root challenge, cultivating the human capacities that are requisite to the exercise of leadership (as I understand it), before addressing the usual academic fare, the skills and means that also are needed for the exercise of leadership. For this reorientation I am profoundly grateful.

Even more basically, I have been inspired to weave the discipline of meditation even more deeply into the rhythms of my own life, and except for some mornings before dawn when I would rather keep my head on my goose-down pillow than place my butt on my meditation cushion, I also am grateful for the inspiration to engage my own life more fully.