



Roar of Authentic Leadership *by Fred Kofman*

Address to the 2001 Authentic Leadership Program, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Susan Skjei: Before we move into our evening talk, I'm going to have a little kitchen table conversation with Fred Kofman. So come on over and join us in our kitchen. Good evening, Fred.

Fred Kofman: Hello, Susan.

Skjei: When people look at your last name, they think, Jewish maybe?

Kofman: Yes.

Skjei: But when they listen to you talk they hear an unusual accent. So you are an enigma to most people.

Kofman: I'm Argentinian. That's why I have this accent. I came to the United States 15 years ago, and for that many years I tried to get rid of my accent. I've finally given up. [Applause.] Now I teach diversity. [Laughter.]

Skjei: Tell us something about what it was like growing up in Argentina.

Kofman: Well, it was pretty crazy. There were two things that

affected me and everyone else in the country. One was that the economy was very, very strange. We had two thousand percent inflation per year. Prices were changing all the time, so people were quick to make decisions to try and save themselves, while at the same time pretty much destroying the social fabric. So it was a society of everyone-for-himself.

And then in addition to that—or perhaps because of that—there was social disintegration. It was a time of a lot of terrorism, followed by counter-terrorism. We had what was called the Dirty Little War, where a lot of evil happened. There was an ultimate lack of respect for diversity. If you were left wing, everyone had to be left wing; if you were right wing, whoever was not right wing was your enemy. So it was a society torn by fighting to prove who was right and who was wrong. And that left a lot of scars.

Skjei: So that must have made a big impression on you as a child and influenced some of your choices as you grew into adulthood.

Kofman: Yes. My first choice was that I didn't want anything to do with human beings. [Laughter.] I studied mathematical economics, because it was the only way to pursue a social science without worrying about human beings. And then I went to MIT, which was even farther removed from human beings. [Laughter.] I taught there, and I managed to stay away from human beings for about four or five years.

Skjei: What happened at MIT that began to change your mind about being involved with people?

Kofman: Well, I became a little lonely. Numbers are okay, but they don't talk back to you. You talk to them, but equations are not as much fun as people.

Also, one of the sayings at the end of the Dirty War was, "Never again." I felt that I wanted to contribute something so that would never happen again—so that people would be able to work out their differences in peace, rather than use those differences to start wars.

And then I just happened to meet Peter Senge. When I went to MIT as a professor, I had no idea that Peter even existed. His book, *The Fifth Discipline*, was published about a month after I arrived there. When I originally talked to the dean of the school about the research centers, he told me about the different groups, saying, "Talk to them. They'll be good for you." But he didn't say anything about the systems dynamics group. So I said, "What about those people?" And he said, "Oh no, you don't want to talk to them." [Laughter.]

So obviously talking to the systems dynamics group was the first item on my agenda. And the dean was right; they ruined me. [Laughter.] They did. I'm not at MIT anymore. I quit, and I joined the circus. [Laughter.] I moved to Boulder, [Colorado], and that's all Peter's fault. Actually, Peter helped me a lot. He opened many doors for me, so I am very grateful. And part of the reason I am here is that I am delighted to share this space with him.

Skjei: Somewhere along the line you also developed a spiritual practice. Maybe you could tell us about that.

Kofman: At the beginning, I thought a spiritual practice was something you did part of the time. I read a lot of books about meditation, and those were very meaningful to me. Then I took some seminars and I developed a meditation practice. Gradually—and I think reading Thich Nhat Hanh had something to do with this—I started thinking that meditation was much more than just sitting and meditating, that it was actually a way of life. I also read books by Stephen Levine about his work with people who were dying or in grief. At some point I started seeing that my spiritual practice was not separate from any other practice. I started thinking of everything as a spiritual practice.

Skjei: You also have a hobby that is somewhat unusual, and I hear that you recently had an adventure. Can you tell us about that?

Kofman: Yes. I like climbing mountains. And that is also a

spiritual practice. Last January I went to South America to climb Aconcagua. Most people thought I was crazy, because it's pretty high—about 23,000 feet. It's the highest mountain outside the Himalayas. When you get above 20,000 feet, it's not pleasant anymore. The air gets pretty thin, the nights are cold, and the winds can reach over 80 miles an hour. I remember waking up one morning and telling my friend, "I never felt so shitty in my life. [Laughter.] I feel so bad I don't even know what hurts. I can't pinpoint where it hurts. It's systemic." [Laughter.]

Skjei: That MIT training came in handy.

Kofman: Yes. It was an awkward experience, because I was feeling terrible but at the same time the whole thing was incredibly exhilarating. As I climbed the mountain I was meditating all the time. It was like a long 20-day walking meditation. It was also like a purification, because the mountain eats away at you. Literally. Not only do you lose weight, but you start dropping baggage. More and more things become irrelevant, until it's just—Did I eat today? Did I go to the bathroom? Can I breathe? Do I have a headache? Am I getting sick? Are my feet able to move? Life becomes very simple. There are only a few things that matter, and friendship, I found out, is one of the things that matter most.

Three of my best friends and I reached the top together. It was very touching to be there, and we started crying uncontrollably. The guide was puzzled: "Why are you sad? " But it was so moving, and we were crying not out of sadness or even joy; it was just raw emotion coming out of our eyes. Meanwhile other people were arriving at the plateau and high-fiving each other, and they just stared at the four of us hugging and crying like babies. It was a rather strange scene.

For me, mountain climbing or anything that pushes the boundaries is a spiritual practice of staying present. I knew I would either get to the top or I would faint, but I thought I would probably faint first. And I would have been happy to faint. [Laughter.] That's not a joke. It's true. My goal was to get to my edge, to my limit. In a way, you could say that because I didn't faint I didn't find my edge. I'm still wondering how I would

respond if I had to turn around and go down before the summit. The people in our party who did turn around had their own spiritual challenge. In a way that may be harder than getting to the top. So I guess I still have more mountains to climb.

Skjei: It sounds like you've been successful in a lot of the things you've tried. Have you ever failed?

Kofman: Yes, I failed at my first marriage. That was a painful failure, a very big lesson. And maybe I failed to learn from it, because I got married again. [Laughter.] Hopefully I'm doing much better this time. You look back and think, "I wish I would have known then what I know now." But I wouldn't know what I know now if I hadn't done what I did then. [Laughter, applause.]

Skjei: Thank you.

Kofman: Now that you know all my intimacies, I'll put on my presenter persona and talk a little about authentic leadership.

This evening, I would like to invite you to consider a slightly different perspective on leadership. From this perspective, being a leader means providing a space for other people to find the truth about themselves. The leader is the person who creates the space, or the opportunity, where some truth can shine forth and where the people who inhabit that space can find themselves at the deepest level.

I'd like to start with a story from the Sufi tradition [in *The Way of Passion: A Celebration of Rumi*], as told by Andrew Harvey, a wonderful writer, mystic, and storyteller. The story is about a pregnant lioness who is hunting. She is happy to find a flock of sheep, because sheep are easy prey. She goes for the sheep and actually kills one, but the effort of running causes her to give birth, and she dies in the process. The little cub is born and he's alone. He doesn't understand anything, and the only thing he sees around him are sheep. His first impression of mommy is sheep, so he thinks, "I must be a sheep."

The cub joins the flock of sheep, and they take him in as one of

them. He walks around like a sheep and ba-a-a-a's like a sheep and eats grass. He joins in as they talk about the stock market, complain about the hard work at the office and how life is boring—you know, the stuff that sheep do all the time.

Life goes on. The cub grows into an adolescent, and you can imagine the ridiculous sight—a grown-up lion walking in the middle of a flock of sheep, eating grass and acting like one of them.

One day an old lion standing on a hilltop sees this horrendous sight and is outraged. It's as if this young lion is bringing shame to the whole race of lions. "What the hell is this guy doing down there? He should be eating them, not eating *with* them!" He runs down into the valley, kills a couple of sheep, and grabs the young lion, who is sure he will also be killed. But of course the old lion doesn't kill him. Instead he takes him to a pool of water and forces him to look at his reflection. The adolescent lion thinks he's going to see a sheep, but he doesn't. He sees a lion. And then the older lion grabs a piece of meat from a dead sheep and feeds it to him. This is like cannibalism to the young lion, so he's horrified. But he eats it, and after a couple of bites he decides the meat doesn't taste so bad.

And then the old lion says, "And now you are going to roar." He shows him: "ROAAAR!!!" "Now you do it."

The young lion lets out a feeble "Roaa-ba-a-a."

"NO, NO!"

So they work at it for a long time, and after many attempts, the young lion manages to give a great "ROOOAAAAAAAAAAR!"

That is the roar of awakening. The Sufis say it is the roar of a human being who discovers his true nature. We could think of the adult lion as an authentic leader. His methods may not be what we would call compassionate, but they are certainly skillful.

I invite you to consider this question: What are the skillful means

through which each one of us learns about our true nature? As a way of exploring the answer, I propose that we do an activity. I'd like you to think about some time in your life when you learned something very significant about yourself—about who you are and your place in the world. Think of an event that was meaningful and life shaping for you, and that you would feel comfortable telling to a couple of other people at your table. Share your story in groups of three, and then in about ten minutes we'll investigate some of the qualities of those events.

[Table conversations]

In order to continue, I'd like to ask you to think about your story and the stories you've just heard as having two parts. The beginning part of the stories, the part that happened before you had your learning experience, is the *leading edge*. And then the part that happened after or as a result of your learning experience I'm going to call the *trailing edge*. For example, if my story is about getting to the top of a mountain, the leading edge is about what I went through during the ascent, and the trailing edge is about what happened afterwards.

Now my question is, What were some of the emotions you experienced during the leading edge of your story; that is, before you learned whatever you learned? What state were you in? How were you feeling?

Various people: Bored... Panic... Frightened... Confused... Fear... Despair.

Kofman: Okay, okay. I think we get the point. Now let me tell you about a discussion I had with the people who organized this conference. I told them I wanted to help them with marketing by sending people the following letter: "We have designed this experience so you will be able to achieve your maximum learning capacity. This is going to be an experience that you'll remember for the rest of your life. Therefore, we have created an environment where you will feel panic, despair, boredom, chaos, fear.... RSVP." [Laughter, applause.]

Who would sign up? If somebody told you this, you would never go! You'd say, "That's just the kind of place I *don't* want to go to." But yet, years later, if somebody asked you to think about a time in your life when you learned something significant about yourself, you would recall a story that starts with panic, despair, confusion, fear. Why? Because that is the ground on which heroism is built. That's where you discover who you are—in the face of very difficult challenges.

You see, I'm not so crazy to be climbing mountains. It's just a cheap way of arriving at that kind of panic, confusion, and fear. Some people work for corporate America. I take my hat off to them. Talk about fear and panic and a challenging environment! And some people work with people who have AIDS or who have other very difficult struggles. Some people choose to put themselves in situations where they will have to find something very deep in themselves or they won't survive. For me, that is the basis of all leadership.

Why on earth would we choose to do something that crazy? Well, first of all, we don't choose. Thank God we don't *have* to choose. We get it anyway. In *Fiddler on the Roof* there is a scene where Tevie says to God, "Dear Lord, I know that being poor is no shame, but couldn't you give me a *little* more money?" I often think, "Dear Lord, you're very kind and you've given me all these wonderful learning opportunities and possibilities for discovering my true self, but can't I take just a little break—like, for the next two hundred years or so?" Haven't you felt that way sometimes? I have a friend who calls these opportunities AFGOs—Another Freaking Growth Opportunity. [Laughter.]

What is it that is so important, so powerful, so meaningful, that we would actually *want* these experiences? The answer is related to what happens on the trailing edge of your stories. What did you feel *after* your important learning experience? What was the experience at the *end* of your stories?

Various people: Courage... Insight... Exhilaration... Inner strength... Compassion... Wisdom... Connection...

Kofman: And aren't those the things that make life worth living? Aren't they the things that really touch us?

Whoever is not ready to pay the price of knowledge will not get knowledge. There is a toll. You have to be willing to pay that price, which is to put at risk everything you *think* you know about yourself. That's why it's so scary—because the price of knowledge is the sum of all your fears. We think, "I may not be the kind of entity I used to think I was." That is the ultimate fear. When we encounter that fear, everything shakes.

I was in Berkeley in 1989, during the big earthquake. For several days the earth was still moving with the aftershocks. If you've never been in an earthquake, I can tell you it's a weird experience. We tend to think that we are standing on solid ground. Well, I have some news for you. Ground is not solid. In an earthquake the ground moves like a sea. It's amazing. After an experience like that, you feel you can't trust the ground anymore. It will not sustain you in certainty as before.

Finding out that what you used to think is certain is not is a bigger shock than being in an earthquake. Every certainty you hold begins to shake. The poet Antonio Machado says, "Man has four things that are no good at sea: anchor, rudder, oars, and the fear of going down." We think we live on solid ground, but we don't. We're in a sea. And one thing that is useless in a sea is the fear of going down. Because when we're afraid of going down, we can't sail very well.

One of the tasks of an authentic leader is to provide the support that people need to get over the fear of going down—the fear that is inherent to every significant learning experience. Because whoever is not willing to pay the price of knowledge will not get knowledge.

If we are alone and all we have is our little idea of our little selves, that is just too scary. Most people will choose not to learn, not to pay the price of knowledge. So the leader is the one who can stand there and support each one of us while we go through that turmoil of discovering that who we thought we are

is not who we really are.

In another poem, Antonio Machado talks about the only truly authentic leader that exists:

*Last night as I slept, I dreamt a marvelous illusion,
That I had a beehive inside my heart.
And the golden bees were making white combs and sweet
honey
Out of old bitterness and failure.
Last night as I slept, I dreamt a marvelous illusion,
That it was God that lies here inside my heart.*

This is a different notion of God than we might be used to. It is not a God that is outside you, that tells you what to do and what not to do. For me it is the God of authentic leadership, the God of the golden bees that each one of us has inside our true heart. That heart has the capacity to take every bitterness, every failure, every fear, every challenge that we face, and turn it into white combs and sweet honey.

That's exactly what you did in those situations you just recalled. There may be many other situations where that did not happen, where the shit hit the fan and just stayed there. [Laughter] There was no saving grace. It just spread all over the place. There are situations like that. But even then, there's a question: Is that the end of the story? Perhaps those situations are nothing more than the leading edge of a story that has not yet ended. If we start thinking that way, even the worse situations can be experienced as a call to grow our heart so it has enough transformative capacity to get the goodies, the juice, that's in that story.

The more grief we experience, the more juice is available to transform into power. The poet Rumi is a sucker for pain. If you want blood, sweat, and tears, read Rumi. He's the most loving but also the most incredibly traumatic poet I have read. In one poem he says, "Whoever is not killed for love is dead meat." There is something about a life of pleasure, a life without challenge, that ends up turning us into dead meat.

A leader's responsibility, as I see it, is not to make sure that nobody is challenged. That would be deadly. That would be like having your kid come home from school saying, "Dad, Mom, I don't understand these math problems," and then you answering, "I don't want you to be traumatized, so let me do them for you." That's not helpful. That's disabling. If, on the other hand, you give your kid a system of differential equations when they are in the second grade, they might not develop a passion for math. [Laughter.]

Many years ago, the Jewish sage Hillel was asked if he could summarize the Jewish tradition in the time he was standing on one leg. Hillel replied, "Love your brother as thyself. The rest is commentary." Robert Kegan, a developmental psychologist from Harvard, echoed Hillel's advice when he said, "If you want to describe the optimum conditions for human development in the time that you're standing on one leg, it is this: Create an environment that gives a person both support and challenge. The rest is commentary."

Development takes place in the tension between support and challenge. As a leader, you want to encourage those two poles to stretch. You want to support *not* the person's old theory of the self, but that which transcends any notion of that self. That is what is able to grow—the part of ourselves that we might call the soul, the divine spirit, divine nature, presence... There are many names and no names for it. But that is the part that, as an authentic leader, you see, you support, and you stand for. And by standing for that part, you might have the toughness needed to allow the personality to burn. Because that is what happens in these trials: the personality burns.

Rumi says, "The soul is singing while the personality is crying tears of blood." He is saying, I love your soul, but that means I'm not going to have any pity for your personality, because it is your personality that blocks the growth of your soul. Your soul will blow up your personality from the inside; it will look for opportunities to break this shell, just as a caterpillar looks for opportunities to break out of the cocoon and become a butterfly. Making sure the caterpillar stays a caterpillar is not leadership.

That's not love.

I would like to finish—not finish but move to the next step—with my own kind of roar. I don't roar like a lion, but I have a song that reminds me of the story of the lion. It's a song that evokes in each one of us the questions, Why are we here? What is our true nature? I will play this song, and afterwards I will give you a chance to share with your table groups something about what the words mean to you. And then we'll close together.

[Plays song "Love, Serve, and Remember" by John Astin, from the CD *Remembrance*.

Lyrics: *"Why have you come to earth? Do you remember? Why have you taken birth? Why have you come? To love, to serve, and remember."*

[Table conversations]

I'd like to hear what people have on their minds.

Participant: When I was listening to the music, I saw this entire room lifted by angels. It was a reminder that life, this journey, is about experiencing our joy of being. Thank you. [Applause.]

Participant: Love sounds great. Serve sounds great. But remember... What does it mean? What is its value? Why is it in the song? As we were talking at our table, I realized that remembering has to do with appreciating your life, your history, how you got to this place.

Participant: I'd like to express appreciation for your bringing up the tough side of things. Sometimes you hear about growth and genuineness as if it's a piece of cake, but it actually does take courage to experience the ground moving. So I hope the Shambhala Institute is a place where we be honest about that. Thank you very much.

Participant: For me, too, the love part seemed obvious, and also serve. When I thought about remember, I was reminded of an

interview with Thomas Berry, the environmental writer, who is now in his 80s. When he was asked what he would have done differently, he said, "I would have kept a diary."

Kofman: Thank you very much. I would like to finish with a personal story that sheds light on my take on "remember." As I said before, I love trekking in the mountains. One of the places I like to go is the Himalayas. I haven't climbed those mountains yet, but I enjoy looking at them and trekking around them. When you are in that part of the world, people come and greet you, but not by shaking hands or saying hello. Instead they put their hands like this [palms joined at the heart] and do a little bow and say, "Namaste." At first I thought that was very funny because in Spanish that means, "There's no more tea." [Laughter] But obviously these people speak Nepali, not Spanish.

The word *namaste* can be translated in many ways, but the translation I like is, "I can see the divine light that shines in you." Imagine if instead of saying hello we greeted each other by saying, "Hi, I can see the divine light that shines in you." [Laughter.] And then the other person greets us back, "Yes, and I can see the divine light that shines in you." We would remind each other of our true nature every time we met. That would be a way of remembering who we really are.

So one thing I like to do is to remember and to bow, like I want to bow to you now, and to say to people when I see them—when I really can see them—"Namaste."

So namaste, and thank you very much. [Applause.]

Fred Kofman is co-founder and president of Axialent, an international consulting company specializing in leadership development and teamwork. He has been honored as Teacher of the Year at both the University of California at Berkeley and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Dr. Kofman has held seminars for more than ten thousand people in the United States, South America, Europe, and Asia.