

# 'ENJOY YOUR DEATH': LEADERSHIP LESSONS FORGED IN THE CRUCIBLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL DEATH AND REBIRTH INFUSED WITH MINDFULNESS AND MASTERY

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*Leaders working in diverse spheres of societal influence including medicine, healthcare, public health, legal services, education, and business are increasingly interested in the potential role of mindfulness practice for experiencing, appreciating and living their lives more fully at work and at home. The discipline of mindfulness meditation practice may offer leaders an effective means of actualizing in their lives an enhanced ability to know themselves more directly and, also, to learn how to use, in skillful ways, both the routine and extraordinary work-related demands and challenges they face as a means of cultivating latent yet innate human qualities necessary for effective leadership. Based upon direct experience as a leader facing a significant, protracted crisis, the author details his experience of integrating mindfulness practice into his life and leadership-related decision-making.*

A task becomes a duty from the moment you suspect it to be an essential part of that integrity which alone entitles a man to assume responsibility.

(Dag Hammarskjöld)

## **Prologue**

In a very real way, perceived through one set of lenses, the story I am about to relate is history; it passed away a very long time ago. And yet, there is something behind this story that might serve us well by examining in finer relief the lived experience of leadership—leadership individually, collectively and organizationally. Leadership informed by meditation practice, mindfulness, and mastery. Before the telling, here is some background information intended to

minimize the potential for confusion because of the array of organizations associated with the unfolding events.

In 1998, 19 years after the founding of the Stress Reduction Clinic and three years after the founding of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society, the University of Massachusetts Medical Center ceased to exist. As the result of a large merger, in its place two separate entities were formed. One entity, UMass Memorial Health Care (UMMHC) became the home to several hospitals and an extended clinical system and the second, The University of Massachusetts Medical School (UMMS) became the home of three schools: The School of Medicine, the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and the Graduate School of Nursing. During the early stages of this merger, the Stress Reduction Clinic—what the Center for Mindfulness was most known for and also the largest source of its revenue—was a part of UMMHC (the hospital and clinical system). All the other aspects of the Center (and far smaller revenue sources) including research, academic medical education, professional education and training, and outreach and public service programmes resided within the Medical School.

One final explanatory comment: throughout this article I have subtitled various sections of the text. In most cases, the topic associated with these subtitles is self-evident. However, in two instances, I have used terms from alchemical writings related to the process of transformation. Latin in origin, they are *solve* (dissolve) and *coagule* (coagulate). For growth to arise, disintegration and dissolution are required—individually and organizationally such dissolution brings with it the death of the old (*solve*). Arising out of this dissolution may occur a new reconstruction and consolidation emerging as vision and as a new capacity for emergent possibility, flexibility, and wise relationship and action (*coagule*). Within each of us and within organizations also, this process is repeated endlessly.

## 1. Solve

In late October 2000, a little more than three months into my tenure as Executive Director of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society, I received the following email from the hospital administration:

*In the next 48 hours, we require you to submit a deficit-free budget for the Stress Reduction Clinic budget totalling not more than \$173,000.*

At that time, the Stress Reduction Clinic's annual budget was \$283,000. In order to comply, I had to reduce the budget by \$110,000. To do so, I cut the clinical budget by \$40,000 and because the Stress Reduction Clinic was itself nested within the Center for Mindfulness, I was able to meet the full budget reduction demand by shifting an additional \$70,000 of the Stress Reduction Clinic budget into the Center's overall operating budget. In response to these changes, I received the following email:

*In addition to decreasing your budget to \$173,000 you will be required to generate an additional 100% of your overhead costs.*

This meant that the Stress Reduction Clinic would now be required to generate nearly \$350,000 in revenues annually—a virtually impossible task.

The protracted merger and burden of mounting debt may have left the newly formed hospital and clinical system with no choice but to cut a host of clinics and programmes. However, virtually overnight, after 21 years of continuous operation, the Stress Reduction Clinic—the clinic of origin of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR)—was eliminated from the clinical system.

This meant no more formalized physician referral system, no more appointment and reminder system for our patients. No more third party insurance coverage, no more dictation and medical records services, no more billing services through the hospital and no more status as a clinic within the greater hospital and clinical system. Without all this, how could we continue to be an exemplar of possibility for colleagues and nascent MBSR clinics all over the world beginning to introduce mindfulness into their patient care, research and medical education programs?

Within the Center for Mindfulness, this larger institutional tremor was seismic, creating an immediate operating budget shortfall of nearly \$300,000. Half the staff had to be cut: some were laid off, a few chose to resign, others found new jobs within the larger institution. Those that were laid off or resigned needed to be respected, protected and paid severance for their years of service and unused vacation time. I had both a moral and fiduciary responsibility to make sure the needed funds were available to them. For the Center for Mindfulness, this meant that either closing our doors or remaining open would require a good deal of capital that we did not have.

My colleagues and I seriously deliberated the merits of closing the doors or attempting to move forward. This analysis and reflection proved to be quite valuable. For my part, I felt like we'd achieved much over the course of two decades. The work of the Center had laid the foundation stones of new fields of inquiry and treatment approaches in medicine and healthcare and, in part, through our efforts a secular form of mindfulness practice was beginning to be known about and experienced directly by a large and growing public and scientific community. I came to see that even if we chose to close the doors, what had been accomplished was substantive. Yet, I also firmly believed that there was far more to be explored and accomplished through the vehicle of the Center and I made the decision to forge ahead and attempt to create a new future within UMass. However, with the loss of a home and operating budget for the Stress Reduction Clinic, a significant budget shortfall, and a staff reduced by 50%, there were many barriers and little space in which to move.

In response to the news about the Center's plight, long-time co-workers, colleagues, and friends nearby and from around the country sent along lots of ideas about how we ought to best respond to the situation. On one extreme, they included quietly closing the doors and writing an open letter in the New York Times announcing this decision and thanking our constituents world wide for their generosity and support. On the other side, there was a call to coalesce the

goodwill and energy of the 12,000 medical patients (and many additional healthcare professionals) we had worked with since 1979 and mount a massive letter writing and telephone call campaign. In addition, they suggested enlisting journalists at the local and regional papers to get the story out and, as well, organize a culminating event—a several day, around the clock silent ‘sit’ along all the primary walkways on the main Common of the medical center. While dramatic and intriguing, I judged that embarking on any of the latter strategies would further antagonize senior administrators thereby virtually sealing the deal and foreclosing on any possibility of our existence at Umass.

To remain afloat and simultaneously begin anew, the first thing we needed was a new home for the Center. As everything became tighter, darker, and seemingly more impossible to overcome, a thin sliver of space did open. I received an unexpected email from a senior Medical School officer inviting me to come and talk with him about a possible future for the Center that would locate it fully within the aegis of the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Negotiations were already underway for establishing the terms for vacating the hospital and clinical system. With this invitation, negotiations aimed at establishing the entire Center within the Medical School were initiated. It took four months of intense, painstaking deliberation to complete the process. Some days I met with hospital officials about the terms of vacating; other days I met with Medical School officials about the terms of habitating. My Division Chair, Judith Ockene, PhD, M.Ed, in an act of immense generosity and risk-taking, agreed to underwrite our budget should we fall further into debt and be forced to close shop. In early February 2001, having agreed to the final terms of this transition, the gentleman who had the final determination for our fate turned to me and proclaimed unambiguously the *real* terms:

*Maintain your academic and scholarly work, run your operation like a business, float your own boat, or you'll be out of here.*

Real indeed; the terms were strikingly clear and terribly daunting. There were failures and major losses sustained during the previous four months. Yet, we had made one essential gain; we had a toe hold that offered us the space needed to begin moving forward. Hafiz, the fifteenth century poet and Sufi teacher describes our condition and motivation well:

*Be strong, Hafiz.  
Work here, inside time,  
where we fail, catch hold again  
and climb.<sup>1</sup>*

Many of my colleagues who made the decision to stay at the Center had to relinquish significant aspects of their benefits and retirement packages in order to meet the insisted upon terms of the transition. Still, in the face of these unbending terms, we had endured the fire; we were alive.

Whatever had us was not yet done with us . . .

Eight months later an accounting audit was completed by the larger institution resulting in the reckoning of an additional deficit of \$200,000 (originally thought to be an operating account surplus from previous years) requiring payback in full. Thus, in the first 12–14 months of my tenure, five years into its founding and 21 years since the formal introduction of mindfulness into mainstream medicine via the Stress Reduction Clinic and its radical approach to patient care and education, the Center faced a financial deficit of nearly \$500,000.

Then, 9/11 burst into fullness. Social chaos ensued; uncertainty and fear took front seats in the collective mind of most Americans, the economy tanked. Clinical referrals dried up; clinic revenue diminished by 50%. The demise and inevitable death of the Center as we had known it for the past 21 years lingered unabated for 36 months. The loss of our organizational 'self' was unmistakable; the reality of inseparability and utter undeniability of a single interdependent reality was experientially validated over and over again *everywhere* to be seen and felt.

While this story is neither exceptional nor unique, it is *real*—shot through with the fundamental characteristics of living, including suffering, impermanence, and non-self. Moments strung together like this one have an awesome, uncompromising way of forcing us to see what appears theoretical or distant as actuality; it all gets close up and evident, vibrantly real and inescapable if we give ourselves over to the *turning towards* rather than away from what is before us.

Ubiquitously permeating this entire unfolding saga was what is sometimes referred to as the 'fourth' characteristic of living—the quality of *nowness*. *Nowness* in all its palpable, persistent, undeniable wildness played centrally in the unfolding of this story, as there were always multiple and often rivalling perspectives to be ascertained and understood *now* . . . branchpoints of possibility turned towards or walked away from *now* . . . strong emotions and mind waves felt, seen, and often enough, caught up in or seen through *now* . . . decisions affecting the lives and livelihoods of my colleagues, hundreds of medical patients, and thousands of professional colleagues around the world weighed and acted upon *now*.

These were life and death moments; the challenges of leadership were relentless and unremitting. I have chosen to report this story to you in the context of this special issue of *Contemporary Buddhism* because the events as described and those that I will detail more fully raise important and highly relevant issues about mindfulness and its potential role in training the mind and heart as an essential element of the cultivation and development of leaders and leadership.

However, before doing so, I want to make it absolutely clear that while I was the director of both the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness and, therefore, the leader and point person for all that I have and will describe, several of my colleagues were also key leaders in this process. Indeed, it was my responsibility to communicate, negotiate and make final decisions. Yet, the leadership was *shared*; it was disbursed among many of us. We were each responsible and fully accountable to ourselves, to one another, and as well, to the larger institutional

community in which we were nested. This seems to me to be one of the most salient aspects of leadership infused with mindfulness—the recognition that we are each accountable to ourselves for our own lives and actions ('Be a light unto yourself'). And, equally so, in the spirit of democracy and shared vision, to one another as we attempt to forge a sense of collective organizational ownership, clarity and purpose expressive of our commitment to a universal sense of accountability and responsibility.

Among the Center leaders, my colleague, Larry Horwitz, was particularly invaluable through both the long period of crisis and the gradual transition into a more robust, programmatically rich, and fiscally sound Center for Mindfulness. For a long time, I have likened Larry's role at the Center to *Fudo*—the great protector of the Dharma described as the 'unmoving, immovable, imperturbable guardian.' My trusted colleagues and companions, Florence Meleo-Meyer and Melissa Blacker, were resolute in their commitment to staying the course, creating new programmatic possibilities in the midst of the falling apart and embracing with great understanding and open-hearted acceptance the cascades of mind waves and emotions that visited us as we walked this long journey that, at moments, felt like hell and at other moments like paradise. Similarly, Jean Baril, the Center's business manager, was a strong and much needed pillar while facing, on a daily basis, dismal spreadsheets and the understandable waves of anxiety about the future emanating from the administrative staff she was charged with supervising and supporting.

Now, back to the story . . . .

I did not want this to happen on 'my watch' . . . .

It was happening on my watch.

I felt like it was all falling apart . . . .

It was all falling apart.

When the events described first transpired, I felt like I had been ambushed. I got upset, indignant, depressed and then angry. I wrote emails, scheduled meetings with hospital officials, appealed to my staunchest medical center allies and to my Division and Department Chairs. In the end, none of this made a whit of difference in regards to the ultimate outcome. Undone and carried by the sustained gravitational pull of such moments, the Spanish poet, Antonio Machado, recognized our deep seated fear of 'going down.'

As an entity or organization, we were 'going down.' Amidst all the dissolution and dying, I believe to this day that until I saw clearly just how impersonal the entire affair was, I had no real clarity of mind and heart by which to meet this situation fully and attempt to go forward.

In the four months between my stepping into the role of Executive Director and the reception of that first email from the hospital administration about our clinic budget, I had not yet decorated my office. There was just so much to attend to; the learning curve was steep. Quite uncharacteristic of me, I simply didn't make the time to create a comfortable workspace. My colleagues used to laugh about it

or in bewilderment shake their heads and say, "Saki, when are you going to move in? Aren't you going to move in?" Soon after the crisis hit, a poem by Rumi made its way into my life; it is entitled, *Ali in Battle*. For me, this was an absolutely fitting poem for the situation. I taped it to the wall I faced every day as I sat at my desk. The only object on my office walls, it remained there for the next 24 months.

Learn from Ali how to fight  
without your ego participating.  
God's Lion did nothing  
that didn't originate  
from his deep center.

Once in battle he got the best of a certain knight  
and quickly drew his sword. The man,  
helpless on the ground, spat,  
in Ali's face. Ali dropped his sword,  
relaxed, and helped the man to his feet.

'Why have you spared me?  
How has lightening contracted back  
into its cloud? Speak, my prince,  
so that my soul can begin to stir  
in me like an embryo.'

Ali was quiet and then finally answered,  
'I am God's Lion, not the lion of passion.  
The sun is my lord. I have no longing  
except for the One.

When a wind of personal reaction comes,  
I do not go along with it.  
There are many winds full of anger,  
and lust, and greed. They move the rubbish  
around, but the solid mountains of our true nature  
stays where it's always been.

There's nothing now  
except the divine qualities.  
Come through the opening into me.

Your impudence was better than any reverence,  
because in this moment I am you and you are me.  
I give you this opened heart as God gives gifts:  
The poison of your spit has become  
the honey of friendship.<sup>2</sup>

To me, this is a poem expressing the core of mindfulness, mastery and leadership. It is about stopping in the heat of easily blinding momentum, about refraining from the forces of conditioning, about anchoring oneself in a deep sobriety in the throes of intoxicating circumstances, about making decisions and choosing actions arising out of intrinsic sovereignty and nobility, about fundamental respect for the 'other,' about conciliation and humility, about non-duality and the dissolution of the conventional boundary of self and other and the blossoming of compassion emerging from such seeing, about honouring our innate capacity for residing in the raw, open heart and remembering the true source of wisdom and power.

It was the only office décor that I needed or wanted . . .

## 2. Coagulate

In the prolonged battle to keep the doors of the Center open, I needed to remind myself daily, often many times a day, that the decisions that had created this situation were *impersonal* and that they were *workable*. They were not about me and that I did not have any rights of entitlement because of the previous contributions of the Clinic or my past contributions to the medical center. And most importantly, that I had deep internal resources to draw upon in my interactions with everyone. I can tell you this—until I realized this in my heart and mind, body and soul, incontrovertibly, I was caught and therefore, ineffective. When I realized that the situation was completely impersonal, I mean absolutely impersonal, the whole situation became a lot more workable because it was no longer about me; success and failure were no longer at stake. I was free to act.

More so, what was transpiring within me behind all the appearances of the Center 'going down' was the emergence of a deep sense of having been *entrusted* with something precious; something that was well worth expending enormous amounts of energy for. Something that was much larger than me. Something that had a chance of continuing to benefit the world enormously if I attended to it carefully and wisely with my colleagues and our communities of resonance and support locally and all over the planet.

Daily, this vision grows stronger in me. Everyday I pray that I am able to carry, nourish and sustain well what has been entrusted to me. What dawned in me was the realization that the essence of good leadership is dharma—dharma in its essential meaning as *duty*.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the recognition of universal responsibility is the duty of all leaders. Dharma is also a path, a way for human beings to learn to connect with and embody a vaster awareness—a direct, experientially verifiable recognition of reality itself—the boundlessness of the universe animated and made palpable in each one of us. Seen more vastly, it is a means of freeing us from the imprisoning shackles of separation by providing us a means of learning to attune to and seek guidance from the great chain of wise and compassionate beings that have come before us. Tinged with mystery and available to everyone, is this not the reality of the Dharma in all its universality offered to every one of us

when, quietly and deliberately, we begin to take responsibility for the whole world each in our own way? None other than the bodhisattva vow made real and compelling because it has arisen out of an intention to courageously meet and positively affect the nitty-gritty affairs of everyday existence.

In the middle of all this dying there was a simultaneous dawning. We were very much alive. We showed up everyday. We laughed. We worked hard and increasingly wisely. We reestablished the Stress Reduction Program in a new location (a little used employee cafeteria) and forged ahead with our research, professional education and medical student programmes. As the first three years of this hard labour wore on, some of my dear and long-standing colleagues who had initially stayed on generously volunteered to leave because they perceived so clearly our financial struggles. Others left because the unwanted yet necessary changes in their job responsibilities were not to their liking. We created a new strategic plan. We asked for help from our patients, professional colleagues and benefactors.

Six months after the first dire audit, the hospital reported to us the discovery of \$183,000 of Center funds that had been encumbered during some of the previous fiscal years and not returned to our operating account after we departed the hospital system. Subtracting \$183,000 from \$480,000 left a deficit of \$297,000. Combined with the required lay-offs, the organizational right sizing enacted, and the momentum we had been gathering in tiny increments, climbing out of this pile of debt seemed downright doable. In three years we were free and clear of all debt. More than 80% of the funds required to return to a balanced budget came directly from our programmatic efforts. The remaining came from gifts and donations by friends of the Center. Forged in the crucible of organizational death and rebirth, this accomplishment altered the consciousness of the Center markedly and to this day. We are one example of a vibrant community that arose *in* disaster.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. The spirit of mastery

In the title of this article I have used the terms 'mindfulness' and 'mastery.' I would like to say something about the latter. Mastery is the deliberate cultivation of inner strength to meet life's continuous challenges. This involves using attainment itself—the objects of attainment and the deliberate renunciation of these objects once attained—as a path of liberation.

Self-discipline, motivation, concentration, patience, endurance, perseverance, will, power, responsibility, and the sense of duty are all cultivated and used in service of learning to *give* rather than take from the world. It is absolutely clear to me that mindfulness and mastery go hand in hand in the cultivation of leadership. Mindfulness meditation is an exquisite technology for cultivating and refining our innate, latent resources for leadership. For most of us living in today's world, it is an inward process completed and made manifest by meeting and mastering the challenges of everyday life.

In all walks of life it will be proved to the seeker after truth that there is a key to success, a key to happiness, a key to advancement and evolution in life; and this key is the attainment of mastery . . . One must check the wrong impulses, even as small as the thought of eating something that one likes, the wish to drink something that one wishes, an impulse to talk back to a person who insults, an impulse to pinch a person by saying a word, an impulse to hurt a person by cutting words, an impulse to get into the secrets of others, the impulse to criticize. All such undesirable impulses can be mastered. And it is not that one has mastered them, but one has gained control over oneself.<sup>5</sup>

My own experience suggests that mastery in its more outward and worldly manifestation is not readily spoken about in regards to meditation and mindfulness practice. I have often wondered why this is so. Perhaps it is because mastery seems to be associated with the aggressive exercise of the will—a kind of striving aimed at dominance of mind over body and other forms of repression and subjugation. Rather, in my experience, mastery is about freedom from habit, the subsequent realization of choice and the realization that mindfulness is not confined to specialized situations or circumstances. Additionally, it seems to me that choice always involves control of oneself. Yet, often enough, control seems to be an aversive word in the Dharma community even as control is expressing itself constantly in our lives as refraining, advancing, yielding, as exercising or withholding power, as surrendering, as conciliation, as forthrightness, as goal setting and attainment, as responsibility, and ultimately as the embodiment of intrinsic freedom. It is the place where the proverbial ‘rubber meets the road,’ none other than meditation in action.

Inwardly speaking, via meditation practice, mastery is cultivated through attending to thoughts, emotions and physical sensations as events in the field of awareness—by allowing these events to arise, be seen, honoured for what they are, and eventually dissipate or dissolve rather than dominating the mind. The process extends and is amplified as we become intimately familiar with our habitual patterns of thinking and acting, and discovering through this familiarization process that we have more choice than we may have previously imagined. It ripens as we recognize that we have our hands on the proverbial tiller and can use all of our interior resources to take our lives into our own hands via the systematic training of the mind and heart. In my experience, this process is enhanced when we begin to turn towards outer circumstances and events with this same inwardly developed approach, perspective, and trained heart-mind. Together, the training of the mind and the cultivation of the heart through meditation and mindfulness coupled with our commitment to meet the outer circumstances of our lives with these same innate qualities and resources (mastery) creates a synergy that may be more powerful than either modality by itself.

My own training has been primarily in the Sufi and Buddhist traditions. I have been a formal student in the western Vipassanā tradition for 27 years and a

student of Sufism for 36 years. My primary Sufi teacher, Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan, sent me to my first Buddhist retreat. The Sufi tradition has a deep, extensive and well-developed body of teachings about meditation, mindfulness, and contemplative practice. There are four main orders and from these four have proliferated a wide array of other orders and lineages. Yet, and importantly so in the context of this article, there are no formal monastic orders. Likewise, there is a long and arduous retreat tradition. Yet, relatively permanent withdrawal from the world is not the primary emphasis. In most instances, both teachers and students marry, have children, and establish businesses and professions. Thus, the inward *and* outward cultivation of mindfulness and mastery 'in service of the real' holds a place of critical importance in the life of the Sufi. As a student in this tradition, I have had the good fortune to be exposed to and systematically explore and study these teachings in depth and over an extended period of time. *Mastery Through Accomplishment* (Khan, 1985), written by Pir-O-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan in the 1920s (the first Sufi teacher to come to the West), is a beginning primer for this body of teachings.

Mastery is cultivated and nurtured through the friction arising out of inner practice *meeting* the outward circumstances of our lives. It is this meeting point that affords us the possibility of mindfulness being made real and therefore of great and lasting value in our lives, relationships and work in the world. In my experience, accomplishment and attainment are valuable opportunities for making meditation practice useful because the circumstances, issues, and responsibilities we face daily challenge us to consolidate and actualize latent qualities and attributes directly into our lives. It seems to me that the real challenge before us in our current age is to live a life in the world infused by the depth and breadth of the inner life:

It is not necessary for man to leave all the things of the world and go into retreat. He can attend to his business, to his profession; to his duties in life yet at the same time develop this spirit in himself, which is the spirit of mastery. The spirit of mastery is like a spark; by blowing continually upon it it will grow into a blaze, and out of it a flame will arise. In reality all is within.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. Leadership

Now, let us turn our attention more directly to the relationship between mindfulness, mastery and leadership. I will begin by posing a question that I posed to myself when I began thinking about the topic for this special issue.

As a leader facing a significant, protracted crisis, in what ways, if any, was the practice of mindfulness useful in informing and guiding my actions, decisions, and leadership?

The usual list of characteristics found in books about leaders include such attributes as visionary, influencer, role model, powerful, responsible, inspirational, charismatic, dependable, and unselfish. These are worthwhile and valuable

attributes of leaders. Yet, for many of the fine leaders that I have met over the years, there is an abiding sense that leaders and leadership are not necessarily the same. Leaders lead; they set goals, make decisions, meet their benchmarks, support, nurture and advance those they lead as well as their organizations. For these same leaders, *leadership* resides in a wider perspective—a view that is global, grounded in the recognition of connectedness and a sense of what they describe as ‘universal accountability.’ This is heartening and hopefully counters in some small measure our stereotypical view of the concerns and attitudes of corporate leaders.

In the following section, I would like to offer another perspective on the characteristics of leadership by describing qualities that might, in fact, be foundational attributes for many of those referenced above. In this final section, I have attempted to identify five human qualities encouraged by the interior work of mindfulness practice and how they were strengthened and made more solid and available to me in my day-to-day experience of leadership. As you will see, I have paired attributes as a means of effectively identifying both the dissolution (*solve*) and integration (*coagule*) phases of their development and expression. Neither definitive nor exhaustive, I have attempted to describe only what I have lived through.

### *Falling and intimacy*

Learning to fall is a highly underrated skill. When I was a young boy living in Japan I studied Jujitsu. During the entire first year of weekly classes my teacher kept throwing me over his hip, teaching me how to fall. Mostly, this was all that happened.

Through the prolonged crisis I have detailed, I learned over and over again that ‘the fear of going down’ is far more terrifying than the actuality of ‘going down.’ The skillfulness by which mindfulness practices teaches us how to be thrown and undone over and over again—and to go along with it voluntarily and purposefully without exerting our conditioned, habitual patterns of control—afforded me the real possibility of being awake in hell as well as a lot of other situations.

In the situation I have recounted, my colleagues and I lost the comfort of history. We lost our status. We lost our place. What could not happen to us actually *did* happen. We disintegrated and dissolved. In the larger community of the medical center, often enough, we were seen as irresponsible or as victims. Even some of our closest colleagues accused us of giving up on or compromising ‘the vision’ when we altered the original structure of the Clinic as a means of accommodating a range of new financial and operational realities, developing a new strategic plan and initiating a new business model.

*Falling* gave me a fresh and far deeper appreciation of *intimacy*—intimacy with the texture of failure, the consistency of dissolution, the feel of humiliation, the rough surface of shame and the heat of disintegration. It softened and helped me begin to appreciate and feel more directly the anxiety and uncertainty of my co-workers. This made me a more compassionate leader. I came to see that by

allowing myself to closely touch all that was arising within me, I began to develop a deeper appreciation for my own struggles and those of my patients and colleagues. This informed and enhanced my ability to stop, to listen more closely and more fully to my larger institutional colleagues, particularly the ones I came to understand had acted in their own perceived best interests and those of their departments as they attempted to minimize the damage and stave off the looming uncertainty of the merger.

*Surrender and sovereignty*

In my experience, the capacity to surrender is tremendously powerful. This has nothing to do with resignation, abdication, or giving up. It has everything to do with seeing situations clearly, exactly as they are. It has to do with realizing deep in our bellies and bones that there are moments in our lives when any move is the wrong move, that it is time to *yield* to reality. I know well that allowing the sense of weakness and vulnerability to be present in all its vividness is often a great and hidden source of strength.

The soft overcomes the hard;  
the gentle overcomes the rigid.  
Everyone knows this is true,  
but few can put it into practice.<sup>7</sup>

Surrendering to the impersonal nature of the events that had transpired, to the perceived sense of hypocrisy or lack of understanding on the part of others about the work of the Clinic and Center that I felt early on in the process, and to the perceived injustice about the situation that I was carrying within me was hard practice. There was a lot of seeing things clearly required and a great deal of letting go asked of me. I had to surrender history and, more so, I had to give up timidity and naïveté. These mind states and attitudes were too safe, too easily taken advantage of and, most importantly, a misrepresentation of what I knew inwardly to be true. As a consequence, I surrendered to having to act: to openly expressing the actuality of my experience, to stating what I saw as so in the presence of people who had the power to exercise their authority in ways that could close our doors. It seemed like everything had to go. I had to surrender all that hindered my giving voice to the lion's roar growing stronger and more uncompromising within me.

Through this process I came to understand more directly and fully the nuanced relationship between surrender and sovereignty. The surrendering I am pointing to is not about surrendering to the will of others in hopes of getting what I wanted. Nor was it a going along with something that fell below my ideals or sense of a clear conscience. By learning to repeatedly surrender my conditioning and small mindedness, I was learning to surrender to the truth, to what was deepest, most functional and indomitable within me. My experience suggests that this larger view of the function of surrender—as a wearing away of the purely personal concerns of self—may be the real source of vision and inspiration,

integrity and nobility. As far as I can tell, there seems to be no end to this process. Surrendering and the challenges sometimes associated with this just keep happening over and over again.

### *Conciliation and wisdom*

During the four months of deliberations and negotiations with hospital and medical school officials, my primary aim was to come to an agreement that both parties could live with well. This did not entail giving up principles or positions I believed in or that I deemed best for the Center. It did involve understanding the 'other' far more closely and, in turn, attempting to reside in some broader view of the issues before us that we could agree upon.

One day, deep into the negotiating process, the Center's business administrator and I were scheduled to meet with the man who was ultimately going to decide our fate. The meeting was scheduled to take place in a small conference room next to his office. In private, this administrator strenuously insisted to me that I sit at the head of the table directly opposite this gentleman. I disagreed and instead deliberately sat to his left. I wanted to have to turn towards him, not to 'face off' with him in any way. After the meeting, she was incredibly upset with me. She said that, in her view, my choice of seating had seriously jeopardized the Center's position and hopes of making our way into the medical school. She told me that she knew this man well and that 'He only respected men who challenged him and who he perceived as his equal.' I responded by saying that I had no intention or desire to go 'man to man' with him. As I saw it, something else was called for in our relationship at that moment. I am quite familiar with the value of friction and persistent dialogue and debate around points of difference. However, in this situation I was not going for differences; I was going for understanding and agreement.

Together, he and I looked carefully at documents during this meeting. Seated as we were, we were leaning close to one another, at times our heads were nearly touching; our hands were in close proximity sometimes resting together on the same document. No doubt, on one level there was a clear power differential between us but I was going for agreement, not for defiance. I needed him to understand the potential for the Center to grow and be of benefit to the Medical School, scientifically, programmatically and financially. I remember him stopping at one point while closely examining our proposed business model and forcefully challenging a key yet politically contentious component of our proposal: 'With this new business model, why do you need the Stress Reduction Program any longer?' Being so close, I was able to speak very deliberately and very quietly to him, 'Because it is the heart of our work, the interface of our research and our professional education and training programs.' He responded immediately, 'Oh, it's your laboratory. Okay. I see.' My sense is that this was the turning point of the entire four month process. I am pretty sure that sitting directly opposite from him would not have produced the same result. Of course, one never knows.

In my experience, the quality of conciliation is under-appreciated and, as a consequence, it is not systematically nurtured and cultivated. Yet, looking at my life, I see that it is a foundational source of understanding because it allows me to more thoroughly consider the viewpoints and perspectives, emotions and ideas of others. This does not mean that I have to always agree with or consistently yield to the viewpoints of others but it does help me to meet people where they are and begin to understand them. For me, this process begins at home, in my interior. By learning to meet and befriend myself through mindfulness practice, I am learning to make room within myself for whatever arises, whether I like it or not. This itself is an act of hospitality, an expression of a basic warmth and friendliness that, in turn, begins to flow out into my relationships with others. As such, it is the basis of understanding and therefore the foundation of wisdom. In turn, the increasing sense of understanding of self and others seems to me to be a central wellspring of self-confidence—a requisite quality for all leaders. Increasingly, I notice that it is not possible for me to be conciliatory and defensive—or dismissive of another (even in thought)—at the same time. Because conciliation it is by nature respectful, it helps me get along with people. It makes me humble and allows me to accommodate difference and diversity because I can rest more easily and fully in my interior sense of 'bigness' and capacity to accommodate and consider diverse views more readily.

*Standing inside of things and sustained concentration*

While there were aspects of this described crisis that required decision making on a daily basis, the capacity to learn how to stand inside of and 'hold' tension for long stretches of time without acting prematurely became one of my greatest allies. This capacity is continually cultivated and sharpened by mindfulness practice and also by working inside a large institution where everything takes time and has to pass through many minds and hands. This aspect of mindfulness practice is not simply learning to 'tolerate' conditions (we have all had a lot of training in this). Rather, it is about recovering or re-learning freshly and then residing for a time in the 'not knowing' and in the willingness to stay put until the right decision or action emerges into awareness.

As I have described above, the negotiation process with the hospital and medical school lasted for four months. However, the final decision about the fate of the Center did not come until very late in the game. For well more than 100 days we had no clear idea about what the final outcome would be. All of this time, we collectively stood inside of uncertainty and not knowing. Still, we came to work everyday, continued many of our planned programmes and activities, watched some of our colleagues depart, faced the webs of our individual and collective minds, and continued to negotiate. Here's what I learned: mental fabrications about the way things used to be (past), how they might be or we wanted them to be (future), are crippling; they drain off enormous amounts of much needed energy and in the process cut off the flow of creativity. More so, in the turbulence

of these 'mind waves' the present moment is either unnoticed or, when noticed, nearly intolerable. As I learned to live more lightly in the tension, uncertainty about the future became less paralyzing. Likewise, it was no longer an excuse for inaction. As a result, we planned, executed when and where we were able, and developed an enhanced appreciation for the process of emergence.

Nonetheless, the cultivation of patience was and remains a very challenging and difficult practice; it has a lot to do with endurance and the development of a long view with regards to the attainment of a goal or ideal. Described as 'one of the wings to the power of concentration' in the Sufi teachings on mastery (Khan 1962), patience is a critical capacity for leaders who are constantly called upon to develop, direct and sustain unwavering concentration on an object often for long periods of time. The capacity to sustain concentration and remain intently focused is supported and nurtured by patience and is one of the ways that single-mindedness and the capacity for a more focused attention is developed through our everyday affairs.

### *Emptying of self and innovation*

There was something transpiring behind the appearance of dissolution and death. The disintegration of our individual and collective identities was confusing, wrenching, crushing, and ultimately, freeing. There was a time when there was no real direction, no real place to turn and gather advice from. It all stopped us cold. We endured 100 days of not knowing our fate and even after the momentary relief of knowing that we had a place within the medical school, we faced three years of debt and sustained financial uncertainty. All of this forced us to halt, *feel* the situation as fully as possible and the unhinging of the past. We were emptied out. We knew it. Through the dying, my colleagues and I came to life.

We became bold; we began to shape a future that surely had the seeds from the past but that required a new garden in which to nourish the old while planting new seeds and new visions. I discovered that I loved the entrepreneurial spirit required to '*Maintain your academic and scholarly work, run your operation like a business and float our own boat.*' The root meaning of entrepreneur is from the French *entreprendre*—to undertake. I loved the feeling of 'undertaking' and shaping something fresh, vital and, hopefully, of greater service to the world. While initially daunting, this mandate was and remains perfectly matched to the innovative and entrepreneurial spirit that has permeated the Clinic and Center for three decades. Being so, it offers my colleagues and I the freedom to be boldly innovative by developing and implementing programmes and initiatives, partnerships, policies and economies that reflected our deepest values. Without hesitation, whether or not I have achieved any success, I can say that I began to discover what Warren Buffet has embodied so fully in his own life:

You've achieved success in your field when you don't know whether what you're doing is work or play.

In summary, my experience strongly suggests that the heat forged in the crucible of this crisis, coupled with my experience of leading the Center for Mindfulness over the last 10 years furthered within me the unfolding of a range of human qualities and attributes generally associated with meditation and mindfulness training. Likewise, it unlocked dormant possibilities that may not have as readily come to the fore and been available within me without the friction and heat arising from these life events. Reflecting upon this, I would have to say that former United Nations Secretary General, Dag Hammarskjöld, had a keen insight when he said,

In our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through  
the world of action.

### 5. Mindfulness practice in contemporary contexts

I have attempted to describe and make more real some small aspect of the interior work of meditation and mindfulness practice and the outer circumstances in which we find ourselves as a fertile ground for the cultivation of leadership. While a topic for another article, likewise, and in parallel, I'd like to suggest that our current conception of practice or Dharma centres might also be in need of a wider view. By example, The Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society is a practice centre in the fullest sense of the word. Yet, unlike traditional practice centres, its context bears a very close resemblance to Jonah residing in the belly of the whale. For 31 years, the life and work of the Center as been purposefully *embedded* in a mainstream academic medical centre. Being *inside*, it is subject to all the rules and requirements of medicine and science and patient care, to all the rules, procedural and legal, of a large institution—an institution that is itself nested within a larger University system, that is itself nested within the State of Massachusetts. Therefore, by its very nature and location, the Center stands in two worlds simultaneously.

Through these years, we have used this unique position as a laboratory—an experimental ground for testing ways to remain absolutely and unequivocally true to the foundational roots of the work while interfacing with and living fully in the world of people not particularly interested in traditional practice centres. Given the state of the world, such 'vehicles' may be well worth contemplating and encouraging. While saddled with their own set of constraints and procedures, working within a large, mainstream institution creates a friction that, if used wisely, can provide an incredibly rich ground in which to realize first-hand the interconnectedness of the world, and to develop a host of approaches and methods that express the potential of the trained mind and cultivated heart. Freed from the cultural constraints, familiar jargon and underlying assumptions of traditional centers for contemplative practice, no matter what their persuasion, such institutional environments force one to skillfully translate, transmit and embody, in a secular manner, the essential reality of interconnectedness, mind-heart training, wholesome ethics and economies and universal responsibility in a manner that is

non-alienating and inclusive, welcoming and highly participatory. Given the state of the world, attempts to forge such laboratories should be encouraged, supported and analysed with regards to their accessibility and effectiveness.

As I began one of my earliest long retreats, the parting words of my teacher were, 'Enjoy your death.' He said it with such clear-eyed knowing and genuine care for me. Within the context of that secluded retreat, I discovered the truth of his words. Through the events described, I have lived into the everyday reality of the abiding wisdom in these words *outside* of the practice hall and retreat setting. Of what value might the invitation to *enjoy your death* be for those of us called to lead? What if behind all the doing, decision making and executing, we come to realize in our bellies and bones the power of dissolution and disintegration to reshape in fundamental ways our conditioned ways of perceiving, thinking, and acting? What if we purposefully lent ourselves to these recurring cycles of disintegration and reintegration? What might we learn by allowing our hard held views, opinions and ideas about the way things are to unravel, melt, and dissolve? What might we see and envision freshly? What might happen if, behind all the 'leading,' we reckoned with the possibility that we are being *led*?

Attending to what these questions are pointing to asks much of us. Learning to stop, listening closely, understanding situations and making wise choices and decisions all require us to become increasingly intimate with our interior. Perhaps our real work is to learn to lead from the *inside* out by exploring and understanding, first-hand, our inner terrain and in so doing come to realize that, like any other human capacity, the attributes and qualities needed for effective leadership are innate and, therefore, capable of being called forth and integrated, via the discipline of mindfulness, into everyday life at work and at home.

## NOTES

1. Last stanza of 'The Substance You Taste' from *The Hand of Poetry* (Khan, 1993).
2. Coleman and Moyne (1995, Poems in chapter 20).
3. For a more detailed discussion of 'duty is Dharma' see Khan (1962, Vol. I, chap. VII, 'The Purpose of Life', 213–17).
4. For an historical account of community transformation arising *in* disasters see Solnit (2009).
5. Khan (1978, see Chapter 3: 'Man, the Master of His Destiny: Training and Mastery').
6. Khan (1978).
7. Mitchell (1988, chapter 36), translation by Stephen Mitchell.

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