

AN INCREDIBLE TIME: CONTEMPLATIVE LEADERSHIP AT THE EDGE OF TRANSFORMATION

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We are in such an incredible time in the evolution of the species. We are breaking into a new mode of consciousness. In the last 50 years we have experienced amazing breakthroughs in terms of civil rights, women's rights, psychology, quantum physics and the new Universe story to mention a few. Each breakthrough has invited us to see ourselves differently as interdependent and part of the Earth community.

In this incredible time we find ourselves at the edge of transformation dealing with many significant issues of culture, meaning, and identity-issues that are political and economic and spiritual-national and global and many which defy categories and borders. With our new understandings we sense that they cannot be addressed in the typical ways of discourse and leadership.

Contemplation and Leadership

Our current culture keeps us separate and pits us against others. Given the complexity of these times, we need to look at an issue from its many sides. When discussions get coded in aggressive language and take place at a feverish pitch, it is very difficult to reflect and act in a stance of

openness. Our exchanges with one another can create tension levels that are so high that we need to step back and pause. Contemplation offers a new approach to leadership that has the potential to lead to more creative, more just resolutions to critical issues.

Contemplation is a form of prayer, but it is also a way of being. Leaders can cultivate the dispositions and attitudes for a contemplative way of being and couple that with a variety of good processes and practical skills. The contemplative posture is one that opens us up to ambiguity, paradox, and the unknown because it releases for us a lot of our preconceived ways of being and thinking and it releases us of our ego. As we try to get in touch with the God within and become open to the Spirit, we are doing some of the very difficult inner work so essential if we are to respond in new ways.

When we engage in contemplation, we develop a welcoming heart and a way of listening to others that allows us to really hear and not just focus on what we think we should be hearing. When we engage in a contemplative stance we realize we are not in control and that we don't

always have the best answer. That seems very simple, but it can be rather difficult when addressing critical issues like health care, immigration, or the survival of the planet; when working with people who bring conflicting perspectives to the table; when demands on time are many or when decisions are made too quickly as is often the case for leaders today. We don't always engage others' wisdom in such a way that something new might emerge. As we become more contemplative, we can hold the differences that we experience, we can take people out of the boxes we have placed them in.

Cultivating Contemplative Leadership

Contemplation is more than just sitting quietly. Contemplation involves getting in touch with the Spirit within, and that takes some discipline. Cultivating contemplative leadership begins with each individual leader and leadership team. It requires allowing time and space each day to get in touch with the inner spirit whether in moments of quiet or prayer or walks in nature. It requires overcoming fear especially of giving up power; it requires learning to trust at deeper levels.

As each leader or leadership team begins to cultivate a contemplative spirit they can approach an issue in a contemplative way by taking a long, loving look at whatever question is at hand. Together a group can look upon the various facets of an issue, and listen to all the voices speaking about that issue, even the ones saying exactly what we dislike. The key is how we listen to ourselves and listen to others.



Leaders must create an atmosphere that encourages people to take the time for contemplation. Each time a meeting agenda is set build in time to pause, be quiet, and prepare for listening as well as speaking. Be intentional in how meetings are structured, in how people are invited into a conversation. Starting meetings with time for contemplative silence creates an atmosphere of real listening, and quality conversations ensue.

How Contemplative Leadership Works: A Personal Example

I chair my congregation's responsible investment committee. We have high level talks with people from DTE Energy about emissions, nuclear power and alternative energy. When our meetings with them are held at our motherhouse, we take the lead at the meeting. At those times we use a reflection piece that helps us share on some common ground before we launch into the issues under discussion.

One time we wanted to acknowledge that all of us around the table were doing a work that we care about. We spent about 30 minutes sharing on what gives each of us energy in our work, no matter which part of the industry we are involved with. Each of us, whether we were the CEO, the shareholder or consumer, or the legislative advocacy head, spoke. It was very interesting because it shifted our relationship with one another and created a different atmosphere in which we could talk.

Another time we met we shared on a reading that encouraged us to think about if we did our job in light of its effect on the seventh generation. What would we do differently if our outcomes were not based on quarterly profits, or a two-year election cycle, or the immediate need of a consumer? It was from there that we began our dialogue about alternative energy and nuclear power plants. Now,

can I say that this changed any policies? I can't. But can I say that we all thought about things in different ways after that discussion? I think so. And we all keep coming back to continue the conversation.

In this incredible time at the edge of transformation contemplative leadership can open us to dealing with the significant issues of our time in imaginative new ways.

Nancy Sylvester, IHM is founder and director of the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue (ICCD). ICCD is beginning its 3rd decade with new resources and programs. For information go to www.iccdinstitute.org.