



Habits of the heart

Being a light in the darkness

I HAVE STRUGGLED to know where to begin with a reflection on leadership as we experience our country as it is today. We are longing for the end of the pandemic. We are looking for a commitment to racial equity. And we are hoping for some level of political harmony. For two years now, what we thought was “normal” was turned upside down.

The reality is nothing remains the same and maybe “normal” wasn’t so great after all. In the midst of confusion, uncertainty and grief, we have been given the opportunity to reset.

The question is: How will we reset? And, who will lead?

What the COVID-19 pandemic imposed was a pause from our daily, take-it-for-granted routines and spiraled us into the unknown. For many, working remotely inspired an opportunity to relocate.

For others, it meant an opportunity to consider a job change. For far too many women, it meant leaving the workforce in order to care for children or aging parents. And we have collectively suffered unspeakable loss. In this country alone, more than 1 million people have died from COVID-19. It’s been suggested that for every person who dies, there are at least nine people who grieve. Who, then, has escaped the impact of this life/death experience?

Even though the dust is settling a bit, the storm is not over, and life continues to hold uncertainty and chaos in our work, in our homes and in our communities.

Leaders have a remarkable opportunity to re-engage by acknowledging our reality and shining the light on what is going well.

Today, our hearts and spirits are fragile. It takes more energy to receive constructive criticism. I have wondered if performance reviews ought to be suspended unless there is something time sensitive that needs to be addressed. And, instead for a leader to say: “Thank you for helping to keep our company afloat during the pandemic. I am glad that you are still here. I am glad that you are alive.”

What difference do you think that might make for a leader in your organization to hear those words from you?

Parker Palmer, author, teacher, poet and all-around amazing human being, wrote “Habits of the Heart.” While these were written in 2014, in his book, “Healing the Heart of Democracy,” they clearly have relevance for leaders today.

HABITS OF THE HEART:

- 1. An understanding that we are all in this together.** Parker reminds us that in spite of our, “illusions of individualism and national superiority,” we are interconnected human beings, dependent on one another. This view for a leader leads to a deeper recognition of our common humanity regardless of titles or positions within the organization.
- 2. An appreciation of the value of “otherness.”** When we read these words, we may be translating to “us vs. them.” For Parker, the words mean “us and them,” and suggests the notion of the ancient tradition of hospitality to the stranger. And here, he says, the stranger has much to teach us! This is not to minimize differences. Rather, it is to embrace them.
- 3. An ability to hold tension in life-giving ways.** Our tendency is to want to be right, which doesn’t allow us to hold tension in life-giving ways, with curiosity and care. The poet, Yehuda Amichai writes:
*From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow in the spring.
The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled like a yard.
But doubts and loves dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined house once stood.*
- 4. A sense of personal voice and agency.**

For so many reasons, many of us lack the confidence that we can make a difference. “We grow up in educational and religious

institutions that treat us as members of an audience instead of actors in (life’s) drama.” As a result, we can become spectators to our own lives.

We must find our voices and learn to speak our truth even in the face of criticism. Good leaders encourage that level of communication within their organizations. They are not afraid of the dialogue or the conflict.

- 5. A capacity to create community.** Without community, it is nearly impossible to exercise the “power of one” in a way that allows power to multiply. Leaders have an opportunity to create and sustain community within their organizations by creating the space for building relationships and valuing differences.

In order for these habits to become a reality, leaders will need the commitment and self-awareness to welcome new possibilities. It will take the willingness to be vulnerable by letting go of what was perceived as “normal.” It will take courage. It will take heart.” ■



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