

Some Thoughts on the Role of Spirituality in Transformational Leadership

By Helen S. Astin

I began studying and writing about leadership in the early 1980's. The first endeavor was a 1981 Wingspread Conference that focused on the role of women's leadership during the onset and early years of a social movement, the second wave of the women's movement. Subsequently, my colleague, Carole Leland and I wrote a book entitled, Women of Influence, Women of Vision: A Cross-generational Study of Leaders and Social Change. The book, based on personal interviews with 77 women leaders in education-- broadly defined-- explored the idea of leadership for social change. We found that these women exercised collective leadership that was driven by a passionate commitment to social justice. They were persevering and very focused on the tasks at hand.

Later, in collaboration with a number of colleagues, I became involved in studies of institutional transformation with special attention given to the role of leadership in the transformational process. This work, together with my research on women leaders for social justice, provided both the inspiration and the empirical grounding for a monograph entitled, Leadership Reconsidered: Engaging Higher Education in Social Change. The monograph, produced with several colleagues, outlines the principles of transformative leadership and addresses how different constituent groups (students, administrators, and faculty) within colleges and universities can exercise transformative leadership.

The principles and the processes of transformative leadership outlined in the monograph draw directly from empirical research: Research on Women in Leadership; the influence of peers on our behavior; and the large body of recent work on leadership that has challenged traditional notions of hierarchical (top down) leadership by focusing more on relational forms of leadership and on the power of collaborative work.

What prompted us to write this monograph was the belief that higher education has the capacity for developing transformative leaders who can contribute to solving many of the problems and challenges that face our society, and the world – global warming, religious and ethnic conflict, the misdistribution of wealth and opportunity, the decline of citizen interest and participation in the political process, and the increasing ineffectiveness of government. We saw these issues in many ways as problems of leadership, problems that are not likely to be solved by traditional hierarchical approaches that emphasize individualism, competitiveness, and materialism.

In beginning to formulate an alternative model of transformative leadership, we articulated four premises of leadership for social change:

- Leadership is concerned with fostering change in contrast to the notion of management which suggests preservation or maintenance
- Leadership is inherently value-based since it is intentional and purposive
- Since efforts to initiate change can come from anyone in the institution, all people are potential leaders
- Leadership is a group process, a collective effort, rather than the actions of a single individual.

In accepting these four premises we felt that it would be critical for us to address certain fundamental questions: What values should guide the leadership process? Towards what end is the leadership effort directed? How do individuals initiate change efforts? How are leadership groups formed?

Values of Leadership

Since we saw leadership as inherently value-based, the leadership model outlined here is predicted on three basic values: the need to create a supportive environment where people can grow, thrive and live in peace with one another; the importance of promoting harmony with nature and thereby provide sustainability for future generations; and the need to create communities of reciprocal care and shared responsibility where every person matters and each person's welfare and dignity is respected and supported.

These value-based purposes should thus be reflected in how the leadership group works together and in the qualities individuals exemplify within the group process. We identified five group qualities and five specific individual qualities.

The five Group Qualities are:

1. *Collaboration*: Collaboration is the cornerstone of an effective group leadership process. It empowers each individual, engenders trust, and capitalizes on the diverse talents of group members within the group.
2. *Shared purpose*: What are the desired changes or transformations that inform how leadership effort is directed? What needs to be changed and why?
3. *Disagreement with respect*: Since differences within a group are inevitable, the key to maintaining the group's cohesion and effectiveness is in how we deal with differences.
4. *Division of Labor*: Each member of the group is involved in making her individual contributions to the overall effort according to each one's talents, strengths, and skills, and
5. *Creating and sustaining a learning environment*: Learning from each other, acquiring shared knowledge, interpersonal skills and technical competencies

Individual Qualities

The five individual qualities that are essential to a well functioning leadership effort are:

1. *Self-Knowledge*: Awareness of your own beliefs, values, attitudes, emotions. What motivates you to seek change? What are your talents and strengths as well as your personal limitations?
2. *Authenticity/Integrity*: Do I behave in congruence with what I believe/value? Do I walk my talk?
3. *Commitment*: Do I bring sufficient passion and intensity about our collective work to sustain the group effort. What is my level of persistence?
4. *Empathy/understanding of others*: Do I work on my capacity to put myself in the other person's place? Do I listen carefully?
5. *Competence*: How do I enhance my competence to contribute to the group effort? This means being knowledgeable, and continuing to develop appropriate knowledge and skills.

The Spiritual Dimension(s) of Transformative Leadership

In thinking about transformative leadership that aims to alter the culture and structure of an organization I have come to the realization that such work calls for a personal transformation. How do we change at the individual level in terms of our inner/interior self and in terms of our behaviors and individual actions?

To be able to work collaboratively for organizational transformation requires a great deal of individual work in the cultivation of the personal qualities just discussed: self awareness, empathy, authenticity and so forth. How do we cultivate these qualities? How do we go inward to examine the values that we hold dear to ourselves, being whole and integrated in our personal and professional lives? How do we become more caring toward each other and our environment? How do we cultivate our inner resources? How do we touch bases with our spirituality, the domain of our life that pertains to ultimate meaning and purpose?

Peter Senge and Margaret Wheatley, both thoughtful scholars of organizations and of change in organizations, in a recent article reflected on the interconnections between leadership and spirituality. Senge sees "leadership as being deeply personal and inherently collective." And it is that personal dimension of leadership that calls, according to Margaret Wheatley, for being aware, listening attentively, and then letting go. Both of these scholars believe that facilitating change in organizations requires that one is able to understand her own habitual patterns and, if necessary, to be willing to move into a different way of being. To do that demands reflection, a careful look into who we are, what our habitual patterns of behavior are and in turn, a willingness to make a shift in thought and behavior, a shift both in our beliefs and in our actions (see interview in Shambhala Sun, Jan. 2001).

In order to begin to connect leadership and spirituality and thus to understand how our spirituality and its cultivation can enable us to practice transformative leadership, it is important to look at what we mean by spirituality. In looking at a number of definitions of the term "spirituality," there appear to be two elements that surface: that of *interconnectedness* and that of the question of *purpose and meaning* in life. For our national study on Spirituality in Higher Education we have adopted the following definition: Spirituality has to do with the values that we hold most dear, our sense of who we are and where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here—the meaning and purpose that we see in our work and our life—and our sense of connectedness to each other and to the world around us. Spirituality can also have to do with aspects of our experience that are not easy to define or talk about, such things as intuition, inspiration, the mysterious, and the mystical.

We believe that there are two important aspects of spirituality -- *values* and a sense of *connectedness* -- that drive leadership for transformation. And while many have argued that leadership is *doing*, and spirituality is *being*, it is in *connecting* what we do with who we are that helps us see how leadership interfaces with spirituality.

As paradigms have shifted to less hierarchical and more collaborative or "servant" models of leadership, we have also witnessed the emergence of many new studies and books on leadership and spirituality. It seems to me that this growing body of literature on spirituality and leadership has been fueled by the recognition that we need to foster a greater sense of community in organizations, to promote the notion of leadership as service, and to see leadership as meaning making.

This new area of inquiry has also mushroomed among recent PhD dissertations. Yoder, for example, in her doctoral dissertation of academic administrators (1998) found that effective administrators tended to describe themselves as being spiritual. In their own words, being spiritual reflected an awareness of being part of something bigger than oneself. Yoder's subjects also enumerated a number of spiritual values that acted as anchors for grounding their actions. These values included such things as respect, human goodness, connection, integrity, equity, humility, service, and personal growth. To me these represent ideal qualities for the exercise of transformative leadership, since they apply directly to most of the individual and group values that we included in our model of transformative leadership for social change. Thus, to be able to shape a *common purpose* you need to have respect for each other in the group, and to believe in the goodness of others. And for the group to work *collaboratively*, you need to work on personal growth (*self awareness*), to have *integrity*, to be *authentic*, and to feel connected -- all critical qualities needed to sustain the collective group effort. And, of course, it is humility that enables one to *disagree with respect*. All of these qualities, essential to leadership, are qualities that can be cultivated by doing the inner work, by recognizing one's spirituality, and by nurturing it.

Helen S. Astin serves as co-principal investigator of "Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose". Dr. Astin is professor emeritus and a senior scholar at the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) located within UCLA's Graduate School of Education & Information Studies.