

Editorial Musings

Leading from Deep Coherence

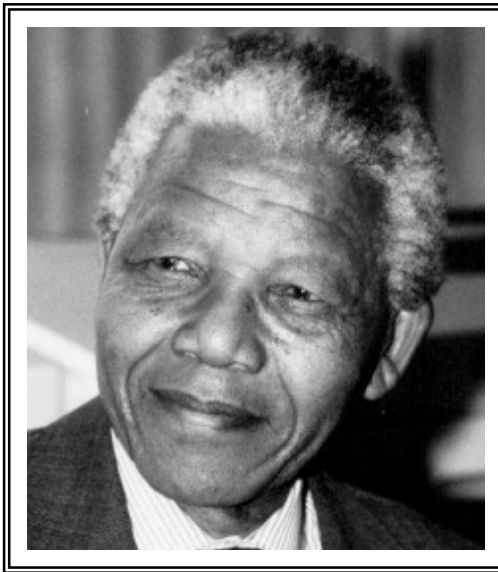
Since we started seriously mulling the issue of leadership for the *Quarterly*, my mind has kept returning to the idea of cortical invariant representations, those neural patterns forged in the fires of experience that tell us the future is going to be like the past (Hawkins & Blakeslee, 2004). Focusing for the moment on a consideration of ethical leadership (which I would define as exerting influence on behalf of a more awake and compassionate society), how does a person rally a group to move beyond the neural push of expectations to consistently embrace a new vision?

One part of the answer may be that this leader is able to *pay attention to intention* in a particularly focused and consistent way (Schwartz & Begley, 2002; Siegel, 2007). Jeff Schwartz and Dan Siegel would tell us that such mental focus changes the way the brain is firing, moving energy and information in new patterns that are not bound entirely by established invariant representations. We might then also imagine that through interpersonal resonance, this person is able to ground social visions that are already stirring in the populace in a less focused and consistent way. He or she becomes the maypole around which others may dance.

What allows a person to become this steady presence? Another way to ask this question might be, what *doesn't* get in the way of such steadiness? Understanding that living systems move toward greater complexity unless constrained in ways that prevent such movement, we might picture a brain with sufficient integration that implicit forces don't run away with the person, at least in this arena of life. Picturing Dan Siegel's (2007) Triangle of Well-Being, we can see how such neural

integration is the companion of a coherent mind and empathic relationships.

We might take Nelson Mandela as our example. In a *Time* magazine article (2008) around his 90th birthday, his long-time friend and biographer, Richard Stengel, talked about Mandela's secrets of leadership. First came his unshakable dedication to the ideal of ending apartheid. Second, his willingness to talk with the so-called enemy even when his followers thought he had lost his bearings. Third, his conscious intention to maintain interpersonal integration with supporters and opponents alike. Fourth, his comfort with contradictions and his appreciation for the complex causes of any situation. He did not see things or people through the lens of good or bad, black or white.



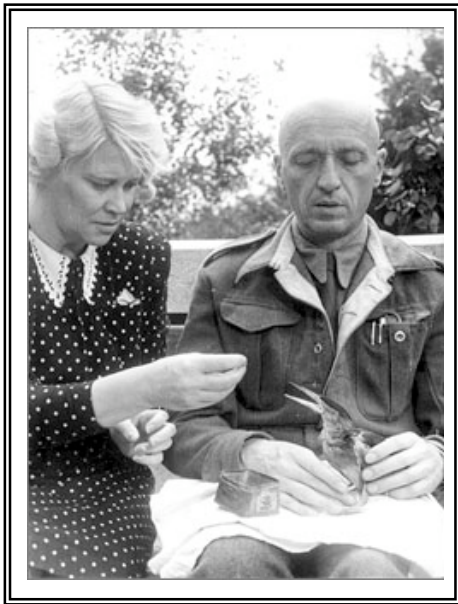
What do we hear in these characteristics? Solid middle prefrontal integration, in all likelihood. His capacity for flexible thought; the deliberation with which he spoke in meetings, making sure everyone was heard and considered; his willingness to learn about and develop an empathic understanding of the Afrikaners who had oppressed black South Africans for centuries; his capacity for attuned communication with almost everyone - these are the hallmarks of a largely coherent mind, particularly in regard to the central issue. With strong middle prefrontal integration, the brain's limbic upset is much less likely to gain a foothold and derail the visionary train. However, this does not mean he was a perfect person, and, in fact, he struggled in his intimate life. However, in all the states of mind related to the central issues, he remained remarkably consistent and balanced, particularly as he matured in prison and after his

release.

Stengel shares the story of a plane flight during which the small craft lost an engine. Everyone was terrified, but found some calmness through watching Nelson Mandela read his newspaper without apparent concern. When they landed, he said to Stengel, “Man, I was *terrified* up there.” Was he being inauthentic by not showing his fear? Perhaps instead he was able to pay attention to the state of mind that supported the central vision rather than to the limbic terror, making it possible for his fellow travelers to resonate with his apparent calmness. Since all interpersonal systems are bi-directional, it is also likely that the strength

others gained from him was transmitted back to further amplify his capacity to remain such a steady presence.

The result of his capacity for holding and embodying the central vision of ending apartheid fueled the transformation of powerfully engrained invariant representations – the inevitability of hatred and strife, and the hopelessness of protracted oppression, to name but two. In my eyes, his two most remarkable achievements were bringing Afrikaners in to share power immediately, and resisting the pull to become president-for-life. What an amazing capacity to continue to pay attention to intention, even after victory.



Jan and Antonina Zabinski
Out of compassion, they
saved over 300 Jewish
people during the Holocaust,
sheltering them at their zoo,
on their way to freedom.

Intrigued by the personality of rescuers, Malka Drucker and Gay Block interviewed over a hundred, and found they shared certain key personality traits. Rescuers tended to be decisive, fast-thinking, risk-taking, independent, adventurous, openhearted, rebellious, and unusually flexible – able to switch plans, abandon habits, or change ingrained routines at a moment’s notice. They tended to be nonconformists, and though many rescuers held solemn principles worth dying for, they didn’t regard themselves as heroic. Typically one would say, as Jan did: “I only did my duty – if you can save somebody’s life, it’s your duty to try.” Or: “We did it because it was the right thing to do.”

--Diane Ackerman,
The Zookeeper’s Wife

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