

## Leaders Shamelessly Lost

by Dr. Paul Dunion, Transformational Faculty Member

Leaders are especially vulnerable to the cultural mandate that they are not supposed to be lost. Laurence Gonzales' seminal work, *Deep Survival*, suggests that when leaders are lost, denial of being lost is inevitable. "Being lost then, is not a location; it is a transformation. It is a failure of mind. It can happen in the woods or it can happen in life. People know that instinctively. A man leaves a perfectly good family for a woman half his age and makes a mess of it, and people say, he got off the path; he lost his way. If he doesn't get back on, he'll lose the self too. A corporation can do the same thing." (Gonzales)

Gonzales goes on to describe five stages of getting lost, with denial being a major driving force in the first four stages.

**Stage One** – Denial of feeling disoriented, pressing on with urgency.

**Stage Two** – Realization of being lost amplifies denial, which "blossoms into a full-scale survival emergency". Clear thinking is sacrificed accompanied by action that is "frantic, unproductive and even dangerous".

**Stage Three** – Driven by adrenalin, an alleged appropriate strategy is generated, continuing to deny being lost.

**Stage Four** – There is a significant loss of both cognitive and emotional intelligence as the strategy fails, with continued denial of being quite lost.

**Stage Five** – Denial is lifted and replaced by resignation that being truly lost is the reality.

Obviously, many unfortunate decisions can take place as a leader meanders through stages one to four. In more cases than not, denial of being lost will likely be driven by feelings of shame. That is, there is a need to deny being lost in order to mitigate feeling shame. Let's look more closely at what happens when shame is holding denial of being lost in place.

### Shamefully Lost

- 1) With shame intensifying denial, the first four stages of denial become protracted.
- 2) Prolonged denial produces an unproductive urgency, which interrupt leaders' capacity to be present to themselves and present to others.
- 3) With a lack of presence in place, clear thinking, including a capacity to process emotion, is seriously compromised.
- 4) Compensation for diminished mindfulness in the name of contrived certainty takes place.
- 5) As contrived certainty reigns, it becomes increasingly difficult for leaders to get honest about the organization's present status of being lost.
- 6) Trapped in a web of rationalizations and distortions, leaders begin to feel the security of their psychological scaffolding begins to wobble. A sense of confidence and security cannot be sustained when leaders live a long distance from the truth.
- 7) Shame begets shame. Unconscious shame tends to get projected to others. A climate of distrust ensues when a leader is shaming colleagues and staff.

### Interrupting Shame

Numerous benefits are yielded when a leader takes on the psychological task of de-shaming.

- 1) Interrupting shame takes courage, a courage that will have far reaching benefits as leaders face future challenges.
- 2) The tendency is to diminish the need for denial.
- 3) Contrived certainty is suspended resulting in an increased capacity for holding ambiguity, which augments a spacious ability to be innovative and imaginative.
- 4) There is an increased ability to hold being lost as not simply unfortunate, but rather a move away from the familiar, reflecting opportunity.
- 5) Leaders increasingly let go of feeling a deep sense of inadequacy when being lost. Instead, they carry a positive and vital sense of themselves. They are clearer about what they can offer during a time of being lost as well as what they can give during the ensuing time of transition.
- 6) What leaders say becomes more believable yielding a climate of trust.
- 7) Displaced shame as a tool for motivations can be significantly discontinued.

Gonzales cites research suggesting that children six-years-old and younger have the highest survival rates when getting lost. He explains this curious fact upon their innocence and ability to remain focused upon what is at hand rather than getting lost in a maze

of strategies. They simply deal with where they are, what they need now, with an unbridled openness. I would add that they likely don't have high expectations regarding knowing their way, hence insignificant shame and denial when they lose their way.

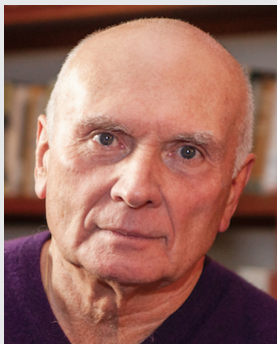
Another way of viewing the acumen of very young children can be taken from the Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki notion of the beginner's mind.

Fear inevitably accompanies feeling shame when leaders are lost. Certainly, there is fear about making mistakes and offering erroneous guidance. However, much of the fear is really about how leaders might treat themselves while being lost. When shame is interrupted, so is the fear of unleashing a self-deprecating assault.

As shame subsides, there is opportunity to unpack one of the cultural formulas for success: *If I say a lot, do a lot, acquire a lot, then I am a lot.* During a period of being lost there is an excellent opportunity to reexamine this alleged blueprint for success. Such a re-evaluation might include the following curiosities: Am I listening enough? How comfortable am I as a listener? How effective am I at discerning when I should be following vs. leading? Can I hold passivity as an important posture for being informed? Do I know how to ask for help? Am I effective at identifying who actually is a viable resource when I need help? How discerning am I in regard to identifying my limits? What does it mean to decide I am a lot? Is there some other way to support my personal worth?

These questions represent the kind of inquiry that allow leaders, in Gonzales' words, "to treat loss as a transformation and not a location".

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**PAUL DUNION** earned his Doctoral degree in Counseling and Consulting Psychology from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and his M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Connecticut. He taught Philosophy for thirteen years at UConn and Three Rivers Community College.

Dr. Dunion has been in private practice for the past thirty-seven years. He is a wholistic psychological healer, employing an existential modality as well as a somatic approach to treating trauma. He is trained in EMDR and is a graduate of the Somatic Experiencing Institute.

From its early beginnings, Dr. Dunion represented the State of Connecticut at the national gatherings of the mytho-poetic men's movement, sponsored by Wingspan. As the founder of Boys to Men, Dr. Dunion created a mentoring community for teenage boys. He is also the co-founder of COMEGA (Connecticut Gathering of Men), having served over 6,000 men since 1992, which continues to offer biannual retreats. In 2013, Dr. Dunion established the Croton Mystery School and designed its curriculum with a focus on teaching students how to make peace with life's mystery and unpredictability. Dr. Dunion has offered over 200 workshops on topics related to Human Potential. Currently, he offers supervision for younger psychotherapists.

He has published five books: *Seekers – Finding Our Way Home*; *Path of the Novice Mystic – Maintaining a Beginner's Heart and Mind*; *Dare to Grow-Up – Become Who You Are Meant to Be*; *Shadow Marriage – A Descent into Intimacy*; and *Temptation in the House of the Lord*. Dr. Dunion's latest offering due to be released in 2020 is *Wisdom – Apprenticing to the Unknown and Befriending Fate*.

