

THE CULTIVATION OF THE SELF

“Man’s character is his fate.”

Heraclitus

by Richard Strozzi-Heckler from the upcoming book, *Leadership Dojo*

A defining moment in my life arrived in the form of a teacher who would become an enduring influence in my life. It was at a time when I was living in a general unsettledness and I was looking for a new direction. I was visiting a friend; a respected practitioner of the Chinese martial and healing arts who I hadn’t seen for a while and in the course of our conversation he suggested there was somebody he thought I should meet. In his own mysterious way he didn’t say why I should meet this person, but I trusted him and accepted his offer. The next day he called and said he had arranged a meeting the following week.

On the scheduled day I arrived early and waited at a café with an outdoor sitting area. I positioned myself so I could see the front entrance of the building where we were to meet and also be visible to my friend when he arrived. At this hour there was no one on the streets and I sat with a cup of hot tea, enjoying the muscular clouds that glided lazily through the spring sky. There was little I expected; yet I was curious about what would unfold.

At some point my eye caught a movement on the alley side of the building. Two men stepped out of a back entrance and after conferring momentarily one went back in and the other walked slowly in my direction. There was nothing exceptional about him, either in dress or looks, except that he moved with an implacable air of gravity. Not solemnity, but a purposeful ease that informed his entire being. He was slight in build but his presence seemed to fill the alley. As he came closer I could see that he was taking everything in, as if he were in a museum and all the debris held some indeterminate value in his eyes. In an odd way I felt that I was also in his field of vision although he never looked directly at me or acknowledged me. At one point he picked up a wooden slat that had broken off a packing crate and began to move in elaborate, circular movements, carving the air with it; sometimes broad and sweeping, other times fast and collected. There was nothing forced or staged about what he was doing, the movements seemingly done for their own pleasure. His grace and poise cloaked an immense internal power.

As he continued to move in my direction I could see his authority was generated from an inner axis that emanated openness while being solidly contained. He radiated warmth, but manifested cool. I found him easy to look at, as if he were cut from a single cloth; there was nothing frivolous or wasted about him. As he approached the end of the alley he looked up and down the street with a disposition of unflappable pleasure, as if he were a pilgrim who after an arduous journey had finally arrived at a holy site. He looked at me and smiled, his face turning into a lantern. He then turned and walked back down the alley and entered the building through the side door. I was transfixed by the power of his presence and it moved me to find out who he was.

The power of that extended moment, almost thirty-five years ago, carved an image into my consciousness for what I can only call the human possibility. It was simply someone walking through a vacant alley with a discarded piece of wood, yet what was revealed to me were the virtues of presence, power, focus, balance, integrity, grace, and a wholehearted commitment to living each moment fully. What was unexplainable was there was no exchange between us, or a historical relationship upon which these assessments could be based. Yet, there was a way that this man comported himself, his living presence, that spoke to me about who he was as a person. This was the individual that my friend wanted me to meet and in the three decades that I've known him his ethical and moral behavior have been consistent with the presence I observed that day.

I tell this story because it speaks to a fundamental claim of the Leadership Dojo: The Self is the fundamental power of a leader and the Self is indistinguishable from the body. That is, one's comportment, body alignment and function, capacity for action, and how we presence ourselves through our body reflects who we are as a person, reflects our orientation to others, and to the world. In other words the body is a manifestation of a person's philosophy. The embodied Self is the primary source of power for a leader and it can be trained through practices.

Powerful leaders embody a centered presence. This centered presence mobilizes and motivates people to action. It calls forth their talents and skills; it increases trust and fellowship. There is a relaxed alertness that is utterly compelling. I'm calling attention to the relationship between moral power and how we live in our bodies. As an example consider this description of George Washington when he was the Commanding General of the Continental Army. The following account occurs during a visit in 1778 to a hospital at West Point.

The appearance of our Commander in Chief is that of the perfect gentleman and the accomplished warrior. He is remarkably tall, full six feet, erect and well proportioned. The strength and proportion of his joints and muscles appear to be commensurate with the preeminent power of his mind. The serenity of his countenance, and majestic gracefulness of his deportment, impart a strong impression of that dignity and grandeur, which are his peculiar characteristics, and no one can stand in his presence without feeling the ascendancy of his mind, and associating with his countenance the idea of wisdom, philanthropy, magnanimity and patriotism. There is a fine symmetry in the features of his face indicative of a benign and dignified spirit...He displays a native gravity, but devoid of all appearance of ostentation.

This is taken from the book, *A New Age Begins: A Peoples' History of the American Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989) by Page Smith. He says he relates this full account as it “serves to remind us how much his mere appearance among his scattered brigades meant in preserving morale and how much he *embodied*, (italics mine) quite literally, the Continental Army”. It is important to note that the observer, a junior officer, had no other acquaintance with General Washington other than being with him as he moved through the hospital at West Point. His conclusions were not based on a long relationship or in-depth conversations. He drew ethical and character conclusions about Washington only through his comportment and the way he presented himself. Reading the biographies of Washington one quickly sees that these are the same traits that he began developing as a youth and were evidenced when he was president. In other words the observations of the diarists were consistent with the Washington that we know in depth. Again, I’m drawing attention to the way in which we comport ourselves, our embodied presence, is inextricably linked to who we are ethically, morally, and spiritually.

We are accustomed to think of someone’s character as either a prominent behavior pattern or what they say about their intentions. But if look at those times of crisis when we are called upon to act ethically and morally, what is observable is a dynamic unification of mind, body and spirit--a presence--that acts with dignity, directness, and decisiveness. A grounded and passionate ethical and moral stand is inevitably generated from a body that is both internally calm and outwardly prepared for action. It is relaxed without being slack, and strong without being stiff. This is the Self that can effectively move into powerful decisive action, as well take a position of dignified restraint.

When Thomas Jefferson said that Washington seated himself better upon a horse than anyone of his time (*Founding Father*, Richard Brookhiser, New York: Free Press, 1996, pg.111) he is not reflecting idly on Washington's equestrian abilities. He is framing the potency of the connection between an authentic centered presence and one's moral and ethical authority. He is suggesting that by observing how one sits a horse—or, I would add, walks, engages in an unfamiliar situation, or rakes the lawn, for example—it's possible to assess their power, restraint, balance, capacity to act, to listen, and to commit. By observing how one is in their body we can tell a great deal about who they are as a person. This is reminiscent of when Arnold Palmer said, "I can tell everything I need to know about a person by watching them play 18 holes of golf".

The point of view I'm suggesting requires us to reconsider the common interpretation of the Self as the exaggerated development of a single part of our personality, perhaps at the expense of the other parts. Or the Cartesian perspective that separates mind, body, and emotions. Instead, a more useful interpretation is to see the Self as a quality of being that reflects one's wholeness. Furthermore it grounds the notion that the Self is indistinguishable from how we present and express ourselves through the body.

At this point it is vitally important to understand that the development of a leadership presence, through the cultivation of the self, is not to be confused with self-esteem training, personality development, or self-improvement seminars. I say this because the centuries old tradition of self-mastery--the rigorous struggle to transform our limitations into strengths and to invigorate our virtues into skillful action—which leads to a deep authenticity and service to others was infantilized into the quick fix self improvement industry of the twentieth century. This movement with its attendant obsessions of material gain, superficiality, and a narcissism which Walt Whitman called "The Great American experiment of Me" has made it fashionable to dismiss, out of hand, the path of self-mastery in business, military, and government because it has come to represent something soft, or airy-fairy, in the public eye. This cynicism has created a critical void in leadership training that is a missing ground in how we grow and cultivate leaders.

There is a long and rich tradition that goes back thousands of years in both the east and the west that spells out a path of self-mastery that is designed *to serve the greater good*. This is not a path of self-aggrandizement, but one in which we grow and transform ourselves in order to contribute to a vision larger

than our petty desires. Consider Plato speaking over two centuries ago: “We will be better and braver if we engage and inquire than if we indulge in the idle fancy that we already know or that it is of no use seeking to know what we do not know.”

In the path of self-cultivation the emphasis is not concerned with “getting better”, fixing oneself, or egoistic self-indulgence, but performing with mastery. Self-esteem training concerns itself with producing positive self-regard. It is a process where one feels better about oneself, but it may not necessarily lead to new actions or improved performance. The leadership path of self-cultivation in the Leadership Dojo is concerned with developing leaders who embody the ethics of individual responsibility, social commitment, and a moral and spiritual vision. It is a rigorous discipline that has its roots in two ancient traditions, from the east and the west.

In the Western tradition Aristotle, in *Rhetoric*, speaks of *ethos*, a type of leadership which is “a form of influence that causes other people to change their values and so their performance of tasks.” He goes on to explain that *ethos* is a leadership virtue distinct from rhetoric or persuasive language. *Ethos* is not what a person says or promises, but it’s their way of being in the world, a presence and comportment that affects others to follow them and to be open to their ideas. Here, the words of William Shakespeare come to mind when he said, “By my actions teach my mind.” *Ethos* implies that the fundamental and distinguishing elements of an individual’s character, as observed in their countenance, has the power to mobilize and change another’s outlook and performance. When someone is the embodiment of *ethos* those around them act with purpose and conviction. *Ethos* is not simply an intellectual principle of character but a living bodily presence. In this state one has the courage to take a stand for what they care about as well as the flexibility to adapt to a changing world. It is the opposite of *pathos*, which arouses one’s pity and sympathy. *Ethos* arouses respect, mobilization and action.

In the Eastern tradition, “*shugyo*”, consists of two Chinese characters, “to master” and a “practice.” Literally then, it means to “master a practice.” In everyday speaking, however, it is understood as self-cultivation. In this tradition the goal is to discipline one’s spirit, or character, by using one’s body. In a general sense the activity is not what is important, we could include walking, running, yoga, swimming, or even golf as the practice. It is the intention behind the practice that produces the meaning. *Shugyo*, or self-

cultivation, carries the meaning of developing the human spirit through physical practices. This is not to be mistaken for the modern Western sports goal of developing the motor and coordination capacity of the body while ignoring the power of mind/body/spirit synchronization. Shugyo has the goal of achieving a level of maturity that generates positive emotional states and controls negative ones. This is a different end than the sports objective of strengthening the body so that it can successfully perform certain movements.

The practices of shugyo are designed so the personal self will ultimately be absorbed into the world self. While this may initially sound vague and fuzzy it simply means that it is a leadership virtue to master one's personal wishes, cravings, and desires for the sake of a larger commitment. Shugyo reflects the importance of going beyond the appetite of the self-centered ego if one wishes to gain mastery, live an exemplary life, and lead people. In this state the body is relaxed, the mind is free of self-conscious thoughts of success or failure, and one's energy, or intention flows freely without obstruction. There is a balance between pushing forward and retreating. From this centered presence one can act directly and appropriately to take care of the situation at hand. This state of bodymind synchronization is more effective than the personal, centralized self. The culmination of shugyo is pragmatic wisdom--a self that is not driven by compulsion, fear, or self-interest, but acts for the greater good.

The following story exemplifies how cultivating the Self produces a leadership sensibility that contributes to the success of the individual and the entire enterprise. As you read this keep in mind that many of the distinctions of the Leadership Dojo have not yet been explained but will be elucidated in following chapters.

Jerry is the CEO of a successful technology company that he founded ten years ago. He received his MBA from a prestigious university and before starting his own business he was the senior vice-president of a Fortune 100 company. His traditional business credentials are impeccable and his direct reports jokingly call him "Patton" for his energy and hard-driving approach. For the first seven years Jerry's company thrived and began to grow at an average of 15% a year. He was on the fast track to bringing his company public when a sudden downturn in the economy produced a decline in sales and then a long stall affected profits and morale. He tried to "fix" this downturn by increasing his autocratic command and control style of leading. Some of his best talent began to leave, the company downsized, and it was questionable whether it would survive not.

Jerry was known among his employees as being over-controlling and confrontational. He had lost a few key people because of his volatility; those that stayed had compensated by either avoiding him or numbing themselves during his outbreaks. In addition these traits remained more in the background when business was good and he would adopt a cheery, upbeat demeanor that made his employees equally wary. When the company ran into trouble his aggressiveness escalated and in the words of one his managers, “He responded to the increased pressure by turning up the volume and turning down the listening. He became more demanding and harsh. This alienated people in the company and our customers began to see him as needy and desperate. Everyone kept away from him.” Jerry felt that the antidote to the company’s downturn was for everyone to work harder and longer. His drive took on a relentless edge and people began to leave.

Jerry saw the problem as outside of himself, something that technology or a systems change could solve. He was looking for tips and techniques to fix his management and sales teams. “Perhaps,” he commented, “we need a new marketing strategy.” When I told him that it was necessary that he first examine his leadership style he was taken back. It had never occurred to him that he might be part of the problem. “Look at my history of success,” he said, “why do I need to change?”

Jerry lived in a world in which the people in his company were seen as pieces to be moved on a gigantic chessboard and the importance, not to mention the camaraderie and joy, of team collaboration were irrelevant. His business acumen, intelligence, the marketplace, and his hard-driving style had allowed him to succeed up to this point; it hadn’t been necessary for him to engage first-hand in the fundamental human issues of coordination, dignity, listening, mood, trust, authenticity, and purpose. But he was now at a crossroads that required he transform his leadership style... or fail. He was initially exasperated to think that he had to be self-reflective; to see that the way he shaped himself in an aggressive and dismissive way alienated others, and how his over-bound, over-charged style limited the way he listened to both his people and his customers. But it was as if he had backed himself into a corner and it became apparent that his “take no prisoners” style of leadership was the core of the company’s problems. Jerry was plenty smart, had the know-how in his industry, but he failed miserably at collaborating, building trust, or motivating others.

Initially I worked with Jerry one and one and then with his entire team. In the beginning of our work Jerry thought he would take a number of personality tests

and instruments like Myers-Briggs and we would analyze them and that would change something. Of course he was surprised when I said I would have him experience his body, the shape of his living and leadership and see what that told him. I pointed out what I saw in the way he organized himself and I asked him to experience this from the inside. This gave him a first-hand awareness of his comportment and presentation to others. This new awareness opened up new choices for him. In addition he committed to certain practices that began to shift the way he comported himself and therefore the way he moved and interacted with the world.

Jerry had an over-developed, over-bound upper body that was set on a pair of spindly, thin legs. His toes were claw-like, his arches and feet contracted away from the ground, like a bird teetering on a wire. His chest was stiff and immobile, held high and puffed out as if he were holding his breath. His shoulders were pulled up and bound to his neck, which constricted his throat and voice. This gave the impression of an inverted pyramid with his weight held high and very little support from underneath. When he walked he looked like he was stumbling forward, forcing himself to move and keep up with himself, always off balance. He did this by squeezing the muscles in his pelvis and buttocks and throwing his rigid frame forward. There was a conflict in his body between moving ahead and restraining himself. He was like a sausage, tied off on both ends, his excitement bouncing around his chest cavity where he was trapped and emotionally suffocating.

Over time Jerry disclosed that his father died when he was young and his mother separated herself emotionally from him and his older brother and withdrew into alcohol. He remembers trying to keep up with his older brother and forcing himself to walk prematurely to be with him. He pushed himself to be older than he was and at the same time he longed for the comfort and nurturing support of his mother. He had learned to anesthetize himself so as not to feel the unmet longing and at the same time to reflexively push himself forward in order to belong. This conflict in muscle groups became a physical rigidity and produced a narrow emotional range. He must not let go of control and yet he must move forward. His woodenness allowed very little to come in and it allowed very little to get out. He was like a kid, secretly in need of support and encouragement, but imitating his version of a man—a hybrid of John Wayne and the Terminator.

As our work deepened he spoke about feelings of inadequacy even though he presented to the world as arrogant, over-bearing and authoritarian. “Always,”

he told me, “I have this feeling of having to be in control. I have to keep myself and things moving ahead, and yet I’m constantly unsure about doing the right thing.” He saw that by holding his breath he could overcome the sensations of fear and he could then move forward on his stiff legs. While he longed for support, he inhibited it by his shallow breath pattern and rigid torso. This stiffening of the muscles around the ribcage, the heart and lungs, gave others the impression that he was above-it-all, a better than others attitude. This style of self-organization alleviated his anxiety but it produced mistrust and resentment in others. Jerry simply steamrolled over people without feeling, thinking, or blinking. He charged ahead by numbing himself to what he felt and therefore to the feelings of others. His fear of collapse created his compulsive need to be the smartest, most assertive; the one always in charge.

Through this process Jerry saw three important things about his style of leadership. First he saw that his bodily structure was intimately linked with who he was as a person. This led him to see that to shift himself, to change his behaviors, it was necessary to shift the shape and motility of his body. Second, he saw that despite what he was feeling or thinking, there was a way he comported himself that produced mistrust and resentment. In this he saw that it was possible through certain practices to produce a different presence, one that made people want to be around him, trust him, and be motivated by his him. Finally he saw that the Self in leadership was as important, if not more important, than how smart you are or how technically competent. This opened him to seeing people as possibilities, as partners instead of instrumental means, and as collaborators instead of someone to dominate.

As Jerry begins to shift his behavior we began working with his team. As with Jerry we began by looking at how they shaped themselves individually and together as a team. Initially we started with exercises in which their historical way of being in the world, as individuals and as a team, were revealed to them. This illuminated the different patterns, both positive and negative, that they automatically fell into with each other. By observing themselves from this perspective it made them less reactive to each other and more accepting of their individual strengths and limitations. They could see what traits were useful to them and what were simply conditioned responses that no longer had value for their business. They learned this by interacting physically together in practices appropriated from aikido, a Japanese martial art. This is more powerful and effective than taking a standardized personality test as it allows one to literally feel and directly experience their patterns of conditioned

tendencies. One's embodied history then is not simply an intellectual idea but something that is felt and lived. There now existed choice where before there was only unexamined reaction. This created increased trust with each other out of which more effective collaboration and cooperation practices were implemented. The exercises that revealed these tendencies were not necessarily "heavy" psychological insights but revealed as a way of being that was reflexive and automatic. They began to lighten up with each other and respectfully note when one of them fell into these conditioned patterns.

In this stage Jerry was able to see how he created a mood of resentment and resignation within the company; he and his team also saw how their automatic reactions affected the way they related to customers and the marketplace itself. It became obvious that Jerry's personal style had become a company style and it hindered the way management saw business opportunities. They saw how much of their recent failures had to do with how they mismanaged their relationships with customers and how they had missed possibilities in the global marketplace. People were not seen as multi-dimensional living beings, but objects that were to be moved around, run over, or to avoid. In a light-hearted moment someone called Jerry the "The Tonka Truck" when he fell into a shouting fit. Jerry laughed and from then on he was referred to as "Tonka" when he flew off the handle.

In the second phase we implemented relational practices and processes that were necessary for them to succeed at the individual, team, and company level. This included structured conversations that ranged from intimate conversations about personal style and history to strategic business conversations. We engaged in movement practices that increased their capacity for coordination in business processes. They learned to be direct and courageous with each other in a way that enhanced both their dignity and success as a team. We taught them how to receive and deliver assessments that produced action and collaboration. It is important to note that these conversational practices were not simply following a script or reading a "how to do" book. They practiced speaking to each other from a centered presence in which they learned to pay attention to mood, dignity, listening, competency and capacity. Trust deepened between them and the intimacy that followed made it possible for them to strategize and innovate in ways they never thought possible.

In the third phase they engaged in practices of reading and anticipating the world. This allowed them to perceive each other, their customers, and their marketplace from a fresh perspective. They investigated marginal discourses

that challenged their traditional belief systems; they had conversations with those who could articulate the historical forces which were shaping the world; and they engaged in movement practices to shape an identity that would produce success in a fast moving world. Built on the foundation of trust and cooperation they had developed in the previous two phases they were able to speculate, collaborate, and innovate in new ways. This kept their thinking vital and their capacity to move in the marketplace agile and flexible.

During my work with Jerry he learned how to manage his moods and he became a more effective listener to his employees and customers. He was able to recruit and retain bright, ambitious new people. His management team learned processes that allowed them to coordinate and collaborate more powerfully together. The company turned around and once again became a leader in their field. During this same period of time they also added new technology and became active in Internet commerce, but Jerry's report, as well as that of his colleagues, was that the company's success couldn't have happened without the change in him and his team.

The practices of the Leadership Dojo produced the following leadership skills in Jerry and in the culture of his company:

- ❑ A Centered Presence of integrity and authenticity.
- ❑ The capacity to generate and manage moods that are coherent with a productive and balanced life.
- ❑ The ability to cultivate, manage, and repair trust.
- ❑ The ability to coordinate effectively with others.
- ❑ The ability to motivate and mobilize others.
- ❑ The capacity to stay emotionally balanced in times of adversity and change.
- ❑ To know when it's time to act and when it's time to restrain oneself.
- ❑ A deep listening in which they could move skillfully with other's concerns.
- ❑ The importance of being a lifelong learner.

These skills of leadership may seem obvious to the point of being elementary. Certainly they are not novel or contestable in what are commonly seen as the necessary social skills for a leader. Yet it is rare to be in an environment in

which there are practices that develop them. The Leadership Dojo addresses how this knowledge is translated into performance.