

*Those who wish to disrupt leadership will always  
frame the problem in terms of liberty and order,  
while those in positions of leadership will always  
see the problem as one of order and chaos.*

Introduction

## ❖ THE PROBLEM WITH LEADERSHIP

In *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, Gilbert Murray suggested that after Socrates had “disillusioned” his society, Greek civilization was around the corner from the Renaissance. But, he said, they seemed to panic at the prospect and, instead, bought into new myths. In a chapter entitled “The Failure of Nerve,” he wrote:

The great thing to remember is that the mind of man cannot be enlightened permanently by merely teaching him to reject some particular set of superstitions. There is an infinite supply of other superstitions always at hand; and the mind that desires such things, that is, the mind that has not trained itself to the hard discipline of reasonableness and honesty, will, as soon as its devils are cast out, proceed to fill itself with their relations.

In this book on leadership, I will describe a similar “failure of nerve” affecting American civilization today. But, I will add, when anxiety reaches certain thresholds, “reasonableness and honesty” no

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When anxiety reaches certain thresholds, even the most learned ideas can begin to function as superstitions.

longer defend against illusion, and then even the most learned ideas can begin to function as superstitions.

I believe there exists throughout America today a rampant sabotaging of leaders who try to stand tall amid the raging anxiety-storms

of our time. It is a highly reactive atmosphere pervading all the institutions of our society—a regressive mood that contaminates the decision-making processes of government and corporations at the highest level, and, on the local level, seeps down into the deliberations of neighborhood church, synagogue, hospital, library, and school boards. It is “something in the air” that affects the most ordinary family no matter what its ethnic background. And its frustrating effect on leaders is the same no matter what their gender, race, or age.

It is my perception that this leadership-toxic climate runs the danger of squandering a natural resource far more vital to the continued evolution of our civilization than any part of the environment. We are polluting our own species. The more immediate threat to the regeneration—and perhaps even the survival—of American civilization is internal, not external. It is our tendency to adapt to its immaturity. To come full circle, this kind of emotional climate can only be dissipated by clear, decisive, well-defined leadership. For whenever a “family” is driven by anxiety, what will also always be present is a failure of nerve among its leaders.

This book is for parents and presidents. It is also for CEOs and educators, prioresses and coaches, healers and generals, managers and clergy. It is about leadership in the land of the quick fix, about leadership in a society so reactive that it cannot choose leaders who might calm its anxiety. It is about the need for clarity and decisiveness in a civilization that inhibits the development of leaders with clarity and decisiveness. It is for leaders who have questioned the widespread triumphing of data over maturity, technique over stamina, and empathy over personal responsibility. And it is for anyone at all who has become suspicious of the illusions of change—suspicious of the modern fashion wherein solutions, as well as symptoms, burst upon us in every

field of endeavor (management, healing, education, parenting) and then disappear as unexpectedly as they had first appeared, only to be supplanted by the fad of another “issue” or cure, sending everyone back to square one.

The emphasis here will be on strength, not pathology; on challenge, not comfort; on self-differentiation, not herding for togetherness. This is a difficult perspective to maintain in a “seatbelt society” more oriented toward safety than adventure. This book is not, therefore, for those who prefer peace to progress. It is not for those who mistake another’s well-defined stand for coercion. It is not for those who fail to see how in any family or institution a perpetual concern for consensus leverages power to the extremists. And it is not for those who lack the nerve to venture out of the calm eye of good feelings and togetherness and weather the storm of protest that inevitably surrounds a leader’s self-definition. For, whether we are considering a family, a work system, or an entire nation, the resistance that sabotages a leader’s initiative usually has less to do with the “issue” that ensues than with the fact that the leader took initiative.

It will be the thesis of this work that leadership in America is stuck in the rut of trying harder and harder without obtaining significantly new results. The rut runs deep, affecting all the institutions of our society irrespective of size or purpose. It even affects those institutions that try to tackle the problem: universities, think tanks, and consultants. These institutions are “stuck,” and there exists a connection between the paralysis that leaders experience and the paralysis in the thinking processes of those who would get them unstuck.

In the pages that follow I will show that America’s leadership rut has both a conceptual and an emotional dimension that reinforce one another. The conceptual dimension is the inadequacy of what I shall refer to as *the social science construction of reality*. This construction fails to explain these emotional processes; even more, it fails to offer leaders a way of gaining some separation from their regressive influence. The emotional dimension is the chronic anxiety that currently

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ricochets from sea to shining sea. However, the word *emotional* as used throughout this work is not to be equated with feelings, which are a later evolutionary development. While it includes feelings, the word refers primarily to the instinctual side of our species that we share in common with all other forms of life.

By *the social science construction of reality* I mean a worldview that focuses on classifications such as the psychological diagnosis of individuals or their “personality profiles” and sociological or anthropological niche (categorized according to culture, gender, class, race, age, and so on) rather than on what will be emphasized in this work: the emotional processes that transcend those categories and that all forms of “colonized protoplasm” share in common, irrespective of those differences. This applies in particular to the tension between the forces for self and togetherness; the reciprocal, adaptive, compensatory functioning by the partners to any relationship; and the evolutionary consequences of self-differentiation for both that individual and other members of his or her community.

These two dimensions of America’s leadership rut, the conceptual and the emotional, are inextricably linked. The emotional climate of a society affects not only the models it conceives and clings to; it also influences what information we consider important and which issues attract our attention.

In neither case, therefore, can the way out be obtained simply by developing some new method for “tinkering with the mechanics” or by redoubling our efforts to try harder. The way out, rather, requires shifting our orientation to the way we think about relationships, from one that focuses on techniques that motivate others to one that focuses on the leader’s own presence and being.

In the first part of this book, I will describe the emotional processes in society that I see affecting the functioning of “parents and presidents.” And I will show how our denial of those processes in both families and in society at large (1) erodes and devalues the individuation necessary for effective leadership, and (2) influences the very way we conceptualize leadership problems to begin with. Then, in the second part of this book, I will present new ways of

understanding leadership that are applicable to all families and institutions, taking those emotional processes into account and emphasizing the importance of the leader's own self-differentiation.

These views on leadership and American society did not burst upon me in some "Eureka" moment of insight. They evolved gradually during forty years of teaching and practicing in a spectrum of fields that included various branches of the helping professions, the military, management, business, and government. This pool of experience has afforded both a long-range and a broad-based perspective, with nodal moments of awareness. Therefore I will describe in these introductory pages how my experience increasingly raised doubts in my mind about the usefulness for leaders of the social science construction of reality, how those doubts eventually led me to reorient my views on leadership, and some of the radically new perspectives for leadership training that came out of that reorientation to reality.

#### ❖ HOW I CAME TO THIS STUDY

I have lived and worked in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area for almost four decades. During this period I have watched families and institutions recycle their problems for several generations, despite enormous efforts to be innovative. The opportunity to observe this firsthand was provided by my involvement in the major institutions designed by our civilization to foster change: religion, education, psychotherapy, and politics (I have been here since Eisenhower). That experience included twenty years as a pulpit rabbi, an overlapping twenty-five years as an organizational consultant and family therapist with a broadly ecumenical practice, and several years of service as a community relations specialist for the Johnson White House, helping metropolitan areas throughout the United States voluntarily desegregate housing before Congress passed appropriate civil rights legislation.

Eventually, the accumulation of this experience began to show me how similar all of our "systems of salvation" are in their structure, the

way they formulate problems, the range of their approaches, and their rationalizations for their failures. It was, indeed, the basic similarity in their *thinking processes*, despite their different sociological classifications, that first led me to consider the possibility that our constant failure to change families and institutions fundamentally has less to do with finding the right methods than with misleading emotional and conceptual factors that reside within society itself.

For example, having been in the rare position of working in the fields of both healing and management, I could not help but notice that the batting average in the war on cancer and the batting average in the struggle to heal chronically troubled institutions are remarkably similar, with cancer perhaps a little ahead. I have been struck by how families, corporations, and other kinds of institutions are constantly trying to cure their own chronic ills through amputations, “strong medicine,” transfusions, and other forms of surgery only to find that, even when successful for the moment, the excised tumor returns several years later in “cells” that never knew the “cells” that left. “New blood” rarely thwarts malignant processes, anywhere. Indeed, with both cancer and institutions, malignant cells that appear to be dead can often revive if they receive new nourishment. Or, to put the problem another way, when we say something has gone into remission, where do we think it has gone?

I came to see that malignancy is rarely only a physical state; it is almost always the perversion of a basic life principle. Ignoring the emotional processes connected to systemic disease process, either in an organism or an organization and whether one is an oncologist or a business consultant, will rarely produce a lasting cure. In both medicine and management, administrative, managerial, and technical solutions seldom alter emotional processes fundamentally. Furthermore, focus on psychology is not focus on emotional processes, and focus on emotional processes cannot be reduced to psychology.

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Another experience that contributed to my doubts about the adequacy of our society’s traditional models for helping leaders

was that although I was quite knowledgeable about what conventional social science theories have to say about marriage and child development, over the long run I was constantly fooled in my expectations of how children would grow up, how marriages would turn out, and which organizational ventures would succeed. In addition, I was continually bewildered by the fact that the same values that motivated people to do good work in society often did not seem to operate in their closest personal relationships. It was, in fact, the consistency of my inability to predict the future course of relationships in families and institutions over the course of several decades that first led me to question the adequacy of the social science construction of reality and eventually led me to wonder if an intended source of enlightenment had become, in fact, a force for denial.

What other crucial variables, I began to ask, had conventional models in the field failed to take into account? For example, if one serves a congregation in Bethesda, Maryland—the site of the National Institutes of Health and the Bethesda Naval Hospital, a hub for think tanks of every imaginable stripe, and the bedroom community for thousands of lawyers, administrators, physicians, and other scientists—then there is a good chance that most of your congregation are either therapists or in therapy. Over the years, I often witnessed successful results from the various forms of counseling individuals experienced, either in symptom relief or an increased capacity to function better. But I also saw from my three-generation perspective that these various forms of therapy generally did not succeed in preventing family emotional processes from passing the problems of one generation on to the next.

This has remained constant, from my perspective, no matter what new form of therapy became fashionable, what symptom became faddish, or how any traditional counseling approach was reinvented. It was almost as though all forms of therapy succeeded only in helping people acquire new characteristics; as is well known, acquired characteristics are never inherited by the next generation unless

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they enter an organism’s germ plasm. What did it take, I began to ask myself, to get into the “germ plasm” of family or organizational emotional processes?

A third observation that contributed to my questioning traditional social science models was my experience with families from many different cultures. As Washington is a mecca for people from all over the world, sooner or later I came into contact with families from a very broad spectrum of backgrounds that included every habitable continent on the planet—literally, the “four corners of the earth.” Although the social science construction of reality tends to emphasize how families differ from one another, I began to see that knowledge of what they have in common could be more important, as a basis both for promoting change and for enabling leaders and consultants to recognize the universal elements of emotional processes found in all institutions as well as in all families.

Rather than assuming that a family’s cultural background determined its emotional processes, I found it far more useful to see culture as the medium through which a family’s own unique multi-generational emotional process worked its art. I began to see that stripping families of their cultural camouflage forced family members to be more accountable for their actions and their responses to one another. I also saw that once one focused on how families were similar rather than on how they differed, it was possible to see universal “laws” of emotional process that were obscured by becoming absorbed in the myriad data on family differences. And later I found that this principle applied to other kinds of institutions as well.

For example, as I began to focus on emotional process rather than cultural background, it eventually became obvious to me that whatever the nature of a family’s customs and ceremonies, the universal problem for all partnerships, marital or otherwise, was not getting closer; it was preserving self in a close relationship, something that no one made of flesh and blood seems to do well. (I eventually came to define my marriage counseling, no matter what the cultural mix, as



trying to help people “separate” so that they would not have to separate.)

Another universal principle of family life transcending cultural or ethnic differences seemed to be that whatever their affliction, individuals who are cut off from their families generally do not heal until they have been reconnected.

Similarly, there seemed to be three universal laws regarding the children of all families that transcended their cultural and sociological characteristics.

- ◆ The children who work through the natural problems of maturing with the least amount of emotional or physical residue are those whose parents have made them *least* important to their own salvation. (Throughout this work, *maturity* will be defined as *the willingness to take responsibility for one’s own emotional being and destiny.*)
- ◆ Children rarely succeed in rising above the maturity level of their parents, and this principle applies to all mentoring, healing, or administrative relationships.
- ◆ Parents cannot produce change in a troubling child, no matter how caring, savvy, or intelligent they may be, until they become completely and totally fed up with their child’s behavior.

Soon I began to realize that cultural camouflage also obscured the universality of emotional process in institutions. For example, frequently, the leaders of a church would come to me seeking techniques for dealing with a member of the staff or a member of the congregation who was acting obstreperously, who was ornery, and who intimidated everyone with his gruffness. I might say to them, “This is not a matter of technique; it’s a matter of taking a stand, telling this person he has to shape up or he cannot continue to remain a member of the community.” And the church leaders would respond, “But that’s not the Christian thing to do.” (Synagogue leaders tolerate abusers for similar reasons.)

Overall, this long-range perspective brought me to the point of wondering if there were not some unwitting conspiracy within society

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itself to avoid recognizing the emotional variables that, for all their lack of concreteness, are far more influential in their effects on institutions than the more obvious data that society loves to measure. Perhaps data collection serves

as a way of avoiding the emotional variables.

After all, the denial of emotional process is evident in society at large. If, for example, we succeed in reducing the number of cigarettes smoked by our nation's youth but do nothing to reduce the level of chronic anxiety throughout the nation, then the addiction will just take another form, and the same children who were vulnerable to one kind of addiction will become easy prey for the as-yet unimagined new temptation.

It may be in the ubiquitous phenomenon of terrorism that one can most easily see how universal emotional processes transcend the conventional categories of the social science construction of reality. According to the latter, families are different from nations, profit-making corporations are different from nonprofit corporations, medical institutions are different from school systems, one nation's infrastructure is different from another's, and so on. Yet whether we are considering any family, any institution, or any nation, for terrorism to hold sway the same three *emotional* prerequisites must always persist in that relationship system:

- ◆ There must be a sense that no one is in charge—in other words, the overall emotional atmosphere must convey that there is no leader with “nerve.”
- ◆ The system must be vulnerable to a hostage situation. That is, its leaders must be hamstrung by a vulnerability of their own, a vulnerability to which the terrorist—whether a bomber, a client, an employee, or a child—is always exquisitely sensitive.
- ◆ There must be among both the leaders and those they lead an unreasonable faith in “being reasonable.”

From an emotional process view of leadership, whether we are talking about families or the family of nations, these three emotional characteristics of a system are the differences that make it vulnerable.

## ❖ LEADERSHIP AS EMOTIONAL PROCESS

Since the publication of my first thoughts on the subject in 1985 in *Generation to Generation*, I have had the opportunity to present my evolving concepts of leadership and emotional processes in institutions and society both in workshops and as a consultant in forty states. At the beginning, I worked with leaders in almost every branch of the helping professions and their various divisions (healers, teachers, attorneys, educators, clergy). Eventually, my work came to include as diverse a range as religious communities, state governors and their staffs, managers from various segments of business and industry, and the General Staff of the United States Army in Europe. It was then, after my presentations to thirty-two generals, that I first began to see how similar the approach to leadership problems was throughout our civilization. After two days of presentations, a three-star general, the commander of an entire Army corps—two panzer divisions—stood up and said to me, “You know, one of our problems is that the sergeant-majors coddle the new recruits, and we keep telling them that such helpfulness will not make them very good soldiers in the field.” And then he turned to his fellow officers and said, “But from what Ed has been saying here the past two days, we’re not going to have any more luck changing the sergeant-majors than they are having trying to change the new recruits.”

Now this man had three stars on his shoulder; how much more authority would you want? He commanded more weapons of destruction than exploded in all of World War II; how much more power do you need? Yet neither his authority nor his power were enough to ensure a “command presence.” And I began to think about similar frustrations reported to me by imaginative psychiatrists who were frustrated by head nurses, creative clergy who were stymied by church treasurers, aggressive CEOs who were hindered by division chiefs, mothers who wished to take more responsible stands with their children but who were blindsided by their chronically passive husbands, not to mention my experience of watching nine eager presidents sabotaged by a chronically recalcitrant Congress.

Eventually I came to see that this “resistance,” as it is usually called, is more than a reaction to novelty; it is part and parcel of

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the systemic process of leadership. Sabotage is not merely something to be avoided or wished away; instead, it comes with the territory of leading, whether the “territory” is a family or an organization. And a leader’s capacity to recognize sabotage for what it is—that is, a systemic phenomenon connected to the shifting balances in the emotional processes of a relationship system and *not* to the institution’s specific issues, makeup, or goals—is the key to the kingdom.

My experience with the superiors of religious orders also helped me see the similarity of all leadership problems, irrespective of the culture of the institution. After two days of intense and varied discussions of the problems of being a leader in a monastery—problems one could just as easily find in a corporation or a street gang, such as cliques, backbiting, withdrawal, polarizations, subversion—one superior rose and said, “We know that while we entered the monastery in order to leave the world, we also brought that world with us.” But what he did not understand was that these issues stemmed not from what they had “learned” outside and brought in, but from the basic nature of life.

My travels affected my thinking in two ways. One result was that every concept and perspective in this work has been put to the challenge of other leaders’ responses and constantly refined and modified through such dialogue. Second, during this feedback process, several factors began to emerge so consistently that I began to see a pattern. While each branch of American society thought its troubles were due to something within its own discipline (religion, therapy, medicine, education, government, business) or were peculiar to its own region (“Here in the South,” the Midwest, the Far West, the Northeast), the problems were, as I had already begun to suspect, nationwide.

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The more my perspective broadened, the more confirmed I became in my view that contemporary leadership dilemmas have less

to do with the specificity of given problems, the nature of a particular technique, or the makeup of a given group than with the way everyone is framing the issues. In addition, I began to realize that this similarity in thinking processes had to do with regressive (in the sense of counter-evolutionary) emotional processes that could be found everywhere. Nor did gender, race, or ethnicity seem to make a difference in the strength or the effects of these processes.

Here are four major similarities in the thinking and functioning of America's families and institutions that I have observed everywhere, and which I believe are at the heart of the problem of contemporary America's orientation toward leadership:

- ◆ *A regressive, counter-evolutionary trend* in which the most dependent members of any organization set the agendas and where adaptation is constantly toward weakness rather than strength, thus leveraging power to the recalcitrant, the passive-aggressive, and the most anxious members of an institution rather than toward the energetic, the visionary, the imaginative, and the motivated.
- ◆ *A devaluation of the process of individuation* so that leaders tend to rely more on expertise than on their own capacity to be decisive. Consultants (to both families and organizations) contribute further to this denial of individuation by offering solutions instead of promoting their clients' capacity to define themselves more clearly.
- ◆ *An obsession with data and technique* that has become a form of addiction and turns professionals into data junkies and their information into data junkyards. As a result, decision-makers avoid or deny the very emotional processes within their families, their institutions, and within society itself that might contribute to their institution's "persistence of form." (This phrase is borrowed from biology, which tries to understand the uncanny self-organizing ability of some embryos that duplicate themselves even after some of their parts have been rearranged or cut away.)
- ◆ *A widespread misunderstanding about the relational nature of destructive processes in families and institutions* that leads leaders to assume

that toxic forces can be regulated through reasonableness, love, insight, role-modeling, inculcation of values, and striving for consensus. It prevents them from taking the kind of stands that set limits to the invasiveness of those who lack self-regulation.

This book will develop an approach to leadership that goes in a different direction. It will encourage leaders to focus first on their own integrity and on the nature of their own presence rather than on techniques for manipulating or motivating others. I will suggest that the importance of leaders' being well informed is overrated, and that the focus on the intellect outside of an emotional context is actually anti-intellectual. It will show leaders how not to be victimized or held hostage by victims. It will offer empowering models of leadership and relationship systems based on the natural thinking systems found in contemporary biology and physics, rather than "psychological" and other abstract social science models that, despite the accuracy of their data, tend to view life in the paradigm of nineteenth-century mechanics.

My own understanding of the fact that leadership is essentially an *emotional* process rather than a *cognitive* phenomenon, and my awareness of the vital importance of well-differentiated leadership for the functioning and survival of institutions, came to me in the following manner. I had been coaching members of various professions concerning either the relational problems experienced by their clients or those that were occurring in their own work systems. As I listened to everyone describe their bonds and their binds, the following universal law of leadership began to formulate itself—one that I regard as the bottom-line concept of this entire work:

In any type of institution whatsoever, when a self-directed, imaginative, energetic, or creative member is being consistently frustrated and sabotaged rather than encouraged and supported, what will turn out to be true 100 percent of the time, regardless of whether the disrupters are supervisors, subordinates, or peers, is that the person at the very top of that institution is a peace-monger. By that I mean a highly anxious

risk-avoider, someone who is more concerned with good feelings than with progress, someone whose life revolves around the axis of consensus, a “middler,” someone who is so incapable of taking well-defined stands that his “disability” seems to be genetic, someone who functions as if she had been filleted of her backbone, someone who treats conflict or anxiety like mustard gas—one whiff, on goes the emotional gas mask, and he flits. Such leaders are often “nice,” if not charming.

This principle of organizational life is so universal it may be rooted in protoplasm itself. It will operate to the same extent regardless of the sociological or psychological profiles of the individuals involved, and it is equally applicable to a family or a nation—that is, to a parent or a president.

While I first saw this leadership principle at work when consulting with various types of organizations, the more I thought about its systemic character, the more I came to realize that what I had been observing with regard to families for more than a quarter of a century was identical. I began to see that if I were to consider, with a two- or three-generation perspective, the thousands of families I had observed go into crisis (whether the crisis was due to sudden loss, acting-out children, severe illness, intense polarized marital conflict, financial problems, or other external impacts), without question the single variable that most distinguished the families that survived and flourished from those that disintegrated was the presence of what I shall refer to throughout this work as *a well-differentiated leader*.

I want to stress that by *well-differentiated leader* I do not mean an autocrat who tells others what to do or orders them around, although any leader who defines himself or herself clearly may be perceived that way by those who are not taking responsibility for their own emotional being and destiny. Rather, I mean someone who has clarity about his or her own life goals and, therefore, someone who is less likely to become lost in the anxious emotional processes swirling about. I mean someone

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who can be separate while still remaining connected and, therefore, can maintain a modifying, non-anxious, and sometimes challenging presence. I mean someone who can manage his or her own reactivity in response to the automatic reactivity of others and, therefore, be able to take stands at the risk of displeasing. It is not as though some leaders can do this and some cannot. No one does this easily, and most leaders, I have learned, can improve their capacity.

Eventually, I found this correlation between self-differentiation in the leader and the nature of the emotional processes of any human institution to be so universal that I was often able to make predictions about how the leader was functioning within minutes of hearing someone talk about the nature of their institution's (or family's) problems. The fact that I found the principle to hold true for both families and organizations, and for leaders of both genders and any racial or ethnic background, again forced me to question the value for leadership of the social science construction of reality. I knew that its categories have often been accurately described and are useful in social planning, but I began to wonder if these were the differences that really mattered when it came to the problems of leadership.

#### ❖ THE SYSTEMIC POWER OF LEADERSHIP

I also saw something else regarding leadership and systemic emotional process that ultimately revolutionized my approach to leadership training. When creative, imaginative, and self-starting members of any organization are being sabotaged rather than supported, the poorly differentiated person “at the top” does not have to be in direct contact with the person being undercut. In fact, neither even has to know that the other exists. What I began to appreciate from that moment on was the wide-ranging *systemic power* of leadership—specifically that the functioning of leaders somehow affects the institution they lead on a far more fundamental level than could be accounted for by traditional psychological concepts that focus on the brain, such as role-modeling, emulation, identification, or



personality profiles. Institutions, I was coming to see, could be conceptualized as emotional fields—environments of force that, for all their influence over people's thinking processes, were largely invisible to the naked eye, like magnetic fields or gravitational fields.

What made these systemic processes invisible was the fact that the usual mechanistic models that emphasize flow charts, trickle-down concepts, and motivational techniques could not explain them. It was not that such models were wrong, but rather that they were inadequate for understanding the organic nature of human colonization. Explaining families and institutions in terms of the nature of their parts, I began to think, was like trying to reduce chemistry to physics. Other forces come into play when one studies "molecules" rather than "atoms," even though molecules consist of atoms. Relational processes in an institution, I concluded, cannot be reduced to psychodynamic or personality factors in the individuals of which they are composed. A different level of inquiry was required from one that tries merely to understand "the minds" or personalities of the individuals involved.

What was needed to account for the connection between leader and follower, I was beginning to realize, was an approach that did not separate them into neat categories nor polarize them into opposite forces, nor even see them as completely discrete entities. Rather, what was needed to explain an emotional process orientation to leadership was a concept that was less moored to linear cause-and-effect thinking. It had to be one that conceptualized the connection between leader and follower as reciprocal and as part of larger natural processes, many of which were intergenerational. Leadership in both families and organizations, I was beginning to see, was rooted in processes that could be found in all colonized life. After all, had not Nature seen to its being built into pods, prides, swarms, schools, flocks, and herds?

While our species is fond of emphasizing the distinctions between humans and animal life, this focus on the intellect can also be a distraction. While the intellect gives us an advantage over other species, it is only an advantage when we are able to deal adequately with

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what we have in common with other forms of life—in particular, the instinctual side of ourselves as manifest in the anxiety (reactivity) that automatically responds to change and the tension in any community between self and togetherness.

Eventually, I found an uncanny parallel that enabled me to put leader and follower together conceptually in a systemic way. The parallel lies between the latest understanding of the connection between the brain and the body in a human organism, on the one hand, and the effects of a “head’s” functioning on a “body politic” in a human organization, on the other. In any age, concepts of leadership must square with the latest understanding of the relationship between brain and body. Recent findings about the brain-body connection have the potential to revolutionize our concept of hierarchy. They suggest that to a large extent we have a liquid nervous system. The brain turns out to function like a gland. It is the largest organ of secretion, communicating simultaneously with various parts of the body, both near and far, through the reciprocal transmission of substances known as neurotransmitters. In other words, the head is *present* in the body!

So, too, the connection between a “head” and its body in any family or institution is not necessarily a function of proximity. The functioning of a “head” can systemically influence all parts of a body simultaneously and totally bypass linear, “head-bone-connected-to-the-neck-bone” thinking. What counts is the leader’s presence and being, not technique and know-how. It is precisely these systemic aspects of an institution’s emotional processes that explain why a leader does not have to know personally those who are being sabotaged or those who are the saboteurs in order for the leader’s own functioning to contribute to that nefarious process.

We can see this in the natural systems process in society, both in the actions of current government leaders and in new understandings of the functioning of past ones. For example, the systemic effects of a well-defined leadership presence can be seen by observing what

happens in a community after major catastrophes such as tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, and assassinations. One can observe an inverse correlation between the speed with which the top political officer in a community defines a presence and the amount of disintegration or looting that occurs. It is not merely the presence of the National Guard that dissuades looters—leaders function as the immune systems of their institutions. When they are well defined, the resulting systemic effects on a society inhibit the probability that the opportunistic infections we call looters are likely to form. In other words, the crucial issue of leadership in democratic societies may not be how much power they exercise but how well their *presence* is able to preserve that society's integrity.

Viewing the Civil War through this principle of leadership, it is possible to see that the war was no more “caused” by the issue of slavery than a divorce results from the perceived differences between spouses. In either case, the “cause” had more to do with the ways in which family emotional processes turned those differences into divisive factors. From this perspective, “the great American divorce” was ultimately the result of the failure of the five presidents before Lincoln (particularly Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan, but also to some extent Polk and Taylor) to function in a differentiated manner. The way in which these glad-handing, conflict-avoiding, and compromising “commanders-in-chief” avoided taking charge of our growing internal crisis when they occupied the position “at the top” is exactly the same way I have seen today's leaders function before their organizations (or families) “split.”

#### ❖ A REVOLUTION IN LEADERSHIP TRAINING

My growing awareness of the universality of these systemic principles of leadership raised fundamental questions in my mind about the nature of most leadership training (including courses on parenting) that puts primary emphasis on others (children or employees) as objects to be motivated rather than on the systemic effects

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Chronic criticism is often a sign that the leader is functioning better.

of the presence—the self—of the leader. I began to see that the same emotional processes that produced dysfunction in an institution when the leader was anxiously reactive or absent could also work in reverse. If the leader did not have to be in direct contact with every member in order to influence them, then it should follow that if a leader could learn to be a well-differentiated presence, by the very nature of his or her being he or she could promote differentiation and support creative imagination throughout the system. These emotional processes could therefore be salutary rather than destructive. This would be the case not by focusing on techniques for moving *others*, but by focusing on the nature of his or her own being and presence.

Such a reorientation is a true paradigm shift rather than a technical innovation because it changes the criteria for which information is important. Rather than being concerned with the size of an organization or its product, or the latest fad for reorganization, the important criteria have to do with a leader's capacity to avoid being regulated by an institution's emotional processes as they are transmitted and reinforced from generation to generation. A leader must separate his or her own emotional being from that of his or her followers while still remaining connected. Vision is basically an emotional rather than a cerebral phenomenon, depending more on a leader's capacity to deal with anxiety than his or her professional training or degree. A leader needs the capacity not only to accept the solitariness that comes with the territory, but also to come to love it. These criteria are based on the recognition that "no good deed goes unpunished." Chronic criticism is, if anything, often a sign that the leader is functioning better. Vision is not enough.

These insights led to a major shift in my mode of consultation with both families and work systems. With families, I stopped creating encyclopedias of data about all their issues and began to search instead for the member with the greatest capacity to be a leader as I have defined it. That person generally turned out to be the one who

could express himself or herself with the least amount of blaming and the one who had the greatest capacity to take responsibility for his or her own emotional being and destiny. I began to coach the “leader” alone, letting the rest of the family drop out and stay home. I stopped trying to get people to “communicate” or find better ways of managing their issues. Instead, I began to concentrate on helping the leader become better defined and learn how to deal adroitly with the sabotage that almost invariably followed any success in this endeavor. Soon I found that the rest of the family was “in therapy” whether or not they came into my office. For it is the integrity of the leader that promotes the integrity or prevents the “dis-integration” of the system he or she is leading.

I then started to function in the same way with organizations, regardless of their nature, their purpose, or their size. I stopped collecting mounds of data, trying to foster team-building, focusing on the difficult people. I stopped polling the workers or going around to the different divisions. Instead, I concentrated on working with only one or two leaders at the top. Soon I found that for organizations, too, by focusing on and supporting the strengths in the system rather than letting the pathology or the pathogens (read *troublemakers*) determine my focus, the rest of the network was “in therapy” whether or not they came into my office and whether or not I joined them on a retreat.

Next, I began to establish leadership seminars emphasizing the self-differentiation of the leader rather than focusing on method and technique. The subject matter of the programs, instead, was directed toward an understanding of how an institution’s emotional processes took shape and persisted; how the emotional processes of leaders’ and followers’ own families interlocked with the emotional processes of the institution in which they worked; and how the emotional processes in society at large also merged with those streams so that problems in any of these systems could produce symptoms in others. In order to enable participants to increase their capacity to recognize and deal adroitly with these binds, an integral part of the seminar had each leader-in-training make an effort to understand how

multi-generational factors in his or her family of origin shaped his or her emotional being. It was then only a small step to ask how that emotional field might still be continuing to regulate their functioning (even at a distance), thus inhibiting their ability to observe and avoid being led by the chronic anxiety and other multigenerational forces in their institutions.

What stood out from the very beginning is that to the extent leaders are successful in their differentiating efforts in their own family of origin, there is immediate carry-over to their functioning in the organizations (or families) they lead. What has also been striking is the universality of the process, no matter the profession. The reciprocity between leaders' ability to be less avoidant of emotional factors in their family of origin and their ability to function likewise within the emotional system where they work was exactly the same for managers, clergy, therapists, physicians, or parents.

But this type of focus on self-differentiation, I also learned, is not easy to foster, especially when society's own emotional processes are in a state of regression (as I shall describe in chapter 2). For the endeavor to gain more regulation over one's own reactive mechanisms requires commitment to the lifetime project of being willing to be continually transformed by one's experience. Frankly, it is easier to focus on data and technique. Yet, at this point, I am convinced that to the extent leaders of any family or institution are willing to make a lifetime commitment to their own continual self-regulated growth, they can make any leadership theory or technique look brilliant. And conversely, to the extent they avoid that commitment, no theory or technique is likely to succeed for very long. As long as new innovations are focused on method and technique rather than on the elements of emotional process, all changes are doomed to recycle.

The following two vignettes will capture the difference between reactive leadership and self-differentiated leadership.

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You have to get up before your people and give an 'I Have a Dream' speech.

After *Generation to Generation* was first published, I began to receive calls from leaders in various parts of the country. At first I listened to the details of their experience, trying

to learn more about my own theories. Then one day I realized that almost everyone who called was functioning in a reactive, defensive way and failing to define his or her own position clearly. They had become so focused on the aches and pains (the pathology) in the system that they had been thrown off course by the complaints. They had stopped supplying vision or had burned out fighting the resistance; they had ceased to be the strength in the system. In short, they had forgotten to lead. I therefore stopped listening to the content of everyone's complaints and, irrespective of the location of their problem or the nature of their institution, began saying the exact same thing to everyone: "You have to get up before your people and give an 'I Have a Dream' speech."

The outcome was dramatic! Most of those who followed through with what I had suggested found that the chaos in their group soon waned. There was, however, another group of "leaders" who were absolutely desperate to stay in their position. They might have been at an age where it would be difficult to find another job, or their spouse had finally found the position of a lifetime, or their kids had just one more year to finish high school. As they put it, "To have to leave right now would be a family tragedy." Yet, when they heard my advice—that the way out of their dilemma was not some quick-fix technique to apply to others but rather a matter of developing their own self-differentiation—their nerve failed them, and they quit their position rather than having to grow.

It was at this point that I began to realize that before any technique or data could be effective, leaders had to be willing to face their own selves. Otherwise the effect of technique was like trying to build up energy in a spring where the initial twists store up more potential and then suddenly, with one twist too many, the entire spring unwinds. If this sounds similar to the recovery problems of alcoholics, there may be more to the association than we would care to admit. As I shall describe in chapter 3, the chronic anxiety in American society has made the imbibing of data and technique addictive precisely because it enables leaders not to have to face their selves.

But there is another kind of potential leader, as illustrated by this second tale. One evening I boarded a flight in Dallas headed for New York. At least twenty minutes went by past take-off time, and the doors still had not been closed. When I asked the chief flight attendant what the problem was, she replied that the smoke detector in one of the lavatories was broken and they were waiting for someone to fix it. Appalled at how many people-hours were being wasted, I asked, "Why don't you just rip it out or seal it off?" "Oh sir," she responded, "you can't do that." When I went back to my seat, my neighbor and I began to commiserate. He was a liquor distributor and several of his young-adult children worked for him. The conversation got around to women in the marketplace, and I asked if he planned to bring his daughter into what was traditionally a man's world. He answered, "I had been hesitant, even though she's probably the most competent and responsible member of the litter. But after a recent experience, I have changed my mind."

He told me this story. His daughter had been working for an ad agency that had a deadline for a multimillion-dollar proposal. Everyone went home, leaving her in charge of making sure that the proposal made the last plane out. But someone goofed and they missed the overnight mail deadline. So on her own, she called the airport, found out the cost of a private jet, and decided that as extravagant as the cost might be, it was a small price to pay to ensure the contract. When her immediate superiors came in the next morning and found out what she had done on her own responsibility, they were furious at her—but, said her father, "That's when I decided to take her into my business."

## ❖ THE PURPOSE, SUMMARY, AND CONTENTS OF THIS BOOK

*A Failure of Nerve* was born out of readers' responses to my earlier book, *Generation to Generation*, and results from my dialogue over the past decade with those who have written to me, consulted with me, or been



present at my presentations in various parts of America. In the final analysis it has been the response of others to my original concepts that has induced me to go further with my ideas. Let me assure those readers, therefore, that while here and there some ideas from *Generation to Generation* (or from my *Fables*) have needed to be included, *A Failure of Nerve* is not a repeat of the former but its logical continuation.

If the ideas in this work are often unconventional, so was the process of putting it together. This may mean that the reader cannot read it in a conventional way. Because of the interrelatedness of all the concepts, it was impossible to write this book one chapter at a time. I constantly found that I could not finish, or sometime even totally outline, one chapter until I had written the next. Thus, a kind of parallel processing occurred in which all the chapters in this book were actually written simultaneously. Ultimately, that process occurred between the two major sections, as well. The construction of this work, therefore, wound up being isomorphic to its content, as perhaps any book will be that emphasizes a process view of reality rather than linear formulations of life.

Since the same may be true for the reader, I have created short synopses of each chapter. While it naturally follows that later material in any book is often dependent on concepts described in earlier chapters, readers also will find that sometimes material in an earlier chapter will make the most sense if they already know what is coming next.

First I will illustrate what I perceive to be the major emotional and conceptual barriers to the development and expression of well-defined leadership in America's families and institutions today. I will begin by comparing the emotional processes of medieval Europe before the Renaissance with the regression that I perceive to be afflicting contemporary American society. The exact same kind of adventurous leadership that enabled the Old World to pull out of its doldrums five hundred years ago is what is needed if the New World is also to have a renaissance, now.

Chapter I is in the form of an extended metaphor. By describing how Europe's understanding of the New World developed, I will

show that it is indeed possible for an entire civilization to be stuck in its orientation. The type of leadership that was required for the Old World to go in new directions is the same kind of leadership that is necessary for reorienting any relationship system in any age. This chapter also emphasizes the inhibiting effect on adventure and imagination of the “equator” (understood as the mythical, anxiety-provoking end of the world). In later chapters, we will see how contemporary emotional barriers have the same limiting effect on leaders’ (and researchers’) horizons today.

In chapter 2, I describe how contemporary American civilization, despite its high level of technical achievement, is in the midst of a regression rather than a renaissance. Our orientation toward relationships today is as stuck as medieval Europe’s orientation toward the major parameters of its world, partly because of the high level of chronic anxiety that has been steadily increasing over the past quarter-century. Five interlocking comparisons are made between highly anxious, regressed families with acting-out children, on the one hand, and the functioning of contemporary American society, on the other. The five aspects of chronic anxiety are reactivity, herding, blaming, a quick-fix mentality, and lack of leadership—the last not only a fifth characteristic of societal regression but one that stems from and contributes to the other four. Each of these perverts natural principles of evolution, namely, self-regulation, adaptation to strength, the response to challenge, and allowing time for processes to mature.

Chapters 3 to 5 describe the imagination-limiting “equators” of our time that are symptomatic of our society’s regression; they also describe how the devaluing of self inhibits an adventurous spirit. One of these myths is an orientation toward *data* rather than the capacity to be decisive, together with the illusion that “if only we knew enough we could do (or fix) anything,” and its obverse, “we failed because we did not use the right technique.”

The second is an orientation toward *empathy* rather than responsibility, with a focus on weakness rather than strength and on ways to avoid personal responsibility. However lofty

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Empathy has become a power tool in the hands of the weak to sabotage the strong.

the original concept of empathy (a word that only came into the English language in 1922), societal regression has distorted it to the point at which it has become a power tool in the hands of the weak to sabotage the strong. It also serves as a rationalization for the inability of those in helping positions to develop self-control and not enable or interfere, a disguise for unacknowledged anxiety that desires a quick fix, and an indulgence for those who are not in a position where they have to make tough decisions. But the most deleterious effect on leaders is that empathy misleads them as to the factors that go into growth and survival and the nature of what is toxic to life itself.

By showing that what all destructive forces share in common is unregulated invasiveness—a characteristic that is totally unresponsive to empathy—I describe in chapter 4 how the focus on empathy rather than responsibility lessens the potential for survival of both leaders and followers. Leaders are victimized by victimization. In contrast, a leader's self-definition is equivalent to an immune response, and it often forces the invasive organism to “mutate,” that is, change.

The third equator-like barrier to imaginative thinking and an adventurous spirit today is the confusion of self with selfishness. The tension between self and togetherness is universal. It appears in areas as diverse as biology, marriage, and politics. There is a tilt toward the togetherness end of the scale, however, when a relationship system becomes emotionally regressed. Then, self becomes threatening to the togetherness needs of the group and is perceived as cruel, cold, and *selfish*.

The way out of this dilemma is not by finding the proper balance of self and togetherness, but by reorienting one's understanding of togetherness and self so that they are made continuous rather than polarized. In chapter 5, therefore, I draw distinctions between the narcissistic self, which is unconnected, and the well-differentiated self, which is the key to integrity. Continuing the theme of immunology, this chapter shows that the latest understanding of the immune response views it less as a force to ward off enemies and more as a force for coherence of the organism. Four comparisons are drawn between the natural processes of immunity as it has evolved in life on

this planet and the need for a similar process of integration in each human being's own evolution. Thus self-differentiation is shown to be a force that is not anti-togetherness; on the contrary, it is a force that modifies the emotional processes within any group's togetherness so that a leader actually promotes community through the emerging self-differentiation (autonomy, independence, individuality) of the other members.

In the latter chapters of the book I will employ the new orientation toward relational processes introduced earlier as the basis for what I call "leadership through self-differentiation." This focuses leaders (parents or presidents) on themselves rather than on their followers, and on the nature of their presence rather than on their technique and "know-how." An underlying theme will be that in families and other institutions, emotional processes are always more powerful than ideas. Thus the aims of these chapters are

- ◆ to show how power lies in presence rather than method;
- ◆ to enable leaders to avoid trying to instill insight into the unmotivated;
- ◆ to help leaders see that concepts such as "role modeling," "emulation," and "identification" are illusions that unnecessarily stress leaders, placing too much emphasis on the brain (or at least the cortex) and tending to work only with those who are not the problem in the first place; and
- ◆ to show how the self-differentiation of leaders and parents can make the dependency of the unimaginative and the recalcitrant work for instead of against them.

Chapter 6 is the keystone chapter of the book, presenting a model of leadership that flows from the new relationship models explored in the previous chapter. It begins by describing how leadership through self-differentiation comes in at a tangent to the charisma/consensus dichotomy that is basic to almost all conventional leadership models—a notion that forces us into either/or choices regarding leader and follower. I question the validity of concepts

such as role modeling, emulation, and identification and describe other variables that affect those leadership styles. The key, in my view, is that by continually working on one's own self-differentiation, the leader optimizes his or her objectivity and decision-making capacity.

In chapter 7, I present a view of the emotional processes of organizations, framed in terms of a system of triangular relationships rather than through the linear formulations that emphasize dyadic relationships and people's inner workings. Emotional triangles are the molecules of any social system, and their laws are universal regardless of the makeup of the group. This chapter describes how these triangles function in various types of relationship systems. It also demonstrates their universality, shows how they transcend conventional social science categories such as gender and ethnicity, and explains that they are often the missing variable for a leader's stress and effectiveness. The concept offers both a perspective for differentiated functioning and a way of thinking that contributes to a leader's further differentiation.

Living with crisis is a major part of leaders' lives. The crises come in two major varieties: (1) those that are not of their own making but are imposed on them from outside or within the system, and (2) those that are actually triggered by the leaders through doing precisely what they should be doing. The final chapter in this book, chapter 8, addresses the handling of crises that are not of the leaders' making. Continuing with the notion of power through presence, I describe how all the factors that go into self-differentiated functioning help resolve crises in more fundamental ways than is accomplished by anxiety-driven quick fixes. Most crises cannot by their very nature be resolved (that is, fixed); they must simply be managed until they work their way through. This is generally a process that cannot be willed, any more than one can make a bean grow by pulling on it. This, of course, puts a premium on self-regulation and the management of anxiety instead of frantically seeking the right solution.

Using a health crisis of my own wherein I needed two different surgical procedures—one for my heart and one for my brain, each of which jeopardized the other organ—I highlight principles that

I applied to my own functioning as I made decisions and prepared for events. I have helped leaders in a variety of organizational crises apply the same principles. This chapter emphasizes that sabotage is not simply something to be overcome; it comes with the territory. It describes the reasons for sabotage and the manifestations it usually takes—with children, with marriage partners, or with managers and employees—and how leaders may best prepare for and deal with it.

All of this circles back to the kind of training leaders need in order to recognize and deal with emotional processes. The most striking parallel of all is this: Family problems can often be resolved by having the parents or partners focus on and work at unresolved issues in their families of origin. By the same token, leaders must not only develop vision, persistence, and stamina; they must also understand that the problems they encounter may stem from their own unresolved family issues, their organization's past, sabotage in response to their effective leadership, or some combination of these factors.

In closing, let the reader beware how subtly radical some of the ideas that follow may be. Perhaps *subversive* is a better word, though not in an obviously confrontational way. Readers may find that the ideas here conflict with what they have always assumed to be the eternal truths of their profession, their politics, their understanding of life, or, sometimes (and perhaps most disturbing), their therapy. Some of the concepts that I will present—particularly with regard to how empathy has become a power tool, the totalitarian effects of consensus, the exaggerated importance of being informed, and the colossal failure of insight to bring change—will also be as jarring to “common sense” as Copernicus's notions were to even the most learned medieval mind.

We thus come to the following “catch 22.” It has been my experience in presenting many of these ideas over the past decade that often the very emotional processes in society that this book will try to elucidate can work to prevent people from hearing precisely what I am trying to say about those processes. For example, given the volatile emotional climate of our time, some readers will look for a political slant. The very words *hierarchy* and *leadership* have become anathema in

some circles. For many, *self* is a four-letter word. For others, any disagreeable idea is dismissed by attributing it to the personality, gender, or ethnic background of its author. Let me state clearly, therefore, that I have no specific political agenda other than to line up with that spirit of radical thinking that inspired those who founded our land. And as near as I can tell, that was never a spirit that revered cloistered virtues. This book is not for those who seek political allies, but it is for those who are excited by the adventure of challenging ideas, who are concerned that theories not get in the way of our survival.

While it is not my claim to be bringing some new truth, it is also not my intention merely to offer a new program. I seek, rather, to reformat the entire disc. Iconoclasm always sides with the doubters of perfect faith. For my part, I will be quite content if all I have succeeded in accomplishing is to supply this century's best candidate for a book-burning.