

How We Lead

A monthly e-column for change agents in business, politics & society

August 2004

By Amiel Handelsman

Shining through Cynicism

A cynic, it is said, is an idealist who has experienced one too many crushing disappointments. After all, who among us has not at some point placed our trust in a person, organization, or idea and then experienced betrayal when reality fell short of the promise? Situations like these rattle the ground upon which we walk.

A dozen years ago, when first encountering such thoughts, I reconciled myself to the notion that cynicism is an inevitable end state of the human condition. We can barricade ourselves from it—some of us longer than others—but eventually it will break through. And once it does, it will hold dominion over us until the day we die.

I'm no longer so sure. Another decade of living and observing leads me to question whether this view is either valid or helpful. While witnessing many challenging events in others' lives and my own, I have learned that pain does not always produce cynicism. Other responses are possible and—under the proper conditions—likely. Clients laid off from their jobs in disrespectful, even cruel, ways have turned these “hits” into “gifts” by rediscovering resilience and forgiveness within and networks of support all around. While feeling the pain (genuinely, in their bodies), they have also discovered reason to hope. In my own life, I have found that the experience of bouncing back from disappointment feeds into my body at least as much energy as was depleted by the disappointment. In short, breakdown does not need to lead to cynicism. It can lead to breakthrough.

This point may seem obvious, yet it cuts against the grain of most of the leadership literature. Sure, there are countless stories of leaders acting courageously in challenging circumstances, but rarely do we get a glimpse of what I find most interesting and important: how these people experience and respond to the emotions that show up: the anger, sadness, fear, shame, and self-doubt. Most books, and most seminars, leave these out. There are exceptions, like Daniel Goleman's work on emotional intelligence or Deborah Tannen's studies of language and communication, but they are rare. For the most part, we are far more likely to study the path to heaven than the road out of hell.

This would be fine except that most people I know, including the happy and successful ones, spend more than half of their time in hell or something resembling it. (If you had an instrument to record their emotions every minute

throughout the day, you'd find far more evidence of frustration and fear than joy and serenity). When they turn to books and teachers for guidance in getting out of hell, they receive instead maps to heaven. This is about as helpful as asking to see a doctor for stomach pain and being given a recipe for a banana split. The pain gets worse, and it becomes hard to imagine things getting better. The result: pain becomes cynicism.

I have mixed feelings about the phenomenon just described. I feel anger that so few people in organizations receive adequate support for dealing with life's challenges. I feel sadness that so few leaders and mentors understand the human and business value of such support, much less how to skillfully provide it themselves. And, more than anything, I feel grateful for the gift of being a coach: the opportunity to be invited into others' lives and be present with them while they makes sense of what is happening around them and within them. This is a very special space to be.

Every time we face the pain of our lives without either dismissing it or getting submerged in it, hope is born. Every time we do this for others, hope is born and mutual trust grows.

What are the conditions needed for this to occur? Four things come to mind:

- Getting in touch with the myriad of emotions we feel and understanding what possibilities each emotion opens and closes
- Appreciating that a healthy, grounded, relaxed, and centered body is crucial to our leadership, and taking on regular practices that support this
- Connecting with people whose presence, words, and listening nourish us
- Choosing to spend time in physical and natural surroundings that enhance life, beauty, vibrancy, and serenity

Of course, we cannot simply will or dream these conditions into being. They come about through assessing what is missing, declaring what is important, and having the conversations with others needed to bring this about. Together, these actions create the conditions for responding to life in new ways. Of course, they themselves don't just happen on their own. They come from somewhere. They arise from something. What is it?

The exploration of this question is a spiritual act. For at the ground of all being and action is, what, atoms? Quarks? Light? Consciousness?

At this moment, as the afternoon sun penetrates through the thin ocean fog, I am casting a vote for light.

The great Sufi master, Hafiz, likely would agree.

It Felt Love

How
Did the rose

Ever open its heart

And give to this world
All its
Beauty

It felt the encouragement of light
Against its
Being

Otherwise,
We all remain

Too

Frightened

- Hafiz

© Amiel Handelsman, 2004. All rights reserved.

About the author

Amiel Handelsman is a leadership coach and writer based in San Francisco. He is a trusted adviser to leaders in business, government, and the philanthropic sector. He can be reached at amiel@curiousleader.com or www.curiousleader.com.