

Leading Globally: Giving Oneself for Things  
Far Greater Than Oneself

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# *Leading Globally: Giving Oneself for Things Far Greater Than Oneself*

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*To be human is to give yourself for things far greater than yourself;  
To lead is to give yourself for things far greater than yourself.<sup>1</sup>*

**W**hen I was 11 years old, my Austrian mother explained to me that when she was my age she had wanted to have at least 6 children. Yet by the time she met my American father, just 8 years later, she no longer wanted any children. Losing most of her friends and family during World War II to Hitler's terror had convinced her that the world was not a fit place to raise children. Luckily, especially from my perspective, my father convinced my mother that within the family the two of them could create a bubble of love, and within that bubble their children could grow up in safety and happiness, protected from the inhumanity raging outside. Having grown up within the bubble of their love, and in sunny southern California rather than war torn Europe, I never doubted that our role on earth, as human beings and as leaders, was to expand the bubble to encompass the world: or as the rabbis would exhort us, to return to our original task of Tikun Olam, the restoration of the

world.

Of course, none of us can claim that the twenty-first century entered on a safe, secure, or loving note—a note imbued with peace, wisdom, compassion, and love. As we ask ourselves which of our twentieth-century legacies we wish to pass on to the children of the twenty-first century, we are humbled into shameful silence. Yes, we have advanced science, technology, and commerce, but at the price of a world torn asunder by a polluted environment, cities infested with social chaos and physical decay, an increasingly skewed income distribution that condemns large portions of the population to poverty (including people living in the world's most affluent societies), and rampant physical violence continuing to kill people in titulary limited wars and seemingly random acts of violence. No, we did not exit the twentieth century with pride. Unless we collectively learn to treat each other and our planet in a more civilized way,

it may soon become blasphemous to even consider ourselves a civilization.<sup>2</sup>

And yet why not a more peaceful, sustainable, and compassionate society in the twenty-first century? Why not a global civilization that we could bequeath with pride to our children and our children's children? Naively idealistic? Perhaps; but only if we ignore the wisdom and approaches to learning of Adam Kahane and like-minded colleagues around the world—people who have dared to attempt to make a difference. Only if we renege on our role as leaders and simply adapt to the future, rather than collectively attempting to improve it. As former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright admonishes us, "We have a responsibility in our time, as others have had in theirs, not to be prisoners of history, but to shape history...."<sup>3</sup>

After a quarter century of conducting research and consulting on global strategy and cross-cultural management, I have increasingly focused the

last few years on the small, but rapidly increasingly number of women who are among the world's most prominent business and political leaders—women who have served as their country's president or prime minister or as CEO of a major global firm.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps it is not surprising that at this moment in history, countries around the world, most for the first time, are turning to women leaders rather than to the traditional cohort of men. People want a change; they no longer want the narrow, circumscribed leadership of the twentieth century nor its outcomes. They hope and imagine that women will bring a more inclusive and compassionate approach to leadership.

In Nicaragua, for example, former president Violetta Chamorro's ability to bring all the members of her family together every week for Sunday dinner achieved near legendary status. Symbolically, her dinners gave the nation hope that it could heal its civil-war-inflicted wounds and find a peace that would reunite all Nicaraguans.<sup>5</sup> Why such elevated hopes from a Sunday night dinner? Because of Chamorro's four adult children, two were prominent Sandanistas while the other two equally prominently opposed the Sandanistas, not an unusual split in war torn Nicaragua.<sup>6</sup> As Violetta Chamorro's children told their stories around her dining room table, others in the country began to believe that they too could "reach a deeper, more real consensus—including around such profoundly important issues as unity and peace—through the telling of their personal stories."<sup>7</sup> Implicitly, the Nicaraguans believed that by listening attentively to each other, with empathy, they could hear the sacred within each person, their core humanity and that of the nation.<sup>8</sup> It is not coincidence that the symbol of hope, peace and unity was a dining room table and not a board room table.<sup>9</sup> Such holographic listening, as Adam Kahane labels it—in which each story reflects the whole,

rather than merely contributing a piece to the puzzle—opens up the possibility of communion and oneness, of transcending history to create a new future: "We have the greatest capacity to make a difference when we dare to open ourselves up, to expose our most honest nightmares and our most heart-felt dreams."<sup>10</sup>

As a social thinker, Adam Kahane points out that leaders who make a difference are extraordinarily committed, body and soul, to the changes they want to see in the world, to goals much larger than themselves.<sup>11</sup> The lives of many of the world's first women leaders mirror commitments much larger than themselves. For example, in her personal commitment, Chandrika Kumaratunga, the president of war torn Sri Lanka, became a prism for the paradoxes of extraordinary leadership. When she was only eleven years old, her father, who was the country's founding father and its first prime minister, was assassinated, many believe due to his policies which advantaged the Sinhalese and stripped the Tamil of many of their cultural rights. Her mother, who also served as prime minister, furthered the country's ethnically divisive policies. As an adult, Kumaratunga's husband, a politically involved citizen and noted actor, was murdered, in what many believe to have been Tamil-initiated violence. With the constant and very real threat of death to her and to her children, why did Kumaratunga choose to stay in Sri Lanka and to run for office? And once she won, how did she find the courage to tell her mother—whom she later appointed to serve as prime minister—and the country that she was going to attempt to find a peaceful solution to Sri Lanka's seemingly interminable civil war by sitting down with the Tamil and listening to their story. Kumaratunga, with both her father and husband murdered, chose to go outside the patterns of history and say, "Enough! There has to be a better

way." Her attempts at moving Sri Lanka toward peace and unity have by no means met with unequivocal success. Yet Kumaratunga persists, even in the face of constant death threats and a bomb explosion that already claimed one of her eyes. Kahane reminds us that leaders who influence history do so because they live the paradox.<sup>12</sup> They have the courage to commit their lives to effecting the changes they want to see.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, they have the courage to engage with others—even their enemies; the courage to give up the illusion of being in control, to venture beyond detachment, and to surrender to the process.<sup>14</sup> Will Kumaratunga be able to stay committed to changing her country while remaining open to listening to how each faction wants to change? Will she be able to maintain the paradox? To paraphrase Martin Buber,<sup>15</sup>

Does Kumaratunga believe in destiny and also that destiny needs her; that destiny does not lead her, but rather waits for her. Can she proceed toward her country's and her own destiny without knowing where it waits for her? Will she be able to continue going forth with her whole being? Destiny will not turn out the way her resolve intended it; but what she wants will come about only if she resolves to do that which she can. Will she be able neither to interfere nor to merely allow things to happen?

While the answer will only be written in the months and years ahead, we know that Kumaratunga has demonstrated enormous courage to date to begin the journey. The challenge of leadership is in the openness to destiny and the complete commitment to change for the better; not in simplistic short term evaluations of success and failure.

This past year, my Jewish nephew Aaron married a deeply religious Catholic woman Karen. Although told that their wedding ceremony and life

together would be rooted in the two spiritual traditions, both families questioned the reality of the young couple's pronouncement when the invitations arrived announcing that the wedding would be celebrated at Holy Family Catholic Church with a Catholic priest, and no rabbi, presiding. Only as the priest opened the service in Hebrew with a traditional Jewish prayer did the tension begin to reside. In one of the most moving and profoundly meaningful wedding ceremonies I have ever attended, the priest celebrated Aaron and Karen's unique individuality, including their two distinctly different spiritual traditions. He made no attempt to minimize or ignore the differences between Judaism and Christianity. After the bride and groom had exchanged vows, the priest reminded us of the hatred that has all too frequently separated Jewish and Catholic communities. He then asked each of us to see Karen and Aaron as symbolic of the love that could unite the two traditions, the love that could replace the all too common hatred. What more powerful symbol of global leadership: love replacing hate, love bridging distinct individuality, love uniting bride and groom on their wedding day, love respecting and bridging differences among all peoples at all times.

Our capacity to see and to change the world co-evolves with our capacity to see and to change ourselves.<sup>16</sup> As the marriage ceremony changed Aaron and Karen into husband and wife, so too did it change all of us into people who more deeply understand what it means to unify diversity without extinguishing individuality. As leaders, we

can never close our eyes to the complexity of the world or to the profoundly influential interactions that define society. Goethe's admonishes us that leaders know themselves only to the extent that they know the world; that they become aware of themselves only within the world, and aware of the world only within themselves.<sup>17</sup>

To be human is to find ourselves  
behind our names.<sup>18</sup>  
To lead is to find ourselves behind our  
names.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> First half of the quote is taken from Sister Joan Chittister, in Frederick Franck, Janis Roze, and Richard Connolly's (eds.) *What Does It Mean To Be Human?* Nyack, New York: Circumstantial Productions, 1998, p. 194.
- <sup>2</sup> Based on Stephan Rechtschaffen's observation in *Timeshifting*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Audio Publishing, 1996.
- <sup>3</sup> From former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright's Harvard Commencement Address as reported in the *New York Times*, June 6th, 1997, p. A8.
- <sup>4</sup> For a more in depth discussion of women serving as global leaders, see Adler's "Did You Hear? Global Leadership in Charity's World," *Journal of Management Inquiry*, Vol. 7 (No. 2), 1998, pp. 135-143; "Global Leaders: A Dialogue with Future History," *International Management*, Vol. 1 (No. 2), 1997, pp. 21-33; "Global Entrepreneurs: Women, Myths, and History," *Global Focus*, Vol.11 (No. 4), 1999, pp. 125-134; "The Women's

Global Leadership Forum: Enhancing One Company's Leadership Capacity," *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 39 (Nos. 2 & 3), 2000, pp. 209-225.

- <sup>5</sup> See Michelle A. Saint-Germain's "Women in Power in Nicaragua: Myth and Reality" in Michael A. Genovese (ed.), *Women as National Leaders*. Newbury Park, California: Sage, 1993, p. 80.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> Kahane, op. cit.
- <sup>8</sup> Paraphrased from Kahane, op. cit., and applied to the situation in Nicaragua.
- <sup>9</sup> Artist Jacqueline Hassink created a series of photo essays on the tables of power (board room tables) and tables of relationship (dining room tables) of both male and female CEOs worldwide. See Hassink's *The Table of Power*. Amsterdam: Menno van de Koppel, 1996 and her *Queen Bees: Female Power Stations*. Amsterdam: Menno van de Koppel, 1999.
- <sup>10</sup> Kahane, op. cit.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid*
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid*
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid*
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid*
- <sup>15</sup> Paraphrased from Martin I Buber's *I and Thou*. New York: Touchstone Books, 1970.
- <sup>16</sup> Kahane, op. cit.
- <sup>17</sup> Paraphrased from J.W. von Goethe, *Goethe's Scientific Studies*. Translated by D. Miller. Edited by A. P. Cottrell and D. Miller. Boston, MA: Suhrkamp Insel, 1985; as cited in Kahane, op. cit.
- <sup>18</sup> First half of quote from David Krieger in Frederick Franck, Janis Roze, and Richard Connolly's (eds.) *What Does It Mean To Be Human?* Nyack, New York: Circumstantial Productions, 1998, p. 273.