



The Berkana Institute

whatever the problem, community is the answer

The Roots of Aliveness

Leading as a Living Process

Michael Jones, ©2007

*whatever you have to say, leave
the roots on, let them
dangle*

And the dirt

*Just to make clear
Where they come from*

—Charles Olsen, “These Days”

It has often been said that our span of awareness is a mile wide and an inch deep. The quality of our inner life is frequently overlooked in our efforts to cope with the daily demands and expectations of our outer life. One enabling metaphor that helps us look at this is the ecology of a tree. The outer life is symbolized by the leaves and branches; they correspond to a life of reactivity and busyness—of action plans, performance goals, desired outcomes and results. Sometimes we direct our attention down a little, to the trunk and lower limbs. Here we look at structures, strategies and processes. Where we spend the least of our time is the ground underneath. Yet it is the roots and the soil that give the tree resilience and the strength to grow and weather sudden changes year after year.

The shift from focusing on the trunk and the branches to the ground beneath corresponds to a shift of awareness from a factory-production mindset to a more adaptive-artful one. Giving our attention to the ground beneath an organization or a community involves an artful process of creating form out of ambiguous and variable circumstances. This includes the very precise and complex interaction among many subtle variables including energy and space, tone and atmosphere, rhythm and time. Our language shifts from action and meaning to story, metaphor, felt experience and the underlying stillness that holds it all.

Root systems, like artists, learn to create in the moment, to search for the soil conditions that feel most fertile and alive, to inquire, to sense and absorb, to follow their attractions, to invent and change course in the moment and to feel their way. In other words, in their search for connective and fertile ground, roots travel a road less traveled, just as we do as we seek to find our way.

Yet we are still influenced by an industrial-age mindset that impedes our ability to adapt creatively in a time of complexity and sudden change. We still tend to rely not on our own deep intuition but on external authority, preconceived actions and mechanisms for scheduling and control. Management theorists Henry Mintzberg and Alexandra McHugh write:

Strategies (and this may apply for life as well as leadership and organizational strategies) grow like weeds in a garden; they are not cultivated like tomatoes in a

hothouse... Sometimes it is more important to let patterns emerge than to foresee an artificial consistency... Sometimes an individual actor ... creates his or her own pattern. ...Other times, the external environment imposes a pattern. In some cases many different actors converge around a theme, perhaps gradually, perhaps spontaneously. ...To manage in this context is to create a climate within which a wide variety of strategies can grow.

What can we do to create the ground for roots systems that are resilient and life affirming?

Letting Go

We need to release our industrial-age and mechanistic ways of thinking—including our needs for planning and control—in order to accept a much wider range of variations and possibilities. This corresponds to musicians' open stage, where their repertoire and what they do well may need to be set aside in order to be open to the aliveness of the moment—and to follow wherever it may go. In other words, in a living process the process itself is the content. It tends to unfold based on what feels most right, alive and true. It cannot be preconceived or created fully in anticipation or out of a concept formed in advance.

Emergence

As a pianist and composer, I go over a composition time and time again, listening and feeling for the underlying pattern that is emerging. In this way, I make a lot of mistakes and go down many blind alleys as I explore the emerging composition's many changing ways. Each iteration contributes to enhancing and enriching my auditory imagination so that I am able to make better aesthetic choices later on. In this context, to be iterative is not to correct errors or mistakes but to engage them so as to be more aligned with the process of emergence. Working in this way holds within it a sense of taking our art into our body, such that there is both naturalness and simplicity, even when it may appear difficult and complex to an outside observer.

Purposefulness

While a living process may often appear random, chaotic and even wrong-headed from the observer's point of view, it is actually highly efficient, coherent, even elegant and inevitable when experienced from within. This is because a living process unfolds within "liminal space," where transitions unfold naturally and organically. This is particularly true when we trust that the container itself carries the seed of its own unfolding potential for what comes next. It is when we try to move ahead by force of will or through tension, urgency and effort that this internal order is disturbed and our progress impeded.

Collaboration

Guiding others in a living process relies upon our capacity for holding presence with the unknown; that is, to be curious and open to whatever is emerging in our awareness that appears to be fuzzy, ambiguous or unclear. This capacity for sense-making is amplified when we are together and diminished when we are apart. There is a power that comes to us when we meet as an "ensemble" where, for a moment, we forget ourselves and work for the benefit of the larger whole. Creating spaces for exploring what we do not yet know, spaces where we can be present to what is unformed and incomplete, sets in motion a process of unfolding order, a practice which has always been familiar for the artist but unfamiliar to others who have been educated in a more parts-based mentality that is common in the industrial world. Once this living process is initiated, it will follow the trajectory of its own unfolding potential—one that is natural, organic and unrepeatable—and which reflects the expression of wholeness as it appears to us in that particular moment.

Rest

All work is half rest. Nature cannot thrive in full flower all the time, and nor can we. We need time to empty, to digest, to assimilate and to be still. Dormancy and decay are as much part of life force as is growth and flowering. The absence of this deep time of gestation can lead to confusion and erosion of the force of life itself. Wayne Muller in his book *Sabbath* reminds us that a successful life can also be a violent life. To live a deeply rooted life is to find and create a home for oneself. Plants can only grow as high as they grow deep. To do otherwise is to be at the mercy of the atmosphere, and we can only blend with its strong forces if we are deeply rooted within ourselves. Too often the sense of duty and responsibility overrides our intuition and good judgment. It becomes difficult to settle. Yet as Muller suggests, the world aches for just that—the generosity of well-rested people.

French painter Georges Braque once wrote, “In art there is only one thing that counts: the thing you can’t explain.” In the busyness of our days we often forget this mystery, particularly as it relates to what lies beneath our feet. Yet what sits above can feel to us like an over-worked and over-processed world—superficial, fabricated, manufactured and refined. Too often, that which feeds us does not fill us. We hunger for something real—words, ideas, connections, possibilities, food good enough to be eaten, food that still has its roots and dirt. Perhaps this is our hunger for good leaders: to be among people who live embodied and conscious lives, who are rooted to the land, who are vital and alive, who know what they love and where they belong—leaders who, when they speak, tell us who they are, how they live and where they come from.

Michael Jones is a pianist/composer, leadership educator, storyteller, writer and creative facilitator. He has recorded 15 CDs of his original piano compositions, written several books on leadership and creative practice and been a featured presenter at a variety of international leadership forums.

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