

Leadership is a choice; an interview with Barbara Waugh of H-P's world e-inclusion

*As part of my work in leadership development, I've been using the concept of the Hero's Journey to help organizations and individuals develop clear and compelling stories that both provide focus and make meaning out of the work they do. I'm currently interviewing a wide variety of leaders for a book called **The Leadership Journey**. What follows is a slightly edited version of one recent interview.*

Barbara, you and I share a common conviction about the power of story to help move and motivate people. The questions I'm going to ask are designed to explore your thinking through a very specific lens: that of the Leadership Story, a variation on Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey. I want to explore how you have experienced a "call" to leadership in yourself and others, the roles others play in your leadership, what your leadership journey has been like, what issues you have faced, the ways in which you have changed and the ways in which you have stayed the same.

First, what's your definition of leadership?

A leader is anyone who has a very big and compelling story of how it could all turn out, who then identifies and amplifies positive deviance within whatever system they're attempting to move, using the system's strengths to migrate it to where it needs to be. For example, the story I hold is that the corporate sector must join the non-profit and public sectors to step up to our share of stewardship for the planet. Studies on the diffusion of innovation have demonstrated that you need only 3% of a system to be firmly convinced of a new direction, to transform the system. Three percent of a given company, 3% of the corporate sector – these are doable in my lifetime.

What, in your mind, is the internal drive to lead? Describe it. What is its source? Is it related to immediate others, to a larger vision, etc.?

The drive to lead is the leader's passion for how they want the world to be, which she or he may not be conscious of (and doesn't have to be). The 3% have that in common. The source is different for different people. For me, it's pragmatic; I have a better life, more interesting, fewer depressions, greater joy when I live as one of these passionate people than when I don't, and I know I have that choice. There's massive evidence to justify cynicism, but it just doesn't get you a good life. Why not live inside a story that gives you a good life and has

the potential for turning out the way you would like? The sources of leadership have been greatly mystified: I say to people “Do you want a good life or not? Do you want to be happy or sad? Have fun or be miserable? It’s not at the mercy of the evidence; the evidence is too complex to reliably predict a future from, so take note of it, and then go on and choose the way you want it to be. ”

What was your first experience of, or discovery of your ability to lead? How has your gift changed over time?

I sometimes have had the experience of people coming up to me from earlier parts of my life saying, “do you remember when you...?” And I think they have the wrong person. So there may be something that was happening for other people with me that wasn’t yet happening for me. For me, my first experience of community organizing is a more useful reference point. Or when I started the first feminist newspaper column in Madison, WI. There was an amazing, unprecedented response; I was announced at parties; my life was threatened several times. I didn’t care for it, but I did notice it. I was startled by the power in that role of creating reality. It was pretty chilling to understand the implicit responsibility; that what you attended to or ignored, choice-fully or inadvertently, had consequences. There was tremendous responsibility there.

However, I truly don’t think leadership is a gift. Calling it a gift is part of the voodoo of leadership. Leadership is accessible to anyone who wants it. It’s a choice; you decide what you want your life to be about and you go after it. It’s not that mystical. The 3% I was talking about earlier make the choice to take the responsibility for their lives, live inside a big story; and others flock to them – most people want to be in a big story. Today I’m more mindful of both the power and the responsibility, and less startled, not as thrown by what comes out of it. I no longer hold any specific idea of how things will turn out; my Rock of Gibraltar is the big story, but the subplots can’t be predicted. Now I watch for valences, directions, projects and people that align or could be ‘framed’ to align with the big story, and I help things turn out that way.

When do you know you’ve received the call to leadership? When do you recognize it in someone else? How? How do you know the call has been answered?

As I said, I’m not so sure leaders are “called.” When I see it in others, it’s because they’re answering a question that people are living with but haven’t, many times, even yet asked; giving words to the unarticulated longings. That’s probably true for me as well. I know it is answered when I feel I’m contributing, when people light up around me. I like the idea of messenger. I feel I’ve

answered the call when I've transmitted the message without messing it up too much.

What do you as a leader need from others in order to be effective, what roles do you need them to play?

The most important thing I need from my managers is space. I've been very fortunate at HP to be with people who didn't micromanage me. In last 10 years, both of my managers made me feel cherished; I don't have to say what I'm going to do, I report what I've done and they're thrilled -- "Grateful and amazed" is how one of them put it. Here's an interesting question: how do you manage, inform, and incent a formal vs. an informal leader? Traditional management assumes predictability and structure; in doing so it precludes 98% of people's possible brilliance.

A little background on those distinctions: formal and informal. We think of our companies in terms of their hierarchies: the titles, org charts, reporting relationships, structures...but living alongside the formal hierarchy and its positional authority are informal, trust-based networks, with their own leaders. The informal leaders constitute a very small fraction of the total company population -- under 5% -- yet they and their networks carry the culture and get the work done. When the formal and informal work together, a company accelerates time to value and increases breakthroughs. Decoupled, they often inadvertently and sometimes even intentionally, sabotage each other.

The networks and informal leaders live outside the immediate purview of the formal leadership. One reason so much is lost with a lay-off is that these knowledge-doing networks are unwittingly destroyed as their leaders disappear. But how do you find, partner with and reward such leaders? It's a field that Karen Stephenson at Netform has pioneered, and after 30 years, she has just begun.

I work in one domain across all functions -- the generative. I'm all over the company; there's no job description for it. I'm very lucky that that didn't mean to my management that I therefore couldn't do the job. All the operational systems require you to have some label or other in the book of jobs, so we went with "Research Engineer" which isn't as far off as some of the job descriptions I've had. One way to look at what I'm doing is that I'm developing & refining change management tools for complex systems....

I also need to be coupled with someone who's as passionate about operationalizing as I am about visioning. It's unfortunate -- tragic, in fact -- that I get the credit and they do work. As long as our recognition and reward systems

are so skewed in favor of the vocal visionary over the quiet implementer, in favor of the one over the many that it actually takes to get things done, we'll continue blind to the potential brilliance in the company. The ongoing lament in companies that we haven't got the right people or the best people – well, I don't buy it. What I see is that we haven't gotten the right and the best of the people we have. If we did, we'd realize we have the perfect people for what we need to do and where we need to go.

Describe your own leadership journey.

Like most people, I always thought great leaders were born, not made, gifted, and special in ways that would never be mine. I figured the best I could ever do was find one and follow. What I didn't realize was that what makes a leader is a great story, and that if you pick a big story and live inside it, great people will be attracted to you and you'll be lifted up by them. I also thought that what life was about was spending a few minutes or less figuring out what you want and then spending the rest of your life going after it. Our whole culture tells us it's like that: think of the structure of movies, advertisements, the myths of western culture – think of Jason and the Golden Fleece, the search for the Holy Grail, Star Wars, etc.

How in fact it works in my life is that most of my life is figuring out what I want. When that's really clear, all kinds of things fall into place and I get what I want very quickly.

The real quest is for the story; ***what story is worth your life?*** Take your time with that, go on a search, if your search leaves you with less than a story worth your life, then invent one. Search for the story; put together the pieces from other stories that compel you. Once you have the story, everything gets attracted to it, the pieces fall in place and things work out. I love James Carse's distinctions in ***Finite and Infinite Games***. The story for my life is an infinite game – the only way to lose is to stop playing, and there are no winners and losers; the story for a given day may be a finite game. But they're all stories.

Human life is either going to make or not: that's pretty binary, and it's the big question. People have to decide how they want it to be and live accordingly. There's something called "water bears," which is a form of life that has survived the greatest extremes of heat and cold, from the beginning of life on the planet. They taught me that just because humans are gone, it doesn't mean that the game is over, life is over, the story ended. So I say it's binary, but then when I worked with Alan Cranston, I watched him scale up from saving human life to saving life at all, and be quite hopeful, because of the water bears, despite his daily facing of the grim realities of rogue nuclear bombs and uranium theft.

What gets in the way of your leadership? What are the dilemmas that cause you the greatest concern?

Schedules that don't align with my own rhythms get in the way. I contribute more when I stay out of the system. The kinds of intelligence and insights required to shift the system are best fostered outside the system. My best "shape shifting" happens in the hot tub, on a long bike ride, or taking a nap. You think differently lying down than sitting up – it's literally a different point of view.

My biggest dilemmas are when I start getting into control, having to make it turn out a certain way, worrying about "what if". If I can live in the big story that doesn't happen, but I still get catapulted into the daily drama and lose that. And I'm still trying to understand the role of informal leaders in making large system change happen.

What have been your most transformational experiences as a leader?

When I taught in Freedom Schools in the South in the early '60's, and realized I could get killed standing up for what I believe. That feminist news column I mentioned earlier. Standing up in front of 3000 people at HP, telling my story, mentioning my partner, and asking if it was all worth it. Going to get my child in Louisiana, a white mother adopting a black kid. They all involve risk -- and realizing it.

What do you understand about leadership now that you didn't five years ago? Ten? How have you evolved or matured? How haven't you?

I understand that what I mean by leadership is authenticity, and that it's a choice. It's not bestowed, it's not a gift, it's something you can choose and if you do, you're in for a ride; it's worth your life! By authenticity, I mean both being true to yourself and inventing a self that's worth being true to. I'm getting much clearer because of this distinction between formal and informal leadership.

What is it about me that just when I'm about to get accolades I bail out of the game? It's Mary Catherine Bateson's quilt metaphor in **Composing a Life**. Quilt is better than quest or "hero's journey" for my life. I want to be surrounded by variety; the generative dimension of new things. When rewards show up, it tells me I've been there too long; the very people who are needed to carry it on are the ones who thrive on the kinds of rewards that start coming in and it's great if you get out of the way and let them have the rewards. (I should note that I've been rewarded anyway – raises, perks, etc.)

My challenge now is to get clearer on the world scene; for the corporate sector to step up to stewardship for the planet, we need to better understand the context,

the game. I have to learn about new domains on behalf of the company as an informal leader – lots to learn about how to be effective in new domains. In terms of igniting, helping to catalyze corporate revolutionaries around the world, I need to learn what subset of what I could say will have the most impact. What has traction, what resonates, what speaks? What isn't doing it? Be it a keynote or a sound bite, balancing the response in the moment with holding the bigger story, that's a learning curve for me.

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Lisa Marshall has been listening to people tell their stories throughout careers as a documentary filmmaker and then as an organizational change consultant. Using communication and collaboration skills training /coaching as a “cover” for making necessary conversations happen inside of organizations, she has helped transform organizational cultures at companies like EDS, Hewlett-Packard and Intel. As principal of The Smart Work Company, she's most recently been exploring the power of stories to build leadership capacity. Co-author of ***Smart Work: The Syntax Guide for Mutual Understanding in the Workplace*** (Kendall/Hunt, 1995), Marshall is currently writing ***The Leadership Story: Growing Leaders in the 21st Century***.

For further information on The Leadership Story, visit <http://www.smartworkco.com>. Marshall can be reached at lisa@smartworkco.com or 202.829.0795.

Barbara Waugh is the author of ***The Soul in the Computer: The Story of a Corporate Revolutionary*** (Inner Ocean Publishing, 2001). A longtime radical activist, she joined Hewlett-Packard 18 years ago, and used her successive positions as company recruiting manager, and personnel director and worldwide change manager for the renowned HP Labs to transform HP's corporate culture. Along the way she invented and discovered a set of "radical tools" for introducing practical change and energizing altruism at all levels of the organization. She is the Co-Founder of World e-Inclusion, a new HP business dedicated to bringing the benefits of the new economy to the poor around the world.

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