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Seeking Alignment in the World Body:

The Art of Embodiment

Skye Burn

Art embodies. Art is unique in that it unifies the material with the spiritual. There is no way to perceive the spiritual without the material; conversely, without spirit the forms yield no lasting truth. Art's form is material, yet it deals with inner reality. It is embodiment. (Karen Stone, 2003, p. 29)

As humanity ventures further into the 21st century, globalization, mass media, and the Internet are weaving a web of connections. The consciousness of separation is yielding to the awareness that we are one body. What happens in Burundi or Brazil trembles the entire web. Images of the tsunami in Japan broadcast horror onto the shores of distant hearts. Secondhand smoke from coal burning in China pollutes our communal living space. The U.S. recession destabilized the global economy. The sight of abject poverty or violence in one part of the world depletes our communal sense of well-being, while evidence of noble human nature increases our collective sense of well-being. Gradually we are acknowledging that all parts of the world body are interconnected and interdependent and no part can experience itself as a separate entity isolated from the whole.

At the same time, as we are drawn into the consciousness of oneness, humanity is undergoing an excruciating process of differentiation and dismemberment, a sense of being torn apart by social, political, economic, and cultural adversity. As the world population grows, we

are learning to live in closer quarters and closer contact with one another, forcing us into a deeper familiarity and deeper knowing. In struggling to access this deeper knowing, we are confronting our differences. Ironically, as we become more acutely conscious of what sets us apart, we face the need to discover and strengthen what holds us together.

The world body is to humanity what my body is to me. Just as my ankle bone is connected to my leg bone, South America is connected to North America, Asia is connected to Europe, and Africa is connected through the plasma of oceans to the whole. I think of different parts of my body as separate—my fingers, my legs, my head, my torso—but when I need to act, the parts of my body work together.

Today, humanity is facing situations that threaten our communal safety, including economic instability, climate change, environmental degradation, resource depletion, food and water shortages, terror, violence. To resolve these situations, all parts of the world body must work together and act as one, with a sense of common purpose. Yet many parts resist integration. Ethnic, religious, economic, political, and ideological factions pursue their separate agendas and refuse to join in working for the common good. Overall, humanity's resistance to unification, personified and embodied in diverse parts of the world body, has a debilitating effect on our collective ability to resolve the challenges we face in the world today. On the collective level, where these matters must be resolved, the world body is unable to "get its act together."

As a whole, humanity is suffering from psychological conditions associated with the lack of integration on the individual level (Jung, 1960, 1966; Kernberg & Michels, 2009; Weill Medical College, 2012), including anxiety, depression, terror, extremism, impaired agency, and oscillations in relationships with self and others. While the symptoms associated with the lack of integration are apparent worldwide, for examples we need look no farther than the United States.

The U.S. Congress is so polarized and split into factions that the governing body (representing our communal agency) is unable to act with clear intent to resolve issues vital to our communal well-being, such as health care and pollution. In addition, according to statistics issued in 2012 by the Institute of Mental Health, 18% of U.S. adults and 25.1% of youth ages 13-18 have anxiety disorder and 6.7% of adults suffer from depression yearly. The level of terror in the U.S. has reached such proportions that fear consumes vast amounts of our energy and resources. As allocations for fighting terrorism, securing borders, and shoring-up defenses skyrocket, budgets for human services, education, and the arts diminish.

“Splitting,” a condition associated in individuals with borderline disorder, extremist thinking, other-directed mood swings, and oscillations in the experience and appraisal of the self, is evident in the world body in extremist views of America, Iran, North Korea, Russia, corporations, and/or the government as the embodiment of good or evil (*we* are good, *they* are evil) and oscillations between self-congratulation (humans are the apex of evolution) and self-flagellation (we have mucked-up in creating the world). The world body is manifesting, and humanity is embodying, the symptoms of splitting and severe dissociation because of the lack of integration in the collective psyche.

THE CHALLENGE FOR LEADERS

For the world body to function effectively we must find ways to integrate the diverse parts of humanity into a cohesive whole, and we must find the right balance between humanity’s various roles and interests. Just as inner conflict stymies an individual’s effectiveness, the world body cannot function effectively when parts of humanity are “at war” with other parts.

Psychologists address the need for integration on the individual level. In treating individuals, psychologists work to integrate all parts of the person into a cohesive whole so they

function with a unified sense of purpose, and so every part is fairly represented in the actions of the whole and no part is squelched, denied, or repressed.

Leaders address the same need on the collective level. In the field of leadership, integration is called alignment. Leaders work to attain alignment in developing organizations, communities, and teams or work groups. *Alignment* means all members of a group are working cohesively with a sense of common purpose toward a common goal (Bodaken & Fritz, 2006; Jaworski, 1998; Sawyer, 2007; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004). With alignment, work flows. Alignment “is the magical moment” when a “group is in sync and the performers seem to be thinking with one mind” (Sawyer, p. 50). Without alignment people work at cross-purposes and “pull in different directions” (Bodaken & Fritz, p. 147).

Today, the primary challenge for leaders is to attain alignment in the world body and the global community. In *Cultivating Peace*, James O’Dea (2012) observed, “Our evolving story as a species seems to want us to learn how we can integrate our unique individual and collective identities” (p. 214), and he offered pointers for dispelling the resistances to integration. When every part of humanity is boldly in sync, and we collectively act as one, humanity will be freed from the conditions associated with splitting and dissociation and the world body will come alive in ways it never has before.

THE PRIMARY TASK FOR LEADERS

James Kouzes and Barry Posner (2002) observed two primary leadership tasks are to “model the way” and “inspire a shared vision” (p. 13). I wish to add that leaders must also correctly interpret the want or need being expressed by the world body. As James MacGregor Burns (2003) noted, “Summoned forth by human wants, the task of leadership is to accomplish some change in the world that responds to those wants” (p. 2).

Interpreting the Situation

An accurate interpretation of the world situation is necessary for effective execution. In creating communities, organizations, and the world, as in creating works of art, “It is the conflict of these two principles—execution and interpretation—that is at the root of all the errors, all the sins, all the misunderstandings that interpose themselves” between the work and the audience (Stravinsky, 1942/1970, p. 122). When world leaders fail to understand what a situation is calling for, the world situation will worsen until their interventions hit the mark.

Listening to the world body, hearing the disenchantment, anxiety, depression, terror, and violent emotions being expressed (physically embodied) in situations around the world, tells us the current interpretations are missing the mark. The lack of success may be due in part to the fact that world leaders are prescribing economic, political, and military interventions in situations where the underlying cause is a lack of alignment, which calls for integrative measures and a commitment to making something beautiful and magical happen.

Modeling the Way

Modeling the way requires leaders to embody (to be a manifestation of) the integration they are leading others toward. Kouzes and Posner (2002) noted, “Words and deeds must be consistent. Exemplary leaders go first. They go first by setting the example through daily actions” (p. 14). To exemplify alignment, leaders must do the work necessary to ensure their own personalities are integrated, well balanced, and coherent, and they are not projecting unresolved aspects of themselves onto others. For each leader, the task of embodying alignment is a personal journey undertaken on one’s own.

Inspiring a Shared Vision

In contrast, inspiring a shared vision is a communal task undertaken with others. To originate a shared vision requires input and feedback from every sector of the world body, proffered by people who understand and respond to different dimensions of the world situation, including the spiritual, material, and cosmic dimensions. The diverse stakeholders contribute different lenses, sensitivities, fields of knowledge, and areas of expertise. Ultimately, sourcing a shared vision requires seeing behind the guises of otherness to discern the deepest nexus of connection: our common identity, common purpose, and common goal.

SEEDS OF A SHARED VISION

In my understanding, sourcing a shared vision requires (1) discovering what resonates with the world body, (2) changing the contextual framing of our communal work, and (3) seeing and understanding our common goal.

Discovering What Resonates

To discover what resonates requires listening to the world body and paying attention to feedback. As a base line leaders need to ask: Do all parts of the world body identify with the vision? Does the vision work? Does it inspire all parts of the world body to work together with a sense of common purpose? Do some parts resist and thwart the vision? Feedback from the world body tells us if the vision is working, or if it needs to be modified or scrapped.

Changing the Contextual Framing

By *contextual framing* I mean how we collectively perceive and experience the meaning, purpose, and goal of human activity worldwide; how we explain to future generations what we are doing and have done in the past; in other words, how we “understand our *mission*” and the direction we are headed (DePree, 1987, p. 33).

In organizations, Bodaken and Fritz (2006) observed, “It is not the actual individuals who limit the team’s ability to function well. Rather, it is the organizational context in which they work. If we can change the context, we can change the team’s performance” (p. 126). Thus, it is not the separate parts of humanity (humanists, progressives, conservatives, Christians, Muslims, atheists, terrorists, politicians) that limit our collective ability to work together cohesively; rather, it is the lack of a contextual framing that allows all parts of the world body to see the purpose of our communal activity and understand how we are collectively working in diverse ways toward a common goal and honor the gifts “each of us as individuals bring to the group effort” (DePree, 1987, p. 77).

None of the current contextual framings available to humanity supports alignment on a deep enough level to integrate all parts of humanity into a cohesive whole. To illustrate the situation, consider two large-scale contextual framings: evolution and creationism. In 1859, the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* reframed human experience, notably in the West. From the beginning, Darwin’s vision has resonated strongly with scientists while it has elicited strong resistance from Christian parts of the world body. The resistance is not to the vision, per se. The resistance derives from what the vision could mean in terms of the potential loss of identity, life purpose, and role in the world body. Certain Christians resist the vision of evolution because adopting it would mean losing their identity (we are created in the image of God and ultimately are one with the Creator) and sense of purpose (we have a creative purpose beyond survival of the fittest). Likewise, for scientists to adopt the vision of creationism without empirical evidence would mean forfeiting their identity, purpose, and role. While the contextual framings of evolution and creationism support alignment in separate sectors of the world body (scientists are aligned in supporting evolution and Christians are united in their opposition),

neither framing supports alignment on a level that allows scientist and Christian parts of the world body to see and understand how they are working in diverse ways toward a common goal.

Inherently, the new contextual framing must be so inclusive and true to the meaning and nature of our communal work it becomes not only a lens of self-reflection but also “lived form-in-the-making” (Sheets, 1966, p. 148). In *The Phenomenology of Dance*, Maxine Sheets observes, “The reflected-upon body is always an externally related system of parts and never a totality which is lived” (p. 27). Any contextual framing must not distract from the life of the work. She explains the “dance does not come alive until the dancer passes beyond a mastery of structure, and comes to realize the dynamic flow inherent in the total piece” (p. 109).

PROPOSAL FOR A SHARED VISION

I propose art making offers a contextual framing in which all parts of humanity can find their belonging and realize the dynamic flow inherent in creating the world. Art is universal in scope and offers a framing that transcends separate individuals and cultures. Further, looking through the lens of art provides a fresh perspective that can free humanity from habitual ways of thinking and can open the door to world renewal.

I submit that we are collectively engaged in a creative process. All parts of humanity are creating the world and have been through the ages. All parts of the world body contribute in diverse ways to the communal work of world making, and in this context can be found our common identity, common goal, and common purpose.

If the world is a work of art, and humanity is the artist creating the world, our common identity is the artist or creator. Looking through the lens of art, our common goal is to create a world that truly is a work of art, a timeless masterpiece, alive in its essence and alive with meaning. Our purpose is to create a world that embodies the essence we seek to reveal.

To clarify, as I have noted elsewhere (Burn, 2012), in creating the world humanity works with the medium of nature (matter, natural resources). The world is not the earth, per se, any more than Michelangelo's *Pietà* is the marble from which it is hewn or Picasso's *Guernica* is the paint from which it is made. The world is a human creation. The world is everything on earth that shows evidence of human touch. Martin Heidegger remarked, "World and earth are essentially different from one another and yet are never separated. The world grounds itself on the earth, and earth juts through the world" (Heidegger, 1994, p. 267).

CREATING A WORLD THAT TRULY IS A WORK OF ART

The artist has four objectives in creating works of art; two that reside in the work and two that reside in the artist. The first two are: (1) create a form that fully embodies the essence and (2) get to the place where "it works." The second two objectives are: (3) attain the flow state and (4) achieve mastery.

Objective 1: Embodying Essence

The word *art* stems from the root *ar*, which means to join together. Artistic practice involves the union of form and essence, as spiritual practice involves the union of soul and body. Artists create tangible forms that capture, embody, and reveal intangible essences, as a painting captures the spirit of someone or something; a poem reveals meaning; a dance embodies feeling; and a symphony embodies the soul of music. In art making, the purpose of creating the form is to reveal the essence. Poet Denise Levertov (1973) noted, "Form is never more than a *revelation of content*" (p. 13). In the world of art, the essence decides what form is fitting. Unfitting forms fall by the wayside of human memory. True works of art are treasured and endure.

Implications for Leadership. From an artistic perspective, humanity seeks to create a world that fully embodies and reveals the essence of what it means to be human. We seek to create a world

that embodies the essence of peace and the spirit of unity. Our ultimate objective is to unify the intangible essence realm (heaven) and tangible form realm (earth, the material realm).

To create a world that fully embodies and reveals the essence of what it means to be human we cannot disown, deny, squelch, or repress any part of humanity. For leaders, it is misleading to incite some parts of the world body to silence or demean other parts of the world body. The result of silencing the self is depression and violence (Gilligan, 2010, xiii). To create a world that embodies the spirit of unity we must get to the place where all parts of the world body act as one in meeting the challenges of our times. David Bohm noted, “The most important thing going forward is to break the boundaries between people so we can operate as a single intelligence” (cited in Senge et al., 2004, p. 195). For the world to embody the essence of peace we must get to the place where we collectively feel at peace with the world we have created, which means listening to feedback from the world body and listening to conscience.

Objective 2: Getting to the Place where “It Works”

Artists often use the phrase “it works.” In *Experimental Drawing*, in his chapter on Organization/Structure: Making Things “Work Together,” Robert Kaupelis (1992) explained what artists mean by this phrase:

If you have ever listened to artists talking about particular works of art, a phrase that you have no doubt heard over and over again is that “it works” or, conversely, “it doesn’t work.” ... If you were to ask these artists what they mean, they would probably come up with such terms or phrases as: it’s composed; it has structure; it makes a statement; it’s unified; it’s well-organized; it’s harmonious throughout; it’s well-designed; there’s a total integration of parts; nothing is superfluous; everything holds together. In more detailed

terms, what they mean is that the organization of a drawing creates an expressive form in which all of the parts, as well as the artist's intentions, are related to one another and to the total form in a unique and distinctive way. (p. 39)

Clearly, judging by the feedback from the world body (expressed in forms of violence, criticism, disenchantment, depression, terror), humanity has not yet gotten to the place where "it works" in creating the world. Although there are plentiful indications that the world as a work of art is coming together, the work is muddled. The world does not make a clear statement; it is not unified; the parts are not integrated; everything does not hold together; it is not harmonious throughout; there is considerable waste or superfluity; and humanity's intentions are unclear and show little relationship to the total form.

Implications for Leadership. The meaning of the phrase "it works" in the field of art is analogous to the concepts of alignment and integration in the fields of leadership and psychology, respectively. Thus, there is a strong and direct correlation between the state of the world and the psychological integration of the artist (humanity).

Again, the challenge is to achieve integration and alignment in the world body. From a leadership perspective, many members of the global community are still pursuing their own goals and separate agendas without considering or being recognized and honored for their contributions to our communal work. As Ben Hecht, Claire Dias Ortiz, and Steve Downs (2012) observed in their webinar, *Leading in a Hyperconnected World*, "While today it is conventional wisdom that major issues are far too complex and interconnected for any one entity to solve alone, many leaders and organizations continue to pursue their own agendas with isolated impact."

From an artistic perspective, the world is a work in progress. The creative process began when humanity began seeking to control nature (the medium of life) to serve human creative purposes. Today, the evidence suggests we have reached the stage where the work is *coming together*. Despite the evidence of dissociation, fragmentation, and splitting reflected in the patterns of culture, we are seeing an emerging realization of wholeness, in systems thinking, globalization, the Internet, and the symbolism of the World Wide Web. Since the 1960s, while humanity has been experiencing wrenching disintegration and dismemberment of social norms and institutions, we have also experienced movement toward integration in the world body and the world.

Through the civil rights movement in the United States and elsewhere, and the worldwide women's movement, black and white and feminine and masculine components of the world body have become integrated, and formerly repressed parts of humanity are more fully represented in humanity's world-making activities. As a consequence, the world more fully embodies the essence of what it means to be human.

Richard Nixon's trip to China in 1974 and, later, the lifting of the Iron Curtain opened the way for cultural exchange between the East and West, to the extent that our economies are now inextricably connected and we have developed a taste for each other's foods. Likewise, since the 1970s the world body has focused considerable energy on integrating the spiritual and material dimensions of human lived experience, with attention also given to resolving the science-religion conflict. Overall, this process of integration is a classic configuration of the archetypal union of opposites (Jung, 1963/1977) on a global scale.

In other areas as well, our communal work is coming together. Educational institutions are encouraging interdisciplinary studies to integrate previously siloed fields of knowledge.

Businesses are integrating environmental considerations into their bottom lines. And, as noted above, travel, immigration, mass media, and the Internet are precipitating exposure to otherness and weaving a World Wide Web of virtual and on-the-ground connections.

Ironically, the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, which tore apart our hearts, also instilled a greater awareness of wholeness. On December 10, 2001, in his speech at the Nobel Prize ceremony, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan (2001) spoke of the deepening awareness of our common bond.

We have entered the third millennium through a gate of fire. If today, after the horror of 11 September, we see better, and we see further—we will realize that humanity is indivisible. New threats make no distinction between races, nations or regions. A new insecurity has entered every mind, regardless of wealth or status. A deeper awareness of the bonds that bind us all—in pain as in prosperity—has gripped young and old (para. 6).

The evidence of increasing integration is offsetting the evidence of polarization, dissociation, and splitting, and leaders need to decide where they want to focus their energies in creating the world. Do they want to serve the process of integration and embodiment or continue perpetuating the social ills that plague humanity?

Objective 3: Attaining the Flow State

The artistic concept of flow also corresponds to alignment and integration. Flow is a state of being and state of consciousness. The flow state is attained when all parts of a person or all members of a group work together and operate as a single intelligence.

Imagine a group of musicians creating music. As the musicians start playing together, they seek alignment around the archetypal patterns forming elements of music: rhythm, harmony, pitch, melody, and timbre. Listening closely, as the musicians play together, one hears them making progress toward the moment when the music “works,” that is, the moment when the performance comes together and the music comes alive. The music works when the musicians attain the flow state. In the flow state there are no impediments or blocks to the life of the music. The soul of the music is fully embodied in the created sounds, and the musicians and audience are transported to another world, the timeless world where music lives.

For humanity to attain the flow state in creating the world, all parts of the world body must be aligned with the “*propriate strivings* or *life themes*” of the whole (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 230). If some parts of the world body are not aligned, humanity as a whole will not attain the flow state. By analogy, if one musician “does his own thing” without consideration for the whole, playing in a different key, a different rhythm, or a different melody, the music will not come alive. It will not work.

Implications for Leadership. From a leadership perspective, “having people in the organization who are not aligned with the dream” or vision results in “deep incoherence in the organization” (Jaworski, 1998, p. 127).

If humanity’s goal in creating the world is to produce a timeless work of art, attaining the flow state is vital to our success. Timeless works are created in the flow state. Researchers who study flow agree that being in the flow state confers a sense of timelessness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Jaworski, 1998; Sawyer, 2007). While a work in progress is directed toward a goal in the future, the flow state entails being fully present. In the *Forgotten Power of Rhythm*, percussionist Reinhard Flatischler (1992) noted: “Everyone knows, consciously or unconsciously, this ‘other

sense of time.’ Some describe it as a wave standing still while all around it the water flows on. Others simply refer to this state as the experience of the present moment” (p. 89). For leaders, part of the challenge is helping humanity transition from working to make progress to living fully in the present.

Objective 4: Achieving Mastery

Mastery is attained in the delicate balance between control and surrender. On one hand artists learn to control the medium. On the other hand, they need to let go and surrender control so the essence can move without impediment into form and action (Bogart, 2001; Herrigel, 1953; Murphy, 1992).

Imagine a pianist. Her performance is technically flawless, but unfortunately the music has no life. She has mastered control of the medium, but she has not let go and surrendered to the life of the work. She has not let herself become an instrument or conduit through whom the music flows and manifests in the world. Her work is mechanical and soulless. She has not attained mastery.

The key to creating a work that is alive in its essence is to “bring forth the emerging reality *as it desires*” (Jaworski, 2012, p. 181). Artists listen to the work. They pay attention and go where “it wants to go.” They surrender their images, ideas, beliefs, and expectations of what the work should look like or be like. They surrender their attachment to outcome and let the essence dictate what form the work takes. They trust the process.

Implications for Leadership. Changes in the field of leadership reflect humanity’s movement toward mastery in creating the world.

The field of leadership began to integrate principles of artistic mastery into leadership practice in the 1970s with the advent of servant leadership. Before the 1970s, leaders operated

primarily in the command and control mode. Leaders sought to control situations, control events, control how people behave, and control what form the world takes. Robert Greenleaf, partly in response to the massive social movements of the sixties and seventies, turned the focus of leadership to serving what wants to emerge. Greenleaf (1977) emphasized the importance of listening: “a natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening *first*.” He added that one becomes a servant leader through a “long arduous discipline of learning to listen” (p. 31). By listening to the world body and listening to the world, Greenleaf said, leaders sense “the *unknowable* and are able to *foresee the unforeseeable*.” By listening, leaders sense what is not yet tangible. They “know some things and foresee some things that those presuming to lead do not know or foresee as clearly” (p. 35). They sense what wants to emerge and help it find its true form of expression in the world. In *Theory U*, Otto Scharmer (2007) expanded the concept of “leading into the emerging future” (p. 163).

Beyond listening, mastery entails letting go and trusting the process. If leaders (like artists) listen closely and go where the work leads, if they surrender their egos and let go of ideas, images, and expectations of where the work should lead or what it should look like, if they go where “it wants to go,” they experience the mystery and magic of co-creation. The universe or Creation supports their work.

In *Trust the Process: An Artist's Guide to Letting Go*, Shaun McNiff (1998) explained, “The creative process is an intelligence that knows where it has to go. Somehow it always finds the way to the place where I need to be, and it is always a destination that never could have been known by me in advance (p. 31). In the field of leadership, Jaworski (1998) echoed McNiff: “Our journey is guided by invisible hands with infinitely greater accuracy than is possible

through our unaided conscious will” (p. 119). Master artists and leaders alike surrender to that intelligence and trust those invisible hands to lead them accurately. They trust life.

Finally, mastery confers a sense of effortlessness. Leaders and artists prize the moment when the work develops a life of its own, when the work becomes rhythmic. At that moment the onus of leadership lifts and the work becomes a dance, a call and response to a cosmic pulsation. One is carried by the rhythm of the work. Flatischler (1992) noted, “When we physically sense the supportive power of a pulsation, it creates within us the psychological qualities associated with being carried: a feeling of effortlessness and safety, and the inner knowledge that life has the power to carry us, if we allow it” (p. 88).

Creative work has a rhythm, consisting of a pattern of beats and off-beats. In music, “When musicians allow themselves to be carried by the silent pulse, the listener will connect consciously or unconsciously to the feeling of being carried” (Flatischler, 1992, p. 89) or transported. The silent pulse is the off-beat, or “ghost beat,” as it is sometimes called. In creating the world, actions and events constitute the beat. The off-beat or silent pulse is the space between events sensed as a readiness, an opening, a “teachable moment” in the world body (Burn, 2005). When leaders are tuned to the off-beat in creating the world and their interventions are impeccably timed to coincide with conditions of readiness in the world body, things come together and fall into place effortlessly, magically. Then we are operating in the flow mode. On the other hand, when our timing is off, and we are not in the flow mode, “The effortless nature of the enterprise disappears, and everything becomes struggle and strain and hard work” (Jaworski, 1998, p. 129).

Currently the world body is still caught in the struggle of creating the world. The work is not yet effortless. For leadership, the challenge is how to bring the world body to the place where we collectively operate in the flow mode where magic happens in the mystery of co-creation.

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