

The Greatest Teacher

August 25, 2007 by [lifeshifting](#)

Recently, I had the opportunity to attend a wonderful retreat/seminar with [Margaret Wheatley](#), the renowned leadership expert and author of the award winning *Leadership and the New Science*, among other great works. Her exploration for the week long seminar was around this question: “Where are the Leaders the World Needs Now?” A great question and one that she, not surprisingly, did not answer but rather prompted us to sit with, reflect upon, and discuss, mostly among ourselves.

Over the five day period, I had the chance to interact with a number of the hundred or so participants and in spite of all the evident diversity of the group—teachers, counselors, administrators, Government officials, corporate types of all ages and backgrounds—I was consistently amused to find a singular rumble of anxiety flowing through each and every one of us. It seems that by posing this provocative question at the outset, Meg had placed us front and center in the firing line of resistance: what, me? A leader? For this time? Well, certainly not! Next in line please.

Yet leaders we are, according to Meg’s simple, eloquent and dis-arming definition: a leader is someone who wants to help. That’s it. Starting here, starting now. Do you want to help? Yes? Well, then, wake up: you’re a leader. And if you thought that wasn’t enough to bring the full rage of resistance to your comfortable, passive seminar-participant existence, Meg added early on, this pearl of wisdom: “I have nothing to teach you.” Nothing. Nada. It seems, according to her estimation (and that is a pretty mighty estimation, by the way, given that she has taught, coached, lectured and cajoled thousands of so-called leaders over many geographies, cultures and years!) that all the knowledge—or rather, wisdom—one needs to be a leader resides right inside our own heart/minds. We only need to let go of our fear of just how great we really are. Smallness is a defense against GOD. Our resistance is our ego, our story of who we THINK we are supposed to be—good soldiers, compliant students, corporate drones, etc. Leaders are OTHER. Not Me. At least that is what our fragile ego would have us believe.

So, as you digest this giant gem of wisdom from which everything Meg shared with us all week emanated, let me share with you what I personally learned from Meg, from the participants, and from myself during the seminar. You see, Meg may have been the muse that week, my guide to the teaching that I most needed to hear, but the real teacher was something entirely “other”. The real teacher, the greatest teacher, during this week or any other is **disappointment**.

Wasting little time with pleasantries, as leaders who are awake to their job rarely do, Meg pointed the way to this powerful teaching right from the outset. She started off her first presentation on the very first morning by saying that if we had come to see her looking for answers or methods or “mental models” or new practices or techniques or formulas for how or why or when to become a leader...or for tool sets to take back to our organizations to turn others into leaders, we would be sorely disappointed. In fact, she

went on to add—nail in the coffin here my friends!—that she could only guarantee one thing about our experience with her during the week ahead: that at some point *we would invariably be disappointed*. We would be disappointed in her ideas, her way of behaving, in the format, the weather, the food, the timing, the institute, something. Guaranteed. As she put it, and I paraphrase, you paid your money to increase your “knowledge-base” regarding leadership, when in actuality that very same knowledge base is a defense, a wall you are building to prevent the experience of your true nature as a leader to emerge. Disappointment is a given, because your soul already knows better. I (Meg) can’t make you happy, teach you anything or turn you into a leader, only you can do that. And since you paid money to supposedly learn “something” from me in that regard...disappointment (maybe already in play, now!!) is guaranteed. Sorry.

Whew. Yikes. Can I get a refund? Well, yes, perhaps on the seminar...but no, not on the truth, the wisdom, and the value of what she was offering here. At the end of the day, the only experience of leadership that is authentic and useful is leadership of the self. We, all of us, ARE the leaders the world needs now...and we know it. But we are afraid. Or should I say, our egos are afraid. The leader beneath the ego, buried under the baggage of cultural and childhood conditioning, is there just waiting to be set free. AND...wise elders like Meg Wheatley go around and do “seminars” with one purpose really—all the fluff of structure and brochures and content is just designed to get our egos to pay up: **to offer us a doorway**. They simply hand us the key to the door behind which lies our golden essence, our true face—timeless, perfect, unblemished and pure. Leaders one and all.

The pathway offered here, by Meg, or by anyone, is through your disappointments. Disappointment is the greatest teacher because it automatically throws us back on ourselves and points to our need to control, our need to stay small and comfortable, our need for life to be predictable. But life is not like that. When we allow ourselves—and we all do it!—to get enveloped in the energy of disappointment, we are resisting life, resisting WHAT IS.

There is much more to be written about this subject. If you have gotten this far in this blog you may be enraged, confused, or have already “logged off” in your mind. You may be sorely **disappointed** that Dr. Hull didn’t go to a world class seminar with a world class teacher on leadership and come back with anything more helpful than this: look to your disappointments to teach you to be a leader.

That’s it. You and I are stuck with it my friend. Leadership lies within us all...in the essence of our very being. It lies in the present moment perfection of life in motion. The river of life is always moving and changing and we have the ability to drink, swim and BE in the flow, leading ourselves towards a promised land of joy and opportunity and blessings for all. But we have to get out of our heads and into our hearts. Disappointment is the pathway from our ego-based, fear-based desire to HOLD ON to our small selves, to sit on the shore line and watch OTHERS lead (down the garden path, but to what/where?).

Think on this for a bit. And the next time your spouse, or loved one or teacher disappoints you (let alone the weather, the stock market, the Government, etc.) which should happen within five or ten minutes of reading this blog...might you have the presence of mind/heart to stop, breathe and look at **HOW YOU ARE CREATING YOUR OWN MISERY.**

I know, this is heavy stuff. So, I will leave you on an up note, again from the experience with Meg and her profound candor and wisdom. By the end of the week, many of us, myself included, had jumped in the river...and slowly with awkward strokes and occasional gulps of water, begun to swim in the joy and vitality and peace of our own folly, imperfection and innocence. We are alive. We are leaders. We will be disappointed...mostly in ourselves. But if not US, then who, if not NOW, then when?

Jump in. The water's fine.

In the flow,

Dr J