“A Failure of Nerve”
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Book Note ~ Dave Kraft

“No one ever made a decision because of a number. They need a story.” For whenever a “family” is driven by anxiety, what will also always be present is a failure of nerve among its leaders. It is about the need for clarity and decisiveness in a civilization that inhibits the development of leaders with clarity and decisiveness. This is a difficult perspective to maintain in a “seatbelt society” more oriented toward safety than adventure. There are those who mistake another’s well-defined stand for coercion. A perpetual concern for consensus leverages power to the extremists.

Throughout this work, maturity will be defined as the willingness to take responsibility for one’s own emotional being and destiny. Whether we are considering any family, any institution, or any nation, for terrorism to hold sway the same emotional prerequisites must always persist in that relationship system: There must be a sense that no one is in charge—in other words, the overall emotional atmosphere must convey that there is no leader with “nerve.” The system must be vulnerable to a hostage situation. That is, its leaders must be hamstrung by a vulnerability of their own, a vulnerability to which the terrorist—whether a bomber, a client, an employee, or a child—is always exquisitely sensitive. There must be among both the leaders and those they lead an unreasonable faith in “being reasonable.” Resistance is more than a reaction to novelty; it is part and parcel of the systemic process of leadership.

Contemporary leadership dilemmas have less to do with the specificity of given problems than with the way everyone is framing the issues.

Here are four major similarities in the thinking and functioning of America’s families and institutions that I have observed everywhere, and which I believe are at the heart of the problem of contemporary America’s orientation toward leadership:

1. A regressive, counter-evolutionary trend
2. A devaluation of the process of individuation
3. An obsession with data and technique
4. A widespread misunderstanding about the relational nature of destructive processes in families and institutions

This leads leaders to assume that toxic forces can be regulated through reasonableness, love, insight, role-modeling, inculcation of values, and striving for consensus. It prevents them from taking the kind of stands that set limits to the invasiveness of those who lack self-regulation.

This book will encourage leaders to focus first on their own integrity and on the nature of their own presence rather than on techniques for manipulating or motivating others. Without question the single variable that most distinguished the families that survived and flourished from those that disintegrated was the presence of what I shall refer to throughout this work as a well-differentiated leader.
A well-differentiated leader is less likely to become lost in the anxious emotional processes swirling about. I want to stress that by well-differentiated leader I do not mean an autocrat who tells others what to do or orders them around, although any leader who defines himself or herself clearly may be perceived that way by those who are not taking responsibility for their own emotional being and destiny. Rather, I mean someone who has clarity about his or her own life goals and, therefore, someone who is less likely to become lost in the anxious emotional processes swirling about.

I mean someone who can manage his or her own reactivity in response to the automatic reactivity of others and, therefore, be able to take stands at the risk of displeasing. What counts is the leader’s presence and being, not technique and know-how. In other words, the crucial issue of leadership in democratic societies may not be how much power they exercise but how well their presence is able to preserve that society’s integrity.

Chronic criticism is often a sign that the leader is functioning better. A leader must separate his or her own emotional being from that of his or her followers while still remaining connected. I stopped creating encyclopedias of data about all their issues and began to search instead for the member with the greatest capacity to be a leader as I have defined.

You have to get up before your people and give an “I Have a Dream” speech.” Almost everyone who called me for help was functioning in a reactive, defensive way and failing to define his or her own position clearly. When they heard my advice—that the way out of their dilemma was not some quick-fix technique to apply to others but rather a matter of developing their own self-differentiation—their nerve didn’t fail them again.

Before any technique or data could be effective leaders had to be willing to face their own selves. Empathy has become a power tool in the hands of the weak to sabotage the strong. an orientation toward empathy rather than responsibility, with a focus on weakness rather than strength and on ways to avoid personal responsibility. the confusion of self with selfishness.

I draw distinctions between the narcissistic self, which is unconnected, and the well-differentiated self, which is the key to integrity. “leadership through self-differentiation.” This focuses leaders (parents or presidents) on themselves rather than on their followers, and on the nature of their presence rather than on their technique and “know-how.” The key, in my view, is that by continually working on one’s own self-differentiation, the leader optimizes his or her objectivity and decision-making capacity. a premium on self-regulation and the management of anxiety instead of frantically seeking the right solution.

It certainly has not been my experience in working with imaginatively stuck marriages, families, corporations, or other institutions that an increase in information will necessarily enable a system to get unstuck. More learning will not, on its own, automatically change the way people see things or think. I believe that the catalyst for those other imaginative breakthroughs was the “nerve” of the great navigators who led the way.
Conceptually stuck systems cannot become unstuck simply by trying harder. For a fundamental reorientation to occur, a spirit of adventure that optimizes serendipity and enables new perceptions beyond the control of our thinking processes must happen first. Any renaissance, anywhere, whether in a marriage or a business, depends primarily not only on new data and techniques, but on the capacity of leaders to separate themselves from the surrounding emotional climate so that they can break through the barriers that are keeping everyone from “going the other way.”

The chronic anxiety that characterizes the emotional processes of contemporary American civilization influences our thoughts and our leaders toward safety and certainty rather than toward boldness and adventure. There are three major and interlocking characteristics common to any relationship system that has become imaginatively gridlocked:

1. An unending treadmill of trying harder
2. A looking for answers rather than reframing questions;
3. Either/or thinking that creates false dichotomies.

Trying harder to find answers rather than asking better questions. Questions are always more important than answers, because the way one frames the question predetermines the range of answers one can conceive in response. Seeking answers can be its own treadmill. Changing the question enables one to step off. Seeking answers can be its own treadmill.

Changing the question enables one to step off. Either/Or Thinking. Intense polarizations are always symptomatic of underlying emotional processes rather than the subject matter of the polarizing issue. The spirit of adventure triumphed over the concern for safety and certainty. Both being stuck and becoming reoriented are essentially emotional processes. There is the failure of nerve that always accompanies anxiety and a quest for certainty. The willingness to encounter serendipity is the best antidote we have for the arrogance of thinking we know.

There are three imagination-limiting issues:

1. Data: that data are more vital to leadership than the capacity to be decisive;
2. Empathy: that feeling for others helps them mature or become more responsible
3. The leader himself/herself

There is the mistaken belief that selfishness is a greater danger to a community than the loss of integrity that comes from having no self. A society cannot evolve, no matter how much freedom is guaranteed, when the citizenry is more focused on one another than on their own beliefs and values. Regressive processes are pervasive throughout American civilization today in families, in institutions, and in society at large. Ironically, the very advances in technology that mark our era tend to intensify the “herding instinct” characteristic of an anxious society.

This kind of enmeshment inhibits further the kind of individuation that is the essential precondition for bold leadership and imaginative thinking. My thesis here is that the climate of contemporary America has become so chronically anxious that our society has gone into an emotional regression that is toxic to well-defined leadership.
It has lowered people’s pain thresholds, with the result that comfort is valued over the rewards of facing challenge. Its fundamental character has instead been shaped into an illusive and often compulsive search for safety and certainty.

1. Reactivity: the vicious cycle of intense reactions of each member to events and to one another

2. Herding: a process through which the forces for togetherness triumph over the forces for individuality and move everyone to adapt to the least mature members

3. Blame displacement: an emotional state in which family members focus on forces that have victimized them rather than taking responsibility for their own being and destiny

4. A quick-fix mentality: a low threshold for pain that constantly seeks symptom relief rather than fundamental change

4. Lack of well-differentiated leadership: a failure of nerve that both stems from and contributes to the first three

Chief among the evolutionary principles of life that have been basic to the development of our species are the following: self-regulation of instinctual drive; adaptation to strength rather than weakness; a growth-producing response to challenge; allowing time for maturing processes to evolve; and the preservation of individuality and integrity.

One result is erosion of the individuation necessary for well-defined leadership to arise or the most critical issue in understanding human institutions is how well they are able to handle the natural tension between individuality and togetherness. We are losing our capacity to produce well-differentiated leadership.

Undifferentiated leadership would fail to expose itself to serendipity; and, in its unwillingness to risk, it would live in a distorted reality. Two factors in common that always tend to compromise effective leadership:

1. The denial of emotional process
2. A devaluing of the individuality that is necessary for summoning “nerve.” Under conditions of chronic anxiety, however, that capacity is eroded—and with it go cooperation, cohesiveness, and altruism.

Reactivity

The most blatant characteristic of chronically anxious families is the vicious cycle of intense reactivity of each member to events and to one another. The absence of playfulness in any institution is almost always a clue to the degree of its emotional regression. The most damaging effect of intense reactivity in any family is on its capacity to produce or support a leader.

The leaders of the greater American family are almost completely incapable of gaining the distance necessary for objectivity. With chronic social anxiety, the major regressive effect on leaders is the same as in families.
They remain in a reactive stance themselves, led by each emerging crisis rather than being able to take a proactive stance that develops out of an objective perspective or principle. Being constantly engaged in the chronically anxious reactive climate, the leaders of the greater American family are almost completely incapable of gaining the distance necessary for objectivity. The constant engagement also prevents leaders from being able to take the necessary time out to become clear about their own vision and prepare new initiatives. Ultimately, even the desire to lead is eroded. the reactivity that is characteristic of emotionally regressed America today can induce a “discouraging” failure of nerve among society’s most individualistic leaders.

**The Herd Instinct**

The herding instinct in a chronically anxious family upsets that balance, however, by encouraging the force for togetherness to smother the force for individuality. When chronic anxiety reaches systemic proportions, the desire for good feelings rather than progress will on its own promote togetherness over individuality. In the herding family, dissent is discouraged, feelings are more important than ideas, peace will be valued over progress, comfort over novelty, and cloistered virtues over adventure. to develop the kind of self-differentiation in each member that will increase their toleration of every other member’s differentiation. only those who are willing to surrender their self to the family’s self will be comfortable in the homogenized togetherness.

The chronically anxious, herding family will be far more willing to risk losing its leadership than to lose those who disturb their togetherness with their immature responses. Always striving for consensus, it will react against any threat to its togetherness by those who stand on principle rather than good feelings. Carried to its ultimate extreme, the herding instinct of the chronically anxious family will eventually lead that family to organize itself around the symptomatic member rather than around its (potential) leader. the less confidence leaders have in their ability to stand alone after they make a decision, the less likely they are to make one. The herding instinct discourages them from expressing “politically incorrect” opinions and encourages them to play it safe generally;

Leaders in chronically anxious America today—whether they are black or white, Jewish or Christian, liberal or conservative, young or old, male or female—tend to adapt to the most incessantly demanding members of their following. The confusion of being “hurt” with being damaged makes it seem as though the feelings of the listener or reader were not their own responsibility. Those who are quickest to inject words like sensitivity, empathy, consensus, trust, confidentiality, and togetherness into their arguments have perverted these humanitarian words into power tools to get others to adapt to them. Chronically anxious families encourage blame rather than ownership. The projection process of casting blame outward rather than taking responsibility for one’s own condition shows up with regard to both other family members and other institutions and forces.

The focus is constantly on pathology rather than strength. To the extent that families deal with crisis by focusing on the impacting agent or condition, they will remain stuck. this is precisely how the immune system (and the self of any human being) “grows”—by broadening the repertoire of its responses.
Indeed, the concept of leadership, as I have been defining it, is totally incompatible with displacing blame. The media are far more likely to report the details of a person who has been victimized by events than one who has overcome obstacles.

The focus on pathology rather than strength throughout our society is itself a form of displacement, since it protects us from the far more difficult task of personal accountability. The focus on safety has become so omnipresent that there is real danger we will come to believe that safety is the most important value in life. Safety can never be allowed to become more important than adventure. Everything we enjoy as part of our advanced civilization, including the discovery, exploration, and development of our country, came about because previous generations made adventure more important than safety.

**The Quick-Fix Mentality**

There is no gene for maturity. But the chronically anxious family thinks it can modify life with technique. Anxious families will seek out those professionals who promise the most comfort, not those who offer the most opportunities for maturation.

Focused always on symptom relief rather than on fundamental change in the emotional processes that underlie their symptoms, the chronically anxious family will constantly seek saviors, then pressure the expert—whether medical, educational, therapeutic, legal, or political—for magical solutions. As with personal families, the desire for a quick fix throughout the greater American family evidences a search for certainty, a penchant for easy answers, an avoidance of the struggles that go into growth, and an unwillingness to accept the short-term acute pain that one must experience in order to reduce chronic anxiety.

**Poorly Differentiated Leadership**

People rarely can rise above the level of the maturity of their leaders or mentors. The major regressive effects on leadership of chronic anxiety in both personal families and in the greater American family are these: Leaders lack the distance to think out their vision clearly. Leaders are led hither and yon by crisis after crisis. Leaders are reluctant to take well-defined stands; if they have any convictions at all. Leaders are selected who lack the maturity and sense of self to deal with sabotage.

These are in stark contrast to the major principles of leadership mentioned earlier that were characteristic of the great renaissance explorers: the capacity to separate oneself from surrounding emotional processes; the capacity to obtain clarity about one’s principles and vision; the willingness to be exposed and to be vulnerable; persistence in the face of inertial resistance; and self-regulation in the face of reactive sabotage.

Chronically anxious families will always lack well-differentiated leadership. I have never seen an exception to this rule. I have found that the single most important factor distinguishing those families that became hopelessly stuck or that disintegrated into crisis from those that recovered was the presence of a well-defined defined leader.
What is always absent from chronically anxious, regressed families is a member who can get himself or herself outside of its reactive, herding, blaming, quick-fix processes sufficiently to take stands. It has to be someone who is not so much in need of approval that being called “cruel,” “cold,” “unfeeling,” “uncooperative,” “insensitive,” “selfish,” “strong-willed,” or “hard-headed” immediately subverts their individuality.

Yet everywhere in our society, the social science construction of reality has confused information with expertise, know-how with wisdom. As long as leaders base their confidence on how much data they have acquired, they are doomed to feeling inadequate. “equators” of modern society. These are myths, emotional barriers, and learned superstitions.

The pursuit of data, in almost any field, has come to resemble a form of substance abuse. Begin with healing because the amount of responsibility one takes for his or her own life is the quintessential issue of leadership and self. Chronic anxiety, on the other hand—the unrealized kind that is deep within the emotional processes of a family, an institution, or a healing practice—not only is more likely to induce a failure of nerve, but it has far more power to “dis-integrate.”

It is in the exceptions that we often find the key to the role of an organism’s response in its own survival. The factors that make it difficult for a person to be clear, decisive, and non-anxiously reactive with regard to his or her own health are the same factors in society that affect any leader’s ability to be clear, decisive, and non-anxious regarding what he or she is managing.

The tendency is to categorize life according to data while omitting the emotional variables that leave room for differentiated responses. I have, for example, almost never seen a mother who had a mature relationship with her own mother have trouble with her daughter.

Or, to use a spiritual metaphor, the worship of data and technique is very simply a form of idolatry. The new maps of the brain not only suggest a new way of thinking about these leadership categories, they suggest a new way of thinking about thinking. Within any relationship system whatsoever, the brain of one individual is connected to the bodies—and the brains—of other individuals through its involvement in the emotional processes between them. The brain does not contain a central processing unit for information. The brain always processes emotional factors and data simultaneously. Thinking always involves the self of the entire organism.

The three criteria that leaders of any family or institution can always rely on to judge madness (of others or their own) are:

1. Interfering in the relationships of others
2. Unceasingly trying to convert others to their own point of view
3. Being unable to relate to people who do not agree with them.

“Feelings are as cognitive as precepts,” and by extension, biological regulation of the entire organism interlocks with reasoning and decision-making. The importance of this distinction for leadership is that information does not consist of energy, and leadership is all about energy, about making an impact.
This understanding of the connection between the brain and the body shows that, through his or her own self-definition, self-regulation, non-reactivity, and capacity to remain connected, a leader can make a critical difference.

The ramification for leaders is this: the “old world” view separates data from emotional process and focuses leaders on the “talking heads” of others, while the “new world” view focuses leaders on the nature of their own presence. The theories and models leaders are currently being taught to use in framing leadership issues are often formatted by society’s chronic anxiety. My experience with families and institutions, however, is that truly novel concepts can begin from within, provided someone can get “outside” of its emotional processes even while remaining physically inside.

Dialogue is only possible when we can learn to distinguish feelings from opinions and recognize that the background or personality of a person is totally irrelevant to the validity of what he or she is saying.” I wanted to pierce the general illusions of empathy which so disorient American society today and give license to undercutting well-defined leadership everywhere.

I have consistently found the introduction of the subject of “empathy” into family, institutional, and community meetings to be reflective of, as well as an effort to induce, a failure of nerve among its leadership. Societal regression has perverted the use of empathy into a disguise for anxiety.

The second emotional barrier to reorienting leadership in our time: the focus on empathy rather than responsibility. The great myth here is that feeling deeply for others increases their ability to mature and survive; its corollary is that the effort to understand another should take precedence over the endeavor to make one’s own self clear.

The focus on empathy rather than responsibility has contributed to a major misorientation in our society about the nature of what is toxic to life itself. the preempting of time and energy by chronic troublemakers in institutions; a focus on being empathic toward others, rather than on being responsible for one’s own integrity, can actually lessen the odds for an organism’s survival believe that the increasing popularity of empathy over the past few decades is symptomatic of the herding/togetherness force characteristic of an anxious society. It has rarely been my experience that being sensitive to others will enable those “others” to be more self-aware.

The focus on “need fulfillment” that so often accompanies an emphasis on empathy leaves out the possibility that what another may really “need” (in order to become more responsible) is not to have their needs fulfilled. Indeed, it is not even clear that feeling for others is a more caring stance (or even a more ethical stance) than challenging them to take responsibility for themselves. It is not clear that feeling for others is a more caring stance than challenging them to take responsibility for themselves.

The kind of “sensitivity” that leaders most require is a sensitivity to the degree of chronic anxiety and the lack of self-differentiation in the system that surrounds them. The development of that ability requires that they self-regulate their own reactive mechanisms and that they muster the stamina to define themselves continually to those who lack such self-regulation. It has to do with leaders putting their primary emphasis on their own continual growth and maturity.
Do they not seem to possess a stamina that is wearying for the larger organism? Is it not true that they only seem to go away when they bring the institution down with them? Will being sensitive to their needs regulate their invasiveness or instill greater self-definition? There are, of course, parents who seem totally incapable of separating their own welfare from their child’s, because they cannot separate (that is, differentiate) their own self from their child’s. These are parents who have become so emotionally fused with their child that the child’s being is part of their being.

They tend to idolize their leaders until their unrealistic expectations fail, whereupon they are quick to crucify their “gods.” (There is a parasitic quality to their bonding.)

They are unforgivingly relentless and totally invulnerable to insight. Unless walled off or totally defeated, they tend to come back with a vengeance, as when an antibiotic is not taken for the fully prescribed period. The problem is not in their beliefs; it is in how they function with those beliefs. But empathy alone will never promote the self-organization necessary for learning from experience; that can only come about when they are told that if they want to be a part of the community, they have to adapt to it, and not the other way around.

I recognize that this approach could sound dictatorial; the emphasis here, however, is not on conformity of thought but on conformity of behavior to the democratic process. Empathy is totally irrelevant to creating a more responsible unit. the entities that are most pathogenic lack self-regulation and self-definition. They always invade the space of others; they always move to take over their environment or their neighbors, and both their poorly defined boundaries and their lack of integrity give them a parasitic quality that is ultimately immoral.

They certainly do not know when to quit, much less die. It is this same lack of self-regulation and the inner integrity required for self-definition that makes totalitarian nations as notoriously untrustworthy of agreements and treaties as a crime syndicate. The irrelevance of empathy in the face of a relentless force. Furthermore, this reluctance of democracies to go to war against totalitarian nations is identical to the reluctance of members of any family, marriage, partnership, or institution to stand up to the “troublemaker.”

And in institution after institution the invasive forces get their way because the “peace-loving” lack the will to confront them. The stamina of pathogenic forces comes not from the fact that they are organized around some resolute purpose, but from the exact opposite: the unwillingness to define a purpose beyond invading and taking over. Whether we are considering the self-defense of a nation, the preservation of a family’s integrity, or the cohesiveness of an organization, the key to survival is the ability of the “host” to recognize and limit the invasiveness of its viral or malignant components.

If lack of self-regulation is the essential characteristic of organisms that are destructive, it is the presence of self-regulatory capacity that is critical to the health, survival, and evolution of an organism or an organization. That is precisely the function of a leader within any institution: to provide that regulation through his or her non-anxious, self-defined presence. the determining variable is usually the integrity of the host. Many battles can be won simply by not giving up.
Those who are less reactive are more self-contained, less blaming, more imaginative, less anxious, and more responsible. When they do seek help, they generally can hear suggestions well, offer less resistance to suggestions for change, and treat their consultant as a coach rather than a savior. Such an approach emphasizes strength rather than weakness, accountability rather than blame, taking responsibility for self rather than feeling for others.

To the extent that those who specialize in conflict resolution focus primarily on empathy, their interventions will not really help the system mature. The immune response is not primarily about getting rid of enemies; it is about the preservation of an organism’s integrity. Those who lack self-definition, whether they are children, marriage partners, employees, clients, therapists, or supervisors, will always perceive those who are well-defined to be “headstrong.”

They will describe well-differentiated leaders as compulsive rather than persistent, as obsessive rather than committed, as foolhardy rather than brave, as dreamers rather than imaginative, as single-minded rather than dedicated, as inflexible rather than principled, as hostile rather than aggressive, as bull-headed rather than resolute, as desperate rather than inspired, as autocratic rather than tough-minded, as ambitious rather than courageous, as domineering rather than self-confident, as egotistical rather than self-assured, as selfish rather than self-possessed—and as insensitive, callous, and cold rather than determined.

Well-defined self in a leader—what I call self-differentiation—is not only critical to effective leadership, it is precisely the leadership characteristic that is most likely to promote the kind of community that preserves the self of its members.

Failure of nerve and the desire for a quick fix are not the result of overly strong self but of weak or no self. It is only when leaders value self that they can prevent it from being eroded by the chronic anxiety of a society in regression. It is only when leaders value self that they can muster the self-regulation necessary for countering the sabotage that will greet them, ironically, in direct relation to the extent that they value and express their self. Self is both desired and feared, praised and denigrated, stolen and surrendered. The forces for individuality must be more vigilant.

And how does one know when another person is rigid or principled, flexible or wishy-washy, zany or nuts? The pressures and the tendencies to lose one’s sense of self are great, and all the more so in a regressed society.

Anyone who wishes to advance our species or an institution must possess qualities that those who have little sense of self will perceive as narcissistic. And “arrogant,” “headstrong,” “narcissistic,” and “cold” will be the terms used against any person who tries to be more himself or herself.

The problem is preserving self in a close relationship. No human on planet earth does that well. Chronic illness is an adaptation to a relationship.

Differentiation is the capacity to take a stand in an intense emotional system. Differentiation is saying “I” when others are demanding “we.” Differentiation is containing one’s reactivity to the reactivity of others, which includes the ability to avoid being polarized. Differentiation is maintaining a non-anxious presence in the face of anxious others. Differentiation is knowing where one ends and another begins.
Differentiation is being able to cease automatically being one of the system’s emotional dominoes. Differentiation is being clear about one’s own personal values and goals. Differentiation is taking maximum responsibility for one’s own emotional being and destiny rather than blaming others or the context. Differentiation is a prerequisite to specialization, even if one is ultimately going to fuse to accomplish one’s purpose.

In its simplest terms, therefore, differentiation is the capacity to be one’s own integrated aggregate-of-cells person while still belonging to, or being able to relate to, a larger colony. It comes up fully on the side of personal responsibility rather than faulting the stars, society, the environment, or one’s parents. Differentiation is inherently an anti-victim, anti-blaming focus. Most theories of leadership recognize the problems of resistance, but there is a deeper systemic phenomenon that occurs when leaders do precisely what they are supposed to do—lead. The very presence of differentiation in a leader will stir up anxious response. What united those who went first was desire, the capacity to be decisive, and just plain “nerve” rather than knowledge of data or technique. There are five aspects of their functioning that enabled these explorers to lead an entire civilization into a New World, and they are the very same factors that must be present in the leaders of any social system if it is to have a renaissance.

A capacity to get outside the emotional climate of the day. A willingness to be exposed and vulnerable. One of the major limitations of imagination’s fruits is the fear of standing out. Leaders must not only not be afraid of that position; they must come to love it. Persistence in the face of resistance and downright rejection. Stamina in the face of sabotage along the way. Being “headstrong” and “ruthless, “at least in the eyes of others.

What makes these attributes universal is that they are not necessarily connected to personality traits, cultural factors, or anything that can be labeled gender specific. They are rather qualities that have to do with the capacity to function well when the world about you is dis-oriented and stuck in a certain way of thinking. To be determined, decisive, and visionary—while keeping your wits about you—may be what it takes to reorient any marriage, family, organization, society, or civilization.

Earlier chapters were devoted to showing the emotional barriers to new thinking about relationships that keep leaders imaginatively stuck: specifically, the reliance on data, empathy, and togetherness. Our chronically anxious civilization inhibits well differentiated leaders from emerging and wears down those who do. As long as emotional process is ignored, so is the sense of self, which will then undercut a leader’s confidence in the uniqueness of his or her own personal being. what our civilization needs most is leaders with a bold sense of adventure. our nation’s obsession with safety ignores the fact that every American alive today benefits from centuries of risk-taking by previous generations.

Americans in previous generations put adventure before safety. the “New World” orientation to relationships will produce a view of leadership that says the following: A leader’s major effect on his or her followers has to do with the way his or her presence (emotional being) affects the emotional processes in the relationship system. A leader’s major job is to understand his or her self. Communication depends on emotional variables such as direction, distance, and anxiety. Stress is due to becoming responsible for the relationships of others.
Hierarchy is a natural systems phenomenon rooted in the nature of protoplasm. There is nothing inherent in life itself that checks the togetherness forces from snuffing out individuality, except the vigilance of individuality to protect itself. While evolution requires coming together as much as it requires preservation of individuality, the two forces are not equally respectful of one another.

A SUMMARY OF PRINCIPLES

The characteristics of a chronically anxious family, organization, or society—reactivity, herding, blaming, a quick-fix mentality, lack of well-differentiated leadership—will always be descriptive of a regressed institution. The basic tension that must constantly be re-balanced in any family, institution, or society is the conflict between the natural forces of togetherness and self-differentiation. Stress and burnout are relational rather than quantitative and are due primarily to getting caught in a responsible position for others and their problems.

The toxicity of an environment in most cases is proportional to the response of the organism or the institution, rather than to the hostility of the environment. A self is more attractive than a no-self. Mature leadership begins with the leader’s capacity to take responsibility for his or her own emotional being and destiny. Clearly defined, non-anxious leadership promotes healthy differentiation throughout a system, while reactive, peace-at-all-costs, anxious leadership does the opposite. Differentiation in a leader will inevitably trigger sabotage from the least well-differentiated others in the system.

Madness cannot be judged from people’s ideas or their values, but rather from (1) the extent to which they interfere in other people’s relationships; (2) the degree to which they constantly try to will others to change; and (3) their inability to continue a relationship with people who disagree with them. The children who work through the natural difficulties of growing up with the least amount of difficulty are those whose parents made them least important to their own salvation.

As mentioned, an emotional triangle is any three members of any relationship system or any two members plus an issue or symptom. The most common emotional triangles are the following: Leaders who are most likely to function poorly physically or emotionally are those who have failed to maintain a well-differentiated position. The position that is most dangerous to a leader’s health is what I call the “togetherness position,” in which the leader feels responsible for keeping a system together. A woman whose headaches go away after she becomes less responsible for her children’s homework exemplifies the dangers of the togetherness position.

This focus on cultural differences is a major way in which the emotional processes of American civilization have been co-opted by forces opposed to differentiated leadership. I wrote above that one outstanding characteristic of families that endure and perhaps even grow from crisis is the presence of a well-differentiated leader. How, then, does one go with the flow and still take the lead? Answer: by positioning oneself in such a way that the natural forces of emotional life carry one in the right direction. The key to that positioning is the leader’s own self-differentiation, by which I mean his or her capacity to be a non-anxious presence, a challenging presence, a well-defined presence, and a paradoxical presence.
Differentiation is not about being coercive, manipulative, reactive, pursuing, or invasive; it is about being rooted in the leader’s own sense of self rather than focused on his or her followers. It is in no way autocratic, narcissistic, or selfish, even though it may be perceived that way by those who are not taking responsibility for their own being.

WELL-DIFFERENTIATED LEADERSHIP

Leadership through self-differentiation is not easy; learning techniques and imbibing data are far easier. Nor is striving or achieving success as a leader without pain: there is the pain of isolation, the pain of loneliness, the pain of personal attacks, the pain of losing friends. That’s what leadership is all about. The importance of self-differentiation and the response of the organism, rather than methodology and data, as the essential basis for all leadership endeavors. The biggest issue regarding the management of information, though, is this: When should you conclude that you have enough and not let the fact that experts know more than you rob you of your responsibility to be decisive?

To summarize these principles in time of crisis:

- Keep up your functioning
- Don’t let crisis become the axis around which your world revolves.
- Develop a support system outside of the work system, such as professional helpers, family, and friends.
- Stay focused on long-term goals.
- It’s time to make decisions when the same question brings no new information.
- It is simply not possible to succeed at the effort of leadership through self-differentiation without triggering reactivity.
- Self-differentiation always triggers sabotage. It is only after having first brought about a change and then subsequently endured the resultant sabotage that the leader can feel truly successful