

OUR JOURNEY

A JOURNEY OF TRANSFORMATION FOR YOU AND YOUR BUSINESS

ELLE
HARRISON

“... brave, timely and right on point.”

FROM THE FORWARD BY
TIM KOOGLE

VICE-CHAIRMAN AND FORMER CEO OF YAHOO!

Introduction

*And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud
was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.*

– ANAIS NIN –

Sometimes we come to a place where the old ways no longer work. Attitudes and behaviours that generated success in the past no longer get the results we want. Accolades, challenges and achievements that once made us proud no longer fill us up. Strategies for growth no longer deliver results. Brands and businesses that once thrived now limp along, failing to inspire the people they serve or employ. Somehow, without any logical explanation, the ‘success formula’ that worked so reliably in the past simply stops working. And we know, like it or not, it’s time for change.

This call for change can show up in any number of ways. Sometimes it comes screeching into our lives, loud and flamboyant: our team or company goes through a major reorganization, the market crashes, sales plummet, or illness or loss in our personal lives turns our world upside down, sending ripples of change out across every aspect of our life and work. Other times the call to change is more subtle: a quiet, unshakable sense that we’re wasting our lives, that there is something ‘more’, that we are not fulfilling our true potential, that we have somehow taken a path that looks good but fundamentally lacks passion, purpose and meaning. Or the changes simply seep into our world through a quiet yet powerful intuition that the world is changing, and that we need to adapt as leaders and businesses to be compelling and sustainable in our emerging world.

What do we do when we hear this call for change? Often, we bury our head in the sand and hope it will go away. No sane human being walks into the fires of transformation without good reason – we know the perils and

challenges of that journey too well to engage with it lightly. So we close our ears, dig in our heels, and continue what we've been doing with renewed vigour. We try harder and harder and harder, applying the old, familiar approaches that worked so well for us in the past. Meanwhile, in an effort to tranquilize the call for transformation, we might make surface changes. As leaders, we might take on a new role; as organizations we might restructure, develop new systems and processes, modify our sourcing strategy, move offices or adapt our product offering. This kind of surface change may work for some time, yet ultimately, it is rarely enough to satisfy the deeper demand for change.

True transformation asks much more of us. It asks us to change deeply, from the inside out. To change not only what we are doing, but also who we are being; not only the actions we take, but also the lens through which we see the world. It asks us to go deep within our selves to dissolve old perspectives, so that we can put things back together in wholly new and creative ways. To die to the past, and to who we have been in the past, to make space for who we are becoming – as leaders, organizations and communities. Transformation asks us to leave behind the solid ground of our old reality, and to step onto a shifting and uncertain surface towards an unknown future. This is a challenging and often terrifying task, and it requires great courage.

My first encounter with this kind of transformational journey came in 2004, when I left a successful global career in marketing for Unilever, and set out into the unknown. It took several years of patiently following my curiosity to finally emerge on new ground, in a new career – supporting leaders and organizations through change with my own company, Wild Courage.

Over the last seven years, in my role as Leadership Coach, I've witnessed and guided hundreds of leaders through similar periods of change and transition. In that time, I've been privileged to work with a wide range of leaders. Some are CEOs and senior executives who tick all the boxes of 'success': highly regarded in their profession, influential, well paid, with a

happy family life, yet wondering: *is this it?* Others are earlier in their careers, in their late 20s and early 30s, high achievers looking down the path of ‘success’ and asking: *is this really how I want to spend the next thirty years of my life?* Others hold no formal leadership position, but are leaders in a broader sense – creating impact in the world through art, parenting, voluntary work and relationships. All of them share a longing to make a difference, to contribute something of value and to live a full and authentic life; all of them are willing to engage in a journey of transformation to stay true to this longing.

Over the years, as I guided these different leaders through change, I began to notice similarities in their experiences. Each journey of transformation was unique, triggered by different circumstances and leading to distinct personal challenges. Yet, within these differences, I also started to recognize certain patterns. Somehow, regardless of where their journeys began, all these leaders faced experiences that brought them face to face with the same six qualities. These were: **Dying, Stillness, Intuition, Wildness, Vulnerability and Surrender.**

It seemed that, regardless of where their journey began, it consistently led them to experiences with these six human qualities. In a sense, an encounter with each of these qualities became a threshold to take them deeper into their journey of transformation. Dying to old habits and identities created space for something new to emerge. It led them into an empty, in-between space where they learned to trust Stillness and wait attentively and patiently for the new world to take form. Intuition offered guidance through the murkiness of change, leading the way into new possibilities and new life. Wildness helped them break free of old rules, beliefs and habits that were limiting their creativity and authenticity. Vulnerability, the willingness to feel and share feelings, created a deeper sense of trust and community. And Surrender? Surrender was the current running through all these qualities. Letting go of the need to control and direct life opened the way for radically new solutions to emerge.

Curiously, we don't usually associate these six qualities with successful leaders and businesses. In fact, they are qualities that we traditionally overlook, dismiss or even judge. Dying (decline and endings) is seen as a failure. Stillness is considered a waste of time. Intuition is a gamble, only to be trusted when backed up with rational arguments and concrete data. Wildness is an act of rebellion that makes us dangerous and ultimately unemployable. Vulnerability is weakness that no leader should expose. Surrender, with the loss of control it suggests, is not even part of our vocabulary. So it may be surprising to discover that the path of transformation winds through these forgotten and little-loved aspects of life and leadership.

Yet, traditional wisdom and mythology has always taught us that growth comes from venturing into new and unfamiliar terrain. Twentieth-century mythologist Joseph Campbell studied myths across time to create a map of the journey into mature leadership. He called it the Hero's Journey, and outlined three clear, consistent elements: the hero leaves the familiarity of his home, embarks on a wild and dangerous adventure that opens him to new aspects of his inner world, and returns home changed, with new gifts and powers to share with his people. We see this same archetypal journey in Dante's passage through hell in the *Commedia*, Persephone's abduction into the underworld, and Saint John of the Cross's 'dark night of the soul', where painful experiences form the path to spiritual maturity.

One of our oldest myths teaches of a similar underworld journey into power and maturity. *The Descent of Inanna* is a Sumerian myth that has been carefully passed down to us on clay tablets that date back approximately six thousand years – perhaps an indication of its wisdom and value. The story tells how Inanna, Queen of the Great Above, ventures down into the underworld (the Great Below) to encounter her dark sister Ereshkigal. There in the underworld, she is killed and her body hung on a hook for three days and three nights, until the flesh is green and rotten. Eventually, helpers are sent from above – tiny figures carved out of dirt from under the god's fingernails. Offering empathy and compassion to Ereshkigal, these

helpers secure Inanna's release. Fed with nectar from the gods, Inanna is brought back to life and returns to the Great Above to resume her role as Queen filled with new wisdom, power and insight from her journey through the dark.

In their different ways, these stories all point towards a leader's path through the 'underworld': a metaphor for our unconscious, the dark inner realm where unknown and forgotten parts of our soul reside. These forgotten qualities are what Carl Jung calls shadow. 'Shadow' does not mean they are dark or evil; sometimes our shadow includes golden qualities like ease, playfulness, joy, empowerment, spontaneity, compassion and intimacy. They are dark only in the sense that they are obscured from view, parts of our inner world that have been disowned by our conscious personality (the *ego*). To grow into our full power and leadership, we must descend into the unconscious and encounter our shadow – our 'dark sister'. In this encounter, old identities are destroyed and old patterns shed. Finally, through an act of grace, we return to the outer world whole: with new power, new wisdom and a new approach to leadership. Through this journey, we discover our essence: the full, pure expression of our selves – what I call *soul*.

In the light of these myths, it is perhaps not so surprising that contemporary journeys of transformation take us into forgotten, shadow aspects of life and leadership. Like Inanna or Campbell's archetypal hero, we too have to venture into the wilderness of our unconscious and discover little-known parts of our selves to find new sources of creativity, power and wisdom. In our journey of transformation, we too may have to let our lives 'hang on a hook' in the underworld for weeks, months or even years. Although this is frightening and uncomfortable, it eventually brings us to new skills, new insight, new perspectives and new ways of being in the world.

As we approach the mysteries of our shadow, it's important to remember that it's never a question of either-or. There's nothing wrong with the familiar mainstays of leadership: growth, activity, logic, conforming, strength and control. These are still important qualities for success.

However, at some stage, we simply can't grow any more by being more powerful, more busy, more factual, more adaptable, more resilient or more directional – and neither can our organizations and societies. To keep growing into our selves and into life, we have to open to new internal terrain: to dive into unknown and forgotten parts of our selves, and follow less-travelled paths to power, growth and success.

To venture into the 'underworld' of our unconscious is a frightening task, and it requires great courage. It's not easy to leave behind familiar identities, habits and attitudes and step into dark, unknown places in our inner and outer worlds. Nor is it easy to answer the questions that inevitably arise when we venture off the path and into the wilderness of soul; questions that we asked naturally as children, and learned to ignore with increasing determination as adults; questions that take courage to ask and to answer.

Who am I? What are my gifts? Am I using these gifts in my leadership, life and work? Does the organization I work for share my values? Am I co-creating a world that I am proud of? Or do I (or we, as an organization or community) need to change, to really move towards a compelling, sustainable and life-giving vision for the future?

Living these questions takes us on a journey of transformation, into courageous leadership. It's not an easy journey, but the rewards are immense. As we venture through the shadows of our unconscious, we come deeper into our selves. We make contact with our essence and we allow it to re-express itself in new and creative ways. We discover a new center of gravity: our inner truth, our authentic and wild self – our soul. Realignment our life and work around our wild self, we come 'home' to ourselves – and we find renewed passion, purpose and meaning in our leadership, life and work.

Reclaiming our shadow not only brings personal reward, it also helps us to support transformation in our teams, organizations, communities – and beyond. After all, it's not just personal crisis we face right now. Whole organizations, industries, communities, political systems, healthcare

systems, financial systems and ecosystems are currently in crisis. Banks and established institutions are crumbling. Traditional political systems are unravelling. Economies teeter on the brink of collapse, weighed down by years of living beyond our means and 12-digit dollar deficits. The environment creaks under the strain of our demands: food shortages, pollution, water shortages and mass extinction whereby one in five species may die out by 2028.¹ Petroleum, central to so many aspects of human civilization, is in finite supply. A million people commit suicide every year, 60 per cent more than in 1955.² Ten per cent of people in the UK and 7 per cent of people in the USA are depressed.³ Kids kill each other. These are not isolated crises. They are the symptoms of a wider change, of a deeper transformation. An old era is dissolving and a new era taking form, and like any process of change, this transition brings an element of chaos and destruction.

How can we support this change? What is our role, as leaders, in this wider journey of transformation?

Engaging in a personal journey of transformation is perhaps our most powerful way of supporting these wider changes. As Albert Einstein said, ‘We cannot solve the problem with the consciousness that created the problem. We must learn to see the world anew.’ When we integrate our shadow, we do indeed see the world anew. With our fresh eyes, we find new insight, new innovation and radically creative solutions to the challenges of our time. Ripples of our own personal journeys reach out across politics, education, business, the environment, healthcare and every other human system, paving the way for a vibrant and sustainable future. These changes begin in the inner world of each leader. They begin with you.

Engaging Your Journey

This book is for anyone ready to engage in a personal journey of transformation. Any number of things could be triggering that journey. Maybe you’re facing obvious change in your working world – reorganization,

redundancy, promotion, retirement, a move to a new company or industry – and want to consciously navigate those changes. Or maybe the call to change is more subtle – a longing for something more, a sense that you’re not fulfilling your potential, a lack of purpose and meaning, the unshakable sense that the ‘real you’ has got lost somewhere along your career path.

Regardless of your starting point, the intention of this book is to support you through your personal journey of transformation.

The next six chapters take you through the six thresholds of change. Each chapter explores one of these thresholds, guiding you on your inner journey through the shadows of Dying, Stillness, Intuition, Wildness, Vulnerability and Surrender.

All chapters follow a similar format. We begin with a story from my own journey of transformation, to start to bring this shadow quality to life. We then move into a more expansive conversation about this quality, exploring it from different perspectives, theories and traditions to see its nature, how it shows up in the shadow (and why), and what gifts it can offer us when we reclaim it. Finally, we turn to stories from inspirational and visionary leaders, sharing their experience with this shadow aspect of leadership and how it showed up in their journey of transformation.

Between chapters, I share practices to help you connect with the creativity and wisdom of your unconscious. These are intended to help you start to engage more actively in your own journey of change. You may find that the questions and changes you’re working with are too big to engage alone, and that you need the support of an event, group or coach to fully engage with them in a way that feels safe and productive. Or you may feel ready to start to explore and open up these questions alone. If so, these practices can support you with that. Although loosely linked to the topic of the previous chapter, each practice stands alone as a gateway into the unconscious. So feel free to mix and match, and use whatever practice resonates for you. Some you may find easy and rich, others won’t resonate at all. Go with what works for you.

Follow your own wisdom in how deeply to engage the practices and the themes of each chapter. You may find that just reading the book is enough for you. Or you might like to spend one week exploring each quality and deepening into the questions each chapter raises. Or if you're drawn to an even deeper exploration, you could give yourself one month for each quality, working through the book slowly over six months. You may well find, as I did while writing it, that life will bring its own initiations into each of the qualities, some more comfortable than others. Stay open to being surprised.

This is not a conventional business book. Yes, its stories and examples are anchored in the work world. Yet it's a book that is speaking to you, not your job title, and the scope of the conversation extends beyond the boundaries of the working world. As the stories show, we can encounter our shadow in any area of life: through our relationship with our boss or our relationship with our child or partner; through redundancy or divorce; through career challenges or personal challenges. Regardless of where we meet our shadow, the ripples of that encounter are felt throughout our lives – at home, at work and everywhere in between. Crises in any area of life can trigger, or dovetail with, journeys of transformation in our work life. So although the intention of this book is to challenge your view of leadership and the way you show up at work, the stories that highlight these changes include every aspect of life and living.

As you read these words, you might be experiencing the first stirrings of discontent, edging towards the precipice of change, descending into your shadow, suspended between your old approach to leadership and something new, lost in the darkness or slowly beginning to emerge. Wherever you are, may you find what you need in these pages. May the stories give you courage and inspiration to follow the call of your soul, wherever it may lead. May the path through the shadows be rich and rewarding. And may all our journeys carry us safely into a new and sustainable world.

