

A Case for Long Term Purposeful Practice

-Lance Giroux-

"I will tell you what I am talking about," he [Malcolm] said. "Most kinds of power require a substantial sacrifice by whoever wants the power. There is an apprenticeship, a discipline lasting many years. Whatever kind of power you want. President of the company. Black belt in karate. Spiritual guru. Whatever it is you seek, you have to put in the time, the practice, the effort. You must give up a lot to get it. It has to be very important to you. And once you have attained it, it is your power. It can't be given away: it resides in you. It is literally the result of your discipline."

- Michael Crichton, Jurassic Park – p. 306

May 28, 2008

I found myself yesterday sitting in a small boardroom on a local university campus. Asked there by the Dean of Students, I attended a meeting with senior administrators. Their interest was (and remains) the potential that experiential education in general, and The Samurai Game® in particular, might hold for incoming freshmen - The Class of 2012. The school seeks engaging ways to deepen one's understanding of the need for sincere commitment and an investment of self in the educational process - something that is life-long. "Young people today, especially in our country, have grown up believing they deserve an A," said one of the administrators. "We have a generation that has never really faced loss. Many arrive on our campus believing that an education is something they are entitled to rather than something they have to earn."



As much as I attempted to remain in the "here and now" at the meeting, I found a part of me reflecting on: (1) the news of the day, and (2) a meeting I had had just prior to this one, a meeting filled with lessons - seemingly timeless – for anyone, any organization, and any culture.

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First - The News of The Day (that really isn't "news"). They come, as they have for quite some years, in sound bites, and I can hear them in the recesses of my mind while the three administrators talk. Sound bites of the day -- • *The market is up ... the market is down.* • *Countrywide Financial is sinking, Oh my ... what will become of us now?* • *Scott McClellan's new book tells all about the current administration* • *Average price of gas is now \$4.20/gal in northern California.* -- As this all runs through my mind I recall a scene from the film, *Good Night and Good Luck*, in which Edward R. Morrow (David Strathairn) advises us to pay attention, remain vigilant and keep sharp our thinking skills lest we, individually and collectively, slip into a lazy mental fog; a fog created by information, mis-information and news (not really news) offered up by a medium that has become more connected to the products (and ideas) marketed than to the people it was designed to serve. Hence, news and information becomes neither news or information, rather a series of sales pitches wherein the national psyche, the marketplace and individual thought merge into a consciousness demanding quick fixes- and we believe that there is *one way* things are destined to (or should) be and we've got to get there fast, and with this (whatever it is) solution we will remain *there and that way* into the hereafter. My memory flashes on a recent radio program and I hear the commentator's words as he discusses the geographical shape of our planet's continents, "... and when the continental plates stopped drifting" When I heard those words on the radio I recall saying to myself, "Stopped drifting? Say's who? When did Earth's plates stop drifting? Aren't they drifting still?" Language is a powerful thing and creates foundations that hold current reality. But what happens when a foundation is full of holes?

Are we (you and I) living in a national consciousness that honestly thinks we can (or should) arrive at a place and time (or that maybe we already have) wherein change and challenge and chaos, responsibility and accountability, effort and study and investment are no longer the order of the day? In other words, in which we and/or our children are entitled to a great life that is pre-ordained or chosen simply because we (or they) are, after

all, *special*? Says who? Thinking of the many months spent outside the US the past five years and a lot of that in China, I recall a proverb – “Life is hard, then you die.” Dr. M. Scott Peck’s words come to mind, words that form the opening lines of his book *The Road Less Traveled* - “Life is difficult. This is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult – once we truly understand and accept it – then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.”

At the January 2008 Allied Ronin Leaders’ Retreat we viewed the film “Enron- The Smartest Guys in the Room”. If you haven’t seen this film, you may want to. If you have seen it, watch it again. It contains more than one sitting can digest. You and I lived through the Enron debacle, but do we understand its lessons? If so, are we vigorously applying them today? Enron, its rise and fall, still affects us dramatically. There is strong argument that the mentality and practices that fostered the ill effects of Enron’s collapse remain alive and well, and in force throughout much of our social, political and corporate cultures - right now. Think! What attitudes, ideas and ideals drove this organization, its partners, leaders, managers, agents, proponents and investors to act as they did? How is this reflected in our schools and institutions? And how is this then reflected in the sub-prime mortgage crisis that is gripping our world today? Most importantly - where and how are similar attitudes, ideas and ideals showing up on a micro scale, i.e. around town and in the neighborhoods in which you live? What can you do about this on a practiced and practical basis?

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Next – The Meeting (that really was “a meeting”). Just prior to arriving on the campus I had the good fortune to spend some time with George and Annie Leonard. We met for tea at their Mill Valley home and talked for an hour about a test of mine that occurred the preceding weekend ... a test that on one hand culminated an eight-year phase of training, and on the other hand begins of a phase of training that hopefully will last the rest of my life. At some point Annie had to go to an appointment, leaving George and me alone, and he turned to me and asked, “Would you like to come to my study and see a few things?” On the walk up the stairs he offered, “You know, I never thought I would be an old person.” George Leonard, the life-long teacher, one more time saying something to me ... giving me (following him up an incline of stairs reminiscent of “the master’s path” outlined in his book) a lesson to remember as I too add years to my life.

In his study sat a model of an A-20 aircraft – the attack fighter/bomber he flew in combat. Adjacent to the model were pictures from his youth - the cockpit, the uniform, the comrades. On the wall more pictures: him with his clarinet alongside a friend holding a flute; a photo with one of the other co-founders of Esalen Institute www.Esalen.com. “Pull up that chair,” he said, “and let’s take a look at some of this stuff.” And we did. First edition copies of his books, including those that have been translated into foreign languages. Pictures taken in flight (by him) during wartime missions. Awards from Look Magazine acknowledging his enormous contribution. Scrapbooks with his original articles scooping the Civil Rights movement in America’s Deep South, a South into which he was born and a South that was transformed in part by his writing. I had no idea of the personal contact and relationship he had had with Martin Luther King, Jr., or Bobby Kennedy. But there it all was in black and white and color. Another section held the complete chronicle of the work he had done, along with one photographer, probing the Iron Curtain ... actually traveling and approaching a 6,000 mile expanse of territory to see what it (and the then Soviet Block forces who guarded it) were made of. Just before I left he pointed to his current book-in-progress and invited a look there too. Yes, he’s still at it, or as he said earlier that day as we talked about the tests one faces in life and about continuing to write about them, “As long as there’s a spark in here (tapping his chest) I’m going to continue.” As I departed he said, “I’ll see you later.” George Leonard, the life-long learner reminding me (and you) of the need to grow, study, contribute ... and practice ... no matter what.

As I left Mill Valley and headed over to the university campus my overwhelming thoughts were of times we had spent together, in person and on the phone, talking about values and the need for *long- term purposeful practices*. Today, as I write these words, in front of me sits a copy of his 1991 book, *Mastery* – still in print, still in bookstores, still in demand seventeen years after its first publication. I flip to page twenty-seven and the chapter titled, *America’s War Against Mastery*. Words written almost two decades ago jump out at me:

- “Our society is now organized around an economic system that seemingly demands a continuing high level of consumer spending.”
[Sound familiar?]

- “Try paying close attention to television commercials. What values do they espouse? Some ... to fear. Some to logic. Some to snobbery. Some to pure hedonism (on a miserable winter day in a city a young couple chances upon a travel agency; their eyes focus on a replica of a credit card on the window and they are instantly transported to a dreamy tropical paradise).”
[I chuckle to think what Leonard would have written had ED and Viagra or Ciealis commercials been on TV when he wrote the book; advertisements encouraging us to be always ready for when the mood is right; advertisements with disclaimers that of necessity must accompany when offered to a litigious and entitled society - in case, after four hours, we find ourselves still highly engaged in (and physically unable to get out of) the mood!]
- “And the sitcoms (etc.) ... on the same hyped-up schedule: (1) If you make smart –assed one-liners for a half hour, everything will work out fine in time for the closing commercials. (2) People are quite nasty, don’t work hard, and get rich quickly. (3) No problem is so serious that it can’t be resolved in the wink of an eye as soon as the gleaming barrel of a handgun appears. (4) The weirdest fantasy you can think of can be realized instantly and without effort.”

Do these words from *Mastery* apply today? They sure do. We know that our lives and pocketbooks will soon adjust to HDTV – becoming not only be the norm, but the necessity. And what is popular on the tube (actually the flat screen) these days? *The Apprentice, Survivor, Dancing With The Stars, Crime Scene Investigation, Dog the Bounty Hunter, The Biggest Loser and American Idol.*

Go back to those four items cited above relating to: one-liners, everything will work out, nasty people, get-rich-quick thinking, gleaming gun barrels, and weird fantasies. Then think of today’s TV shows, so popular that the episodes are discussed in detail on talk radio the day following as if their significance really matters to the world at large. Two generations are being fed Britney and Paris for breakfast, lunch and supper – yet know not the location of Myanmar nor the kind of the international backlash facing nations that dare to host privatized military forces, e.g. Blackwater. We were warned about this kind of indulgence by Eisenhower, Morrow and others. Alas, ask on the street who they were and you’ll get blank stares by bucket loads.

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Questions Worth Reflecting Upon And Worth Answering. What are your practices? Are you aware of them? For what purpose are you practicing these things? What results will your practices produce ... short term and long term? Beyond yourself, who else is attending to your practices? Are you sure? Who is following in your footsteps ... the examples you are setting? Do you know? Who and what is being influenced by the practices you live by?

“Now, what is interesting about this process is that, by the time someone [e.g. the black belt in karate] has acquired the ability to kill with his bare hands, he has also matured to the point where he won’t use it unwisely. So that kind of power has a built-in control. The discipline of getting the power changes you so that you won’t abuse it.

But [the kind of power your chase] is like inherited wealth: attained without discipline. You read what others have done, and you take the next step. --- There is no mastery: old [masters] are ignored. --- There is only a get-rich-quick, make-a-name-for-yourself-fast philosophy. ...

And because you can stand on the shoulders of giants, you can accomplish something quickly. You don’t even know exactly what you have done, but already you have reported it, patented it, and sold it. And the buyer will have even less discipline than you. The buyer simply purchases the power, like any commodity. The buyer doesn’t even conceive that any discipline might be necessary.”

- Michael Crichton, *Jurassic Park* – p. 306 – 307