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"Of Elephants, Hedgehogs, and the Ouroboros"

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Mr. President Dr. Danilo Türk, Danica, Elisabet, Ladies and Gentlemen....

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James distinguished people as being either "once-born" or "twice-born." According to James, "once-borns" are individuals who do not stray from the straight and narrow. They are tied to familiar territory where they have always felt comfortable. Conversely, "twice-born" people go to great lengths to reinvent themselves, often as a result of dramatic changes in their life. On reflection, they come to realize that their life is too predictable, and that if they do not embark on change, they will sink into a state of living death. The implication is that "twice-born" people actively use difficult changes in their external life to help them come to peace with their inner demons.

In William James's mental framework, we start our life's journey simply by being physically born. However, we may be spiritually and intellectually challenged—in other words, "reborn"—when faced with unexpected adversity, such as a dramatic life crisis. "Twice-borns"—people who have undergone an experience of fundamental, moral, and spiritual upheaval (a near-death experience, for example)—may transcend their self-limitations. They may succeed in escaping their self-imposed mental prison and discover imaginative ways of dealing with adversity. "Twice-borns" are given a new lease of life. The ability to reinvent themselves changes the way they relate to other people and the world around them.

During the past three years, I have had two near-death experiences, a terrifying accident on the top of a snowy mountain at the Kamchatka Peninsula of the Russian Far East, followed by an almost deadly hospital infection. These experiences created in me a greater awareness of what being "twice-born" really means. They brought home to me—more than once—how to make the best of the precious gift that life really is. They also brought home to me the fragility of life.

I am a disciple of what Sigmund Freud described as "the impossible profession." As well as being a professor of leadership development and change, I have a parallel life in which I am also a psychoanalyst. In that respect, it might be said that I am a kind of shaman—shamanism is, of course, the origin of all the psychotherapies in this world of ours. Throughout human history, shamans have bridged the world of the living and the world of the spirits. Shamans would ensure that the right ceremonies were enacted in the right way to put the world to rights.

Shamans were the explorers of the magnificent hidden universe that lies beyond this visible one. They brokered our search for another dimension of seeing.

In this context, it's clear that there are many similarities between the role of the shaman and the role played today by people in the helping professions—psychiatrists, psychotherapists, psychoanalysts, social workers, and even coaches, counselors, and consultants.

As a practitioner in a “helping” profession, I have spent many years working with executives who are trying to become more human. On a macro level, my life's task has been to bring the human dimension back into the organization—to create the kinds of organization that bring out the best in people, that help them become more human. And I have also seen it as my task to do everything in my power to prevent dysfunctional, pathological leadership.

I was born in occupied Holland during the Second World War, a period that wrought immeasurable human tragedy. So it is no surprise that pathological leadership always has been at the top of my mind. I have always been curious why some people in a leadership position will abuse the power that comes with the job. What is the fundamental difference between the Mugabes and the Mandelas of this world? Lord Acton's words have been much quoted—“Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”—but that does not make his words any less true. When the sirens of power beckon, some people cannot resist the call.

But grim as Lord Acton's statement is, we should never underestimate the altruistic motive that is part of the DNA of the human race. Homo sapiens evolved rapidly to become the most sophisticated species on earth largely because of our ability to engage in cooperative behavior. Thus, we should not give up on the human race. I believe there is reason to hope for the best—surely this is the meaning of the story of Pandora's box?

Without hope, there is no life. As Napoleon Bonaparte said—and he should know—“Leaders are merchants of hope.” Leaders need to speak to the collective imagination of their people to create a group identity—to help people become better than they think they are—a task that I have taken very seriously in my educational work. I help people to have dreams about the future. And I like to see people acting on those dreams.

True enough, when I look at the world around me, I don't see recently many signs of the kind of leadership that transforms people, helping them to live fully and with hope. Perhaps this is because there are not many “twice-born” leaders among us. Far from it—we are currently faced with leadership meltdowns everywhere. The political leaders of Europe and the United States are exhibiting behavior that should be excised from the leadership equation.

Unfortunately, in this age of greed and anxiety, short-term expediency prevails, while bold, imaginative leadership is sorely missing. “Twice-born” thinking is notable by its absence. One exception, and one of the few signs of hope, can be seen in the Middle East, although we don't know yet whether a new form of pathological leadership will replace the old.

In my work with leaders I have not given up hope. It is very possible that a new generation of leaders will rise to the challenge. And certainly, I am prepared to do all I can to help them move forward.

A sine qua non in increasing leadership effectiveness is to make leaders realize that they are not rational decision makers—that much of their behavior is out-of-awareness—that they may have many blind spots that need attention.

Above the Temple of Apollo in ancient Delphi was written: “Know thyself.” This observation is as true today as it was in those bygone times. If we want to develop more effective leaders we have to start with ourselves. But as I have discovered, to paraphrase Goethe, what is often hardest to see is what is right in front of your eyes.

I once read the following words on a tombstone in Westminster Abbey:

*When I was young and free and my imagination had no limits
I dreamed of changing the world.
as I grew older...I discovered the world would not change,
so I shortened my sights and decided to change only my country.
but it, too, seemed immovable.*

*As I grew into my twilight years, in one last desperate attempt,
I settled for changing my family...those close to me,
but alas, they would have none of it.*

*And now as I lie on my deathbed, I realize:
If I had only changed myself first, then by example,
I might have changed my family.*

*From their inspiration and encouragement,
I would have been able to better my country,
And, who knows, I may have even changed the world.*

The most exemplary living leader of our times, Nelson Mandela, once said, “You can never have an impact on society if you have not changed yourself.” To get this message across, I often use metaphors to describe the key actors and primary forces that take the stage in the “inner theater” that plays in all of us. I tell the leaders I work with, that we all have to manage the elephants, hedgehogs, and Ouroboros we harbor within ourselves.

Metaphorically speaking, the elephant is our character—a part of us that can have a powerful and uncontrollable effect on our actions. As a psychoanalyst I am very aware of the fact that much of our behavior is unconscious—we often do not understand (to quote my old friend Sudhir Kakar) what the elephant inside us is doing. (It is a metaphor he likes to use.)

For example, the elephant is narcissistic. We have a tendency to look at ourselves through rose-colored glasses. The elephant is also somewhat paranoid. We are inclined to look at the world in a suspicious way—and such an outlook can have dire consequences. Furthermore, the elephant seeks revenge when it has been wronged. Finally, the elephant is lazy. It is very reluctant to change its behavior. And the elephant is alive and trumpeting in all of us; but only by acknowledging that it is there, can we learn to live with it.

And what about hedgehogs? The great German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer drew an analogy between humans' and hedgehogs' discomfort with social proximity. In cold weather, hedgehogs cluster together for warmth but soon find that their spines hurt each other. Yet when they withdraw, they very quickly get cold again. Eventually, after a lot of shuffling and reshuffling, they find the optimum distance for warmth and comfort. For human hedgehogs, this conundrum—our simultaneous need for closeness and distance is a fundamental reason why people often find it so difficult to work successfully in groups, teams, organizations, and civil society.

The third animal in our inner menagerie is a mythical one, the Ouroboros, usually depicted as a serpent or dragon swallowing its own tail. The Ouroboros symbolizes the cyclic nature of the universe: creation out of destruction, life out of death. The Ouroboros eats its own tail to sustain its life, in an eternal cycle of reinvention and renewal.

The Ouroboros symbolism should remind leaders that things cannot remain the same eternally—that there are times when they have to break with the past. To quote Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa from his famous novel *Il Gattopardo* (The Leopard), "If you want things to stay as they are, things will have to change."

Unfortunately, there are far too many leaders who fit Albert Einstein's definition of insanity: "Doing the same thing over and over again, expecting different results." Some people don't seem to know, that when we find we are riding a dead horse, the best thing to do is to dismount.

The ability to work well as a leader is essential in 21st-century organizations. The price tag of dysfunctionality, particularly in teams, can be staggering. For example, in one of my latest books, *The Hedgehog Effect*, I present the case for leadership group coaching as an experiential training ground for creating more effective leaders. My leadership group coaching model, incorporating the life case study, has been developed over more than 20 years of delivering programs to top-level executives, and is now successfully applied all over the world. It is a process whereby people are gently nudged to reinvent themselves. Fortunately, what helps in working with so many leaders, is the discovery that they all are quite normal—until you get to know them better!

As I said earlier, one of the hats I wear is that of a psychoanalyst, and that leads me to focus on the darker side of organizational life. It is now more than a decade since I truly went into the leadership development business, creating with the help of many others (in particular my

wife Elisabet) a leadership development center that has become the second largest in the world—and the largest in group leadership coaching. Through my work in this center, I have been trying to make human hedgehogs more effective and humane. I have been trying to help leaders create what I have called authentizotic organizations—places of work where people feel at their best. In these kinds of organizations, people find meaning in their work; they enjoy the people they work with; they have pride in what they are doing; and they trust the people they work for and with. Such a view of organizations may be idealistic, but (as I said before) without hope, there is no life.

For many years, I taught the core Organizational Behavior course in various MBA programs around the world. I always enjoyed giving this course. I felt it was a gift to be able to guide these young men and women in making life choices about their interpersonal relationships and career. I wanted to help them understand better their own elephant, hedgehog, and Ouroboros.

In my final class, I used to show the students an old black-and-white masterpiece called “Wild Strawberries” made by the famous film director Ingmar Bergmann. It tells the story of an old man, Isak Borg, who is making two journeys—one from Stockholm to Lund to receive an honorary doctorate (now you know why I have been thinking about this film so recently)—the other a more personal journey, a trip into his inner world. Helped by a mixture of dreams, daydreams, fantasies, and various encounters on the way to the ceremony (including one with his very icy mother—very different from mine by the way)—we obtain a remarkable insight into his personal inner theater, the quality of his interpersonal relationships, and the kind of muddles and mistakes he has made during his life’s journey. We really come to understand his elephant, his hedgehog, and his struggles with the Ouroboros. In spite of all the setbacks he encounters, it is a journey of hope. Even at his advanced age, and guided by the various people he meets on this journey, he opens up to change. One of the messages of the film is that it is never too late—but as we all know, a sine qua non in any change process, is the will to change yourself.

A goal I have set myself as a teacher is to help people feel better in their skin—to help them attain a modicum of happiness. In that respect, I tend to be a believer in the notion that happiness is not merely a question of good health and a bad memory, but more importantly, having something to do, someone to love, and something to hope for. Happiness doesn’t come as a result of gaining something we don’t have but by recognizing and appreciating the things we do have.

The ancient Greeks believed that our life’s journey lies at the intersection of the Morae, the three Goddesses of Fate who spin our inescapable destiny; the goddess Tichy, symbolizing luck and chance; and the daemon, who is the elephant that represents our inner theater, guiding our steps. The way these various dramatic personae interact will always be a work in progress. And in dealing with this work in progress, it is not good enough to complain about the poor hand of cards we may have been dealt. The challenge of life is to make the

best out of a poor hand. True leadership shows itself in tough situations. And as I said at the beginning of this speech, many of today's leaders fail that test miserably. They badly need to get in touch with the Ouroboros inside them.

I would like to end my speech by paying tribute to Danica Purg, who is one of these rare transformational leaders, the kind of people who are so badly needed in difficult times. More than most of us, she must have pondered the question of what we would like to leave behind as a legacy in life. How do we want to be remembered? I believe that true leaders take the kinds of action that will benefit the next generation. Danica certainly has done so. Just look around you. And for that we should be very grateful.

I would like to thank you all for the honor you have bestowed on me today. Once again, thank you very much.....