

## Getting Unstuck

Perhaps because I worked in academic environments until my early forties, fall is also when I am most drawn to attending conferences and taking formal courses. Many years ago, on a crisp October morning when the fiery palette of autumn foliage was at its brilliant height, I drove through the granite-producing city of Barre and east past hardscrabble farms in one village after another to a conference in Fairlee, Vermont. Unbeknowst to me, I was about to take a brief but revelatory workshop there that would starkly uncover my approach to a career transition that I didn't realize had already begun.

In one of the session's activities, participants were invited to make a collage by choosing from among dozens – or was it hundreds?! – of cut-out magazine images spread all over a long table. The assigned theme of the collage was something like, “my past, my present, and who I am becoming.” I kept it simple and went for one picture to symbolize each time period, and was attracted to images in chronological order. I had no trouble being drawn to the right picture to represent the “past,” a photo of a young girl in braided pigtails and a frilly bikini, up to her ankles in water, sifting something through her hands. The girl reminded me of an intense dream I had when I was twelve or so: *I'm on a beach – a wide expanse with few or no people on it. I'm sitting in the sand and sorting through it, examining the particles one at a time and putting them into one of two growing piles of either darker or lighter grains. With some of them, I'm just doing my best to make a judgment call. I know it's going to be an infinite task.*

Next, I was immediately intrigued by the cut-out I found to capture the present, but I felt self-conscious about choosing it because I did not like what I thought it said about me. It was a bizarre drawing of a magical, malevolent-looking hooded human figure, dressed in a curly-

horned helmet, a clown's red gloves, fleshy tights and ballet shoes. This joker-like character held a wand with a thin white ribbon, like an ineffectual whip. He stood on a carved stone precipice in the air, just above a subdued tiger with half-open eyes. I became aware that I identified with *both* the clown *and* the drowsy, unintimidating beast. How was this a symbol of the present? I was at a crossroads in my career, and realized that the paralyzing dynamic between the tamer and the potentially powerful tiger, who was uncommitted to action, together represented my ambivalence toward assuming a new leadership position. The tamer was deriving some benefit from the tiger's passivity, and the tiger was too comfortable letting its power remain dormant. I put aside my self-conscious concern that other people building their collages nearby might judge me for picking up this weird image, and I lifted it off the table.

I was confused as to what I would embrace as the emblem of what I was becoming. There were renderings of landscapes, animals, human faces, food, inanimate objects, buildings and machines. As I scanned the options, I found that I could make intellectual arguments in favor of scads of them. Then, instantly, I recognized my "future" with such certainty that I immediately feared someone else would get to the picture before I could. To lose this image would be to possibly lose my real future, too. It was a large photo portrait of an alert and self-assured tiger, addressing the camera directly, neither threatened nor threatening, at rest in water. I thought: "There the water is again, like with the little girl in the past – nice connection." And unlike the tiger of the "present," this relaxed tiger was the master of its whole self and the world it observed, independent of time. I had to lean on the table and stretch my right arm out as far as I could to reach the photo. I was reaching for my future.

But wait! I hesitated. "If I want it so badly," I thought, "someone else must want it too. I don't

*need* it. Maybe someone else wants or needs it more than I do. Who am I to have that transcendent, stunning tiger; to presume that this symbol of mastery is what I am becoming?” I glanced up at all the busy folks around the table, intently shopping for collage fodder. Initially, I wanted to detect whether anyone else appeared to be attracted to the tiger. Then it came to me: “This is ridiculous. I am as entitled as anyone else here to having the tiger if I want it. Why am I deferring to the imagined goals and desires and preferences of others? SHIT! How often do I think like this?!” I decided to change that pattern, then and there, by tapping into the power of the moment. As I claimed the tiger from the pile I observed no one else was noticing, although suddenly that did not matter at all.

**Learning and Leading Pause:  
Getting Unstuck**

- What types of activities promote insight for you?
- How do you bring your unconscious assumptions to conscious awareness? Where and when have you had “aha” moments before?
- Where are you currently stuck, regarding your leadership? Have you ever been stuck in the same way in the past; is there a pattern? What is your “tiger” and what is your “tamer?”
- Be candid with yourself: what is getting in the way of you owning all of your power, your full potential as a leader?
- Could it be that what had been a strength of yours up until now has, paradoxically, become a liability?
- What assumptions are you making about what is possible for you as a leader?
- What do you have to let go of in order to transition into the leader you are becoming?