



BEFORE I LEAVE, I'D LIKE EVERYONE TO KNOW I WEAR A TOUPEE.

The Courage to Learn and Lead Part 1A: The Wheel of Life

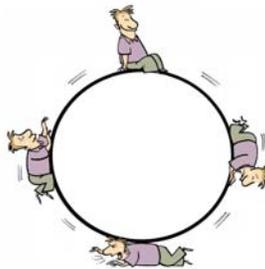
by Marilyn Herasymowych,
Christine Oliver, and Henry Senko

“It is possible, of course, that we are all so busy using time-saving devices that we don’t have time to do anything meaningful. Or we may have the right intentions, but instead of acting, we decide to wait — until we are out of school, until we can afford a down payment on a home, until we can finance college for our children, or until we can free up time in retirement. We keep waiting until we run out of ‘untils.’ Then, it is too late. ... We have lived our lives, but we have not led.”

— Madeleine K. Albright, from the *Foreword by Madeleine K. Albright* in the book **Leading from Within: Poetry that Sustains the Courage to Lead** by Sam M. Intrator and Megan Scribner, Editors (2007)

In this newsletter, we begin this new series on the courage to learn and lead by exploring the metaphor of the *Wheel of Life*. The concept of the *Wheel of Life* is found in many

ancient cultures and religions. The version described here refers to the dynamic nature of a wheel that turns and creates forward movement. The wheel has four stages that attempt to describe this forward movement.



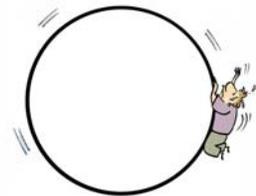
We are the wheel of life, and it is us, constantly moving forward through the four stages. This movement is called learning. As we experience each stage, we learn from it, thus allowing us to move to the next stage and learn from it. We can think of ourselves as attached to the outside of the wheel, moving with it. This describes the experience of learning, from which our emotions (reflexes from our unconscious) arise. For example, sometimes within our lives we are at the top of the wheel. At these moments, we feel competent, knowledgeable, and able to control our destiny.



But these moments are fleeting. The wheel moves forward, causing us to experience a downturn, and the emotions that go with this experience. At these moments, we feel less sure of ourselves, less knowledgeable, and less able to control our destiny.



It is at these moments we can experience a strong desire to get back to the way things were when we were at the top of the wheel. As a result, as the wheel moves forward, we tend to fight the movement, rather than go with the flow.

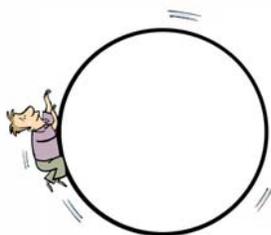


We are trying to stop the wheel from moving forward, because we see the next stage of being crushed by the wheel as an unwanted experience. We may be able to slow down the movement, but we cannot stop the wheel.

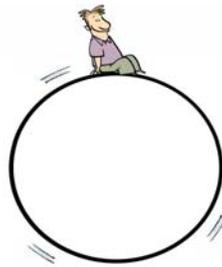


According to Kurt Lewin, the father of social psychology, in order to learn, one must *unfreeze* old thinking (stories told) by entering a low point of disruption, confusion, and loss. This is symbolized as being crushed by the wheel. What is being crushed (challenged) are *stories told* about *patterns lived*. What results is a new *story yet to be told* about a *pattern yet to be lived*.

This transformation is what the *Wheel of Life* is about. It is about *learning as you go*. Once the stories told have been transformed, there is a period of creating and implementing new knowledge. Lewin describes this stage as *refreezing* new thinking (stories yet to be told) into a new order (patterns yet to be lived). At these moments, we feel more sure of ourselves, more knowledgeable, and more able to control our destiny.

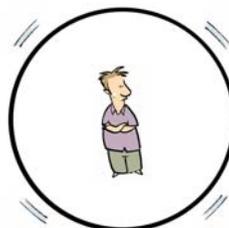


This takes us to the top of the wheel, back to a place of comfort and mastery.



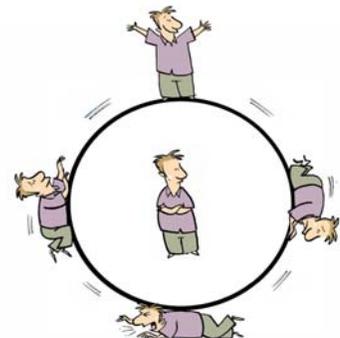
The *Wheel of Life* is a paradox: to learn, one must go down to go up. This means that learning is an emotional journey and that both desired and undesired emotions are required for the experience to be transformational. However, it is extremely difficult to be critically conscious (reflexive) when we are riding the outside of the wheel. And, if the wheel is moving quickly, as it does in times of great change and complexity, being critically conscious becomes less possible.

This means that our emotions will make our decisions for us, causing us to react, thus rendering us victims to the consequences of our reactions. However, there is another place from which to experience the wheel and be critically conscious. If we can centre ourselves in the hub of the wheel, we become both participants and observers of our experience of the wheel moving forward.



Peter Senge's first discipline of *personal mastery* means operating

from the centre of the wheel, as well as experiencing and learning from the four stages of the wheel moving forward. Being critically conscious keeps us centred in the wheel by honouring each stage as its own separate episode, while also being aware that it is part of a larger dynamic.



“...true leadership comes not from the sound of a commanding voice but from the nudging of an inner voice — from our own realization that the time has come to go beyond dreaming to doing.”

— Madeleine K. Albright, from the *Foreword by Madeleine K. Albright* in the book **Leading from Within: Poetry that Sustains the Courage to Lead** by Sam M. Intrator and Megan Scribner, Editors (2007)



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