

# Emergent Leadership

## Applying Contemporary Embodied Mysticism to Today's Challenges

A White Paper from Mobius Transformational Faculty member  
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Mobius Transformational Faculty member Robin Alfred is a seasoned trainer, facilitator and organizational consultant who has extensive experience in facilitating personal discovery, depth work and collective group intelligence, enabling emergence and the manifestation of transformational fields.

In this white paper, he examines what mysticism might teach us about radical leadership – in how we navigate stress, approach obstacles, facilitate solutions, and hold space for the future to arise.

It has become something of a cliché to say that we face a polycrisis. Challenges surround us on all fronts: war, refugee movements, climate change, loss of biodiversity, increased polarization, income inequality, water shortages, fake news and more. It is also something of a cliché to quote Einstein saying that we cannot solve the current problems we face with the same level of consciousness that created them. The question arises: What does this really mean for us and for how we host and respond to the challenges within and around us? For me, it means delving deep into the timeless wisdom encoded for thousands of years in the mystical traditions that lie at the heart of all faiths.

Attempting to solve our current crises with what we might call 'horizontal' or relational awareness and the use of our five senses has become simply inadequate. We must tap into the deepest and highest resourcing, and the deepest and highest truth that is available

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to us. That is what I mean by a contemporary and embodied mysticism. A mysticism that, while rooted in tradition, is consistently and continuously being updated; and a mysticism that is embodied – not only a mental understanding and orientation to life, but something that we feel in our hearts and our bodies – in every cell in our beings. Embracing a contemporary embodied mysticism is the only way to generate the radicality, deep love, compassion, and the embodied wisdom that we need at this time.

### Context

For the past many years, consultants adopted a grading given by the US military to territory they were entering. Consultants said we lived in a VUCA world – that is Volatile, Uncertain Complex and Ambiguous. So it was and so we responded, seeking to render the world less volatile, more certain, less complex and one with greater clarity.

I was recently struck, however, by an article by futurist James Cascio, “Facing the Age of Chaos” in which he said we have moved from this context to a BANI world – one that is Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear and Incomprehensible. Such a world, Cascio suggests, requires cultivating resilience and slack to reduce the fragility of Brittleness and increase the empathy and mindfulness that can host and ease our Anxiety. Non-linearity needs context and flexibility, while Incomprehensibility asks for transparency and intuition. Such qualities are found more in the right brain and in the emergence of our spiritual senses than in the left brain, the site of planning and control. Such qualities are more likely to be accessed and developed through a contemporary mysticism or what I might call emergent leadership.

### What is Mysticism?

Dictionary definitions of mysticism tend to revolve around the search for and experience of unity with God. It is unsurprising, then, that the business world might shy away from the word. I would like to adopt a more practical, perhaps more prosaic, approach and suggest it includes the following elements:

- The search for the **deepest and highest truth available** to us at any time. We live in a world of relative truth. There is also an absolute truth which is, for the most part, beyond our

awareness but that we can sometimes sense in moments of awe and wonder, experiences where we touch on the ultimate nature of reality, a sense of deep unity with all life forms, samadhi experiences of non-dualism. From such a place, an absolute truth might emanate. Mysticism, for me, is a quest for the highest approximation to that. We might call it the search for the highest relative truth available to us at any one time.

- Mysticism also allows us to understand how life works; **how energy flows within us, between us and around us, and where inspiration is sourced from.** As contemporary mystic Thomas Huebl says, an understanding of mysticism allows us to co-direct, with a higher intelligence, our own movie rather than simply finding ourselves as an actor within it. How many times do we wonder “Why is this happening to me? Or “How can this be happening again?” Mysticism does not promise answers to every circumstance we encounter, but it does start to provide a map of the territory and allow us to cultivate more awareness of dynamics we might be caught in, situations we encounter, and questions we carry. Mystical knowledge points us to a higher level of understanding and a wider perspective.



IN THE MIST II by Jim McManus, Mobius Featured Artist

- Lastly, I would say that **mysticism allows us to embrace paradox**. A paradox is only a paradox at a certain level of consciousness. Things that appear to be opposite and true at the same time can find resolution through mystical understanding: ‘both and’ rather than ‘either or’.

In this article, I contrast what I call “classical” and “mystical” approaches to four frequently encountered aspects of a leadership journey; and then look at four common paradoxes that we may otherwise struggle to reconcile – each of which are essential to the radical leadership today’s challenges require.

### **Aspects of a Leadership Journey – from the classical and the mystical perspective**

#### **1. Stress**

When talking about stress, it is important to distinguish two different generators:

- **Evolutionary stress** – where I am growing into a new role, a new direction in life, and I experience some stress and anxiety, maybe nervousness, as I embrace the new.
- **Shadow stress** – when a situation that I encounter shows me parts of myself that are not yet integrated and where I do not have enough inner spaciousness to hold the complexity of the situation that I encounter.

Either way, the stress may overpower too small a vessel.

Classically, we might say that the response to stress is to limit what is coming in. Delegate more. Say ‘no’ more frequently. Summon up warrior energy to set a boundary. Take some time off. Have a holiday. Or even go to the doctor who might sign you off sick.

From a mystical point of view, we might focus more on how we can expand the vessel. This means engaging in shadow work – taking time to integrate what remains unintegrated from our past and deepening our practice of presence to be able to onboard the unintegrated aspects of the past. When we expand the vessel through such practices, and by reaching out to others and forming collective vessels to host the more collective challenges that we face, we can hold and host more. Our vessel grows.

We are not meant to face situations alone. We are social beings and our tendency to feel *I must do this alone* reveals a trauma response of separation and isolation (often, a necessary and intelligent protective response at an earlier time in our life), rather than a mature and healthy expression of autonomy and of taking responsibility.

#### **2. Facilitation**

Classically, facilitation might be seen as a set of tools. People speak of the ‘Facilitator Tool Kit’ and

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such practices as the Art of Hosting, World Café, Open Space, Pro Action Café, and other useful and helpful processes for facilitating groups and harvesting collective wisdom. I have seen many facilitators work extremely effectively with these ... until they hit an edge.

The edge may be around facilitating intense conflict, polarization, or topics and feelings where the inner world of the facilitator is not spacious enough to host the reality, the complexity and the fragmentation of what participants are experiencing in the group. This is where an embodied mystical understanding can be helpful.

From a mystical point of view, we might say that facilitation is about conducting the energy flows in the group space or, as Thomas Huebl puts it, it is a dialogue with the higher organizing principle in the group. This implies that there is something that is “wanting to happen” in a group experience and that our job as facilitators is to be sensitive and aware of *that*. Writing 2000 years ago Chinese mystic Lao Tzu expressed it thus:

*The Master allows things to happen.  
She shapes events as they come.  
She steps out of the way  
And let's the Tao speak for itself.*

In facilitation terms, I take this to mean that something is wanting to happen in a group experience and that, as facilitators, we need to meet that and shape it. It means paying attention to the inner condition of the facilitator. As Bill O'Brien, the former CEO of Hanover Insurance, wisely declared in the 1980s: “The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervener.”

This means we must cleanse our vessel, our inner space, and fill it with self-awareness. When we are aware of our own fears and bias, we can meet a group with more confidence, becoming curious about everything that arises. Once we let go of the idea that the group needs to have a certain experience, that they must reach certain goals of the meeting, then we become more awake to what is actually waiting and wanting to emerge which is often more profound than any goal we might set. We are more interested in the health and coherence of the field, by which I mean

the atmosphere within which the group experience unfolds, than we are with getting to a specific and pre-defined outcome.

Group coherence is a product of presence, shared intention and vulnerability, and it starts with me, the facilitator. How coherent am I internally? How aligned are my thoughts, words and actions? How present am I? What is my intention? What is the appropriate vulnerability for me to show as a leader and facilitator in this space? From a place of self-awareness and inner alignment, I am able to ripple out a sense of safety and security into the group. I can notice whether the group feels close or far away. Whether it is represented within me or something external. I can tune into the next movement that wants to arise, noticing the in breath and the out breath of the group and its qualities of relatedness, grounded-ness and coherence. Such terrain is the habitat of the embodied and mystically informed facilitator, and invites a more emergent leadership.

### 3. The Future

In everyday language, we say that yesterday is the past, today is the present and tomorrow is the future. We live in linear time and that is as far as we go.

However, from a mystical point of view, the future is what is fresh, alive, awake, and calling to us all the time. It is what we can sense on the horizon of our life or, in more organizational contexts, we express it as the capacity to “detect weak signals” or “look around corners” – something unshaped, out there, waiting for us and calling to us, a point that we are already journeying towards that arises in presence. Only in presence, do we onboard the past and access the future.

From a mystical point of view, the past is everything that is unintegrated. It is not yesterday. It is happening today because it is unintegrated and still having its effect on us now. The Holocaust did not only happen in the Second World War. It is happening today because it remains unintegrated experience that is still having its effect on us now. Everything that we do not integrate from the past drives us still. We might experience it as personal, ancestral or collective fields of trauma – when we behave in ways that we take as normal, but which are really adaptive responses to challenges we experienced in the past.

In presence, we can start to reflect on, digest and then integrate our past experiences so that they no longer run us. This clears a path through which the future can arrive more fluidly, and in a less filtered way, in our lives.

#### 4. Obstacles

When something is difficult in our life, we generally don't want it. We want to get rid of it, go round it, blast it out of the way or somehow remove it from our path. However, Lao Tzu suggests that

*When the Master runs into a difficulty,  
she stops and gives herself to it.  
She doesn't cling to her own comfort;  
thus problems are no problem for her.*

There is something useful and interesting in the obstacles we encounter. If we cultivate curiosity about them, ask ourselves why they are on our path and what it is we have to learn from them, seeing our difficulties as spiritual challenges rather than something to avoid, ignore or remove, we will learn and grow through the difficulties on our path. Lao Tzu also says that:

*Every being in the universe  
is an expression of the Tao.  
It springs into existence,  
unconscious, perfect, free,  
takes on a physical body,  
lets circumstances complete it.*

In other words, there is nothing wrong in what we encounter. There are no mistakes. There is a higher organizing principle that is conducting our life and giving us exactly the challenges and obstacles that we need to meet in order to learn, grow and develop.

#### Paradoxes

Here are four paradoxes that mysticism and emergent forms of leadership help us embrace:

##### 1. Urgency and Slowing down

In times of urgency and crisis, paradoxically we often need to go slower. Quick responses are likely to come from a reactive place where younger, immature and unintegrated parts of us, may run the show. Having



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OUT OF THE PAST by Jim McManus, Mobius Featured Artist

time to reflect, digest and integrate our experience is more likely to generate an embodied response to a situation than a knee jerk reaction. Slowing down requires spaciousness. How much time in a day are we still? Is our calendar so full and busy that we simply collapse into bed at the end of the day, or do we have some kind of self-reflective practice such as conducting a daily review, meditation or journaling to cultivate our self-awareness? A world full of *reactivity* requires the antidote – pockets of spaciousness to generate healthy, ethically aligned and purposeful *responses*.

## 2. Acceptance and Change

One of my early teachers, Eileen Caddy, a co-founder of the Findhorn Community in Northern Scotland, where I held a position of leadership for many years, used to have a favourite saying “All is very, very well.” I would go to her railing about the injustices I saw in the world, or in the community, and countering that “all is far from well.”

The role of the mystic is to embrace both realities.

On a human level there is suffering that we want to bring our agency and compassion to. On that level all is far from well and there is much that needs to be done. However, if we do not learn to rest in a place of deep acceptance that the world is exactly as it is, if we don't meet that reality fully, which requires the slowing down mentioned above, we will move, as Otto Scharmer says, from the top left-hand side of the U to the top right hand side of the U, from problem to apparent solution, without descending into a place of listening for what really needs and wants to happen. We need to act from a deep presencing of the world as it is. As Lao Tzu says “The world is sacred, it cannot be improved.” From that place, a natural, evolutionary impulse to make our contribution is more likely to arise.

## 3. Surrender and Drive

We are born with a healthy drive to contribute. We experience that as our will, agency, passion, purpose.

At the same time, we must surrender and bow, with deep humility, to an understanding that we contribute what we can without an attachment to the outcome.

**What you can plan  
is too small  
for you to live.**

FROM *ON WHAT TO  
REMEMBER WHEN WAKING*,  
BY POET AND ASSOCIATE  
FELLOW AT MOBIUS,  
DAVID WHYTE

Deepak Chopra references the difference between *intention* and *desire*. Desire has the energy of an intense wanting of a certain outcome. It is as if I hold something in my closed fist – I will have this! Intention is something that I hold with an open palm. It is a direction that I intend to go in, but I also accept that life might take me on a different trajectory.

True intention is born in the meeting place of Thy Will and My Will. Something is coming (Thy Will) and there is also my agency,

my contribution, my drive (My Will) that wants to meet it. The deepest, and most ethically aligned intention is formed at that juncture.

The philosopher David Spangler states that intention alone will not manifest what we need unless it is a true intention that is aligned with the needs of the world.

I remember receiving very strong guidance in my early days in the Findhorn community, that I needed to step into the role of Chair of the Management Team. I really didn't want to do this, but it was very clear guidance from a source beyond my personality. I went to see Eileen Caddy and talked to her about both the guidance and my reluctance. She said to me, “Your job now, Robin, is to make Thy Will, Your Will as well. You can't reluctantly follow higher guidance. You must want it too.”

## 4. Structure and Emergence

As facilitators, as leaders, and in life, we are often dancing on the tightrope of structure and emergence. Structure is useful in framing what is happening, setting time boundaries and bringing clarity to decision making. It is good to notice where we might lean into structure as a means of providing a sense of safety and control when we might be nervous to open to the flow of life, not knowing where it will lead us.

In *Reinventing Organizations*, Frederic Laloux talks about abandoning five-year plans and financial blueprints, a command-and-control style of management, and moving to one that is about sensing and responding. This requires a sensitivity to what is wanting to emerge. As facilitators of a group, for example, we will need a certain degree of structure regarding starting and ending times, and the capacity to frame the processes, but we also need to stay awake to what is wanting to emerge. This means we need to ride the waves of discomfort experienced by people who require more structure, while providing a sufficient framing to allow them to settle into the emergence. As we get to know a group more and trust builds, there may be more permission for more emergence. Emergence is like a window of fresh air blowing into the space.

It is always needed, and dialoguing with the higher organizing principle that is manifesting in the group space will lead us to the right balance of structure and emergence.

### Conclusion

We will not generate the wisdom, radicality and potency of contribution that we are called to make at this time, if we rely on structure, patterns of the past, existing knowledge, and what we can access from our five senses in our relationships, the media and all that is tangible. But practical applications of a contemporary, embodied mysticism can generate the true nature and highest potential of the radical and emergent leadership that our Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, and Incomprehensible world is calling for. ■

**ROBIN ALFRED** worked as a trainer, educator and social work manager for 15 years in London, before moving to Scotland in 1995 where he founded the Findhorn Consultancy Service and then later, Open Circle Consulting. He has extensive experience of leading and developing groups and individuals across all sectors – corporate, public, and third sector.

For more than 25 years, Robin has facilitated groups of all sizes, from 6 – 600, in all sectors. He was a registered facilitator for the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and was part of the design and facilitation team for the 2013 UN Global Compact in New York. Robin is trained in a wide variety of approaches to personal and organizational development including: Appreciative Inquiry, the Frameworks for Change Coaching Process, Process Work, Spiral Dynamics and Tools for Corporate Transformation. His facilitation work draws on these processes as well as Open Space, World Café and other innovative processes to maximize the group's collective intelligence.

Robin's clients include BP, the National Health Service, ABN-AMRO Bank, RBS, Tasweeq Qatar, BAE Systems, UN, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, CDP, Weleda and the UK Cabinet Office. Robin also spent 15 years as an Associate with Olivier Mythodrama, working with Shakespearean stories and Jungian archetypal psychology to develop high level leadership in many of the world's major corporations.

Robin is a Senior Student of contemporary mystic, Thomas Huebl. He offers coaching and trainings in Trauma-informed Leadership and the Art of Facilitating Transformational Fields. He also serves as a Mobius Transformational Faculty Member and joined us in October 2022 to guide a week-long, highly experiential track on Leading from the Future at the Annual Gathering of the Next Practice Institute.