

Habits of the Heart

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My journal this month will be longer than usual. I have had a profound learning experience and I am going to write about it – not just for you to read – but also for me to chronicle what I learned.

In mid-January I attended a three day (twelve hours each day) leadership workshop at USD with about 60 other students. The purpose of this workshop is to observe our effects on others within groups and to see how groups interact. The workshop is in the tradition of Tavistock (see link for details: <http://www.tavinstitute.org/index.php>). I have attended five of these three-day leadership workshops in the past but always as a participant. My husband, sons, sons-in-law, and our younger daughter have also attended them.

I was not a regular participant this time, nor was I a person in authority. I was part of a team of four who were designated as a “management training team.” As a member of this team our instructions were to observe and not to talk in most of the leadership sessions. This time our youngest daughter, Laura, attended and she was also on the management team. This was Laura’s third time to attend Tavistock at USD.

The title of the January, 2007 leadership workshop was, “Habits of the Heart.” On one level I went into this event fearful that working with Laura, our daughter, would create tension between us. (Laura is 32, was Captain and MVP on her college volleyball team and is currently the Strategic Human Resources Director for an organization in stress of about 1,000 people). On another level I was delighted to watch and learn from Laura as she exercised leadership. I have been in awe of Laura since she was about three. I have watched Laura exercise leadership (in the family, on the court and now in the workplace). She has a calm leadership style and creates real change without causing much push back, or wake, from others. Laura is very kind to me and rarely criticizes me. In contrast, I have had a history of creating a lot of push back from others when I exercise leadership in our family and in the workplace. (As evidence I have been fired twice and I am currently having difficult fitting into an organization).

There were many learning edges for me during the three-day “Habits of the Heart.” They included; 1) how being silent often makes me more observant **and** more powerful, 2) working with my daughter sometimes made me feel smug because she is so well received without having to be the center of attention (unlike me); 3) how difficult it is to exercise leadership. The purpose of this paper is to discuss one of my “Habits of the Heart” that has caused me to receive “push back” in attempts to exercise leadership.

First, I will explain the context for my learning, then I will explain what happened and what I learned, then lastly I will explain how I researched further to improve my learning and future leadership (in the family and at work).

The Context

On the middle day of this three day event the assignment was for our management training team to, for the first time, become part of the participant exercise (we were no longer observers). The assignment for the evening was to “observe the interaction between and among teams.” Our team of four (three women, one man) met and discussed how we would interact (or not interact) with the other 60 participants. I thought we had agreed as to how we would interact with the other groups and Laura had gone out of the room to invite other groups to join us.

While Laura was still gone a group came in to visit our management training team. I jumped up from our team members and welcomed in the other group (of about five people – both genders). They were curious about our management training team and asked questions. I was careful not to do all of the talking (which is often my mistake). At one point Laura came in the room and sat directly between me and the visiting group. I could not see any of the visitors and got up and walked around and sat to the side where I could see. But, I thought things went OK with the visitors. It felt like a party with them in the room. But I was curious what it meant for Laura to “block” me from the visitors.

What Happened

At that time there was a “time boundary” and an hour break where participants were invited to a group meditation/yoga class. I was anxious to attend the yoga class as my body was tired from sitting. The other three members of the group stayed behind and talked. I sat in the back of the yoga class on the floor by myself and noticed at the end of the class that all three of the other members of the management training team (including Laura) were sitting in the front and looking very “together” (like they were in agreement about something). I can’t explain how I knew this – but I knew it.

After the yoga class I walked up to the three of them and each of them had a one line sentence for me concerning our interaction with the group that had visited us, their comments included, “we made a mistake,” “need to change things” and “wrong.” They felt the “party” atmosphere was inappropriate. I was surprised and felt that the three of them had ganged up on me. It is important to note here that I often feel “ganged up on” and left out of groups. These feelings of not fitting in were similar to when I was fired and now at an organization where I am trying to gain inclusion. Feeling like “I’m out of it AND bad” comes up for me often – and here it was once again.

I don’t think I was angry (yet). Frankly I was very curious to hear why they felt our management training team had made a mistake and was “wrong.” *The leadership term that was in question was concerning boundaries. The question was “how permeable were the boundaries for our team.” For example I thought the boundaries of our team were permeable – that it was OK for people to drop into our group and become “like a member of our group” for as long as they wanted. The other members of our team saw our team as being less permeable – that people could observe our group, either formally or informally but they were not to be treated as they were a part of our group.*

As time went by two more groups came into our group and observed our group as observers. My other team members wanted strong boundaries between visitors and us. I thought creating this “hierarchy” between visiting groups and our own to be more about our own egos than about doing the work of leadership. The discussion concerning the permeability of our group became quite heated and the two oldest women on the training team, “Jill” and I went at each other. (While Laura and the man and a hapless visiting team observed). The (perhaps) “alpha females” yelled, had red faces and completely saw the way to exercise permeability between the groups in diametrically opposed ways. I did not look at Laura while this battle was going on – but I felt some disdain coming from her direction. Laura is not a “hot-head” and I fear that she has spent too much of her life watching me lose my cool. But this did not stop me – I was on an angry roll.

After the “heat” died down Jill expressed that she “always wanted to create tight boundaries around any team” she participated in (or her family). I then expressed that I liked looser boundaries in groups that I participated in. I felt pretty smug. I felt that my arguments with Jill were more on task with the assignment.

WHAT I LEARNED

Laura then very quietly and powerfully said the following looking me eye- to-eye, “Mom, you have always done this. You will be in a group talking to someone and if someone new comes into the room you turn and ignore the persons you are with. You did this during my whole childhood.”

I stopped and thought about my Habit of my Heart around groups. I admit that I am often more interested in what is “next” rather than what is “now.” I know this began as a child for me. My parents and my only sibling, a brother are Introverts and I am an Extrovert. I think as a child I was often bored at home and knew that if my life was going to be any fun someone else was going to have to visit. I think I grew up looking out our front door. But after Laura spoke to me, I could not imagine how hard it has been for my family being “dropped like a hot rock” every time a stranger came to our door. In short, my preference for permeability has unilaterally dominated groups in which I have been a member (regardless of what is agreed upon by the group).

RESEARCH

After the weekend was over I went to my husband, Jim, and asked him if he had experienced me leaving him emotionally and physically whenever someone new entered the room. He looked at me with an incredulous flash in his eyes and said, “You do this all the time. I have never liked it. I never will.”

The next weekend I went to our youngest son, who is also named Jim, (and also a Tavistock graduate) and asked him if he had ever experienced me leaving him emotionally and physically whenever someone new entered the room. This young man has hardly ever, to my mind, said anything unkind to or about anyone. He is a very thoughtful, intelligent and successful man (and often a “peacemaker” in our family and at work).

Our son looked at me and took a long time to answer. He took a deep breath. (At first I thought I was going to finally hear some good news about my behavior in groups). He then said, “Mom, of all the things you did in being my mom, this is without a doubt the biggest and the most painful part of my childhood.”

THIS MEANS THAT

To my mind this is the first time I have had so much collaboration in a lesson concerning my leadership. Two of our children, my husband and strangers in a leadership group have let me know how I often create a negative “wake” in my leadership attempts due to my insistence for a very high level of permeability in groups.

I have learned that one of my Habits of the Heart is to ignore established groups in favor of what is new or different. I have not paid enough attention to the differing needs for permeability of other members of the groups that I am a part of.

In the past few weeks since the leadership workshop I have had three opportunities to “stay put” with the person I am with instead of running off to someone new. I have successfully stayed put only once.

I am now painfully aware that the permeability of a group is something that needs to be discussed and agreed upon by everyone in the group. In the past I have failed to exercise good judgment in understanding how my desire for a more permeable group has hurt others and caused my family and people I work with to become distance from me (and thus kept me as an outsider). Leadership works best with an agreement of priorities and boundaries.