Adaptive Change: What's Essential and What's Expendable?

Conversation with Ronald Heifetz Harvard Kennedy School of Government, June 23rd, 1999 Claus Otto Scharmer

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O. Scharmer: Professor Heifetz, what underlying question does your work address; and what context let you to focus your work on leadership?

I. What's Essential And What's Expendable?

Ronald Heifetz: Ours is a time of great opportunity and great transition. And transitions inevitably cause people to ask a fundamental question: what's essential and what's expendable? What's precious and what isn't as precious? One can't move into the future and take advantage of the opportunities generated by engaging with new cultures, thoughts, systems of values, and new economic opportunities without letting go of elements from the past that to many seem precious.

Many of us who work on leadership and change tend to talk in enthusiastic, optimistic tones about the opportunities of change, of a global world, and the opportunities of a sustainable world, a more elevated consciousness, and system of interdependencies. It's very exciting, that possibility of a more elevated consciousness, and of a system of interdependencies that have economic, political, and cultural features as well as religious and spiritual features.

It's not simply that this is a wonderful vision for the winners. Even those people who've seen themselves as unabashedly and wholeheartedly on the side of this new vision frequently haven't really investigated for themselves what they're going to have to lose for the sake of that future. This is the essential question of adaptive work, as I've described it: What's essential and what's expendable?

The aphorism that is commonly bandied about is "people resist change," or "change frightens people." I think that's wrong~~. I think that when peop~~le win the lottery and win a million dollars, or ten million dollars, they know their life is going to be enormously changed and they welcome that change. They don't give the money back. Change is hard when it represents the possibility of loss**.** It's the possibility of loss, and the apprehension, fear, and anxiety associated with that possibility of loss that generates resistance.

Those of us who are doing work on leadership and change frequently don't appreciate sufficiently the sources of resistance. We frequently fail to have enough respect for the pain of these adjustments and changes. Rather than having a reverence for the pain of the change that we're asking people to sustain, we speak in fairly disrespectful terms about the resistor's parochialism, narrowness, or short-sighted selfish political interests. That is one way to describe some human motives. But everyone is, within his or her own frame of mind and within his or her own life, trying to hold on to what is conceived as precious. And who amongst us does not resist having something we consider precious taken out of our hands?

I used to work in emergency rooms when I practiced medicine. Every doctor in an emergency room has come into contact at one time or another with a woman who's been bruised and battered by some abusive husband. We've all experienced the difficulty of getting that woman to take advantage of the services that will help her extricate herself from that awful situation. We have experienced the difficulty of helping someone begin to see that there are a whole host of better opportunities for how she can live her life, and that she can build relationships with people in which abuse won't be endemic. She resists because it's part of the complexity of the loyalties that she grew up with. It's part of having a

deep love for one or both of her parents who may also have been physically abusive to her. Sifting through the loyalty that she feels towards this source of inadequate or imperfect love is difficult**. And then she must step into the void**—into a world that we have experienced and know is possible. But she's never experienced it and she doesn't know it is possible.

What she does know is that the husband who abuses her sometimes is wonderful. He is sometimes the sweetest, most loving, most tender man. Sometimes he makes love to her beautifully and sometimes he buys her roses, and she knows that that's a lot to lose. For what? We say, well, there's a greener pasture over that mountain path. All she knows is that she's never seen that pasture.

II. Meeting The Monster That You Created

You imagine a 35-year-old man who works hard tending to his family. John comes home on a Sunday morning after church for his one afternoon a week when he can rest. He goes into his living room and he straightens out on his couch, or his special place, and he then goes to the ice box and gets a can of soda or a can of beer. He goes back into the living room and turns on his ball game on the television, and then he settles into his chair and breathes a sigh of relief, "Ahh," and he begins to experience, in his own way, a transcendent kind of tranquility. He's out of the normal realm of time, not thinking about tomorrow and not thinking about yesterday. He's just present for himself.

All of a sudden, on this Sunday afternoon in 1965, his 15-year-old daughter Mary comes running into the living room from the bedroom. She agitatedly says to him: "Daddy, Daddy, we've got to change the television channels and see if the news is on television right now. I was just listening to the radio and I heard that there are innocent men and women and children being beat up by police on horseback, tear-gassed, because they're demonstrating and they claim they're not allowed to vote. In America, they claim they're not allowed to vote, simply because they're black. I wonder if it's on television."

Boldly, she goes to the television and tries to change the channel. And Daddy says to her, "Child, my sweetheart, this is my time to rest. Now I'm sure there's something agitating you, but go back to your room."

Mary doesn't give up, she's filled with enthusiasm, and the divine inspiration of youth. She goes back to the TV and she insists saying, "Daddy, we've got to see what's on TV. You know, all the things you've taught me about what America stands for, freedom and equality. And the things the preacher was telling us this morning about how we're all children of God."

So she goes back to the TV and tries to change the channels. And now Daddy gets upset, and he says, "Now, Mary, I've told you once, child, and I will not tell you again, go back to your room."

And so a fight breaks out, a fight that lasts six months. Maybe it lasts six years, where Mary keeps challenging her dad. "How come our senator supported that watered-down version of a civil rights bill back in 1957? Why was he trading votes with those southern senators in order to get us this dam here in Montana?"

Daddy says, "But child, aren't you glad you had electricity?"

And Mary says, "But does it really require us to give away our most precious values?"

So Mary gets an education in civics and politics, and John gets an education from this Frankenstein monster that he's created in his daughter, who's throwing back in his own face the values that he's taught her.

Now why doesn't Mary's Dad turn around overnight? Why doesn't that fight last only a week, after which Dad says, "I see what you mean, Mary, our senator did the wrong thing. We'd better support and lobby our senator to stand firm on civil rights if there's legislation this next year." Why doesn't John turn around right away? John doesn't turn around right away for the same reason that a battered woman doesn't turn around right away. Because when he was a little boy his dad went off to World War II, and his grandfather used to fill in by coming by on Sunday afternoons, or Saturday afternoons, or in the after

school afternoons. Grandpa would take little John by the hand, and take him to a matinee movie, or take him to a local high school baseball game, and would tell him stories, and with all sorts of love and tenderness would teach him about how the world works. About how you buy things, about what banks do, about how you save money, about the nature of this war that's being fought, about good and evil, about right and wrong. And with all of that love came stories also about who's responsible and capable in the world, and who's less capable and inferior in the world, and how those people who are better and better endowed need to take responsibility for those who are not. So now, at 35 years old, John doesn't even remember where all those lessons came from. His grandfather passed on already ten years ago. Unconsciously, laced with the milk of love, came also this consciousness about how the world works.

What Mary is really challenging her Dad to do, then, what she's really asking her dad is not simply, "What do we stand for in our country?" She's really saying to her Dad, "Some of the lessons your grandfather taught you were evil, some of the lessons your grandfather taught you were wrong." "You have to sift through the love and the lessons that you got from your grandfather, you have to experience disloyalty of the most profound and personal sort, disloyalty to somebody who loved you beautifully. You have to sift through those loyalties to capture for yourself what was most essential and enduring in his wisdom and in his love. And then you have to cast away that which is wrong, parochial, and narrow."

Now John does not have an easy time doing that sifting. He doesn't live in Cambridge, Massachusetts, spending half of his income seeing psychotherapists. He's a very hard-working guy who spends most of his time tending to his community and tending to his family. He doesn't know how to do that kind of work. He doesn't know how to sift through all those loyalties. And indeed, John would not go and do that work if it were not for his deepest loyalty and love to his own daughter. So it's not anybody who can challenge John to rethink his attitudes towards black people, some of his latent prejudices. It's not anybody who can challenge him on those prejudices, because you're not just challenging somebody's attitudes, you're challenging somebody's loyalties to those sources of love and protection that passed on those lessons in the first place.

III. A Transitional Moment For Communities Of Faith

I think our transitional moment in human history is so extraordinarily exciting. We're revisiting our failed effort a hundred years ago at global interdependence.

A hundred years ago the economy was more interdependent than it is now. There was free flow of labor from country to country. There were no passports or passport controls. There were emerging efforts at thinking about political interdependence. The League of Nations was the product of World War I, but the seeds of the idea came from before World War I. So now we're having another chance, having learned from the tragedies of this century to experiment with economic and political interdependence. We've learned lessons from the various supremacist ideologies that have swept our century's political history.

And even the triumphalist operating system that is embedded in many religious systems—in which each in a deep way still believes that it has the truth, and that in the end of days its truth will prevail—even that triumphalist set of assumptions is beginning to lose some of its hold. We have a long way to go for it to lose all of its hold. But there's a more reverent appreciation across faiths, of different religious traditions and a self-awareness within these faith communities that none of us has the whole truth, and that we're each working one road up the mountain.

COS: Would that be true for all religions?

Ronald Heifetz: I've studied Buddhism and Hinduism in the East, and Zoroastrianism from Persia, but I don't know enough to be able to comment on them. So I can't answer your question. There certainly is supremacist ideology in the East, in Asia—the notion that somehow "we" are genetically better people. You find those attitudes at times in Japan and in China. So I don't think that the defensive arrogance in various cultural or religious or political systems is uniquely Western, by any means. I think we find defensive arrogance all over the world.

So we're at a wonderful time in human history. We're getting to revisit these experiments in global interdependence in a more pluralist set of spiritual perspectives.

IV. Spirituality and Leadership

COS: What do you mean by spiritual perspectives?

Ronald Heifetz: I mean conceptions of the divine. There are interesting dialogues taking place across faith communities in regard to conceptions of the divine. These dialogues are taking place between Buddhists and Jews, and Christians and Jews, and Muslims. The various emerging conceptions of the divine from the new age movement, which have more mystical roots, have challenged the established Western religions to revisit some of their own mystical roots from the pre-Cartesian rationalists era. These explorations, these dialogues, hold out the hope that people can learn from one another rather than simply prove that their way is the right way.

I believe a lot of learning is beginning to take place across these communities. There's an openness and a willingness to learn that I don't think existed a hundred years ago. When I as a Jew give a lecture to a group of Episcopal priests or bishops, and speak in what seem to me to be Jewish terms about my insights into Jesus and the nature of "sacred heart," I find an enthusiastic reception. We're talking about a pluralism that's far more than tolerant respect. **A tolerant respect is: "I tolerate our differences and we're not going to go to war over them anymore." But an appreciative pluralism is where we really have a lot to learn from one another, because we've been plowing similar terrain.** As a part of the traumas we've generated with each other, we've generated a kind of rigid impermeable boundary between our respective inquiries. Instead of joining those inquiries, we keep them separate. Within the Jewish tradition there are thousands of years of rich inquiry into all sorts of spiritual, ethical, social, and political questions. The same is true within the Christian tradition, the Muslim tradition, the Hindu tradition, the Buddhist tradition, and so forth. There are similar sorts of rich traditions of inquiry into similar kinds of questions, but rarely do we get synergies across the rigid boundaries between these faith communities. We're beginning to see some of those boundaries rendered more permeable. Not simply in the interest of a sterile peace, but in the interest of a richer spiritual experience for all people.

COS: How does that dimension of experience relate to leadership?

Ronald Heifetz: Well, profoundly, because **leadership is about mobilizing people's capacity to sift through and hold on to what's essential from their past**. Sift through their organization's past, or from their family, neighborhood, or community's past, and hold on to what's precious and essential from that past. To hold onto what's essential. They carry that forward, and discard and let go of that which is no longer essential so that they can take advantage of the opportunities that are generated from these cross-boundary interactions and from contemporary life.

Say you're a local business that knows its own market very, very well because it's been in some local community for 130 years. Now the government is no longer protecting you from global competition. You've got to figure out how the heck to maintain what's precious from your company's capacity, its core values and competencies, so to speak. Or its cultural norms, including its membership in this particular local community in which it plays a role as a citizen of the community. How can it hold on to that which is precious and begin to take advantage of the opportunities of an open economy? That's a huge piece of adaptive work for that company. And that company may fail, as so many do, to do that adaptive work. It may not be able to learn what it needs to learn quickly enough to thrive in the new environment, in which case it becomes an adaptive failure.

So leadership is all about mobilizing businesses, communities, or societies, to achieve better adaptations. When they adapt, they carry forward from the past that which is best, and yet have the openness to learn from engaging with the wider world so that they can continue to thrive and carry forward and sustain that which is precious.

COS: In what you just described, leadership is a phenomenon that deals with collective identity formations.

Ronald Heifetz: In part. But it deals with loss also, that's what I'm trying to suggest.

V. Creating Better Adaptations

We frequently like the word "transformation," but transformation is an ahistorical term. It tends to suggest that we're engaging in a radical departure from the past and creating a whole new future that's almost disconnected from the past. First, I think that image is unrealistic, and that it fails to capture how small "t" –transformational change actually happens. And second, it's grandiose, and sets us up for demigods and tyrants posing as leaders who fill us up with delusions of grandeur and lead us over a cliff.

I like the term "creating better adaptations," because as in biology, an adaptation may be transformative in the sense that it dramatically widens, deepens, and broadens our capacity to thrive in new environments. And to redefine, even, what thriving means in terms of the values that we stand for and the values that we hold in our aspirations.

So, for example, in biology we share 99% of our DNA with chimpanzees, and we carry forward in our own evolution the wisdom of hundreds of millions of years of evolutionary experimentation, of God's experimentation in the divine effort, trial and error, to create a conscious creature. It would be ludicrous to say we want to create a new human being that does not take advantage of those hundreds of millions of years of biological experiment.

Who amongst us could actually design a hand or a heart or a brain, let alone a whole system that works as miraculously as these systems work, that can even reproduce itself?

So we want to carry forward the wisdom of the past, and on the other hand, we want to do better than the chimpanzees. And we do do better than the chimpanzees, we do a lot better. According to anthropologists, it began with a small adaptation in which our thumb was able to touch our baby finger, our fifth finger, in opposition. That then enabled us to hold and build and make tools in a way that chimpanzees and gorillas cannot. It enables flexibility with the hand, a capacity to manipulate objects that other animals do not have. As soon as we began to be able to make tools, we began to expand our environmental niche, because we could start hunting in a different way. Once we could start hunting in a different way, we needed to be able to run in a different way, we needed a brain that could compute trajectories differently. We needed a communication capacity that could communicate across distances. And all of a sudden, (but over millions of years) we had a whole series of rapid new adaptations that generated in a miraculous way an expanded set of capacities, including our capacity for learning and symbolic logic and language. In other words, "transformative" capacity is generated through adaptive work.

VI. Leadership And Loss

So I think we're socially at an extraordinary moment historically. We're creating a whole new set of social adaptations in our relationship with the earth, in our understanding of its limitations, of our role in stewarding the earth and our relationship to it, and in our relationship to one another. It's an extraordinary moment.

But the leadership that will be required, I believe, to take advantage of these opportunities will be a leadership that will have a reverence for the losses and the disloyalties that you're asking people to sustain as they let go of pieces of the past that no longer serve them. And therefore, leadership requires a diagnostic capacity to be able to assess the resistances that accompany painful adjustments, painful adaptations, painful change. We need for leadership a rich organizational and political diagnostic framework for understanding the complex dynamics by which social systems avoid adaptive work and accomplish adaptive work. We need a lot better thought on how to orchestrate multiparty conflict in which fights between Mary and John, between daughter and father, can be both promoted and orchestrated to generate social learning. We need to understand, much better than we currently do, how to effectively manage systemic conflict so that it produces learning rather than simply damage. So

there's a lot of work to be done in figuring out what leadership ought to look like and beginning to take advantage of this new world.

VII. Where Does The New Come From?

COS: I absolutely agree with all you've said, particularly that the dimension of loss is usually underplayed or not even noted in most of the literature on leadership and change. That certainly matches my own experience.

My sense is what you have described is one dimension of change work. But there is also another one. For example, the story you told about Mary. I can identify with Mary's role because it's also my story. When I acted like this in my environment, it wasn't an adaptation on my part. I was tapping into a kind of knowledge that I took from my heart. That was also what Joe Jaworski and I learned in a recent interview project with entrepreneurs. When they were making their critical moves that turned out to be real entrepreneurial steps they were pointing to this dimension of "knowing." So there's this other source of knowing. That source didn't come from the past, from past experience. What we enacted in the Peace Movement and the Green Movement did not come out of our families or history. It was more a feel of a generation. It felt as if the inspiration of our actions came from the future into the present rather than from the past into the present.

Ronald Heifetz: I don't understand you.

COS: You know, the knowledge you are acting upon in this Mary role, it is that you want to bring something new into the world.

Ronald Heifetz: Oh, yes...

COS: You have to bring something new into the world, or you have the capacity to bring something into the world which isn't there yet. And it's not adaptation. Michael Ray probably would call that the "Self" with a capital "S", that is, your highest potential.

Ronald Heifetz: But I don't think that's true.

COS: You don't think that's true?

Ronald Heifetz: No, on two counts. First of all, bringing something new into the world is what adaptation does. That's what evolution does. It creates new permutations, new mutations, new experiments. It's innovation to have the thumb be able to oppose the fifth finger. And that innovation then generates a whole new set of capacities. And the second thing that you said that I'm not sure is true is that it comes from the future. I think that your inspired knowing has roots. It has roots in the world that you grew up in, it has roots in your history, it has roots in your family. It has roots in your culture and your community and in the historical era that you are a part of. It has roots and we're fashioning something new because you're taking one old thing and another old thing and putting them in conflict with each other. And by being in conflict with each other something new is being generated. So it is a political process, political in the sense that there are some people in the community who have one historical root that generates a particular consciousness and a particular inspiration, say, Mary's inspiration. Other people in the community have John's historical roots, have John's inspiration. And you push them together and engage them in conflict, and both Mary and John optimally will learn something about how to make the world work better, in which they both can carry forward what's precious and let go of what's expendable.

COS: So you would say that consciousness is a function of the environment, of the process that acts upon you from the environment?

Ronald Heifetz: Oh I would, yes, at first impression at least. I would say that new consciousness is a product of engagement, engagement with the world around us, with people and with the physical environment.

COS: But engagement would work both ways, right? So you're not just a function of the process that acts upon you, but it's also the other way around?

Ronald Heifetz: Oh, it's an active engagement. It's dynamic, absolutely, I agree. It's not that you are just -

COS: Just a product of your environment.

Ronald Heifetz: No, though most of us frequently operate as if we were simply a product of our environment, because we take a passive role. But then again, that's the same problem that John or this battered woman has, which is that they have accepted a set of truths as truths in a passive way. They've absorbed these truths, rather than investigating if they are true and whether they are still operational.

COS: So that would be one mode of consciousness we can and we do operate on. Do you see other modes of consciousness we can operate on in our lives and leadership activity, self-leadership?

Ronald Heifetz: **It isn't true in my experience yet that one can achieve a transcendent consciousness without engagement with the world around us. I think the reason people seek a monastery or why an artist seeks the solitude of his or her garret is because they've already internalized so much of the environment around them. That environment is so pregnant and so alive as an inner chorus of voices speaking to them all the time that they need a quiet and protected haven. In solitude they can begin to hear themselves think and experience their consciousness. In solitude they can engage with and distinguish themselves from the environment that they've already internalized.** But they don't achieve that transcendence independent of that engagement, in my experience. And indeed, I can't imagine how one could, because from the first moment of a baby's birth…

COS: We are in the social context.

Ronald Heifetz: We are immediately internalizing the environment around us. So I think that structurally engagement holds true, even to the everyday reality of a woman sifting through whether she is going to leave this man because he's abusing her. **It's an achievement of a different consciousness that can give her the courage to step into the void.** A faith in life, a faith in herself, a confidence in her own creative and learning capacity to create a new life beyond anything she had ever seen in her upbringing. That would be the work of leadership, it would seem to me-- Leadership in the role of the healthcare worker who's trying to lead this particular person to achieve a far better adaptation so that she can thrive and grow.

VIII. Leadership = Therapy?

COS: What would that leadership work really do to that woman? The first part of the story you shared is that she eventually becomes a victim. So what is the leadership work that starts at this point? What does the leader do?

Ronald Heifetz: That is a really rich question. In some ways, I address that question in two chapters in my book when I talk about a patient with cancer. I see I don't really have time to go into it deeply today. **But first, the activity of leadership has to be tailored to that person. The strategic and tactical ideas that I've discussed in my writing and teaching are general ideas that then have to be tailored to that person or context. In short, however, they have to do with moving her from what you're calling a victim consciousness to an agency consciousness, or a creative consciousness.** In a sense, in the particular case of an individual, it seems to me that that is what the art of therapy is supposed to be about. And then leadership might look, in a one-on-one situation, like therapy.

In the case of a leader of a social movement, leadership might look like trying to pick the right town in Alabama, with the right sheriff who can be provoked into brutal violence, and then making sure the cameras are there. So that John, then, innocently, 2,000 miles away in Montana, in the peace of his Sunday living room will see these televised images. These images force him to face the gap between the values he stands for and the reality of how he lives. These images force him to face that internal

contradiction. That is a political process of mobilizing social learning, of mobilizing a change in mindset, a change in values, a change in priorities, rather than a therapist's process.

But in both cases, the similarity is that you're trying to move people from an entrenched set of investments with an entrenched set of loyalties to a more curious, adventuresome, experimental mindset. Then, they are more willing to entertain opposing points of view without feeling that their most precious set of values are going to be lost in the process. With the faith in themselves that they can find and then hold onto what is most essential. So in one context it might look like therapy and in another context it might look like political action. And in a business context it might look quite different, but I think it will have the same feature.

COS: Thank you very much.

Ronald Heifetz: You are most welcome.

IX. Reflection

Ron Heifetz's concept of adaptive change emphasizes what in most rhetoric and popular writings about leadership tends to be tuned out: that leadership means dealing with losses and addressing the fundamental question, "what's essential and what's expendable?" From this angle, resistance to change has to be reframed as resistance to the possibility of loss. Section VII of the interview contains an interesting exchange about the sources from where the new comes into being: does it come from holding on to what's essential from the past and adapting to an environment that has changed (perspective 1), or does it come from accessing a deeper knowing that connects us to the future that wants to emerge through us (perspective 2)? While my experience, when I am doing my best work, tends to resonate with the second perspective, Heifetz did not agree with that. His experience resonated with the first perspective. While both perspectives are embedded in a joint cyclical view of dynamic interaction between self and environment, it is an interesting question whether, when going through a process of profound change, you focus on what is essential that you want to keep and take forward or whether you focus on surrendering to what wants to emerge (through you)—that is, surrendering to the unknown.

X. Bio

Ronald A. Heifetz co-directs the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. For the last eighteen years, he has been responsible for developing a theory of leadership and a method for leadership development. His research aims to provide strategy and tactics for mobilizing adaptive work in politics, businesses, and nonprofits. His courses on leadership and authority are among the most popular in the University. His widely acclaimed book, Leadership Without Easy Answers (now in its eleventh printing) was published by The Belknap/Harvard University Press in 1994. His second book, Staying Alive: Leadership on the Line, written with Marty Linsky, will be published by Harvard Business School Press in January 2002.

Formerly a Clinical Instructor in Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, Heifetz works extensively with leaders in government, nonprofits, and business. His consultations and seminars with individuals, executive committees and leadership teams focus on the work of leaders in generating and sustaining adaptive change across political boundaries, operating units, product divisions, and functions in politics, government agencies and international businesses.

Heifetz is a graduate of Columbia University, Harvard Medical School and the John F. Kennedy School of Government. He is also a cellist and former student of Gregor Piatigorsky.