

Becoming A  
CREATIVELY MALADJUSTED LEADER

By Daniel Holden

The Rev. Martin Luther King announced in a 1963 speech he was "...Proud to be maladjusted." There are certain realities, he argued, we should not and need not adjust to as people and leaders. I have reflected on my own call to action this year and find, in Dr. King's slight twist on the word, a surprisingly liberating doorway for the New Year. Our current business world seems to require high levels of adjustment —research indicates upwards of 65% of leaders fall somewhere in the Reactive/Conventional or Socialized stage of development. It seems obvious we need more creative maladjustment! In this article I will discuss illusion, passion, sensuality, lovemaking and finding the Essential in our work. I will suggest all play a role in performing our work at the highest level and can be exercised in seven practical actions. A good round number. I hope I now have your attention.

Eight hundred years ago Hafiz compared our journey to a desert caravan where the challenge was to discern what was real from what was mirage. Sitting here in my office, this seems straightforward. Apparently, trying to stay alive in a barren desert is an altogether different story. Trying to find what is true and essential in organizational life is daunting as well. Hafiz' perspective:

It has not rained light for many days,  
The wells in most eyes look  
Drought-stricken.  
Thus friends are not easy to find  
In this barren  
Place.  
Where most everyone has become ill  
From guarding  
Nothing.  
On this primal caravan  
Careers and cities can appear real in this  
Intense  
Desert heat,  
But I say to my close ones,  
Don't get lost in them,  
It has not rained light there for days.  
Look, most everyone is diseased  
From 'making love' to  
Nothing."

(The Gift: Poems by Hafiz, the Great Sufi Master. Daniel Ladinski, editor.)

Let's begin by coming to terms with how marvelously easy it is to lose our way. We begin with humility. "...*It has not rained light for many days...*" I re-learned something the hard way last year: when I am weary and exhausted, stressed from an overwhelming set of priorities or secretly concerned that I may not measure up to the demands placed on me, my brain doesn't work well. I see things that are not there; I make up stories and treat as real something that is completely imaginary. I worry about things I cannot control and battle enemies that appear to be "out there" but are really "in here". I lose the ability to clearly tell the difference. The heat of my energy-demanding life, the torrid landscape of uncertainty, complexity, and endless demands on my time and calendar all take an invisible and cumulative toll. I feel thirsty for light.

- Action: Become strategically unavailable. I have purposed to build in time to breathe deeply and cool down. I suggest you find room to breathe, and travel more lightly, as well. Drought-stricken eyes are caused by an endless diet of problems and things gone wrong. Problems we take personally. I will find and pursue possibilities that awaken others and me so that we each have a more enjoyable and meaningful trip. I will learn how to rain light, a vital leadership competency not often listed in leadership journals.

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In an illusionary world, where a mirage can make real what is not, we may need resiliency and resolve to reach our destination. In the interim, we live primarily with uncertainty and with what David Whyte calls "...*The bitter unwanted passion of our sure defeat.*" Under this kind of pressure we can lapse into categorizing others around us friend or foe, ally or enemy. These are not useful categories except on the wartime field of battle. Yet I have seen several instances where colleagues and I fell into this mindset: If you see the world differently than we do you are not one of us. You are with "them." *Friends are hard to find in this barren place.*

When complexity, pace of change and scarcity of resources simultaneously escalate, the organizational world can become spiritually and emotionally barren. Sound bites pass as dialogue and heaving opinions back and forth passes for learning from one another. We want to be right more than effective. It is easy to see where we could feel justified in excluding those who seem different. We have simply adjusted to the norm of separation. We have adjusted to the mirage of separate and competing interests. We have fallen into the bleak, un-awakened landscape of believing that in order to get what I want you must lose something. Each time I am successful taking from you I become more vulnerable myself. I know you could do the same to me. My defenses must therefore be made stronger. On it goes. I personally have done these things even while righteously proclaiming I want to be creatively maladjusted. Welcome to the citadel of my life!

- Action: Cultivate friendships and new partnerships with others who may appear to see their world differently than you do but who are undoubtedly cut from the same cloth as you and me. "...*Thus friends are hard to find in this barren place...*" I have purposed to find ways to connect with others I see as different. I have spent too many days and years as a lone sentinel standing over my organization, my field of study, my professional discipline and other things I mistook for me. I have begun to see that when I mistake my business strategies, my politics, my ideology, my religion, my nation, my organization for myself, I then lose the ability to live with compassion in the world. I then become just one more man, defending one more mirage and fighting one more senseless battle. It is enough.

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When I spend time and energy defending my position, my opinion, my career, my technical expertise, my functional area...virtually anything that has the word “my” in front of it...I am very likely guarding nothing. “...*Most everyone has become ill from guarding nothing...*”

Guarding is essentially a reactive action, i.e., I must be vigilant from a threat that always emerges “out there” and be ready to defend. Even when my action appears strong and tough, it is motivated by a desire to guard or defend (myself and what I have mistaken to be real). Then my action is compensatory at best. I am playing to not lose. It is impossible to move into elite level work from such a defensive stance.

- Action: Watch closely what you defend and guard and get curious when and why you defend it. Curiosity is often much better than judgment. I have purposed to defend much less this year than in any other year. I desire that my action be purpose-driven—moving others and me towards outcomes that matter to us all—and no longer in protecting and guarding my illusory and false sense of self. I will watch closely how often I reference “me” and “my”, seeing these indicators as a relevant set of (creatively maladjusted) metrics in a world that claims to like metrics.

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Consider the real possibility that core systems and structures in our lives may be mirages. “...*Careers and cities can appear real in this intense desert heat...*” When you are under considerable heat pay careful attention to what you think you see. Mirages abound! The small footnote in the torn page of my life is worth remembering here. Careers, cities, businesses appear and appear real when you’re in them! There are, after all, traffic lights, buildings, and noise. There are customers, incentive plans, and performance evaluations, pay grades, promotions and turnover. I hope the last item does not include me! It is only in perspective, gained by stepping back and breathing, that I can begin to entertain the possibility that much of what I have invested my life energy in is temporary, impermanent, and likely to be gone soon. If it was ever there at all! But this is a perspective gained from being *outside the mirage looking at it, not from within it.*

- Action: Remember: things are not as they appear. I purpose to act as if all things are malleable. I see what I am prepared to see. Problems or opportunities? My call and yours. Nothing is as fixed, dense and “given” as I think it is. Neither my customers’ behavior and circumstances nor my own behavior and circumstances are as dense as I once thought. There is hope. Then again, I might be a mirage myself, but that’s another article.

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From his desert experiences Hafiz implies there is an abiding spiritual reality behind things, an un-changing truth behind the shimmering mirage. “...*I say to my close ones, ‘Don’t get lost in them’...*” No prayer beads, wailing or sacrifice are required, just curiosity. The underlying Essence is not always easy to find and doesn’t announce itself with lights and flags waving. Yet, asking, “What’s really going on here” seems to invite its response. Learn to bring this “meaning making” power we have into your direct conversation with others. When done right, this will at times feel uncomfortable and awkward, and require vulnerability and courage on your part. Particularly in misunderstandings where tensions get triggered, don’t get lost in meaningless positions and exaggerated arguments. Why defend gravity?

- Action: Find your own way of pursuing and describing the essence of the issues with which you are faced. Use your intuition or your gut to discern the small voice or gentle hand on the small of your back saying, “*Don’t get lost in them.*” I have purposed to listen for the open secret hidden in plain sight, there in the midst of conversations with those I live and work with. I have tasted a different kind of

connection with others and have grown weary of settling for something less. Plus, drought stricken eyes don't look cool.

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The complexity, pace and pressure of the workplace today require an unprecedented level of emotional and behavioral resiliency. We have to hang in with each other for the long haul caravan. For leaders, this means we have to speak into the heart of others in ways we may never have before. We appeal to drought-stricken eyes with our own vulnerability and openness to new learning, our courage to share our struggles, uncertainties and concerns even as we pursue outcomes that are important but seem impossible. As we take others aside and share what we know with them (instead of using them as order takers) we are implicitly calling out and speaking to the inherent brilliance of others as we see it. What could be more important?

- Action: Expand your skill set by learning how to appeal to the mind, hands and heart of those you work alongside. Most of us appeal only to the mind: we want to be seen as relevant, rational and right. A new slant on the Three R's. We speak in declarative statements that reveal our thinking and position on things. If we are with each other long enough, we can easily predict one another's viewpoints before we open our mouths. Put down the spreadsheet or your cash flow analysis and look out. I have laid mine aside too. I'll meet you in a different conversation.

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The short story here is this: leadership is not only or even primarily a rational discipline. When done well, it awakens passions and emotions. When done at a high level, leadership combines elements of inward and outward strength, power, authority, touch, vulnerability, sensitivity, imagination, connection, intuitive knowing and risky conversation. Leadership is, at times, very sensual. It can involve lovemaking of a highest order—devotion not just to good work and purposeful achievement but also to *inevitable work, that which we came into life to do and to that Essential part of us that calls us to it*. It is only in this larger context that we can see more clearly how easy it is to “...Become diseased from making love with nothing.” A look at the headlines in any newspaper confirms how easily we can be duped into settling for something, or someone, less.

- Final Action: Love what is real. “*Look, almost everyone is diseased from making love with nothing.*” Imagine the CNN headlines: *American health care costs skyrocket—Defending and making love with nothing reach epidemic levels in the workplace!* If you're considering a creatively maladjusted life you've got to appreciate the desert mystics of another time and era. Their love of the Divine was sensual; their ecstasy in union whole-body! Their connection with The Essential, Body-Consuming.

Mine is something less than this.

I have purposed to follow the thread of the Essential as it seeks expression in my life and work this year. I do not want to fall prey to fighting small battles over nothing and finding when I win I actually become smaller. I want to be decisively defeated by what is Essential. I will do my best to ask: What matters most here? What seems to want to happen here? What truth lies behind and fuels the frustration I see in others and myself?

May you see the inherent beauty in and come to trust your own maladjustment. Remember, we are not supposed to adjust to inequity, injustice, mediocrity and deception. What are the additional things you know you are not supposed to adjust to this year? Join the creatively maladjusted community of leaders and those who work with them. We are a small but deceptively powerful group caravanning through a world in dire need of magic!