

Chapter 16. Looking on the Dark Side of a Center of Light

Introduction

This piece was written during a difficult period when I was on the Board of a New Age retreat center that was in financial difficulties. Often, intentional communities present a mirror image of business, being strong on faith and vision, but ungrounded in their relationship to the world of money. This section is concerned with maintaining the balance between a focus on vision and a preoccupation with current mundane reality. It will be of use to anyone endeavoring to lead or manage an organization founded on vision and values, whether a business or a community.

The piece was originally written in 1989 as a letter to my colleagues on the Board, and I have preserved that more personal form in the version which follows.

Our Denial of Impending Disaster

During our current discussions about the financial future, I have been impressed with a shared reluctance in our community to look failure and disaster in the face. I am concerned that we may cloak an unwillingness to deal forthrightly with reality under the guise of a faith in miracles, and a commitment to manifesting our visions through positive thinking. In this paper I want to say why I believe that taking a hard look at the dangers and the risks we face is essential if we are eventually to bring our vision into reality.

Some of you have said to me that dwelling thus on the dangers which beset our community is "negative thinking," inconsistent with faith in our vision and belief in miracles. There is room for us to differ about such things. I do have faith in the power of the vision. I believe the vision is most empowered when we place it in tension with current reality.

The Relationship between Vision and Current Reality

Manifesting a vision begins when we specify a state which does not now exist, and which we devoutly desire to bring into being. We create a vision of the highest good. That vision exists *in tension* with current reality, in that the two are not yet congruent. If they were, we would not have a vision. It would be a statement about what is.

It has been shown by Robert Fritz, and later elaborated upon by Charles Kiefer and Peter Senge (Senge, 1990), that organizations (and individuals) are most likely to succeed in manifesting their visions when both of the following conditions apply:

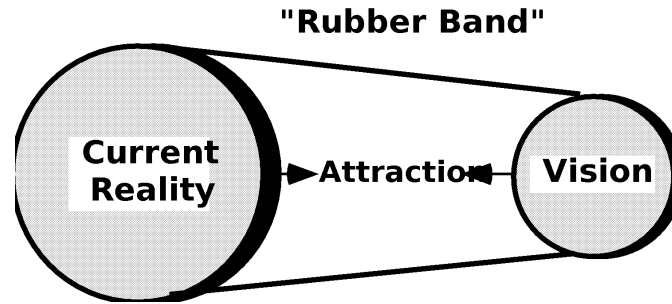
- We elaborate the vision in great detail, and together we frequently rededicate ourselves to it, for example through repeated affirmations.
- We describe current reality in great detail, particularly where it deviates from our vision, and we explicitly acknowledge the distance between the vision and reality.

We do this with the same rigor with which we affirm our vision.

The "Rubber Band" Metaphor

When we hold the vision, and at the same time allow ourselves to be fully aware of current reality, we set up and maintain a continuous tension between the two. It is as though there were a rubber band connecting the vision and reality, as in Figure 16.1. The distance between the two stretches the rubber band. By holding firm to the vision, we fix it as an anchor. Neither our minds nor, it seems, the Universe, likes an unresolved tension. The anchored vision exerts an *attraction* on reality, and it begins to move towards the vision, reducing the tension.

Figure 16.1 The Tension between Vision and Current Reality.



Most of us have had the experience that when our intention is firmly fixed on a vision, and we are also painfully aware of how far we are from its realization, it programs us to observe and take advantage of every event that impacts our project. We begin to see opportunities where before we saw barriers. Our creativity is enhanced, and we receive inspiration. Heaven begins to move in mysterious ways, and large and small miracles occur.

How We Degrade Our Visions

However, since we really don't enjoy living in tension, we tend to find ways to reduce the discomfort of being aware of the differences between reality and our vision. There are at least three ways we can reduce the tension, and all of them weaken the process of manifestation.

- The first is to degrade our vision, to bring it closer to current reality. We may say to ourselves, "That's unrealistic. Let's set our sights a little lower, so we can have the satisfaction of achieving our goals." When we do this, the tension is relieved, and there is then less pressure on current reality to move in the direction of the vision.
- The second way we weaken the process of manifestation is to ignore or to deny current reality. We may focus exclusively on the vision, saying, "We need to think positively. We don't want to get stuck in negativity and fear by dwelling on our troubles." Or we may keep ourselves unclear and fuzzy about the threats and

dangers in the environment by never allowing ourselves to dwell on them or be specific about them. When we focus exclusively on the vision, we tend not to take personal responsibility for the changes we want. We leave it to a higher Power, hoping for miracles.

- The third way we weaken the process is through collusion between leaders and followers. It often begins with leaders not trusting that followers will hold their faith and commitment in the face of the stark reality of limitations, strategic errors, dangers and failures. The leaders then minimize threats, and withhold bad news. The followers, for their part, are content to believe of the leaders that "They wouldn't be there if they didn't know what they were doing." They don't question the leaders' image of invulnerability, and they don't seek to know the difficulties and dangers. They place their trust in their leaders, rather than in their own efforts and the power of the vision.

The Ingredients of Manifestation

I believe that manifesting a vision takes place through a combination of perceptual focus, directed effort, and Divine intervention. The first two flow directly from maintaining the tension between vision and reality. The awareness of that tension directs our attention to events and entities in our environment which are relevant to our task. We become highly sensitized to what will help or hinder our success, and we move quickly to apply our effort where it will make a difference. Divine intervention seems to depend on our doing this. When we are excruciatingly aware of how each event and process we observe impacts our project, and when we devote ourselves body and soul to doing the best we can to achieve our vision, the Universe seems to

move to help us. As was said in another generation, "The Lord helps those who help themselves." I prefer to think of it as God saying, "Do the best you can, and I'll help you out."

I call this "tough visioning." We don't use our vision and faith to spare ourselves the discomfort of knowing we are not where we want to be, but rather to mold ourselves into a cohesive group, and to spur us to our best efforts. Both business entrepreneurs like Steve Jobs, and New Age pioneers like Peter Caddy, know this and do it. They believe in their vision, *and they take personal responsibility for manifesting it.*

Soft Visioning: the Dark Side of New Age Faith

Until now, I have seen our group engage in much "soft visioning." Soft visioning denies or ignores environmental threats, using faith in the vision to soothe ourselves against what might otherwise become immobilizing anxiety. This is the dark side of New Age faith, where we turn our faces toward heaven because we can't stand the unpleasantness looking at the real world. And while we look hopefully toward heaven, dark reality is sneaking up on us from behind, and may shortly engulf this enterprise.

I know we can overcome our difficulties and eventually see our dreams come true. I am equally sure that to succeed in this enterprise, we must be as willing to look at the dark side as we are to see the light.

Epilogue

It is heartwarming to be able to relate that in fact this group did, after much stormy debate, come to grips with its very difficult and perilous "current reality." Once it faced up to its financial situation, it began to work with its investors and customers creatively and with integrity. A new plan for financing was developed to replace the one that was not working, and

at this writing, the organization is solvent and growing, both in the mundane realm, and in spirit.

Another perspective on the story of this group is given in Chapter 13 of *Creating Community*

Anywhere (Shaffer and Anundsen, 1993).