

Coherence

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I was born into an affluent family that left a country fraught with religious persecution; one where my grandfather was imprisoned because he had the audacity to have a Baha'i wedding ceremony, one where today Baha'is are denied access to higher education. So, in the winter of 1976, just prior to the Islamic revolution in Iran, I left with hope. A seven-year-old, I was ecstatic to make my mark in the land of opportunity where it rained toys and was full of friends. It wasn't long thereafter that I awoke from that dream.

"You will never be able to write as well as us because English is your second language," said my second-grade teacher. My impressionable young mind was immediately molded because I looked to my teacher as a guardian that had my best interest in mind and that I should trust and obey implicitly. Her words had a devastating effect on me because I felt no matter how hard I toiled my destiny was set to always be a second-class citizen. It wasn't until I met Ms. Weiss in the seventh grade that I started to doubt that premise. She said she knew I was smart based on my participation in her class and asked why I didn't try harder. My transformation happened in the instant when I saw the indignation in Ms. Weiss' face as I relayed to her what my teacher had said to me so long ago. That is when I realized that I am the author of my own destiny and my unique identity is not an encumbrance but a needed voice. Realization was merely the first step and I've been on a lifelong journey to cultivate that voice for my own growth and to understand its impact in my various communities. Today, I write for a living as Associate Director at Intel Corporation providing legal counsel to its procurement divisions.

Coherence goes beyond bringing your whole self to work. On an individual level, it speaks to healing ourselves from split personas that live in superficiality, which leaves us feeling empty. However, perhaps even more importantly, on a collective level, coherence speaks to the health of an organization where authenticity leads to business solutions with universal applications.

There are numerous studies that validate the value of bring one's whole self to work. Works by Mike Robbins and others emphasize how the unwritten rules of taboo topics at work foster superficiality in the name of professionalism. The repercussion is, by suppressing what is core to our identity that motivates us, we lack engagement. For countless years throughout my profession I did not share with colleagues that I fast during the month of March or I spend my weekends teaching Baha'i classes to the children using hand puppets or to the youth using law school inspired case studies. Instead, I wore the Christmas hats for the holiday pictures and sang the carols as asked. It wasn't that I was against Christmas or I did not believe in Christ because I believe in Christ. Rather, I felt like I was expected to have blue eyes while mine are brown. It was as though keeping the mirage that what is most frequent, or the majority, is what is "normal" for a human being and that those that are not "normal" should sacrifice their identity so as to no upset the rest; so, I kept quiet. The price for being quiet was I couldn't bring the stories or my learnings of patience, wonderment, collaboration, or constructive resilience that I learned from the children and youth to my workplace. My misconception was that comfort is best policy for the workplace. I've learned,

however, we should embrace discomfort because it is the crucible for cultivating our character. As Layli Miller-Muro states “[w]e must have courage not to sit only with those that affirm us.” It is through their different angled perceptions that we strip away our assumptions and can understand the world around us.

Businesses that foster authenticity benefit from it. The lone genius solving big problems is extinct. Diversity of thought is integral for tackling the complex problems that surround us and for making the proposed solutions more universally applicable. Scott Page’s seminal work showed us that “[d]iverse groups of problem solvers outperformed the groups of the best individuals at solving complex problems. The reason: the diverse groups got stuck less often than the smart individuals, who tended to think similarly.” I see this every day at work. It is only when we have all stakeholders in the room that we can identify what our true technical or business needs are, and we can consult on what solutions we should pursue that fits all our and our customers’ needs.

Authenticity is hard work but with practice it strengthens our confidence to speak our minds truthfully, which is what business needs today in order to divert catastrophe and survive in highly competitive industries. Authenticity demands that we have the courage to be vulnerable and disagreed with. However, when we speak up truthfully, we become trusted. When team members trust one another, their efforts are focused on the issue at hand rather than each other. This raises capacity through participation and fortifies collective volition. Therefore, authenticity is not nice to have but a must have if we are to survive in business.

Unity in diversity based on the recognition of the oneness of humanity is the central principle of the Baha’i Faith. When I behave coherently, it means, on a daily basis, I seek out different points of view to help me understand the challenges I must solve because I believe each person matters. I bring my learnings of collaboration and consultation from my faith-based activities into the work rooms while making sure all those present have a voice to speak. Inspired by my faith, I have two-fold purpose: my own spiritual and intellectual growth and my and other’s contribution to the collective.

We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions.

- From the Baha’i writing.