

# Reflective Dialogue, Life Stories, and Leadership Development

*Philip H. Mirvis and Karen Ayas*

Our group of some 25 young leaders from Unilever, representing countries across the Asian Pacific, met in Danang, Vietnam, in November 2002 to continue the leadership journey they began two years earlier (see Ayas and Mirvis, 2002). Tex Gunning, the president of the Unilever Asia Pacific region, established the Young Leaders' Forum to bring together the young managers and help them develop into top leaders in the company. The forum was intended as a learning community and a network of support. Young leaders would stay with the forum until they became management board members. Several new members joined with the reorganization of the business, and a few moved on, but the group has continued its biannual meetings.

One practice of the group is reflective dialogue at several points during meetings. The group members, sitting in a circle, share their thoughts and feelings on a subject and reflect on themselves and their reactions to what is shared. This process has many features in common with the dialogue methodology developed and refined by William Isaacs and Peter Senge. It emphasizes self-scanning, suspending judgment, and creating a container for "hot issues," as Edgar Schein points out in his article in this issue (please see page 27). But it also draws on the principles and practices of community building, as articulated by psychiatrist and spiritualist M. Scott Peck (1987, 1993):

- "I" statements—Use the first-person pronoun to claim knowledge, feelings, and observations rather than ascribe them to "we" or to "everyone."
- Moved to speak—Follow the Quaker injunction to wait until you are personally moved to say something and, when so moved, to speak.
- Difficult issues—Face difficult issues that arise rather than deny, disregard, or downplay them.
- Emptiness—Share personal thoughts and feelings, especially those that prevent you from being fully present in the dialogue.
- Witnessing—Welcome and affirm others' stories and points of view and, in the spirit of community, bridge differences with love and respect.

The young leaders had used reflective dialogue in previous meetings to talk about their life histories and careers. To this point, however, group dialogues had been conducted in the relatively safe container of peers, after the participants had developed trustworthy relations with one another, the business group president, and external facilitators. The task ahead was uncharted and risky: to prepare—without the help and involvement of the president and facilitators—to meet with Niall FitzGerald, the chairman of the British side of Unilever.

To begin preparations, one young leader reminded the group of "lessons learned" about teamwork from a challenge they had faced in a previous meeting in India—presenting a business case to the board of Hindustan Lever. Putting these lessons to use, the group appointed a facilitator and developed plans for engaging the chairman. They decided to invite FitzGerald into the *experience* of the forum rather than preparing a presentation



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about it. It had to be a dialogue session, they decided, but that raised further questions: What would they talk about? Would that be defined beforehand? Should they assign someone to facilitate the dialogue? Would there be time boundaries? They debated these and other questions in the prep session where they exchanged ideas about not only content but also process. They decided, for instance, to talk about people's "leadership journey." "But we cannot script this," said one young leader, "you speak when you are moved to speak. Is that not the whole point of dialogue?" Added another, "Yes, but we should assign someone to start things off and bring the session to closure when the time is right."

## Dialogue with the Chairman

Niall FitzGerald sat on the floor in a circle with the young Asian leaders. The dialogue, starting at nine PM, lasted until midnight. One participant from Indonesia opened the session and welcomed FitzGerald:

Our journey began about two years ago, when we started assembling as a group. Ever since, it's been a journey of self-discovery and personal development for each one of us. The group may change in size, but the form stays the same—it's always a circle. Each time we meet, we create a new spirit in the group through the circle. You are now part of this circle; the group will share with you, and we would also welcome you to share with us.

After a moment of sitting in silence in community, a young leader from the Philippines was moved to speak:

We sometimes don't have the courage to act like leaders when we need to. These sessions remind us who we want to be and allow us to share our difficulties. We are supposed to be a group of top young leaders in the region, but here we share a lot of our disappointments. This ultimately helps us become stronger. It's basically what this circle is all about.

As the conversation went along, FitzGerald asked: "What have you learned about yourself through this process that you didn't know before?"

"I learned something very special," said a Taiwanese. "You can only understand the issues in business if you face yourself. In my job, I look at numbers, I look at strategy, I look at process. But I didn't look at the real factor behind that—people. And if you want to be able to deal with people, you really need to face humanity."

A Pakistani stated, "Before I joined, I just did things as requested. My drive was to deliver to perfection. I'd never done any reflection before. Suddenly I had a mirror in front of me: 'Why are you doing this? Why do you want that? If you want leadership, do you really want to take the consequences?' Self-awareness is the thing that I learned from the circle."

Fitzgerald also questioned the importance of deep, personal sharing in becoming part of the group. One young leader from Australia said: "In listening to other people's stories, you hear your own story. Other people's stories often clarify things in your own mind—what your past is and what drives you. I'm a 33-year-old guy, and I'm still trying to get recognition from my parents. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but having that self-awareness at least allows you to acknowledge and deal with that issue." A young woman from Indonesia added: "As I listened to others sharing their stories and learned about their journeys, I gained more confidence. At the same time, I grew strong. I realized what I want to do with my life. That realization gave me a very clear direction of how to move forward."

## A Leadership Journey

After sharing these reflections, the young leaders asked FitzGerald about his leadership journey. They wanted to know how he became chairman and what it took to get there. FitzGerald began: "I have been perpetually amazed that people take me seriously. There is a little boy in me, even at this advanced age, who often says, 'What are you doing here? How did you get here? How could you possibly be doing what you do?'"

In the spirit of the forum, FitzGerald shared personal stories of early childhood and experiences that shaped him as a person and as a leader:

I got married, and then, within a year, we had our first baby. She was born on Good Friday. She had to be put in an incubator. The doctor said, “It’s fine. She just needs to be kept under observation for a while.” But I was still a bit worried. I left the hospital to go home, and I stopped off in a church. I’m a Roman Catholic by upbringing, but I’m not particularly religious. But I went into the church and sat on a bench at the end and spoke to God. I didn’t pray; I spoke. I said, “God, I haven’t spoken to you too often in the last few years, but I really need you to do something for me now. And I’d really appreciate it if you would. Just look over this little baby. It’s the first and she’s really important.” And then I left the church. That was on Friday. On Monday, this little baby died.

I went back to the church on my way home, because my wife was staying in the hospital. I sat on the same bench and spoke to God again. And I said, “You let me down. You shouldn’t really have done this. This was not necessary. This was the only time I’ve ever asked you for something and you wouldn’t give it to me. So I feel betrayed, and you and I can never be friends.” Then I left the church. That was in 1971. I didn’t walk back into a church for 26 years, until the death of a friend.

The death of a child was a scarring experience. Next came a bittersweet memory of becoming the chairman while facing the end of his first marriage:

I became chairman, which was wonderful. But at the same time, something quite traumatic was happening in my life. My marriage was breaking up. The problem was, I wasn’t recognizing it and I wasn’t admitting it. I found myself in the first two or three years as chairman doing two really catastrophic things. I started to act as if everything was sweetness and light in my personal life. So I began to act a role in my personal life, which is very debilitating and takes a lot of energy. And it’s not you. But at the same time, without realizing it, I began to act another role as chairman. That was really sad. I’d gotten to be a chairman by being me, and suddenly, I stopped being me. Then some things happened that changed me fundamentally and forever.

The trigger was the death of Peter, his very close friend, who left him with these words: “What I’m angry about is that it’s taken the imminence of death to get a real understanding of life and to understand the fact that life is not a rehearsal. It had better be the performance you want to give and had better be in the place you want to give it. It better be the best bloody performance you’re capable of giving. I want you to take that away, Niall, and act on it.”

FitzGerald emphasized the true gift his friend had offered him and explained to the group:

What that gave me was an absolute determination that I would do things only my way. By that, I mean that if it seems the best and true way for me, it is likely to be good for others too. Out of that came a freedom in how I live my life and a complete commitment to truth, because I think it’s only truth that matters. Be truthful to yourself, to begin with, and then be truthful to everyone. It saves a lot of time, by the way, to be truthful.

What I’ve learned is that you can align what you want to do in your career with what you want to do as a person. If you don’t align them, you’ll do neither very well. So if you find yourself in the wrong place, either in your personal life or in your business life, you better get out of there. That’s easy to say, but it’s tough to do—getting yourself into the right place.



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## Leadership Is a Choice

The memorable evening of reflective dialogue closed with FitzGerald's remarks:

I now am at a stage in my life where I feel very relaxed. I love what's happening with the business. I love the people in the business. I think we're finally beginning to understand how we really should be as a group of people. And I love what's happening in my life.

But it still leaves me with a dilemma. When you become a father again at an older age, you're much more conscious that time is limited. And you're much more conscious that each day is a day that's never going to be repeated. Therefore you had better make the best use of that day you possibly can. You're also very conscious that when you're blessed with a child—you're handed this spirit that you've called into the world—you're also handed a blank canvas and a set of paints. You're responsible for what you put on the canvas. You'd better think about the brush strokes, not just let them happen. You'd better understand that, when the picture eventually emerges, it's the picture you painted. It's both genetically what you've put in and environmentally what you created around your children, so it's your creation.

Why do I tell you that? Because I want you to understand the dilemma. My struggle at this moment is that I'm very conscious of trying to balance my life—to be with Ingrid and little Gabriella as much as I can. So why did I spend last weekend away from home, the weekend before, and two weekends before that? This business and particularly this group of people, which has taken 35 years of my life, is at a moment of potential transformation that I feel needs just another shove. It'll get to a place where it's always intended to be, but it might miss.

Although I'm in a place I want to be and love it, and I've never felt happier, here I am, still sitting with this dilemma. My point is to tell you that you're always going to have this. I still have to choose between doing what I think I can do with others and with you to bring this wonderful business that I love to a special place. But it requires me to make other sacrifices that I'm much more conscious of making than I was before. However far you go, remember that you're never going to be free of having to make those choices.

FitzGerald's closing notes resonated strongly with the young leaders. He had spoken about an important theme raised in all forum meetings: "Leadership is a choice." Though the evening ended with FitzGerald's story, the dialogue continued the next morning. First, the young leaders shared what had struck them. A Dutchman based in Singapore said,



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## Stories of Parents

**Marketer from Taiwan:** "When I went back to my home country, I called my mom. She was touched. It's been a very tough year for her because she's getting weaker. But she remembers every one of the six kids in the family and who has how much in the bank. She knows investments and watches stock announcers. She says, 'I would like to buy this stock. Would you like to buy it? I can buy it for you.' So that's her role. My father would decide big things, and my mother would make decisions on small things. But big things never happened in the family, so it's always my mom. Now I know why I'm so organized and detailed-oriented; I just am just like her."

"Starting about a year and a half ago, she told us she felt like she would fall when she walks. One night, she fell down in the bathroom. The doctor found a tumor in her brain. Now she has to walk with someone's assistance. She's also acting like a kid now, because of her weakness. Still, she remembers everything, all the bank records, everything."

**Marketer from Australia:** "I chose to go back to Australia to work in the family business. It was not something we often talked about, but because my father had to work for his father and his father passed away, my father never put any pressure on me to work in the business. But I thought that's what I wanted."

"When my father turned 58—his father had died at 58—something changed in him. He didn't want to work anymore, but wanted to get out of the business. I had gone back to Australia thinking I was going to work with him for five years, learn how to run the business, and then take the role of the leader. But it didn't work out that way."

"I felt extremely disappointed in my father because I'd given up a good career at Unilever and moved my family, my young daughter, back to Australia, to do what I thought was my dream—to live with my family near the beach and work with my parents."

"I realize I was quite dependent on my parents and in a transitional phase. I have my own children now. I have to become the man. First I was disappointed in myself. But, I think from every bad thing comes a good thing. Now my parents are retired, and they're very happy together. Through my children, I'm reestablishing my relationship with my father. I can forgive him now for the things he did to me and my family. And I feel fortunate that Unilever was willing to accept me back into the family."

**Marketer from Thailand:** "My family is a traditional Asian one. As we were discussing in our group, in our culture, we don't express our love as much as we should, especially physically, like hugging or saying things to our parents. I now realize it is very important to say things out loud. You can't take it for granted that they know how much you love them, how much you care. It was very hard for me to start doing that. I have to internalize it again and again to open myself up more."

"I've been in China for about five or six months now without my family. It's a bit frightening. That really made me think: How can you share with them that you really care about them, even if you're far away? I discovered that just a phone call to them, just to hear how excited they were, was a first step. They just started crying when they heard my voice. When I went back home this October for the first time, my whole family picked me up at the airport. And we all hugged each other, something that was never done before in my family. Everyone just came out of their shell and started hugging and crying. There was so much to express in loving that I had never experienced before."

"The most important message I heard from Niall is that life is not a rehearsal; you get one shot at it. When you are young, you don't really think that way. Being reminded of that fact so you can live accordingly and act on it is very important." A woman from Japan said, "You made me realize that it is not about balancing work and life. It's about being me, balancing me." A woman from Thailand commented, "From your story, I learned that you need to be truthful to yourself. We shouldn't just do things to make other people happy. You end up suffering if you are not true to yourself. You don't live life to the fullest today, and you make everybody suffer."

The session concluded with a further summation of the lessons the young leaders learned and FitzGerald's reflections about his lessons on leading a business (see the sidebar "Niall FitzGerald on Leadership").

## Reflective Dialogue and Leadership Development

What was the rationale for this dialogue between the young leaders and their company chairman? What was the basis for reflections and lessons learned? It is important to note that different forms of dialogue are practiced in therapy, human relations training, team building, conflict resolution, and community-building programs. The universal principles apply to private prayer and public policy-making (Buber, 1965; Yankelovich, 1999). The

## Niall FitzGerald on Leadership

There ain't no leadership style. Each of us needs to be led in a different way, so you can't adopt a style and apply it to everybody. You can have common characteristics on how you deal with each individual and how you deal with teams and subteams. But you have to take the time to understand those you're seeking to lead. You can't be a leader without followers, and people must want to follow you. The characteristics are a combination of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects.

**Physical aspects.** A leader needs to take care of his own mind and body. You can't do it if you're not fit. Your mind won't rule or react with the speed it needs or be able to probe deeply if you haven't exercised. Of the physical aspects, courage is top on my list. There are times when you physically need the courage to do something, to face the reality. Often, it's very unpopular to define the reality, to say, "This is where we are; look in the mirror." That's the first duty of a leader.

Passion, with both physical and emotional sides, is also hugely important. Without passion, nothing moves. We can be sitting here with the most wonderfully engineered Ferrari and racing driver Michael Schumacher in it. But unless we put fuel in it, it doesn't go anywhere. Passion is the fuel that drives us on.

**Mental aspects.** Sometimes, people think that leadership is standing back and being rather lofty, saying, "I don't have to attend to the detail." Like hell, I don't. As a leader, I need to have the knowledge to be able to judge what the detail is that I don't need to attend to. I have to be concerned by the details that matter, without getting in people's way. How can I judge them, how can I coach them, how can I inspire them, if I don't understand the basic thing they're trying to do or say?

You need simplicity and curiosity. The really bright, sharp minds don't complicate; they quickly get to the essence of the issue. Only the finest minds simplify. I've always noticed that great leaders have a kind of restless curiosity about the world, about themselves, and about people around them.

**Emotions.** The leader casts a shadow and needs to understand the influence of that shadow. If you're not self-aware, how do you know what impact you're having on people? A mean-spirited leader grinds you down, even if you try hard and you do everything. The leader has to show optimism, but not unrealistic optimism. Willpower is an emotional force. Sometimes you see insurmountable problems overcome by naked willpower: "We will not be defeated at this. We will prevail." People are going to look at you and your shadow. Always be sensitive to what that's doing.

Openness, generous listening, and being prepared to show your vulnerabilities are essential. You can't be inspired by an icon of perfection, because you know it isn't real. Nobody is perfect. So anyone who seeks to consciously or subconsciously hold themselves up as king is by definition being false. Yet how many people try to create that illusion?

There is also a necessity to connect with people. If you want to lead, you must like people. You must be inspired by what other people do and what you help them to do. If you do not like being with people, you're not going to be authentic; you're going through a mechanical motion. People will see through that. You have to connect with people and have them feel that you want to give them something and you don't expect anything in return. You appreciate what they do and thank them.

**Spiritual aspects.** The spiritual side starts with truth. Every time I have departed from the truth, I have failed, without exception. There has never been a moment in my life when I chose to be

(continued)

key elements of reflective dialogue in the forum show its relevance for leadership development.

### *The Power of Life Stories*

The young leaders have shared stories about their lives and careers among themselves and now with their chairman. The aim was to increase their self-awareness. Of course,

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the same can be said of personality surveys, projective tests, and other self-assessment methodologies. Is there something special about a life story for "knowing thyself"?

Psychotherapy contends that people "reexperience" their lives when they delve into their past. This reexperiencing helps to surface long-ago and sometimes forgotten feelings about one's life course and, when given thoughtful consideration, to understand the self. There is also the notion from cultural anthropology that people live their lives through and in stories. Self-narration, in this line of thought, yields a dynamic rather than static picture, like the difference between a film of your life and snapshots. It locates the self in a familial and sociocultural context. Stories have communicative value; people seldom remember a bullet point. Furthermore, in conversations about lives lived, other people's experiences bring to mind stories of oneself.

dishonest that I succeeded. I may have had some short-term success, but ultimately, I fail. If you're not being truthful, you have to have a very good memory. You have to keep flying back to keep consistency in what you're doing.

Truth is the foundation stone for me in building trust. If I know that you're dealing with me always truthfully and you know that I'm dealing with you always truthfully, we begin to know where we can place our trust. There will be events and circumstances that force us away from that. But, when that happens, we will know it and force ourselves back again. Trust, of course, is also required to build a team. Teams cannot function without unconditional trust, given without reservation. Give it too widely and it's useless. You have to give it selectively but unconditionally.

Authenticity is also something that is important. What essence do you allow to come out? People who are spiritually secure have a generosity of spirit and know there's something very valuable in every person. They seek to find the best in everyone, however difficult it may seem, however unpleasant the person seems. If you feel spiritually strong, you are prepared to show your vulnerability. By spiritual, I don't mean religious; I mean the soul, something deep inside you.

**Balance.** You are not going to lead people because you've been appointed the leader. People are not going to be led solely by your physical and intellectual strength. They're going to need to engage with your emotional and spiritual side. The balance of all dimensions and more attention to the emotional and spiritual aspects of leadership will be increasingly important.

On balance, women are stronger than men, emotionally and spiritually. They are better listeners, are more sensitive to advice, and work more with intuition. They are more sensitive to relationship building and maintaining relationships.

When I look around at the future leaders, I see many more women. But I am also deeply concerned that some women have succeeded under what I call the old leadership model. They succeeded by becoming more like men. As far as I'm concerned, that is a disaster. We're going in the wrong direction. You should play to the strengths that women naturally have. The message for men is to find some of those strengths yourselves and be mentored by women, rather than telling women how men do it.

**The choice.** Leadership can be very lonely. The leader is ultimately left with decisions to take. He's left with the consequence of those decisions. He's left to cope with the criticism.

That's not something that takes away the enjoyment. Nothing for me is more deeply satisfying than seeing a group of people or even a single person respond to what you've seen in them and then understand that they have a potential far beyond anything they thought of themselves. You've helped them both to see it and to reach it. That is most satisfying, whether it's your child, friend, or team. But it doesn't take away from the fact that there are lonely times.

With my own children, for instance, I've known that what I've had to say to them has not always been what they wanted to hear. It created a distance for a moment. But I knew that it was the right thing to do or to say, and they in due course would know it. But at that moment, it makes you very lonely.

How would you know when the leader has succeeded? The ultimate sign is when the leader is redundant, no longer necessary. It means that everybody has filled the space. Then the leader should move on because he will have done what he set out to do. He would have drawn people in, inspired them, and made them believe in themselves, and made himself unnecessary. So I wish you well on your journey.

In *Leading Minds*, Howard Gardner emphasizes the importance of leaders' storytelling: "The story is a basic human cognitive form; the artful creation and articulation of stories constitutes a fundamental part of the leader's vocation. Stories speak to both parts of the human mind—its reason and emotion" (1995: 43). The introspective value of a self-story was much in evidence as the young leaders discussed their parents. A marketer from Taiwan—a modern woman raised by a traditional mother—began to appreciate what the two have in common. A young man—deeply disappointed by his experiences in the family business—spoke of becoming a parent and reconciling with his father (see the sidebar "Stories of Parents").

Reflecting on life stories also seems a valuable management practice ("Personal Histories," 2000). Whatever the value of such self-reflection, sharing these stories—between the self and others—transforms personal reflection into reflective dialogue.

### *The Experience of Reflective Dialogue*

Some practitioners characterize reflective dialogue as a stage in the process, when, for example, there is a shift from "third person" to "first person" and people "slow down and think" (see Isaacs, 1999). The use of "I" statements and the experience of the young leaders working in community have facilitated the movement toward self-reflection. At the same time, reflections called forth in the forum are not *cognitive*; the intent of reflection



Figure 1

is not solely to help the group *think together* better. On the contrary, the expression of *emotions* and inclination to *feel together* are very much part of communal dialogue with the young leaders (see Mirvis, 2002).

Consider the reflective experience of the “self and other” in a dialogue about life stories (figure 1). On the cognitive side of self-reflection, there is, to use Gardner’s imagery, the creation and articulation of a life story. This act of organizing thoughts and explaining oneself is itself a boon to self-understanding. Then there is the interaction with another’s life story and perspective, then another’s story, and so on. While witnessing another’s story, some of the attendant self-scanning concerns perceptions and assumptions: “How am I reacting to this story? To this

person? What are my reactions telling me about my own assumptions about life and people?” Schein calls this “listening to ourselves” (see the article on page 27 in this issue). At the same time, attention also turns to imagining: “What has this person’s life been like? Why do they see things the way they do?” This is a different sort of self-listening in which the self makes inferences about what makes others tick and how they relate to their world.

Such inferences contribute to what sociologist George Herbert Mead described as “role taking” or, more colloquially, putting your self in the place of others (1934). In taking on another person’s perspective, people not only enrich their understanding of others but also see how their *own* lives and perspectives are both similar *and* different. In short, in understanding another person, we come to better understand ourselves. This braid of reciprocal role taking, over the life course, is central to both socialization and the forming of character, hence, the relevance for sharing life stories as a means of developing young leaders.

What about the emotional aspects? Certainly reexperiencing your life history stimulates emotions, which are sometimes painful, sometimes pleasurable, and cathartic. In truly experiencing affect in dialogue, moreover, you may not only imagine how others feel, but also empathize with or literally “feel into” them. In so doing, of course, people also feel into themselves. Not surprising, tears and laughter often reverberate through reflective dialogues among the young leaders. How else can you react when you feel like another who expresses pain or joy or both?

Empathizing is central to what Erich Fromm calls the “art of loving” (2000). It too is integral to socialization and growth. Indeed, psychologists posit that just as seeing the

world through another’s perspective helps people to grow beyond egocentrism, so empathizing with another is the antidote to human selfishness. Alfie Kohn, among others, suggests that empathy, more so than sympathy, is the basis for the “helping relationship” (1990). Certainly we have seen this among the young leaders who, beyond reflecting on one another’s pain, also reach out and offer support and comfort to each other (see the sidebar “From Feeling to Helping”).

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ourselves.*

### *“Eldering” and Lessons Learned*

Reflective dialogues about life and its lessons are a form of socialization. Among the young leaders, it is peer mentoring and, with the chairman, formal role modeling. The young leaders’ dialogue with their chief is called, in traditional cultures, “eldering.”

Sandy Johnson, who has studied the customs of Native Americans, quotes Sylvia Walulatumá, from the Warm Springs reservation, on the custom: “Around December, the people would all come and move into the loghouse. It had a dirt floor and there were three fires burning in there during wintertime, it was so cold. The old people told us stories and Indian legends during the winter months” (1994: 157). Johnson amplified on the elders’ roles:



## From Feeling to Helping: A Conversation among Young Leaders

"My daughter was only 1.8 kilograms at birth. She was in intensive care for three weeks. I was going through quite a lot of emotional ups and downs. The nightmare just wouldn't stop. Because she was a preemie, she tended to catch a lot of viruses; she was in and out of hospital. At that time, I had also gone back to work. I needed to pick up everything and make sure that I was up to speed.

"I really appreciate this forum. I've learned a lot here, but at the back of my mind, I'm worried. All of you are so great and I feel really small. When Niall said he knew that some people would drop out, I was worried. I'm very scared that after five to eight years, I'll be such a letdown to you. I'm feeling so torn between my own emotions and what I should do for the company and for Asia. I have the sense that you guys know what to do and what's going to happen to Asia."

"Join the club. We have no clue either. You're very harsh on yourself. I've seen that from day one. I think you should start to realize that this is your strength, this is your source of growth. You have the courage to confront yourself. Like you, we have no clue what's going to happen in Asia. That's why we're here together."

"Sometimes, I ask myself why I want to join this forum. Is it for my personal development? Or is it for the company? It is not fair for me to do it just for myself. I'm so scared that I'll never be able to make it."

"You will. What you have said strikes me. I don't know how many of us have the courage to say it."

"It's not just you. It's also luck. Sometimes things just happen. I think we are too harsh with ourselves. You are superb. If you were in Thailand, you probably would have made a huge difference because of the opportunity."

"How you hold yourself accountable has been such a wonderful source of inspiration for all of us."

"You have the values of a good leader. You confront yourself and you feel that you are responsible for your business and for your country. Yet you feel ashamed that you couldn't do it all. To be honest, I haven't done anything for the company yet. And sometimes I struggle with it. I feel ashamed that I'm here. But then I think, it takes time to turn around the business. As long as you have the passion and stay with it, one day you get there."

"May I also share one of my tough moments? When we were at the end of the program in India, everybody was very happy and celebrating because we'd finished the case. That was the worst night for me. I felt that I come from a different world. I cannot deliver anything. I also have a big question about myself.

"I decided not to go out that night and locked myself in my room. I was crying; I lost all my confidence. I skipped dinner, even though I was hungry. But I just couldn't face people. I didn't know what to say. I was very disappointed with myself. Then I used reflection. That is the most valuable thing I learned from this journey. I thought, 'Okay, I love myself. What do I need to do? Cry? No, stop crying.' I thought how I came to be in such a situation. I made myself describe the situation and ask myself what I needed to do. I reflected on that and where I wanted to go.

"So I made a choice to want to be someplace, even though I had no clue where it should be. But I made a choice and started a journey. I think that once you commit yourself to the journey, then, of course, something good will happen."

On most of these reservations, there lives an elder. Not defined by age or gender, an elder is one who carries the knowledge of the tradition and wisdom of the heart, one who walks in truth and dignity. . . . Some elders heal with a knowledge of nature medicine not yet known or recognized by the dominant culture. Some heal with a spirituality that is worlds beyond many of those who don black robes and preach on Sundays. Some heal with a song (1994: 47).

In sharing his life story and speaking of his life lessons, FitzGerald was fulfilling an elder's role in Unilever. In the language of indigenous people, he was using his "medicine" and his spiritual wisdom to teach his people. Using modern-day concepts, Gardner stresses the value of conveying *identity stories*. Through such stories, the leader reveals his or her character and, in turn, helps followers to discover and develop their own identities. "It is the particular burden of the leader to help other individuals to determine their personal, social, and moral identities," he writes. "More often than not, leaders inspire in part because of how they have resolved their own identity issues" (1995: 25).

In addition to its importance for mentoring, this sharing of stories—across hierarchical layers, age groupings, and national identities, in the case of the Young Leaders'

Forum—is also a way to bridge differences between subcultures in organizations. Dialogue has served as the primary vehicle in building common understanding and facilitating the development of a shared group culture. There are 15 nationalities represented in this group and attendant differences in thinking, language, communication styles, norms, and values dictated by their cultures. Nearly all the young leaders are Asian, for whom “maintaining face” is of prime concern (Goffman, 2003). More than any other cultural group, Asians tend to eschew self-disclosure, confronting others, and saying what’s really on their minds.

The group has now evolved to a stage where young leaders can talk about “face” and the influence of cultural norms and values on the ways they think and feel. In the forum, they feel comfortable and safe enough to be “themselves.” They have also adopted ways of being together—in dialogue and community—that may be counter to the native cultures. Furthermore, many have been courageous enough to bring new ways of behaving back to their home cultures. For instance, a Thai woman hugged all her family members for the first time in her life when they came to greet her at the airport. An Indonesian man wrote a letter to his father to tell him how much he loves him.

These examples show how the young leaders have learned to become more self-reflective, to challenge culturally learned assumptions, and to try out new behaviors. Indeed, many lessons that emerge seem to speak to universal truths about living and leadership—what thinking and feeling together can produce.

At the same time, sharing life stories is a specific experience. The young leaders felt very privileged to meet with their tribe’s elder. The dialogue enabled intimacy and authenticity. A Thai woman’s comments exemplify the benefit of this session:

Getting to know you as a person was very valuable. I never thought I would have the opportunity to meet you, let alone hear your real story. In Thailand, we don’t get to see our chairman. If he’s around, we are too scared to meet him. But, with you now, I feel different. Whenever you come to Thailand, I hope you will visit us. Now it feels like we know each other, not that you are “Mr. Chairman.” It feels good to know that, even in a big position, you are a real person.

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