

Letter to a Young(er) Consultant – Inspired by Rilke’s “Letters to a Young Poet”

By Verna Allee

I know you were very disappointed in the meeting with our project leader today and what essentially feels like a dismissal. According to our customer, nobody likes the ideas and methods we have introduced; she can't find anyone who feels positive about the work; it is too hard; it isn't valuable; it doesn't help them think through what is important; they aren't using it; and they think it is a waste of their time. So she wants us to stop everything we are doing, and if it were her decision alone we would clearly drop completely off the radar screen. Her message was thanks anyway, but this is too hard and it is time for you to go away now.

It is very frustrating to be marginalized in any circumstances and always painful to be dismissed from a project before people have really given it a chance. It is not the first time for me, indeed for the type of work that we do – and being outside the power circles and dominant decision-making centers of the world – it is all too common. It can be very difficult but it is a waste of energy to whine about it. It is part of the work. I try not take it personally because it really isn't about us, or the quality or importance of our work. It is about all of us and about the underlying work we are engaged in as a whole society, which is really about the transformation of consciousness on the planet.

When people ask me how I came to do the work that I do they are often surprised that my advanced degree is in the Study of Human Consciousness. But it really is about human consciousness – changing human consciousness. For people like us this work is much larger than a job. It is a calling. It comes from a deep and passionate desire to help make the world a better place by demonstrating how business can be conducted in ways that are good for people, good for business, *and* good for the planet.

Max Boisot reminds us that whenever there is a powerful new worldview or consciousness emerging there are a number of reactions to the new thinking. First of all it is ignored. If it still won't go away then it is laughed at or denigrated in some way. In the consulting world this means whatever we do gets dismissed as the “flavor of the month” and shows up in Dilbert comic strips and jokes about consulting “jargon.” If that doesn't work and it still won't go away then two things begin to happen, almost at the same time. The first thing that happens is it will get attacked outright, as our work was today. The academics will pick it apart, other consultants will attack it, popular business journals will “objectively” present a totally opposite view or critique,” and our customers will say it is just too hard, we are not ready for this and it won't work here.

However, the attacks become particularly intense just at the point when people are really starting to take it very seriously – and are beginning to accept and even embrace it. This is also happening in our own customer case – in the same company and at very high levels! We have those who love it and those who obviously hate it. Remember last fall at the conference? You were there. A lot of people loved the keynote and master class – it was one of the most positive responses I have experienced. It was also where someone literally shouted back from the audience in alarm that what I was saying was just wrong! Both reactions, hand in hand. Love it – hate it. This of course is very hard on a personal level as it can be quite a roller coaster ride. But it is not nearly as hard as being ignored completely. It is actually a sign of great progress.

The difficulty of the work that I do is why I am by necessity a cross pollinator – I plant the seeds and then sadly, most of the time, have to move on. It is a kind of interesting spin on kill the messenger. It is not unusual for my first work with a company to have an experience such as the one we are having in this case. I think of it as *running for the hills* or *sending them screaming into the woodwork*.

Invariably a few months later they will pick up the ideas and actually begin to work with them. Sometimes they will call me back to help them do so. In other cases they will call in another consultant, who may or may not hold the edge of the new thinking and ideas. In fact, often they will choose someone who speaks the new language but who goes about the work itself in a way that feels much safer and more familiar. Another phenomenon that Max Boisot warns about is what often follows initial acceptance. People will take this wonderful new idea and then pull it right back in to the old way of doing things, trying to stretch there old approaches just a little farther. It is not easy to hold that edge where they really do come into the new ways of thinking and working.

People ask me sometimes what I do to get people to see the world “this way.” I reply it is not my job to sell or persuade or convert anyone. Tilting at windmills only gets me a bloody nose. If people are asking certain kinds of questions (like other people we know in the same company and in other quarters) then they are not only ready but eager for what we are offering. My job is to be as absolutely clear about what it is I understand and believe and to communicate that as simply, clearly and effectively as I possibly can – and to not back off the message. There is no way to make these new ideas about real partnership, collaboration, systems thinking, intangible assets, dynamic relationships, knowledge sharing, social responsibility, sustainability, ethics, and self organization “safe” or “easy.” As Marianne Williamson wrote in “Our Deepest Fear,”

It is our *light*, not our darkness that most frightens us...

Your playing small does not serve the world.
There’s nothing enlightened about shrinking so that
Other people won’t feel insecure around you.

The only way I know how to deal with any of it is just do the best I can and keep putting one foot in front of another and do the work that calls me. It is transformation work – transformation of human consciousness into another way of seeing the world and its possibilities. It is some of the hardest work on the planet, I think, because if you do it really well people will almost always react by saying – *oh yeah, we really knew that already – we just hadn’t put it together that way*. In fact, that response is actually the best response of all and the only way you know you have really accomplished your goal of helping to shift consciousness

Why do I say that is really the best response? Think back on breakthrough moments you have had. Don’t they always feel like a blinding flash of the obvious? Your response is – *oh of course! How could I have not seen that? It all makes perfect sense.*” Followed by a little voice that pops in there with - *I guess I really knew it all along*. That reaction says that you now totally and completely “own” the insight and the worldview it is part of. In other words it is now part of your consciousness, where it was not before. But we don’t consciously experience it as a change of worldview or consciousness – it feels like the next logical step in our own thinking.

You now have taken this new idea completely within your psyche as your own understanding. You don't refer to the idea as someone else's understanding - as Joe's way of thinking or Mary's or whoever. You may reference their work or their ideas, quote them, even critique them and disagree with them, but you will do so in a way that affirms the underlying idea as essentially correct because of course it is the way you have understood it all along!

This is an important point. As long as the idea somehow stays "outside" your own understanding then that idea has not entered your consciousness as a basic pattern of understanding or belief that informs your worldview. Yet, now that you have expanded beyond the box of your more limited understanding, you can't go back inside.

Once you shift into that new way of thinking you rearrange everything you knew before to fit the larger, more comprehensive understanding. I heard of a research project where they went back into people's journals of a project to see how their anecdotal story of the project changes according to whether it is considered a success or failure. Either way, they tell the story with a completely different emphasis than the way it emerges in the journal. They will always tell it as a coherent and logical series of events and decisions that led to the "success" or the "failure." But the journal account is simply a recording of events. The interpretation comes after the fact.

We do of course recognize transforming moments in our lives. We can all name times that our identity shifted or we had an experience that "changed my life." Once in awhile we might acknowledge a guru or teacher that was instrumental in that life changing experience. The older we become, however, the more difficult it is for us to acknowledge the instrumentality of another in those life changing moments or significant shifts of consciousness or understanding. We become more and more the agents of our own transformation. Transformation no longer happens "to" us, it happens because we ourselves are pursuing a question, seeking knowledge, or are growing in our understanding.

I believe this is why as a consultant you will rarely get an acknowledgement that you had anything to do with their breakthrough. A few people over the course of your career might understand what it is you really do and appreciate it. But for the most part consultants are right behind lawyers in terms of respect. On a few rare occasions your work makes a significant difference by fostering better relationships, encouraging people to play a more compassionate and positive role in the world, sparking a return to deeper human values and supporting healthier behaviors as individuals, as organizations and as nations.

And in a thousand little ways and little moments you connect to people along the way, touching each other with shared hope and vision. Those moments are luminous points, like lanterns lighting a sometimes dark path. These little successes and heart connections are great gifts. They bring a deep inner joy that reminds you that the real reason you do this is - it is just what you are here to do.