Synchronistic Leadership
by Jim Robertson and Karen Talley

Warning: If you’re a pragmatist trusting only facts or things seen, then the following may cause acute disorientation, emerging signs of intuition, recurring self-awareness, and advanced stages of individualization. This is an over the counter (or over the edge, depending on your point of view!) prescription for probing the mysteries of the psychic, imaginal, and paradoxical that emerge inexplicably and mysteriously from the quantum fog.

Funny, but that sounds a lot like an early childhood director’s day! So what role do these unusual, intuitive, spiritual, and psychic forces, which quantum physicists and their New Sciences are hastening to explore, play in our lives and work with young children? It’s a subject that we have enthusiastically explored and are excited to share.

As two early childhood directors and consultants, (one male, one female; one right brained/intuitive, the other left/sensorial) who have pursued early childhood education as a career for more than two decades and find inquiry, metaphysics, and psychology fascinating, we understand that we and our topic fall a tad bit outside the box! But in truth, such probing of the mysterious and speculative shouldn’t prove that alien to early childhood educators. After all, on any given day, we eagerly sit down to sip tea from a toddler’s imaginary cup or turn cardboard boxes into rocket ships!

In a recent Synchronicity — those timely accidents or coincidences that somehow seem to correspond, inform, and direct us — ExchangeEveryDay posted an e-mail on intuition and inner guidance. At the end Roger Neugebauer asked: Is this too weird for you? We were working on this article and wondered if anybody in our field would really be interested. To our delight, many of you actually called for more daring sojourns into the intuitive Twilight Zone! Shirley Maclain’s no longer the only one out on a limb!

In Cultural Creatives: How Fifty Million People are Changing the World, a recommended reading in an earlier Exchange e-mail, the authors unveil an apropos (dare we say synchronistic?) statistical and sociological finding. They propose that an explosive new subset of the world population, coined Cultural Creatives, are emerging with a new paradigm cast from an eclectic integration of traditional, New Age, and personal ideologies. Many, it seems, believe in and honor an intuitive, spiritual call from within.

Surprisingly, most of the Cultural Creatives believe they are alone, unaware of the 50 million others who feel similarly. The possibilities as a collective, according to the authors, to change the way we think and act as a species, is unprecedented. Perhaps not so surprising (as you’ve probably already intuited!), is our supposition that early childhood education is not only poised to be part of this developmental evolution, but to facilitate, enhance, and yes, lead it!
Our research and exploration these past few years, including studies of the “New Sciences,” have uncovered some surprising and synchronistic findings. By inspiring a debate on these topics within our field, we hope to support interested individuals in a renewed journey of self discovery — rekindling those joys and passions (crucial to Synchronicity) that brought us into the field and will keep us thriving for years to come.

To give background to all of this, and to highlight Synchronicity in action, we have to take you back a little more than a decade. Karen and I, both members of the Boston AEYC Committee on Administrative Leadership, enjoyed the research and discussions about leadership and management, but did not truly resonate with the emphasis placed on the bottom line and ways to squash the competition. We agreed that sound business procedures and fiscal accountability were essential, but for most in our field, people and relationships were the critical priority.

As our friendship grew and our discussions expanded, we began sharing stories about our lives and our beliefs. We dialogued on the spiritual basis of life and joked that our work seemed like a calling. We noticed that our philosophies correlated with our business practices, reflecting not only who we were as people but how we acted as leaders and administrators. We seemed to derive purpose and meaning from the relationships and interconnections we had with the children, families, and staff. To us, many of the ideas and philosophies that underscored spiritual practices, humanistic psychology, and self-help literature seemed uncannily aligned to early childhood education philosophies and practices. Had others in our field noticed this? We started talking about a workshop to explore this topic.

Serendipitously, we got just what we needed to boost our intentions to do so. I had my doubts about opening a dialogue on the spiritual nature of our work in a world in which church and state are separated. When I mentioned these concerns to a friend, she promptly retorted, “Of course it is a spiritual profession, Jim. You all took vows of poverty, didn’t you?”

This was followed by the remarks of a professor at Wellesley College who noted the historic roots the nursery movement had to missionary outreach. Karen and I made the decision on the spot to go ahead. Then, as if to underscore our determination, the accompanying Synchronicities sprang to life!

The first appeared while we were debating the title. Should it be “Soulful” or “Synchronistic” Leadership? When I returned to work that day, there in the mail was a brochure on a recent publication — Leading with Soul (Bolman & Deal, 1995). I flew to the library where I searched the good old-fashioned way; I went straight to the librarian! As I explained my dilemma, something out of the corner of my eye made me look at her computer. There on the screen was the title: Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership by J. Jaworski.

What were the odds . . . to have accidentally gone to the librarian at the exact moment that she was ordering this title and to now hold two books with titles almost identical to those we had debated — what is this if not some inexplicable guiding force or field? Fascinated by these timely and meaningful coincidences himself, Carl Jung, the eminent psychiatrist who first coined the term “Synchronicity,” meticulously studied such events. While some of his analyses netted little or no statistical significance, other probabilities soared off the charts with greater than 60 million to one odds (Jung, 1955).

Who hasn’t thought or dreamt of an absent or forgotten friend only to find him or her at the end of the ringing phone? How many times have you needed something and out of the blue a friend mentions just the person you need to see or a flyer on the topic comes in the mail? Most Synchronicities lend surprise and fun, but many inspire speculation, awe, and wonder.

**The Call at Mid-Life**

Interestingly, neither Karen nor I really began to examine the meaning of these Synchronicities in our lives until mid-life. There’s something about being at the middle of one’s life that lends itself to reflection and examination. At this stage most of us have experienced the duality of life, both the joys and the trials, including illness, heartbreak, and loss of loved ones. It’s from this fuller understanding of life, that mentors and sages seem to spring, seeking to give back and share that which has been given or learned.

How coincidental that the median age for directors should happen to be the heart of mid-life itself!

Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* eloquently documents this cycle and process. By examining the myths and fairytales of the world’s great cultures, Campbell uncovered the earliest metaphoric recordings of man’s dawning consciousness, stages of psychic development, and heroic evolution. These tales echo our primal quest for purpose, understanding, and meaning. And we, the heroes, at the critical juncture of the mid-point, pause and reflect on the battles we have undertaken — the dragons of woe and travail we have slain — and assimilate the lessons gained from our personal and unique journeys. Through such introspection we uncover the gifts of wisdom that each of us has to carry back, integrate, and share with our family, friends, and collective humanity.

Jung proposed that mid-life was actually a developmentally triggered period of
rebirth and spiritual (not necessarily religious) awakening. Like the DNA coding that dictates the limits and timing in and of our physical development, mid-life fires up the archetypal drives within our psyche that spur a closer look at the Authentic Self, that selfless non-ego, deep inside each of us.

According to Jung, embedded at the core of everyone are driving forces, attractors, and behavioral predispositions known as archetypes — blueprints, if you will, universally inherent in the design of the human psyche. They operate unconsciously and autonomously, akin to instincts, but can, according to Jung, be made conscious through focused awareness, meditation, and dreams. They are as varied, rich, and numerous as the human experience itself — the child, the hero, the parent, the lover, the fool, the teacher, etc. They are part of the psyche Jung termed the Collective Unconscious. Contained within is the cumulative wisdom and knowledge derived through the physical and psychic evolution of our species.

Through quiet, reflective practices, such as yoga and meditation, we are often enabled to tune into and glean some of the wisdom and insights from this psychic wellsprings of intuition, creativity, imagination, and dreams. Jung contended humanity’s age-old inclination to seek and honor the Imago Deo, the image of the creator within, to likely be the primary archetypal drive in human beings. It is, along with our conscious ability to reflect, the distinguishing factor that separates us from the lower animal kingdom. Jung believed this soul-searching drive was the most important job of our lives. By honoring the inner call, or vocation (Latin “to call”), we discover our primary mission and raison d’etre.

Not surprisingly, to many in our field the caretaking archetype — this desire to nurture and support young children — is a fundamental calling as gripping as any biological need. In spite of society’s negligible recognition of our work, we still manage to honor this inherent call, seeking to be authentic and true to our deepest selves. Clearly, making a difference overrides the drive for status and money. It is purpose and relationship — connecting, loving, and guiding — that seems to stay our course.

The lessons of September 11 underscore how valuable these gifts are. Now more than ever, our truths must be voiced. It is painful to watch violence. It is even more painful to see it manifesting earlier and earlier in our children. We cannot afford to be complacent. Out of the ashes of catastrophe come unexpected opportunities. Like the phoenix, we must rise to the challenge, stretching beyond the limited view others have of us, and spotlight the wisdom and knowledge our profession has gained.

We need to ensure that equality, kindness, and caring flourish. We must stand strong on the value of play, imagination, arts, and physical education. We must advocate not only for the rights of children, but for our own rights, speaking up when others treat us like “glorified babysitters.” We must demand equitable salaries and adequate funding. Let our programs model parent partnership and cooperative relationships, reflecting deep and essential principles such as inclusion, diversity, and non-violence.

Like so many other colleagues we’ve met from across the country, neither Karen nor I intended to enter this profession. We had yet to hear the call of our vocation. Then Synchronicity led the way — a chance word of encouragement, an unexpected opportunity. What a gift these accidents turned out to be! Nothing could have proved more gratifying or fulfilling. What a gift these accidents turned out to be! Nothing could have proved more gratifying or fulfilling.

Is this article too weird for you? Has Synchronicity played a role in your work with children, staff, and families? E-mail us at: Stirlingjr@aol.com. We want your thoughts and ideas on these important issues.

References


