

## Shifting the Currents: An interview with Brian Bacon

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**Susan Szpakowski for Fieldnotes:** In your seminars, you often refer to the image of the iceberg. Above the waterline, the “winds” of an organization’s mission statement, strategic direction, and so on blow across the iceberg’s tip. Below the surface, the powerful “currents” of the organization’s deeply held assumptions and beliefs push against the iceberg’s great mass, possibly in a completely different direction. And the leadership challenge, according to your model, is to change the currents. It’s a simple but provocative image.

My question is about what you are seeing these days in terms of global currents. Your consulting takes you into the inner sanctums of heads of state and multinational CEOs, and with 200 flights per year crisscrossing several continents I’d say you have an unusual perspective. Most of us read the news and get glimpses from a distance, but I’m wondering what you sense are the deeper movements at work in the world at this time.

**Brian Bacon:** Amidst the growing sense of angst and hopelessness, there is an accelerating recognition of the need to find a better way and somehow become part of it. Almost every other day we hear stories about freak hurricanes and other natural disasters, and top scientists are now saying, yes, this is about global warming. People are wondering who is going to turn the tide. Where are the new leaders?

People are also impacted by the images seen virtually every night on television, of innocent hostages having their heads sawn off. People are appalled but feel hopeless and doubt their leader’s ability to do much about it. We are right to be appalled by acts of terrorism, but we shouldn’t be surprised when there are such colossal imbalances in our society—when 1.3 billion people have no access to fresh water, 3 billion have no access to sanitation, 2 billion people have no access to electricity, and 24,000 people die every day from starvation.

The social trends are alarming. A UK government report released last June shows that the number of people in their 30s suffering from depression has doubled since 1987, from 1 in 14 to 1 in 7 today. Worldwide suicide rates have risen 60 percent in the last 45 years. Here in the developed world we feel good that the economy appears to be growing, but what can you say about a world where the three wealthiest individuals on the planet—Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, and Theo Albrecht—together have personal wealth greater than the combined GDP of the poorest 48 nations, comprising 2.5 billion people?

Meanwhile, within our communities the role of work in a person’s life has never been more significant, and never less satisfying. It is significant because of the

needs and expectations that have been built up through television, which is telling us that we can have whatever we want. “You’ll have a great education and everything’s going to be great.” Our society tells us we can have everything, do anything. We’ve got so many choices. We can go anywhere, do anything we want, be everything we want to be. Technology makes everything possible. There are no limits anymore.

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In a world of massive choices, we’ve got endless opportunities for pleasure but very few opportunities for joy. In 300 BC Epicurus talked about the three fundamentals of happiness: a sense of belonging in a community of friends, freedom and the feeling that the choices and decisions of one’s life are in one’s own hands, and time to reflect about the meaning and direction of one’s life.

Those fundamentals are just not accessible when we are working and living the way we are. As a consequence, there is a feeling of despair, hopelessness, and emptiness. People just have a dry existence. They seek meaning by going shopping, and they avoid having meaningful conversations by going to a movie or renting a video. We’re afraid that if we talk about things that are meaningful and moving, it might create conflict, so we don’t go there any longer. And we don’t have time to reflect and process our feelings and fears.

All of this is affecting our communities and our societies, and it’s particularly affecting our workplaces. We only have to look at the statistics. According to a recent Gallup poll, 64 percent of employees say they are depressed, anxious, and wished they worked elsewhere. Seventy-four percent of workers are disengaged clock watchers who can’t wait to go home. People are working harder, longer, and getting less out of it. Their bosses are struggling as well. The average length of tenure of a CEO is 4.6 years. Twenty-two European CEOs were fired in 2003. A recent EU study shows that 45 percent of top management are currently looking for a new position. Executives are getting burned out, pissed off, and fired.

I talk about this context because my interest is in the role a leader plays in shifting the currents. The currents are moving, very disturbingly, in a direction that is leading us towards destruction. And those currents will only be turned around through the influence of leaders. It will happen when individuals wake up, see the direction we’re heading in, and realize, “The way that I’m living my life is perverse. Even though this is what society tells me I should be doing, I’m just not going to do it anymore. I’m going to do something different with my life; I’m going to do something more authentic.”

So as not to get lost in the gloom and depression, I should say that I’m also acutely aware that there’s something else stirring down beneath the surface. People *are* waking up and turning in the other direction. Real leaders are emerging, in government and in business. These people have to fight like hell, because the system does everything it can to shut them down and get them out of the way. The purpose and passion of my own life is to find, support, protect these people—to do everything I can to empower and help them in their work. What I have seen is that when these people do make a commitment to living their life in a more authentic way, they signal something through their presence and their actions that speaks to the deep honesty inside others. Something magical occurs when people suddenly begin to trust each other.

I'm not talking about big artificial organizational change processes that take a long time. When a leader emerges and holds to a more authentic way of behaving, change happens quickly. Some of the greatest thrills I've had in my life have been to witness this reversal in organizations. And we will see more of it. Not everyone gets called to this, but those who do commit themselves to creating what in effect is a new tradition in business.

Business has become the most powerful force on the planet. For the first time in human history, the dominant institution on the planet has never had any tradition of taking responsibility for anybody or anything except itself. Of course, there are traditions within business of charity and philanthropy, but that's not the point. Business doesn't have any innate sense of responsibility for the environment or for society.

As the late Willis Harman, co-founder of the World Business Academy, said, business has to develop a new tradition that involves taking responsibility for the whole. Not many will be called to this mission, but those who are will find it extremely satisfying and a great calling. It is the call of our time.

I believe this civilization will survive. It is turning now, and during times of transformation there are always periods of chaos.

When you walk along the pavement outside, you can see places where the concrete is broken because down beneath the surface a small plant or tree has over time just kept at it and kept at it until it broke through and came up through a tiny crack. The truth will reveal itself. But it's going to be chaotic and it's going to be messy.

If we see things in this perspective, we recognize this to be a very, very exciting time. It's like a confluence between two epochs. When we see that it is the end of an era, we can become morose and despairing if that's all we see. But my vision, and what I hope and assume is part of the mission of Shambhala and other spiritual traditions, is to support the new enlightenment that is emerging. But we can't permit this thinking to be confined to our spiritual institutions, it has to become part of the mainstream awareness of our society.

**Fieldnotes:** I agree that having that glimpse that there is actually a powerful force that wants to come up from below, so to speak, is important as a basis for confidence. Because the other forces at work in our world right now are so obviously powerful as well. Without some experience that there's something innate that wants to break through, and some faith in that, then it's easy to feel hopeless, as you began by saying. Also, without that experience this could all just sound like wishful thinking or a cheap movie script—the forces of good win over the forces of evil, and the story ends happily.

**Brian Bacon:** We have to be aware that it is a spiritual process that is occurring in our society as well as within ourselves. Spirituality isn't like engineering. It's messy—more like riding a surfboard than catching a ferry or building a bridge across the river. We need to get used to a higher level of disorder in our lives than we have been used to in the past. Confusion is inevitable, but spirituality teaches us not to try to stop confusion. That will only make it worse. Instead, we need to put a full stop to worrying about being confused. Our spiritual practice of being the detached observer is vitally important if we are not to lose hope.

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We also have to be prepared to give up some things. This is why so few people become strongly committed to a spiritual path. It's like a very sick man covered in boils and ulcers saying to the doctor, "I want you to cure me, but look, I love my wine and rich food, don't ask me to give those up. I don't want anything that is going to change my lifestyle, just give me something to take." Of course that won't work. We are consuming not only material poisons, but also extremely toxic energies all the time. We have to clean our minds out. A spiritual approach to life is imperative today. It is not okay to live with hatreds and grudges and resentments and remorse. These are just as poisonous as the toxins in a cigarette. If you're addicted to these things, it takes quite a lot of will and effort to overcome them.

What does it take for an alcoholic to wake up and come clean? It's not an easy thing, and the tragic nature of addiction is that generally a person only pulls out of it after hitting rock bottom and they've lost everything. People are addicted to their negativity and toxic patterns of thought and only seem truly prepared to change after they've developed a life threatening disease, their marriage has collapsed, and their kids are up on drug charges. Then they become open to a spiritual solution, but often it's too late. The same thing is happening to our society and civilization. Are we going to wait for destruction to occur before we decide we have to do something? A few people have woken up and are playing their role in shifting the currents.

**Fieldnotes:** I have one final question about currents. A tension sometimes arises at the Institute between two views about where the greatest leverage for positive change lies, and about what kind of leadership is being called for now. One view is that real change can only come through the actions of people in existing leadership positions—people in business and government who are able to shift large-scale currents. The other view is that the old systems are dying and there's no point in wasting energy trying to change institutions. Instead, it's time to create new structures, new communities, and new networks to support a new kind of leadership. I hear many young people saying this, for example.

**Brian Bacon:** I think some people will be called to one approach and others will be called to the other. There's not one way. I think it's important for each of us to ask ourselves what time is calling us to do at this time in our life. Is my role to effect change from the inside, from the outside, or to experiment with something altogether new? From an institutional and societal perspective each one is required.

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Institutional change is like rebuilding the ship while it's still at sea, and top leaders have three different organizations they need to manage. Firstly there is the existing organization which they need to keep afloat. Secondly, there are the prototypes and pilots of the new institution based on their vision of the future. Thirdly, there is the "transitional" organization. Each requires a different approach and usually different people to handle each one. Great leaders recognize this and their biggest challenge is to ensure mutual respect and harmony among the different groups.

The other thing is that institutions change from the inside but it is usually in response to changes and pressure from the outside. In 1986 I was involved in "The Million Minutes of Peace," the biggest peace program ever conducted in the world. It was an odd experience for me—I'd never had any exposure to the peace movement before

and I didn't like it. I came across many activists who believed that to make changes you have to link arms and smash down the institutions, burn the ships. I was shocked by this approach and believed you needed to work from the inside to change the consciousness of individuals who influence the institutions, not blow them up. However I came to realize that work from within and pressure from the outside were both necessary simultaneously. The role Greenpeace and similar groups play in terms of the environment is not one that I would play. I would prefer to work with companies from within and help them cultivate more responsible attitudes and policies towards the environment and society. But I can tell you that when Greenpeace and others are applying pressure, it makes the inside job a whole lot easier.

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By way of a corporate example, it's unlikely that McDonald's would have ever made the commitment to nutrition and healthy lifestyles if their customers hadn't begun demanding it and the media attacking them. Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* and Morgan Spurlock's *Supersize Me* did McDonald's a great service. I've been a vegetarian for 23 years and had never been inside a McDonald's until a few years ago. However, I'm fascinated by what happened when the top McDonald's guys decided to become part of the solution instead of part of the problem—not only in relation to health and nutrition, but even more widely to society.

More than 1.6 million people work under the "golden arches," and McDonald's is the largest employer of young people in the world. Besides refocusing their menu, they also asked themselves, "What would happen if we adopted a policy that said anybody who joins McDonald's should leave a better person than when they came in? What would happen if these young people received an education in values, communication, and diversity, and in how to manage themselves, so that they were better prepared to be contribute to society as well as operate a fries station?" And that's what happened. They said, "Let's just do it and find out." What happened was a revitalization of their company from the inside out and one of the biggest corporate turnarounds in history.

More people get their first job at McDonald's than at any other organization on earth. When a company like that decides to be part of the solution instead of part of the problem, they begin to shift the currents. I'm not suggesting that McDonald's is going to change the destiny of our civilization by building the character of the kids who work there, or by selling more salads and apples than any other organization on earth (which they now are). All I'm saying is that they are now playing their role in society in a more relevant and authentic way than before. That's what we should be asking of all our corporate citizens, and I do think McDonald's is playing a leadership role in this, even though I still won't eat a Big Mac!

When young people say, "I'm not interested in trying to change institutions like McDonald's or governments; I want to experiment with creating a new communities," I say, "Fantastic! Get in there and do that." We need people to do that as well, but don't consider the people who are working on the inside or applying pressure from the outside to be your enemies; they are your allies in a cause of immense importance at this time in world history. The important thing is for people to know what their mission is. That is what we all need to be asking. What is the right thing for me to be doing at this time? What is time calling me to do?

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Brian Bacon will lead a module on "Leading with Purpose, Values & Vision" at the 2005 Summer Program.