

Encounter With an Ermine

Is Joseph Jaworski's
Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership
a metaphysical guidebook for leaders
or merely one more volume of instant
mysticism? Here's a review by a
theologian and teacher.

JOSEPH JAWORSKI'S book, *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1996), presents so many handles that it's difficult to know which one to grab first. It can be read on at least three levels. One, it's the author's personal story of his life journey from a successful career as a Houston attorney to his present work as a consultant for the MIT Center for Organizational Learning (with other stops along the way). Two, it can be

read as a gentle urging to cast off stodginess (or whatever holds you back) in order to take a hero's journey—an inner path to leadership. Three, it can be read as a metaphysical and moral vision beneath the personal story, leadership principles, and reality itself.

Between the individual and cosmic levels lies a level of historical and social existence, one normally engaged by organizations and their leaders. That intermediate level isn't missing

from the book—the traumas of our century seem to hang heavily over its pages—but it doesn't come into a sustained focus. Breathless pronouncements about the nature of reality and transforming consciousness don't entirely fill the bill.

Jaworski sets his story in historical context by beginning with his reflections on the Watergate scandal from a close vantage point as the son of special prosecutor, Leon Jaworski. Those events shook Joseph Jaworski's confidence in the character and style of American leadership. The book's epilogue brings him full circle. At a conference in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, a Holocaust survivor's anguish moves him to recite another story from his father's legal career, serving as a war crimes prosecutor in 1945. His father's book about that experience has been a source of the younger Jaworski's quest for a new concept of, and personal commitment to, leadership. Recalling that meeting, Jaworski tells how he wept openly: "I was also crying my father's tears for all the victims of the horror." He implies that because his father never expressed his grief, he now did that for him.

Jaworski seems painfully conscious of living in the shadow of his famous father. How could he ever match the "Colonel"? And yet, his father never outwardly expressed love for him, Jaworski says. Like the biblical Jacob, he seeks his father's blessing, not by subterfuge but by caring confrontation, and he happily succeeds. Those events, though never spoken of as parables with a larger point, lend a rich texture to the book.

Jaworski recounts numerous personal events patterned by writer Joseph Campbell's four stages of a hero's journey:

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- ▶ preparation
- ▶ crossing the threshold
- ▶ adventures in the face of adversity
- ▶ triumphant return.

Some events, though distinctly negative, have a catalytic, yet ultimately positive, effect—for instance, the unexpected breakup of his first marriage, the death of a beloved nephew, and the confrontation with an armed robber. Other events are distinctly positive. In fact, Jaworski assigns a transcendental or mystical significance and refers to them often, such as his hiking encounter with a playful ermine in the Teton Mountains.

Personal transformation

What, then, is Jaworski's vision of the inner path of leadership? We make our life a hero's journey when we undertake the risks and uncertainties of searching for our true destiny. The decisive moment is in crossing the threshold—a moment of commitment without fear. Philosophically, destiny is coincident with freedom. Psychologically, self-confidence and spontaneity come together. The end of the quest is the merging of event and meaning in *synchronicity*, a term coined by psychologist Carl Jung for events that are not explained by cause and effect or by chance.

What holds us back from crossing the threshold to a new level of awareness? Jaworski suggests that it is fear—of being different and ostracized, or of failure and shame. Those fears seem to be rooted in a failure to differentiate one's self from society, resulting in a sense of personal insignificance and an inability to act on one's own. But what finally enables us or pushes us to cross over? Jaworski cites transcendental experiences—feelings of at-oneness in cathedral and wilderness settings; fortuitous

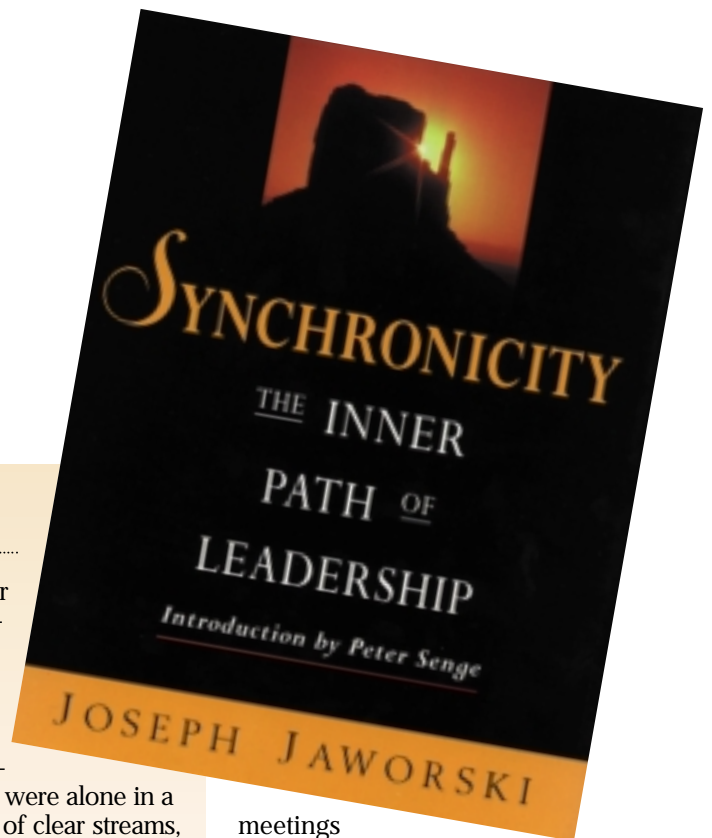
THE ERMINE ENCOUNTER

It was October 1977. Joseph Jaworski was backpacking in the Grand Teton Mountains after a lengthy legal trial. He and a guide were alone in a

snowy wilderness of clear streams, snowshoe rabbits, and icicle falls.

He got up early one morning to go fishing in a nearby stream. As he walked along, he was surprised by an ermine that appeared out of the deep snow about 10 feet in front of him. Jaworski stopped in his tracks, and they stared at each other for some time. Finally, the ermine started to leave, but it stopped and turned around for another look at the man. Then, the unexpected—the ermine jumped in the air and performed a flip. It repeated the trick three or four times, each time stopping to stare at Jaworski with a cocked head, as if looking for approval. Mesmerized, Jaworski playfully mocked the ermine's head movements. The ermine finally disappeared into the snow after one last look back.

Jaworski says, "I stayed in that spot for the longest time, alone, considering the experience. I knew then that it was a profound experience and consider it so to this day." On that October day, he and the ermine had communicated, and Jaworski had learned the importance of experiencing oneness.



meetings with intellectual or attractive men and women; or "moving with the flow" to go beyond a rational level in a sport such as auto racing or skeet shooting. Jaworski understands the transformation of consciousness as the removal of boundaries that were imposed and accepted during childhood socialization (the boundary between animal and human, or wild and tame). He says, "The encounter with the ermine was so important to me because it was the first time I had directly experienced the interrelatedness of the universe."

Robert K. Greenleaf's concept of servant leadership became pivotal in Jaworski's dream of creating the American Leadership Forum, a network of midcareer professionals committed to a new generation of public leadership. For Greenleaf, he says, "The essence of leadership...is the desire to serve one another and to see something beyond ourselves, a higher purpose." To fulfill his dream, Jaworski had to set his career on a new course. Few of us have as much courage. Jaworski cites such writers as Herman Hesse and Rollo May regarding the way freedom and destiny coincide in life-shaping decisions. Generative leadership is rooted in what Jaworski calls, "the mystery of commitment"—commitment that cannot be calculated rationally.

Jaworski suggests that to lead others, you must first undergo a personal transformation, becoming a leader to and for oneself. To make such an inner change, you need a trusted guide (as Jaworski found in British theoretical physicist David Bohm) and a test. The Jungian pattern of affirming a new identity and being tested has biblical roots. According to the gospel of *Mark*, God announced at the baptism of Jesus, "You are my beloved son." Then, the spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness where he was tempted (tested) by Satan. For Jaworski, the time of preparation is past. Crossing the threshold follows.

What's the higher purpose of that new sense of mission? Jaworski seeks to validate it on a metaphysical level before describing it on an organizational level, primarily by appealing to the ideas of Bohm. In his book, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, Bohm describes an essential interrelatedness of reality as an "enfolding." All things are enfolded (or implicate) in the present, and all are unfolded (or explicate) in time and space. In Bohm's cosmos, synchronicity becomes normal, not extraordinary or a matter of chance. Synchronous events are "predictable miracles," according to Jaworski. Applying that idea to teamwork, Jaworski cites David Halberstam's description of the phenomenon that team rowers call "saving," a sensation of effortlessness when the boat seems to lift out of the water.

A similar phenomenon, more applicable to organizational development, is dialogue—also described by Bohm and, earlier, by Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (cited by Jaworski). Dialogue isn't simply conversation between two persons; it's the colloquy of a group that gathers and—without a leader, an agenda, or a task—talks until mutual understandings emerge. That way, effective decision making and action become possible. Again, we have a bible story in secular dress. The book of *Acts* tells of the day of the Pentecost when disciples gathered from many nations and, fired by the Holy Spirit, babbled in their own tongues with perfect, mutual understanding.

Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership is the story of a remarkable individual's discovery, through pain and joy, of ideas that became rooted convictions and the foundation of a new vocation—indeed, a whole new life. Under the guiding star of servant leadership, the same happens for other people, for our world of crisis and change, and for the cosmic order.

No wonder we feel a certain breathless quality to the story, such as when Jaworski reports what can only be called, "mystical experiences." He says, "I continued to have similar experiences involving the loss of boundaries where my sense of identity expanded to include God and the entire universe." He seems innocent of the dangerous waters—the psychic and theological grandiosity—into which he plunges at such moments. Jaworski says that

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when he first started having those feelings, he went to a psychiatrist to check his sanity. The doctor assured him that people in all of the world's religions report such mystical experiences.

Theologically attuned readers will wonder about that kind of instant mysticism. In the absence of devotional disciplines or serious ethical commitments, we may merely be indulging in feel-good spirituality. For example, earlier generations would have spoken of God's grace; Jaworski speaks of energy, a quasi-supernatural force that remains coldly impersonal. Cathedral and wilderness experiences gave him a powerful sense of being in "the energy field...as if I were participating in divinity itself." He is caught between discomfort (or unfamiliarity) with au-

thentic theological language and a strong need to speak of powerful experiences that have reshaped his life and thought. He cites, but too often doesn't heed, Bohm's insightful words on the inadequacy of language: "The implicate order is in the first instance a language...referring to something that cannot be stated. The reality that is most immediate to us [because we are within it, not over against it] cannot be stated."

Jaworski broaches major moral issues in his discussion of working with the Royal Dutch/Shell Group on scenarios for the economic and social future of the world. In the scenario entitled "Barricades," the division between rich and poor nations grows wider, leading the rich ones to barricade themselves, literally, against the poor. In an alternative, more hopeful scenario, "New Frontiers," incremental economic and political improvements take place among poor nations, gradually shifting the balance of power. We can agree that a shift from the first to the second scenario for global history is a guiding task of leadership—indeed, of servant leadership.

But we want to hear more about how such ideas as *metanoia* (a radical change of heart) and the "mystery of commitment" relate to organizations and their leaders. The central thesis of the book, Jaworski says, is that "if individuals and organizations operate from the generative orientation, from possibility rather than resignation, we can create the future [rather than] merely react to it when we get there." Good. Then, what real sacrifices will servant leaders of corporations, universities, governments, and other institutions need to make if we and our children are to have "New Frontiers" rather than "Barricades"? We look forward to further leadership from Joseph Jaworski on that question. ■

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