

EXPLORE

BY JOHN VARNEY

"We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and to know the place for the first time."

~ T.S. Eliot, from *Four Quartets*

Talk of exploration brings to mind images of brave men riding out into unknown territory, trekking across continents with simple equipment, entirely self-sufficient. Exploration is linked to discovery and a sense of adventure. My own exploration took the form of mountaineering, which had the elements of risk and intrinsic reward that every explorer enjoys. Strange then, that I increasingly found myself taking novices to the mountains – a fact that aroused my curiosity about the very nature of exploration.

It occurred to me there is an inner exploration independent of the outer – that exploration 'out there' is complemented by discovery within. When my novices were opened by the external experience, I took the opportunity to awaken their inner awareness. These two aspects of discovery, while not inseparable, are certainly complementary. Some people seem to be able to travel the world and remain unchanged. Others, when we are less identified with our daily round, reflect on what is significant in our lives. We develop an appetite for asking deep questions, without which our lives are in danger of becoming increasingly banal.

This inner exploration can become a search for meaning – for what makes sense of life. As we gather information and knowledge and attempt to make sense of our experience, we can transform our understanding. It is not inevitable but, with intent, it is possible.

So, the inner exploration and the outer are reconciled by the change that comes about in the person who explores. The inner search can be even more enthralling than the outer journey, and the search for meaning can become a passion of its own. Meaning is constantly changing and this shift of meaning is at the fuzzy edge of our culture. We can learn to challenge received wisdom and the status quo, and as we do so we participate in the dance of change. The search for meaning is the way civilization evolves and those who dare to live on the edge are creators of the future.

Long ago, as a young man climbing in the Alps with a novice on my rope, we were horrified to witness our colleagues' rope of two seasoned climbers come to grief. As we watched, one person slipped. Digging into the ice to stop himself, he dragged the other from his stance. When he managed to arrest his fall the other passed and pulled him off. In a slow, sad drama the two swung alternately until they disappeared from view, leaving the beauty of the mountains to me and my companion. For me that was the start of a search for meaning – not just of the specific event but an exploration of meaning in my life – a search that continues even today.

It is this search that qualifies me to lead others in their own exploration. To me leadership is about raising aspiration, of going into unknown territory, of having the courage to go where none has gone before. In my work with managers and leaders I want to show them, like novice climbers in the hills, that there is more to life than we ever dare imagine; that each of us is a magical being; that the doors of perception can open, and that we can create new meaning together.

Work is a medium for learning and growth – a medium for exploration. As leaders we can imbue work with elements of risk and excitement, of challenge and discovery. We can communicate a deeply fulfilling zest for life that enables people to create new meaning, making us fit for an ever evolving world.

John Varney, founder and chief executive of the Centre for Management Creativity in the UK, works with senior managers to develop strategic dynamism and manage cultural changes. A mountaineer and psychological group leader with a first career in architecture, Varney's work focuses on awakening people's innate creative capabilities and awareness of leadership responsibility.



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