

# Reflections on Environmental Leadership: Thirty-Two Hours of Remarkable Coincidences

*The building blocks of environmental leadership reveal themselves*

by Richard MacLean

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**M**ovies frequently entertain us with icons of wise leadership. Yoda in *Stars Wars* is the serene, all-knowing one who teaches Luke Skywalker the ways of The Force to save the galaxy. Mr. Kesuke Miyagi in *Karate Kid* rescues the boy and goes on to mentor him to be at the top of his fighting rank. He could do all this because he had a “brown belt” . . . from JC Penney. But in the real world, what does it take to lead?

The media, public, and politicians currently are focused on global warming, but there are scores of other environmental threats with even more immediate consequences. Where are the wise environmental leaders who can sort through all this confusion and these competing priorities? Who will help guide businesses and the governments toward a sustainable path? Today these leaders appear to be as rare as spotted owls, but if you ran into one, what would be his or her characteristics and what traits should you emulate to reach that admirable position?

This is a “stream of consciousness” story of 32 hours in my life spanning July 11-12, 2008. Some names have been omitted to protect both the guilty and the innocent. As a colleague, Sam Ofshinsky, always tells me after delivering a true, but completely unbelievable story: “Ya just can’t make this stuff up.” Well, I’m not making this up.

## I. Precursor Events

For several weeks, I had been brooding over the suppression of several well-documented facts from an article I wrote for a trade publication. The editor was fine with the original, but a “review committee of the organization’s leadership” decided to nix a few sentences, fearing that it might offend advertisers and sponsors and thereby present a “business risk.” This censorship was a first for me in the nearly 200 articles I have authored, so I asked other editors and writers for their opinions. All of them expressed a view similar to that

of Ben Elgin, an environmental journalist with *BusinessWeek*: “Pretty stunning.”

I was puzzled because I could not fathom how environmental professionals wind up on this slippery slope of unethical business practice. In effect, they were putting a price tag on the organization: if you sponsor or advertise with us, we will not say negative things about your company, no matter how true or widely known the information. I wondered, of all people, how could environmental professionals—the protectors of our planet—rationalize away such behavior?

Another issue troubling me was the continuing saga of Arizona Public Service (APS), the local electric utility, where I had once worked more than a decade ago. The company appeared to be in a leadership crisis as top executives shuffled in, out, and around the company. For example, the Palo Verde nuclear power plant, the nation’s largest, has been rated one level above shutdown since February 2007. As reported in the *Arizona Republic* on July 1, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) “could consider upgrading its ‘Category 4’ operating status by the end of 2009. . . . There was a lot of denial of problems and a lot of people not taking ownership of problems”—classic signs of dysfunctional management.

Over the same period, I also had been conducting research for a magazine article unrelated to environmental issues. The story described an event that took place near Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1978. Only a handful of people were present, including the actor Steve McQueen. Ali McGraw, McQueen’s second wife, was filming *Convoy* in the area with Kris Kristofferson and McQueen decided to visit his friend, Sam Allred. The event was filmed by a news photographer as a favor to Allred. Both worked at the local Channel 13 television station.

Twenty-two years later, a very brief clip of that event appeared in the Academy Award winning documentary *Bowling for Columbine*. Probably not even Michael Moore knew

who the bearded man was in his movie; Chad McQueen, McQueen's son, was flabbergasted when I told him.

Allred is a ninth-degree grand master. I had asked him to provide me with a fitting description of himself, something that would convey to the readers his fame and accomplishments. I mention all of this as background information. Sit back, readers, as the 32 hours now begin.

## II. Friday, 10 a.m.

I opened an e-mail from Allred expecting to see a list of such things as his being elected to the Black Belt Hall of Fame and being named "Man of the Year." Maybe he would want me to add something about his association with Bruce Lee. Or maybe the tidbit that Chuck Norris started his career as an actor instead of just doing fight stunts through Allred's prodding.

No, none of these things mattered. He wanted me to mention that he was a friend of the late Alfredo Zalce, Mexico's renowned revolutionary muralist, and owned one of the largest private collections of the artist's works.

Suddenly, the past few weeks working with him on the article made sense: his attention to ownership and copyrights, his modesty, his fairness on the possible commercial value of the film, and his concern for other artistic expressions. Another telling example: he promised Steve McQueen not to use the film without prior permission. He kept his word.

After McQueen died in 1980, Allred was troubled over a request by Channel 7 in Denver, where he was working at the time, to use the footage for a story on Allred's life. He decided to call his friend Pat Johnson, the famous fight choreographer for dozens of films, including the *Karate Kid* series that Chad McQueen starred in as Dutch. Johnson was one of McQueen's closest friends and only after Johnson said that it would be all right to use it, did Allred agree.

Allred is a real life Miyagi from *Karate Kid*. He reached the top of his class and mentored thousands along the way. What I had been sensing in my dealings with him was the *integrity, ethics, and inner harmony* of a real leader. He was someone who transcended the all-too-common business risk calculations based first and foremost on short-term revenue streams.

## III. Friday, 12 p.m.

I received a call from a colleague in Boston who was troubled by an ongoing issue she was facing with the executive director and the board of an environmental nonprofit organization. She thought that there was evidence of possible fraud, sweetheart deals, and misconduct, but management was stonewalling her request to turn over information that might uncover the truth. What disheartened her was that most of the other board members seemed unconcerned by what might be going on. She was on her own.

I have been in similar situations. In the early 1990s, while working for APS, I was on the board of a local nonprofit organization. An employee of the nonprofit organization quit and came to work within my department. Subsequently, I became aware of possible activities that were unethical and also might

subject the nonprofit organization to a harassment lawsuit. After conferring with legal counsel, I knew that I was obligated to act. I called a group of other board members over lunch and I found, to my amazement, that several were already well aware of these allegations. They had chosen to do nothing.

I resigned from the board soon thereafter when it became apparent that the situation would be superficially investigated and whitewashed over. But once exposed, within a year the entire management had changed, and the organization has grown wonderfully in the intervening years.

My own experience underscored what my colleague in Boston already suspected: she must act on her own to expose and fix the problems or she would have to resign her coveted position. It was clear that she had the *courage* of a leader to fight a potentially very messy battle.

The challenge of leadership was on my mind when I went to bed that night.

## IV. Saturday, 5 a.m.

I awoke in the middle of a vivid dream. A colleague and I were in the back of a meeting room at a major corporation. At the front was the sustainability vice president for the company waxing eloquently about the strategic dynamic of competitive positioning for products that leverage green market share at the bottom of the pyramid, blah, blah, blah. He was on a roll and the company's business managers were all fired up.

My colleague and I were exchanging looks of disbelief and rolling our eyes. This guy knew all the buzzwords, but was totally removed from reality and clueless of the fundamentals. What was I to make of this dream?

Maybe it's my growing annoyance with companies that spend millions on marketing while providing little evidence that they are on a path to anything remotely resembling sustainability. Maybe it's because of the several so-called leaders who promote themselves as the brown belt Miyagis of the sustainability world when, in reality, the companies in which they once worked were able to advance in spite of their obstruction and poor management. Maybe I'm just jealous that I do not have such a polished sales pitch.

The real environmental leaders that I see today are very low key and *modest*. Indeed, Jim Collins, author of the bestseller, *Good to Great*, has characterized the greatest leaders as nothing resembling the trophy chief executive officers that attract so much media attention and collect the largest salaries, but do not necessarily deliver long-term results. As Collins states in his book: "Good-to-great companies place greater weight on character attributes than on specific educational background, practical skills, specialized knowledge, or work experience."

## V. Saturday, 8 a.m.

I opened the *Wall Street Journal* to page A2, and there above the fold was the headline: "Administration Releases EPA Report, Then Repudiates It—Blueprint to Reduce Greenhouse Gases Called Too Costly." I suddenly had a flashback to the 2007 Bali climate conference when Kevin Conrad, the

delegate from Papua New Guinea, stated: “[W]e ask for your leadership, we seek your leadership. But, if for some reason you are not willing to lead, leave it to the rest of us—please, get out of the way.”

Yes, climate change is a tough area and yes, it has dire economic implications, but isn’t that what leadership is all about? Isn’t it about developing a *strategic vision* and sticking to it? Needless to say, much of the current ills with the economy would not be as severe today if a strategic vision had been formulated for alternative energy resources and conservation back after the 1967 oil embargo.

## **VI. Saturday, 4 p.m.**

During the day, I mulled over the question of leadership characteristics and wondered if it might be worthwhile to write an article on my views. Divine intervention answered my question. I gathered the mail and there it was: *Time* magazine’s cover story, “Mandela—His 8 Lessons of Leadership.”

I found it fascinating that the first lesson on Mandela’s list was: “Courage is not the absence of fear—it’s inspiring others to move beyond it.” This statement accurately describes the challenge being faced by my colleague in Boston, who must now rally the other board members.

Yes, of all the traits, courage is number one. Much of the progress in the environment during the 1970s and 1980s was propelled forward by the radicalism of a generation who came of age during the turbulent time of the Vietnam War, social unrest, and assassinations. There was a certain “fire in the belly” that drove them forward. Cynics might claim it was driven instead by feelings of outsized moral superiority.

It would be presumptuous of me to judge the current generation of environmental professionals. What I have seen, however, is far too much decisionmaking by business risk analysis and not enough leadership guided by courage, a long-term vision, and a moral compass.

Well, that summed up my leadership list: courage; strategic vision; modesty; inner harmony; ethical behavior; and integrity. I was ready to write this Aarticle.

## **VII. Saturday, 5:45 p.m.**

I sat down at my computer and typed the first paragraph and then the power in my entire neighborhood went out.

As Ofshinsky would say: “Ya just can’t make this stuff up.”