

Art, Fear, and Self Development

By Kitty Wooley - Washington, DC

There is a saying, widely attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, that goes, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.” It implies a level of commitment, a sense of calling, to the work that one is doing – whatever it is. That is, you and I can choose to commit our hearts and souls to a process that’s called, “making a difference.” The phrase implies creative accomplishment that somehow improves the lot of others who are less fortunate. If we really commit to wholehearted engagement with our work, however we conceive of it, we enter the territory of an artist. In looking at the challenges that confront government, it’s easy to argue that much more such commitment is needed.

In 1993, David Bayles and Ted Orland wrote a little book, *Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking*. It’s really a survival guide for artists – and, I would argue – rising leaders of all ages, everywhere in the organization. Why? What on earth could this possibly have to do with us? Well, consider the following excerpts:

“By definition, *whatever* you have is exactly what you need to produce your best work (p.26).

In the end it all comes down to this: you have a choice (or more accurately a rolling tangle of choices) between giving your work your best shot and risking that it will not make you happy, or not giving it your best shot – and thereby *guaranteeing* that it will not make you happy (p.118).”

Over the past five years, I’ve observed that many GS-13, -14, and -15 Federal government employees have been enrolled by their agencies in one of a handful of leadership development programs that have been designed specifically for them. To my dismay, in encounters with graduates, I’ve found that many have not changed what they think or do – and that they are waiting, rather than working, for change. But what are they waiting *for*? To be promoted into a position that gives them permission to take responsibility? For a pre-existing mold into which they may safely pour their efforts?

Art & Fear speaks to the roots of these problems as they appear to people who make art: fears about one's own inadequacy, the need for approval of others, and the need to find one's own work. The latter seems to be a particular problem for prospective government leaders: I talk to many who are bored. But, listen to what Bayles and Orland say about that: "Look at your work and it tells you how it is when you hold back or when you embrace. When you are lazy, your art is lazy; when you hold back, it holds back; when you hesitate, it stands there staring, hands in its pockets. But when you commit, it comes on like blazes (p.49)."

This standpoint may not be popular. For one thing, every leadership program's assessment toolkit refers to work/life balance (although OPM's Executive Core Qualifications, at <http://www.opm.gov/ses/ecq.asp>, do not). Serious commitment to making a difference may look unbalanced to others. But, at the end of the day, lack of such commitment, and the creative work that follows, may result in mediocrity that the people who depend on government can't afford. What do you choose?

This post appeared on the 13L site, which has expired.