A Story of Whole Systems Leadership

After Gandhi’s death, the whole Gandhian movement was in disarray. Within a year or two of the establishment of India, a number of his followers decided to have a nationwide meeting to see how best to continue his work. They hoped to convince Vinoba Bhave, Gandhi’s closest disciple, to lead this conference, but he declined. “We cannot revive the past,” he stated.

After much pleading, they finally convinced Vinoba to lead the gathering, but he required that it be postponed for six months, giving him enough time to walk on foot from where he lived to the meeting site, halfway across India.

He began to walk from village to village. As he stayed in each village, he would call a meeting as Gandhi had done. He would listen to their problems and at times advise the villagers. Naturally, he walked through a series of very poor villages. In one, many people spoke of the hardship, of how little food they had to eat.

He asked them, “Why don’t you grow your own food?” But most of them were untouchables, and they said, “We would grow our own food, sir, but we have no land.” Upon reflection, Vinoba promised them that when he returned to Delhi he would speak to Prime Minister Nehru and see if a law could be passed giving land to the poorest villagers in India.

The villagers went to sleep, but Vinoba, struggling with the problem, did not rest that night. In the morning he called the villagers together and apologized. “I know government too well,” he said. “Even if after several years I’m able to convince them to pass a law granting land, you may never see it. It will go through the states and provinces, the district head man and the village head man, and by the time the land grant reaches you, with everyone in the government taking their piece, there probably will be nothing left for you.” This was his honest but sad predicament.

Then one villager stood up and said, “I have land. How much do these people need?” There were sixteen families, needing five acres each. So Vinoba said, “Eighty acres,” and the man, deeply inspired by the spirit of Gandhi and Vinoba, offered eighty acres.

Vinoba replied, “No, we cannot accept it. You must first go home and speak with your wife and children who would inherit your land.” The man went home, got permission, and returned, saying, “Yes, we will give eighty acres of our land.” That morning eighty acres of land were given to the poorest families.
The next day Vinoba walked to another poor village and heard the plight of hunger and landlessness from its lowest caste members. In the meeting he recited the tale of the previous village, and from his story another rich landowner was inspired. He offered 110 acres for the desperate 22 poorest families and again was directed to get permission from his family. Within that day the land was granted to the poor.

Village by village, Vinoba held meetings and continued this process until he reached the council several months later. In the course of his walk, he had collected over 2,200 acres of land for the poorest families along the way. He told this story to the council, and out of it, many joined him to start the great Indian Land Reform Movement. For fourteen years, Vinoba Bhave and thousands of those inspired by him walked through every state, province, and district, and without any government complications or red tape, collected more than 10 million acres of land for the hungriest and most impoverished villagers.

from *A Path With Heart* by Jack Kornfield

**How the Story Reflects Whole Systems Leadership**

The story of the Bhoodan Land Gift Movement is the story of the largest voluntary transfer of land in human history. Embedded in this dramatic example of non-violent change are many illustrations of Whole Systems Leadership, a way for people to influence their collective future.

As you reflect on this story:

- Find three examples where leadership was exercised by different people in this story.
- What role did listening play in this telling of the origins of the Bhoodan Land Gift Movement?
- How did Vinoba Bhave’s willingness to embrace his own uncertainty about the next phase of the movement end up serving the movement well?
- How did Vinobha Bhave demonstrate an awareness of systems?
- Where in this story was there a plan for action proposed that was then adapted to align better with reality?
- What similarities do you see between this story and David Gergen’s comment that “The days of command and control leadership have evaporated?”