Review of My soul’s journey to redefine leadership

Patricia Mische
Have you ever wondered what motivates people to work for social justice, peace, and ecological integrity? What sustains them through disappointments and difficult times? How do they keep from becoming angry, bitter, resentful, or burned out? How do they tame inner angsts that hinder effective work? What happens to their relationships with spouses, family, or friends who may not share their goals or means to achieve them?

Some people in social movements are driven by their sense of injustice. Some by a vision of a world that could be. Some are guided by reason. Some by emotion. Some by a sense of solidarity with those who suffer. Some by hatred of those seen as oppressors. Some by past events, traumas, guilt that affect their actions in the present. Some by shadows lurking in their unconscious that they blindly project onto the world. And some are guided and sustained by their spirituality. They feel called by a sense of the sacred within themselves, others, and the universe. They draw their energy from this sacred wellspring.

Virginia Swain is among the latter. She is not immune to other motives and influences. Indeed, she confesses to their existence and effects in her life and work. But after deep personal examination she decided to ground her work in the Sacred and committed herself to the daily discipline necessary to pursue a spiritual path. She sees personal inner transformation as the foundation on which to advance global transformation.

In *My Soul’s Journey* she chronicles the inner processes and spiritual pathways that guided and sustained her in a vocation she identifies as redefining leadership for peace. Her journey involved acknowledging her shadow side and the inner fears, limitations and guilt that blocked her way. It included learning to forgive herself and others, to listen and trust her inner voice, and to meet the challenges and responsibilities of leadership. It led her to establish a nongovernmental organization, to collaborate with the United Nations, and to develop training programs that would help others discover and develop their own inner resources in work for peace.

Swain does not share her journey as a prescription for others to follow. It is uniquely her own, affected by events, needs, and challenges in her life, and by the particular people who inspired and helped her along her pathway. But she offers the story of her spiritual journey for whatever assistance it may offer others seeking to find their own path.

**A White Paper with God**

In her Preface, Swain underscores the purpose of her book: It is to be a “white paper with God.” In this she aligns herself with Dag Hammarskjold, the second Secretary General of the United Nations, who wrote in his private journal, *Markings*, that he intended his life to be a “white paper with God.” Hammarskjold believed security was to be found within each person as a foundation for security in the world.
He personally designed the Meditation Room at the UN and wrote the inscription at its entrance:

We all have within us a center of stillness surrounded by silence. This House dedicated to work and debate in the service of peace should have one room dedicated to outward silence and inner stillness. Join in this work of peace and enter this small room where doors may be opened to the infinite land of thought and prayer (p. 19).

Swain often meditated there and found it gave her a sense of “connection to all the souls in the world even as I celebrate our differences.”

A Phoenix Rising from the 9/11 Ashes
She also found inspiration in the mural in the UN Security Council chamber that depicts a phoenix rising from the ashes of war. Swain sees the phoenix as a “transformative and regenerative bird of resurrection.” She was at the UN headquarters in New York City on September 11, 2001 when terrorists attacked the World Trade Center and thousands died in the flames. The UN was also threatened that day and she and others were evacuated from the building. Outside, on the UN grounds, Swain watched smoke pouring from the World Trade Center buildings in lower Manhattan. Later she dreamt that a new phoenix, which she identified as America’s soul, would rise from the ashes. She felt called to work for, a post 9/11 America that would rising from terror into peace.

In the ensuing years she came to see leadership in the image of the phoenix and to redefine her own path in leadership as a transformative process involving six steps:

- Restoring faith in myself;
- Redefining leadership and faith in the family and the relationship of men and women;
- Restoring faith in business;
- Developing Reconciliation Leadership and the Peacebuilding Process of Reconciliation to develop political will as a way to empower ordinary people;
- Restoring faith in the United Nations; and
- Restoring faith in the United States (p. 12).

Steps on a Spiral Pathway
She further refines and describes these steps in 11 chapters and depicts her pathway on these steps as a spiral. The steps spiral inward toward the essential core of her being, a place of safety and trust. They also spiral outward, taking inner wisdom into the world. The chapter titles/steps on her spiral journey are:

1. Spiritual Emergency.
2. Trusting an Inner Prompting.
3. It’s Time to Know Who I Am.
4. The Divinity of My Humanness.
5. My Soul and the Soul Unity of Humanity.
6. Two Souls in Marriage.
7. Finding My Soul’s Vocation.

**Spiritual Crisis as a Springboard for Development**

But Swain’s spiritual journey did not begin on 9/11 or at the UN. Rather, it was her spiritual search that led her to the UN. Her journey began in 1979 when she suffered what she describes as a “spiritual emergency.” The crisis was multi-faceted. She was shaken to the core by the sudden death of a much beloved younger brother. Filled with guilt for being too busy at work to respond to his call for help the night before his unexpected death, she sank into self-doubt. Then her father died. And then her second marriage collapsed, making her doubt her ability to succeed in relationships with men. She realized that she had been attracted to men who were emotionally unavailable and not suitable life partners or soul mates and she did not want to venture again into such relationships. And she was unsatisfied with her life direction. She sank into depression, felt lost and thought of suicide.

**Encounters that Inspired and Supported**

But instead of defeat, her crisis became a springboard into a quest for self-understanding and purpose. She left her job in the corporate world to seek inner direction. Her spiritual search led to encounters that helped her rediscover her Christian and Episcopalian roots and to embrace Christ at the center of her life. But her search was more eclectic than Christianity alone and included encounters with people of diverse spiritual traditions. She felt gifted by Hopi Elder, Thomas Banyacya, and other native Americans who shared their traditional wisdoms. She also grew from encounters with Quakers, with Buddhists at the Ikeda Center, with Findhorn co-founder Peter Caddy, with the Grandmothers of war-torn Yugoslavia, with women’s spirituality movements, with peace scholar and educator, Elise Boulding, and with the writings of Rumi, Carl Jung, Henri Nouwen, and many others. She went on retreats where she explored work and purpose, Death, and God as Love. Her spiritual path was also illuminated by time in nature, meditation, journaling, and dream work.

Along the way she earned an M.A. from Lesley University in Community Building in Organizations and International Peacebuilding. Her thesis on a Celebration of the World’s Children was the basis for a program she led at the UN.

The journey she chronicles moves from personal crisis, through accepting responsibility for her own transformation, to work for global transformation. She learns to go inward to her sacred center and to listen, surrender, and trust her inner guide. She learns to be honest, open and overcome inner fears, guilts, unconscious projections, and other obstacles to personal and global peace. She also learns to recognize the abiding presence of God as Love at the core of her being, to identify and embrace her gifts and potential, to develop confidence in her voice, and to discern her calling in life.

**The Greatest Learning: Being True to My Soul**

“My greatest learning,” she realized, was that “my path was my own. Other people cannot give the answers for my life. I needed to learn what my soul needed to be true to itself.” The inner love and peace she found became the foundation for her global peace-building work. It led her to
develop new leadership models that would help others grow spiritually as a foundation for finding their own paths in peace building.

**Finding a Soulmate**

Her spiritual journey also led her to a soul mate in Joseph Baratta, a professor, author, and advocate for world law and a strengthened United Nations. Joseph and Virginia were both committed to a more humane global future, but approached it through different, complementary strengths. Swain observes that while Joseph primarily used reason, she proceeded more through emotions, from her heart. They made a commitment not only to work together for peace, but to make their marriage work. On their anniversary each year they write a letter examining the “State of the Marriage,” which helps to identify and bridge rifts and to grow in love.

Together Joseph and Virginia founded the Center for Global Community and World Law (1993-2017) with consultative status at the United Nations. Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Virginia founded the Institute for Global Leadership to provide training and coaching for leaders and teams to adapt to the changing global dynamics. She also developed reconciliation training programs to aid organizations and peoples in peace building.

Her work in these and other venues, and her collaboration with UN programs, took her to five continents, including the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. And she brought UN programs to her local community in Worcester, MA, including the UN initiative for a Culture of Peace. In 2007 she created a television program, “Imagine Worcester in the World,” featuring interviews with local and global peacemakers.

**Unison of Personal, Local and Global Transformation**

Virginia does not see a dichotomy between working locally and globally, between loving one’s country and loving the world, between national citizenship and global citizenship. Nor does she separate her inner journey from her work in the world. They are in unison. Her spiritual path bridges these dichotomies and is grounded in a consciousness of the oneness of life. Again, she quotes Dag Hammarskjold:

> Everybody today with part of his [sic] being belongs to one country while with another part has become a citizen of a world which no longer permits national isolation. Seen in this light, there could be no conflict between nationalism and internationalism, between the nation and the world. The question is not either the nation or the world, it is how to serve the world by service to our nation and how to serve the nation by service to our world (p. 74).

In his Foreword, Ambassador Anwarul K. Chowdhury, former Under-Secretary-General and High Representative of the United Nations, and founder of the Global Movement for the Culture of Peace, commends Virginia for sharing her soul journey and for her work to ensure peaceful coexistence through accountability, forgiveness and reconciliation. He agrees that the UN must be strengthened if there is to be a sustainable peace. But for that to happen its 193 Member States, who increasingly put national self-interest above the global common good, must resolve to collaborate for the good of humanity and the planet. In turn, such a transformation of national
governments depends on the citizens of these countries. A sense of global citizenship on the part of people everywhere is a prerequisite for global transformation.

He concludes, “My intellectual journey for the culture of peace with Virginia will always have a special place in my heart and soul.”

The book includes two appendices listing Swain’s workshops, consultations, interviews, and publications. It also includes discussion questions for each chapter, endorsements by prominent individuals, and contact information.

*Pat Mische was Lloyd Professor of Peace Studies and World Law, Antioch College (ret.) and author, numerous works, including Toward a Human world Order: Beyond the National Security Straitjacket; Star Wars and the State of our Souls; and Toward a Global Civilization? The Contribution of Religions.*