

Avalon and Glastonbury The Merlin Factor

“A high performing human work place calls for equal attention to Glastonbury and Avalon”.

Charles E. Smith, PhD, May 2012

In King Arthur’s legend, Glastonbury symbolized a visible city and Avalon an invisible city. Each, however, occupied the same physical territory. Only a few individuals like Merlin, the King’s Counsel, knew how to find their way between the two. In fact, most people no longer even knew of Avalon's existence; let alone how to get there.

By analogy, each of today's corporations, government agencies, and communities includes these same two dimensions. In a corporation’s visible Glastonbury are found familiar objects and events such as buildings, machines, materials, products, services, vendors, customers, and stock prices. Also there, unfortunately, often reside a host of problems.

In the same companies’ invisible Avalon are relational qualities such as mutual trust, honesty, compassionate listening, forgiveness and reconciliation, caring relationships, cooperation toward grand visions, confidence in the future, alignment among personnel, and commitment to others’ success. Avalon too, harbors difficulties. Both dimensions have their own cultures and structures, forms of energy, and outputs.

Both Glastonbury and Avalon are essential to the vibrant health, genuine success, and continuous improvement of any organization. Glastonbury deals primarily with objective reality -- things tangible and countable. Avalon is most concerned with relational realities -- neither physical nor easily measurable. Without Glastonbury a corporation cannot offer products and services to its customers. Without Avalon it lacks heart and soul.

Both individuals and organizations move naturally toward higher levels of complexity as they age. At any point in time, too much order, certainty, and predetermined process can suppress energy. So can too much flexibility, looseness, and motion. People need as much energy as possible to achieve their highest purposes. Typically, however, both people and organizations respond to increased complexity by reflexively increasing order and process. When problems are about relationships, they would be better off tending to Avalon. But Avalon approaches such as becoming more flexible, adaptive, and open are not effective when Glastonbury qualities of order and measuring are called for.

Raising consciousness of both Avalon and Glastonbury may be confusing since people tend to spend their lives seeing the world from one place or the other. As the new category of thought gets clearer, people experience changes and they become more able to operate from a place that recognizes both realities at once.

People tend to think in either/or terms, especially under pressure. In the 'business as usual' universe, people rarely speak the truth from their hearts. They stick to the language of business. While many people are quite willing to talk *about* Avalon, this is deceptive because they are not willing to *go* there experientially. They often need to be led into this unfamiliar territory, and may need to change their usual rules of engagement. In organizations, only a few take on that kind of dual leadership, as most corporate measurement and reward systems place the greatest value on Glastonbury.

Merlin's power comes from the ability to see both sides fully -- to hold opposites in the mind with equal attention. This takes commitment and practice, and is as much about physical realities as about relationships.

Those who operate from Glastonbury, and treat people as things, pay a price in human energy, creativity, innovation and commitment. Those who operate from Avalon, and handle people and things too gently, pay a price in productivity, focus, coordination, and results.

Trust in Glastonbury demands performance and results. Trust in Avalon requires emotional connection and caring. Both are needed in a vibrant and successful enterprise. It's difficult to hold onto the paradoxical reality of a system that honors both realities at the same time.

However, a leader's mind can be open to both realities at once. They can serve both as steward of their organization's Avalon and guardian of their Glastonbury. When successful, what occurs is a fundamental shift in the corporation's aliveness and effectiveness. If a corporate Camelot could someday become the norm, the same spirit could also extend to the families, communities, governments, and international relations.

The world needs a quantum shift in the way people think. This change need not wait for gradual evolution nor dramatic social or economic crises.

Glastonbury at its best

The optimum Glastonbury is an honorable place where all detail matters. Careful attention to physical detail releases people's physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual energies into great richness and variety. James W. Rouse was founder of the Rouse Company, which became one of the nation's largest publicly held real estate development and management companies. He wrote,

"I am committed with the lives of people and communities for generations to come will be affected by what we do; that the surest road to success is to discover the authentic needs of people and do our best to service them; that people seek human places of diversity and charm, full of festival and delight; they are degraded by tacky, tasteless places and oppressed by coldness and indifference; that they are uplifted by the creative caring which that demands; that we believe everything matters; that all detail matters."

(personal communication, 1995)

In our view, Glastonbury is an organizational metaphor for such integrity.

As Glastonbury stands for the integrity of things measurable in a Corporation, so Avalon stands for the integrity of things non-measurable -- harmony, cooperation, commitment, joy, presence, benevolent authority, freedom, truth, healing, trust, and so on. Creating a unified purpose in a

divided kingdom was King Arthur's main job. It is also the job of most corporate leaders. For a corporation to undergo a transformation, leaders need to alter processes fundamental to improving customer focus continually in visible Glastonbury. At the same time, relationships need to expand and improve in unseen Avalon.

Avalon consists of all the genuine relationships within the company as well as relationships with those closely related to it, such as suppliers, distributors, customers. Avalon often fades into the mists unless you are creating and fostering relationships intentionally. Avalon doesn't just happen. As soon as the champions of Avalon go away, so does Avalon. That is why so much wonderful cultural change management fades when the Avalon leadership changes jobs.

Avalon's energies are all relational, connecting people to each other heart-to-heart. Certain Glastonbury energies are often mistakenly viewed as expressions of Avalon -- smiles, handshakes, hearty greetings, polite conversations, lunches, holding doors open for people, ordering coffee or refreshment, pointing out safety cautions, being on time, showing patience, etc. These don't necessarily require commitment to a relationship nor to the success of another person.

Negative energies happen in Avalon as well. For example, while those who live in Glastonbury can find themselves enmeshed in internal competition, hierarchies of scarcity, and scapegoats, people who live mainly in Avalon can show little concern for results, set unrealistic goals, avoid measurement, and respond with passive aggression to people asking that they perform.

The Merlin Factor is the unblocked present awareness that lets you see that both Avalon and Glastonbury are real, and the intention to act on it.

* Adapted and revised from [The Merlin Factor: Keys to the Corporate Kingdom](#)

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