

Finding Sanctuary in a World of Complexity, Unpredictability and Turbulence

By

William Bergquist

In a beautifully poignant song ("And So It Goes", 1983), written by the popular singer, Billy Joel, a sanctuary is described that exists in every person's heart. This part of our heart will always be "safe and strong." It is where we "heal the wounds from lovers past/Until a new one comes along." Sanctuaries of a similar nature exist in our heart and hopefully are supported by our organizations and society as a means of healing other wounds and providing space and time for needed reflection and inquiry.

We are currently confronting a postmodern world that is very complex. Clarity of mission and purpose seems critical in leading an organization, in large part because our organizations are fragmented, contradictory and unpredictable. We live in an era not of accelerating change, but rather of turbulence (the "white water" world): rapid change intermixes with patterned change, stagnation and chaos. In such a world, there is great need for Billy Joel's "safe and strong" sanctuary.

Complexity, unpredictability and turbulence are not new to us living in a postmodern world. And we are not the first people to yearn for sanctuary. Back in the 1930s, with World War II looming in the near future and the world limping its way out of a major recession, there was a strong need for sanctuary-- as captured in the popular film, *Lost Horizons*. Ronald Colman played the role of a very successful British statesman who is kidnapped and taken to a remote land called "Shangri-La." For Colman, as for many of us, this location held great attraction. It was free of pain and strife. Shangri-La also provided an opportunity for reflection on the complex and turbulent world outside, while giving those who entered its cloistered walls (in this case, a hidden valley) the opportunity for personal growth and renewal. Colman, like many us who have created or stumbled into "Shangri-La," found that the hardest part is leaving and returning to a world that he no longer appreciated. However, "Shangri-La" like all sanctuaries exists precisely because of our need to remain engaged in an active life in which we address the critical needs and concerns of our family, our organization and our community.

THE NATURE OF SANCTUARY

A sanctuary may be a physical location: a retreat, a "safe place" within or outside the organization. Some Japanese firms provide private rooms where employees can go to let loose their frustrations and anger. However, sanctuaries (almost by definition) usually exist outside of an organizational context. They are found in remote locations, hallowed grounds, beautiful settings or formally constructed retreat centers, spas and health resorts.

Alternatively, as Billy Joel suggests, the sanctuary may be within one's own heart or head. In one of his gentle stories from the Prairie Home companion radio program about life in a small Minnesota town ("Lake Wobegon"), Garrison Keiller (1983) speaks about the "storm home" that was assigned to him by his school when he was a small boy. Keiller lived in the country and had to get to school by bus. Consequently, to prepare for the possibility that he might be stranded in town as a result of a snow

blizzard, the school gave him (and the other children living in the country) an alternative home to go to that is located in town. Keeler never had to go to this home; however, he often walked by his "storm home" and reflected on the loving, supportive nature of the couple who were his "storm parents." He often thought of this man and woman and their house when things were going bad or when he was discouraged. He fantasized that this couple had specifically picked him out as their "storm child" and that they would welcome him with open arms during difficult times.

We may have similar need for a "storm home" as adults working in a highly turbulent world. The "storm home" of the mind may be created through use of a technique or ritual that provides internal support and encouragement for our difficult decisions and risk-taking behavior. In essence, we pat ourselves on the back or find a way (through meditation, daydreaming or quiet reflection) to calm ourselves down and gain a sense of reassurance. A colleague of mine who presides over an educational institution found that he could gently touch his forehead when under stress and evoke with this touch a sense of personal calmness. These moments of personal sanctuary during the day may be essential components in any postmodern survival kit. Another colleague ensures that she set aside one day each week for her writing. A third friend insists on swimming in the San Francisco Bay every day during lunchtime. In each instance, an internal sanctuary that is "safe and strong" has been created for both healing and reflection.

THE "NEGATIVE" SANCTUARY

Many types of sanctuaries are available to us has inhabitants of the 21st Century. Some of these are quite beneficial, others are destructive . The safe spaces within our heads sometimes take the rather destructive form of projections upon our leaders. Our Tavistock colleagues suggest that we project onto our leader all of our own wisdom and knowledge. We perceive them as wise and compassionate people, when in fact they may be quite the opposite. This basic perception often prevents members of a group from "growing up" and when they do tend to grow up there often is a "revolution" in which the king or queen (i.e. , the leader) is deposed and replaced by one of the other members of the group. This cycle of dependency and counter-dependency is replicated again and again, leaving the group without continuity or an effective plan for group member maturation.

Alternatively, we project our aggressive attitudes onto the leader and make him or her a great warrior, or project our dreams and aspirations onto the leader and make this person into a great visionary. In the case of these latter two forms of projection, there is a swing back and forth from admiration of the leader to disillusionment -- much as in the case of dependency on the leader. All three sets of assumptions provide temporary "storm homes" when we are faced with the need to make decisions and establish commitments in a relativistic, postmodern context.

In his essay written more than two decades ago on the spiritual hollowness of the baby boom generation, George Sim Johnston (1990) identified four other types of destructive sanctuaries that seem to be still prevalent. He suggests that these sanctuaries may provide a "manipulable sense of well-being." One of these sanctuaries is sexuality -- the obsession with seduction and the almighty orgasm. Unfortunately, this sanctuary in organizational life has often been employed by men, at the expense of women employed in the organization. A second destructive sanctuary, according to Johnston, has been politics. This sanctuary was particularly prevalent during the Viet Nam war years and has recently

regained popularity with the threat of internal and external terrorism. War and politics become wonderful distractions from our immediate problems and concerns.

Johnston's third sanctuary is health or more specifically our obsession with exercise and diet. While many formal sanctuaries, such as health spas and recreational centers, do a wonderful job of providing sanctuary from tense daily living, there can be an overconcern that leads not only to alienation from some of life's richest treats but also isolation from other, diverse aspects of life. Finally, according to Johnston, new forms of religion serve as sources of sanctuary. The "new age" religions, according to Johnston, sometime provide temporary solace in part because they demand only temporary and superficial commitment.

We might add several other candidates to Johnston's list, especially when examining sanctuaries within organizational settings. One excellent candidate is power and status within the organization. If we can just get the corner office or the new company car, then all will be well in our own personal world. If we can just gain control over the budget or expand the number of people reporting to us, then we know that we have arrived and will finally find some happiness. Another candidate is wealth. For many of us, the accumulation of wealth not only becomes a sign of self-worth, but also a "storm home." If only we can set aside X number of dollars, we can weather any storm and, even more importantly, we can find some enduring sense of meaning and fulfillment in life.

This is the case, especially when we consider yet another candidate for sanctuary, namely, purchase and consumption of material goods. In 1955, Erich Fromm foresaw the role to be played by consumption in our postmodern world when he spoke of the "marketing orientation" of men and women in our Western world, and proposed that this orientation is a psychological defense against the terror of death and meaningless life. A somewhat more contemporary observer of American society, Sam Kean (Kean, 1991, pp. 110-111) suggested, similarly, that: "at worst, postmodern man is the concupiscent consumer. His tastes, life-style, and convictions are formed by fashion. Like the god, Proteus, and unlike the substantial self-made men of the last century, he changes shapes at will . . . You could call him disillusioned except that he has never dared care about anything passionately enough to have developed hope or illusion."

ORGANIZATIONAL SANCTUARIES

How do we ensure (or at least encourage) a more productive use of sanctuary? We would suggest that constructive organizational sanctuaries are created when space and time are found for: (1) reflection on past experiences in life (a passage into a deeper sense of self) and (2) experimentation in thought or action regarding future ways in which we wish to lead our lives. I recently asked a group of managers enrolled in a Masters level organizational behavior program to identify and study sanctuaries in their own organizations to see how these two factors play out.

My students identified many types of organizational sanctuaries, ranging from special rooms or outdoor spaces in the organization where employees call "cool out," to elaborate programs that focus on relaxation responses, meditation and other forms of stress reduction. Other managers commented on those special moments in the ongoing operations of their organization or work group when sanctuary is created. Yet others spoke more personally of how work in and of itself provides sanctuary for them from other more stressful aspects of their lives (a marriage in trouble, loneliness as a single parent and so

forth). Most often, however, our managers concluded that their own organization rarely if ever provided sanctuary for them. As a result, they look outside their organization for sanctuaries.

As organizational coaches and consultants, how do we help our clients to find or construct personal or organization-based sanctuaries? Can we consistently provide appropriate and constructive solace to the battered, perhaps indifferent, postmodernist? How do we help to create opportunities for reflection, experimentation and, ultimately, renewal and re-creation? In many instances, coaches and consultants help to create successful organizational sanctuaries by establishing temporary systems. First described by Matthew Miles (1964), temporary systems are to be found throughout our society, but are often underused in formal organizational settings. Examples of temporary organizational systems that Miles offers include carnivals, theater, celebrations, games, retreats, workshops, conferences, task forces, project teams, coffee breaks, and office parties. How do we create each of these settings in the organizations with which we work? At a more personal level, Miles identified psychotherapeutic sessions and personal growth programs as temporary systems. How do we replicate settings that are comparable to these sanctuaries?

Temporary systems can take on many different forms. Some provide short-term, ad hoc settings in which new methods or products are tested out (a "wind tunnel" for new ideas), while others provide regularly convened alternative structures , in which all or many members of an organization can identify and solve problems , communication , and manage conflicts in ways that are not usually employed in daily work life (what is sometimes called a "collateral organization"). Some temporary systems enable employees to try out a new skill without fear of failure (a "dress rehearsal") , while other temporary systems enable employees to get a taste of the end point to which they are striving . Regardless of the forum which these systems take, they provide a "storm home" that can help men and women return in renewed fashion to the postmodern fray.

More generally, coaches and consultants are effective if they help organizations find sanctuaries that exist at those moments and places in organizational life when there is, as Nevitt Sanford (1966) suggested many years ago, an appropriate balance between challenge and support. Often, as Csikszentmihalyi (1990) noted, organizational life is either quite boring or profoundly anxiety-provoking. It is in the threshold between boredom and anxiety that we find rich occasions for organizational learning as well as for personal growth and learning. It is in the threshold that we find Johansson's (2004) Medici Effect – the intersection of ideas, concepts and cultures.

As organizational coaches and consultants, we can be particularly effective in influencing the directions and cultures of organizations when we can help create conditions that are both challenging and supportive. Our attempts to encourage change (which inevitably increases challenge) must be matched with a comparable concern for support and nurturance. We are likely to find organizational sanctuaries when and where this balance is achieved. In creating a sanctuary, we must, as Riane Eisler (1987) has suggested, mold a chalice to contain the anxiety and direct the energy (Sanford's support), while also wielding the sword of change and transformation (Sanford's challenge) which helps to mobilize creativity and energy in the first place.

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