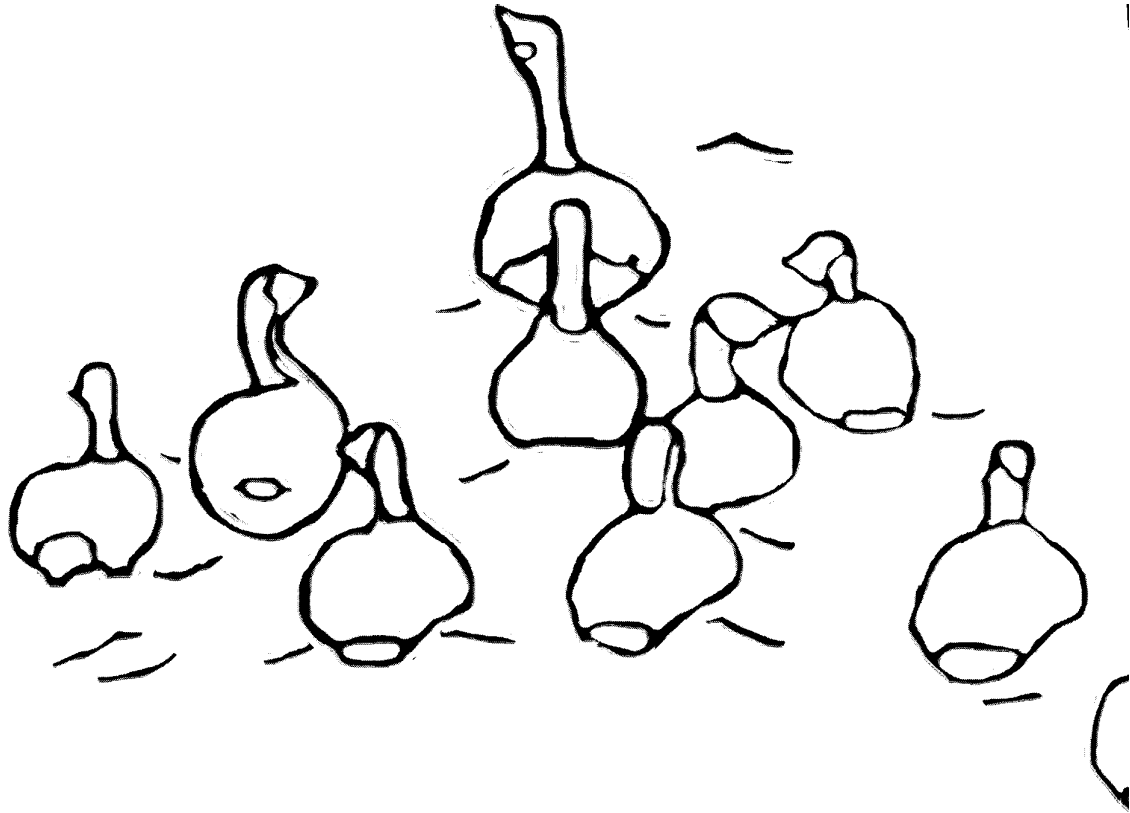


ON BEING A LEADER



A reflective conversation with Mohini Punjabi by Stella Eugene Humphries

Mohini Punjabi is a senior spiritual leader of the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual Organisation (BKWSO) and their Regional Co-ordinator for North and South America and the Caribbean. She is also the BKWSO representative to the United Nations. To place her leadership role in context, I will first describe some features of the BKWSU which make it an organisation of interest to the study of governance, structure, coordination and leadership.

The BKWSO is dedicated to providing knowledge and an environment for individual transformation in practical everyday life. It is founded on the belief that through the attainment, in action, of personal qualities such as peace, compassion, inner power, and wisdom, fundamental social transformation can be brought about.

The organisation consists of self-organising centers (in most countries known as Raja Yoga Meditation Centres)

which are run by volunteers. Each Raja Yoga centre provides the same daily classes to its students. There is no 'membership' and each individual is free to find their relationship to the organisation on a continuum from daily study to occasional participation in special programmes. Co-ordination of activities among local, national and international regional centers and the headquarters in Mt. Abu, is dynamic and regular through the internet and telephone. In addition to the daily schedule of teaching and meditation, the organisation holds special programmes for the public as well as professional groups in the arts, sciences, medicine, government, the legal profession, education and business. It organises conferences, training workshops, concerts, retreats and lectures often in partnerships with other organisations.

SEH: Can you tell us a little of your own story - how you came to be a leader?

MP: I was a very private person and wanted to live a simple family life but the need for knowing more was within me and a sense of service was important. I had feelings of wanting to provide for myself but I also had a lot of care for people from a very early age. At first, service for me was very simple - to reach out to people and to give people whatever they need - small things. I remember in the early '60s there was an epidemic of influenza - it was very new - people did not know what the flu was. In almost every home in the large block where we lived people were sick because we did not have immunity or injections. I didn't get sick - I would make tea, go door to door and serve food. India had two or three small wars with Pakistan and China and I remember reaching out to wounded people - going to hospitals and seeing what could be done.

I think an understanding of what one wants to achieve for oneself and also what one wants to do to serve others is needed in combination. It seems to me people either want to do something for others or do something for themselves but they do not often live the combination. When I think of where I began and where the story of leadership began I discover that I sought to combine the two very specifically. I wanted both a quality life for myself and I wanted to offer myself to service.

SEH: You feel awareness of one's inner needs is important for playing a public leadership role?

MP: I think the story of a successful leader begins with how one leads one's own life. Many people look to others for direction and insight. But others feel that there is some purpose they wish to fulfil. There is an inner calling that pulls and to which one has to respond. That is when learning begins.

Learning is connected with helping one's self. One should ask, "Which direction would I like to go and what is the aim of my life. What do I want to do?" People tend not to think about their lives in this way. They accept information and norms external to them without questioning what these mean. Most people today focus on what the market wants. They think that if they study to fill the current market need, they can immediately start and earn money. But one should rather feel what guidance is within. They should **look for something very special that gives fulfilment**. Once one commits to following one's intuition and finding one's own inner direction, fulfilment begins to grow. Of course education needs to be connected with livelihood but job and money are secondary. Attention is first needed on connecting one's education to developing the quality of one's 'being' and not only to developing

one's capacity for 'doing.' Whatever I did, I wanted first to know, "Why am I doing it? What is it bringing to me? What is it bringing to others?"

SEH: From where do you get your guidance and support as a leader?

MP: Basically my strength comes from my principles, my strength comes from learning and my strength came from my insights. I like being governed from my insights and I like to have information. I read a lot in every area; economics, politics, medicine. When I have to decide something and when I have to form an opinion or I have to give comments, I give these from inside. I like to hear the news and be informed but I do not necessarily like to be influenced to an extent that my own initiative and my own pure reasoning and my own insights get lost. I keep a distance and it helps me to discern.

Before I become a guide for others, am I a good guide for myself? If I am a guide for my self then I know where I am leading people. I feel each one has to have one's own map and one's own inner direction in life. Every human life becomes a guidance or misguidance for others. That is, whatever is spoken or whatever is done by someone will be seen by others and many will want to do the same. I am careful because I know when I do something others will want to do it. But then when others are doing something, I remind myself not to get influenced if I don't want to do it. I won't do it even if 100 people say 'yes.' I will just do what I am internally comfortable with but without imposing that on others. The individual - even in a large organisation, and I am part of a large organisation - always has to maintain connection with the guidance of the self. Wherever I feel that I am not clear, I am not comfortable, I will go inside and I will try to find the right direction. To **be guided by one's**

inner self and to act with the awareness that others will follow, are very, very important.

The strength of a leader should come from inside, should come from values. Their life should be governed by principles because following your principles protects your strength. When you speak the truth you only have to say it once, you don't have to try to convince. But once you speak a lie - you have to tell another 20 and still you are not able to convince. So it is more simple to be truthful, to be honest. In my heart I always hold on to honesty and truth.

SEH: What is your vision of a well-functioning system - towards what ideal way of organising do you lead?

MP: A teacher had a world map which was torn into little pieces and the teacher gave it to the students to fix. The students looked at it and wondered how could they restore it. But one of the students, within 15 minutes, had done it. He turned the map over, and on the back, there was a figure of the human body so he put the pieces together that way. He knew where everything fitted. He knew where the eyes should be and where the nose should be and so on. When he turned it over, the world was also put together. This is a metaphor for the interdependency of the world of human beings - beneath the surface things have a connection, the whole has a pattern. We should neither be dependent nor independent - instead we need to understand and accept the right relationship among the parts of the whole. Each of the parts is important and has a role. Understanding this leads to right relationship. **If we truly understood that the whole world is one family, then abuse through power and status and greed would end.**



When one thinks of family, one doesn't think only of the task. There is much more to a family than getting tasks done. A task-oriented personality sooner or later loses effectiveness as a leader because they lose the people. Mostly leaders are remembered for small things not for large things by those close to them. An ambassador for one of Caribbean islands was speaking of the ex-Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Publicly she was known as the Iron Woman - as a very strong politician. Few knew her soft side which was her true strength. He spoke of a time when he was in her Cabinet and they worked late or were doing a project at her residence. Every two or three hours she would send someone for tea. He said that such little gestures of her care made them work day and night.

True leaders are remembered for small humanitarian acts which those close to them always appreciate and describe. But more often status and greed become very big challenges for a leader. Even praise and success is difficult for many. That is why **a leader has to remember, "I am a server - I am on service."**

One of the important factors I find within the BKWSU is that at its core it is a family, then it is an organisation. Because it is a very large family, we need to run it as an organisation - but we do not have presidents, secretaries etc., so it is like an organized family. This structure is very beautiful - family and organisation. It means the personal care and security of each member is really the well-being of the organisation.

SEH: What should be our attitude towards leaders today who have betrayed trust?

MP: There needs to be the realisation that everyone is responsible. Whatever is happening in a collective is not because of one, two, ten individuals, but because of each one of us. We are in a system. It is we who elect our leaders, we who really allow all that happens to happen. So **if at the grass roots people do not empower themselves, they will always look to the leaders, blame the leaders.** Both the formal leaders and the grass roots levels need to take responsibility of whatever is happening in the world. Blaming only leaders for the fate of millions is not right. Each one has to **look at what is happening and ask, "How am I contributing by my actions, my thoughts, my attitudes, my choices?"** If I want peace I have to ask myself, 'Am I being peaceful?' If I want tolerance or nonviolence, I need to look where in my life I am contributing to peacelessness or violence and start to change those thoughts and attitudes and actions.

I feel that **each one needs to take responsibility, not only expect rights. The contribution of each one is very important and each one needs to contribute whatever he or she can towards a better world. Everyone needs to feel, "I am a leader" in this regard.** One should not only look to the leaders and follow. One needs to also take responsibility. Each one's inner leadership is important. Every individual can contribute a great deal. In this way people working with leaders and leaders working with people are equally necessary. Empowerment of each individual is very important.

SEH: Why are women especially prominent in leadership roles within the organisation?

MP: I think organisations today need leadership which is more nurturing. Women tend to have natural nurturing qualities and a balance between the head and heart. A lot of things the head will miss but the heart will not miss. Women listen to the heart. I find women serve from the heart. Being a mother is basically serving, thinking of others. Intellectual capacities can more easily be developed in today's institutional cultures, but the feminine qualities of listening to the heart and kindness are not recognised to be important. As a result, they are not developed. Because women tend to bring those qualities naturally, we can use their capacities to bring about a simple way of organizing, based on values.

When people come to the BKSU, especially to the headquarters in Mt. Abu, India, they see dedication, commitment, patience. Being devoted to something in a sustained way is a very feminine quality. It is one thing to be task oriented, it is another to have long-term dedication. Some people can be task-oriented but not dedicated long-term. Women have the quality of dedication. Not that men don't have it, but women tend to have it well developed.

Many, many Indian family businesses know their success is dependent on the woman's influence. When male business leaders come to the Brahma Kumaris headquarters in Mt. Abu, they see that the influence of women's leadership is missing in their organisations. Many have said to us, "If we had that we would also grow like you are growing." They can feel this balance of the head and the heart.

Our founder taught that if you want the organisation to be whole in the sense of balanced, women should be the leaders. He placed women in leadership roles from the beginning. **Leaders need to be people with a good rational mind and well developed capacities of the heart.** These qualities can become balanced in each one, man or woman. It is only now when the feminine qualities are not

valued in the world that the balance needs to be restored. This is what we are doing here, bringing balance between the head and the heart.

SEH: Can you suggest some practices people could experiment with?

MP: One of the practices we use is to pause a few times a day, maybe every two or three hours. We call this 'traffic control' or controlling the traffic of thoughts in the mind. We take a few moments to calm down, get connected within and clear the mind of noise. Once we feel reconnected with the peaceful inner self, we go back to the task. Another regular practice is to start the day with time alone and to think or read something of inspiration and to meditate. Filling the mind with something that nourishes it, is important at the start of the day. Thinking about a virtue or a value that we can apply that day is a good morning practice. Then during the day we will have an enhanced awareness of that virtue and be able to draw on its power when difficulties arise. Strength is experienced through this and day by day, with regular practice, that strength grows. We often say, "Drops make the ocean."



One of the most important things in life is to pay attention to one's thoughts. People do not understand and realise

how powerful their thoughts are. With our thoughts we create our future - consciously or unconsciously. Each thought is therefore so important. This is why we need to slow down at the start of each day and during the day to get to know our thoughts and to choose which ones to engage and which ones to let go.

Related to this is how one uses time and energy. One should not need to go back and forth over the same situation in one's thoughts – one's thinking should be clean and direct, so when it is over, one is

finished with the situation. Seeing the value of one's mental energy, making the effort to have clear and stable mental energy, will make it easy to take on responsibility and to stay fresh. If one allows one's mental energy to be lost, one is drained, and it is not possible to be effective. **Time, thoughts and energy are inter-related personal properties to care a great deal about. These are the foundation upon which we individually and collectively create the quality of our lives and our society.**