



Coming Home to Leadership

An Essay on Embodiment, Presence, and Emotional Capacity in Leadership

By Alex Carabi

www.alexcarabi.com
alex@alexcarabi.com

ALEX CARABI is an executive leadership coach. He supports CEOs, founders, and investors from around the world in their inner and outer journeys of leadership development and embodied presence.

Alex is an International Coaching Federation Professional Certified Coach (ICF PCC), a Master Practitioner in Transformational Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), and is a Practitioner-in-Training of NeuroAffective Relational Model (NARM), dealing with complex trauma and early childhood development. He holds an MSc in International Management and Marketing from Copenhagen Business School.

*"There is deep wisdom within our very flesh,
if we can only come to our senses and feel it."*

– ELIZABETH A. BEHNKE

*"And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And to know the place for the first time."*

– T.S. ELIOT

WHERE WE ARE

We stand in a space between the new world and the old.

Yesterday lingers with the residue of the past. Tomorrow beckons with possibilities from beyond. Between the two, in a place we call today, we paint the future against the backdrop of what has been.

What will our future be? Who will we become?

We are asked these questions every day. But now, as the old world ruptures at its seams, the questions are being asked more starkly, more urgently.

Every act in these pivotal moments carries momentous weight. Even the faintest of actions can significantly shift the trajectory of what will come.

As we grapple with gravity of our choices, we realize that we can't do it alone. There is so much to process, too much to hold. We need bridges, we need platforms that can support us through what unfolds.

We are yearning for leadership. We are longing for vessels that have the capacity to hold others, that can bring each other and tomorrow into being.

Leadership is not separate from us. We are the leadership we have. So, to bring forth the world we desire, **we must be the leaders and the humans we seek.**

We have everything we need to do so.

Hidden right beneath our fingertips is a finely tuned yet neglected instrument. It holds capacities that allow us to make sense of the world, to relate with ourselves and others, and to lead with compassion and conviction amidst complexity.

The time has come to reconnect with our overlooked capacities. What becomes of our future will depend on it.

Our hidden instrument is called embodied presence.

In a word: feeling.



We crave data, insight, and knowledge. Especially in times of increased uncertainty.

Like vultures we descend on facts and figures, devouring them all in the hope of knowing enough to survive and thrive.

Valuable as that knowledge might be, our obsession with external data blinds us to an entire realm of information that is closer to home and yet endlessly abundant: **the felt-sense of our sensory perceptions.**

As living, breathing human beings, we are always taking in stimuli through our senses.

What we sense is data about our world. Everything we see, touch, hear, taste, and smell is information.

A micro-expression on a colleague's face. A gut feeling. A constrained throat. A sense of nausea or discombobulation. A sense of panic or despair.

Together, our sense impressions form the composition of our reality. Our senses are the gates through which we receive the world.

By taking in our external world, we create an internal representation of where we are. The outer enters into us, forming an internal multi-dimensional map. From this ever-shifting inner map, our own rules of engagement, we interact with the external world.

We can't help but take part in this continuous relationship, this constant conversation, between ourselves and life itself. In our meeting with the fabric of life, we weave a tapestry of reality, one sensory thread after another.

The tragedy, however, is that we mute, dim, even cut ourselves off from this vital conversation.

We don't value, and we don't even notice, what it is that we sense and what we feel.



We are always feeling, all of the time.

We cannot not feel. Our body-mind is always absorbing ceaseless amounts of information.

This sensory information is felt. We don't neutrally take in stimuli. We feel what we receive.

"Feelings accompany the unfolding of life in our organisms, whatever one perceives, learns, remembers, imagines, reasons, judges, decides, plans, or mentally creates," says neuroscientist Antonio Damasio. "Regarding feelings as occasional visitors to the mind ... does not do justice to the ubiquity and functional importance of the phenomenon. ... There is no *being*, in the proper sense of the term, without a spontaneous mental experience of life, a feeling of existence. The ground zero of *being* corresponds to **a deceptively continuous and endless feeling state.**"

Our never-ending state of feeling is how we make sense of our senses.

Feelings are communication signals to ourselves about what we are sensing. Feelings inform us of what is beautiful, threatening, dangerous, or desired. Without the ability to feel, we would take in endless data but wouldn't be able to make sense of it.

To feel is to make sense of. To feel is to know.

William James, the psychologist and philosopher, said that depths of feeling "are the only places in the world in which we catch **real fact** in the making." The dancer Yvonne Rainer agreed: she titled her autobiography *Feelings Are Facts*.

Feelings are facts—real facts about our world and our making of it.



In our modern world, we have swept feelings under the rug. We have banished emotional states into eternal exodus.

We have lifted our entire sense of self into our heads, giving sole arbitration of what's real, worthy, and right to the mind.

We value only what we think. We identify exclusively with our thoughts. Pure, rational, logical thinking is the modern world's highest good.

We assume that the less we feel, the more rational and perfect our decisions will be.

But the absurdity of this attempt to strip away feelings from decision-making is that **decision-making is feeling.**

Feelings are how we make choices. It's the mechanism that tells us whether something is right or wrong. Right *feels* very different than how wrong *feels*. Even

when solving a mathematical equation, the *feeling* of the right answer is how we know we have reached completion.

Without feeling you can't decide, because you cannot know what option feels better. Feeling is how we *know* what to decide, regardless of the logical and rational nature of the problem at hand.

Studies of people who have suffered damage to the orbitofrontal cortex—the part of the brain that connects analytic reasoning capacities with emotional states—are revealing. Subjects end up in never-ending rational argumentation, weighing and scrutinizing all available information. But they can never get themselves to make a decision. They aren't capable of weighing the difference between the different options on their menu.

Our objects of mind have weight, and that weight is determined by how they feel. Without feelings there is no weight. No feelings means no deciding.

So, when we discount our feelings to make better decisions, we are discounting the actual tool and arbiter of decision-making itself.



From an early age, we learn to negate what we feel and to distrust our emotions.

When we're scared as children, our parents tell us:

"Oh, that's nothing to be afraid of, my dear."

When we admit our insecurities, our friends tell us:

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that, everything will be fine."

These responses, as well-intentioned as they are, don't acknowledge the fear or the worry. Even though our insecurities might not be "rational", in the moment we are nevertheless still scared or worried. The responses we receive dismiss our fear. They negate what we feel.

We aren't met where we're at. Instead, we're met where other people think we should be.

The constant, reinforced message that "there's nothing to be scared or worried about" teaches us that we can't nor shouldn't trust what we feel.

We learn that what we feel is wrong, and what we somehow "should" feel is right.



This discounting of feeling—through schooling, parenting, and culture—is the result of a several millennia-long movement **upward**. We've pulled our entire sense of self up and out from our bodies and into our heads.

In this upward movement, we've cut off what Candace Pert, neuroscientist and pharmacologist, described as the "the nexus between mind and matter": our emotions. We have severed our bodies.

We have become dissociated.

Dissociation, in psychology and psychiatry, is a state of separation and disconnection. It's a natural response to trauma.

Not all painful experiences lead to trauma responses. Trauma arises when there's a lack of an appropriate emotional capacity to integrate a painful experience. Children, for example, require attuned parents to regulate the emotions in their own nervous systems. Without attunement and regulation, painful emotions become overwhelming.

The body's instinctive reaction to unmanageable, unregulated overwhelm is to cut off access to its felt experience. The person dissociates from their body and their feelings.

Despite the difficulties that dissociation can later entail, it is an elegant, intelligent response in the moment. A traumatizing event is, per definition, overwhelming. It's too much to bear given the person's internal capacities and external circumstances. So severing the link to strong feelings is what makes life manageable.

"Traumatized people are often afraid of feeling," says psychologist Bessel van der Kolk. "It is not so much the perpetrators (who, hopefully, are no longer around to hurt them) but their own physical sensations that are now the enemy."

Physical sensations have become the enemy.

This, in a sentence, is the tragedy of our modern world.

We live on the surface, constantly hovering *on top of* what we feel but never sinking into it. We're terrified of feeling our feelings, just as we are terrified of feeling other people's feelings, too.

This is a necessary, learned response to the world we've grown up in. But we leave so much of life on the table. Since we never sink into ourselves, we are always hovering on the surface. And we end up living in an alternative, semi-hallucinated reality.

"If an individual is deprived of sensory stimulation for a length of time," says psychologist Alexander Lowen, "he will begin to hallucinate. ... The decrease of body sensation caused by the absence of external stimulation or internal motor activity reduces the person's feeling of his body. When a person loses touch with his body, reality fades out."

In our fear of relating to others and ourselves, reality has faded out.



Disconnected.

Negated.

Severed.

Dissociated.

Hallucinated.

This has been the state of our world.

This is the state of most leadership today.

Will this be the state of our future?

COMING HOME

We are called to come home—to ourselves, to our bodies, to our feelings.

Coming home is a reconnection with the birthright of our sensory apparatus, the inner radar, that's been there all along.

It's a clearing away of the cultural cobwebs that devalue feelings, and healing the frozen patterns of fear and overwhelm that remain.

It's a journey of seeing and feeling more clearly what is always and already being felt.

It's a process of arriving more fully and deeply in our natural home.

"We need to come home to the temple of our senses," writes poet John O'Donohue. "Our bodies know that they belong ... **it is our minds that make us homeless.** ... The senses are generous pathways which can bring you home."

To be a leader outwardly, we need to come home inwardly, first.

The path to go out is to go in.



Coming home to ourselves is to come all the way in to who we are. It is to settle, to lovingly and tenderly feel every last nook and cranny of the most intimate and only true home we will ever have: our naked body.

"There is a strong identity," says Juhani Pallasmaa, "between naked skin and the sensation of home. The experience of home is essentially an experience of intimate warmth."

This sense of intimate warmth is that of the motherly embrace.

When a bare child settles into its mother's arms, it can fully settle and relax. The child can let go of any fear that lingers because it knows it doesn't have to protect itself anymore. The child is protected and connected by the intimate warmth.

The child is at home.

To come home as adults is to invite the archetypically feminine and motherly aspects of ourselves into our own experience.

"The first sound that every human hears," John O'Donohue writes, "is the sound of the mother's heartbeat in the dark waters of the womb. ... The sound of the drum brings us consolation because it brings us back to that time when we were at one with the mother's heartbeat. That was a time of complete belonging."

In our state of disconnection, we're missing that sense of complete belonging. We long for the drum, the rhythm of the motherly beat.

"Utshani obulele buvuswa wumlilo umami," the Zulu say. The dead grass is awakened by the fire mother.

We are but dead grass.

To come alive again, we must receive the rhythmic warmth of the fire mother, drumming us awake and welcoming us back into ourselves.



The tragedy of our modern world is that its foundation is dissociation.

Richer and fuller versions of reality are available. But they will remain mere possibilities unless we do the inner work of integration to uncover them.

"If the problem ... is dissociation," says Bessel van der Kolk, "the goal of treatment would be **association**: integrating the cut-off elements of the trauma into the ongoing narrative of life, so that the brain can recognize that 'that was then, and this is now.'"

By learning to integrate with our cut-off parts, we can begin to sink into our bodies. We start updating our notion of time, and increasing our sense of belonging to our bodily home.

This process is a gradual, ongoing practice. There is no finish line.

We are not flawed if we don't feel at home. Nor are we faulty if there is work left to do.

The question is not whether we're at home or not.

The question is simply if we would like to expand our capacity to feel.

If we so choose, there will always be more comfort, more information, more relational capacity available. That path will never end.

With respect and curiosity, you gently get to know your instrument better, more intimately, one nuance and one sensation at a time.

To associate means to reconnect, to find again.

Finding and recovering. Associating and reintegrating.

It's a remembering of our way back home, a waking up to a richer, fuller picture of leadership and life.



The more alive and awake the body is, the greater the capacity to feel.

The greater the capacity to feel, the more of the world can be taken in and responded to.

As capacity increases, new fields of information become available. More of the incoming sensory data can be distinguished and understood. Your map of reality expands.

By sinking into your body, and expanding your own internal map, you begin to sharpen your instrument of leadership. You become increasingly adequate to the task at hand: knowing other people.

"Nothing can be known without there being an appropriate 'instrument' in the makeup of the knower," said E. F. Schumacher. "The understanding of the knower must be adequate to the thing to be known."

The thing to be known is the internal state of others.

The instrument to do so is *your* internal state.

So as you develop your instrument, your knowledge of the external world opens up, too.

What was previously hidden now becomes subtly felt, informing and directing you about what you're experiencing. Your inner radar picks up signals that couldn't be detected before.

You notice the flavor of your colleague's sadness. You can sense the age of your co-founder's fear.

More color becomes available in your world. The resolution of your screen of life gets upgraded from black and white to technicolor. Everything becomes more alive. Everything starts making more sense.

"To make sense is to enliven the senses," says David Abram. "To make sense is to release the body from the constraints imposed by outworn ways of speaking, and hence to renew and rejuvenate one's felt awareness of the world. It is to make the senses wake up to where they are."

You wake up to the informational abundance of where you are.



Leadership is about capacity—to guide, to decide, to shepherd, to hold.

A leader is the vessel for others. **As a leader, you are a container with the capacity to hold the tensions around you**, thereby helping to transform that friction into energy and action.

A leader dares to hold it all.

If others are in pain, if they're scared, if they're buckling under pressure, you sit with it. You take it on board, *feeling* it with your entire nervous system.

By feeling it all, it all becomes information.

You take it in, feel it, and let it marinate, allowing the hidden implications to take form and inform you.

This doesn't paralyze you or freak you out, because you're grounded, you're rooted. **You are OK.**

Just as a tree is OK being a tree, and a lion is OK being a lion, you are OK being you.

If you're able to fundamentally assume that you're OK, then nothing can get to you. You are OK. No matter what.

This doesn't mean that you're stoically unfazed. In fact, it's quite the opposite. **You feel everything.**

When your colleague is sad, you feel her sadness. When your friends are elated, you feel their elation with them.

You laugh, you cry, you grieve. You feel everything, but it doesn't trigger you into defensive, reactionary responses.

Since your fundamental assumption is that you're OK, your system can feel it all without becoming scared, threatened, or overwhelmed. You don't flee from the sensory information you're steeped in. You swim in it.

You're at home. You're grounded and settled, with yourself and with others.

And because you're settled in your body, **you are able to respond rather than react.**



To lead is to meet the fabric of reality. A leader doesn't work with reality as it should be—a leader plays with *what is*.

Leadership is a radical act of acknowledging. It's an embracing of whatever arises with all-encompassing gratitude. As the Fremen say in the novel *Dune*: "Be prepared to appreciate what you meet."

This does not mean supporting or condoning everything that happens. It simply means meeting and receiving what occurs with open arms, without preconceived judgement.

When an event or an emotion is acknowledged and met, it can be felt. And when it's felt, it can be dealt with and responded to.

Too often we close our eyes to what's unfolding. We override, we neglect, we turn away, we push ahead, we avoid.

When we avoid—by denying, banishing, rushing, resisting—we freeze. Avoidance locks-in unprocessed energy and emotion, which then has no option but to repeat itself until it has been completed.

What we resist, persists.

Only by **including**—by appreciating all that we experience, by witnessing, by being with—can resisted emotions be completed. When they are included and welcomed, they begin to shift, melt, and flow. "They actually start to take on a kind

of seasonality," the poet David Whyte says. Emotional winter turns to spring. Ice melts, rivers flow, and plants blossom. Aliveness blooms.

Being able to hold, meet, and be with *what is*—without pretense, without needing to get anywhere, without judgment, without criticism, without looking for anything in particular—is the most sacred form of change.

"As long as we are trying to figure out how we can escape from our present situation, we can't notice much about it," said Chogyam Trungpa. "**Only when we feel that this is it, this is how it is right now, without any clutching toward something different, will our intelligence really come alive.**"

It hinges on our ability to *be with* what we sense and feel. It depends on our capacity to be with our emotions, and those of others.

If we can embrace and learn to thrive in these spaces, we will not just become better humans.

We will become leaders that bring each other home, turning the repetitive patterns of the past into new possibilities of the future.

This is leadership.



"What are you experiencing?"

This is the most beautiful of questions. It invites both parties to become more attuned to **what is happening right now**.

Indeed, what is so refreshing about the body, emotions, feelings, and the felt sense, is that it is all happening right now.

What is happening on the inside, is, per definition, happening right now.

The more intimate we are with what we are feeling, the more present we become.

The greater the precision, the greater our resolution of reality becomes, and the greater our chances of getting where we want to go.

"The remarkable thing about human beings, I find," says David Whyte, "and the merciful thing about human beings is that you only have to articulate *exactly* the way you feel ... and **as soon as you have articulated that exactly as you feel, you're on your way home**. You've started the journey to the place you want to go."



Coming home is to be present. Coming home means being here, in your body, right now.

It's to synchronize and update our notion of time. We bring our mind, body, and emotions into alignment with the current moment.

It's a collective upgrading of our operating systems. We leave our old, outdated, legacy programming behind, and we opt-in for new updates as they become available.

The degree to which we can come home to ourselves tells us the state of our own homes.

If home is a comfortable, up-to-date place, then we will feel OK being there.

But, "if home is painful," says modern mystic Thomas Hübl, "we are constantly journeying."

The constant journeying we do internally is reflected in our external choices. Our outer world is a mirror image of our inner homes.

So many of us are constantly journeying, always travelling, never here right now. We're always on the way to other places, other feelings, other times. We're even on our way to other planets.

The world becomes what we make it.

We, as leaders, are vessels for the future.

If we are running outdated software in our homes, tomorrow will be the past.

If our internal software is up-to-date, then tomorrow will be the future it can be.



Leadership is not only an outward journey.

It is an inner exploration.

We lead to come home again.

As T.S. Eliot said:

*And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And to know the place for the first time.*

Exploration *is* coming home, again and again.

There is no destination. There is no point at which we can say we are finally at home. There is only the process of learning to find our way home more intimately.

Again and again.



Home is an inner belonging.

A belonging to ourselves—to our body, our own temple of the senses.

A belonging to each other—determined not by how much we agree, but on our capacities to attune to and feel each other.

A belonging to life itself—to what Mary Oliver calls our “place in the family of things.”

Coming home is a path of reclaiming the birthright of your bodily instrument.

It’s a path of developing the capacity to hold and be with your own emotions and those of others.

It’s a path of being the vessel for turning darkness into light.

To come home again and again, in every waking moment. It’s a giving birth to oneself, to each other, and to life, in each and every instant.

This is creation.

This is leadership.

This is life.

Sources and recommended reading:

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Thomas Hübl, "Celebrate Life Festival 2019 – Summary"

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