CHAPTER

1

The Central Problem Affecting Work

The War on Imagination, and How I Lost My Creative Courage

Have cake and tea with your demons. When we shun our own darkness (our weaknesses, our anger, our sadness, our shame, our pain), we are disconnecting ourselves from the full spectrum of elements that exists within ourselves and the rest of the universe.

Yumi Sakugawa[1]

I. Raising the Curtain

Finding in North Korea the Words for an Old Problem

I was on my way to lunch in Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea, officially the Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK), on my third day there. Every day at the Koryo Hotel, one of the only lodging options in the city for foreigners, I was greeted by an ageless man as the elevator's doors opened. His responsibilities seem to be to discreetly smile when someone entered the elevator and press the buttons leading to the appropriate floors. From my limited point of view, his third task seemed the most consequential. It was to arrange, impeccably, a doormat-size carpet on the elevator's floor indicating, in English, the day of the week. The daily ritual of leaving my room and walking through an absurdly dimly lit corridor on one of the highest floors of the hotel was systematically accompanied by this visual reference to the current day of the week. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday . . . And it was on that Wednesday that I was about to feel a visceral and sudden unease and fear when I discovered a four-headed monster that was hiding in plain sight.

My temperature rose, I felt disoriented, panicked. The monster was invisible yet powerful. On one head, I could suddenly see its dysfunction and on another one how it was a result of a profound clash between the past and the present. The third head turned at various speeds, abnormally, unusually. The last head, the fourth one, appeared completely disconnected, from the other ones, unaware.

Why I Was in North Korea

Some of the world's best flying trapeze acts ever created come mostly from the former Soviet Union's countries (Russia, Ukraine), from China, and, less known, from North Korea. For close to two decades, troupes from North Korea won many major prizes and gold medals in some of the most prestigious festivals and competitions on the international circus arts event circuit: Monte Carlo, Monaco, Circus of Tomorrow in Paris, Zhuhai in China, and others. In fact, they typically won the biggest prize in their category.

The reputation of these troupes in the international talent scouting circles was not a secret, and everyone also knew that it was nearly impossible to hire artist troupes from that region other than for short stints in international festivals and performances in China. The prestige of those flying trapeze troupes was a source of pride for North Korea and its government was actively supporting their development. Circus in North Korea was an outlet to demonstrate the talent of its designers in acrobatics and the might of its people. Bringing such a troupe to the Cirque du Soleil, based in the West, and offering contracts spanning generally two years suggested major, controversial, cultural clashes. In short, it felt impossible to bring such a troupe to the West despite their recognized talents.

A New Role for Me: Cultural Diplomat

I was in North Korea by mere chance. By the beginning of 2008, I had already played several important functions at Cirque du Soleil within the talent casting team. I had traveled the world to find distinctive contortionists and trapeze artists, but also dancers, singers, physical actors, musicians, and even comic actors or clowns who formed the different troupes of the Cirque du Soleil shows. I was now in charge of leading discussions to create collaborations with sports federations, arts organizations, and circus schools around the world. In the evolution of my roles as talent scout and later as director of the casting advising team, I was acting as a sort of cultural diplomat for Cirque du Soleil with the title of strategic relationship director for arts, sports, and circus.

With the company presenting over fifteen different shows simultaneously around the world, my new objective was to facilitate the access and the long-term recruitment of artists by developing an international network of partnerships between Cirque du Soleil and many national and global federations and schools. This role offered me the opportunity to work closely with several pioneers and experts in body movement, entertainment technology, the performing arts, sports high performance, and circus arts at Cirque du Soleil and beyond.

A Beautiful-Impossible Objective

The utopian and positive spirit present in Cirque du Soleil's creation was both a source of inspiration and a reinforcement of some of my instincts. In my

naive, idealistic view of the world and my excitement over this new role, I had set a few key goals for myself and the small team I was working with. One of my objectives was to establish the groundwork for an eventual connection between our team of professional acrobatic designers, arguably some of the best in the world, and their counterparts from the Pyongyang National Circus in North Korea. I was dreaming that we could rise beyond the politics of our respective regions, that we could create a cultural bridge to exchange ideas on best practices and innovation in trapeze act design and performances—if or when the situation ever improved between our countries, some time, in an unforeseen, distant future. It was a long shot, what I called a *beautiful-impossible dream*, and what Team X from Google calls Moonshot projects and goals, an objective that I liked to set for myself among more pragmatic milestones.

Whenever I establish a direction for my work and think about its eventual impact, setting at least one truly out-of-the-ordinary objective on my list became a must and a best practice after the experience in North Korea. The founder of Cirque du Soleil, Guy Laliberté, referred at times to the mission of the company as bringing dreams and peace to the world through shows and entertainment, something I translated and adapted as being a warrior for peace and dreams into my work. Inspired by this beautiful-impossible objective and the idea of being a warrior for peace and dreams, I imagine my work to have a potential impact on the horizon of five to seven years. I thought that if I could establish a few critical, strategic contacts in North Korea, even if I was long gone or had moved to a new role at Cirque du Soleil, the casting team would be able to take advantage of that groundwork and eventually create the knowledge and cultural exchange I was visualizing. No one truly believed that this initiative would go anywhere, and so nobody tried to stop me.

Dreams of Peace

I was also considering this project because when I was a child, I had dreamed of becoming a diplomat, helping to achieve peace in the most conflicted parts of our world. Later, at twenty years old, I got emotional when President Bill Clinton invited Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization chairman Yasser Arafat to "shake hands for peace in the world" at the White House in 1993.

After a short and inconclusive stint in political science at the University of Montreal, Canada, I was left feeling ambivalent about the discipline,

while still passionately interested in discovering the inner workings of our world and its potential for peace and harmony. I thought that opening the possibility for our designers and those in North Korea meeting and exchanging innovative ideas on how to make people fly was a way to express a form of creativity. It could move us closer to an inner aspiration for mutual understanding, meaningful insight, and the discovery that art calls for again and again: that beyond our differences, we share something elemental and universal that can unite us all.

There was this possible promise stemming from the fact that anywhere in the world, kids of any origin, background, and culture resonated with awe and wonder when seeing a human fly from one trapeze to another. In something as simple yet as extraordinarily complex as a flying trapeze act, cultures could be transcended, even if just for a moment. In some ways, my idealism and naiveté prevented me from seeing the obvious obstacles; instead they gave me a push to move forward where others might not have even started.

Circus Diplomacy

I reached out to the Canadian embassy in Ottawa in winter and spring 2008, explaining the essence of the project and my role at Cirque du Soleil. I didn't know when I called that the Canadian Foreign Affairs Services was involved, through its embassy in Seoul, South Korea, in quiet efforts to ease the tensions in the region and help engage the North Korean government in international talks toward peace. Just before my call to Ottawa, apparently a new initiative was about to be deployed for engaging with the leadership of North Korea through cultural and social exchanges and discussions. Very quickly after one of my calls with the Canadian diplomatic team in Ottawa and Seoul, a new expression was born: circus diplomacy.

Approximately four months from my first call in Ottawa, I had established a link with North Korea's permanent mission to the United Nation; hosted them in Montreal for a dinner and a tour of our facilities at Cirque du Soleil's International Headquarters; and explained the possibility of eventual cultural exchange between our respective heads of acrobatic design. Where I imagined an outcome over five to seven years, I found myself suddenly catapulted into the middle of diplomatic complexities,

nuances, and potential perils of international politics in one of the world's most sensitive and volatile regions.

Even if Cirque du Soleil shows had never made it to North Korea, the designers of the National Circus of Pyongyang, the Ministry of Culture and Foreign Services Department were very aware of Cirque's work and interested in engaging with its representatives. I have no doubt that Cirque's reputation made the process to visit their country, famously difficult to access, not only possible but fast-tracked.

I was accompanied by a colleague from the casting team, an acrobatic talent scout, and the Canadian ambassador to North Korea, based in Seoul, and his retinue, on our way from Beijing to Pyongyang. Arriving at the Pyongyang International Airport was a notable experience. As soon as we crossed the gate at the border, an agent asked for our passports and our cell phones. Each of our phones was placed in an individual burgundy velvet sachet, and kept at the airport during our entire stay.

A Monster at Lunch

In the elevator that Wednesday afternoon at the hotel, three days into this trip, I looked down at the doormat-size carpet and read "WEDNESDAY" in bright yellow, surrounded by a cheerful blue background and a corresponding rectangular yellow lining.

I was making my way to the one functioning revolving restaurant of the two rotating eateries perched near the top of the hotel and offering a prized panoramic view of the city. Although the hotel's capacity was five hundred guests, I estimated that we were probably only fifteen to twenty clients for a staff of about ninety. Through the restaurant's speakers, the persistent music of the revolution echoed, both epic and mysterious, just above the sound of a whisper, as my colleague and I spoke with our guardian who was assigned to follow and lead us everywhere except in our bedroom.

Over cold noodles, a delicious North Korean specialty that can also be served spicy hot, barbecue beef, and a local version of *cheongju*, a fermented clear rice wine similar to Japanese sake, my colleague and I carried on a conversation with our guardian as we would with any other lunch companion. We tried to balance our curiosity to know more about this seemingly impenetrable world we had managed to enter with the invisible boundaries set out by our dissimilar conditions. I knew not to comment on

anything political; not to take photographs of political leaders' statues or billboards without authorization; and not to be intrusive about any topics that could be interpreted incorrectly. Despite all that, we shared moments of genuine laughter and could relate to our shared humanity. My initial difficulty with manipulating my plate of brown, slightly translucent cold noodles provided lots of comic relief.

Suddenly the restaurant started revolving, and it offered an astounding view of the city and its blunt, stark attributes. On the horizon was a surreal sight, unthinkable in the West, absent any publicity other than billboards with images of the political leaders of the dynastic Kim family (called "Dear Leaders") or posters glorifying the state's hegemony and power. There were no personal cars in the streets and only scattered working traffic lights; only governmental vehicles were authorized to circulate. The few citizens walking, even without carrying a single bag with them, seemed to carry something indiscernible yet unusually heavy inside them. Through the large windows, I could see a huge chimney in the city center spewing thick gray-white smoke into an increasingly cloudy sky.

The pace of life in the streets of the capital appeared so slow, covert, and halting that I had the vivid impression that everything around me was turning into black and white, not like Madonna's "Vogue" video of 1990 but Chaplin's *Modern Times*. I was suddenly feeling the full force of being a cog in an impersonal, immaterial, and strange machine.

Panic

This was the moment in my trip to North Korea where I unexpectedly became utterly depressed and confused, although there was nothing visible to explain it. Fighting nausea and something akin to an inner panic attack, scared perhaps that I wouldn't be able to leave the country through some terrible, arbitrary misunderstanding, I couldn't shake the feeling that the monotonous procession of weekday doormats, diligently set up in the elevator, would never end.

While I was feeling lost, pessimistic, and struggling to smile, even to my colleague and our keeper, I needed to escape to the bathroom from a city that was bare, austere, and implacable. After days of visiting historical monuments, I couldn't help but notice the broken city lights, exposed in plain sight as a forgotten priority from a time long past. I couldn't pretend not to take stock of the unfinished buildings that once were the promise of

the city's aspirational modernity, independence, and pride. I was now the startled witness of a city, a country perhaps, put on pause from a TV remote made in the 1970s, with crumbling buildings and shivering from the cold and the not-so-secret energy crisis.

Staying too long anywhere becomes suspicious, so I quickly used warm water and then a paper cloth to wipe my face dry. I compare my sensation then to being suddenly hit by freezing rain, cold winds, without having an umbrella for protection despite the urgent need to run home.

In Pyongyang, the deep sadness that fell on me and that I had observed in the streets expanded as I sat down and quickly drank a few sips of rice wine with my lunch companions. Disoriented, I was trying not to follow the curved windows of the revolving restaurant. The room's speakers projected the sound of a choir celebrating the valor of North Korea's army. Outside, erected to honor North Korea's official ideology of self-reliance, called *Juche*, stood the country's highest construction: a 560-foot tower with a monumental plastic orange and red flame-shaped light bulb. At night, it was one of the few buildings still lit through the deep darkness of this urban area.

A Beam of Insight with Words

As I had been making my way back to our table while the light was resolutely leaving the cityscape, I was having trouble finding the words for what I was feeling. All of a sudden, a beam of insight revealed a clarity that continues to support my reflections and thinking around creativity and leadership practices. Whether I'm considering how to best mobilize teams, how to support the creation of great cultures, and how to stay relevant to employees, team members, audiences, customers, and clients alike, I owe a lot of inspiration to that moment of disorientation and subsequent discernment. I was able, for the first time in the heart of Pyongyang, to move beyond the emotional intensity of the moment and put personal words on a distinct experience.

I was experiencing in North Korea at that moment the consequences of a phenomenon that I eventually called the *war on imagination*. Following this trip, I tried to understand, articulate, and characterize the attributes of that unique war, as my experience in North Korea led me to observe its pervasiveness, shape-shifting qualities, and core invisibility.

You can recognize the presence of the war on imagination not by the war itself but by its impact (like my physical sensations in North Korea), the conditions that lead to its expansion, and the toxic environment it produces.

In that moment, at my lunch table in the hotel, I felt the overbearing weight of restrictions put on me and my fellow humans in North Korea, and it almost instantly took my breath away. Those who live under that war on imagination ask for permission, authorization, validation, approval, and consent before they do anything, or they just shut down into not asking much from life anymore. Imagination becomes something suspicious and subversive that must be suppressed. Progressively, without realizing it, we bury the truth of who we are and try to hide as best as we can our attraction for the light in life. In its most extreme form, the war on imagination makes you lose sight of the sacredness of any life, including your own.

We typically associate imagination with artistic creativity or technological innovation, but it is a critical mind-set that can influence every aspect of our lives. Imagination represents the potential that we all have to expand on our abilities to use our hearts and minds in visualizing our lives differently from how they currently are. With practice, imagination gives us the power to project mental images of the future that exist only in our mind onto the screen of the present, like in a movie theater. The more we use our heart and mind to project invented realities or parts of made-up realities in our present, the better we become at using the critical skill of imagination. The more we trust our ability to imagine what's not there yet, the better we improve as innovators; integrators of differences, diversities, and possibility makers; and problem solvers. We embrace the dance with the unknown and the chance for us to become sense maker or meaning maker.

Imagination encapsulates our ability to invent the totality or parts of our lives, even if these parts don't exist yet. Finally, imagination can be a source of growth and mental flexibility, beyond the creation of symbols (art), the invention of tools (technology), and the adaptation of languages (coding), for our hearts and minds. Simply put, through imagination, we can dramatically enhance our relationship with life and the life of those around us. The war on imagination threatens all of that.

A Four-Headed Monster

After the pain and subsequent awakening I experienced in North Korea, I started to identify the most fundamental features of the war on imagination and settled on four of them: dysfunctional leadership, a clash between the past and the present, speed anomaly, and deliberate unawareness.

Dysfunctional Leadership

Dysfunctional leadership refers to autocratic-despotic-dogmatic (*I can only be right*), ungenerous (*it's about me, not about you*), or myopic (*all eyes on the bottom line, by any means*) approaches (or combinations of these) to leadership. Usually these destructive leadership attributes are the result of fear, conscious or not, layered on a sophisticated defense or attack mechanism—or both. These leadership approaches are often expressed through hubris (extreme arrogance), insularity, and delusional self-reliance. Certainly my experience in North Korea exposed the extreme of that dysfunction and how logic can become absurd. The entire contents of the hotel bookshop, for example, had more than a thousand books, all authored by North Korea's leaders. The war on imagination is present when the space for dissension, criticism, or opposition to a situation that anyone inside the country would see as unfair is absent.

Clash between the Past and the Present

The clash between the past and the present stems from an aggravated tension between the establishment's values and the transformative power of aspirations anchored in the present. In such an environment, the future is even more unpredictable, blurry, and opaque. Pyongyang then offered an almost physical representation of a city caught between the past and the present. It gave the impression that it tried to physically stop the progression of time, bare-handed. Its core philosophy of self-reliance metamorphosed into extreme protectionism and isolation from most of the rest of the world.

Speed Anomaly

In a context of speed anomaly**,** things are either moving too slowly or too fast for comfort and clarity. When the pace of needed improvements is too slow for comfort and yearned changes seem almost impossible, a sense of entropy, deterioration, even the absence of movement, can set in. This situation can bring a feeling of backward movement where time traveling becomes a fantasy and opposition to progress becomes the only celebrated development. In this way, we try to hold on to the fleeting past and keep it safe in a box. In contrast, the speed of change and transformation can be so fast that people feel that there's no reasonable time to think and absorb what those revolutions truly represent for their lives.

In speed anomaly, the feeling of being out of touch, of being unable to keep up with the present, is magnified and even exaggerated. Typically, when the values of the past have the upper hand (conservation), the march of transformation slows, and when the present's aspirations take over blindly (transformation), it throws away the references from the past, brusquely, as fast as possible.

As I was driven through Pyongyang and observed the citizens walking to work or home, I'd had the vivid impression of hundreds of thousands of people walking hurriedly, but paradoxically in slow motion, on thousands of treadmills, neither advancing nor going backward. Without being able to explain it, I also felt that this paradox was not exclusive to North Korea.

Deliberate Unawareness

In deliberate unawareness, we put on a blindfold when we face issues and problems that we want to avoid even though we know that they are in front of us. We hope that by ignoring them or even pretending that they are not there, we will be able to thrive without dealing with them. Even when faced with the most obvious evidence, we refuse to see what's in front of us. Everywhere in Pyongyang, there were traces of unfinished projects and the brutal impact left by the passage of time. Construction of the 105-story Ryugyong Hotel, started in 1987, has never been finished. When visitors ask about the immense construction in the middle of the city, their keepers explain that it will be finished very soon.

The Two Pillars of the War on Imagination: Unconsciousness and Time

The war on imagination finds its bedrock in two pillars: unconsciousness and time. Unconsciousness refers to an insular, autocratic, or ungenerous leadership that favors not generosity but control and the fear of losing it as the ultimate currency and source of power. It also encompasses the deliberate and systematic denial of truth or facts that are unwelcome or would put a predetermined course of action in question.

The second pillar, time, refers to the aggravated disharmony between the values from the past and the movement of transformation or innovation in the present. There's always a natural tension between our conventions—the

result of our history—on one hand, and our aspirations to improve and grow, on the other hand. The tension between the past and the present, where our imagination thrives, is one of the most profound sources of our creativity and the bridge that allows us to shape the future. These movements forward are supported by discoveries in the world and within ourselves. When this natural tension between these two poles moves beyond a tolerable point, creativity and growth are still possible, but the risk of damaging conflicts, confusion in direction, and destruction also increases.

When that tension is exacerbated, when the cultural anchors grown and established out of heritage clash with the call of transformation and the plea of the future, the profound and dangerous disharmony that emerges contributes to the intensity of the war on imagination. This is usually when we start dreaming of going back in time (*We had so much fun when we were only sixty employees!*), stopping time, or beaming ourselves into the future. In short, when the past and the future fight in the present because of a marked acceleration of changes (technology leap, major historical updates, political change of paradigm, restructuration at work), our ability to use imagination through the filters of our heart and mind is at risk of succumbing to the war.

When we try to make an initial assessment of our culture at work, we might notice an autocratic, insular, or ungenerous leadership at the upper echelon. This is a clear indicator that a war on imagination is brewing. We might also participate in the debate that most organizations will have to grapple with at some point: how to find harmony between their heritage (even start-ups deal earlier than they realize with their culture) and their need to stay relevant in the present and the future.

The easiest, most predictable posture for me in North Korea would be to stand tall, victorious, superior and to say that this was the only place—mysterious, opaque, insular, dictatorial, obstinate, arbitrary, even cruel—where my painful epiphany and such an invisible war could exist and take place. But I realized that what I found in Pyongyang were only the words to describe something I had experienced before. This wasn't the first time that I could sense that my ability to imagine the world could potentially be threatened, challenged, discouraged, even denigrated, in an instant. The more profound insight was that I didn't need to visit Pyongyang to observe in and around me the impact of the war on imagination. That understanding led me to realize that none of us is immune to the presence and the effect of the war on imagination, no matter where we live. At least I now had the words, acting like a spotlight in theater, to call its bluff.

The War Closer to Us

The war on imagination is vicious and pernicious and it doesn't need any political affiliations to rear its four heads. We feel it every time we don't face up to mistakes, discern the sharpness of our limitations, and debunk our delusions. It's there when we become self-righteous, thinking that we have all the answers and consider it more important to be right than happy. It can also do a lot of damage when our inner voice of critic expresses its doubt about our initiatives, our aspirations, and who we truly are. The war on imagination creates a context where we can become rigid, manipulative, arrogant, self-defeating, insular, and even cruel to others and ourselves. When spread inside an entire organization, these attributes expand, affecting the very engagement of its members. It's a war that affects our ability to see the world with love when we are the ones waging it. It guards us against saying "sorry" when we hurt others.

Alternatively, when we fall victim to its aggression, it prevents us from walking in the world with confidence. Impulsively and fearfully, we find ourselves asking for permission just to breathe and exist. And a question we ask ourselves and receive from the world lingers incessantly: "Who do you think you are?"

In both cases, aggressor or victim, the war on imagination promotes an anticreative life, or a creativity channeled toward destruction, subjugation, concrete or metaphoric, of what is not us, of what doesn't look like us, and of what doesn't agree with us. As I observed it in North Korea, the paradox about the extreme form of the war on imagination there was that it could take the life out of you without necessarily killing you, which made it that much more dangerous and insidious.

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In the end, I didn't manage to bring our acrobatic design experts together with theirs and bring about world peace. Flying trapezes didn't stop the tension between humans in the region. Nonetheless, I learned something precious about myself during that trip that I brought all the way back home.

Childhood Dreams and the Personal War

My parents loved me passionately, if not adroitly. They were constantly fearful that something bad would happen to me so they protected my every

move. Eventually their control over my young, free-spirited self quickly grew to an intolerable point of no return. According to their filtered view of the world, I couldn't learn to swim with my schoolmates because the indifferent pool monitors would let me drown; I couldn't go to the corner store with my friends because if one of them stole something, they would then accuse me and the police would put me in jail; if I played soccer, the team would leave me behind, on my own, alone on the field. In fact, that last situation did happen when I was about ten years old, and it reinforced their fears for my safety. According to their view, tragedy, injustice, and unfair treatment would follow me even when it came to innocently buying candy around the corner from our house. I couldn't see the danger they saw everywhere, and I was left time and again puzzled, angry, and sad.

Born in Paradox

My parents came from Haiti, where the fruits of imagination were everywhere to grasp while the political and religious leadership of the country discouraged, expelled, or even killed those expressing imagination or creativity outside the established norms of their times. Despite it all, in the way that people lived, survived, and spoke in Creole and French, the vivaciousness and humor of the people's imagination was fragrant, colorful, and fearlessly expressive, subverting the war on imagination taking place in their country. People there lived and sometimes thrived against all odds, and my parents brought that mentality of survival and dignity when they moved for good to Canada. But my parents were not culture hackers; if anything, they were very attached to their faith and religion.

Fitting In, Not Standing Out

I was born a few years after my parents emigrated to Canada, and I grew up in Montreal's East End with a distorted sense of what imagination was. I probably never heard the word *creativity* in the circles in which I grew up. If anything, I learned from my parents that imagination was suspicious and could bring trouble. It was an expression of arrogance, they thought, even blasphemy to make things up when our "Creator had already figured it all out" and a book had been written with prescriptions for all of us.

My parents wanted me to become a medical doctor like Marcus Welby M.D., the iconic TV doctor in the 1970s played by Robert Young. For a

while, out of vanity and a need to please them, I aspired to become somebody that I fundamentally wasn't. They, like so many other parents before who had emigrated under immense stress and sacrifice, threw all their efforts in making sure that my younger brother Wendy, my sister Annie, and I fit in the new society they had adopted. Their core parental message was to never stand out, whatever we did, and to always fit in so we could stay out of trouble and go unnoticed.

In hindsight, they likely wanted us to be safe more than they wanted us to succeed because even that might have exposed us to the potential danger they saw everywhere. Security mattered more to them than entrepreneurial grit or creative courage, although they had risked it all by leaving their country to live in a sub-zero-degree climate. If I can observe this paradox in my parents' choices and priorities, it's hardly unique to them.

In fact, these are familiar tropes that many of us have been exposed to from an early age: *work hard; don't look too high; do your best to fit in; don't stand out; who do you think you are?* That message of conformism is not exclusive to immigrants. It's a message that sits at the core of our societies' need for control of the unknown, and under the wrong kind of leadership, it's a petri dish for the war on imagination to prosper. Blind conformism, unquestioned and never upgraded, is a creed that we find overtly or covertly expressed under the guise of celebrating individuals in every modern society, from the most conservative workplaces to many offices and headquarters considered to be paragons of creativity and innovation in the world.

My Personal War

Despite my parents' best intentions and their determination for me and my siblings to thrive, they unwittingly unleashed a similar war on imagination in our house. It was a war that I would observe and feel in my body and my bones many years later while eating Korean-style barbecue and cold noodles in the heart of North Korea.

The epicenter of that nameless war then, as I was heading toward preadolescence, found its most acute and painful expression in my con-frontational and combustible relationship with my father. We didn't agree on much as I was growing up, and most of our disagreements would end in verbal or physical violence. He would exert his authority and rules-superabundant parenting in the way he had learned from his own father

in Haiti by trying to stop any expression of dissidence from me with his hands and with a variety of objects.

I felt the effects of the war on imagination in a concrete way as a child and adolescent in and on my body. My father used violence as a way to beat the imagination out of me and keep my light from shining too brightly: *Fit in; conform; follow the rules; keep your voice down; work harder than anyone else; if you are not careful, you will be abandoned; with so many mistakes, it's almost too late for you now; wake up.* Every time he beat me, one or a combination of those messages was meant to enter my flesh, like a potent magical body lotion that left bold scarlet marks on my small frame as reminders for me to meditate on and pray through my tears.

My father didn't beat me out of love, nor out of cruelty, mercilessness, or pettiness but out of fear. He feared losing control of something he saw in me, a light that wasn't for him a source of orientation but something that would single me out, that would make me stand out in the world and bring trouble to my life. He saw in me the light that every kid has—the light of discovery and imagination, the source of our creative life force, the light that by its mere existence is already challenging the past and the status quo.

The war on imagination can emerge from the most positive intentions and legitimate goals. In my case, my father wanted to keep me safe and protect me from the discrimination that he suffered and from the harm of being denigrated. But his attempts at controlling my life made him the chief general of a war that nobody could win. The extent of that war expressed itself in concrete and disastrous ways. I was beaten with white electric extension cords, wet face cloths, a telephone. I was beaten with a kitchen table that perfectly fit the description of fake country antique. I was beaten with an oak bunk bed ladder that had two metal hooks to fix its body to the bed railings. I was beaten with a dark burgundy leather belt, a fine testament to the style meanderings of the 1970s. I find it curious and surprising looking back that a man like my father wore a belt that RuPaul himself might wear with aplomb and swagger today. I was beaten with a classic black leather belt, and a brown one and one with a big metal buckle celebrating the bold fashion of the 1980s, and with a badminton racket. I even had a kitchen slicing knife with a light green avocado handle pointed at my throat in a fit of anger.

I made furious, futile runs as I tried to escape the belts, hands, verbal invectives, and flying objects to dodge one more lash or hit.

My younger brother Wendy, agile in dark, resilient humor, joked some years later when we were adults that the only time my father got close to us

or touched us during our childhood was to impose his will or frustrations by beating us.

There was no smart love at home, and the environment in which I grew up in was not conducive to any of us thriving; getting by was a better, more realistic option. Nobody could thrive through the impact of the war on imagination, waged with good intentions by my father and by forces much greater than him: not my dad, who was a high school teacher; not my mom, a pastry chef; not my brother or sister. Consequently, we became strangers to each other. We were bonded by our context and circumstances, but our links never deepened in intimacy, closeness, trust, or openness. Our family space had no sharable magic.

The Process of Creating Remarkable Communities

Perhaps because of my family experience steeped in pain, I became curious when I very young to learn more about what makes leaders and communities achieve remarkable, constructive things. Was there a way to lead, inspired by kindness, fairness, and real love rather than fear and despotic control? Without knowing anything about leadership, management, teamwork, success, or collaboration, my sensitivity to functioning at the highest level possible without inflicting psychological and physical abuse on anyone was emerging.

Church

Another source for my interest in the creation of positive communities came from the role that church played on my young mind during childhood. The experience of going to a place of worship, no matter the denomination, is connected, beyond faith, to building a sense of community, to belonging to a group. It's also about performances (singing, playing music, speaking, praying, sermonizing, teaching, debating). Both the sense of being part of a group of kindred spirits and the performances can play a role in the sensory happening and the rituals of each visit.

Learning about Good and Bad Performances

As a child, I could already see the impact of a good or a bad performance from a pastor on my parents and grandmother when we'd go to different

churches. I'd often mentally compare notes. We'd go to the Pentecostal churches led by some members of the Haitian diaspora, nestled in the most improbable, inexpensive rental locations in Montreal, to the main church my family would eventually settle in, on Papineau Street near the subway of the same name and the gay village, established by locals, mixing Quebec-born citizens with immigrants from around the world; to the churches from myriads of denominations that we would visit from time to time for a wedding, a concert, or a funeral.

At four years old, as I imitated Elvis Presley in our living room with a carrot in hand as my microphone and an eight-track tape as my backup vocal, I intuitively yearned to understand not only the magic of performance but also the process behind the magic.

Surreal, Scary Stories from My Parents' Homeland

Finally, another strong reason for that interest in process and results stemmed from my parents' lives as Haitian immigrants. For most of its history, Haiti has been led by so-called strongmen, dictators, and other authoritarian figures—colonial and then native. My parents had escaped the increasingly oppressive island in the 1970s. I was born a few years later in Montreal and have unfortunately visited Haiti only twice, at four and six years of age.

Despite my lack of familiarity with my parents' homeland, I was enthralled by the stories and news they would discuss with their friends and family, late at night, long after I was supposed to be in bed, about this notoriously ill yet beautiful, magical, obstinate country. The stories and news they shared were scary, heartbreaking, funny, and often surreal. There was the story of how my grandfather had stopped the rain to allow my young father to walk through a forest near Gonaives so he could get to an exam without getting wet. There was the story of the friends of the students' associations who would suddenly disappear, never to be seen again, and the fear of the Tonton Macoute, a special operations force, ruthless and brutal, that policed the country under their own arbitrary and cruel rules, even snatching kids to make them disappear (the force's name comes from a mythological Haitian Creole character who kidnaps children).

There were also other stories that we couldn't talk about because they involved too much magic, and that too was suspicious at home. In essence, though, they were stories not so different from those shared around the

world on hardship and the will to rise beyond suffering. Around the kitchen table, my parents and their friends from time to time yearned for and dreamed and fantasized that Haiti would transform itself and finally get its affairs in order. They would tell those stories in disbelief, in irony, laughing and crying at the same time.

In my child's mind and heart, as I heard these stories not meant for me, I often dreamed that perhaps I could find a solution to these problems and sources of heartbreak for my parents. I would wonder if I could find a way to fix my parents' country. Maybe, as a ten-year-old, I could take a plane during the night, I could go there and talk to those people in power, convince them that a better way was possible. As a child emissary, I would speak truth and sense to power! *What if goodwill and love could change everything?* I wondered as I lay awake. My parents, particularly my dad, would be so proud of my heroic efforts. I wanted to do something impossible and beautiful for them.

I dreamed, as a child, of nothing less than saving an entire country, my parents' country, fantasizing that after such a feat, our family life would certainly be more peaceful and the conflict with my father less frequent. In radical contrast, and more in line with my age I had another vibrant dream, this one of dancing in one of Michael Jackson's videos. In fact, this happened when I started giving open-air break-dance classes in my neighborhood at Parc Liébert next to my elementary school in Montreal. It was also in that school that I performed, dressed as a highly approximate, improvised Michael Jackson look-alike for the kindergartners.

To Be Like MJ

Although 1984 marked the beginning of the video clip era in Canada, the access to videos was only occasional, as TV was in our home. Nonetheless, I had somehow found a way to study Michael Jackson's videos and moves. Even though I didn't look anything like the famous superstar, my teacher had organized a few shows for me to perform. Apparently, after my performance, the kids thought that I was the real Michael Jackson, despite my broken English and my royal blue baseball bomber jacket, dark pants, white socks, and running shoes.

I'd learn about the power of storytelling with the half-baked staging of my entrance in the kindergarten class. With my relatively small cassette tape player, offering to the audience the option of "Beat It" on one side and

"Billy Jean" on the other side of the BASF cassette, I would tell the class, half in invented English, half in French, with a fabricated high-pitched voice, that I could stay for only one performance since my helicopter was waiting for me outside to continue on to a world tour. The kids screamed with enthusiasm, and I magically made them travel with me to this imaginary world where for about four minutes, Michael Jackson had come to visit their class despite his extremely busy schedule. I remember the rush of adrenaline before and after showing my skills, and the eyes of the kids admiring my moonwalk, spins, and signature moves. I would leave the class shaking and proud. Through the power of imagination and play, we had transformed our lives for a few moments.

When my father learned about my dance performance at school, he profoundly disapproved. I was living parts of the similar story of a punishing, strict father in *Footloose* or *Billy Elliot* before these movies were released and long before I could see them myself. For my father and for our church, dance was suspicious; it meant moving with the unknown, the invisible. Dance was also insidiously sensual and therefore sexual, a sacrilege that could put you in touch with unseen forces and take control of your body. Dance was not serious but it was dangerous; it was the language of thugs and others who didn't respect the sanctity of order. Dance meant using your imagination to move molecules around you, and if my grades at school were not as good as they should be, it was probably because of the distractions of dance. Dance had nothing to do with my future success, and it needed to be stopped. My father did his best to get dance out of me, trying at times to physically remove it as if it were clothing too large for my body.

Masters of Illusion

A few years would go by and I kept wanting to dance, and it kept creating trouble for me. Never short on the only kind of stories that the war on imagination relishes, I was accused of "bringing Satan in a place of worship" when I tried to show friends at church how to do the break-dance windmill moves (in fact, I didn't really know how to do the move, and I should have been accused instead of bragging and lying). I had also secretly formed a break-dance crew near the end of elementary school, and we had all managed to save enough money by various means to buy a wonderful navy blue, white-striped Adidas crew windbreaker with "Masters of Illusion" printed on the back.

Every day, I hid the coat in my schoolbag, left home, turned the street corner, looked behind me, changed sidewalks, got closer to the baseball bleachers next to the park where I gave break-dance classes, and quickly changed coats, becoming one of the masters of illusion. At the end of the school day, I changed coats again before making my way home.

I remember the feeling of walking with my crew one day after school, intoxicated by the sensation of oneness and coolness that emanated from all of us. The girls, the other kids, the teachers: everyone smiled at our nascent swag. I felt free on those modest, working-class streets of eastern Montreal. I'd forget for a moment the many confrontations with my father. Now, I was one of the masters of illusion, and the war on imagination didn't exist. What if we were the next sensation to drop on the world? Montreal East, the new hub for talent after Brooklyn!

That's when my father suddenly emerged, like a dark force, from a street corner in his bright blue Ford Mercury Monarch, and angrily summoned me home. I was visibly scared and ashamed in front of my friends. At our house, I reluctantly gave up my beloved secret jacket, as my father requested, and he ripped it apart, like a violent surgery, separating in front of my eyes the words "Masters of" from "Illusion." It's as if my dad had ripped my heart out and scarred any future attempts at reconciliation between us.

The war on imagination was taking its toll on my spirit, and the resounding message sounded something like: "Don't dance, and don't bring that silly, dangerous magic home."

The Inner War

Over time, through escalating conflicts with my father, I was forced to make a choice that most kids continue to be asked to make as soon as possible, indirectly or directly, between imagination and factual, literal reality. In that sense, I could be either creative or pragmatic, artistic or organized, dreamer or focused, right brain or left brain. There were no acceptable or serious bridges between imagination and reality. The world was apparently sealed from any serious communication between these dimensions, and I was told that the one that prevailed, which had to do with hard, concrete facts and data, had more market value. *We can't choose*

to be both, so choose and be, wisely was the meme. The war on imagination forced choosing sides.

In part, the logic behind this thinking was the idea that the skills of reasoning and pragmatism are something that you work to acquire. This demands an investment of efforts, even pain, to integrate, and therefore have nobility from not being easily accessible. Acquiring the ability of reasoning promises to forge character over time, whereas imagination and creativity are mostly connected to the artistic life, or to the archetype of gifted geniuses like Mozart, J. K. Rowling, and Nelson Mandela. The notion that the only way you could be gifted for creativity was naturally—that it was given to you, that you didn't really work for it—added suspicion to something already deemed fuzzy and difficult to measure.

The Falling Wall

On November 9, 1989, a vivid and irresistible rush of life force and hope filled my heart as I witnessed, with hundreds of millions of other people around the world, the beginning of the fall of the Berlin Wall. I was sixteen years old, and the metaphor of a mighty oppressive wall chipped at and breaking apart was uplifting, empowering, and a validation that I should seek more freedom within my own life. I felt that it was time to break the constraints on my own existence.

Looking back at my emotional reaction to the radical political changes around the fall of the wall in Berlin, I see how much it felt for me as the end of the war (on imagination) and the beginning of a new movement connecting different people and different ideas into something original and positive. I remember crying from the promise of reconciliation between people I didn't know but who had considered each other as enemies. I was elated, and I transported that enthusiasm at home, only to find the wall between my father and me taller than before, as if some of the snipers and checkpoints of the Berlin Wall had moved into our house after being evicted from Germany. The potential for incidents grew to the point that daily, the entire family suffered from bruises and discontent over the confrontations between my father and me. There was more violence for even much less of a reason and the newly open wound on my bedroom door—the trace of a fist leaving an irregular puncture that was my father's exclamation mark during a recent argument—was a reminder of how

unstable peace and emotional safety had become in our home. What I was losing in imagination, I was gaining in distorted courage.

One night, I lost my creative courage, and the war almost won.

On April 10, 1990, at the age of sixteen, five months after the emotional euphoria I had experienced as I watched East and West Germany trying to move beyond their divisions, I tried to kill myself. I failed.

That day, after several weeks of falling downward, I became a casualty of the war on imagination after internalizing that conflict inside me. The only belief I had left was the dubious courage to quit. I no longer wanted to pursue what was beautiful. Questions, answers, and emotions didn't matter to me anymore.

But that day I failed at failing and faced a second chance at creating a more meaningful life. It would take years to untangle myself from the war on imagination, but slowly and progressively, I emerged with a new outlook on life and work. I know that what we choose to do can be important and meaningful for ourselves and others, despite the fear of rejection that never completely goes away.

At home and abroad, the challenge on imagination remains. The war on imagination in my home made the magic of discovering life's mysteries and secrets, growth, even love more difficult to experience, integrate, and benefit from. Although innovation, discoveries, and breakthroughs can happen in the most abject conditions, they are much harder to taste, celebrate, and sustain in a toxic environment where the war festers. In North Korea, for instance, I felt intuitively in many fellow humans there the same hidden despair stemming from pretending to be "all right" and to be invincible, and the covert but real yearning for light, love, and belonging that most human beings thrive on.

The war on imagination tries to build a wall to seal imagination away from reality, but unless you build a wall that doesn't have a door, effectively locking yourself in from the outside world, there's always an opening and therefore a chance for the wall to be breached or, metaphorically, for hope, light, and unity to emerge again.

I left North Korea with a sense that although you can build the most elaborate, monumental walls, like a virtual prison, there are always cracks to let some of the light in and for people to not be locked in forever. The jailer never sleeps in the cell.

Harmful work conditions stemming from what I call the war on imagination will make it more difficult to thrive and create products

and services of meaningful impact, no matter where you live or work. Still more pernicious, the war on imagination creates the most devastation when we integrate its codes inside ourselves. It affects our capacity to grow constructively and to work with more influence and meaning. At the other end of the spectrum, creativity as a tool and a trigger of innovations can produce important, sustainable impact.

II. Insights

The War at Work

We don't all live in North Korea, and not everyone had to struggle with abuse and violence at home; nonetheless, the war on imagination affects many among us and eventually creeps into our work. Sir Ken Robinson, the internationally known British arts education professor, famously said, "All children start their school careers with sparkling imaginations, fertile minds, and a willingness to take risks with what they think. . . . Most students never get to explore the full range of their abilities and interests. . . . Education is the system that's supposed to develop our natural abilities and enable us to make our way in the world. Instead, it is stifling the individual talents and abilities of too many students and killing their motivation to learn."[2]

In the context of nurturing our creative courage, we could add to Sir Ken Robinson's invitation to reignite in our schools the "motivation to learn," the desire to discover, to move beyond the unknown. This process of disconnection from our potential for imagination, and therefore with our creativity in school while growing up, can find an exceptionally fertile ground at work. The war on imagination is pervasive; it knows no discrimination based on gender, socioeconomic background, geography, or personal history. Through the erosion from the war on imagination, I had lost my drive to learn, create, and solve problems. The connection to my creative courage was missing because I didn't understand then that it wasn't a destination to reach, but a mind-set to cultivate and revisit as often as possible. It was the foundation for a set of practices that could form an antidote against the war on imagination, against losing my creative courage and for making it stronger.

A Clash at the Heart of Our Brand

The conditions for the war on imagination to damage our experience at work takes a familiar shape that can be as damaging as when we suffer from it in our personal lives. Its symptoms can affect both the organization and the individuals who work in it.
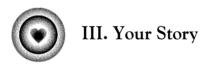
Typically the context necessary for the war to grow starts with a clash between a company's legacy on one hand and its need to continue to grow on the other hand. The more a company understands about its heritage and the reason for its past or current relevance, the more it can grow; it can then let go of that past or at least not hold on to it so hard. The more its past serves as a cane to justify the relevance of its existence rather than a strong reference to its foundation, the more it puts growth in the future at risk. This clash between its past, present, and future offers opportunities to increase its influence on the world; it can also introduce the risk of becoming overly defensive about its assets and eventually lose ground and importance. If you add to this background a more autocratic style of leadership and a closed, noninclusive, diversity-averse process for decision making, arrogance can quickly develop and, with it, the belief that all answers come only from inside of the company. It leads constituents, employees, team members, and eventually clients and customers to progressively lose faith in the ability of the company to affect the world positively. In fact, all of these constituents also start to lose the belief in their own capacity to leverage imagination and creativity to solve problems and meet challenges in their environment. They lose something akin to what David Kelley and Tom Kelley call "creative confidence."[3]

Manifestations of the War on Imagination at Work

If confidence is something that you build over time, courage stems from a decision that you take right now. It can last as little as ten seconds yet be powerful enough to trigger a path toward eventual confidence. Courage, in other words, precedes confidence. Confidence is a by-product, the outcome, stemming from the decision to practice courage. Without that creative courage, fear sets in.

At the level of the organization, the business becomes hostile to creativity and imagination not because it is heartless but because it is

afraid. Creativity can start to sound like an expensive waste of time and resources. At the level of the individual in the organization, the toxic effects of the war on imagination can take many forms, even if they appear benign and inconsequential. For example, it happens when we are in a meeting and keep our mouth shut because we think that our idea is stupid or not worth sharing, or that we are not qualified or high enough in the hierarchy to share our views. At times, our organization will actively or covertly send us the same message that our views, opinions, and aspirations don't matter, for whatever reason.

I meet casualties of the war on imagination almost every day whenever I hear someone tell me that he or she is "not creative" before expressing an idea, or as an explanation for not sharing her views on a given situation, challenge, or problem. When we are not connected to our creative potential, no matter what work we do, we fall for one of the most damaging effects of the war: we disengage, and that disengagement becomes the status quo, the default position.

III. Your Story

Disconnection with Imagination at Work

My experience has led me to see, at times, in myself and in colleagues or partners a palpable disconnection from our creativity and sense of imagination. This disconnection is prevalent across different work cultures, industries, and disciplines. I've tracked six main symptoms or false beliefs that help identify the presence of elements of the war on imagination at work. Whenever these are present, the risks for the war to expand grow.

False Belief 1. I'm Not Creative

This is the most common statement I hear: only certain people are creative. Often we feel this way because the process behind leveraging creativity and imagination is obscure and mysterious and we connect them exclusively to professional artistic practices.

"I'm not creative" can take on different meanings depending on the situation. Here are a few examples:

- I'm too serious, rigorous, scientific, organized [etc.] to be creative.
- I can't draw.
- I'm color-blind.
- I hate fashion.
- I only paint as a hobby.
- I can't dance.
- I'm on the business side of the company.
- I'm not a creative genius like you are.
- I don't have ideas.
- I take care of operations.
- I don't know anything about this situation.
- I can't do trapeze.
- I can't sing.
- I can't dream.
- I can't be organized, structured, and creative at the same time [and vice versa].

False Belief 2. Only Artists Are Creative

This is the greatest confusion I've noticed and something that continues to be encouraged by our culture and education system. Being creative for many is the equivalent of being an artist. Images of the liberal arts or the performing arts emerge to delight or conjure fear in the minds of those blurring the line between the two. The confusion confining creativity to art is sad both for artists who want to meet an audience that's as creative as possible and for all the nonartists who should remember that every child is inherently creative.

The war on imagination creates a mask that makes people disconnect from their creativity at work, which discourages the basic needs for accountability, engagement, and a sense of initiative that businesses yearn to find in their employees. It's a huge disservice to our culture and a false belief that's hard to dispel that only artists are creative. At its most fundamental expression, life itself is an incarnation of creativity, and all

of us can become a vector, a medium of that creative energy, harnessing it for work and for our life.

False Belief 3. Creativity Is Scarce

Creativity and the fruits of imagination are scarce and therefore need to be carefully shared or kept secret; otherwise the well of ideas will soon tarnish. I've witnessed collaborators so insecure about their ideas, creativity, and artistry that they struggled to share the fruits of their talents with their teammates and the projects they were working on. They approached creativity, imagination, and ideas from a standpoint of extreme limitation rather than abundance and possibility.

I certainly was a culprit of waiting for the right moment to develop an idea, keeping it sealed in my heart or in a notebook, only to discover later that someone else also had had that idea and had taken the time to develop it further. The beautiful and unsettling truth is that ideas are plentiful, and they will visit anyone ready not only to host them but also to develop them and make them grow.

False Belief 4. I'm the Special One, the Only One Who Can Be Creative

When you are more in touch with your creativity and since not everyone enjoys the same level of intimacy with that aspect of themselves, you run a risk of becoming exclusive in the way you develop your gift. The war on imagination is never far away when we think that creativity and imagination come through us exclusively. By definition, creativity and imagination have everything to do with generosity above egoism. Creating from a place where you are the only person perceived as having something special comes with advantages (adulation, admiration, deference, fascination), although it doesn't maximize the potential of the project as a source of growth for the collective. If everyone is creative, you might ask, then what makes *me* special? My answer is that being creative is not so much about being special but about having a special, original, courageous relationship with what's inside and around us. In that sense, it's a lie to think that it's about our own specialness more than it is about what's special through our eyes and heart, a progressively more intimate connection with the unknown.

False Belief 5. Creativity Is a Waste of Time—It Offers No Return on Investment, No Value

I've witnessed how dangerous it can be to expect the fruits of imagination to flourish without proper watering and wise patience. This always makes leveraging imagination and creativity for innovation hard in a business context. Although you need to capture as much of it as possible through typical management tools, its essence will remain unfathomable to spreadsheet and return on investment data analysis. It resists straight-jackets yet in the proper context, it is a great power to counter the effects of the war on imagination. The path that creativity proposes rarely takes the shape of a straight, unobstructed line.

False Belief 6. In Results Only We Trust: Creativity in Result but Not in Process

No matter what the human cost is, only results matter. The entertainment industry is notorious for being primarily concerned with the outcome rather than the process that leads to it. If you have any doubt about that, consider the many stars who end up destroyed by the industry that brought them fame and fortune. It's true not only for stars; this applies as well to people working backstage, supporting those who are in the spotlight. In other words, until recently, it didn't matter so much how a show was created, how a star was prepared for a tour, or what it took for the crew to make it to the premiere. *The show had to go on*, and that usually meant by any means necessary. If some people weren't making it to the end or made it there but were somewhat damaged, it didn't matter much as long as the result was spectacular.

This *show must go on* mind-set is not restricted to the entertainment world; in most organizations, our attitude toward the end justifying the means applies as well. In sports, it's not uncommon to hear that if the team wins and everyone does their jobs, it doesn't matter if people get abused, an unfortunate mentality that is omnipresent in our culture despite our aspirations to change it.

I'm uniquely driven about the result of what I create, but I wanted to understand more and improve how we reach our outcomes, however great or small. Progressively over the last twenty years, I have made it my passion to work hard at understanding what makes memorable work stick in the

hearts and minds of both audiences and the people creating it. I believe that my desire for improving the quality of our process when creating great work is relevant not only for people evolving in the traditionally assigned creative sectors, but for anyone working with a group, small or big, or in the business world working with teams, collaborators, or partners. How can you improve the process of creating your work, and how can improving that process create value, inside and out, for the people on your team and those you are working to serve (e.g., customers, clients)? How can you forge ahead with amazing work without having people lose part of who they are or more during the work cycle? How can you transform your work beyond your wildest dream?

Scanning Your Team, Project, Business, and Organization

During the sixteen years that I've spent working at Cirque du Soleil, I've experienced the glorious energy of an organization dedicated to surpassing its unique heritage of imagination and outstanding creativity every day. I've also lived through moments when the war on imagination took too much space, threatening the resilience and the relevance of such an extraordinary company.

No one and no organization is beyond the risk of suffering from such a war; no organization is ever perfect. I believe that creative courage as a mind-set and a conscious decision to constantly go back to a spirit of humility, curiosity, and determination toward the unknown is an attitude that opens doors to practices and activities that can strengthen our work and how people grow within it. Over the years, I have assembled these practices and activities into a framework inspired by my view of creative courage. Most of us say that we value innovation, imagination, creativity, and collaboration at work, but how do we know if our work culture promotes or discourages imagination, beyond the talking point, the PR operations, and the branding savvy? How do we know if the war on imagination happens at work, and what can we do to fix it, improving the situation and reaching beyond our wildest dreams? Either the war on imagination is kept at bay, and we can use the framework to fortify our organization against it, or we can realize that the war is front and center and we can also use the framework to fight back with creative courage.

Here are a few questions to use to quickly and intuitively scan your work, your team, your organization and assess the presence—or not—of the war on imagination:

- How do you qualify the general leadership of your organization or business (it can obviously be a mix of the strongest attributes)?
  - Responsive (feedback and discussion leads to improvement)
  - Accessible (open-door policy)
  - Inclusive (actively consulting at multiple levels of the organization)
  - Autocratic (hard to voice your disagreement or to correct course if you see things going wrong)
  - Secretive (you don't know what's going on and care less and less, disengaging; note that organizations that are simply bad at communicating with their teams end up giving the same impression of secrecy even if the intention is different)
- If you are one of the executive leaders of the organization, are you typically accessible or difficult to reach for your team, partners, clients, and others, no matter what the reasons are?
- How upfront and proactive is the organization in dealing with the good news (celebration) and bad news with its personnel?
- Do you consider your organization excellent, good, or weak at dealing constructively with facts and perceptions if those facts and perceptions are negative, neutral to its image, and positive to its image? Are there any notable differences between the categories of facts and perceptions?
- Do you find that your time for reflection versus your time for action is optimal, excellent, fair, or inadequate?
- How much tension exists in your organization between past successes and history and the need for growth and relevance in the present and future? Is there a lot of nostalgia about how things were or instead great clarity on the company's current purpose?
- Who's your sage, your Yoda (the old and famous *Star Wars* Jedi)? Do you have a sage, a wise man or wise woman, a group of mentors within your organization you can access easily? Is this a formal or informal structure within your organization? In either case, how easy is it to access such resources when they are needed?

- On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the highest, how much care do you think people use to work with each other in your business? Do you think that care and high performance are somewhat in contradiction, the two faces of the same coin, or something in between?

- Do you recognize any of the false beliefs listed previously in you or within your organization? List them. Do you know of other false beliefs that it might be worth listing here as well?

The war on imagination at work will affect the ability of your leadership to be more inclusive and visionary by struggling to include diverse points of view and agile integration of feedback from the outside world on its activities. In addition, the war on imagination will take a bigger toll on teams, groups, and individuals when there's an disproportionate amount of time devoted to thinking in relation to action, either because we think too much without making things happen or inversely because we are constantly in action mode with little or no space for deep reflection and deep work. Finally, and most fundamentally, the war on imagination at work will intensify when the harmony and natural tension between the past success and heritage of an organization and its most pressing questions in the present (Where do we go from here? How do we grow now?) start to lose their harmony, becoming instead dissonant and conflictual. Typically, in such a scenario, the company's purpose becomes blurry, and the exclusive focus on the bottom line replaces it. The more your answers to the questions listed tend to outline a disharmony of time and consciousness, of past and present, the more likely it is that the invisible war on imagination has taken hold. If that is the case, do not despair; transformation is always possible when there's a will to put a shining, benevolent spotlight on the issues we face.

If your answers to this quick scan demonstrates that your organization tends toward harmony, congratulations. The path ahead could still inspire you to fortify your projects, team, and business with the spirit of creative courage.

A Path of Seven Stages

At its core, practicing creative courage unbars the path to a sequence of evolving and infinitely open cycles composed of seven integrated stages that represent as many dimensions of creative courage and that comprise an array of

practices, questions, tools and tips that you can augment, improve and adapt to your unique situation. To rise beyond the war on imagination or to prevent its outbreak, we start by *caring first* (Chapter 2) and *securing safety* within the team (Chapter 3). Caring and safety allow you to move forward effectively and with confidence in *fostering trust* (Chapter 4) because of your groundwork. You can then start to experiment with *playing with danger and limitations* (Chapter 5) to unlock the ability of your team to *dream* (Chapter 6) boldly, more generously, dreams that can lead to discover real breakthroughs (Chapter 7), which allows you, your employees, your audience, your clients, and your business to *grow* (Chapter 8).

With time, this can become a virtuous circle, allowing the practices that you already master to be integrated into that framework. I finish with an example, *start to dance* (chapter 9), that puts all these stages together, in a personal way, to transform the outcome of the war on imagination.

The practices, outlook, tools, and tips under the umbrella of creative courage offer a powerful framework that you can adapt to your reality as you help yourself and your organization transform while staying true to your most important principles. Leading with creative courage offers support on the path to inside-out importance for you and your brand, however big or small.

You can implement actions at any of the seven stages, although their sequence means that the strength of one stage is related to the strength of what precedes it. For example, if you identified that work needs to be done in securing safety within your team, your success can improve if you have worked diligently on assessing where you are with the caring first practices, and so on.

Summary

Creative courage is the mind-set triggered by the decision to embrace the unknown without having all of the answers. Because this condition is inherent to life itself, we have in all of us the potential to activate our creative courage. It's also an umbrella term for a set of practices and activities aimed at supporting an environment fertile for holistic creativity and innovation.

Creative courage opens routes to move through the fear of failure toward the joy of bringing something essential to our life and that of others. To our conventional concerns about our bottom line, we add a high line that

considers relevance, meaning, and resonance for the people that we create for and ultimately benefit from our work. Relevance becomes the ultimate currency. Through the practice of leading with creative courage, we realize how precious valuing the bottom line and the high line of our organization is. Profit and relevance unite.

One of the greatest challenges of our time lies in the tension that emerges from the dialogue between the past and the present. This pressure is one of the most important sources of creativity and innovation. Although the potential for innovation rises when that tension is exacerbated, the risk of confusion, isolation, and conflict rises as well. Coupled with an autocratic or a myopic leadership (focused on the necessary bottom line but not on the vital high line, the visionary work), the risk of a war on imagination, a war on the potential for creativity, innovation, and breakthrough at work, is high. But this is not inevitable; there are ways to fight back, reclaim our sacred and innate sense of imagination, and courageously transform or reinvigorate our work into a well of meaning and a source of real value, for us and for those that we work for and with.

In a few words, the war on imagination has these characteristics:

- Dysfunctional leadership
- Clash of the past and the present at work, making your brand unclear to manage and grow
- Speed anomaly: little or no time to think, reflect, and step back
- Deliberate unawareness: organizational denial or refusal to address facts and perceptions about itself

This book offers a sequential, incremental, evolving path and framework to transform work:

Stage 1. Care first
Stage 2. Secure safety
Stage 3. Foster trust
Stage 4. Play with danger and limitations
Stage 5. Dream
Stage 6. Discover breakthroughs
Stage 7. Grow

Note that this is not *the* only path but *a* path that I propose based on my experience, discussions with hundreds of leaders from a variety of industries, observations and interpretations, and inspiration from other authors and thinkers. I have conceived this path of stages with open source as a quality in mind. It has the potential to be used in any organization, large or small, as a simple work grid for evaluating, assessing where you are, and identifying the strengths and weaknesses of your approaches to innovation and leadership, which I believe are profoundly linked.

The order of the practices suggests the beginning and the end of a loop that keeps growing, within you and with your business, and that you can review or update whenever you need to. In other words, there will never be a time during the life of your organization when you will be able to say that you have cared enough, dreamed enough, or grown enough. It's also an incremental path that proposes a relationship between what precedes and what follows. For example, it's harder to play with danger and limitations when trust is too deficient. Trust goes beyond demonstrated safety and denotes a living, dynamic relationship of give and take. Trust goes beyond the transactional and moves to the emotional. In the same spirit, growth follows discovering breakthroughs because typically it's hard to grow without a breakthrough. It doesn't mean that things are perfect, only that there's enough care and safety in the bank to live and work through trust.

Of course, you can enter at any stage and develop from there and take ideas, do exercises, and get inspired by the practices that I propose. But it's important to keep in mind that one stage will only be as strong as the one that precedes it. Finally, the stronger and more in shape your previous stages are, the better you can reinforce the stage you want to reach.