I have never been comfortable with leadership. Nevertheless, there I was, leading a five-day retreat with twenty-something seasoned leaders, activists, counselors, and other people more qualified than I was to lead it. On day four it cracked. Diverse expressions of a seething dissatisfaction rose to the surface—a cacophony of unmet needs.

Many of their expressed needs seemed contradictory: some wanted more physical activity; others more deep intellectual discussion or more on practical applications. Some requested more structure and leadership from me; others wanted less from me and more from other people. One person said that she felt that imposing a structure upon a group and taking it upon myself to administer that structure was an inherently violent expression of patriarchy. Another was in anguish that as we sat in that room, rain forests were being cut down—and what were we doing about it?

I won’t pretend that I masterfully held space for all the conflict to arise, for the hidden to become visible, for the group to pass through that inevitable stage that precedes real intimacy. The best I can say is that I listened to everyone without getting defensive and tried on each criticism like a piece of clothing. But I had no idea what to say, who was right, or what to do next.

Notwithstanding my having no idea what to do, something larger than any of us held us all in its hands. After the storm passed, we entered an activity that took on a transformative power I’d never seen it have before. I felt like the servant of that activity, not its leader, even as I “led” it. Afterward, the earlier conflicts felt resolved, even though none had been met directly.

Significantly, that activity never would have happened at all were it not for a stroke of extraordinary luck that contributed to my feeling of being held by something larger than our separate selves. At a key moment, a woman who had been mostly silent said, “I see a lot of egos flying around the room. I came here to spend time with Charles and I trust him to offer what is right.” She spoke with a simple humility that totally shifted the energy of the room. This woman had actually walked out, intending to go home, but by chance had encountered one of the organizers, who at that exact moment...
was cut off from an urgent phone call and was thus able to encourage her to return and share her opinion.

I recount this story because it illuminates and personalizes some of the themes of Miki Kashtan’s new book, *Reweaving Our Human Fabric*. One of these themes is the issue of power and how it is mediated through organizational structures. Kashtan, who is a prominent figure in the Nonviolent Communication (NVC) movement founded by Marshall Rosenberg, questions certain values long in vogue in the nonviolent world: nonhierarchy, leaderlessness, egalitarianism, and radical inclusivity. In a provocative chapter entitled “Myths of Power-with,” she describes the frustration of activist groups that devolve into endless meetings devoted to “process,” attending to the needs of everyone in the group, but getting very little accomplished. The group or movement is very fair, inclusive, and egalitarian, but fails to achieve any concrete, external goals. Is there a way to replicate the efficiency and effectiveness of, say, business organizations (or for that matter, the hierarchical, leader-driven movements of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.), without replicating the abuses that seem inherent in that mode of organization?

**The Pitfalls of Leaderless Movements**

The deficiencies of the leaderless, structureless ideal became apparent a long time ago in the feminist movement, which, drawing on earlier roots in leftist political theory, explored various alternatives to the “patriarchal” norm. The results were often disappointing. As Jo Freeman described so precisely in her classic essay, “The Tyranny of Structurelessness,” what masquerades as egalitarian collaboration often hides informal power dynamics that are all the more oppressive for being hidden. This became quickly apparent in the breakdown phase of that day at my retreat, when, at the moment that the leader was toppled, it was the loudest and most manipulative personalities that quickly began to take charge. No agreed-upon power structure was in place, yet the quiet people felt no more empowered—perhaps even less so—than they had before.

A related paradox, which Kashtan discusses in some depth, is that radical inclusivity creates a kind of exclusivity; for example, when abrasive or disruptive people who would ordinarily be excluded create an environment in which quiet, sensitive, or results-oriented people feel uncomfortable. This phenomenon (apparent in many Occupy Wall Street encampments) illustrates her point that it is impossible to meet everyone’s needs and still get much accomplished. To address this in the context of NVC, she draws a valuable distinction between “empathy circles,” which are dedicated to healing, and “action circles,” groups that are dedicated to an external purpose. Her discussion of power-with explores how to facilitate such a group, that is, how to utilize the power of hierarchy and structure with minimal violence to any of its members.

Power-with, as described by Mary Parker Follett, who coined the term, is “jointly developed power, a co-active, not a coercive power.” She offered it in contradistinction to power-over, which implies domination: to coerce the choices of another through force, whether physical, psychological, or economic. While Follett was not a feminist herself, the distinction was taken up by feminists in the 1970s who disputed the equation of power with male-associated behaviors. They sought to expand the word beyond its associations with dominance and control to denote the capacity to act, a capacity not necessarily diminished by another’s capacity and perhaps synergistic with it. This expanded notion of power, they believed, was more consistent with feminine qualities like nurture and empathy.
Yet I wonder whether the whole concept of power-with, and beyond that, the concept of nonviolence, entails a kind of distancing from uncomfortable truths about the material world and human relationships. Is there any way to assert ourselves as creative beings in the world without imposing something of ourselves upon it? Is power-with ever possible in pure form?

Equivalently, we might ask, can we ever escape the play of dominance and submission that pervades human relationships (and those in the animal kingdom as well)? Can we ever truly be nonviolent? Nonviolence is an elusive concept, framed as it is in English as a negation: an absence, not a presence. We can say what it is not, but can we say what it is? Furthermore, it isn’t even obvious what it is not. Violence connotes that which violates. Even if I don’t do you physical harm, even if I have no intent to cause you pain, a simple statement of what is true for me or what injustice I have witnessed might violate your worldview, your self-image, or your comfort. Whatever our underlying oneness, we are bounded beings; any act of self-assertion—to eat, to move, even to breathe—may in some way violate the boundary of another. Nature is rife with violence.

**From Nonviolence to Service**

Perhaps the avoidance of violence is not a coherent aim. In fact, Kashtan offers an alternative lens that I find much more illuminative of my own successes and failures in leadership. It is the lens of service. What mission, what purpose, does the group serve? A leader is someone who holds this purpose on behalf of the group and who creates conditions for others to serve it. Kashtan points out that this purpose may not be helped by various “myths of power-with” like “everyone should participate in all decisions,” or “everyone’s needs are equally important.”

Understanding the leader as steward of a vision and servant of a purpose cuts through the tangle of principles, rationalizations, and paradoxes surrounding the creation of structure, with its implications of arrogance and violence. The leader is not imposing her ego onto others, nor is she using others for her own ends. Of course, most tyrants have justified their exercise of power by claiming that it is in service to a greater good. That is why channels of feedback and accountability are so important (and Kashtan discusses these at length). However, to shrink from leadership in an effort to conform to fashionable ideals of inclusivity and egalitarianism is not an act of compassion at all. It is an act of cowardice and an abdication of one’s duty to serve a calling.

In my case, sometimes “letting the group decide” is a cover for my own fear or a capitulation to my desire to get people to like me. It is therefore a means of manipulation, all the more dangerous for being covert. In some situations a show of inclusivity seems like an empty gesture by which one seeks to demonstrate allegiance to the values of the in-group. I know that at the retreat, my clarity of purpose was severely compromised by my desire for approval and by the shame-inducing associations of leadership with patriarchal violence.

There is a time to shrink from leadership: when you don’t know what you serve. In the absence of a mission beyond oneself, the leader becomes nothing more than an institutional functionary, serving the aggrandizement of a power structure in which he enjoys special privileges. This explains the state of many of the dominant political institutions of our time: as their motivating ideologies become obsolete, they are aligned with no compelling purpose except careerism, ambition, and muddling through. At best, we get technocratic managers; rarely in our moribund system will a visionary leader be attracted to politics. In that context, the deconstruction of power, structure, and authority is a necessary step to enter the space between purpose-generating narratives, a space where a new purpose becomes visible. But there is another step after that, one that Kashtan takes in this book: to explore whether old structures and hierarchies may contain something of value in empowering a renewed self-assertiveness, in service to our planet’s healing.

Shrinking back from leadership, letting the group decide, and refusing to exercise power are quite understandable reactions to centuries of patriarchal domination and exploitation of the Other. We want nothing to do with that, and so retreat sometimes to its antipode: self-abnegation. Perhaps recasting the next paradigm of leadership in terms of service rather than nonviolence (itself a negation) will remedy this tendency. A more beautiful world is calling us, and we need people to bow into its service as leaders.