

in the final analysis

“The only person you are destined to become is the person you decide to be.”

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

JOM

Volume 66

Number 8

August 2014

Over the last few days, I’ve been thinking Emersonian thoughts. For those unacquainted, Emerson is a giant of American literature—a poet and essayist who helped frame the transcendental movement in the mid-1800s. Others can explain transcendentalism much more credibly than I, but my mind shorthands it as exalting the magnificent potential of human nature and celebrating the inspirational beauty of nature itself. While it has been decades since I last read Emerson, his ethos occurred to me while attending a professional development seminar on the shore of Lake Louise in Canada’s Banff National Park. The venue, with its partially ice-covered lake, snow-covered craggy mountains, and ancient glaciers was the art of nature at its most inspirational. I kid you not in saying that it is one of the most transcendent places that I have ever visited.

While the view was an eyeful, my mind’s eye was equally opened by an impressive array of speakers assembled by the American Society of Association Executives for the forum, 360° View on Leadership. The goal: Help us CEO-types become better leaders. I took many pages of notes, but my seminar-attendance mantra is to come away with three credible ideas that I will try to act upon. What was my trio from this event? They were obvious:

Obvious populations matter. Demographer Kenneth Gronback looks at population trends to gain insight that can be used in marketing and social theory. He put it generically that a bigger pool of people means a bigger pool of potential association members. For example, we in the U.S. association community have a lot of members from the gigantic “Baby Boomer” generation (1945–1964) based on the sheer number of people born during this period. Conversely, we see a clear decline in the number of “Generation X” (1965–1984) members as there were simply fewer people born during this period. “Generation Y” (1985–2004), however, is a generation of record numbers—even bigger than the Boomers. As these individuals reach professional age, there could be significant growth in associations—if we have the right value proposition for these young people who breathe social media, treasure diversity, and are passionate about sustainability. That’s intriguing.

Obvious ideas come from unobvious places. Professor Alan Gregerman of Georgetown University recounted how we are most likely to collaborate with people and groups that we know since people generally have an aversion to interacting with people who are different. We are most likely to innovate, however, by reaching beyond our comfortable communities. Indeed, the farther afield we go, the more likely we are to find people and ideas capable of reshaping our thinking in new and creative ways. This does not apply to just businesses and networks of colleagues, but to cultures and countries as well. That’s provocative.

Obviousness is in the eye of the beholder. Creative Revolution Arms Dealer Todd Henry advised attendees to avoid fossilizing around practices that may have allowed us to reach one plateau, but may be hindering us from reaching the next one. As a tactic to “continually assault the beachhead of apathy,” he encouraged the attendees to continue to have curiosity and be urgent in our learning. A great approach to use with colleagues, members, clients, friends, and family members is to ask a single question: “What is something that I am not seeing, but that is obvious to you?” A person will be well-equipped for growth if he or she can get (and is willing to listen to) the answer to that question. That’s an open invitation for you to give me guidance.

Was there more good advice? Plenty. Like the Canadian Rockies outside the window, there was much to scale for the motivated hiker. And like the Rockies, that’s a journey best taken one step at a time.



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A transcendental view of
Lake Louise in June.