

Little Book of Practice

for Authentic Leadership in Action

By Susan Szpakowski
Illustrations by Barbara Bash



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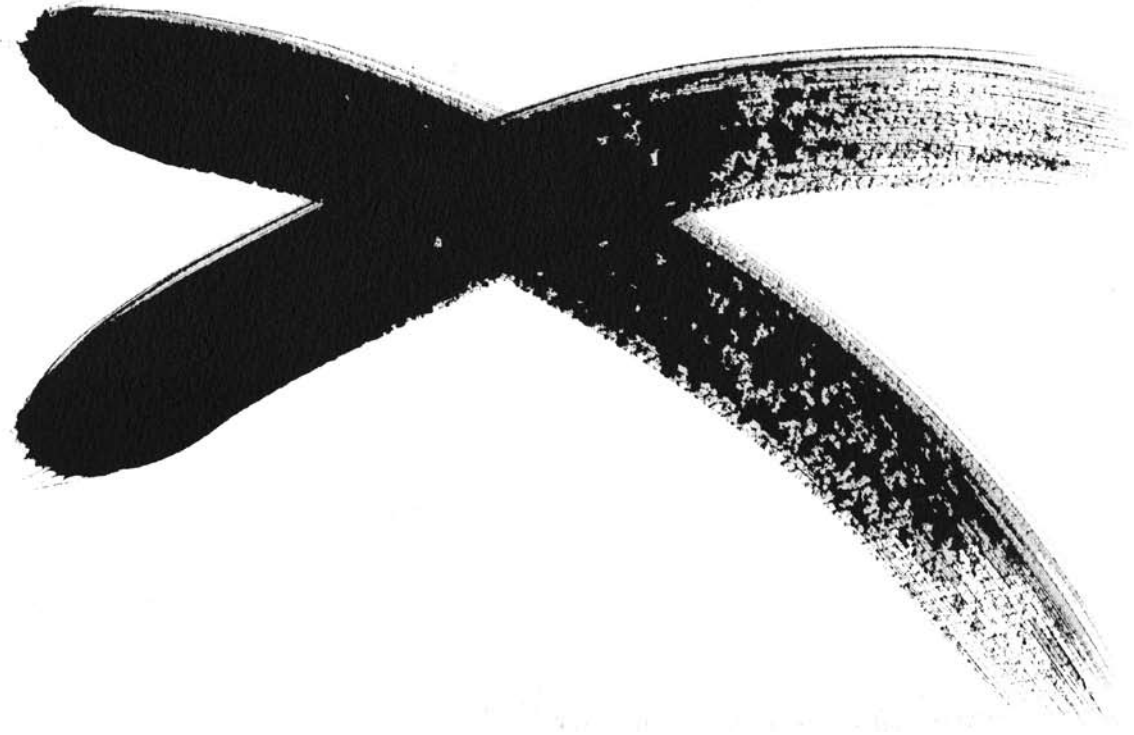
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Welcome, travelers.

Over the past decade, the ALIA Institute has been situated at a crossroads, like an inn at the convergence of multiple trade routes. Many explorers have passed through—some global thought leaders, others everyday leaders in search of new thinking and new solutions. Business leaders, NGO executives, artists, meditation teachers, social entrepreneurs, academics, clergy, activists, and policy-makers have all spent time here. For some the Institute has become an annual destination.

The ALIA Institute began as the week-long Shambhala Summer Program, which has been convening in Nova Scotia since 2001. This gathering has seen a convergence not only of people but also of leadership theories and practices, ranging from those that have been refined over thousands of years to new models and approaches that are being rapidly developed and tested in response to the conditions and challenges of our time.

From a distance, this gathering might look like a colourful and chaotic display of people and disciplines. But ever since the Institute's first Summer Program, I have been in awe of the level of coherence that seems to "show up" of its own accord, in spite of the great diversity of people, cultures, and methodologies that come together for that short week. This coherence seems to exist between or beyond the parts as if something bright and powerful is able to shine through.

People often say that there is nothing quite like the ALIA Institute, and many return year after year, sometimes making the journey from the far reaches of the globe. When reflecting on their experience, they often talk about the uncanny relevance of the learning, the synchronicity of the connections, the deep learning and shifts of perception. I believe that all of this is made possible by something more elusive than can be explained in a program brochure. I have come to realize that what seems like magic is actually the power of authenticity, our own nature, which is already present but usually hidden away.

The leadership practices that converge at the ALIA Institute each play a part in revealing, amplifying, and harnessing this authentic nature, this hidden potential. Those of us who have been involved in organizing and convening the Institute have been building a body of tacit understanding about how these practices work together, and how they can be applied in various professional fields. As we enter our tenth year, this Little Book is an attempt to capture and make visible some of that understanding.

I see the ALIA Institute, this inn at the crossroads, as a place of cross-pollination, incubation, and training for what is to come. Ultimately, programs aren't enough. As leaders, we are increasingly called to create spaces where inspired thinking, deep learning, and bold emergent action can take hold, wherever we are. So while thousands of people have come to ALIA programs, acquired specific leadership tools and practices, and had a whiff of something else, I feel that now it is time to further illuminate and articulate the "something else," so that we can all continue to strengthen our capacity to create the conditions for authentic community and enlightened action.

ORIGINS OF ALIA

We could say that the ground of the Institute is trust in authentic human nature. While this is true it is also not the whole story. The Institute's ground has a specific texture, a deeply embedded pattern, which comes from its origins in the Shambhala wisdom tradition. Most of the founding members were students and teachers of this tradition, and its practices and insights have been an invisible compass that has guided us along the way. This was especially true in the beginning, when we were literally creating something out of nothing. As time goes on, this deep pattern continues to mix with many others, creating a new synthesis that is now stewarded by an increasingly wide and diverse group.

At its core, the Shambhala tradition is not about any particular dogma or religion, but about connecting with reality. When we connect with an authentic way of being, our guiding purpose and our actions become more aligned with a natural order. We are able to recognize what is authentic and helpful in ourselves, as well as in our environment. The tradition itself is a synthesis of "authentic and helpful" wisdom and forms from many cultures and historical times. It is this timeless, ancient quality coming into the forms of the present moment that creates the deep patterns of Shambhala.

MEANINGS OF PRACTICE

The simplest dictionary definition of *practice* is "to do repeatedly to acquire or polish a skill." Included in this book are practices that will increase your leadership proficiency, particularly as you engage yourself and others in new ways of thinking and doing. A *professional practice* is a vocation that is bounded by a set of responsibilities and ethics. You will also see the practice

of authentic leadership referred to this way—as a vocation and life’s path. And a *community of practice* is a social network with shared interests dedicated to mutual learning. This book has grown out of an ALIA community of practice, and it provides language and frameworks that will hopefully be useful as this community continues to grow.

There is yet another shade of meaning for *practice*. In his module on “Leadership for Networked, Emergent Systems,” Tom Hurley sketched the relationship between core principles and action as being like the roots and branches of a tree. The roots are embedded in our source of collective inspiration and values, and the branches express these principles in our actions, which could involve diverse projects, multiple teams, and even multiple organizations. The trunk, which joins these two, is made up of our individual and collective practices. Without practices that continually reinforce our connection with the roots, our relationships and actions will easily fall into old patterns. So practicing authentic leadership is key to bringing new ideas and more authentic, flexible, and emergent ways of organizing into the world. It is something we *do*, as opposed to something we merely believe or think about. Otherwise we are left with some good ideas layered on top of the same old ways of doing things, with no real change.

Once when ALIA board member Chris Grant was flying over Nova Scotia, en route from his home in the UK to the Summer Program in Halifax, he says that he looked down at the expanse of green and imagined wisps of smoke rising from campfires hidden in the woods below. He imagined that each campfire marked an ALIA training camp, where leaders had gathered to share their skills, learn new ones, and spar with comrades. They were developing strength and courage, and learning the practices that would sustain them during the rest of the year.

VOICES

What follows is a compilation of practices, woven together with stories from Institute faculty and friends, as well as my own experience as one of the ALIA Institute’s founding members and now its executive director.

Like the Institute itself, this book is a story told in a personal voice while also being a container for many voices. I have not intended to suggest a definitive theory or framework. In fact, I suspect there may never be such a thing. The Institute is too porous and too alive to ever be completely pinned down. It is defined by the nature of its roots, rather than the shape and colour of its branches and leaves. Those roots are both ancient and current, as they tap into the wellspring of universal human goodness and aspiration.

I hope this Little Book sheds new light on the practices you already have and helps you find your way to new ones that work for you. I welcome your suggestions and stories, as we continue to grow our shared understanding of the practices that sustain authentic leadership in times of great challenge.



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