

The Corporate Mystic

AN INTERVIEW WITH
GAY HENDRICKS



The secret of life is to have a task, something you devote your entire life to...and the most important thing is—it must be something you cannot possibly do!

—Henry Moore



FROM ITS INCEPTION, the *Wild Heart Journal* has had the intention to cover a broader spectrum of the creative process than that which is clearly present in the arts. Our idea of creativity also includes the visionary gardener, the original chef, and the businessperson who “thinks out of the box.” Meet Gay Hendricks, a

cutting edge consultant in executive development as well as in the healing professions. In *The Corporate Mystic*, he reports that enlightened thinking and awareness can show up in the boardroom at least as often as the meditation hall. To those who have an instinctive mistrust of big corporations, that’s an astounding notion.

Before founding The Hendricks Institute and The Foundation for Conscious Living, Gay was a Professor of Counseling at the University of Colorado for 21 years. His 20 books include *Conscious Loving*, *Conscious Breathing* (co-authored), *At the Speed of Life*, and *Conscious Loving: The Journey to Co-Commitment*, with his wife and creative partner of two decades, Dr. Kathlyn Hendricks. Gay & Kathlyn have appeared on over 500 radio and TV shows, including Oprah, CNN and 48 Hours. Kathlyn says of Gay: “Songwriter, avid mountain bicyclist and holder of encyclopedic knowledge of rock and roll history, Gay is also the funniest person I know.”

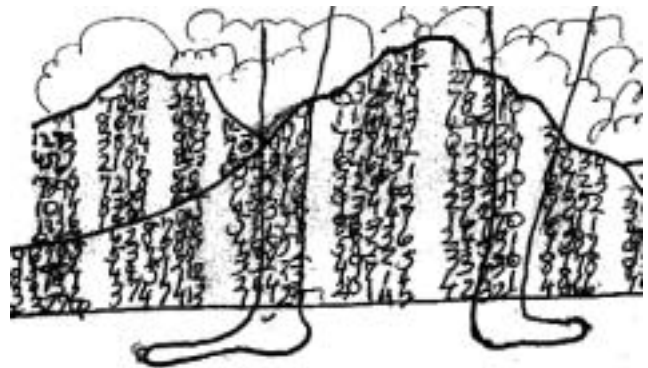
WHJ: *When I first heard the title of your book, “The Corporate Mystic,” it sounded like an oxymoron.*

GH: Yes, well that’s also the place that I came from in my transformation about it, because I came of age in the 60s, in kind of a radical context, and I mostly thought of corporate types at that time as makers of Napalm and Velveeta, which seemed to me to be basically interchangeable. And then once I got out into the world a little bit and I began to actually work with business executives, I came to find, to my great surprise, that many of the top business people had more of a spiritual center and were acting more in consonance with spiritual practices in their lives—like actual acts of compassion, generosity, and honoring other people’s essence—than I had seen in many of the spiritual organizations I’d been in.

In fact, in various spiritual organizations that I either studied meditation with, or listened to their guru or whatever, I’d often come away feeling like people were talking a good game but that their actual behavior more resembled the kind of emotional immaturity that I would associate with junior high school students. And so I came to see that business people had actually gotten kind of a bad rap—sometimes deserved—as being very closed off to emotion and closed off to spirit. But I was certainly surprised to find a huge number of them that really did think of their work as their spiritual practice and acted on it.

WHJ: *That’s completely surprising. There are so many people—like many of our readers, perhaps—who grew up in the 60s with a leftist liberal leaning, for whom corporations are clearly the bad guys, committed to the bottom line at anyone’s expense, or the environment’s expense. Are you saying that that’s the exception to the rule?*

GH: I can’t really say what’s the exception because I haven’t taken a big enough statistical sample, but I can tell you that I’ve been surprised to find a lot more of these kinds of people in the business world than I ever expected to find, so I don’t know if they’re the minority or the majority...



Corporate Mystics are visionaries with their feet on the ground. They celebrate the oneness of everything, yet at the same time they are able to focus on details. They look at a mountain peak and a spreadsheet with the same eyes. They treat the janitor and their biggest client with the same attitude.



Gay recalls something he learned as a child, working for the circus:

“I noticed that the elephants were tethered to the to a tiny peg that the trainer stuck in the ground. I could pull the peg out with two fingers, so I wondered to the trainer why the elephant didn’t pull it out. He told me that the trick was to use a bigger peg when the elephant is little. The elephant cannot in the beginning budge the peg, so that it eventually stops trying to pull it out of the ground. The animal grows up with a clear sense of limitation. After a while, the elephant just knows it can’t budge the peg, so you can tether several tons of elephant to a peg that a child could pull out of the ground. Most of us have some kind of limitation in our minds that we take as real. We don’t realize that it is simply made up.”

WHJ: *But you’ve spoken to thousands, your book says.*

GH: Yes, but you have to remember that those thousand people are also people that would be willing to hire a guy like me! Because I’m widely known as being on the far-out fringe of therapists, in that I require my clients to meditate or I won’t see them, and a lot of strange things that a lot of therapists don’t do as an ordinary rule of thumb.

WHJ: *How are you using the word mystic? My understanding or definition of the word would be someone who is fundamentally living from an awareness that existence is an interdependent web, united in one Source of Being or Consciousness.*

GH: That is absolutely what I found so often in the business world, especially at the top of an organization. That people *actually* think that way, and they *act* on it! That’s what’s so bizarre about it, and that was the paradox that I attempted to capture in *The Corporate Mystic*.

WHJ: *And you did. It’s just so hard to swallow. Are you disheartened by the daily headlines of all the scandals being uncovered in the business world?*

GH: No, because this is the time when the volume has been turned up and the microscope has been turned on business in a way that I think is ultimately going to be for the good. For every one of these companies that gets put under the microscope—whether it’s Enron or Worldcom, or I’m hoping that Dick Cheney’s old company Halliburton is next—there is going to be a whole bunch of people that say, “Okay, we gotta clean up our act.” So I think that it’s a very healthy thing. I’m actually very excited by it, just like I was excited when the spotlight got put on Idi Amin in Uganda, because I knew that that wouldn’t allow him to last very long, and pretty soon he was living out in the desert somewhere and Uganda’s a better place for it, I think. So we’ve got to get that microscope focused in enough places that it has that purifying effect.

WHJ: *I’m coming back to your use of the word “mystic.” When we speak of people who truly enter and experience that place of being connected to the Source, it usually evokes an ecstatic being, like a Rumi. And I don’t think you’re implying that Rumi or Kabir are running our corporations!*

GH: When I’m feeling my most expanded, I may think like Rumi, I sometimes speak like Rumi. But when I’m not feeling that expanded I may read Rumi, and when I’m feeling even less expanded I may not even notice Rumi on my bookshelf! I think that in many corporations now, they’re being run by people who’ve read Rumi, or Rumi is someone they know—and I’m speaking metaphorically: they’ve had flashes of illumination. And what characterizes them, and what impresses me about them, is their ability to *act* on their spiritual awareness, not just to talk about it. They perform genuine acts of compassion and genuine acts that consider the interdependence of all things.

I've had the pleasure of being around some really amazing people. As we're speaking, I'm thinking of Michael Dell, who founded Dell Computer. He's a brilliant young man in his 30s, a multi-billionaire, is able to run a corporation of 30 or 40,000 people, and he truly has a heart of gold. He has a brilliant business mind too, and the ability to handle data and crunch numbers better than just about any human being I've ever run across. And yet Michael also has a true heart of gold and the ability to act out of interdependence all the time.

Another of my heroes, who's now retired, is Bob Shapiro, who used to run Monsanto, and was instrumental in helping Monsanto begin making the shift away from producing a lot of toxic kinds of chemicals into being a more environmentally friendly company. He spearheaded that movement, and that got him into a lot of trouble—with the shareholders and so forth. But to me it was a great example of someone being aware of interdependence and also putting it into practice in a really practical way. So that's why I think these kinds of folks ought to be really saluted.

WHJ: *So after spending most of my first 50 years pursuing the arts and spiritual practices, here I am now attempting to run a business, something I know nothing about. Maybe I'm on the right track to find what I've been looking for all along?*

GH: Yes, and especially if you are able to contextualize running a business as the next evolution of your spiritual practice. That's what I've been trying to do over the past ten years...often without success! One of my huge challenges has been to find a way to produce substantial revenues, get health insurance for the people who work with me—all of the things that I probably would have shied away from 20 years ago, I see now as part of the challenge—and also handling my feelings about it in the present moment.

If you've been immersed in spiritual concerns and practices for a number of years, the next evolution of that practice is to test yourself in the real world, where you have to show up with integrity all the time, show up with responsibility to deliver a product, to bring things that will change people's lives but to do it in a way that allows the shareholders or yourself to make money and to stay in business. Those are really spiritual concerns. They're in the "making-the-spiritual-practical" realm of life.

I think it's an extraordinarily powerful thing to do, and it's an example of spiritual maturity. A lot of people, for example, criticize various meditation teachers for making their work more public, or releasing a video, or having a chain of people that teaches their work. On the other hand, where else would you go with a spiritual practice if you really wanted the world to know about it? You'd make a video of it! Or you'd train a whole bunch of people to teach it. So I consider that to be part of the holy task in any kind of spiritual work, to really make it practical and real in the world.

WHJ: *How do creativity and the creative process impact “corporate mystics” in terms of how they do their work and how they create their organizations?*

GH: First of all, I feel that real, genuine creativity—authentic, organic creativity—is something that is fairly rare and requires a certain amount of discipline to achieve. Yesterday I was counseling a guy over the phone who’s a very well-known rock star, and he was saying that in his 20s, the creativity was just there all the time, and he could drop into it whenever he wanted to. As I continued to inquire, it came out that during his 20s, he spent a lot of time alone in his room, just kind of practicing the guitar, feeling his way into song lyrics. And now he said he was having a hard time accessing his creativity, and it was bringing up the fear of death, and “will I be able to support my family?” or in his case, several different families. So he had this fear that he’d “lost it.”

Then I asked him, “Realistically speaking, how many times this week did you go and sit alone in a room and open up to the void, open up to your creativity, to just allow yourself to sink into that level?” Well the answer was zero, because “I was on the phone all the time, my manager and my booking agent and my lawyers...”

And so the creative process, especially as you get older, has a lot to do with giving yourself permission to drop into those deep levels of yourself so that you can then enjoy the expressive phase. There’s a dropping in, an interior phase of creativity, and then an outward stroke. It’s a two-stroke process, where one stroke takes you down deep inside yourself and the next stroke brings you out into an expression that can be tangibly seen, heard, felt, measured.

With business people, when I’m able to get them to give themselves that ten minutes or thirty minutes to drop in at a deep level, they’re astonishingly good at it! I mean, they do it really quickly and efficiently and they get good information. It’s just a question of getting them convinced that that’s

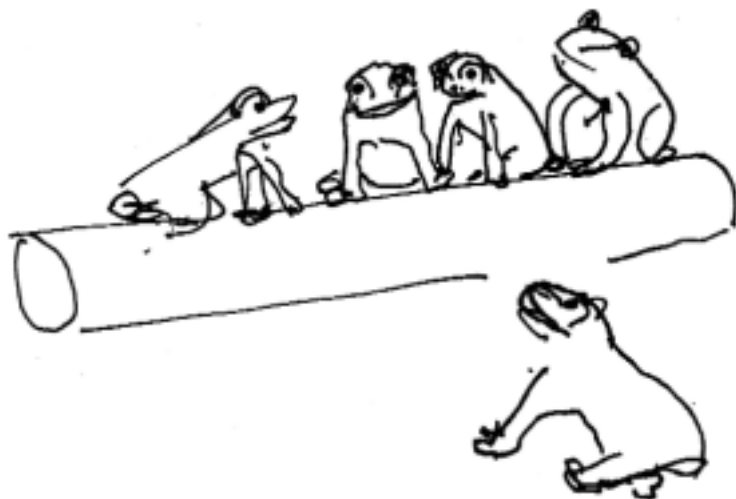
a good thing to do, because many of them have it in their minds that they’ve got to stay in their left hemisphere and keep their number-crunching machinery going all the time to get the job done. So assisting them to open up and access that deep wellspring of creativity and come back out and express it, that’s a very powerful thing to do, and many business people are surprisingly good at it.

WHJ: *You write of such things as “no-limits vision” and believing “six impossible things before breakfast,” as Lewis Carroll wrote. Can you elaborate, in terms of the kind of creative thinking a corporate mystic engages in?*

GH: Breakthrough solutions are often discontinuous from the past—they don’t refer to what has worked in the past. I spend a lot of my time helping people solve personal and interpersonal problems, and the truly useful solutions have this quality of being radically different from the past. I once worked with a family of five who fought constantly over where they should go out to eat on their once-weekly family dinner excursion. The situation was that everybody got upset if any one of them got to eat in their favorite restaurant. The solution they’d come up with was to go out for dinner only at restaurants where none of them wanted to go! While this worked to minimize conflict, to me it was the worst sort of solution...lose-lose-lose-lose-lose instead of win-win.

My solution, which they loved, was to hire a student chef from the local cooking school to come over and make each one’s favorite dish. Five people—five dishes. It ended up costing the same, and everybody got something they liked. Fortunately, with a little more help they were able to come up with creative solutions on their own. I mention this story because it’s an example of how brilliant business executives think. Breakthrough solutions are where the money is—thinking the unthinkable, but with the background context of goodness and wellbeing for all.

That’s what corporate mystics do all day long.



Five frogs sat on a log. One decided to jump.

How many were left?

Five. There’s a big difference between deciding to jump and actually jumping. The inspired leader knows how to get total commitment, so that no frogs are left on the corporate log.

Zero-frog leadership.