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I was asked to contribute my thoughts on the topic, "Vision and Courage" to this evening's salon. Liz had proposed the topic to me in the context of her ongoing assistance to The Cecil Group regarding our quest to advance the firm's future. She thought that this would be an interesting opportunity to convey several of the characteristics of the practice in which I am engaged.

I grasped the "vision" side of the topic immediately. After all, I am in the business of shaping places and communities through planning and design, helping clients shape their future. In terms of the topic posed by Liz, the idea of **"vision" must refer to the ultimate goal or purpose of the professional practice in which I am engaged.**

But... "courage"? – I confessed immediately to Liz that, from my perspective, I certainly have lived through long periods of nearly constant fear, horrible moments of uncertainty and have endured business-related events when I have been actually terrified - all the while pursuing the course that I had set out. I never thought of this as courageous, however. At times, certainly, it seemed crazy. Nevertheless, in view of my persistence through all of this (now over many years), I realized that my behavior - seen through another perspective - could reasonably be seen as evidence of courage. So, in the terms of Liz's proposed topic, **"courage" must mean the persistence of behavior and actions that are distinctly risky and unquestionably difficult when other options are apparently available.**

So, let's first take the topic apart and then put the pieces back together again, and see what we can learn. I'll start with the "vision" part.

I have a fundamental and compelling view of the world that is the basis of my professional practice and the company that I lead. Put as simply as I can, here is the vision: **there is a large and largely unmet need to "put the pieces together" in the physical shape of our communities.** This is true at all scales, from individual sites to entire regions. In the process, the possibility of the unique and satisfying fit among the elements that can compose our physical environment is frequently lost. What is lost, in short, is what architects and landscape architects refer to when they talk about "sense of place".

The parts of our physical environment – buildings, open spaces, infrastructure and natural environment – are frequently out of balance, damaged or compromised in ways that many people recognize and dislike. The image is like having a broken or unfinished picture that many people understand is not well assembled, where my purpose is to help those people find the most satisfactory way of putting the pieces together.

I absolutely do not ascribe this vision to a romantic and unfounded notion that we need to return to some lost era when things were more balanced and in better relationship to one another. My vision is insistently not a doctrine or aesthetic system

- like the neo-traditionalist sensibility (a largely romantic and often unhelpful model of nineteenth century communities), or “Smart Growth”, or other formulaic perspectives. My vision is more basic. I find that many of the powerful forces of contemporary economics, political and social organization when combined with our cultural values have made it very difficult to establish the balance and sense of unique places that nearly everyone recognizes as desirable. My job is to find the practical paths to this balance and unique qualities – and not just once or in one place, but **to leverage as much positive change as I can during my professional lifetime.**

The firm – The Cecil Group – is a means to this end, and is not an end in itself – it never has been. In fact, I never meant to create a firm in the first place. It happened, because it was quite simply the best choice and tool to achieve the vision at a key points in my career. This sub-task – creating and operating The Cecil Group - engages a substantial portion of my time and attention and is the focus of the great help that Liz is providing.

And I am proud of our accomplishments. We have advanced hundreds important initiatives. Attracted to waterfronts, we have planned public parks, redevelopment of shipyards, and conversion of Massport’s East Boston waterfront to mixed use. We have helped scores of towns and cities with their town centers, downtowns, and neighborhoods, from streetscape to civic improvements, to revitalization of whole districts. We have been helping developers and communities create transit-oriented development from long before “TOD” tripped off of everyone’s tongues. We have been restoring historic districts, improving the fit between infrastructure and the communities they serve. We are inventing urban objects to celebrate Boston’s Avenue of the Arts. We managed a process to help introduce alternative fuel vehicles nationally for General Motors and others, and then helped the Federal Transit Administration advance the introduction of Bus Rapid Transit, including redesign of the buses themselves. Planning for mixed use, we have helped find ways to put the pieces together for the Russia Wharf redevelopment, as well as We are very active at a regional scale, finding new uses and new relationships on vast parcels of land – the 20,000 acre, Mass Military Reservation, South Weymouth Naval Air Station, and chart the course for 10 miles of coastline along Narragansett Bay. It’s now public – we played a key role in creating a partnership between a coalition of preservation institutions and the Makepeace land development encompassing over 8,000 acres of land.

But – and here is a link to the courage side – **this vision can be a devilishly difficult basis for a business.** This company is **a challenging, unwieldy, risky and occasionally counterproductive tool that must be constantly improved and refined to best accomplish its mission.** The company’s leadership cannot assume that because they (I) invented the tool, they (I) already know how to best operate or control it. What a big and constant source of errors that assumption is!

Many of the challenges are typical of entrepreneurial professional service firms. For these challenges, there are many sources of shared lessons and guidance that I am constantly seeking and for which I am grateful.

However, many of the challenges are linked to our particular mission and do not lend themselves to the characteristics of a normal business enterprise. For example, accomplishing this vision requires approaches that are difficult to institutionalize. The solutions are, by definition, complex and unique compositions of specific places and circumstances; therefore, the solutions are absolutely impossible to repeat, make into formulas, or convey as a branded product. This vision spans an astonishing range of topics and scales and is not focused on any project type. Accomplishing this vision necessarily involves finding paths to resolution among many people who have conflicting perceptions and/or interests (the “out of balance” problem in human form). The vision spans many disciplines and requires the ability to bring together specialized professionals whose knowledge and skills tend to be insular. Ours is labor-intensive work that few people are trained to do and which requires constant innovation. As a result, it is challenging to find experienced professionals with multi-disciplinary perspectives, the work is expensive to perform and suffers from a lack of efficiencies associated with repetitive tasks. It can be very hard to make money this way.

My commitment to the vision of The Cecil Group is linked to my **continued resolve to persist in overcoming challenges that cannot be changed, while reshaping the firm so that it requires less courage in the future - and is even more successful.** And I have had an inspiration along the way.

I was recently struck by a marvelous parallel biography of the two great explorers of the Antarctic, Roald Amundsen (who first reached the pole and returned to tell about it) and Sir Walter Scott (who reached the pole just weeks later, and has been lionized for his courageous but unsuccessful attempt to return from it). It is a great study of vision, courage, and the role of leadership. With the identical vision and the same obstacles, the two leaders attained very different results. Amundsen translated his early exploration experiences and failures into new strategies; he tried many methods during small outings, abandoned bad ideas, learned and adjusted. He prepared for everything he could, carefully trained his team, and expected problems as part of the deal. Scott relied on a particular mission plan that was built on resolution rather than experience, a sense of duty and persistence by his team rather than their training, and a plan that did not admit to problems, and so could not react to the unexpected.

Amundsen’s courage was found in the willingness to set off on a unique venture that he feared would be misunderstood and frowned upon by his community, a voyage that was dangerous even with excellent preparation, and for which he had inadequate financial resources – he literally risked personal ruin (and nearly got it). Sir Walter Scott’s notable courage was bound up in his fear of losing his standing in his community, along with a noble sense of physical courage in the face of astonishing (and, as it turned out, entirely unnecessary) deprivations.

So, we are working hard to be more like the Amundsen expedition than Scott’s. For us, this means:

- **Clearing the decks** – One of the most important lessons has been to evaluate the firm’s structure and activities, learning from experience and getting rid of what is not really helping to achieve the vision.
- **Expanding our capabilities** – We are focusing on selecting professionals who can accomplish the vision by virtue of their own multi-disciplinary background – many of us have multiple degrees and disciplines to their own work. We are instituting internal training and information programs, to speed learning and revisions in our approaches to project. We have relocated to a space that that we designed to serve as an open studio environment that is part of our culture.
- **Underlining the Group in The Cecil Group** – We are underlining the ability of the individuals that compose the firm to take the initiative to put the pieces together for our clients.

Some aspects of the practice will always require some courage, and this cannot be changed. Part of the territory includes arenas where pieces cannot be reassembled without a resolved consensus. We must continue to operate with as much courage, dignity and self preservation as possible while helping communities reach resolution within a charged atmosphere. Our projects are created where there are different points of view weighing in on complex issues with persistent misunderstanding, mistrust, misinformation and even manipulation (the M&M&M&M’s). We will need the courage and confidence needed to continue to sign contracts to solve unparalleled problems, knowing that we can and will find a way.

But it is somehow worth it all, because of the vision that drives it.

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N.B. For those interested, I recommend as an excellent study on vision and courage the book on Amundsen and Scott by Roland Huntford, ***The Last Place on Earth*** (Modern Library of Exploration, Jon Krakauer, series editor).