

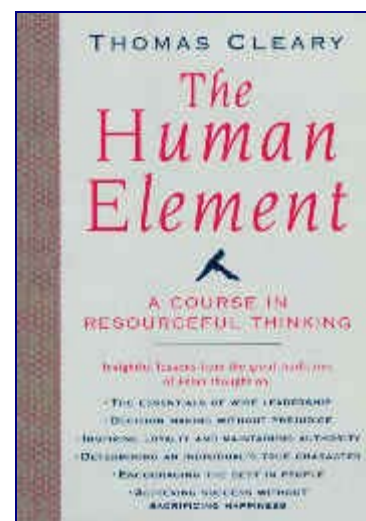
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A READER'S JOURNAL

The Human Element
by
Thomas Cleary

A Course in Resourceful Thinking
Published by Shambala in 1994
A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©1998



This is a trivial book with a glowing report by the author of another trivial book on its back cover:

A glistening jewel of wisdom that gracefully rearranges the tangles of commercial life. *The Human Element* contains more practical 'management' advice than the last decade's worth of how-to books. Don't read it once. Not even twice. If you care about your business, work, or family, you will want to read it for the rest of your life. — Paul Hawken, author of *The Ecology of Commerce*

I read Hawken's book several years ago and thought so lightly of it that I gave the book away to someone else and never wrote a review of it. Having damned Cleary's book with Hawken's praise, let me say that *The Human Element* is a useful book of quotations from Confucius, Lao-Tzu, The Book of Change, and Sun-tzu. Cleary's commentary sometimes adds to the clarity of the quotations, but unfortunately often detracts from or confuses the meaning of the quotation. Here's an example:

[page 102 — Quotation from Book of Change] There is nothing wrong with working on yourself alone when necessary, but it does not help those around you just then.

[page 102-103 — Cleary's clarification] You cannot do for others what you cannot do for yourself, so it is necessary to develop yourself before you can be of genuine help to others. To work on your own development may therefore be in fact altruistic when it appears to be selfish; but at the stage when you are concentrating on self-work, the benefit this may have for others in the future has not yet materialized and is therefore not yet apparent to those around you.

This juxtaposition of the quote and Cleary's explication of the quote can best describe the problem I have with this book. There is a hint of an inconsistency in the two. While it may not yet be "apparent to those around you" of the benefit, the benefit is still there and will help the person. Reading the two excerpts again and again does not help, as the meaning of Cleary's clarification gets muddier and muddier. Besides that, I have a basic disagreement with both excerpts in that I think that the best work on oneself takes place when one helps others. In 1978 I penned an aphorism that describes this process: [Thus A Teacher, So Also A Learner](#).

To Cleary's credit, the next quote and explication were right on point.

[page 103] When in an unsettled state, it is well to practice moderation.

Cleary explains it thus, "If you exercise strength immoderately while in an unsettled condition, you are likely to lose balance and go too far." I experienced just such an exercise of immoderate strength by a friend who came unglued because I offered to show a picture I made of him to other friends over the Internet. He had made no prior mention of being sensitive about having his picture taken or my showing the picture to anyone, but raised a holy ruckus when I offered to show it to some mutual friends on an Internet list. What struck me so strongly was this: he responded as strongly to my doing something inadvertently against his wishes as if I had it done willfully against his wishes. Where was the leeway to respond to a willful transgression? He had left himself none. "When in an unsettled state, it is well to practice moderation."

With all the news in the fall of 1998 focusing on the misdeeds of the president of the United States and possible impeachment, here's what Confucius offers about the subject. One can see vapor trails of both Nixon and the current temporary resident of the White House in the following quote.

[page 28] Confucius said, "Ignoble people are not for positions of authority, because they worry about getting something; and once they have gotten whatever it is they want, then they worry about losing it. As long as they are worried about losing something, there is no telling what they might do."

One further negative criticism of Cleary's book. He wrote this material prior to 1994 when the economy of Japan was the epitome of what it meant to be a great economic power. With Japan's economy on the ropes a short five years later, his canonization of Japan has a flat ring to it. All of his "big talk" about how great Japan is in the last chapter leads me to end the review with this quote:

[page 42] Lao-tzu said, "Big talkers reach the end of their wits over and over again."

