



the Leadership LENS

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a monthly resource providing insight, opinion & practical information on life balance, creativity & powerful communications

Outsourcing Our Lives

I enjoy a cup of hot tea especially in the afternoons. It's a habit I picked up from having a good Chinese friend while attending public school and then later spending time on the island nation of Taiwan. I remember one particular trip to a tea plantation near the southern city of Kaohsiung (pronounced gow-shung). Row after row of verdant green tea bushes flowed down one hill and up the next as far as my eyes could see. After touring the compound, I was escorted into the dark brown wood tasting room. It was adorned with Chinese scrolls extolling the virtues of tea. I sampled a few varieties taking a keen interest in one called 'springtime high mountain oolong.' Instead of the shredded tea leaves in Lipton's bags, I was exposed to the fragrant scents of entire dried leaves.

I learned the first 'pour' of hot water is then poured back over the small teapot almost immediately, and tea drinkers tend to use the same leaves three, eight or more times. There really is an art to the tea ceremony including offering your guest the first cup of tea with both hands. Afterwards, the spent tea leaves can even be used as an odor absorber for the refrigerator and freezer. At the insistence of my host, I was encouraged to try lots of tea. A few hours later as my vehicle pulled out of the gravel parking lot, sweat was pouring down my face. My head was spinning from an appreciation of Chinese culture and an overdose of caffeine. The experience showed me the power and concentration of natural ingredients and the importance of taking the time to enjoy the simple things in life.

You can imagine my frustration when it was becoming increasingly difficult to find hot water in the kitchen at one of my clients. Ever since my trip to Taiwan, I have managed to carry some whole leaf tea bags in my work backpack. Instead of having something as simple as hot water close by, this client had decided to take outsourcing to a whole new level (liter-



A Chinese man fishes off of the bridge to Wuli Pagoda, Lotus Lake, Kaohsiung, Taiwan, (c) Mark Sincevich

ally). They outsourced every company kitchen or pantry in three buildings and installed automated kitchens on every floor. In four neatly arranged vending machines, there was an assortment of highly processed food laden with an abundance of transfat as well as a variety of high fructose corn syrup beverages. There were no cups, plates or napkins and I later found out the hot water 'function' had been put in a different building across the courtyard! Since I needed a vendor badge to go through various levels of security, it was virtually impossible to get hot water without assistance.

This whole exercise struck me as rather strange. What should have been simple, getting a mug of hot water, had now become extremely complicated. Instead of making the sodas and other unhealthy food more complicated to retrieve, the reverse had occurred. At the same time the experience is redolent of what is happening in our society. We often make things much more complicated than they need to be. For example, the average American home has become increasingly large, up from just 800 square feet in the early 1950's to nearly 2,500 square feet today, according to the National Association of Home Builders. This is about four times the size in just 50 years. While people have larger homes, the ability to do simple errands has easily become four times more complicated. We live further out from the center of our cities and towns, so the places we shop are often located further away. This goes against how nature operates. In nature, everything is no more complicated than it

needs to be in order to fulfill its particular function. Nature is simple by design.

While many Americans have more room to roam in their homes, they are not necessarily happier. According to architect Sarah Susanka, the author of *Inside The Not So Big House*, "After moving in, filled with expectations of a better life, many wonder why they aren't any more satisfied ... the only real changes are higher energy bills, more rooms to clean and a longer ride to work. What's missing is the feeling of 'home' many of us are seeking has almost nothing to do with square footage." Focusing on the size of our homes or finding the most efficient way to outsource a task leaves less time to add more character to our lives. Instead of eliminating redundancy and useless tasks, many people and organizations are adding more steps to the process all in the name of outsourcing and cost cutting.

What are we really cutting here? Sure it takes time to cook a nutritious meal with natural ingredients or to visit a tea shop. What really is getting cut is the magical experience of exploring and the time necessary to do so. In today's overly complicated world, we have managed to make getting hot water, running errands and even processes at our work (think filling out your expense report) more complicated. Overly complicating your life will lead to more frustration and allows for less time to be spent on the things we really want to enjoy like family, a simple and nutritious meal, a hobby, time for an interesting work assignment, and even a cup of whole leaf tea. The Chinese tea ceremony was developed in the 9th century around the Taoist philosophy of 'living in the moment.' Living in the moment implies living a more simple life. It is simplicity in the design of everything we do including the experience of visiting a tea shop and drinking Chinese tea.



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