The Art of Regenerative Leadership: Language, Spirit, and Principles

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If ever there was a time in American history when whole and integrated leadership, a balance of healthy characteristics, was necessary, that time is now. During the past two decades, we witnessed conscious attempts to create leadership paradigms which spoke about stewardship (Block, 1993); moving people to yes (Fisher and Ury, 1981; Block, 2002); partnership and responsibility; circles and “feminine” ways of leading and using power (Hagberg, 1994). Although these are not new ideas, their movement from fringe thinking to more general consciousness was evident. Now, with the occupation of Iraq (I admit to the biased phrase), we are once again in the grip of command and control leadership, dominance, linear thinking, black and white framing of problems and solutions.

We are ready to colonize Mars and the Moon, according to the U.S. President, in a race to conquer space. The military-industrial axis (notice how our national leaders and the media have resurrected that word with its heavy freight of twentieth century history) propels the world into a “for us or against us” mentality. And as we are obsessed with terrorists, terrorism and color code travel alerts, virtually everything—from the pulpits to politics to the Patriot Act—is transformed into ersatz priorities (“Leave no child behind,” but don’t fund the necessities to accomplish this, for example) and pinchbeck democratic processes. The stunning phrase “preemptive war” to define an American right, even obligation, has indeed set leadership, politics, language and values on a ruinous course.

What are the arenas where leadership and culture can be revitalized? In my own history of three university and college presidencies (public and private, traditional and non traditional), a stint in Washington, DC, as Vice President and Director of the Office of Women in Higher Education at the American Council on Education, the establishment of my own international business in executive leadership coaching and consulting, my work as a writer and teacher of leadership theory (including leadership and gender), and my experiences facilitating leadership training for developing nations under the auspices of the United Nations, I have consciously struggled with ways to define my own leadership as a force for renewal and transformative change.

We need a very different kind of leadership and a powerful language to describe it. Several terms depict what I view as essential components of the contemporary leader: the Leader as 1) Explorer and Journeyer, 2) Creator of Personal and Organizational Coherence, 3) Healer, 4) Mentor-Teacher, and 5) Magus. Because the first point under girds the other four, most of my discussion will focus on that, with the other points touched on only briefly.

The Leader as Explorer and Journeyer may be a particularly apt phrase for American leadership—our history is, after all, rich with the language and concepts of westward expansionism, frontier consciousness, the mapping expedition of Lewis and Clark. But I want to use the phrase in an especially transformative way. I am speaking of the leader who intentionally explores the territory within and who understands that the inner journey—including those god-forsaken periodic times of wandering in the wilderness or walking in the desert—never ends. S/he has seen the Shadow with all its implicit terror as well as the Light, and has faced down her own inner darkness. This
knowledge is hard-won. It leaves our psyches bloodied and renewed.

Many of us who work with leadership development find that the journey must be undertaken before the map can be created, personally and organizationally. None of our contemporary careening values, paradigms, contexts or realities lends themselves to easy understanding.

Complex understanding for a leader (for each of us, for that matter) begins with knowing the complexity within. That archetypal cyclic journey undertaken by the initiate, the leaders-to-be—from the tribe into the wilderness, to confront temptation and/or danger (dragons, Scylla and Charybdis, Satan), the encounter with the wise teacher or god (the Crone of the Woods, Athena, Allah), the consequent epiphany or transformation in the wilderness, and the return to the tribe in the transformed state—that journey is essential to all future actions. The cycle, as ancient as storytelling, allows for fear that one is not courageous enough, for doubt, terror, indecision, the wish to flee, perseverance, and the amazing power of self-discovery. The journey is heroic after one has survived it, not during the experience. More than ever, we now need leaders who bring their wisdom back to the tribe: the university, state, nation, whatever form the community takes. This is the heroic leadership that regenerates through the potent example of experience and wisdom.

What I am saying is that spirituality and leadership are inextricably intertwined, in my perspective. When I first started lecturing, speaking and writing about the spiritual nature of leadership to secular academic audiences, both they and I often felt awkward in the discussion. How do we address spirituality without crossing into the realms of theology, doctrine, religion and religiosity? After twenty-plus years of describing effective leadership characteristics and experiences, and having interviewed numerous presidents and CEOs, I no longer feel that awkwardness. Yes, issues and challenges are complex within even the smallest organization. And yet there is wonder in the effable, in the soul of leadership which is not easily defined, but which nevertheless genuinely exists. We see its presence in the vision and manifestation of our most inspiring leaders from the recent past—from Eleanor Roosevelt to Clark Kerr to Martin Luther King, Jr., to Dag Hammarskjöld.

Because a common understanding of spirituality would be helpful at this point, let me use the definition from the National Study of Spirituality in Higher Education (Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA): “Spirituality points to our interiors, our subjective life, as contrasted to the objective domains of material events and objects. Our spirituality is reflected in the values and ideals that we hold most dear, our sense of who we are and where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here—the meaning and purpose we see in our lives—and our connectedness to each other and to the world around us.”

With this cogent definition as a guide, we need not shy away from crucial discussions of the role of spirituality in leadership. Its power and wisdom need to be evoked in our organizations, classrooms, and our leadership councils. In acknowledging its influence over not only how we lead, but why we lead, we open ourselves up to a greater resource of Wise Knowledge, as well as to sharing that knowledge. Its presence keeps us honest about ourselves and our organizations, including institutions of teaching and learning.

From self-exploration and inner journeying springs the wisdom that every organization, in all sectors of life, also must engage in an exploratory journey. The Leader as Explorer becomes the Leader as Journeyer. Having mapped the moral domain, s/he now brings us into the journey so that we too may experience an inner expedition, personally and organizationally.

The expedition to discover, name, and change an organization is a necessary
requirement during this time of transition in education, our society, the world. In all of the literature about organizational change, not enough has been written about inner exploration—that the leader first engages in that painful and enlightening self-exploration, and then leads the inner expedition of the organization to discovery, redefining institutional values, and creating coherent actions from those values. It is not about dogma; it is about continuous discovery—collectively, institutionally, personally.

The incongruity often is that we who have most pursed our internal ways of knowing often end up in jobs which are so massively demanding that we become fugitives from self; the professional exhaustion can create a kind of spiritual amnesia. Some time ago, I visited the campus of a prestigious university where the president had become a national and international icon. What I saw as he moved among the crowd of alumni and guests on a football Saturday was an exhausted man moving on automatic pilot, repeating his mantra from person to person: “Hi, how areya? Great to see ya again. How’re the kids doin'? Whaddya think of last week’s game?” The scene was sad and informative—and it has haunted me for years.

Perhaps the great challenge of seeing leadership as an exploration is that exploring meanders, may take diversionary side roads and short cuts. We are as a society typically impatient with such thoughtful asides. Great leaders, we Americans often assert, are insightful and decisive, without self-doubt; so we go to war over weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and even when we do not discover such weapons, we continue to assert the belief that they nevertheless do exist. The fiction becomes the reality. Rather than insisting the Untrue is actually True, the Journeyer brings us to a deeper sense of ourselves within our organizations, and within our multiple realities in this complex contemporary world. In this way, the Leader as Explorer-Journeyer gives us permission, as well as a model, for our own journeys.

Am I talking about authenticity in leadership? Well, yes—and more than that. One can lead from the authentic self, and yet not have achieved multidimensional leadership coherence. Although authenticity is essential, coherence is a critical marker beyond that. Let me explain by moving onto my second point: Leader as Creator of Personal and Organizational Coherence.

Coherent leadership is the result of a good many things, two of the most important of which are: the inner, unifying journey of the individual leader, about which we have already spoken, and her/his ability to achieve and express personal and public coherence as a consequence of that journey. In a world of increasing polarities and extremes, coherence often eludes us on both the macro and micro levels of our experiences. For example, we have attempted to deal with gender polarities by speaking about androgynous leadership. Important as this concept is, it is only a starting point in the search for logical congruence of language and leadership. Leadership coherence embraces androgyny, but ranges far beyond it. When I began writing this essay, I intended to talk about the “deep feminine” as representative of obscured aspects of leadership. This concept however is even more relevant to the discussion of coherence. One of the greatest disjunctures of all is the split between the masculine and the feminine. We have language about androgyny, but we do not have the meanings of androgyny. Putting women leaders in place does not in the least assure either androgynous leadership or the expression of deeper aspects of inner wisdom. So leadership is not about gender per se; it is about values and codes of action.

We can slightly shift the phrase “deep feminine” to “deep principles,” a term I am using with the intention of bringing us outside the boundaries of gender. This phrase bespeaks an ability to be linked to the esoteric, as well as the practical, able to move fluidly between left and
practical, able to move fluidly between left and right brain activity, to discover, explore and fearlessly use intuitive understanding. I employ "fearlessly" as a descriptive adverb because intuition is generally perceived as soft, touchy feely and New Agey. In fact, intuition is substantive and integrative of all our senses, and it inspires creative thinking and decisions. When I have followed my intuitive "hits," I have seldom been out of sync; when I have ignored them, I have made some stunning errors. For example, I once hired a disastrous vice president, against my intuitive judgment. Because I could not put my finger on a sense of disease around this person, there was no logical reason not to offer the job to her. With rapidity, she proved to be disruptive and self-serving in all arenas within and outside the institution. I more recently accepted a leadership position when every intuitive instinct told me I could not trust a key member of the board. That distrust proved to be well-founded. Had I learned to depend upon, polish, and trust intuition (which we define as feminine in our culture), I would have made a wiser decision and avoided a great deal of pain. (I did, however, learn a great deal from that pain.)

Even so, there is a larger point to make. The richness of meaning inherent in "deep principles" is suggested here as an aspect of Depth Psychology, the psychology of the unconscious. Jung's concepts of Anima/Animus (Soul and Spirit) are part of what the phrase expresses; it is the propelling motivation, the archetypal image of leadership carried within one's heart and mind, the desire to sound the previously unathomable depths of one's psyche, to comprehend anima and animus—not only for oneself, but for the fulfillment of a life mission. It is an integration of our authentic selves with the task at hand, with the greater missions of ourselves and our organizations. It means a supernal sense of unity, the core wisdom that All is indeed One. It unifies Systems thinking (touching any part of the cobweb causes the entire web to reverberate) with a personal Code of the Soul (Hillman, 1996). This is the capacity to hold a clear institutional vision in the midst of constant paradigm shifts, and to create the living, connective filaments which allow for the reimaginings and reinventions of our life and work. It is the force that is alive, generative, and vitalizing.

These deep principles lead us also into reflective and contemplative leadership. Because the journeyer leader needs the deep principles which are found only within the stillness inside, an inspired leader needs time to be immersed in the Great Mystery: daily silence to listen, to seek the witness within, to be open to many levels of knowing, to connect to the cyclic rhythms of life (including organizational cycles), to be imbued with heartfelt purpose.

The connection, then, between reflection and healing is compelling, and it manifests the third aspect of leadership: the Leader as Healer. I have often thought that the really extraordinary power of leadership lies in the recognition that individuals and institutions require healing processes before they can release toxicity and move forward into health. Most of us know many walking wounded within our organizations; we certainly know them well in higher education. Thus it is not inaccurate to suggest that the deep feminine emerges again in the concern with healing. I vividly recall a seminar I ran for the leaders of several start-up companies in the San Jose area several years ago. When I drew attention to the role of Leader as Healer, I invoked a reaction not of interest but of irritation. As one of the participants said with asperity, "Let's move off the soft stuff and get on with the seminar!" The participants, exclusively male, wanted the nuts and bolts of hard-nosed leadership, a cut-to-the-bottom-line seminar, minus a discussion of the fiscal and human costs of wounded employees.
This was particularly striking to me since many of my one-on-one executive coaching clients were deeply wounded by and in the very organizations represented at this meeting.

In my essay on “Healing Leadership” (Spear, ed, 1998, p.187), I present six stages of healing leadership: 1) consciousness of health; 2) willingness to change; 3) a teachable moment; 4) healthy support systems; 5) immersion in the duality of our inner lives; and 6) the return to service in leadership. What is consciousness of health? It is a concept of soundness, harmonious balance mentally/physically/emotionally/spiritually. Disease has been dealt with; wounds are treated and allowed to heal. The point is that only the individual who has gone through an intensely personal healing process and absorbed those learnings can understand and lead institutional healing and inspire the ongoing, evolving process of personal and organizational healing. The journeyer and the healer are one.

The concepts of the Leader as Explorer and Journeyer, as the Creator of Personal and Organization Coherence, and as Healer lead into the role of the Leader as Mentor-Teacher. What we learn, we must teach, and the most effective leaders are teachers in every action they take. As is always true, we lead and teach both explicitly and implicitly, by example and words, by our public and private selves/lives. If we think of education as a leading forth, the principles of leadership are evident, for by the ways in which we are and lead, we teach—among other things—values, ethics, style, priorities, and our sense of being in the world.

More than this, as mentor-teacher, the leader develops leadership in others. The mentor role allows us to leave legacies which are, at the same time, both tangible and spiritual. We foster, nurture the talents and advancement of talented individuals; we raise the complex questions and counsel our mentees in the varieties of possibilities. In the best sense, leaders are intentional about mentoring and teaching, as aspects of ethical responsibility to individuals and the organization. Although planning for succession is a most imperfect art, the process of teaching/mentoring is invaluable in any context. What we have and the wisdom we cherish are most meaningful when they are shared; these elements must not vanish when we leave the organization—they are the hand-holds and ledges on the cliff which can be used by others who are now climbing behind us.

My discussion of leadership concludes with the concept of the Leader as Magus/Magae. Although this may be a risky concept because of the prestidigitator connotations of the “M” word, it is the closest approximation to what I want to express. The phrase depicts the Leader as Wise Wo/Man; in this way it weaves together all the threads discussed in this essay. It is not conjuring, but it is intuitive (there’s the deep feminine arising again) and knowing on an expanded level, seeing beyond what is material into the immaterial. It represents the true visionary impulse; it is the ineffability of the most superb leadership. The soul of the organization is recognized and called forth so that the individual and the organization intertwine with a higher purpose. It is the acknowledgement that there is more than a touch of magic, of powers beyond the normal, in the presence, vision and powerful influence of the great leader.

Despite modern complexities, perhaps because of such complexities, there exists the possibility of powerful leadership congruence. In summary, we can define striking, distinctive, and effective leadership in many of its most salient aspects: Explorer-Journeyer, Creator of Personal and Organizational Coherence, Healer, Mentor-Teacher, and Magus. These components are the magic of truly regenerative leadership.
References


