

Leadership and Two Worlds

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We live in two worlds. The First World is the external world of competition, getting ahead, and reaching for the brass ring of material success and social status. It is a hectic world filled with ego, ambition, influence, power and pretense. In this world image and style frequently supersede substance. Here, metrics rule, bottom lines revered, and seeing is believing. In the First World, we chase control through rational planning and plastic procedures designed to manipulate results and stave off mortality.

The Second World is our internal one in which our spirit and soul live. It is a world where wonder sparkles, compassion speaks, and nature sings. The Second World is where innocence and wisdom are revered and where values and principles under gird our conscience. In this world, stewardship is more important than power, and head and heart act one. Our longing to truly belong and finding and living our destiny are inherent in the Second World. Here, relationships are primary and nature and the natural order and cycle of life are respected.

Leaders live each day in both worlds. They face all the pressures, emptiness, and allures of the First World. Our culture created that world, and some would say it is constructed on the shaky perception of human nature with its greed, competitiveness, and materialism. This dark and dangerous view of human nature permeates relationships, decisions, and protocols in the First World. For cynics, this is the so-called 'real world'.

We frequently think that this First World is the "practical" one -- the real one. The Second World appears fanciful, idealistic, and unrealistic. This seems odd because as life ebbs from our pores, we yearn for a final grasp at the Second World—children's laughter, our embrace of loved ones, or seeing a rainbow for the last time. I doubt we will yearn for another board meeting or receiving another wall plaque. So, what is reality?

There are paradoxes in life, and one certainly works here. The mythological view is of a leader who is an independent individual and is his or her "own person". Yet, paradoxically, to win favor and survive in the First World conforming and molding ourselves to "propriety" and the expectations of others are valued. Speaking, dressing, thinking, eating, and behaving imprison people of the First World to what is 'appropriate' and accepted to maintain influence. They don't become their own people. In this context, leaders adopt vanilla personalities and pursue goals that alienate the fewest people. Politicians are known for trying to govern by public opinion polls and paradoxically compromise their values and leadership standing.

In the First World, we create rules designed to help us "get ahead". Yet, in many cases, these pronouncements are dysfunctional and contrary to what leaders need to succeed. Some of them include:

- "We go along...to get along" and, as a consequence, we implement the rule of self-censorship. We don't say what's on our mind in order to be accepted and not upset the organizational 'apple cart'. We go along to belong to the group or "club" of colleagues or influentials. In the process, we may not be true to ourselves,

and consequently, we collide with our conscience if we do not speak and live our truth.

- “*We play the game*”, an outgrowth of getting along, requiring manipulation, deflecting responsibility, and avoiding direct conflict. If life is a game, then winning and looking good is important, and “getting the edge” even by cutting corners, is advantageous. Many people use military or sports metaphors about their work—building teams, mobilizing forces, strategically thinking, dying on hills, falling on swords, blitzing, and multi-frontal strategies are all examples.

In playing games, however, competition, not cooperation; analysis, not synthesis; individualism, not collaboration; and tangibles, not intangibles become all-important. Balance and relationships become lost in reaching the “targets” and beating the competition. We are fearful that we will ‘bomb’ in leading and become failures.

- In playing the game, “*we don’t want to be loved, we want to be respected*”. We play for keeps, keep score, and believe that what goes around comes around. Getting to the right bottom line is all important, regardless of the road we take to get there. The emotional tenor is generally negative. Retribution, not forgiveness; fear, not affection, and revenge, not reconciliation are the major emotions. A life lived on this emotional edge is lived in desperation, loneliness, and disconnection. Maybe that is why some leaders feel it is lonely at the top or fear being vulnerable to questions and criticism.
- Finally, the First World is one filled with influence, not the creative genius of people. It is “*who you know, not what you know*”. Mutual back scratching and boot licking, influence following cash, and power following position is the landscape of the First World. Power is seen as finite and needs to be hoarded and controlled, while leaders play things close-to-the-vest and do not betray their motives or connections.

The First World confronts conflict with power, cleverness, and force. Disequilibrium does not fit the tightly controlled plans and strategies that are designed to increase conforming behavior or to achieve a desired metric and bottom line.

The backdrop or context for leadership in the First World is economic, political, and social systems. The First World values certainty and clarity. To be successful, there has to be the appearance of control; which is one of life’s great illusions. In either world, getting control and keeping it is impossible. Control is an ephemeral concept because we have power over so little. Life’s ebbs and flows keep disturbing our plans. Life’s journey is unpredictable and filled with surprises.

Leaders live in a chaotic external context fraught with disequilibrium. It is easy to fall out of balance in this milieu. Those who are at peace with themselves will not succumb to the whims, expectations and temptations of others or organizations. They will act with integrity to the principles in the First World.

To do so, leaders need to identify those principles that are not negotiable. To the extent you compromise a principle you have no principle. Knowing where to stand—on what ground you intend to claim—is important. Not all conflicts are important. Leaders define themselves by the issues on which they are willing to risk their attachments, those things they are not willing to give up on that are nonnegotiable.

In the external world, strength is more important than power. History shows us that brute power cannot overcome personal strength of purpose and integrity. People have faced the world with all its harshness and survived by inner strength and by being strong of heart and principle. Many great leaders -- Mandela, Havel, and King -- were imprisoned by powerful forces. Yet they prevailed because of strength of purpose and ideas and their integrity with principles.

Leading from your inner core is to serve others with honor. Leaders with strength act with honor in all their actions, and they respect and dignify life and the human spirit. If not, they lose their credibility and fall into insignificance.

The external world crashes in on us on waves of conflict, expectation, and doubt. It is on these shores, we learn to come to terms with the differences between both worlds and our own tenor. David Whyte in his poem “What I Must Tell Myself” says,

When you are alone
you must do anything
to believe
and when you are
abandoned
you must speak
with everything
you know
and everything you are
in order
to belong.

As leaders, we belong on these shores of conflict and we must speak our truth and not become impotent victims in the maelstrom. Whyte does not mean we need to conform to belong. To belong to and with others we must be true to ourselves and take our place next to those who stand against the tide and do not blanche from the strong seas of First World seductions.

Accepting others and those conditions beyond our control or different than we would like them to be is a challenge. Acceptance does not mean agreement. Quite the contrary. It means that we don't curse the darkness, wring our hands, and simply complain, thereby frustrating ourselves because those existing conditions will not change. But leaders work within those conditions -- even against the odds. They fight the good fight.

Leaders with strength of heart contribute and participate, they do the right things, not just do things right. When we are in harmony with ourselves we share our ideas, thoughts, reverence, and talents. Thoughts and ideas are powerful. They crush tanks and deflect missiles and can outwit “smart” bombs. Ideas are the basis for noble efforts. Liberty,

justice, and freedom are abstract ideals, yet the world has been moved and changed by them because they ring in the very heart and soul of humanity.

Leaders are not driven by the ego needs – the need to do things for personal benefit and acclaim of the First World. They are driven by the reverence they have for the inherent value and goodness of human beings and the great potential they bring to this earth. They are stewards, which mean creating the conditions necessary for people to meet their destiny. Reverence is a form of stewardship. To be a good steward is to leave your home, relationships, community, organization and world in better shape than you found them.

Emotion and feeling are strong forces in leadership. Passion and its sometimes difficult cousin, intensity, can mobilize and inspire others. Diversion is not the strategy of leaders. Courage to face realities, to confront and even create conflict, and to make a difference are at the crux of leading.

Conflict is a factor in both worlds but the conflict is over different terms. The conflict in our inner world is what we seldom mention, no less discuss. These conflicts are revealing and quite personal, and may swim against the tide of leadership myth.

For example, inside each of us is a longing. John O'Donahue the Irish writer and poet says, "Each one of us journeys alone to this world and it is our nature to seek out belonging." He states, "No one was created for isolation. When we became isolated, we are prone to being damaged; our minds lose their flexibility and natural kindness; we became vulnerable to fear and negativity. The sense of belonging keeps you in balance amidst the inner and outer immensities. The ancient and eternal values of human life—truth, unity, goodness, justice, beauty, and love are all statements of true belonging..."

Coming to grips with our natural desire for belonging as leaders and making positive connections is something we must confront—and maybe we need to help each other with those connections. The sense of longing we have as leaders is far different from the false images people have of lonely, detached, leaders sitting on the top of the bureaucratic pyramid. Does it have to be lonely at the top? Isn't that a dysfunction that eventually causes leaders succumb to "fear and negativity"?

What a paradox. Deep within us is a longing to belong. Yet business schools and leadership programs promote detachment under the guise of objectivity and impartiality. It's as if we believe the more detached we are, the more competent we are and the more respect we get. This curious logic has its roots in the mythology of the leader as independent hero.

Part of our longing is to meet our destiny, to reach our calling, and to use our talents and energy to do what is good and right. Meeting our potential and becoming the person we desire to be, is part of our longing. Our calling lives in our spirit and haunts us when we follow a different road, steer off course or live in isolated invincibility.

This longing is to be connected in a meaningful way in relationship with others and to the larger world. We all seek a sense of efficacy; finding our place in the world where we are in our element. The German poet Rilke described the movement of the swan. He said,

The clumsy living that moves lumbering
as if in ropes through what is not done
reminds us of the awkward way the swan walks

and to die, which is letting go
of the ground we stand on and cling to every day
is like the swan when he nervously lets himself down

into the water, which receives him gaily
and which flows joyfully under
and after him, wave after wave,
while the swan, unmoving and marvelously calm
is pleased to be carried, each minute more fully-grown,
more like a king, composed, farther and farther on.

The swan in its element is a metaphor for grace. On land, swans lumber left and right and are the picture of pure awkwardness. But in the water, they move with unmatched grace and beauty. When we are in our element -- where we are meant to be -- we too are graceful, confident, and comfortable. Not everyone is cut out for the responsibility and obligations of leadership. People who choose leadership positions because of First World needs are swans awkwardly wandering the fields.

When we are where we are supposed to be there is a grace about us. When we are in our element we find our voice and our place in the world. Then, we live in dignity and with integrity. If our ego pushes us into places out of our element, then we lumber and weave. We are not a "natural" or authentic. Our inner voice raises serious conflict and our happiness becomes the victim of our awkward, meandering walk.

Finally, inside each of us is fear. The fearless leader is another figment of our imagination and is a tribute to the facades people build and the protective masks they wear. Fear is a normal human emotion; the most fearsome images come from deep within us, not from the outside world. Even the great prophets of our world expressed fear: not fear from powerful physical forces and governments but from fear from within.

In quiet moments we hold a mirror up to our life and compare the image to our deepest selves and longing. Many leaders fear not being up to the challenge. Many of us think we "luck out", and our talent and skill were not the reasons for overcoming obstacles and having success. If you were ever placed on the sidelines and were out of your element of leadership, another fear is born: the fear of not meeting your calling and doing what you were supposed to do with your life. Not being able to contribute creates great fear. What bigger loss is there than not being able use your talents and skill in the work you love?

Another fear is vulnerability. We fear that if we treat people in caring ways that we will be perceived as soft and easily manipulated. Tough leaders want respect; they trivialize being loved under the rubric that if you are loved as a leader you either "gave away the store" or you are weak and soft headed. It is as if respect and love are incongruous and unnatural in the First World of leadership.

Because many leaders are attached to the role of leader and its challenges, they fear losing their titles and positions. This fear is dangerous because ultimately leaders do move on, by choice or suggestion. Facing attachments and fear is essential in order for leaders to live peacefully inside without the growing cancer of anger or retribution.

The First World is laden with conflict. One major source of it is the illusion of control. People fight to gain control and then fight to maintain control. In a chaotic system like the universe, control is an illusion. We really do not control much in life. The pages of our life flip at a pace independent of our wishes. Our lives hang on a thin thread of fate. Disequilibrium and the struggle for homeostasis are the natural order of things. The most we can hope for is order, which is no small achievement.

Control raises issues of power and pressure. Those who want control chase political, social, or economic power. Power, to them, is about the ability to direct other people's lives and events. In this world, they seek control over people, issues, and dynamics. Our culture celebrates so-called barons of power and people of influence, as if they are immune to the serendipity of life.

The search for power in the First World is a competitive one. Sometimes, we compete with the system, trying to beat it and gain advantage. Other times the competition is with brass ring runners who want to control things. In other cases, we compete with ourselves or with our parents. Today, many children face stiff competition with their parents' economic and social status that places them under great pressure. Sometimes that pressure leads to alcohol and drug abuse and psychological disorders or even suicide. Not meeting your own or other's expectations can be a grueling and unhappy experience if you don't listen to your inner voice.

These issues explode into dysfunction for individuals and for organizations as well. In a competitive environment, people try to be clever. They become gamesmen who try beating the system through deception in strategy or by parsing words. While being clever seems harmless—“stings” are a part of our culture and are pointed to as testament to American ingenuity—they can lead to more serious issues.

Corruption is the grandchild of cleverness. There are two types of corruption. One is painfully obvious in our society and business world. The contemporary view of corruption is bribery, money schemes, “cooking the books”, false reporting, and selling inside information. This type of corruption is geared to First World advantage in worshipping on the altar of wealth and status based on a false definition of success. Unfortunately many perceived leaders had feet of clay as their “success” was tainted by using deception and smoke and mirrors.

Another type of corruption exists, yet it is one we seldom define. In fact, it is a classical view of corruption and has links to both the internal and external worlds and calling, stewardship and ego.

When leaders place personal good over the common good, it is corruption. In our society we do not have much discussion of the common good. We hear of entitlement and rights. We hear of every person for him or herself. We hear that if you don't watch out for

“number one” no one else will. These feelings are based on the notion that people are basically selfish. The common good or the commonweal seem like a value alien to our materialistic and ego-driven culture.

Leaders who are in a true sense stewards, and who operate from internal values and ideals, do not act in their self-interest at the expense of the common good. They look to what is good for all. They use their leadership position not to please power groups or themselves, but to take positions that help people see issues larger than their own parochial interests.

This classical view of corruption raises another issue: the conflict over purpose. What purpose drives our institutions and us? This question is one for both the inner and the outer worlds and has to be answered by each of us individually, as well as by our society collectively.

The question of purpose has to do with justice, goodness, truth, beauty, equality, and liberty. Individuals seek liberty and freedom for themselves to pursue their passion and bliss. These noble ideals challenge us in what we want to accomplish as leaders. Almost all issues leaders confront have to do with one or more of these ideals. In pursuing them there is struggle—a noble struggle that involves high stakes and high risk. As Whyte said, in “Secret Darkness”, “You must learn one thing. The world is made to be free in.” They combine the internal and external worlds.

Conflict and struggle are a part of life as we act on our yearnings and longings. Conflict is not all negative, and with it can come learning and satisfaction. From conflict and difficulty creativity and innovation can be born through the application of human genius. Being authentic to our values in time of conflict is a venture of high order. We learn in these situations. We gain insight and understanding, and our errors are there for us to turn into nourishment for a better future.

Leaders have an obligation in times of conflict to engage people in a conversation. Leadership is about conversation. It is not paternal or maternal usurpation of people’s options and reality.

Through respectful and dignified conversation can come wisdom. A conversation is not a dispute or shouting match as is so frequently found on cable television and radio today. A conversation is about commitment and passion and about the head, heart, and spirit of individuals. A formal way for leaders to have conversation is to engage in dialogue to achieve deep understanding through judgment, clarifying values, and listening.

Bill Bradley, former senator, said that leaders should “say the things that everyone else is afraid to say. Ask the uncomfortable question. Tell your own story. Listen to the stories of others. That’s leadership.” And when the burden of the First and Second Worlds is heavy, and fears chase you in the quiet of the night, remember that peace can be found.

Wendell Berry suggests:

When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. I come into

the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought or grief. I come into the presence of still water and I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

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