

# Leadership and Poetry

“The real change takes place within our souls; the real change takes place when the unfolding of our souls reflects in some deep, mysterious way the unfolding of the universe. Then it is – when an individual person dares to live within his or her truth – that the world is changed, forever.”

--- Vaclav Havel

Leadership is about life. It is about having an impact on other’s lives, the life of the organization, and ultimately the leader’s own existence. Life emerges in mysterious and engaging ways, pressing challenges into our faces and providing opportunities for finding meaning and living deeply. If our lives were flat lines with no peaks or valleys, leadership would not be necessary, and there would be little poetry in the nature of things.

Life is not a technical or mechanical act of engineering. It cannot be lived by following a script or a manual. It cannot be planned because our lives and destiny have plans enough for us. Life engages our total being and is unpredictable. It is not simply about ‘doing’, it is about who we are as ‘beings’. It is poetic more than scientific. Schools should be places of poetry and beauty, not factories or organizations where children are considered products and competition is based on a metrical analysis of people, their potential, and success.

Poets and leaders grapple with the same mysteries of life. In fact, all of us do. We just don’t recognize them or perceive them as part of the great stage on which life plays out. Poetry can be a metaphor for leading in today’s difficult world filled with ambiguity and uncertainty, and connected through a subtle, transparent, and complex web of relationships and dimensions. Leadership, like poetry, is about learning what it means to be fully human, to remember who we are, why we are here, and to find our place in the world.<sup>120</sup>

We usually think of the context of our life in an external way: examining what is outside of ourselves as if we are bystanders to a play unfolding around us. We think the context is “out there” in the greater world as if we exist solely in a social, political, and economic context. Certainly in the external world -- our society, community, and institutions – those issues are a part of our existence.

But there is more, something sweeter that moves beyond knowing systems, routines, and concepts. There is a greater and much more personal dimension. Leadership has an inner as well as an external context. These outer and inner domains affect our personal and leadership behavior. Like poets, leaders toil in the messy fields of day-to-day life, with its emotional heat of heart and soul and the clash of reality and principle. They try to understand the dynamics that tug and pull events and happenings.

The metaphor of leader as poet is an important one because metaphors establish a mindscape that affects the way we look at the world. They influence what we believe and how we act. They also set our expectations and establish the way we think about leadership, who we are, and what we do.

Poetry and leadership seem to be odd bedfellows with very little connection. One seems so esoteric, and the other so grounded in the pragmatic demands of organizations. What does leadership have in common with poetry? Quite a lot, frankly.

Leaders and poets are charged with the same role, although their responsibilities and circumstance differ. School leaders and poets turn the same soil of human perspective and the art of living. They both place a perspective on life and its meaning. Leaders and poets engage people in conversation about relationships, what is important and the very purpose of life.

Poets also explore the unknown, the mystical, the spiritual, and the mysterious worlds inside us. They raise questions about themselves and others. Who are we? Why are we here? What is it we are called to do? What is inside of us? Where do heart, head, spirit, and soul come to play in life? What is the purpose of our journey? What is the meaning of all of this?

Poets also observe and celebrate the interconnectedness of human beings in both the inner and outer worlds. They ponder our relationship to others and to the universe. They marvel at the simplicity and beauty of our natural world, and the intense desire, emotion, and feeling we have in this life. In a sense, they see life and envision the meaning of its subtle and obvious connections.

Poets muse on life itself—its purpose, its significance, its wonder, its beauty, its genius, its travails, its pain, its conflict. Poets and other artists help us define ourselves with respect to others and the universe, and they help us see and marvel at the gift of life in bright or dark times. They help define humanity and dream of noble ventures and the simple beauty of nature and human tenderness. They speak of soul and spirit.

Great leaders do the same. They use not only the pen but other symbolic gestures as well. Leaders center people's attention on the critical issues of life, rallying people around honorable and noble causes and helping people reach for a higher calling.

Leadership has a moral dimension requiring that the ends and means must have the same harmonic structure. Leaders must select strategies in the same sense that poets select poetic forms and apply artistic license in addressing creative challenges. The impact of these strategies is only felt if the principle and the approach are in harmony thus ensuring integrity and credibility.

Leaders and poets understand the unseen world of forces and intangibles -- those things in life that are hard to measure but make us uniquely human and alive. Leadership is not an emotionless endeavor. Leaders connect with the heartstrings of people to nourish insight, wonder, creativity and motivation. Poets and leaders live in intimate relationship with the minds, hearts and souls of people. Sometimes that life is harsh or tender, noble or crass, or quiet or bombastic. But leaders and poets touch us in ways that help us see our world and ourselves more clearly and sometimes through a different lens.

Poetry frequently provides insight on the simple things of life. The call to simplicity is legend in literature, poetry, and philosophy. Leaders' lives seem consumed by the external

context and its complex conundrums. Issues bombard school leaders from all directions and multiple expectations of the community and others clash and crash around them. Yet, leaders, while yearning for simplicity, must make complex issues known and understandable in simple terms to others. Leaders connect with people and unite them in common purpose in making a difficult world better.

Bathed in complex challenges, leaders do not always know what to do or how things will work. They must face issues regardless of personal price or cost—success or failure—if they are to help people see how they can contribute. Sometimes, leaders can only do simple things or nothing at all because that is all that is available in a confusing and messy world. Sometimes, simplicity is the only virtue leaders have, just as a simple poetic line expresses all.

The old Shaker hymn, “Simple Gifts”, reminds us that in simplicity there is freedom and a sense of peace and efficacy.

‘Tis the gift to be simple, ‘tis the gift to be free;  
‘Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be;  
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,  
‘Twill be in the valley of love and delight.

When true simplicity is gained,  
To bow and to bend we shan’t be ashamed  
To turn, turn will be our delight,  
‘Til by turning, turning we come round right.

As leaders, finding “where we ought to be” in our life and work is a true gift. In today’s world, we can spin our lives in layers of involvement and tiers of actions, reactions, pro-actions and distress. Finding our place and calling in clear, simple terms in a frenzied environment frees us to be ourselves and meet our destiny; the place where things fit and feel just right.

Simplicity, getting to the core and cutting through the swamps of politics and procedures, is a hallmark of both leadership and poetry in creating meaning. There is no script to life, and heroes and villains are not always in clear focus. Good leaders share their truth and invoke both wonder and anger and a whole range of emotions in between. The risk of leadership is in allowing people to see our thoughts and emotions, and with it comes great human vulnerability.

Poets speak of vulnerability but being vulnerable is what many leaders fear, seeing it as a sign of weakness. Being vulnerable, however, is an important part of leadership if you are to trust people and put a human face on responsibilities and obligations. The paradox is that leaders desire to touch people’s lives but some want to do so from the antiseptic cocoon of an organizational hierarchy far away from the vulnerability of genuine relationships of openness and candor.

Vulnerability requires taking responsibility. Leaders who are courageous put themselves on the line and assume accountability. In many organizations, deflecting responsibility or pointing the finger of blame at others is the norm. Vulnerable leaders open themselves to

criticism and avoid defensiveness. When leaders are open, sensitive, and thoughtful, people are inclined to believe the strength and force of the leader's position.

Dancing around issues, dodging responsibility, and not facing people directly when things are tough generates cynicism and doubt. Walking straight into adversity takes strength because the wall of isolation between the leader and those they lead is gone. Unexpected feelings and "undiscussables", --those elephants in the room people ignore because of discomfort or fear – are revealed and uncovered. This type of vulnerability takes real and poetic courage.

Both good leaders and poets understand that life is not an exercise in engineering because it does not follow a logical or sequential path. It is filled with whimsy and mystery, serendipity and synchronicity. The unanticipated in life frequently hands us the biggest challenges, the largest gifts, and the greatest satisfaction. The celebration of life, for poets and leaders, is about facing our yearning for belonging and finding our calling in the pursuit of goodness.

Leaders and poets are tightly connected in spirit. Leaders and engineers are distant, distant cousins. The world calls for leadership that helps us all be the people we are called to be. Leadership is not about controlling, appealing to the lowest common denominator or assuming we are all motivated by selfish interests. Leaders nurture relationships, connections, and commitment.

Leaders write organizational poetry. They engage others in a conversation about high ideals and righteous causes. They try to identify ways in which that conversation can be held and how our lives at work can be rewarding and fulfilling. Great poets call on our best angels. Leaders call on us to use our creative energy and human spirit to act with virtue and do good things. Leaders and poets are kindred spirits.

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