



ARTFUL LEADERSHIP

Awakening the Commons of the Imagination

Michael Jones

Chapter 1
A WALK IN THE PARK
The Personal and Social Artistry of Leadership

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Published by Pianoscapes
www.pianoscapes.com



Chapter 1

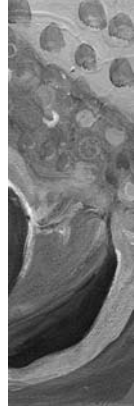
A Walk in the Park

The Personal and Social Artistry of Leadership

*In times of uncertainty
we need to look to the spaces between
for order and coherence—
to gifts, beauty, grace, voice and wholeness—
what may be called the commons of the imagination.
Awakening to the presence of the commons
in both the personal and the public imagination
is our new art form.
It is also the leader's new work.*

A Walk in the Park

*The Personal and Social
Artistry of Leadership*



*Not all those who wander are lost.
-J.R.R. Tolkien*

A Third Way of Knowing

Robert M. Ingle, in an article in *Scientific American* entitled “Life in an Estuary” writes, “Life in an estuary may be rich but it is also almost inconceivably dangerous...twice each day the ebb and flow of the tide drastically alters the conditions of life, sometimes stranding whole populations to die.”

Leading in turbulent times is much like living at the moving edge of a salt marsh: survival requires extraordinary presence and adaptability, and flourishing requires something even more. As leaders today, we must be willing to suspend our dependence on past knowledge in favor of being fully alert to what is emerging before us. Yesterday’s route home is of little use when faced with the need to move more quickly than the tides. Only in being alert to new possibilities and dimensions may we navigate wisely, finding natural, unique, even unrepeatable ways of dealing with the challenges of leadership and governance.

The unpredictability of these sweeping changes suggests that, beyond both the cognitive and social sciences, we need a third way of knowing—what physicist David Bohm describes as ‘a subtle intelligence’ that seeks the wholeness behind all things, and invites into awareness whatever might normally seem vague, ambiguous or unclear. The root of subtle is *subtex*, which means ‘finely woven.’ This third way of knowing is at once refined, delicate and indefinable. It is a kind of intelligence that can hold in awareness the things that slip by us when we rely too much on memory or past knowledge. It is also an

intelligence that loves all that does not yet exist.

We need to understand this subtle intelligence not as a separate mental function, but rather as the source of an imaginative response to our world. As a kind of sense organ, the imagination reaches out and makes tentative contact with wholeness—that is, the things of an order larger than we can see directly—making visible that which is hidden, so as to begin to draw into awareness that which cannot yet be heard or seen.

More than almost any other faculty, the capacity to sense these almost-indiscernible forces is essential to navigating our uncertain and changeable world. By developing this ability, we reawaken our relationship to our imagination, which makes available the twin gifts of intuition and inspiration. Together these serve as an effective counterpoint to the more usual mechanistic view of the world.

This is, of course, a skill-set that takes time to mature; it is not enough to summon our capacity for insight only when we are quiet or deeply engaged. In the time ahead, the most valuable leaders will be those who see what others don't yet see and think what others are not yet thinking. Merely to say, "I didn't see it coming," is not an effective strategy for survival in the tides of change.

While not entirely common, these ideas are slowly taking root alongside the more conventional inventory of today's leadership wisdom. I shared many of the ideas in this book with John, a consulting client and vice president of marketing and sales for a large international pharmaceuticals company, whom I met while working on this manuscript. He knew the territory well from his own experience. As he insightfully put it, "Things are changing so quickly now that if I already know where I am going, it is probably not worth getting there." The creative conversations he and I had about this have infused much of this work.

On one of our frequent walks I asked John what he saw as the leading edge of leadership. "When I think of it," he reflected, "truly outstanding leaders are not remembered largely for their professional, technical or cost-cutting skills, but for their wisdom, presence, intuition and artistry. These are the qualities that prepare them for making an organic response to critical situations. Technical knowledge is important, but it is only part of the story; listening, getting a 'feeling' for things and engaging others in imagining possibilities, is the larger part of it. So much of a leader's work today is not about playing the notes but listening for what's emerging in the space between."

This idea of 'the space between' brings to mind the words of Thomas Merton, who claimed, "There is in all things...a hidden wholeness." The possibility that,

just back of our human world, there exists a more-than-human sphere—an area of potential in the spaces between and around things—is an intriguing one. For John, it ran contrary to what he had been taught in business school. His curiosity about how we may engage a sense of wholeness to find this bridge between the visible and invisible was the starting point for many explorations. Often our informal conversations took place over lunch, complemented by long walks in a lakeside park.

Our considerations were influenced by the elemental beauty of our surroundings; the sun, the wind, and the waves that washed along the shore served to balance our work. Our walks were a reminder not only that we share with the land a reciprocal arrangement of care, but also that what we were trying to be faithful to was not the examination of a set of finished facts, but to an unfolding story. It is a narrative that only makes sense when it is enlivened by the elemental presence of wind, water, sun, rain, trees and rocks. It is a story that could only be told while walking, for every gust of wind helped us to think as nature thinks—each moment evolving, organic, innovative and unique.

John spent what little free time he had reading and thinking about re-imagining leadership in the context of a world engaged in constant and disruptive change. The image of tidal marshes resonated very strongly with him. He believed the major challenges facing leaders today were not technical but transformational, based more in transforming situations than fixing them. He anticipated that leaders would need forums where they might explore the dimensions of their own subtle nature. This would include honest personal investigation of such questions as: Who am I really? Where is home? What is my relationship with beauty? Where do I go for inspiration? How can I serve the well-being of the whole?

As John and I talked over time, it became clear to both of us that there are two predominant leadership stories today. The first utilizes management sciences to ensure the integrity of organizational structures and processes and to develop the cognitive intelligence of leaders. In order to build relationships, enhance communication skills and forge commitments, this journey has depended largely on the application of the social sciences.

“Yet,” as John pointed out, “even though these two approaches offer many benefits, management and social sciences alone aren’t going to help leaders like me who get overwhelmed by the pace of change.”

And so began another conversation. “It’s true,” I said. “As you have highlighted, for the things that really matter we often can’t know with absolute certainty where we are going until *after* we have arrived. By necessity our actions need to be spontaneous and improvised, and for that we need a third

way of leadership. It needs to be grounded in a new form of intelligence—one based in what you might call an engaged imagination. This can help us ‘sense’ more deeply into the reality of our experience so we can draw into awareness whatever is unclear, clarify it and express it in a fresh and evocative way.”

“And,” John said, “for most of us leaders this is as unsettling as it is useful.”

Despite his trepidation, John was excited to explore the possibility that the artist’s gifts of awareness and sensory ability might blend into the field of leadership. He was hungry for the kinds of ideas and experiences that would further nourish his own curiosity. Having earned his own MBA several years before, he already knew that leaders need to establish competence in the core areas of management, but he also saw that this in itself is not enough.

Like many executives, John made a distinction between managers and leaders. For him, the first is one who predominantly occupies an organizational role. The second, a true leader, is anyone who is committed to living a complete life, regardless of organizational function. In this context, he considered such qualities as uniqueness, beauty, home, quality of place, and the ability to find one’s signature voice to be in the domain of leadership. He also believed that considerations about these areas need to be kept in the forefront of leadership thinking, not only because these explorations inspire leaders, but also because they inspire the communities and organizations they lead.

Like John, I see such meditations as a crucial part of a leader’s responsibility. I believe there is a growing need for new forms of social space that make possible the exploration of deeper questions—ones that bring together functional and social considerations with the aesthetic. Effective leaders need to be able to both create such spaces and participate in them. Also, leaders themselves must be committed to gaining a better understanding of their own needs and wants as they reflect on the inner core of their nature, and such considerations naturally lend themselves to this kind of work. Connecting this range of leadership function to a language of community and of the common good puts unique demands on leaders, particularly those who have largely defined their role more strictly in the context of strategic priorities and performance goals.

This is why I always learned from my conversations with John. Like me, he was very passionate about these ideas and wanted to make visible in his own practice the underlying principles of this more ‘organic’ form of leadership. He also had a keen sense of the need for balance between the public and the personal self. He believed that the application of these principles was directly related to the development of the imagination, and particularly to those virtues of presence, gifts, beauty, grace and voice that make up the realm of the imagination. He was convinced that leaders cannot truly engage in cultural or social change unless they have first re-imagined their own life and work.

“When I hear you describe the imagination’s influence I translate it into leadership language” John said “What you call gifts corresponds with qualities of identity, integrity and being true to one’s self; beauty corresponds to perception and adaptiveness, the ability to recognize one’s own home and make finely tuned adjustments quickly; grace is related to the emergence of shared meaning; and voice is the ability to know your own experience and articulate it clearly.”

“That’s a great translation,” I said, “and I’m sure you’ll find that the crossover between artistic endeavour and leadership ability is a natural one.”

John was particularly intrigued by the idea that these aesthetic principles were grounded in ancient practices that contributed to the coherence, pattern and order of complex and successful communities for thousands of years.

Given his background, John’s openness symbolizes a new stage in leadership and human development. For any true leader, it begins with an essential humility as we realize how much we don’t know. For John, the revelation of ‘not knowing’ was an ongoing struggle. As he often commented, “I get paid for knowing, not for not knowing!”

Yet he recognized that these virtues live in the spaces between us, spaces that can never be adequately defined or known. He also sensed that they may be the source of deep reserves of energy that could revitalize our current-day organizations and communities. It was this openness to ‘not knowing’ that made him into the effective leader he was. It was also this acceptance of himself as a constant and curious learner that helped him acknowledge the process of becoming—and exploring the space between—not as a temporary condition but as a permanent state of being.

The Space Between—Leadership and Personal Artistry

Reverence for the Moment

“When I think of this process of becoming,” John once said, “it seems to involve a shift of attention from goals and outcomes to means and processes—to reverence for each moment. Reverence opens the way to respect, and it is difficult to generate respect when your mind is set on a narrow set of goals.”

“Yes,” I said. “Years ago I attended a piano concert performed by Don Shirley. What I remember most were his first three notes. They had such a quality of attention to them. It is as if it had taken him his whole life to arrive at this place and at this moment. In addition to the sound of the note itself I also heard in them a reverence for the audience, the auditorium, the

other musicians—even the rainy weather outside. Often in the presence of a musician or speaker you feel ‘played to’ but he offered something more. We felt held in a common field of appreciation, a moment to pause and listen and to find one another in a spirit of neutrality and openness.”

“For me, this is where the life of the leader and the artist intersect,” John said. “Leaders can learn a lot from artists about respect for the moment, of pausing and listening for the spaces between the notes. In leaders’ terms, it’s the space between the words. Sometimes leaders are so focused on outcomes that they can’t leave space to listen to other points of view; their mind is already made up. They know where they want to go and only want help to get there.”

“That’s what impressed me with that piano concert,” I said, “he wasn’t trying to get somewhere. Too often we miss the greater potential that attention to the moment might bring. If the more technically based form of leadership is built around realizing goals, the other, more artistic way is constructed around a series of moments in a flow of experience that leads towards a sense of wholeness and a less divided life. To find these moments we need to step off the path of our own habits and routines.”

“That’s true,” said John. “These moments build up through a precision of listening and seeing. I sense that this is a gradual awakening of attention—of bringing back from sleep such elemental aspects of the human experience as our relationship with nature, as well as with poetry, dance, music and the spoken word—that helps us awaken this inner perception.”

“And when we have that experience with art,” I said, “then we can grow out from it to bring a similar quality of attention in other things later on.”

What John had been outlining could be considered the pure expressions of reverence: times almost outside of time that serve to amplify the moment in a way that helps us more deeply perceive and respect what is present. This is what these experiences teach us—how to be with that which we cannot define or fully understand.

As we shared these ideas I recalled the words of poet W.S. Merwin, who reminds us that: “If you can get one moment right, it will tell you the whole thing. And that’s true of your own life—each moment is absolutely separate and unique and it contains your entire life.” (Merwin, 2005: 39)

Merwin’s words also find an echo in those of Bob Dylan, who said, in explaining his being absorbed as a teenager in the music of Woody Guthrie, “You could listen to one of his songs and learn how to live.”

For leaders this means seeing ourselves as artists, where the first few actions

taken are like the brush strokes of a painter—each carrying the destiny for all that will follow. Leaders who can shift their attention from goals to a respect for the unfolding of a moment will find within it a hologram revealing the pattern of the whole.

“What this means for me,” John said, “is that when I’m looking at something like a leaf, for example”—and he took hold of one in a tree nearby—“I can either analyse this object as inert and in its finished state or see it as continually coming into being.”

“Yes,” I said, “and by seeing it as a process rather than as a thing changes our relationship to it. It draws us into this more subtle intelligence because it is reciprocal. The only way we can know it is to also be known by it. As I suggested earlier, this intelligence is tuned to relationship. And it loves what does not yet exist. So we can analyse and make concrete our concept of the leaf, or we can participate with its continuous unfolding as something organic. In this way, its wholeness will become more and more visible to us over time.”

In this newfound awareness we may be more reluctant to impose our will on things and instead become curious to discover what the moment is trying to tell us. Engaging in the moment does not necessarily mean trying to change or even interpret or understand it. Acting organically begins by being with the other and sensing into the nature of what is there. For example, an artist’s sensibility will cause us to ask about a moment’s atmosphere, how alive it feels, what story it is telling, what we want from it, and what it wants from us. Inquiring into the nature of the moment invites responses that are quite different and more reciprocal than those that occur when we try to impose our will upon it.

John laughed.

“I initially came here expecting to talk over some business problems with you,” he said. “But I’m beginning to think that the root of these problems has to do with what you just said—too often I try to analyse and fix a situation without taking time for reverence—that is, to experience and participate in what it is trying to tell me.”

John paused for a moment then said, “Maybe what we need are fewer planners and more ‘perceivers’—leaders who can take in the full and immense complexity of events.”

Living Into the Question

This was indeed at the root of John’s dilemma. His training had prepared him to plan, control, fix, measure, evaluate and problem-solve—skills well

suited to the kinds of situations that arise in a more stable and predictable world. These very skills, however, kept him from being fully present to the space between, and to fully experience those valued moments that would bring him closer to a sense of being at home within himself and his world.

This led John to ask, “How do we preserve these moments, when there is such a pressure for executing planned action and meeting anticipated results?”

“By living in the question,” I answered.

“You’ll need to explain,” said John.

Successful artists understand what it means to ‘live in the question’. As an improvisational pianist I have learned that when I am no longer ‘in the question’—when I stop exploring and settle for what my memory has to offer—then the music stops as well. So to attend to the moment, artists devote as much of their attention to staying in the questions as they do to the mechanics of their craft. They realize that there is a holographic quality to the imagination. Again, if they can get one moment right; that is, if they can find the right phrasing or starting image, as Don Shirley did, then their perception for seeing the whole in a vital new way is heightened.

For example, an artist may ask, “Is what I am doing leading me to feeling more alive? Does it hold my interest and curiosity? Does it express beauty in a unique and original way? Does it lead me to feeling more nourished and engaged? Does it capture or express the moment in a way that feels right and true? And does it connect me in some way to a larger sense of the whole?” Such questions are answered more fully at the sensory level than the intellectual.

Sculptor Henry Moore, in a conversation with poet Donald Hall, said this of life-guiding questions: “The secret of life is to have a question or task, something you devote your entire life to, something you bring everything to, every minute of the day of your whole life and the most important thing is—it must be something you cannot possibly do!” (Hall, 1993:54)

“To see my entire life in the context of a question,” John said, “is both profound and overwhelming.”

“It helps if we begin with finding a path to the question and following it,” I replied. “That is, we may begin with a sense of the whole, knowing that often it is not very clear. Instead it may be fuzzy and vague, more like a feeling, sensation or impression. Beginning with this awareness deepens our relationship with the question. It nurtures an inquiring state of mind.”

“I notice you have used the word sense instead of thought—what’s your

reason for that?” John asked.

“Whatever we hold in our intellect probably started as sensation. Artists by necessity need to be masters in this range, because they are always working with the unknown. To find their way, artists must pay attention in each moment. And while there may be an overall sense of the whole, the artist’s central focus is on making infinite aesthetic choices as to how to proceed slowly, step by step, towards something that feels right—something that, through conscious awareness, is being made more coherent and whole. But it is only after you have taken the first step that you find the next.”

“So let me be clear about what you mean,” John said. “You’re saying that the space between only exists in the moment. It cannot be planned in advance.”

“That’s right.”

“This would suggest a new vision for leaders,” John said. “As I think of this way of seeing things, I believe that it offers a more accurate reading of the needs of the situation than a plan or prescription that has been formulated in advance.”

“Yes,” I said, “It gives us a suppleness of mind, and with it, the ability to make very finely-tuned adjustments, each instantaneously calibrated to the moment—something we will need in order to meet a world that is changing so quickly. This approach also helps us suspend the need for judgment or certainty. Instead we can hold back, pause and wonder.”

John reflected for a moment. “I believe that would mean we need to become servants to the question rather than masters over it. To be reverent is to serve the moment, to be open to its changing form, isn’t it?”

“Yes!” I laughed.

“This is a great distinction. To be ‘master over the question’ likely suggests that we think we already have the answer and just need to bring others around to it. It directs our attention to the solution rather than the inquiry. But to be a servant to the question...well, that suggests being willing to live deeply into the uncertainty of the question itself, doesn’t it? When we can be tentative and fluid with the question rather than absolutely certain and fixed in our response, we discover a field large enough to wander in. It also teaches us something about being vulnerable in that we cannot control where the question will lead us.”

“That’s it!” John said. “It’s exactly what I’ve been thinking lately. This letting go, allowing something other—a question, a momentary impulse, something unexpected that seems outside the habitual. It’s what brings us closer to the

power of creation. All this, despite the fact that as leaders, we are so impatient with questions and seek closure through quick, serviceable answers!”

As we continued to walk and talk together I was pleased to notice how easily John and I were setting a template for our conversations. The root of conversation is ‘*convers*’, which means, ‘to turn together’. The ideas we had been exploring about attending to the moment and living into the larger questions were helping us to recover the very attention needed to re-imagine the place of leadership. It was apparent to both of us that these insights would not come ready-made. Instead, the reality we were exploring was as fluid and ephemeral as the beauty of the scenery at the periphery of our attention, drifting in and out of our awareness. Much of it would be easily missed if we were not attentive to impressions that were floating in the spaces between.

“I find it reassuring,” John said, his eyes brightening, “to know that we innately possess the capacity of awareness to navigate the unknown. But unlike the other intelligences—managerial and social-science based—I have the impression that this subtle intelligence, because it is a property of the imagination, will not tell us what to do and therefore remains little understood.”

“Yes,” I replied. “And at the same time it is vital. If we cannot look and listen well—that is, if we don’t try to see things whole—then we begin to disown ourselves.”

John shook his head. “This happens so much at work. People will not own the authority of their own experience. They are always looking out to see what others think and try to match their thinking to that. It’s as if they don’t trust themselves, as if they are not at home in their own skins. People have so much to offer but there must be something we do that inhibits them from speaking out.”

“I wonder, if the beginning question we need to ask is, ‘Where is home and how do we find our way there?’” I said.

Finding Our Way Home

In the absence of a sense of belonging, including a sense of home in corporate culture, as organizational issues have grown in complexity, most of us fail to grow in presence to adequately meet the underlying needs of today’s situations. Too often, instead of slowing down to reflect and gain a deeper perspective from our own direct experience, we get busier. When we adopt the common belief that any action is better than no action, we accelerate the cycle of cause and effect, which leads to solutions that often prove, in hindsight,

to have been based on an historical perspective that is reflexive and overly simplistic.

“I believe the question of home has everything to do with what you said about looking, listening, and feeling what is alive in us in each moment.” John said. “This is what brings us closer to ‘home’, and I think it is what you mean by listening. We cannot listen well unless we are ‘at home’ and present with ourselves.”

“Yes,” I said. “I also wonder if most leadership failure can be attributed, not to a lack of knowledge or resources, but rather to a failure of presence. Despite the proliferation of theoretical concepts, models, knowledge and technology, we have not developed the corresponding imaginative capacities to see the overall pattern.”

“I agree,” John said. “But when we get so far off track, how do we find our way back?”

I think home is a unique place for each of us and we recognize it when we are there. I remember a beautiful line from a Robert Frost poem:

“Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.”

Our conversation had opened the possibility that we would need to shift our focus from problem solving to problem discovering. When we frame issues in the context of finding the right questions, it slows our impulse to action and invites a renewed focus on creating a home for the question – that is, of actually taking the question in. These kinds of questions engage the imagination and serve as powerful attractors, drawing insights that are often beyond what we could foresee. In this sense, a leader’s greatest asset is not technical knowledge but rather the commitment and curiosity to ask the kinds of questions that invite others to suspend what is familiar in order to see and hear with fresh eyes and ears.

“This curiosity cannot be trained into us, can it?” John wondered aloud. “You’re right,” I replied. “It is already in us and needs only to be evoked.”

“I can see how it unfolds naturally when we are able to bring to the forefront questions that awaken those virtues you spoke of earlier: of presence, gifts, beauty, grace, and voice. But these are different from the virtues we commonly speak of, such as honesty, justice, courage and truth. What makes these so unique and important now?”

“They represent the common meeting-place of the imagination,” I said.

“They awaken our senses and that subtle intelligence. And they bring to light the innate artistry that was such a cohesive element for ancient cultures for thousands of years.”

“The purpose now is not so much to educate leaders as ‘artists,’ but more to help them find something that engages reverence in the way that music does for a musician or words for a poet. Beauty and grace both do that. It gives them a chance to read the world afresh and see it in its full complexity. It is these aesthetic qualities that offer tangible nourishment to the imagination.”

John completed my thought: “And the imagination is marginalized when the only lenses we use to measure value are statistics and facts—and, of course, the economic benefits.”

“The irony is that it is precisely when these aesthetic qualities are needed most that they are most often overlooked.” I said. “This happens in school curricula for example, and in other ways. The development of the imagination represents the next frontier in leadership development. It holds the key to navigating complexity because, as a home for the senses, it expands our attention so that we may more fully comprehend the full complexity of unfolding events.”

John reminded me how difficult it is in his world to measure the value of such an approach.

“Acts of the imagination tend to be messy, evocative and nonlinear,” he said. “Even though I agree that the managerial and social sciences don’t offer a vocabulary for creating a home for our gifts or discovering how to belong in the world, neither does that make it easy to engage others in something that does not yield immediate results.”

“It’s clear to me that the imagination needs multiple points of interest.” He added. “To recognize these points, we need to encourage others to see and speak in their own unique way.” John paused. “Having said that, however, I work in an environment where everyone is compartmentalized. They stay very close to others who think the same way they do. It’s becoming increasingly difficult for us to step out of our tribal affiliations and meet in the middle.”

“This may help explain why authentic curiosity is difficult to achieve,” I said. “By definition, curiosity challenges us to release the old and leads us towards the fresh and the new. Specifically, it is naturally responsive to what spontaneously arises in the flow of our direct experience. At first, this will most likely yield only an ephemeral impression: a moment found in nature; a tug at our heart in response to something spoken that is real and true. This is where we find one another. As Merwin once noted, it is by being open to

these moments that we realize they are unique and also hold certain things in common at the same time.”

“Ah yes,” John said. “And so we begin to fulfill what we always wanted but did not know how to ask for. My own longing has not necessarily been for a greater measure of understanding, but rather to be gripped by life; to experience something that feels authentic and true.”

We walked on for a while in silence, listening to the rustle of the wind in the pines overhead.

“And this is what happens in what you’ve called the commons, isn’t it,” John said. “It makes the spaces between visible. And it’s what we are missing. I’m seeing it now as the opportunity to pause and listen, to be reverent and respectful—maybe even find home. What was that you said? The world will have to take me in.”

“In a manner of speaking, yes,” I said. “And in so doing you may also be a part of an experience that offers the possibility for greater depth, discovery and surprise.”

Gates to the Imagination

Through our conversations, I realized that there are many openings that engage the imagination and lead us to feeling more at home in the world. When I mentioned this to John, he suggested that we might think of home not as a noun but as a verb. That is, to appreciate that when we are listening, looking, touching, imagining, we are also ‘homing’, or providing a place of the commons.

Among the many questions we might have asked in order to awaken this awareness, a list emerged as of particular interest to John and myself:

- When do we feel most alive?
- What are the patterns of beliefs that tend to reinforce our need to perform and keep us from being fully present to ourselves?
 - How can we deepen an attitude of listening and presence?
 - Who are we really? What claims us? Is there something we feel particularly beholden to?
 - What is the work that lasts?
 - When do we have the courage to be fully ourselves? What are the life-affirming gifts that represent the seeds of our own unfolding potential?
 - Where is home? To what do we feel we most belong? When do we most experience a love of place?

- What is our relationship with beauty? What most inspires us?
- How do we let go?
- What do we find interesting that is hard to explain?
- Is there something that helps us recognize and have confidence in what is arising naturally in our experience? How can we trust in the authority of our own subjective experience and inner life?
 - To what do we most want to give voice? If we were being deeply listened to, what would we want to say?
 - What is the story through which we wish to express ourselves in the world?
 - How can we learn to receive and participate in a grace-filled world?
 - How can we access the curiosity and wisdom of our common humanity?
 - Is there a public face for home? What is the relationship between inspired personal leadership and the revitalizing of culture and community?
 - What would it mean to restore the commons as a centre piece of organizational and community life?

We knew that the choice to follow any of these themes or questions would set us on the journey of self- and collective-knowledge. Unlike the first journey of certainty which has been well traveled, this second journey of re-imagining our world often seems to be the uncommon road, directionless, tentative and unclear. Few would choose to embark on it—until one day they falter in their chosen path and sense that there is something more.

Following Our Attractions

“It is this hunger for something more that has attracted me to these conversations,” John said. “But I always thought it had more to do with actions than with being. I have come to realize that the very words that had once been my touchstones—targets, performance, efficiency, solutions, results, breakthroughs—are now beginning to suffocate me.”

At the same time, John acknowledged the difficulty in breaking free of these habitual ways of being. “The proliferation of knowledge and technology for its own sake has put many of us in a trance,” he said. “In my organization, language creates our reality, and that language originated in the Industrial Revolution. So we are still being informed through language that was most relevant to a world that existed 300 years ago. There is no language for being stewards of the imagination.”

For many analytical processes, the skills of managerial planning and the allure of performance measurement are the waters we swim in. As John so often asked when we first met, “If I wasn’t managing people in order to meet performance goals, what would I do?”

Even as we struggle to apply our well-hewn skills to a world that is in constant flux, we need to recognize the need for something more. Leaders must learn to move further upstream. When unanticipated events dramatically affect even the most certain plans, we need to see action in the context of the quality of our collective gifts, strengths and self-knowledge—and better understand the atmosphere, or soil, in which they can best grow. In other words, the journey to wholeness begins with a renewed commitment to following what attracts us, even if it seems like nonsense and impossible to explain. Following these paths may become critical in formative times when we must bring into awareness—and eventually into reality—something that was not there a moment before.

“This conversation is reminding me of something the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda beautifully said about this process of attraction,” I said. “It’s his description of writing his first poem. Would you like to hear it? I just happen to have it here in my back pocket.”

“Sure,” John said. “But before you do, I want to say that I notice you draw from the images of poets and other artists. Even though this is very helpful, because it is like learning a new language, I’m finding that I need to suspend my impulse to draw too many conclusions too early. But I wonder, are there also leadership stories that convey similar messages?”

“There are many leadership stories. The reason I am drawn to the poetic is that prose—and for that matter, leadership practice—have both tended to be linear and sequential. A poem for me is like music. It gathers together many things simultaneously that are quite different and offers them in one moment in time. This is the source of its strength and power. As we discussed earlier, this is a different intelligence, one that is more metaphoric and so can accommodate many things going on at the same time. This describes the world the leader is moving into. Wherever you see a poet, you’ll find a leader not far behind!”

John laughed. “That explains why I have been following you through these woods! I also notice that poets and artists travel the same roads as leaders do, but they do so years before us. Yet we don’t need to become artists to learn from them if we are paying attention.”

“And for the artist,” I said, “waiting for nothing in particular, going fishing for an idea is how they spend most of their time. This also holds relevance for leaders who find themselves in circumstances where they need to master their own capacities for waiting observantly and allowing the many diverse threads to come together without acting.”

“Now are you ready to turn to another poet?” I laughed.

“I’m ready!” John said. He had caught up with me, and we walked alongside as the path widened.

I pulled the poem from my pocket. “Okay. Here it is:”

Pablo Neruda writes:

*“... I did not know what to say,
my mouth
had no way
with names,*

*my eyes were blind,
and something started in
my soul
fever or forgotten wings,
and I made my way,
deciphering
that fire
and wrote the first
faint line,
faint without substance,
pure nonsense,
pure wisdom.”*

– An excerpt from “Poetry” Translation By Alistair Reid

“That’s beautiful,” John said. “When we speak of making our way home, our words often do stretch into poetry, don’t they? The language comes from a place other than the ordinary.”

“Yes—and perhaps if we are too ‘competent’ we cannot write poems. We may be too comfortably settled in our knowing to be in a place where ‘our eyes are blind and our mouth has no way with names’. If we become empty and lost, we have no choice but to decipher that fire. In so doing we hear the words behind the words and, in them, the strengthening order of our own deeper nature.”

John spent many hours trying to get from nonsense to wisdom in his thinking and writing in order to decipher this fire and find these first faint lines for himself. He showed through his dedicated commitment that this way of life was as much for leaders as it was for artists.

“When I was doing my MBA I was being educated to live a competent life,” John said. “But that isn’t enough for any leader now. We also need to

be committed to living an original life. And with an original life you need to accept the nonsense—the many ways things come up short or don't work in the way you expect—to get to wisdom.

“Most won't take that risk,” he added. “They don't have the patience for it. It is almost as if we believe that we are entitled to get it all the first time. And so it is lonely if you choose to persist anyway, because others are not necessarily with you. How do you let yourself experience your own doubt and vulnerability in order to find your own forgotten wings when those around you insist that what they know is enough, and that their life is complete?”

Listening for the Unheard Melody

This question brought John to an even deeper leadership question in the context of this subtle intelligence: What is leadership for? What is life for? What are we here to do?

Even though we have acknowledged that a familiarity with technical knowledge is important, it is not enough. The risk for all leaders under tremendous pressure is to fall prey to the instinct to set the daily agenda so that there's no room for those unscheduled moments when something new may emerge.

John's question about the purpose of leadership and life intrigued me. I shared with him a commentary I had heard spoken by the popular conductor Seiji Ozawa, who observed that, in one sense, symphony orchestras no longer needed conductors. Musicians had become so developed at their craft that they could keep the rhythm and discover the subtleties of expression that were once part of the conductor's work. All that was left for the conductor to do, Ozawa concluded, was to listen for the unheard melody—the something extra—that his ears were attuned to, but which the symphony could not hear on its own. He was there to hear the music whole.

“So as people become more accomplished at discovering and developing their own uniqueness,” I added, “the leader's role is to listen for what is still implicit; their job is to hear what is missing. In doing so, they can let new things come. They allow the emergence of possibility, finding opportunities for a pause, for a stillness in which we can gather our thoughts—all so we can see and hear things whole.”

In a world that is consumed with parts, this is where the work of the leader and the artist intersect. Leaders and artists set the tone, attune others to a central theme, the drumbeat, to which others may orient themselves. In other words, by seeing things whole we direct our eyes to seeing and doing what no

one else can see or do.

“This is Robert Frost’s uncommon fork in the road,” John said. “And the deeper purpose for leaders and artists—for everyone, really—is to choose ‘the road not taken.’”

“Some hear that unheard melody more clearly than others,” I said. “And there may not be any such thing as a truly solo journey. It is often only through the presence of others that we discover what we think, feel and see.”

“This is what I’ve been struggling with,” said John. “There is an individual learning journey, but the journey is not about me. It is a preparation for something else. This is the new territory we are exploring, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I replied. “And I believe that, with the passage of time, our individual journeys of awakening merge into a common story, many paths configuring into a diamond, the light from which may illuminate a space of collective presence. This is what I would call ‘the public face of home,’ a place of wholeness where we may meet a changing world together from a new centre of being. It’s a place that is more cohesive and organic; one that has always been with us, but that is often invisible to the divided self such that its music remains unheard.”

The voice that is unheard is contained in what we have been referring to as the commons: a community of the imagination where the full ecology of the human experience that has infused conversation around fires, in native councils, civic squares, soup kitchens, village greens and in countless other forms for all of time can again be restored. In a time when we face the daily possibility of severe uprooting and sudden change we cannot rely on individual effort alone. We will need to rebuild the sense of connection and cohesion with one another to form a new, generative core of creation that can hold steady in the midst of the tides of change.

Reclaiming the Commons—A Template for Wholeness

“This in-between space is hard to describe, isn’t, it?” John said. “There is always the tendency to push to the extremes. Yet with the loss of this in-between space there has also been a loss of centre. I am thinking that in a reverent society, all voices would be respected and listened to, and in this mutual listening we would hear this unheard melody and find a new harmony together.”

“This is the leader’s new role,” I said. “While we may think of the new leader as an artist, it is a very special kind of artist. Even if we can make music together, we cannot necessarily think together, and it is this capacity for

collective talking and listening—to think of the leader as a social artist—that is the new art form. It is one that brings the leader to their new and urgent work.”

“When I think of a space which is devoted solely to listening and speaking rather than only to planning or action” John said, “I recall the front porch, the parlor with a piano and fire or the salons and cafes in the small European town where I grew up.”

“Exactly,” I said. “All of these served as portals into this commons space. The paradox is that by not focusing exclusively on action, this place becomes capable of remarkable achievement. What distinguishes it from more action-oriented spaces is not its focus only on the future but its immediacy—that is, its capacity for considering what is emerging into awareness now. By keeping its attention on what is alive in the moment, it offers a sense of depth, ease and grace—qualities of attention that are sometimes lost when we try to put our focus on problem solving, action planning and conflict resolution too soon.”

“So the commons is asking us to learn to be together before acting together,” John said.

“That’s right,” I said. “It is not necessarily a steering committee, task group or advisory board. Instead the commons draws us further upstream; it is the internal and reflective *we* as distinct from the exclusive orientation in external action. It is a space where we may bring a qualitative shift in consciousness—a more mature and subtle quality of attention that weaves together the many diverse threads of our common experience. By sensing and finding our way together, it gives us the opportunity for deepening our collective awareness. And it does all this by bringing to our awareness implicit patterns of meaning and connection that enable us to carry both the process of being and acting at the same time.”

“This leads me to wonder if we have made our work environments too sterilized,” John said. “Do we have real lives anymore, or do we just have jobs and careers? It sometimes appears that we have become addicted to action. So it seems so uncommon to come together to simply be together without the overriding pressure of a goal or agenda or plan!”

As John shared his own longing for a space of open fellowship, I shared with him the words of German–American political philosopher Hannah Arendt, who described the commons (or polis) in Athens in this way:

“One, if not the chief reason for the incredible development of gift and genius in Athens was precisely that from the beginning to the end its foremost aim was to make the extraordinary an ordinary occurrence in every day life.”

(Arendt,1958: 197)

It was the function of the commons over the ages to make a home for magnifying the spirit of the other, of letting no deed or word be offered without witness. To act in this way was to ensure that those who participated were subject to everlasting remembrance by those whose lives they had touched.

“By tapping into this unexpressed potential, the commons was able to accomplish a great deal.” I said. “It served as a template for wholeness—a space from which new possibilities could be both imagined and realized.”

“What is central to the commons,” I added, “is that it finds its roots in communities of gift exchange—communities that once thrived as parallel economies to those of market exchange. But with the relatively recent dominance of the market, these economies of the creative spirit have been lost. In our conversations we have been exploring the properties of these gift communities—properties such as our gifts, beauty, grace and story. We may speak of these as virtues in that they are reciprocal. As we awaken to them they also awaken us to ourselves. These are what we all hold in common at the deepest level, and with which we need to re-engage if we are to bring our world into balance again.”

We had come to a picnic bench and we sat for a moment. John brought out his journal and took this opportunity to take a few notes. Then he spoke again. He was visibly excited with the possibility, and his thoughts came in a torrent.

“The commons is a wonderful way for growing us and revitalizing our communities and organizations. We do inventories of skills, but it is all done on paper, so we don’t witness one another in the context of our gifts and uniqueness. So we suffer for this failure of absence; we see, but we don’t see. We are fearful of the space between because we associate it—as we do silence or a pause or a break in the routine—with nothingness. It is a form of death to a busy leader. But what I realize today is that the space between is not a nothingness but an ‘everythingness.’ So much of what truly matters arises out of this space but because we don’t see it we let so much of what moves amongst us every day stay invisible!”

“That’s right,” I said. “Because the commons represents the invisible structure of the imagination, it offers a space both for seeing and being seen. Many of the resources—including the leaders’ ideas, stories and imaginative insights, which can contribute to the long-term sustainability of our communities and organizations—will be found there.”

“As you speak about a commons of the imagination I realize how much we are strangers to it,” John said. “In some ways it is like exploring a foreign territory.” As John put away his journal and we walked again, I was excited

with how quickly he had grasped the essence of the idea.

“It is indeed,” I said. “We’re very familiar with the territory of the mind, but not so close to the heart. The commons is a good way for the mind and heart to flower together. Then we can go on to do many things alone or with one another, but we can do them from a new spirit from having shared these times of ‘emptiness’ together.”

An Unbroken Wholeness

Towards the end of our walk we came to a point of land that extended into the lake. The clouds were heavy with a coming storm, and the winds churned the waters around our feet. The mist that rolled along the water’s edge made it difficult to see the far shore.

“We have covered a lot of ground,” John said, “yet I feel quite still inside; more at peace than I have for a long time. I remember how your music has brought me to this place on occasion, but I had not expected that a conversation could do the same.”

“Yet,” he added, “I believe that the experience of finding this still centre within is part of what leadership offers us. It cannot be achieved through any single activity. It does indeed involve a different way of listening—to hear the echoes and sense the implicit. I am certain that this is what this new intelligence is for—to hear the aliveness of this unheard melody, a voice of belonging that brings the commons into view. This is what artists have always listened for, and now the rest of us need to listen for this music in ourselves as well.”

“Wholeness is the unheard melody,” John said, “and I realize that we come to it in conversations as well as through music. Whenever there is the presence of another, the potential for wholeness is present. So we are all musicians in this respect!”

John’s words brought to mind the same quality of attentiveness that occurred at the end of a musical concert by the great violinist Yehudi Menuhin. It was described in loving detail by Nadia Boulanger, herself an accomplished teacher of composition:

“He brought the audience to a place of indescribable completeness,” she said. “The whole house found itself in the grip of the same mute emotion, which created a silence of extraordinary quality. Everyone understood, felt, participated in what he himself must have been feeling... in some way it passed beyond him to a higher level.” (Monsaingeon 1988: 37)

These words gripped John in a similar emotion. We walked quietly for a time and then he said, “When you and I first met, you were playing the piano for a company-wide conversation café. We had been invited to listen and reflect on our own leadership story, to think about what our story had been, how it had changed and what we wanted the new story to be.”

“As I listened I had the experience of what I would describe as an inspired solitude. For a long time no words came to me. I was also confused, as I had never before associated solitude as a leadership skill. But as I put that experience together with what you have just described about Yehudi Menuhin, I realize that this is the wholeness we have been speaking of. It is to find a place inside us with which we can touch the world—and be touched by it—in such a manner that we experience this profound sense of completeness and openness at the same time.”

“Yes,” I said, “and it is interesting that the meaning of solitude is ‘an unbroken wholeness’. This is the new story that leaders and artists share. Years ago I made the transition back to leadership work after ten years of being only with music, and my way of teaching changed. I no longer taught from the models and concepts that others had created. Instead I let the words come from the same place from which the music comes. I think this is what we all need to do: to find our own feeling and our own thought, which comes from being at home with this place of undivided wholeness within ourselves.”

We do this by finding the courage to follow our attractions, to be reverent in the presence of the mystery of the moment, to trust in the subjectivity of our own experience, to live into the larger questions, to consider where home is for us, to find a harmony with our own inner commons and to nurture this quality of inspired solitude inside ourselves. All of this brings us to that place within ourselves where authentic action is possible and our leadership and artistry are one and the same.

“To create this new story,” John said, “we will need a new vocabulary. Maybe we begin at the place you described, where our words become our music. Today we have shared words like *presence, beauty, home, place, uniqueness, gifts, curiosity, emergence, belonging, heart, inspiration, authenticity and originality*; perhaps the true measure of this musical property of words is the quality of feeling each brings us to when we hear them spoken.”

“That’s so true, John. I would suggest that this is precisely what the experience of solitude brings us to. It helps us truly hear this ‘something’ that will be essential if we are to effectively meet the dislocations and complexities of our world.”

As we walked along the water’s edge towards the parking lot, a ray of

sunshine found its path through the mist that still clung to the shore. Both of us smiled.

“It will be a different world when we can see and acknowledge the invisible gifts of beauty, grace and expressions of wholeness,” John said quietly. “It will be a new light to live by.”

While we didn't set specific goals for our times together, each time John and I met we found a thread of connection and followed it. As time passed this thread did indeed lead us to re-imagine a new role for leaders in the world the way it is.

The pages to follow include something of a record of John's and my explorations as we continued to meet and talk. As we traced this journey of awakening to our inner commons, we came to recognize how vital the outer commons will become as a space for revitalizing the public imagination. Many of the ideas that emerged in our first conversation, recorded here—ideas about reverence for the moment, following our attractions, being servants to the questions, opening spaces in our life for wholeness, being available to inspired solitude, and creating a common space—served as the light that illuminated the pathway of our ongoing conversations.

But before we could proceed further we needed to explore an implicit cultural story—a carryover from the thinking of our industrial age that has cast a cloud over the commons and our imaginative life. Marcel Proust once wrote that, “we do not need to search for new landscapes, we simply need to see the familiar landscapes with fresh eyes.” The commons has always been with us, but we have lost the sight to see it clearly. In our next conversation, John and I explored the myths that impede presence, and we looked at how an awareness of these myths may help us find new pathways to the imagination and our common life together.

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