

EDITORIAL • Where Are the Falconers? A meditation on leadership⁽¹⁾

*“Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer.”*

– William Butler Yeats (2)

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When the falcons cannot hear their falconer — worse still, when the falcons have no falconer(s) — then, Yeats continues after two lines of the opening quotation from his poem, the Second Coming, “Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold.” I use Yeats’ lines and his image “falcon, falconer” to start up this editorial-meditation on leadership and its core functions. When leaders fail to fulfill the functions of leadership, or when leaders are simply absent, things do fall apart. What should be said, is never heard. What should never have been said, cannot now be forgotten. What should be done now, is either postponed until it is too late, or is never undertaken at all. What should not be done becomes rule of the day and accustomed behaviour. What should be seen — the signs of what is rushing down towards or upon us — remains hidden in darkness to eyes unable to envision anything beyond the horizon of today or around the curve of tomorrow. Where seeing occurs it is shortsighted and what is seen ties people to the centre of a *status quo* around which they move in ever returning circles, at a loss to grasp they are going nowhere.

This is what can happen where leadership, perhaps present in name, fails to fulfill at least the following of its essential functions.

On Knowing What We Are Doing

Palliative care physicians, psychiatrists, nurses, psychologists, grief counselors, and other health care professionals are supposed to, and are trusted to, *know* what they are doing when they intervene into the bodies, psyches, and lives of vulnerable, suffering and dying people. The whole point of intervention is to bring about a desired and controlled change in an undesired or even intolerable condition, be it a disease progression, a pain, a symptom, a distress, or a loss. Since reliable and precise knowledge is needed to achieve controlled change, compassionate and effective care rests essentially upon advances in the basic, clinical, and social sciences. Reliability of knowledge, if we accept H.A.F. Dudley’s view (3), stretches along a continuum from ignorance at the far left to high probability or certainty of verified knowledge at the far right. Sustaining along that continuum a steady movement away from mere appearances and untested ideas towards reality and real

knowledge could be the *epistemological function of leadership*. Fulfilling that function can make high and different demands.

On Matching Our Doing to our Knowing

The *moral function of leadership* is to promote and sustain consistency between our knowing and our doing; between our knowing what has to be done and actually doing it. Maintaining this consistency can be very demanding and the persistent temptation is to escape from meeting these demands.

There are at least three ways of escaping the high demands of maintaining consistency between our knowing and our doing. (4) The first is to flee from self-awareness. We can achieve this by constantly distracting ourselves from critical self-reflection on what we are doing and failing to do. A second escape is moral renunciation. We then do not deny what we know has to be done, we rather just give up trying to meet the high demands of moral consistency. We confess our weakness and unwillingness to make the efforts and accept the sacrifices moral consistency would require of us. We then play games with knowledge and truth. We refuse to remodel our doing and our actions to match up to what we know should be done and we remodel our knowledge so that it becomes consistent with what we want to do or want to avoid doing. We betray knowledge and truth to satisfy our own narrow desires and aversions. Examples of this betrayal occur regularly, as when so-called leaders in whatever domains reject validated knowledge as being wrong when it conflicts with preferred economic, industrial, academic, professional, or political purposes. When such betrayals of moral leadership occurs, things do tend to fall apart, and what should be centres of excellence tend to become centres for chaos.

On Seeing and Shaping What Is Coming

Leadership has at least two specific functions regarding the future. The space for the first function is where we are when we just do not hear the grass growing in the woods beneath our feet, nor do we feel the closeness of secret circles slowly or even rapidly growing small around us. (5) We are insensitive to, and unable to perceive, the multiple criss-crossing and latent tendencies out of which a

possible future is arising to come down so unexpectedly upon us. Leadership's *anticipatory* or *visionary function* is to grasp the latent lines and signs of an emergent future and to reduce that future's unexpectedness.

Poets, Dante said, strive to say "that which was never said by anyone." (6) These are the poets of words. However, the questions arising out of the fragility of civilization, community, the economy, and organized healthcare seek the poets of action. Herman Broch, in his novel, *The Death of Virgil*, (7) introduced the idea of *poets of action* because he realized, as George Steiner explains, "that the beauty and truth of language are inadequate to cope with human suffering and the advance of barbarism. Man must find a poetry more immediate and helpful to man than that of words: a poetry of action." (8)

Leadership's second function regarding the future is to bring about such a poetry of action. Thus is *leadership's creative function*: not just to foresee what is coming upon us; but to imagine the unimaginable and to follow through with the creation of things never seen before. Leaders do not just await a foreseen future to happen. They shape and bring about a future quite different from a future that might have emerged from the interactive latent tendencies of the present.

On Knowing What Extreme Situations Require

One of the most difficult functions of leadership — a function that, in my view is only rarely fulfilled — consists in knowing and in being able to decide what to do in situations where all established procedures, rules, and accustomed plans of action will not and cannot work. I use the term *charismatic* for this function of leadership. This function involves much more than being able to "think outside the box." This function is called forth particularly in extreme situations, for example, situations of extreme danger; situations of war and violence; situations of social, political, or economic collapse. These situations may well call for more than originality or strokes of genius, as welcome and as needed as these may be. The charismatic function of leadership is called into action particularly when the needed decisions and actions bring one right up to and even beyond the frontiers of what is widely accepted to be right and moral behaviour. If some extreme situations call for extreme kinds of action, these actions may still be widely condemned by many. So leaders who can and do fulfill the demands of the charismatic function may find themselves widely criticized and even condemned for doing what an extreme situation requires, even if and perhaps particularly if, no one else around knew what to do or was able to do it.

Are there situations in the care of very sick and dying people, and in the organization of palliative care, that require charismatic leadership?

On Knowing What Really Counts

I use words from Robert Fisk, foreign correspondent, to introduce the idea of the last function of leadership to be considered in this meditation. "War," Fisk has written, "is primarily not about victory or defeat, but about death and the infliction of death. It represents the total failure of the human spirit." (9)

War is not the only venue where people can encounter and suffer from total failures of the human spirit. Wherever human beings are interacting, working, and living, total failures of the human spirit can occur, particularly if we do not know or have forgotten what really counts when we speak, decide, and act. Paul Celan, the poet, has warned:

"We
really don't know, you know,
we
really don't know
what counts" (10)

In the sense of Robert Fisk's use of "spirit" where he speaks of the "total failure of the human spirit," *leadership's spiritual function* is to mobilize people, communities, and nations around "what really counts." Throughout history, there have been powerful men and women who have betrayed the spiritual function of leadership as they successfully manipulated countless numbers of their fellow human beings, blinded them to what really counts, and seduced them into the pits of nihilism. Leadership's spiritual function is to awaken people to what really counts; to sustain that awakening; and to guide people away from the nihilistic failures of the human spirit and towards the headlands of human transcendence.

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