

Book Review

Harter, N. (2006). *Clearings in the Forest: On the Study of Leadership*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press.

I spent many years studying leadership as the focus on my graduate education, and have encountered many attempts to describe both leadership and what the study of it is about. My experience of most of that literature was usually disappointment, as authors tended to try more to answer the question than to understand its scope and context. The drive to “know” the subject, to be an “expert” in order to fulfill various motivations or needs, or even the desire to report on research and study that proved useful in certain contexts all left me with a kind of dissatisfaction that the scope of the question, the basis for knowledge, the rigor brought to bear was insufficient to the nature of the subject.

In that context, I recently read Nathan Harter’s *Clearings in the Forest: On the Study of Leadership* and found myself pleased to be guided on a journey that spent far more time orienting me to the scope and nuances of this field than placing stakes in the ground to assert positions. Harter’s metaphor of taking a walk in the forest, going down into its valley to explore the experience of leadership, and then ascending the slopes along well chosen paths that illuminate the meaning of leadership, helps the reader avoid being unable to see the forest for the trees.

It is this level of Harter’s capacity to situate the reader in relation to the subject, both at the level of the entire book, and as he focuses on each specific topic, that brings an integral flavor to it. For instance, at the valley bottom he explores the role of image and imagination in leadership in a way that shows how it goes beyond the limitations of theoretical or symbolic approaches. Then, on the way up the slopes, he chooses a path of examining leadership as a sociological form, noting different qualities of the form, structures it can take and the conditions that it arises in. He begins with simple examples, and moves on to explore more and more complex ones. Examining this complexity, he notes:

In other words, after taking hold of one little strand in the great ball of reality, we shall have isolated the role of imagination – a nearly transparent moment in human experience – and placed it in larger and larger contexts, by a process of synthesis, until very nearly reaching world-historical patterns of continuity and change (p. 147).

Harter’s work is not superficial. He utilizes elements of pragmatism and phenomenology and digs deep into epistemological issues inherent in the study of leadership. At times the reader may wonder where he is going, if he is not lost in his own forest. But some patience and perseverance rewards the reader with a perspective that shows these elements—pragmatism and phenomenology—to be critically involved in such study. Approaches that do not take sufficient account of them are bound to lead to the kind of disappointment I alluded to earlier.

While this is not a traditional approach to examining leadership and its study, Harter does tackle some of its sticky issues, including notions of power, elites, and ethics. Near the end, he

introduces a relatively obscure framework¹ for introducing the notion of verticality as a way to situate different elements of leadership. This move adds a further element of an integral approach. And the ever evolving nature of an integral approach to the topic is reflected in his closing comments about the study of leadership.

I have decided that the ambivalence, uncertainty, and “dim perception of the future” that Thompson worries about are inherent, part of the constitution of our study, never to be resolved—at least not without distorting reality. That is my tentative position (p. 186).

Allowing Nathan Harter to be your guide on a journey through the forest of leadership studies is not for the faint of heart, or for those looking for definitive answers on key questions. It is a rigorous hike, rewarded at the top with a view that takes in the whole forest. Standing here and gazing out, I feel the kind of satisfaction that comes from having a view that integrates the breadth and depth of the landscape.

¹ You can find a description of this framework in issue #2 of *Integral Review*, in Harter’s article *Voegelin’s Ladder*