

The Springs of Leadership

Nathan Harter

Abstract: Leadership denotes activity, if not strenuous activity. Yet in its own way contemplation is an activity—an activity arguably at the root of leadership, which this meditation seeks to justify.

Keywords: Activity, contemplation/meditation, *ensimismamiento*, leadership, nature.

I

In the season of dogwood, I drag out the pieces of an old father's day gift—a hammock—so I can read outdoors, reclining. I find it easy on my back and, after so many weeks of winter, easier on my spirits. There I take up books on leadership, books of theory and of philosophy. Soon I stop reading, lost in my own reflections and staring up through the boughs of the flowering tree, falling asleep, as my thoughts become increasingly irresponsible, deranged. Study becomes meditation, mediation becomes a nap.

The literature on leadership emphasizes striving, the pursuit of goals, the accomplishment of tasks. Leaders constantly do things. If they are not task oriented, then they are relationship oriented, but leaders are always oriented outward, representative of purpose. They communicate a vision. They resolve conflict. They transact and transform. They are symbols of what yet needs to be done. In a manner of speaking, leaders are especially future oriented, warning about threats and promising hope.

Leaders can be imagined as that vital impulse, whatever it is, the inner drive that characterizes life. Just as the dogwood competes for water and light, striving, so also groups and teams compete for bigger budgets and status. The metaphor is never far from the surface: images of natural selection, the survival of the fittest, and nature red in tooth and claw. The philosophers Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche both tried to penetrate the commotion of life. What force or power lay behind it? The Greek called it *entelechy*. The Christian called it providence. These Germans decided to call it “will”—a single abstract relentless tendency in living things to survive, thrive, and persist. The struggle to exist pits organisms against each other. Selfish genes make adaptations, cooperating where they might, competing where they must.

Plant life low to the ground finds itself in shadow to the leaves of taller plants, which in forest competition grow taller still and spread their sun-catching leaves. Lower plants must flourish where trees cannot grow, or they must live in the shade, or live off of the dominant trees as vines, even perhaps slowly creeping and swallowing the trees, like kudzu taking back the sunlight, forcing the trees to hold them up, reversing the hierarchy. In his book *The Accursed Share*, Georges Bataille describes the restlessness in nature to absorb energy and protect itself, even prolong itself, to the point that life completely detaches itself from the dirt and moves. You and I are evidence of that!

The most obvious use of these metaphors from nature exists in business, where doctrines of capitalism emphasize growth, competition, adaptation, uncertainty, and self-interest. Firms “capitalize” on the individual strivings of employees, channeling their natural proclivities into a corporate body with a single, abstract mission: to garner profit. Firms compete with other firms. Management negotiates with labor. Industries lobby governments. From the springs of appetite, we seem to have built an enormous autopoietic system devoted to everlasting change in a process of renewal. And the vital impulse in these various operations is the leader.

At the heart of nearly any definition of leadership is change. Leaders bring about change. Change is ascribed to them. They are the change agents, the ones who stimulate, direct, and sustain energy. They keep our human systems whirling. They feed progress.

Other sectors regard leadership in much the same way. In the military, of course, leaders orient themselves to conflict, to withstanding the onslaught and to conquest. That crafty Florentine, Niccolò Machiavelli, advised generals and politicians always to study war, especially in times of peace. One must never rest. It is no coincidence that in addition to his political handbook titled *The Prince*, Machiavelli wrote *The Art of War*. Today, politicians prefer to be seen as strong, allied with the military, war-time leaders, commanders in chief, hawkish—patriotic most in seasons of struggle. It helps when they can cite previous military service. Politicians will even borrow militaristic imagery to wage wars on poverty and combat illegal drugs. Few candidates promise to do nothing while in office. They promise to fight for their constituents.

Leadership exists for the sake of activity.

What then am I doing lying on a hammock, face to the sun, watching the layers of dogwood bob and weave? This is most passive, the antithesis of leadership. Somebody probably ought to rouse me to exertion. What good am I, suspended from a rope, swaying in the breeze? The book face down on my chest is likely to be about leadership, since that is what I teach. Catching up on my reading is the laziest of races. How can one catch up while lying down? But I am not even reading now. I am gazing at the underside of leaves, the flecks of blossoms, and the gaps of sky between them. I am absorbed in the texture, somewhere between thought and dreaming.

It occurs to me, this too is nature. Life is not all “eat or be eaten.” Maybe I was laboring under an illusion, the pace of nature’s conflicts being imperceptible. Trees do not grow abruptly. They stretch slowly. Their roots wriggle over time. Their girth expands in small rings. Their lives are measured in decades. To the naked eye, nothing of the tension is apparent. It all seems so tranquil. A cardinal calls from the rooftop. Bees hover. Grasses bask and bend. Maybe images of struggle overstate the case. Even in the motion I do detect, there is more of the dance than of domination.

When artists approach nature’s beauty, they often respond to its momentary order, its balance. They usually celebrate what is, rather than what is passing away into corruption or pushing out of concealment. There is something thrilling in the whale that arcs out of the water. It rises from the sea and massively thrashes back into the sea, but for an instant in the air it instills awe.

Maybe the beauty derives from our awareness as observers that such moments are transitory. Maybe we celebrate the experience knowing how brief it is. We are already nostalgic for it, rather like touching the face of a child or lifting a peony. This too shall pass. Nature grinds and shivers and bores and splits, but in that wild flux—and we soon learn, because of that wild flux—there is a beautiful thing. Call it what you will, the impulse of vitality has yielded remarkable diversity and treasures.

I do not think that spiders admire the orchid. Orchids do not admire the spider's web. Nature is busy. So far as we can tell, only human beings notice and value the incredible display. It is within our powers and apparently our powers alone to admire. And a part of our appreciation originates in our longing that it stay. We hate to see the fish swim away into deeper waters. We regret the collapse of our favorite redbud tree. We spend weeks each spring waiting impatiently for the crocus. We schedule vacations in the autumn in order to drive through the wooded hills, so we can experience the colors and the damp smells. We stand perpetually on tiptoe, even straining our necks at the office to look at the weather outside. Is it a sunny day? Human beings regard it as our unique privilege to notice nature as something of a pageant. We are its audience.

So, in my hammock, attuned to my garden and gate, I serve this purpose. I am being distinctly human. Part of me is, anyway. Part of me is yielding to my own natural rhythms, alleviating my aching back and falling asleep; perfectly natural. In fact, I am between being part of nature, on the one hand, and experiencing nature, on the other hand—both within the environment and separated in my consciousness from it. I am both participant and observer. I am suspended in a tension, just as my body is suspended by the tensions in the rope.

I like the feeling. I enjoy the perspective. Where then in leadership studies, with all of the havoc and hubbub, do we find ourselves in that state, suspended and appreciative, fleetingly grateful, largely passive? As students of leadership, we can read stories about leaders, biographies and case studies. In that sense, we are not far removed from hero-worship...oh, maybe more realistic, even skeptical, assured of keeping things in perspective. But we still talk endlessly about exemplars, citing the same paragons: Gandhi, Mother Teresa, MLK.

That alone is an indulgence. If all we do is read their narratives and thrill at their heroism, then how is that different from spending an afternoon reading dime novels or watching adventure flicks? We are being entertained. We are witnessing leadership as something exterior, part of an exterior reality. That is different from what I have been trying to describe, an interior reality. As I laze on my hammock, I am not just being entertained by nature. I am experiencing it differently, deeply.

The philosopher Ken Wilber would refer to it as the translogical eye of contemplation.

Meditation is assisted by nature. It includes me serving as a witness to what nature has wrought. It also includes pondering my place in the flux. It includes using the imagination. It is more active than it seems from the sidewalk. Neighbors probably wonder when I actually work. But done properly, freely, meditation of this sort draws so many thoughts and ideas and memories together into new and creative combinations that some of my most satisfying and productive breakthroughs have originated in the twilight of consciousness, after reading a powerful passage and then halting long enough to consider it.

In a sense, I am very much like the dogwood, seemingly languid on a spring day while working beneath the surface, imperceptibly, strengthening my grip on the soil.

II

Leadership denotes activity. Unlike nature, however, leadership derives from choices that people make. Whatever role there might be for impulse, instinct, appetite, desire, and habit, at least one part of leadership includes choosing to do one thing, rather than another. Somewhere in the process, a participant exercises freedom.

When a person in position of authority carries out the commands of superiors, without initiative, without making any unique contribution, we would be hard pressed to say that he or

she is leading in any meaningful sense. That person is an extension of somebody else's will, an instrument, a tool, a flunky. We expect for leadership to contain a spark of individual creativity. A leader brings something to the table. Where does that spark come from? In the relentless pace of human organization, when does the leader interject that contribution?

Warren Bennis, writing *On Becoming a Leader* in 1989, made an interesting observation. "The importance of reflecting on experience, the idea that reflecting leads to understanding, came up again and again in my conversations with leaders." Leaders periodically withdraw, even if only to take a deep breath and really think about a problem. They emerge from such moments resolved. Something happens in the stillness. José Ortega y Gasset called it *ensimismamiento*, a phase of disengagement, solitude—not to escape life's predicament, but to ponder it in peace. In short, leaders meditate. It can happen quickly. Or it can take a year-long sabbatical. In any case, it seems to be an integral part of forming purpose. Call it a retreat, call it visioning, call it prayer, call it recharging your batteries. For busy leaders, it is the pause that refreshes.

Life has a way of scurrying ahead. Work expands to fill the available time. There is always more to do. "What have you done for me lately?" Customers expect results. Supervisors need quantifiable measures, deliverables. A really talented leader is in demand.

I never get tired of the story of an efficiency expert who told the manager to fire that guy in the corner office who never seems to be doing anything. He sits all day staring out of the window with his feet up on the desk. "I seem to recall," replied the manager, "that he was sitting just that way when he came up with an idea to save this firm a quarter million dollars. He stays."

Without *ensimismamiento*, leadership can be reduced to technique, schedules of reinforcement, manipulation, the causal relation between something the leader says or does and something the follower does in response. Leadership is a collision of human particles, reduced to mathematical formula, like fluid dynamics. One can turn then to the science of leadership. What makes leadership uniquely human, however, and more of an art, is the experience equivalent to what I enjoy lying on my hammock. I get to suspend overt activity and become quiet.

Meditation has its risks. A person might come away with nothing. There are no guarantees that it will produce. It is, if anything, a letting go of such expectations. At such times, one is living, in the memorable words of Hannah Arendt, without banisters. Meditation can also veer a person away to other things, to distractions, even to sleep, where deeper powers of the psyche cavort. That is not an altogether bad thing. Worse, meditation might impress upon a person some new idea—an innovation, reform, repentance—conscripting the conscious leader to take up a new burden, a challenge. Meditation just might demand exertion. The risk is that meditation issues in a call for leadership.

Be careful what you wish for. You just might get it.

We have little reason to believe that the rest of nature experiences purpose. The more mechanistic models of nature say that organisms have their functions within a system, and that's just about it. There is no doubt, on the other hand, that human beings do experience purpose. And it is my job as a teacher to emphasize the value of these experiences and to give my students opportunities to have these experiences, to knock the chocks away from the wheel, to disengage the clutch, to drift in a state of wonder and doubt. Students learn to right themselves. First, I want them to submit themselves, subject themselves to these disorienting experiences, inasmuch as education consists in a series of such experiments.

Happily, our very human capacity to gaze on nature, to watch it without asking anything more from it, assists in the process of meditation. It is a meditation to see it snowing outside or to stop and smell the roses. Nature invites us to come away and lose ourselves in its texture and depth.

Nature draws us away from struggle and routine. Where else do we go when we stare into a roaring fire or gaze at a rippling stream? We turn from Doing to Being and then return to Doing more richly, or at least refreshed.

It is my contention that leadership as such originates in solitude, private unstructured reverie, even dreams.

III

The Christian tradition depicts at least three women named Mary. Mary, the mother of Jesus Bar-Joseph, observed her remarkable young son and pondered these things in her heart. Mary, the sister of Martha, attended Jesus as a houseguest, not by scurrying about the house getting things in order, but rather by sitting and listening to him. Mary Magdalene in the garden, after searching in vain for the corpse of Jesus, stood outside the empty tomb weeping. Moments of passivity, yet moments of drama. Perhaps unlike the quarrelsome men in his entourage, they had chosen the better part.

We are each of us suspended in the world. Occasionally, we ought to slide the book down, remove the pen, cock our head to one side, and take our thoughts into the wilderness of a hundred rustling dogwood blossoms, for a kind of alchemy where troubles turn to gold and we find purpose sufficient for the day.

I want my leaders to use a hammock.

Nathan Harter left the practice of law in 1989 to become a college professor at Purdue University, where he teaches organizational leadership. In 1995, he was promoted and tenured in the School of Technology for his work in southeastern Indiana. His first book on leadership theory is being published by the Purdue University Press. The father's day hammock was given to him by his children, Nathan, Elijah, and Kalyani, with some assistance from his wife, Karin.

Nathan W. Harter
422 E. Central Ave., Suite #2
Greensburg, IN 47240 USA
nharter@purdue.edu