

Addressing the Irony: Three Styles of Leadership

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There is an important point to make regarding postmodern and contingent notions about leadership – and even more fundamentally the challenge in addressing the ironic conditions to be found in contemporary organizations and societies. No one leadership style is best. A great (or at least effective) leader is flexible in their style of leadership. This is a model of leadership that aligns with Richard Rorty's (1989) notions of contingency. This contingent leader at times can lead through wisdom, and at other times can lead through either courage or vision. We find the heart of ironically contingent leadership in this capacity to shift styles of leadership in ways that are contingent with the needs and dynamics of the organization this person is serving. I turn now to a brief description of these three styles of leadership and the irony inherent in each style (the type of irony I first identified in the cases of Kristen and Joshua).

The Wise Leader

I begin with the leadership style that focuses on wisdom. A person is assigned leadership in a family, clan, group or organization because this person has more experience than anyone else or because this person possesses some fundamental and distinctive knowledge either because this competency is inherited or because it has been taught to the wise leader (usually as a result of this person's inherited wealth or great promise as a young person). Alexander the Great is certainly one of the vivid personifications of this premodern mode of leadership. Alexander was "born into greatness."

The Nature of Wise Leadership

Alexander's father had been king of Macedonia and, even more importantly, Alexander displayed great potential as a young man – physically and intellectually. Perhaps most importantly, Alexander was the only pupil of one of the legendary teachers of all times:

Aristotle. Thus, at a young age, Alexander was identified as a wise leader (we will also see that he is identified, as well, as a brave leader and as a leader of vision). While most wise leaders don't arrive at their leadership position until accumulating many years of experience and expertise, Alexander was able to assume a leadership role, based on wisdom, at a very early age, in large part because of not only his inheritance (father was king) and his early display of competence, but also his credentials as a pupil of Aristotle.

We find that this accumulation of prestigious credentials is found not only in the ancient world of Alexander, but also in contemporary society. Men (and women) who have graduated from such American universities as Harvard, Yale or Stanford are assumed to be not only prepared for leadership but also, in some way, deserving of leadership. They have studied hard in high school (supposedly), which enabled them to be selected to a highly competitive college or university.

We see this respect (even "reverence") for a prestigious education in the election of many recent American presidents. They graduated (undergraduate or graduate school) from either Harvard or Yale (Clinton, both Bushes, Obama). The irony is that this prestigious education has rarely been directly devoted to the acquisition of leadership skills – usually because the assumption is made that leadership can't be taught. Only character, discipline, and broad-based knowledge can (perhaps) be taught or inculcated. This is often identified as a "liberal arts" education or, in previous times, as the form of education that was becoming to a "gentleman" or "gentlewoman."

Even when a man or woman is not formally educated and prepared to become a leader, he or she may attain this status as a result of substantial experience in the field or organization. What kind of experience seems to be important? We tend to value both breadth and depth of experience. We look for wisdom in someone who has "seen it all" – meaning that he or she has not remained in one place for many years, doing only one thing repeatedly. Twenty years of experience is not assigned much validity if this

person has learned everything in one year and simply repetitively enacted this year of experience for twenty years.

We also tend to look for wisdom among those who can reflect back on and articulate their rich experiences. They are often brilliant storytellers, even if they usually remain rather quiet (unless asked to provide advice or guidance). These men and women often are natural (and informally designated) mentors. They enjoy teaching those who are younger or less experienced. They take great delight in seeing other people succeed as a result of sharing their expertise and tend to view these younger or less experienced people as protégés rather than rivals. We talk in psychology about the shift in attention from personal success (one's own accomplishments) to a sense of collective significance (the accomplishments of other people or one's family, group or society).

The Challenges and Irony of Wise Leadership

This positive and perhaps overly optimistic portrait of the wise leader needs to be moderated – for the wise leader is not always so gracious and delighted with the transition of leadership to the next generation. The wise leader can at times be quite resistant to this transition and may be threatened by the acquisition of new knowledge and additional experiences by younger men and women. The threat and resistance are often couched in ambivalence – and produces Hard Irony. The wise leader teaches and encourages education--yet doesn't want her protégé to become too smart or too experienced.

Even when the wise leader is fully open to the transition in leadership, there is often a hesitation on the part of other members of the organization to acknowledge, let alone actively support, this transition – yet another source of ambivalence and irony. They have relied for many years on the wisdom of the “old” leader and do not yet trust the competence of the new leader – he or she is not yet “tested” as to the practicality of their wisdom. Do we dare risk relying on this person's experience, when we have the wise, old leader to guide us? Ironically, even when the knowledge and expertise of the old

leader is now “out-of-date” – which is very common in our technologically-driving, postmodern world – there is still a yearning for that which is known and reliable.

The ironic challenge for this form of leadership is two-fold. There is first the challenge of succession planning. When a wise leader is playing a key role in an organization, then plans must begin very early regarding the preparation of other men and women to assume the wise leader’s role. This involves not just the mentoring of the new leader(s) by the old leader, but also the building of formal programs that prepare the organization for this transition in leadership.

In some instances, these formal programs involve placing a new person in an interim leadership role (alongside the old leader); in other instances, it means the use of rituals and rites regarding the succession; in yet other instances, it means sending the new leader off for additional training or education. This provides the new leader with an opportunity not only to step away from their own organization to gain a fresh perspective, but also to return to their home organization with new credibility and with reassuring breadth and depth of “wisdom.” The irony of wise leadership is addressed in part by encouraging the new leader to not only learn from the old leader, but also acquire and bring to the organization her own unique and informed perspectives.

Second, there is the Soft Ironic challenge of appreciation. The wise leader helps members of the organization understand and appreciate a world that is very complex, unpredictable and turbulent. It is a white-water world and a dancing landscape. In such a world, multiple interpretations can be offered and each of these interpretations may in some important way be considered valid. This is at the heart of the ironic condition identified and described by Richard Rorty. Appreciation of this ironic condition is critical to the 21st Century leadership of wisdom. We must seek to understand and honor these diverse perspectives – this is part of the process of appreciation. We must also identify and honor the many resources that exist in our organizations to meet the multiple challenges inherent in our world of complexity, unpredictability and turbulence.

Appreciation takes place when we not only point to but also make use of these resources through construction of a human resource bank or at least enactment of a comprehensive survey of the talents already existing in our organization. (Bergquist, 2004). People want to be recognized and appreciated for the skills, knowledge and expertise they bring to the organization. They also want to honor the wisdom of their leaders. They yearn for the day when leaders were truly wise (we will never know if this “day” actually existed) and hope that they can find wisdom in their current leaders, their future leaders -and perhaps most importantly in themselves. This is the foundation of appreciation: honoring our own wisdom as well as the wisdom held and deployed by our leaders.

The Courageous Leader

This second leadership style focuses on courage. A person is assigned this second form of leadership because the family, clan, group or organization in which he or she lives or works is confronting a major challenge (the enemy) that is very strong (not easily conquered) and quite menacing (serious in its intention to be victorious). This person is assigned a leadership role not only because he or she has demonstrated experience as a skillful tactician and strategist against this enemy (or a similar enemy in the past), but also because he or she is brave and willing to risk his or her own welfare (even life) in order to defeat the enemy.

The Nature of Courageous Leadership

I previously mentioned that Alexander the Great is a vivid personification of the first style of leadership. I propose that he also exemplifies the second style. He was truly a “courageous” leader and used much of the wisdom he had acquired as a student of Aristotle and much of his credibility as the son of Phillip of Macedonia to wage war against many enemies throughout the Mideast and Asia. Alexander apparently was physically quite impressive – as are many courageous leaders. Research has shown that leaders tend to be taller than non-leaders (George Washington being an excellent

example) and usually physically stronger or more skillful than other people. The original qualifications of the prestigious Rhodes scholarship illustrate this focus. Recipients of the highly competitive Rhodes scholarship were to be not only academically gifted; they were also expected to be active in competitive sports.

While organizational leadership that builds on wisdom usually comes with a prestigious education, we are more likely to find that courageous leaders receive training that prepares them to fight against the enemy. It is much harder to defeat an enemy with a carefully worded argument than to defeat an enemy with a well-fought battle. Obviously, most of the battles being fought in contemporary organizations do not require the wielding of a sword; however, we do find that the courageous leader has been taught something about tactical and strategic planning as an MBA student or as a participant in management development programs within their organization.

The knowledge needed to be effective as a tactician or strategist can be taught and there are specific planning tools and procedures that are available through management training programs. Courage cannot be taught, just as wisdom is not readily acquired. However, there are ways in which this second type of leader can prepare ahead of time for battle. It is not enough, in other words, to be a courageous warrior. One must also be a cunning warrior.

The key to wholehearted acceptance of and sustained support for a courageous leader resides in the identification of an enemy that is both powerful and persistent. What triggers the sense of “enemy”? At one level the answer to this question is obvious: someone or some group is an enemy if it is threatening – if its intentions are not honorable, if it is capable of posing a threat, and if this threat is detectable to the enemy’s opponent. At a neuropsychological level, we can say that an enemy is threatening if it triggers a strong reaction from our Amygdala (a small neuro-structure located in our mid-brain that is often identified as the seat of our emotions). Many years ago,

Charles Osgood (1957) proposed that humans tend to categorize almost everything into three binary categories: (1) good or bad, (2) active or passive, and (3) strong or weak. Using a factor-analysis-based tool called the Semantic Differential, Osgood made a persuasive case for the impact of these three categories on the ways in which we structure our world. Given the more recent research on the role played by the Amygdala, we might propose that it is this mid-brain neurological structure that does the categorizing of everything into these three categories.

Something is viewed as threatening if it is bad (not interested in our welfare), if it is active and if it is strong. Perhaps these are also the criteria we use (via the Amygdala) in identifying an enemy. The enemy is someone or something that is bad (evil, ill-intentioned, against us) and is also strong and active. While another organization can be in opposition to us, it will probably not be very threatening if it is weak or if it is inactive. A weak enemy can readily be defeated. A passive enemy remains non-threatening as long as it is itself not provoked.

If an enemy does emerge, what do we do about it? Once again, the neurosciences offer an important clue. Most neurosciences for many years have suggested that human beings (like other primates) tend to react in one of three ways to threat (and the Amygdala helps to prepare the body for these three responses, through activation of the arousal/stress system). The first response is fight. Here is where the courageous leader obviously enters the picture. We mount an attack against the enemy and are led by the courageous leader.

The second response is flight. While the courageous leader would not initially seem to play an appropriate role regarding this second response, we find that courageous leaders often do play an important (if somewhat indirect) role in assisting another person, group or even entire society to escape from a very powerful enemy. At the global scale we see the emergence of great leaders who have led their tribe into exile. Moses comes immediately to mind, as do the leaders of many Native American tribes who were driven into exile.

There is yet another way, however, where flight leadership comes to the fore. Filmmakers produce movies of distraction during period of social unrest, while comedienne find a way to make light of the challenges that a society faces. It is not irrelevant that many filmmakers and humorists come from a background of discrimination and poverty. They know how to flee from a powerful enemy (racial bias or economic distress) and apply these flight strategies in their work as cultural leaders in a highly stressed society.

The third response is freeze. It has only recently been given sufficient attention – and it is closely related to the dynamics of irony. As several neurobiologists have noted, a human being living on the African savanna will rarely be successful in fighting against a ferocious opponent. Furthermore, as a guide in a South African game park once told me, there are very few animals that are slower than the human being. Hence, humans don't stand much of a chance if they try to run away from their enemy. In contemporary organizations (under conditions of irony) there is nowhere to run and hide, for there is an enemy everywhere and every direction leads you toward a threat and away from safety.

The only alternative is freeze. If we can just hide behind a tree or stand absolutely still, then maybe we won't be detected by the enemy. If we make no choices under a condition of irony (where there are contradictions everywhere), then we don't have to encounter another enemy. Unfortunately, freeze is not very good for our body or mind. We are frightened and this triggers the neurotransmitters and hormones needed to engage in fight or flight. We are suddenly wired for action, yet decide that the best action is inaction. As a result of this freezing response, our body is boiling over but unable to dissipate the energy. We end up with ulcers, hypertension and other stress-related illnesses.

Our courageous leader doesn't have much of a role to play when freeze is the chosen response. Furthermore, she is likely to experience the stress associated with inaction in a very personal manner. Our courageous leader probably will be even more stressed by

the inaction than will other members of the group, organization or society – given expectations that the courageous leader will take action. Thus, while freeze may be the most common reaction to powerful and highly active enemies, it is least aligned with the assumptions about courageous leadership – leaving many organizations with a pervasive sense of profound disappointment in the “cowardly” inaction of their leaders.

The Challenges and Irony of Courageous Leadership

Just as the challenge of a wisdom-based form of leadership can be summed up in two phrases words (succession planning and appreciation), so can leadership based on courage be summed up in two phrases: powerful enemy and decisiveness. We must retain (and never defeat) the enemy. We must “sort of” win, but not too decisively. If we lose our enemy than we are no longer needed as a courageous leader. This is the ultimate in Hard Irony. It can drive any of us mad (or at least can drive us to anger – leading us to the search for a new enemy)!

When a courageous leader is playing a key role in an organization, then considerable discussion must occur regarding who or what is the enemy. There can’t be multiple enemies (unless they are perceived as being part of a unified coalition), nor can the enemy be identified in some vague terms. In addition, the organization must focus on the tactical and strategic plans that will be engaged when confronting the enemy.

The organizational leader who is honored and respected for his or her courage needs a viable enemy. One of the great challenges and sources of irony for this type of leader emerges when the enemy has been defeated. If there is no longer an enemy, then why do we need a courageous leader? We can point to Winston Churchill as a notable example of this decline in collective support for courageous leadership. While most historians agree that Churchill was a disagreeable chap, he is widely acknowledged to be a man of extraordinary courage during war time. His speeches and actions during World War II may have been critical in the failure of Nazi Germany to invade Great Britain.

Yet, soon after the end of the war, Churchill was out of office. When he came back into office in the early 1950s the British Empire was in decline. While England during the 1950s was engaged in battles in many parts of the world (including the Mau-Mau rebellion in Africa, the war in Malaya and the Korean War), none of these wars involved England's defense of its own homeland. As a result, Churchill was not very successful as Prime Minister. He was the prince of War not the Prince of Peace (nor the Prince of Wars in distant lands).

What about the role of courage on a smaller plain – in a group or organization? I would propose that the same challenge and irony exists. The enemy must be strong and menacing. This enemy might be a competitor, in which case a win-lose mentality is likely to be prevalent. If there is no clear external enemy, then an organization can turn to internal enemies. There are many candidates: management, unions, sales, finance, or stockholders (to name a few candidates).

Alternatively, the enemy can be identified in a more nuanced manner. The “enemy” can be poor quality of product or service. It can be poor management, inequitable labor policies, or ill-informed decision-making processes. If this latter perspective is embraced by an organization, then the enemy is likely to remain viable for many years – given that we can always find ignorance, injustice and poor group process in an organization!

The second kind of ironic challenge being faced by the courageous leader concerns decisiveness. It is very tempting to freeze when facing complexity, unpredictability and turbulence. And we are particularly inclined to freeze when there are contradictions swirling all around us. One is inclined to simply keep one's balance when navigating the dancing and ironic landscape of a contemporary organization. The courageous leader must act rather than freeze. She must move forward rather than simply find balance.

While a canoe might be appropriate when moving down a rapidly flowing river, the white-water world requires a kayak and the capacity of the occupant of this kayak to

both keep centered in the kayak and move forward through the turbulent white-water. Such is also the case for the leader of a white-water organization. In addition, the courageous leader must help other members of the organization face up to and engage decisions and actions in the face of complexity, unpredictability and turbulence.

Just as the wise leader must help other members of the organization appreciate the multiple perspectives that can be taken in viewing and analyzing the problems, dilemmas and mysteries (not just puzzles) facing the organization, so the courageous leader must enable her organization to take action and find an appropriate path—despite the fact that multiple directions can be taken. There are many forks in the road—this is part of the ironic condition—and in each instance, a decision must be made about the fork in the road to be taken. This is the ironic challenge of decisiveness.

The Visionary Leader

This third leadership style focuses on vision. A person is assigned this third form of leadership because he or she can articulate a vision of the future that is persuasive and motivating. This person is assigned a leadership role not only because he or she is articulate and persuasive, but also because the people he or she is leading “hunger” for a dream or image of an alternative reality that will either help them build a game plan for getting out of the current reality or will enable them to be distracted from their current reality (a variation on the Style Two strategy of flight).

The Nature of Visionary Leadership

In both of the previous descriptions, I mentioned that Alexander the Great is a vivid personification of leadership. I propose that he also exemplifies the third style. He was truly a “visionary” and coupled this vision with the wisdom he had acquired as a student of Aristotle and as the son of Phillip of Macedonia with the courage and competence he displayed as a great warrior. His vision was to conquer and “civilize” the Mideast and Asia. Like many of his fellow-citizens in the Grecian world, Alexander was apparently quite arrogant about the “advanced” state of Greece (when compared to

the rest of the world) and quite patronizing with regard to his “responsibility” to make the rest of the world more like Greece.

As is the case with many contemporary leaders in the Western World, Alexander offered a vision that was quite biased and xenophobic: “we are the best and will bring all other people, even if by force, to our state of advancement.” Visions are not always beneficial to the world – this is part of the irony of vision. Hitler offers a prime and horrific example of a visionary leader who was articulate and compelling in offering his people a vision of genocide and world dominance.

While organizational leadership that builds on wisdom usually comes with a prestigious education, and courageous leaders receive training that prepares them to fight against the enemy, the visionary leader is someone who may not have much of an education or much training. Rather, she is in the right place at the right time to offer a vision of the future. In fact, the visionary leader often comes to leadership with minimal preparation. Her compelling vision often comes with a story of personal triumph over adversity and discrimination.

Visionary leaders like Abraham Lincoln often were born in poverty and are self-taught. Other visionary leaders such as Susan B. Anthony (and the other Seneca Falls advocates for women’s rights) and Martin Luther King (and the other civil rights leaders of the 1960s) grew up in a world that discriminated against them (or at least against other people “of their kind”). Visionary leaders such as Frederick Douglass offer even more compelling story of being born into slavery and escaping to freedom.

The visionary stories often contain moments of personal doubt and spiritual despair. We see this in the inspiring stories of Joan-of-Arc and Mother Teresa. Visionary stories often contain elements not only of doubt and despair, but also of wisdom (combining Style One and Style Three leadership) and of courage (combining Style Two and Style Three leadership). Visionary leaders convey stories of sacrifice, tribulation and triumph – having parted the Red Sea or dwelled in the desert so that they might enter

into a land of milk and honey. Ironically, in many instances they have led their people to a land of milk and honey but have not been able to enter this land themselves (Moses, Lincoln, Gandhi, John and Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King).

This is a key point in understanding the ironic dynamics of Style Three leadership: the vision can never be realized (just as ironically the enemy can never be defeated if Style Two leadership is to be sustained and the followers can never become too wise if Style One leadership is to prevail). One way to be certain that the vision remains intact is to kill the visionary leader (figuratively or literally). We can sustain the vision of a new Camelot because John Kennedy never had a chance to enact his dream and can be moved by King's "I have a dream" speech in part because he was not alive to realize this dream.

The key to wholehearted acceptance of and sustained support for a visionary leader resides in the identification of a compelling story from the past that bridges to the future. While this story often involves something about the visionary leader's own life and struggles, it must also resonate with and align with the stories and personal aspirations of those hearing or reading this story. There is a phrase which usually reads: "think globally but act locally." This same sentiment, slightly revised, can apply to visionary stories: "make them personal and local, but be sure that they speak to a much larger constituency."

Given that visionary leadership is dependent on the right place and the right time, it is also important that the vision is articulated at the right time and in the right place. While Lincoln's Gettysburg Address still appeals to us today, it is profound in large part because it was given at a commemoration ceremony for those soldiers who died during the bloody battle at Gettysburg. Lincoln is literally "consecrating" the ground where these young men were buried. Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech was similarly given on a particularly auspicious occasion (a major civil rights march on Washington D.C.) and at a very patriotic location (facing the Lincoln Memorial). The

visionary leader must pick the special time and place when offering a visionary statement.

Where and when does the visionary leader find this special place and time? This is a critical decision. I propose that there are five primary criteria with regard to the nature of an effective statement of vision. These five criteria tell us something about when and where we should offer a vision. I will first briefly identify these criteria and then suggest how these criteria help us identify an appropriate time and place for vision.

First, any statement of vision must be created and sustained by an entire social system – not just its leader(s). Collaboration is just as important when formulating a vision, as it is when assembling an army as a courageous (style two) leader. Second, the vision statement must be offered within a context of appreciation for past accomplishments and present-day contributions. All too often the visionary leader (especially if new to this role) will ignore or offer a critical perspective on past achievements rather than honoring these achievements and seeking to learn from them. We must always remember that someday in the near future, we will be the relics of the past and may be overlooked by the next generation. It is not just the wise leader who often feels devalued by the next generation – it is also the visionary leader who holds a vision that is now out-of-date and whose accomplishments on behalf of this vision are no longer fully appreciated.

Third, the statement of vision must be coupled with a statement of mission. Whenever a leader creates a vision of the future, it must be coupled with a clear commitment to something that is not about the future, or even exclusively about the present. It must be coupled with an enduring sense of mission. What do we do as a family, clan, organization, or social system that remains fundamental and unchanged? What do we do that is key to our survival? We must always look toward the future and toward change through the lens of foundations and continuity. What is our “business” and how does our vision for the future relate to this business?

The fourth criterion concerns the relationship between vision and values. How does our vision of the future relate to the fundamental values of this family, clan, organization or social system? What will and what won't we do in order to realize our dream for the future? Martin Luther King not only offered us a dream, he also insisted that this dream be realized through a set of values based on nonviolence. Similarly, Lincoln's statement of gratitude for the sacrifice made at Gettysburg is based on his firm commitment to preservation of the union. The "ends" (vision) never justify the use of inappropriate or unethical "means" (values).

Fifth, the vision statement should relate to some formally identified sense of purpose: what difference does our family, clan, organization or social system in the life of people living in this community, country or world. What social purpose are we serving and how does this purpose relate to our vision of the future? Our vision can be self-serving or even profoundly destructive regarding social purpose (as in the case of Hitler's vision). It is important that vision be aligned with a fundamental social purpose.

Thus, while a vision statement will change over time, the mission, values and social purposes tend not to change – or they change very slowly. While the vision is the wind in the sails that propels a vessel, the mission, values and social purposes provide the anchor, keel and rudder that keep the ship afloat and properly aligned. Furthermore, even though a compelling vision statement may come out of the mouth of a visionary leader, it ultimately requires collaboration and appreciation if the vision is to be truly owned by those who must enact this vision.

Several conclusions regarding appropriate time and place can be extracted from these five criteria. First, the vision statement should be offered alongside clearly articulated statements regarding mission, values and purposes. These four dimensions of what I label the "intentions" of an organization are tightly interwoven (as an organizational charter) and modifications in one will inevitably impact on the other three. The vision itself should build on many conversations, the sharing of stories (not just the visionary leader's stories) and the identification of moments of "greatness" in the past history and

present realities of the organization. Visions come alive and help guide an organization when they are generated and articulated under these conditions (place and time).

The Challenges and Irony of Visionary Leadership

If a compelling vision is generated, then what do we do about it? We must do more than applaud the visionary speech-giver. We must do more than walk away, inspired to do good –for at least a day or week. So-called “motivational” speakers provide a welcome respite from the daily grind, but they rarely have long term impact. As was the case with the two other styles of leadership, the neurosciences offer an important clue. Recent research regarding the hormonal system in the human body points to the important role played not just by adrenaline (critical in the Style Two Leadership focus on fighting and fleeing from the enemy), but also by oxytocin, a hormone that brings us closer together rather than leads us to fight or flee. Oxytocin is a “bonding” agency. It is critical to the production of love and hope in human beings. It is the hormone that surges in women (and even in men) when a child is about to be born. It is the primary physiological ingredient which turns (to use Martin Buber’s phrase) an “I-It” relationship into an “I-Thou” relationship (Buber, 2000).

I propose that oxytocin is also critical to the sustained engagement with a compelling vision. While adrenaline may surge after a stirring (and visionary) speech, it is the bonding power of oxytocin that motivates people to build on a vision through collaboration and community. Thus, the neurosciences are teaching us that organizational leaders of vision must not just excite people, they must also “bond” people to the new vision. Triangulation is required for a vision to be sustained. By this I mean that it is enough for two people to work together – a third element must be present if the working relationship is to be sustained. This third element is a shared vision (linked to a shared mission, set of values and compelling social purpose).

The “I-Thou” conception offered by Martin Buber provides us with guidance in this matter. According to Buber (a Jewish theologian), the “I-Thou” exists through God’s

grace. Similarly, the Greek word “agape” refers not just to mankind’s relationship to some deity. It also relates to the ways in which we treat and care for other people on behalf of our religious beliefs.

In the 21st Century, we need not focus on the relationship between humankind and a deity – we can focus instead on the ways in which relationships are enhanced and sustained (“I-Thou”) when these relationships are based on a shared vision – when oxytocin is produced to bind people together and bind people to an organization and its vision (as well as mission, values and purposes). This is the key to enactment of a vision. It must induce a sense of community and shared commitment – hence cannot just be the product of one person’s sense of the future.

If people are bound together, at least in part, through commitment to a shared, compelling vision of the future, then it becomes obvious that the two key roles to be played by the visionary leader are keeping the vision alive and preparing a new vision. This usually means not only that the leader periodically reminds his or her colleagues of the vision, but also that the leader facilitates a periodic review of and updating of the vision. The leader of vision is in trouble if the vision either is ignored or if the vision is reached. Thus, there must always be a sense of something undone, of something yet to be done, of something worth doing.

Many years ago, a noted European social historian, Fred Polak (1972), wrote about the decline of social systems that have lost their image of the future. Polak points to a critical factor in the ongoing existence of any social system (or any living system for that matter). It must have something toward which it is moving or toward which it is growing. Organisms are inherently “auto-telic” – meaning that they are self-purposed. They don’t need anything outside themselves to engage their world actively and in an inquisitive manner. This is the fundamental nature of play and curiosity that is to be found among all mammals. `

Without a sense of direction and future possibilities we dry up and find no reason to face the continuing challenge of survival. We find little reason for producing and preparing a new generation. In the series of Australian movies regarding Mad Max a post-nuclear holocaust world is portrayed that is coming to an end. When no viable future is in sight, then (as we see in these movies) there is no attending to children. They must fend for themselves, for we know they have no personal futures.

Ironically, there is a powerful story about post-nuclear holocaust in a novel by Cormac McCarthy (2006), called *The Road*, in which the father continues to protect and sacrifice for his son, even though the world is coming to an end. This extraordinary protagonist somehow finds meaning and purpose – and vision – regarding his son in the midst of despair and death. Perhaps this is the type of leadership that we need in the challenging and irony-filled world of 21st Century terrorism, nihilism and despair. McCarthy offers us a portrait of leadership that blends courage (Style Two) with vision (Style Three) – and perhaps in some very deep manner even the qualities of wisdom (Style One).

The organizational leader who is honored and respected for his or her capacity to convey a compelling vision of the future needs a viable vision (just as the Style Two leader needs an enemy and the Style One leader needs to possess wisdom). One of the great ironies to be faced by the third type of leader emerges when the vision has been realized, abandoned or ignored. If there is no longer the need for a vision, then we certainly don't need a visionary leader. As in the case of the wise and courageous leader, the visionary leader confronts Hard Irony: don't be too successful. Without an unfulfilled vision there is no need for hope or commitment to the cause. We confiscate our future and walk away with nothing new about which to dream.

We can point once again to Winston Churchill as a notable example of this decline in collective support for a visionary leadership. During World War II, Churchill not only exhibited courage, he also articulated a compelling vision regarding the future of England (and all of Europe), that helped to increase the resolve of English citizens to fight against the Nazi regime and Hitler's equally as compelling (though horrifying)

vision for a new Europe. When the Germans were defeated, England and Churchill not only lost an enemy, they also lost their compelling vision for the future.

While England (and all of Western Europe) were certainly better off after World War II than they were during the war, there was not a new Europe. The United Nations didn't solve all international problems. This was not the war-to-end-all-wars (as was proclaimed at the conclusion of World War I). Many writers have documented the existential despair that followed World War II, when people had to return to a life that had not improved, despite the visionary statements of World War II leaders like Churchill, Roosevelt, De Gaulle – even Stalin.

What about the role of vision on a smaller plain – in a group or organization? I propose that the same ironic challenge exists. The vision must remain viable. Organizations are often in crisis when they achieve some success and have realized a dream. What do we do now that we have completed this five-year plan? We have obtained this grant and have initiated our new programs, but nothing has really changed. We are still hustling for more funds. It is critical that a new set of goals be established before the old ones are realized; it is equally as important, however, that achievement of the old goals be honored and celebrated.

An organization that simply moves from one five-year plan to a second five-year plan is just as vulnerable to exhaustion and disillusionment as an organization that never realizes its dreams (because they have been set too high). We must appreciate the achievement of current goals and must linger for a moment to honor the old dream and vision before moving forward to a new sense of the future.

The old visionary leader faces Hard Irony at this point. At times, this dispensable visionary leader must embrace the Irony and step aside for the new vision – given that he or she has finished the task and awaits a period of rest and reflection back on what has been achieved. At other times, old visionary leaders can move beyond the Irony by becoming the new visionary leader. They find renewed energy and commitment while

collaborating with others in the formulation of the new vision. As in the case of the old, wise leader and the warrior who has spent many years battling an ancient foe, the visionary leader and their followers must decide when “enough-is-enough” and when the mantle of leadership must be passed on to the next generation. This is perhaps the most important decision that an organizational leader can make – whether wise, courageous or visionary. When do I move on and how do I help the next generation succeed? A little wisdom and guidance offered by a coach or consultant might be helpful at this decision point.

Concluding Comments

It is not uncommon for us to live (in the back of our minds and hearts) in a world that may no longer exist – if it ever did. On the one hand, we know that this world doesn’t exist in the 21st Century. On the other hand, we envision a world that is filled with men and women of vision (as well as courage and wisdom). We don’t differ in this regard from men and women who lived at much earlier times.

The Greeks of antiquity, for instance, believed that their myths were the “realities” of a previous time in their history – when Gods acted upon and in the world and when exceptional men and women (called “heroes”) lived in the world. Then one day, according to many Greek writers (such as Homer and Sophocles) this Golden Age came to an end. The Greeks were left, as ordinary men and women, to live ordinary lives and reflect back through myths and ceremonies on this previous world of Gods and Heroes.

It is important – perhaps essential – that we recognize the fact that this same perspective exists in 21st Century life. We must acknowledge, like the Greeks before us that we yearn for a certain type of leadership. We find ourselves disappointed in our leaders. They are, after all, only human. They are neither Gods nor Heroes. At other times we are profoundly thankful for and appreciative of these leaders – and in particular for the moments when these leaders are truly heroic as they face and engage (with wisdom,

courage and vision) the challenging and ironic world of 21st Century complexity, unpredictability, turbulence – and contradiction.

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