

# Harmlessness and the Leadership Spectrum

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I am now reading the new novel, *Jack*, written by the Pulitzer Prize winning author, Marilynne Robinson (Robinson, 2020). One of the many rich themes contained in this novel is *Harmlessness*. Robinson's protagonist, Jack Boughton, ponders about harmfulness and about whether he (or anyone) can go through life without causing harm. Do we lead a life when no harm is being done to other people—or do we harm other people through the actions we have taken (or not taken). Can we ever lead a harmless life or is our world designed in such a way that harm is inevitable? Is this especially the case when we are in a leadership position?

With the best of intentions, are we inevitably going to leave someone feeling wounded, ignored, misunderstood, betrayed – or at least disappointed? This essay is all about these important (and often haunting) questions and about the way harm and harmlessness play out in the decisions and actions taken by leaders who embrace differing styles of leadership. I start this essay by turning to a tradition that focuses on doing no harm to any living being.

## **The Jain Commitment to Harmlessness**

I am reminded of the extreme position taken by the Jain in India, who seek to harm no living being during their life. Jain texts, such as *Acaranga Sūtra* and *Tattvarthasūtra*, state that one must renounce all killing of living beings, whether tiny or large, movable or immovable. In its extreme form, this includes sweeping the road in front of them when they are walking, so that no animal is being stepped on.

The commitment to doing no harm extends beyond the domain of physical harm and beyond one's own actions. Those devoted to the Jain perspective believe that one should neither kill another living being, nor cause another to kill, nor consent to any killing directly or indirectly. Furthermore, Jains strongly advocate non-violence against all beings—one must in all ways be harmless. Nonviolence for Jains comes not just in the form of action but also in speech and in thought. Instead of hate or violence against anyone, we must respect and protect the life of all creatures. Jains specifically believe that violence, in all forms, chips away at one's soul. This is particularly the case when the violence is done with intent, hate or carelessness, or when one indirectly causes or consents to the killing of a human or non-human living being.

## Are We Harmless?

While the Jains set the “gold standard” for engaging in a harmless life, we must ask whether a similar commitment to harmlessness is practical – or even possible – for anyone living in a contemporary society. Do we never swat at a mosquito, let alone ban any broad-based program to eradicate any insect? Do we adopt the challenging Christian principle of turning the other cheek and loving your enemies as much as your friends—is such a policy and practice feasible in a world of polarization and injustice?

### Harm and Leadership

I would suggest that there is an even more fundamental question concerning a commitment to leading a harmless life. Can we truly be harmless if we accept a leadership role in a contemporary society? As a leader do we automatically tread a bit hard on the world around us—creating conditions that hopefully are helpful and healing, but inevitably create some damage or at least disappointment in the people with whom we interact and, in particular, those who we in some sense “lead.” Parker Palmer (1990, p. 11) puts it this way:

Many of us know the violence of active life, a violence we sometimes inflict on ourselves and sometimes inflict on our world. In action, we project our spirits outside ourselves. Sometimes we project shadows which do damage to others, and sometimes we project light that others want to extinguish. Action poses some of our deepest spiritual crises as well as some of our most heartfelt joys.

As I reflect on my own role as the leader of a graduate school of psychology for the past 38 years, I can take pride and pleasure in having had a significant impact on the lives of the 600 plus graduates students we have served for many different countries in the world. I hope that I have also treated our staff members, faculty members, and board members over these years in a fair and considerate manner.

I do know, however, that some members of my graduate school committee have been disappointed in my work with them and in my overall leadership of the school. Some even have left my graduate school with a great deal of hatred toward me. I have been described as a bombastic fool who should have retired many years ago. I suspect that this description is accurate—at least as I am perceived by some people in my community. I have indeed stepped on some people while traveling on my own road. I have

not gently found a way to protect them or escort them off the path that lay in front of me. I have not been a Jain.

### **Harm, Grace and Wholeness**

So, if one is never harmless when serving in a leadership role – or even being active in life (as Parker Palmer notes), then what would it mean to be harmless. Does it mean to simply do nothing? Does it mean to not leave any mark on the world—not to move on any path nor to do anything other than sit passively aside waiting for the world to act on us rather than we on it? Can there be an active harmless, such as the Jains practice—where we not only do no harm ourselves but also seek to reduce all levels and types of harm in the world. As noted in the Christian beatitudes, this might mean that we strive to be “peacemakers” and in this way become “the sons [children] of God.” This is a tall order, though perhaps as Paul Tillich (1948) notes, the Grace of God allows us to be peacemakers. The safe thing might be to do nothing—and in this way, sadly, live in a very ungraceful state of stagnation.

Perhaps grace is something other than the capacity to be peacemakers who can extend harmless beyond themselves. Grace might be more about forgiveness. We might be forgiven for doing harm to other people – intentionally or unintentionally. And this grace might come not from a source of divinity but instead from inside ourselves. We find a way to forgive our own harmful acts—and in doing so, we acknowledge our union with all other human beings—who like us can’t always avoid doing harm. We can turn once again to Parker Palmer (1990, p. 31), to gain his wisdom on this matter of doing harm in a life of action. He suggests that it is through our decisions and actions taken under difficult circumstances, when we are likely to do harm, that we find community and gain a fully appreciation of our own self:

The nonmonstrous [non harming] parts of ourselves, the parts we consider angelic, are parts that separate us from others; they make for distinction, not unity. These parts give us pride because they make us different, not because they unite us with the common lot of humankind. Our successes and our glories are not the stuff of community, but our sins and our failures are. In those difficult areas of our lives we confront the human condition, and we begin to learn compassion for all beings who share the limits of life itself. It is not the [lofty]angels in us but the fallen angels who know the way down, down to the hidden wholeness.

Many years ago, the noted psychologist, Erik Erikson and his associates (Erikson, Erikson and Kivnick, 1986) wrote about the primary developmental task of our senior years being the forgiveness of our own

parents—and then perhaps the forgiveness of ourselves. As Palmer suggests, it is in the acknowledgement of our own failings and our union with all flawed human beings that we find a deeper insight about our self and the life we have lived. This might be a form of secular, psychological Grace that we can bestow on ourselves (and the other significant people in our lives – past and present).

### **Strengths, Weaknesses and Harmfulness**

In turning to the insights that we might each gain from acknowledging the harm we have done in leading a life of action, we often find that our lofty angels and our fallen angels often look alike. Ironically, in some cases, the harm or at least disappointment that can be assigned to me comes from one of my strengths. I can be quite persuasive and inspire trust. My age and physical appearance would suggest that I am a kind and compassionate person – perhaps a modern day “Santa Claus.” But this is not me and the person who eventually comes to the surface is more selfish and practical than initially imagined. Psychodynamic theorists write about the “ego ideal” that can easily be created when meeting someone whom we wish to be trustworthy and competent. Certainly, when choosing a graduate school in which to earn a doctorate, it is critical that one believe the president of this school to be honorable and trustworthy. I am not sure that anyone can live up to the expectations arising from the impression that some people have of me (or other academic leaders in a similar role).

The ego ideal is formed by projecting one’s own personal quality or one’s own hopes for personal qualities onto another person: “I fear that I am not perfect and perhaps even know that I am not perfect. This is very disconcerting, so I project these positive characteristics onto another person – so that at least one of us is perfect.” Often this projective process is first engaged with our own parents. We consider our father or mother to be perfect, until reality creeps in (or leaps in) and we see our parent as being a decent but inevitably flawed human being.

Harm is done when the ego ideal is shattered—and the real person is revealed. With the withdrawal of projected identification, the emperor is found to have no clothes (or at least to be clothed in ordinary clothes that are often a bit disheveled). With this withdrawal comes a sense of betrayal: why has this person been so dishonest, such an imposter. I placed my trust in them and they abused this trust. I believed them to be competent and find that they are no better than I am (and probably a whole lot worse).

Palmer (1990, p. 118) similarly noted, in identifying sources of temptation in life, that there is a tendency to project onto a leader: “a quality that they want to possess but are unable to find in

themselves, so they burden their hero with the impossible task of living out a part of their lives for them.” Palmer goes on to suggest that “one can resist the destructive projections that people often make, by being relentlessly honest about one’s own reality. . . . One can fend off the illusions of others by staying rooted in one’s own truth.” While I fully support Palmer’s solution to the problem of projection, I would suggest that this honesty and search for one’s own truth is never easy, for the temptation to accept, uncritically, the soul-stirring projections being placed on us is great. As Palmer (1990, pp. 128-129) himself notes: “our activism sometimes breeds the arrogant belief that nothing exists except as we make it, buy it, sell it, or get grant for it.” With this acceptance comes a sense of personal entitlement—even arrogance—that inevitably increases the level of harm we have done in our work.

### **Who is Harmed?**

As we explore the nature of harmfulness, it is important to ask a question that seems to have an easy answer: who is really harmed when a harmful act takes place? Of course, it is the person to whom the harm is directed! Yet, as Resmaa Menakem (2017), the author of *My Grandmother’s Hands*, has noted, the harm is often much more widespread. The harmer often feels the effect of the harm, themselves, and the trauma created by the harmful event can spread to other people associated with the harmful event. I know that I have often felt confused or even guilty about the negative impact I have had on other people. Like most other people, I tend to dwell on the negative feedback I have received, rather than the positive feedback. I am pulled in several directions and ambivalent about the decisions I must make. There often seems to be no way in which the decisions I must make and actions I must take don’t do some harm to someone and don’t have even broader implications for many other people.

It seems that I often must decide which people I must disappoint and which path I must take that tramples on (or at least impacts) the rights and privileges of someone. And when I choose the path to be taken, I can’t sweep away all of the problems I will be creating for those people I encounter on this path. I have the opportunity (and privilege) to be of help to many people who are enrolled in my graduate school and I know that they will be able to do an even better job of serving their therapy, coaching and consulting clients as a result of the training and education they receive. I am fortunate to be doing work that makes a positive difference in the world. I also am burdened by assuming responsibility for not doing the best possible job of leading this worthy institution. Harm has a way of spreading out to all involved in doing meaningful work.

## The Multiple Forms of Harm on the Leadership Spectrum

I wish to introduce the Leadership Spectrum at this point so that I might explore the different ways in which we, as leaders, engage in decision-making processes and take actions that inevitably lead to some form of harm. As I have already noted, I believe that harm often takes place when we deploy our leadership strengths too often or in an inappropriate manner.

### **Ruby Red**

The Ruby Red form of leadership is embedded in a perspective and value system that encourages achievement and accountability. It is a form leadership that is filled with energy and action. It is a leadership of fire and resolve, of courage and valor. While this mode of leadership can produce remarkable results that lead to successful operations, it can also produce great harm. People working with the Ruby Red leader can be trampled while a leader and their dedicated followers charge down the chosen path. The Ruby Red leader can be a bully, who countenances no disagreement or disloyalty. Wounding is inevitable in an organizational culture that is saturated with Ruby Red. The very act of employment is wounding and those who remained employed in this toxic environment are often trapped in a world that places job security and income above self-dignity and a sense of work-related justice.

To add a related perspective to this analysis of Ruby Red, we can turn to the widely acknowledged description of the life led by our ancestors on the savanna of Africa. In what in many ways is only a few years ago (in evolutionary terms), we survived in an environment that was highly anxiety producing. We were among the slowest and weakest animals on the Savannah and only survived because of our capacity to form supportive, protective communities (aided in large part by our capacity to readily communicate with one another). We know that highly anxious settings are highly destructive for human being regarding both physical and mental health—especially when this anxiety is sustained and when little action is being taken. The anxiety produces neurochemicals and (in particular) hormones that are coursing through the body and preparing human beings for battle. Fortunately, human beings living on the Savannah had a good way to diffuse this anxiety—they could fight and do battle against a menacing foe. This probably didn't mean struggling with attacking lions (only Tarzan could do this in 20<sup>th</sup> Century movies). It did mean struggling with lesser animals and, most importantly, struggling with other families or tribes.

The Ruby Red style of leadership is a throw back essentially to the battleground of the Savannah. Like our ancestors, we can address our anxiety by doing battle. Furthermore, as Robert Sapolski (2004) has so dramatically noted, we don't need to be threatened by real lions or an actually attacking tribe from next door – we can readily imagine the lion and the attacking tribe. We prepare to do battle with the anxiety-producing lion or tribe by engaging in Ruby Red leadership. We mobilize for the battle and demand loyalty of those joining us in the battle. Much harm can be done in not only creating anxiety associated with an imagined foe, but also in the decisions made and actions taken to engage in the warfare. Casualties mount – and often for no good reason. Bottom line economic measurements take the place of the defeat of an enemy. We earn profit share rather than acquire land or slaves from the defeated foe. *Fight creates harm.*

## **Azure Blue**

There is a different kind of harm that comes with an Azure Blue form of leadership. It often comes as a surprise to learn that this benevolent and inspiring form of leadership can be harmful. This, after all, is leadership filled with vision. Azure Blue leaders are looking up at the sky and pointing to the heavenly state that can be achieved if everyone will gather in their loving hands. How could any harm come from such a person? There are certainly many benefits to be derived from this form of leadership (just as there are with Ruby Red leadership). Those who follow the Azura Blue leader can find purpose and direction in their work; they can find support and encouragement, as well as receive healing attention from other members of the Azure Blue culture when they are wounded.

However, there are actually quite a few ways in which one can be harmed under this form of leadership. First, there is the matter of appeasement. Azure Blue leaders often seek out the approval (even love) of those who they consider their current (or even potential) followers: you tell me which path to take. As a result, the Azure Blue leader is often changing their mind and promoting the pathway promoted from the latest person to enter their office. We don't want to stir things up and certainly don't want to make anyone displeased. The result is not displeasure, but rather disappointment. The Azure Blue leader is no longer trusted. There is nothing but fluff and P.R. in what the leader is now promoting.

Even when the Azure Blue leader remains consistent in the vision they are promoting, this vision is often unrealistic. Rather than linking the current reality (the ground on which the organization is sitting) with the desired state (the sky above the organization), the Azure Blue leader is inclined to point only at the sky and ignore the ground. Here is the path for us to take – don't pay attention to all of the thorns on

this path. Or don't worry that this path doesn't seem to lead anywhere—just notice how beautiful the path is itself.

The harm being done might not be as noticeable as that done on the battlefield of Ruby Red leadership, but it is just as damaging at a psychological level. Hopes are being dashed and leaders of all kinds can no longer be trusted. There is a pervasive sense of alienation, with work no longer being engaged for a real purpose. While those following the Ruby Red leader might continue to be employed out of a sense of loyalty or a sense of security and livelihood, those who are following the Azure Blue leader remain committed to their organization because of the inspiring vision of this leader. When this vision is discredited, then the followers have no reason to remain actively engaged in the organization. They either leave the organization or (more often) remain at the organization, but without any remaining passion, energy or sense of empowerment. There is the wounding of dreams.

We can return to the African Savannah in seeking to better understand and appreciate the nature of Azure Blue leadership. Anxiety can be alleviated not only by fight, but also by flight. The neurochemicals and hormones that prepare us for fight also prepare us for flight. We can run away from the attacking lion or threatening tribe. A nearby tree might help us escape from the lion, and a bit of appeasement might help to reduce the damage done by a strong human adversary. We give our enemy something and hope that they will leave us alone. Unfortunately, these strategies of flight and appeasement don't seem to work very well in our contemporary world. We don't have any trees to climb when an imaginary lion or enemy attacks, and we know that initial appeasement usually requires additional appeasement. And our individual and collective soul is torn apart when we have run away or sacrifice our integrity to avoid being hurt or overrun. We are psychologically harmed when seeking to avoid physical harm. *Flight creates harm.*

## **Golden Yellow**

From one perspective, it would seem that the Jains are most closely aligned with the Golden Yellow perspective on leadership. Both the Jains and Golden Yellow leaders are inclined to step back and not engage actively in the world of organizational decisions-making and action. There is a tendency on the part of both to observe from a distance and sound alarms regarding the inhumanity being perpetrated in the communities in which they live (though might not engage). The alignment stops here, however, for the Golden Yellows do eventually have to enter the complex and often unpredictable world of the organization – especially if they serve in a leadership role. The Golden Yellow leader might try to sweep the pathway in front of them – but it usually is not a very successful strategy: there are too many critters (mostly people) on the path, and too much

movement of these critters to be successful in sweeping them aside or avoiding them. Life for the Golden Yellows must be lived with inevitable impact on other people – both helpful and harmful.

While Golden Yellow leaders can be of great value to any organization with which they are affiliated—providing a dose of reality, a moment of reflection on underlying assumptions, and a glimmer of rationality, they can also bring their organization to a grinding halt. The organization might spend too much time collecting information regarding each of the possible pathways they might take. As a result, no pathway is ever taken and members of the organization watch as opportunities pass by and pathways are never explored (beyond being outlined in one of a dozen position papers). Procedural manuals are brought out and revised while the real operations of the organization are creating chaos. Extensive strategic planning is being done, while short term actions and a bit of risk-taking is needed (a Ruby Red orientation). This inaction and the resulting Analysis Paralysis lead to disappointment, impatience and the harm associated with a loss of opportunity, loss of potential income, or even the loss of a current or potential job.

Harm is engaged at yet another level when Golden Yellow leadership is dominant. With all of the rationality in place, there seems to be little room for empathy or care (Azure Blue). Not only are people in the organization wounded by the organization's inactions—they also find nowhere in the organization to gain a sense of empathy and care. Golden Yellow leadership can lead to a wounding of opportunity.

We can return one last time to the Savannah of Africa, to gain a fuller understanding of the potential for harm when Golden Yellow perspectives and practices prevails in an organization. It is not only fight and flight that are engaged when those living on the Savannah encountered a threatening lion or rival tribe. There was a third choice – and it was probably the one most often chosen (because human beings are weak and slow). This choice was Freeze. Like the small mammals of the Savannah, human beings probably often just stood in place or hid behind a tree, hoping they would either not be discovered or would be uninteresting as a source of food for the lion or being a worthy adversary as the opponent of a challenging tribe.

The Freeze strategy certainly makes sense when the alternative is to lose the fight or lose the race with a lion or powerful invading tribe. The problem is that Freeze plays havoc with our physical and mental health. While the rodents will tend to shake off their frozen state after a few seconds (there draining off the chemicals that were preparing the animal for taking some action), human beings have not been known to do a similar dance after being Frozen. Especially in contemporary times, human beings tend not only to remain frozen for a long period of time (given that imaginary lions and invading tribes don't soon leave), they also do very little to drain off the arousing chemicals. Some of us are smart enough to go to the gym, close the door to our office and scream about the injustice done to us, or join a protest march. These actions are all quite healthy in terms of our physical and mental health. Unfortunately, a Golden Yellow environment is not conducive to this

release of tension. Rather, members of the organization stay frozen in Analysis Paralysis and great harm is done while they remain in this state. *Freeze creates harm.*

## **Conclusion: Spectrums and Pebbles**

I am indebted to Marilynne Robinson for bringing the issue of harmfulness to the fore through the ruminations of her protagonist, Jack Boughton. I have found that my own reflections on this matter has yielded insights for me and has enabled me to reflect in new ways on the Leadership spectrum. I believe there are several important takeaways from this essay..

### **Harm and the Spectrum**

First, I would suggest that there is no way in complexity, unpredictability, turbulence and contradictory nature of our contemporary world to live without creating some harm. It would be very hard to live as the Jains do, and the alternative of living in a state of inaction is itself a form of doing passive harm in a world that requires remedial action.

Second, we often can reduce the level of harm that we do by exploring the leadership spectrum and the colors of leadership in order to our own preferences and habits of leadership. In engaging in a self-dialogue regarding the spectrum, we can come to insightful recognition of ways in which our own strengths as a leader can become harmful weaknesses. This potential of harm related to our own leadership preferences is especially great under the pressure of projective identification and the presence of a distorted ego ideal being assigned to us by those people who look to us for leadership.

We must be committed to seeing and telling the truth about ourselves, regardless of what other people see, think and say about us – especially if what is to be conveyed is uncritically positive. Without this self-honesty, we are not only likely to harm other people—we will inevitably do harm to ourselves. It is in our failures and our unintended harm to other people that we are likely to gain the greatest (though perhaps painful) insights about ourselves. And in the midst of this honesty and truth, we might find Grace and forgiveness.

### **Pebbles and Impact**

I wish to conclude by offering an expanded version of a commonly shared metaphor regarding the dropping of a pebble into either a bowl of water or into a pond or lake. The first (and most painful) version is that when the pebble is dropped into the bowl of water, ripples are created. A change seems to have taken place. Action has led to results. Yet, the water soon returns to its original form and there no longer are any ripples. *The water has lost all memory of the dropped pebble and the ripples.* Seeking to take action and make a difference in the world, we must acknowledge that the impact we have made is an illusion. As beings who are cursed with the capacity of transcendence (ability to see into the future and into space), we are never able, ultimately, to take credit for any lasting change—be it positive or negative. From this perspective, harm is always transient and of little importance in a university of eternity.

There is a second version of the pebble dropping in the water. The bowl has now been expanded to become a lake (usually with a sandy shoreline). The pebble is dropped in the water. There are ripples in the water that soon dissipate, apparently leaving nothing behind. Yet, if we wander along the edge of the lake we find that the ripples have left an imprint in the sand or even more subtly has made a minor erosion of the rocks located in and beside the lake. There has been an impact, be it ever so small and perhaps ever so remote. We have made a difference – and have only to search for and be patient in discovering the difference we have made. As part of a community and as one element in a complex system, we can't help but influence everything around us—unless somehow we manage never to drop a pebble in the water (as perhaps the Janes have sought to do).

But what about harm. Do our actions (our dropped pebbles) cause harm or are they helpful and healing. In part this depends on how we interpret the impact that has been made. Do we want the sand to remain pristine and do we worry about the rock being eroded? Over the short run, the indentations and erosions might be fine, but the sand might eventually be lost (especially with much more extreme generation of ripples and waves with the introduction of motorboats to the lake). The rocks are needed to ensure the structural integrity of the lake and play a role in sustaining the lake's biology.

There is also the matter of what happens to the ripples as they cross the lake. They are rarely allowed to proceed without disruption. There are other ripples being produced by other pebbles being dropped by other people at the edge of the lake. Winds are blowing across the lake, currents are generated by the water entering and leaving the lake. A lovely loon might be crossing the lake or a fish splashes the surface of the lake or generates movement of the water far below its surface. All of these other factors influence the nature and impact of the ripples we have produced. They also have something to say

about whether our ripples are doing harm. I would suggest that it is not so much a matter of recognizing that over the long term, the water (and our universe) has lost all memory of the ripple, but that our actions are rarely themselves solely determinative of their impact. As Tillich, Palmer, Erikson, Menakem, and Marilynne Robinson's Jack Boughton have all noted from their own distinctive perspectives, the impact of our actions are most likely to be internal. The harm, ultimately, is to ourselves in an immediate and transforming manner.

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