

On Leadership and Reflection

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14.09.2019

To begin at the beginning: interviews for Laidlaw scholar hopefuls. A Scottish day, overcast, wind-scrubbed, and unbeknownst to I, the first stage of personal development in a compelling and eye-opening lesson in leadership.

The three tasks: compromise in collaboration while planning escape from a sinking ship; precision under pressure, keeping a clear head for interview while assaulted by noise and time constraint; finally, clarity: accuracy in reflection on one's strengths, shortcomings and goals. The three combined: a veritable allegory for the trials and triumphs of leadership. A novel scenario, to whet the appetite for challenge.

What did I learn, from this fast-paced introduction to leadership development? Too many lessons to list. But to mark just a few: the importance of time before the race, the meeting, the collaboration begins, to assess one's company and begin to formulate a strategy for bringing the best out of each member. The importance of silence; of giving time for views to evolve before discussion can dissuade a tentative suggestion. The value of planning, for time may move swifter than one expects. Importantly, the effectiveness of a plunge into the deep end by all involved, so that adversity may reveal the unique strengths of all rowers of our little lifeboat of collaboration and bind us together with the potency of shared experience.

Our leadership weekend in the imposing Gothic halls of Hospitalfield House further confirmed that the most stable common ground for strengthening group cohesion is a situation novel to all parties. In one fell swoop a level footing is found, and shared experiences secured. This realisation revealed the greater purpose of the raft-building, mud crawls and vertigo-inducing obstacle courses of previous leadership camps and provided impetus to organise a meeting with a visiting scholar, from which I gained new insights into a starkly contrasting university life abroad. This continued a development begun on arrival in St Andrews two years prior: my transition from a self-reliant, driven student, at times isolated by my independence, to an active networker confident in my capacity to create connections and forge alliances.

Debates with fellow scholars also proved conducive to learning. Split into groups and tasked with delineating the characteristics of a good leader, our cohort shuffled out of the gallery and into the cold. Condensing into heat-seeking clusters in a Spartan shed, we laid out our views on the frozen air. Two parties were swiftly delineated, divided by their willingness or reluctance to distinguish between effective leadership and an agreeable moral standard. The former cited the subjectivity of morality and frequency of mutation of the cultural norm, to justify the necessity of isolating the merits of a leader from one's personal opinion of the decisions made under such leadership. Opponents, however, maintained that the definition of a 'good' leader must encompass both morality and method.

I could not agree with this second view. From a reductionist perspective, leaving two aspects of leadership intertwined has the potential to obscure causality: is it a specifically desirable morality, or the tools and tactics of an adept communicator, which give one person the ability to mobilise an entire population? As a student of science, I would fain isolate the variables.

Furthermore, when leadership abides in the house of democracy, a collection of decisions is not representative of the priorities of a single member's moral code. Indeed, any member may be called upon to uphold the execution of a motion, regardless of their stance as opponent or proponent, demonstrating that good leadership and morality are independent and can be evaluated in isolation. Is it not those politicians who remember their duty to their office in such a task, that become recipients of our admiration? And do we not cut with our disdain and disapproval those who abandon ship when a decision contradicts their preference? If we demand leadership irrespective of personal belief, to turn our eyes from a spectacle distasteful to our morality, discarding the opportunity to learn from observation of an inspirational orator, would find us guilty of hypocrisy.

The debate stays with me, for the rift in the assembly could not be bridged, the two sides remaining irreconciled. However, the discussion revealed an important lesson: philosophy can hinder learning. Namely, belief in the unassailable truth of personal morality, or simply adherence to the notion of some preordained moral code, can preclude development. This rigidity is dangerous: in an ever changing climate, adherence to preconceptions stunts progress. New knowledge, novel times, demand flexibility of mind: one must adapt, or decline. Thus, I was reminded of the necessity of addressing not only action and reaction, but also philosophy and belief, in all times of leadership.

From the adventures of leadership weekend, to the unfamiliar territory of a five week research project: beginning with the daunting task of finding my 'laboratory' behind a shock of warning signs and blinking hazard notices. But as I soon learned, over a chuckled conversation regarding the disposal of flammable waste, there was no need to harbour anxiety. A little common sense and planning does the trick, the intimidating abruptness of the safety wall-art bearing little similarity to the general gaiety of a collection of scientists investigating their world. As Goodall maintains, the best work is carried out while having fun. This is one lesson which I shall carry forward to future collaborations: science is play for the inquisitive mind; gravity and duty wear down resolve, but curiosity and light-heartedness safeguard commitment through times of success and of struggle.

At the beginning of my time as a Laidlaw scholar, I hoped to develop strategies for balancing contribution in a group situation. What I did not expect to find, but did so gladly during the leadership weekend, was that an environment conducive to learning those strategies was not collaboration with peers reluctant to engage, but a group so evenly matched in leadership capability that an imbalance of input became impossible. In a historic house full of students pigeon-holed as future leaders, all primed to develop their leadership skills, each discussion became a delicate balancing of contribution and co-operation, dominance and deference, in an attempt to adapt to the presence of multiple strong personalities in the absence of the usual naturally emerging hierarchy of speakers. This was a valuable exercise in cultivating group cohesion, and a reminder that the role of a leader is to inhabit two forms: companion, and guide; as thoroughly integrated with one's fellows as a single fish in a shoal, but ready, at the first inkling of need, to lead and direct. I later observed the balancing of these roles by my research supervisor, Dr Janet Lovett, whose seemingly effortless switching between patient listener and astute lecturer provided students with time for both learning and testing of knowledge. The same dynamic appeared again at the annual conference of the Centre of Magnetic Resonance, speakers oscillating between guiding their audience through a technical topic and debating points of contention as peers.

An essential element of the success of this strategy is one of the most difficult to achieve: trust. Trust in the abilities of collaborators, and in one's own ability to avert shortfalls if that first trust

is dismayed. Once found, trust enables a leader to distribute responsibility without anxiety, creating opportunity for equal contribution.

Trust is a wonderful gift to bestow, at once freeing and frightening to receive. Trust gives the freedom to exercise independence, test ideas and find solutions, alongside the responsibility to plan, calculate and communicate, so that one's benefactor is not inconvenienced by any unexpected complication. Throughout my research, I was benefited by the trust of Dr Lovett: permitted to fix equipment, finalise designs and carry out minor experiments at my own discretion, self-reliance and resourcefulness became indispensable companions. Standing alone in a laboratory with a collection of valves, tubes and sensors with which no one else in the building is familiar, is a world away from the demonstrator-populated, carefully directed Thursday afternoon laboratory of second-year Physics. Yet this was the precise situation that I had hoped for when submitting my application months prior: unfamiliarity and pressure (in this case, literally), to accelerate my journey to confidence and independence in a research setting.

Happily, the experience fulfilled those expectations precisely. In five weeks of high pressure, steel and fast-changing designs, I discovered that a great many of the challenges of personal leadership arise in the difficulty of hurling convictions over that thorny hedge named inertia, to spike a reluctant collection of motor neurons. The transition from the safe, padded space of ideas, plans and predicted outcomes, to the unapologetic solidity of the external world, is jarring. Outside of the mind, things break, agendas conflict, thoughts are concealed. However, the task of the leader is to find solutions, and the surest progress comes from decisive action: it is far more effective to maintain pace than to invest effort in accelerating from repeated standstills. These first five weeks provided every opportunity to practice surmounting nervous anticipation and doubt. In research, I find I must throw my ideas through each door and trust that my legs will catch up: in a project where the solving of one conundrum immediately reveals several more, the faster one walks through doors, the more problems there is time to solve. There will always be more questions to ask, more help to enlist. The best one can do is to step forward without delay, trusting to experience and adaptability to surmount all things unexpected.

This improvement in proactivity and decisiveness has prompted me to re-evaluate my direction in the year ahead. Attending a meeting to discuss impending development of the rural region I call home, airing ideas and hearing confirmation of the novelty and relevance of these suggestions, I came to comprehend the foolishness of assuming that a thought must have emerged in another mind first. The peril, in the supposition that authority and omniscience equate. Who am I, to indulge in the myopic faith that there will always be another to convey the perspective that I hold? Nobody, no-one and nothing of the future will remember with fondness acquiescence to indolence in those who are capable of change. I am resolved, then, to hold myself to higher standards in the year ahead: to break the glass case demarcating the possibilities for an undergraduate student, which I did not at first realise I had constructed.

After mulling over sketches in the dusty silence of the St James library, washed in sunlight, or tentatively tapping steel connections in the sterile cleanroom cold, the long Northern dusk let musings uncoil. These hours of solitary reflection cocooned the transition from a child, racing blindly through the fields catching up daisies, to the mantis: armoured, watchful, eyes wide as the changing skies. For opportunities like transient flowers will open in the garden of life, cloying, tantalising. All may nourish, all provide; but some will trap this journeying moth, which, dusted with the hopes of the tenacious tree, will relinquish the freedom of the skies for the stars' full turn, until, the night's wonders spent, it is released, ignorant of the breadth of wonder that the dark hours kept. This is the danger of enduring curiosity: that an adventure

down the tunnel of a narrow discipline may obscure the majesty, the mastery, and the epic breadth of the wide wilderness of intellectual pursuit. Discernment must creep upwards as surely as the grass; selectivity must thrive on the swift spawning of opportunity, if personal development is to be sustained. Above all, the heart must safeguard its vision, distracted not by the notions of the present: for they fall as inexorably as the rain. Thus, is new growth borne into the light.

With this in mind, what will the next twelvemonth bring? Increased respect for my ideas, demonstrated through proactivity and determination in defending and achieving my goals. As I have learned, a leap into action is the finest response to imagination. What care I, if a long and winding road brings a dead end? I will simply step from the path and strike into the wilderness in search of the forest.