

2020 Leadership Development Essay

Aimee Bebbington

Cherry blossoms still in leaf, and liquid amber turning gold; susurrations of the insects, from cricket, bee and wandering wasp, with his long and dangling legs. The grass, still crisp underfoot, hears the sighing of the stream: in drying pools, clay beads to its run, mottled eels dig deep. On the roads, an eerie quiet: no rattle of engines, no exhale of rubber tyres. Just the two-voiced call of tui, and the pent breath of a drought.

Three days into lockdown, and the land could be as I left it in January, with just a few beads more moisture wicked up into the atmosphere. Squeezed down the black tube of international flight, it seemed one moment I was in the highlands, and the next, teleported to a land of dappled sunlight under a sky rippling with the milky way. 'The past becomes dreamy because its symbols have all vanished,' writes George Eliot of Silas Marner, weaver of Raveloe, and so it was with my return to the Southern hemisphere. The same might be said of my time as a Laidlaw scholar: memories of a rain-lashed London, the polished doors of Bentham's cupboard, the turrets of Hospitalfield and long hours dissecting papers by firelight obscure, like ripples in a pond, the second-year of eighteen months ago, who spent four hours telephoning home, struggling to commit a personal statement to paper.

At the time, my impressions of leadership were sculpted from a combination of observation, experience and that vast repository of role models, fictional literature. For inspiration I looked, in times of anxiety, to Rowling, for courage, to Tolkien. Analogy became indispensable: every challenge smacked of Marsden's imagined war¹, and every trek became an epic journey. Incorporal role models, combining as they do so many learnings of past struggles, such a vibrancy of allegory, are arguably some of the best. Yet the way in which I had assimilated the lessons of those ink-bound leaders, in mental vistas and unspoken, unwritten impressions, meant that, in summarizing for a personal statement my understanding of, and aspirations to, leadership, I encountered some difficulty.

Is this not often the case? It is frequent that, when prompted to analyse the qualities of a leader, a familiar face will rise from memory like a leaf to the surface of a river, to embody those qualities. But separating these characteristics from the bearer, be they a mother, strong and sheltering as an ancient oak; a politician, visionary and informed; or the explorer, relentless as the northern gale, is challenging. It is a challenge akin to the extraction, from diverse phenomena of nature, of physical law, or from the complexity of language in all its contexts, an underlying grammar. Yet this extraction, the Laidlaw scholar is encouraged to perform. The elements of leadership are identified, dissected, laid out side by side and examined. Never has this examination appeared to me more critical than at the present time, in the eye of a pandemic which weighs in the balance both global solidarity, and individual responsibility.

Before the tumultuous events of this year, I could distil those leadership qualities I most keenly appreciated down to two: understanding, and decisiveness. Understanding in a leader, I believe, embodies knowledge of the factual, the emotional and the instinctual types. By factual, I mean the acquisition of information pertaining to a situation, enabling a preliminary assessment of possible outcomes. The emotional side of knowledge addresses the human element of any scenario: the questions of whose abilities will be called upon, who will be affected by the outcome of a decision, and how their prior experiences will shape their emotional and physical responses. The remaining element, instinct, concerns those feelings, intuitions and rapid responses which are influenced by experience. The flip side of the coin, decisiveness, is the interaction of this understanding with the physical world: that which governs the translation of understanding into action. To illustrate: a mountain guide, perceiving the approach of a storm, might reflect on weather forecasts and observe the patterns of cloud, light and wind in the gathering of factual knowledge; may consider the abilities,

energy and morale of his or her team in pursuit of emotional knowledge; subconsciously contrast the current experience to those of previous adventures, prompting an impression of calm or of alarm; and ultimately make a call, to continue or arrest the ascent. This model of leadership fitted well with my experiences at the time, and I remain in agreement with its elements. There are, however, certain aspects of leadership, and of those who lead, which hold now, as a result of the past year, a greater prominence in my mental construct of what it means to be a leader.

The first of these is investment, emotional and physical. With global leaders under intense scrutiny for decisions which have so great a bearing on our health and our liberty, both in the present and in days to come, I would conjecture that a great many individuals are considering with great care, perhaps greater than in years past, their choice of leader in the years to come. Besides ensuring that my own priorities and values are to some degree consistent with those of an aspiring leader, and beyond initial impressions of competency, what I look for is an emotional and physical investment on the part of that leader. In other words, the knowledge that their own fortunes are intrinsically linked to the future of the establishment that they endeavour to lead. Why is it, that I have faith in New Zealand's Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern? Because she, with a young daughter to raise in the country her actions will shape, has clearly a strong reason to ensure, as far as her actions allow, the health, safety, and prosperity of its people. Those leaders who do not have the ability to step back to a safe distance when plans go awry, I believe, are those who will evidence the greatest determination in their office of leadership.

This principle can be applied to leadership of the self. By exploring and identifying those aims with which we resonate, it becomes easier to separate instances where leadership is sought for its own sake, from those where a genuine drive towards a vision brings about leadership as its natural consequence. Call it leadership with integrity. To perceive one's values and motivations with such clarity requires reflection and introspection and is something which I continue to strive towards.

This brings me to my next point. Clarity. In time of fair weather, I believe that it is easy to mistake eloquence for competence. Fine words which trip off the tongue can dazzle the senses and leave a pleasing impression. But raise the stakes to a crisis, and the importance of clean, effective communication becomes immediately apparent. No frills, no floundering: only a straightforward plan and mutual understanding of the need and the goal. Let us take New Zealand's Covid-19 response as a case in point. A rapid response, daily communication, a simple four-level system consistently maintained and delivered with understanding and compassion. Many in the UK will agree, I am sure, that clarity is as useful as it is appreciated.

Clarity begins with the understanding of a situation and culminates in the communication of an action as the front-end of a black box of planning and analysis. Firmness in this communication is essential, but equally so is, I have come to appreciate, a sympathy with humanity and with emotion. All too often I am guilty of permitting logic to, more than complement, obscure the importance of feeling. Perhaps this is the fallout of studying the physical sciences, the 'seeking after a law which we may obey'.² Perhaps, the philosophers might argue, this is the stamp of the enlightenment and the disenchantment it can father forth. In either case or another, I believe that there is a risk of becoming embedded in process and lost in a scaffolding of convention. It is all too easy to lose sight of the wildness of the human spirit when under the sanitizing influence of schedule and hierarchy. But the fact, the glorious fact remains that, the human being loves and is loved; feels the clarion shock of awe, the cold slap of fear, all the fire of imperilled love and the dizzying ascents of joy. These are the things which move us, which bring forth the greatest of acts. Their influence stays with us, and I believe that to presume to lead from a throne of reason, without consideration for the passions and inspirations which are the sources of extraordinary feats of creativity, would be to discard the very source of motivation; the most fertile of soils that we can ill afford to lose.

One of the more productive soils from which leadership grows is need. How often do we hear of the quiet leader who, when necessity beckons and his skills are of use, rises to the occasion? I am convinced that leadership grows organically. In the rich loam of experience its form is shaped, then fired by necessity. Structured activities can till the ground from which it grows: familiarity breeds confidence, and confidence engenders action; yet contrived scenarios of leadership instruction are not an end in themselves. Of this I would caution new scholars: use the Laidlaw experience as a reminder to be cognizant of your leadership style, and mindful of opportunities; but remember that leadership is marshalled by circumstance. Listen well and take heed of the experiences of others. Who knows when a humorous anecdote might provoke a most useful thought? Strive for a clarity of observation, to recognize need; and for the confidence to act on that need, to such a degree that the action eventually becomes intuitive.

Those are, then, three of the lessons in leadership I have learned. Firstly, investment can be a cause for trust, in the intentions of others and in your own motivations and determination. Secondly, that clarity is an attribute of great assistance, well worth pursuing. Tied to clarity, the importance of sensitivity to emotion. Finally, the role of necessity in driving leadership development. I am sure that my opinions will continue to change as rapidly as they have done during my time as a Laidlaw scholar. For now, I hope that this brief essay may provide a little food for thought, or something to reflect on once again in a year's time.

Leaden sky bedridden on stubbled field and furrow, tarnished gold in the deepening gloam. By the slow chilling river, the wind flaps loose. A pheasant, resplendent in panic, chokes on his laughter and departs. Elm and beech writhe over the paths, over the wall, over the wind-tossed grain.

In the drystone shadows, a scuffling, a searching: a rabbit, tawny, blind. Swollen mounds like weeping sponges burst from its orbits. If myxomatosis does not, Reynard³ will take him. For now, he is calm: pattering in the whipped-up dust, burrowing in among the royal purple blooms. So calm, in the darkness of disease.

A discarded mask, dusted and drab, flops against a thistle like a landed fish. Beech trees loom and chatter in the gale. But behind all this, somewhere in the woods, a sparrow builds her nest. Above the treetops, a golden sun shines and lights a leaping doe. Six swans whisper and, sweeping about, go dreaming away into the curling clouds.

With my time as a Laidlaw scholar drawing to a close, a number of thanks are in order. To Lord Laidlaw, for his vision and ongoing support of a programme to accelerate the growth of young leaders; Dr Ian Smith, who accompanied the cohort through a rainy London with a smile; Cat Wilson, Hayley Mathews and the rest of the team at CEED, who prepared so many successful events; Alex Stanley, who generously shared humour, anecdotes and advice, and held our cohort to account; Dr Janet Lovett, who expertly guided the first half of my research, and kindly permitted my many changes of direction during the second; and finally to the scholars of St Andrews' 2018/19/20 cohorts: this leadership journey would not have been half so enjoyable without you.

1 A reference to John Marsden's *Tomorrow* series.

2 Henry David Thoreau, *Walking*.

3 The fox of Aesop's *Fables*