



Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme
Record of Reflection

Looking for Leadership in an Age of Biological Annihilation

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Mid-July and the humid days distort deceptively longer. Thirty minutes before my interview starts, I crawl mournfully from the warmth of the blankets into the dispassionate plastic arms of my desk chair. The pillow makes meaningful eye contact. Zoom is asking me to log in again, for the second time in as many days; I am trying to remember my password, for the second time in as many days. It's an organised business that I keep here.

On a week during which Toronto will be declared the most polluted city in the world, I prepare to interview a student about their experience transforming planetary health education into action. I imagine, outside, clouds on top of clouds, crawling away from the piercing eye of a red sun, and I do not open the curtains.

It's an interesting thing to be, an ostensible environmental leader. What does leadership— meaningful, compassionate, engaged leadership— look like, in the midst of the sixth extinction crisis? When 99% of the human population live in air conditions beyond the World Health Organisation's safety limits? When so many of the world's leaders dedicate themselves not even to the devastation but to the complete disregard of the environment, what can leadership possibly be worth?

Growing up, this was the image of leadership: straight white teeth glaring out from a smile, bright eyes, all the dimensions of the face stretched wide like a wound. Inevitably alone, paired only with the favoured font (serif, to communicate dignity; bold sans-serif to remind us all of their Innovative, Creative Spirit!), in the appropriate colours. A quick Google search, “leader”, delivers the following images. There are several that show a team working together. Others, however, show—and I draw your attention to the second image in the top left as the most heavy-handed example—a man, backlit, his subordinates gazing reverently up at him. Raskolnikov might be forgiven for feeling somewhat vindicated.



Please, free me.

The image persists at the University of Toronto, even if not purposefully. It is the stories of individual students or faculty that form the basis of the Instagram posts, the LinkedIn everything, even the reflection that I write now. It's very valuable for network development and personal growth, to be sure, and yet as a result the image and language of leadership seeping through our society is one that neatly sidesteps the point: the community on the ground. It's one that promotes the leader over the community that made their work meaningful in the first place. Here are some of the stories I heard this summer: learners reminding their family to save water, changing what they shop for to reduce waste, attending protests to protect their local ecosystems. Learners co-creating local farms and teaching their patients how the environment affects their health. Their anonymous voices from my computer, describing their work as part of a community, transcribed and saved into NVivo, were always in the back of my mind. I read them over and over again. I remember being in the back of an Uber home from organizing a clean up,

laptop open to my transcripts, sunlight at the edges of afternoon and beginning the transformation into orange evening. The hope I felt as across the world, a learner in Kenya described their own clean ups. I remember reviewing the codes at two in the morning, unidentifiable insects outside the window the only sound in the world, and a desk lamp the only light. The determination of the students I interviewed, lodging within me. When I doubted my work, when I doubted my capacity, when I doubted all my reasons for doing this, it was the will of those I interviewed that kept me going. Would you call this leadership? Perhaps not traditionally so, and yet.

To study environmental biology is many wonderful things: to step outside, and think, *this air that touches my lungs has touched a thousand lungs before. This air that gives me life has and will give life to a thousand beings.* To smell the summer lilacs and know that, under the earth, untold numbers of microbes are keeping it alive, sequestering nutrients for it. To see the rapid vibration of a honeybee, and know that this is a dance to tell the other bees where to discover food. To look at the world and feel wonder, and to feel that it is dying.

Here is the point that I am trying to make: this Earth is, in the simplest of terms, on fire.

Throughout this summer, I found a version of leadership that meant something to me not through polished soundbites, but through the conversation that happens between people who care very deeply about a cause. The conversation did not occur for the virtual, anonymous masses, but with others with whom I am in community, and they were what fuelled the research and volunteering that I did this summer.

In the end, my only explanation of leadership is that it will make the future more bearable, and that the only way to do this is through the unrelenting work of making someone's life a little better. Then leadership is picking up a cigarette butt, in the desperate belief that for

one moment, and one being, this will mean something, and that moment will be worth it. Then leadership requires community. It deliberately and entirely eschews isolation. I, as an individual, am entirely beside the point.

This understated, ephemeral action is the root site of leadership. The world will bury it and the earth overturn it, over and over. It is the only thing that will ever matter.