Leading Beautifully: How Mastery, Coherence and Purpose contribute to Inspirational Leadership Performance

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the territory of leading as an enacted activity through the lens of the aesthetic category of ‘the beautiful’. Its starting point is that although much of the literature about effective leadership practice focuses on leadership behaviours, little is written about the way in which those behaviours are actually enacted. It argues that the ‘how’ of leadership enactment is a powerful determinant of the subsequent effectiveness of that action, particularly in terms of inspiring followers to engage with projects with commitment and enthusiasm. The musician, Bobby MCFerrin serves as a case study for identifying three key aspects of leading beautifully: mastery, congruence between form and purpose, and leadership purposes themselves. These are further considered through reference to idealised notions of beauty as theorised within Classical aesthetics.
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Much of the leadership canon attends to behavioural aspects of leading: the leader creates and imparts a ‘vision’ (Bryman 1992, Drath 2001) he or she motivates and directs followers (Hersey and Blanchard 1977, Bennis 1985), according to Bass (1985) he or she enables followers to achieve higher aims through transformational practices. Rather less appears about how the way in which leaders actually enact these behaviours—the embodied WAY in which they attempt to motivate, direct, or transform. In fact, as highlighted by Sinclair (2005) to a large extent ‘leaders’ are theorised as disembodied beings. She argues: ‘leadership has been constructed as an activity of brains without bodies’ (388). Yet, much of the how associated with the way in which leadership is accomplished is through the embodied enactment of the leadership role.

This paper explores the territory of leading as an enacted activity through the lens of aesthetic perception. A key assumption underpinning its argument is that the quality of a leader’s performance has an aesthetic dimension, as well as the more commonly recognised operational, symbolic, political, or even moral ones. Followers will perceive the elegance, awkwardness, comedy, or beauty of a leader’s performance even as they judge its relevance and effectiveness. I argue here that the aesthetic dimension of a leader’s bearing can impact greatly on whether or not followers are enthused to engage in a leader’s project with
enthusiasm and commitment. In other words, the aesthetic dimension, I believe, serves as the ground for inspirational leadership.

This paper focuses on the aesthetic quality of ‘the beautiful’. Hillman (1998) argues that ‘beauty’ is one of the most repressed and taboo concepts in our secularised and materialistic times. Certainly, within the domain of organisation studies, beauty is not a construct commonly associated with leading or leadership. Yet, quoting from Plato, Hillman argues that beauty ‘reminds us of our wings, it inspires us, lifting the mind to permanent values and eternal truths.’ (261) This aspiration does not seem that estranged from the aims of leaders today, and aligns itself with concepts such as ‘authentic leadership’ () as well as Bass’s ever popular transformational leadership. But I will argue here that although similar to these notions, ‘leading beautifully’ distinguishes itself in key ways from them as well.

The paper explores what ‘the beautiful’ might mean in terms of the enactment of leadership both experientially and theoretically. It begins with a descriptive account of a leadership performance perceived as ‘beautiful’. This account is then analysed, and linked to idealised notions of ‘the beautiful’ originating in Classical Western philosophy. The paper concludes by considering why leaders might aspire to lead beautifully, along with consideration of those aspects of leading to which they might particularly attend in order to do so. Let me start with a story.
I had the pleasure of attending Prom 32 this year at the Royal Albert Hall in London, which featured the *a capella* vocalist, Bobby McFerrin, performing in collaboration with a jazz band and the African Children’s Choir. I’d attended his concert at the Proms in 2003, when he’d conducted the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, as well as singing the second cello part of a Vivaldi double concerto. He’d struck me then as being a particularly engaging performer. I’d been especially taken by how he managed to get the staid members of the Vienna Phil to SING their parts of the William Tell Overture—it was a moment of sheer delight when they put their instruments on their laps and began singing their parts—these aged Viennese men oom-pahing their way through the final chorus. I remember leaving the hall wondering how McFerrin had achieved the level of rapport with the symphony to enable them to let their inhibitions relax in this way. He’d also included the audience in the performance, evoking from the
Promenaders the melody line of Salve Regina, while he sang the organ part below. Another quite magical experience. How had he engaged us so completely? It wasn’t through his use of words, in fact, I don’t think he uttered one during the entire afternoon. It was through his use of his body, and his energy, completely unaggressive, inviting, playful, and totally accepting.

The performance this year was just as delightful. This time, he shared the stage with a jazz band, as well as the African Children’s Choir. Again, he engaged the audience, getting us to imitate his vocal tones, encouraging us to explore the way we could make music with our own bodies. And I began to wonder about the nature of his leadership style. Because there was a certain kind of leadership process going on in the Hall. Before I knew it, we the audience were no longer just onlookers, we were actively engaged in the performance. I became increasingly curious about how he was achieving this, amidst the largely white, middle-aged, middle-class crowd.

Of course, we were a willing group. We’d all chosen to attend that particular performance, probably because of our expectation of the man and his style of performance. It was a Sunday afternoon, there was a relatively large proportion of children in the audience. But still. To have the entire Royal Albert Hall responding to every flicker of your hand, and to have achieved this so unobtrusively, was no mean feat.

I thought if I were to describe what he did, and HOW he did it, one of the descriptors I would use would be ‘beautiful’. He led us beautifully. There was MORE than ‘effectiveness’ going on. There was a quality of engagement which I
experienced as ‘nourishing’. McFerrin is charismatic, certainly—but his is a soft kind of charisma. He never seemed to have to dominate, or ‘take control of’ the other musicians with whom he worked. When he was not performing directly, he often stood at the back of the stage, nodding along to the beat, connecting with the music, rather than in any way having to orchestrate it.

During the encore he insisted on not taking centre stage himself, but instead, the jazz musicians and he joined the African Children’s Choir in their rendition of the African Anthem. McFerrin stood in the back row, singing along to the words as he could grasp them under the direction of the young African woman who conducted the choir. He could lead the audience in an impromptu rendering of the Salve Regina, and he could retreat back into a supporting role, and the movement between the two was enacted with a quiet grace.

I liked his leadership style. I experienced it as inclusive, accepting, and creating of a safe environment. It was gentle. It happened in the moment. During one of his vocal improvisations, when he was singing nonsense syllables, a baby in the audience began crying. I wondered whether he would respond in any way, and in a moment he did, working into his improvisation—‘the baby’s crying’, and then he incorporated into his song, ‘it will be all right, it will be all right’. The audience responded with warm laughter. I found the way he responded to whatever appeared in the present moment, magical. He seemed to work with the present in such a way that I experienced now as rich ground, pregnant with potential for something new and creative to happen. I reflected that so much of leadership literature attends to the leader’s ability to say where
his or her organisation should go---to articulate a vision—towards some utopian future. What McFerrin did was bring our attention to the possibilities and potentialities of THIS moment, right here and right now.

How did he do it?

Firstly, to me McFerrin comes across as completely authentic. He gave me the impression of being very congruent, in both the way he presented himself in terms of what he wore (a Black t-shirt and jeans, his hair arranged in long dread-locks) as well as in the way he uses his body. He moves in a quiet, graceful manner, and his body language is unhurried and relaxed. He expresses no anxiety or concern, and he is quick to smile. He and his fellow jazz musicians clasped hands, readily patted one another on the back--when the children came on stage McFerrin easily loped his arm round whoever was nearest, in a completely unforced and natural manner.

Secondly, he is a consummately skilled musician. He has obviously practiced and practiced and practiced to the extent that he moves in the realm of mastery—he can alter what he does in the moment to respond to the moment. He completely understands his medium.

He also has consummate communication skills. So much of what is written about leadership and communication focuses on the verbal. McFerrin never spoke to us. He communicated through gestures, vocal inflections, the way he used his body. His body language was inclusive, there was an openness and a lack of guardedness in the way he loped around the stage. Finally, he exuded
playfulness and delight throughout the afternoon. It was a pleasure to be in his presence.

Bobby McFerrin embodied a leadership in a way which I experienced as very different from that more commonly theorised within the leadership canon. Foremost, it was not heroic. Although the afternoon had a transformational quality to it—this transformation was not evoked through any articulation vision or through ‘aligning our values’, well, not explicitly, anyway. Perhaps one could say he embodied ‘quiet’ leadership in (Mintzberg 1999) terms. But this theory doesn’t really speak to the quality of what he did. No, for me, what he did was lead us beautifully. The remainder of this paper considers three different areas:

1. How the notion of leading beautifully might link to other theoretical ideas about the enactment of leadership;
2. Aspects of leading beautifully and how these aspects link to broader ideas of 'the beautiful';
3. A brief consideration of the effect of leading beauty—why might it be something to which leaders might aspire?

**Leading Beautifully: Tangential Theories**

My initial foray into the literature reveals a dearth of connections between ideas of the beautiful and leadership. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is that focusing on 'beauty' brings attention to the body—and within the leadership canon, bodies are largely absent. However as well as noting the absence of theorisation about the leader as an embodied being, she also points out that:
Leadership is a bodily practice, a physical performance in addition to a triumph of mental or motivational mastery...leadership works at a visceral and sensual level, activating appetites and desires (387) The accomplishment of leadership is often highly dramatic and full-bodied; there is intimacy, titillation, sometimes mystique (388).

Part of what ‘activates appetites and desires’, I am arguing here, is the aesthetic dimension of a leader’s performance. Leading can evoke a range of different aesthetic experiences, from comic to grotesque, to, in the case that I am focusing on, an experience of the beautiful.

Of course notions of the beautiful are deeply ingrained in our cultural, historic and societal locations—over time, ‘the beautiful’ in terms of bodies in particular has been determined by the fluctuations of taste and fashion. In my study of the beautiful and how it might apply to leadership, I’m attempting to delve below historically constrained constructions, perhaps to reach towards an ‘ideal’ of beauty, as offered in the writings of Classical philosophers. And here again, I’m not interested in the beauty of the body of the leader, but more about how he or she uses his or her body in such a way that is experienced as beautiful. In fact, what I’m talking about goes beyond how we experience a leader as an isolated body, to taking into account how the leader interacts with others, the qualities of their interpersonal interactions and connections, which can be experienced as beautiful.

So here I’m not interested in exploring the line of argument assumed by my stepson when I told him I was writing about ‘leading beautifully’—he asked--
‘What do you mean by beauty and leaders—do you mean it’s easier to follow someone you fancy?’ Well—it may or may not be—but that is not the point of my exploration—here, I’m interested to know more about how might a leader who aspires to ‘leading beautifully’ achieve that, and what effect can leading beautifully have on followers?

Before turning to those questions however, I’d like to consider those areas of the leadership literature which touch on aspects of the physical nature of leading, without directly addressing the notion of beauty. These include:

- Leading as a performing art
- Charismatic leadership
- Authentic leadership
- Impression management

Grint (2000) suggests that Leadership should be considered more of an art form than a science, and highlights four particular art forms which leadership emulates, the philosophical arts, the fine arts, the martial arts, and finally, the performing arts. The performing arts take into account the way things are said, including aspects such as body language, the use of rhetoric, and the use of symbols to convey meanings. It is the performing arts which ‘move the hearts and minds of followers’ (p). Leading beautifully, I will argue later, is one of the key ways in which a leader might indeed capture the hearts and minds of followers. However, I would suggest that the performing art to which Grint refers could evoke a wide variety of aesthetic experiences, besides that of the beautiful. Incorporates attention to those aspects of performance. For instance, Bob
Geldorf’s leadership of Live Aid and the more recent Live 8 Extravaganza was effective from the point of view of the performing arts, but I would not consider his style of leadership ‘beautiful’. For me, Geldorf epitomizes a sort of melancholic Irish bard, an aesthetic more akin to the tragic, rather than the beautiful.

Likewise, I would argue that there are differences between the experience of charismatic leadership and beautiful leadership. Undoubtedly, leading beautifully can be experienced as charismatic. However, for me the two enactments do also have different qualities. Elsewhere (Ladkin 2006 in press), I’ve written about possible linkages between the charismatic and the ‘sublime’ aesthetic experience. One of the points made in that writing is that in both Weber’s theorization of charisma, and Kant’s theorization of the sublime, there is a recognition of a ‘negative pleasure’ associated with each experience. The sublime cannot be wholeheartedly embraced, without a concurrent experience of discomfort, and likewise, Weber suggests that in the engagement with a charismatic leader, the follower experiences a loss of self, a kind of obliterating of one’s individual identity, which is not an altogether pleasant experience.

The experience of the beautiful, I would suggest, contrasts markedly with this experience in that it can be wholeheartedly enjoyed, there is not discomfiture or unease. As Plotinus (1984) suggests, the experience of the beautiful is pleasurable because of the kinship between the beautiful and our soul—that is, the highest aspect of our nature:

It must be therefore that, since the soul’s nature is what it is, and ranks among the highest essences in the order of things, when she sees
something akin to herself or even a vestige of kinship she rejoices and flutters her wings, and receives it within her, and remembers her true self and that which is hers' (5)

In contrast to that rendering, charisma can operate in such a way that the follower loses his or her own sense of identity through identification with the leader. Instead of being a soul-affirming experience, engagement with extreme versions of charisma can veer into being a soul-destroying, as witnessed by the ‘shadow side’ of charismatic power (Kets de Vries 1989)

The charismatic has been linked to a third area of literature which intersects with the notion of leading beautifully, ‘impression management’. In their paper Bass and Avolio (1998) set forth an argument in which they outline the components of impression management and show evidence which indicates that certain behaviours which charismatic leaders engage in can be seen to increase the chances that followers will attribute charisma to them.

A key example of how effective leaders manage their images can be seen in Richard Branson, who talks quite openly in his recent autobiography (Branson 2005) about the role impression management played in his success, particularly as he began establishing the Virgin brand. For instance, he reveals that in the early days, he would arrange for a telephone operator to ring potential advertisers, having claimed he’d lost his money. When he was being transferred, the operator would say, ‘We have Mr Branson for you,’ sounding like his PA or secretary, thereby giving the impression of operating from a much larger firm. Similarly, when he was on the telephone with potential clients, he would arrange
for a friend to call out to him from the other side of the office, ‘I have Ted Heath on the phone wanting to talk with you,’ thus giving the impression that he interacted with people that well located within the government.

Although such behaviours give a certain, favourable impression, they are not what I would consider ‘beautiful’ leadership. In fact, there is quite a debate in the literature about the extent to which impression management always involves, at some level, a degree of manipulation and deceit, (REF) whereas others, such as Goffman (1959) who first theorized impression management, suggest that we are always to some extent making choices about what we reveal about ourselves, and therefore are always engaged in impression management at some level. But not all of one’s performance can be managed, as Goffman notes, there are two kinds of sign activity involved in impression management, the expression which the actor ‘gives’ in order to create the desired impression, and the expression the actor ‘gives off’, which are always less subject to the actor’s control. It may not therefore be surprising that audiences assign more weight to the latter rather than the former.

This leads to consideration of the fourth tangential area to be explored, that of ‘authentic’ leadership. In the wake of corporate misbehaviours as witnessed by Enron, Shell, Worldcom, there has been a burgeoning literature, mostly in the US, in the field of ‘authentic’ leadership. In the words of two of its key proponents, Bass and Avolio (1994), ‘authentic leadership aims to integrate the personal values of the leader into actions which are congruent with them’. Much of the literature about authentic leadership seems to assume that if people
are acting from their value base their actions will be ethical and full good intent. In this way, authentic leadership could look like beautiful leadership. Certainly, for me one of the aspects I found so captivating about Bobby McFerrin’s leadership style was the way it came across as very authentic and deeply connected with a core aspect of the man himself. However, again, although authentic leadership and beautiful leadership may share certain aspects, for me, an authentic leader might not execute his or her role in a ‘beautiful’ manner. Mo Mowlem, for instance, could perhaps have been said to have been an authentic leader, however the aesthetic which her style evoked was not necessarily ‘beautiful’, for instance.

So far, the paper has addressed the theories which leading beautifully might intersect or resemble, now it addresses the question of what IS leading beautifully?

**The Beautiful—Key Theoretical Questions**

What IS ‘the beautiful’ in terms of an embodied practice? In attempting to answer this question from a theoretical viewpoint, I have turned to the philosophical literature concerning aesthetics. One of the difficulties in referring to philosophical discourse is that much of the writing about the beautiful is associated with art—as is much of the writing about aesthetic experience over all. Aesthetics within the field of organizational studies is a relatively new departure (Linstead and Hopfl, Strati, Taylor) and although a number of writers are focusing on aesthetics within organizational life, there is little if any writing devoted specifically to leading beautifully.
As a pathfinder in this area, what I’ve done in the following section is to reflect on my experience of McFerrin’s leading, and link those observations with ‘idealised’ views of beauty, originating in the first instance in those philosophers of antiquity, Plato and Plotinus. Their project was certainly different from my own. However, to the extent that these philosophers were aiming to define the beautiful from an idealized perspective, their ideas might bring insight from across the centuries into the perennial issues of what constitutes the perception and experience of the beautiful.

Mastery

The first constituent I’d like to consider is ‘mastery’. McFerrin came across as being superbly masterful in working with his medium, music. He demonstrated the kind of expertise which can only be achieved through years of dedicated practice and study. He also demonstrated a mastery over himself, he was focused, present and attentive. This kind of self-mastery can be seen as important in the writings of Plato, in his notion, in particular, of the ‘philosopher king’ (a notion which others have explored for its insight into the phenomenon of leadership, see Grint 1997, Takala 1985). In order to justify his mastery over others, the philosopher king had to demonstrate mastery over himself. This was developed through a lengthy process involving years of apprenticeship and study.

In his Dialogue ‘The Statesman’, Plato elaborates on a particular aspect of mastery, that of ‘measure’ which is a principle attribute of art.
'When a maker commands his art he can judge the excellence of his product according to his insight into proportion and measure. Fundamentally then, the artist must, if he is to work well, know the nature of Measure. For to know the proper length of a speech, the proper proportion of a painting, the proper distribution of functions in a society, the proper organization of a poem, is to command the art of measurement.' (285)

Hofstadter and Kuhn (1964: 4) suggest that for Plato, ‘measure’ embraces the principles of the good and the beautiful and knowing the measure of something is essential to producing it beautifully. For me, this could be seen as a key feature of mastery, of knowing what, in a particular circumstance, is the ‘right’ amount of interaction, the length of the speech, the loudness of the crescendo. Because such discernment makes the difference between an action or intonation fitting, adding to the overall shape and form, or, acting in a way which is distracting, and detracting from the overall form. This leads into another key area which many philosophers have touched on in terms of the beautiful, and that is the idea of form.

Form

In early writings of ‘the beautiful’, a key preoccupation was in defining the beautiful as an objective, ideal form. In the Philebus, Plato asserts that the form or essence of beauty is knowable, exact, rational and measurable, and goes on to suggest that simple geometrical shapes, simple colours and musical notes all
have ‘intrinsic beauty’ which arouses a pure, ‘unmixed’ pleasure in the perceiver and is unaffected by context’ (Audi 1999: 76).

Adhering to a certain form is a key quality of the beautiful for Plotinus, who writes that ‘the beautiful’ is created through the harmonious proportion of parts to each other and the whole thing must have pleasing colouring (Plotinus 1984: 4)—and that we can tell the difference between the beautiful and the ugly by reference to the way each relates to form: ‘the ugly is that which is not dominated by its form and reason, when its matter will not allow it to be completely moulded to its form. (Plotinus: 5).

In considering how form plays itself out in the possibility of the beautiful performance, I’d like to suggest two areas which speak to the relationship between ‘beauty’ and ‘form’. The first is ‘congruence’, in particular, the congruence between purpose and form. My hypothesis is ‘leading’ has a higher chance of being perceived as beautiful if there is coherence between the purpose of the leadership intervention, and the form it takes. So, for instance, I recently attended a meeting which was initially described as a forum for discussion, but when I arrived, the meeting was being held in a tiered lecture theatre and the meeting’s convenor proceeded to take us through power point slides which he’d prepared, with all of the solutions he was suggesting, laid out. The purported purpose of the meeting: to stimulate open discussion, did not cohere with the form, either in the way we were geometrically arranged, or in the tone of speech used by the meeting’s leader, especially as objections began to arise from the floor. In fact, the whole event turned rather ugly, rather than beautiful!
Secondly, form and its relation to beauty is connected to the sense of authenticity displayed by the leader. Although again, there is overlap between the idea of the authentic leader as offered in the literature previously mentioned and the idea of authenticity I am working with here, there are also differences. There is a passage in Plato’s Phaedres dialogue which points to this distinction:

‘There is something in imitative art that is different from, and not reducible to ‘techne’. The poet is inspired, a winged, holy thing, filled with power of the divine, hence mad in a noble way…it is this possession which enables him to achieve the authentically artistic that is more than techne. Conscious, rational intellect cannot reduce this to a rule, nor can the man who commands techne raise himself to the genuinely poetic without Divine assistance’ (Hofstadler and Kuhn 4).

There’s a link I want to make here, between a notion of authenticity deriving from adherence to one’s character—and the idea of authenticity as coming about through the marriage of techne and Divine inspiration. ‘Techne’ comes from the Greek word meaning to bring into form. It could in fact be related to a kind of mastery. But mastery on its own is not enough to create the authentically artistic performance—it also requires this ‘breathing in’ of the Divine. Is it too large a leap to make that in our terms, we might think of that aspect of divinity as the spark of our own unique character? And that the congruence between our expertise, and our own uniqueness, our own unique way of expressing ourselves and our expertise—is what could ultimately lead to the ‘beauty’ of the enactment of leadership?
There is a third aspect, I’d like to suggest, which also contributes to the sense of authenticity ‘given off’ (in Hoffman’s terms) by the leader, and that is ‘purpose’.

**Purpose**

Unquestionably, for the philosophers of antiquity, the Beautiful as a concept is interwoven with the concept of ‘the Good’, as well as with ideas of the soul. It is through the notion of the Soul that the moral dimension of Beauty reveals itself.

For Plotinus, for example, we respond to Beauty external to ourselves because of our soul. The soul responds to the beautiful because it perceives something that has kinship with it. In his Ennead I.6, Plotinus writes:

> What the beautiful in bodies is: It is something which in its first appeal affects the senses, which the soul apprehends understandingly and embraces with recognition, being in some way assimilated to it (4)

Kant also recognized the role of the soul in discerning the beautiful:

> ‘It is in our experience of beauty that the congruence of nature and the moral will is realized for us, to such an extent that it becomes a meaningful postulate of reason to assert that man as a moral being inhabits a universe compatible with his spiritual longings. (Critique of Aesthetic Judgment 339, cited in Hofstadter and Kuhns).

What I am taking from these writers is that the beautiful is essentially connected with the moral. In order to be beautiful, an action must have a purpose which is aligned with the best intentions and ideals of humankind. This
is for me, why, although Hitler may have been a master of himself and his context, and certainly produced a system in which form and purpose were exactly aligned, his purpose negates any possibility that he could be considered a Beautiful leader.

Before ending there, however, I’d like to briefly explore how the role of the perceiver in the aesthetic encounter as theorized particularly by Kant, may have an important contribution to make to the way in which philosophical notions of aesthetics could bring insight into the possibility of leading beautifully.

The Role of the Perceiver

Kant’s Critique of Aesthetic Judgment is key in that it sets out a philosophy of art in the modern sense. Kant’s Critique is unique in terms of aesthetic analysis of the beautiful, in that rather than focusing on what it is in an object which makes it beautiful, he sets out to establish the kind of judgement required to ascertain whether or not something is beautiful. In this way, the object of Kant’s Analytic of the Beautiful is ‘to formulate the conception of a pure judgement of taste’. (Meredith 1911, d2).

It is not my intention to discuss Kant’s theory here, however, the point I want to draw from it is that for Kant, this judgement of taste was critical in the assessment of beauty. If I map this idea on to the possibility of ‘leading beautifully’, a similar responsibility falls onto the ‘follower’ within the leadership dynamic. For Kant, that which is beautiful is that which is universally ascribed to be beautiful. What relevance does the idea have to this inquiry? First of all, the
beautiful, although it exists in the form and structure of the thing, must be appreciated by the perceiver. The most elegant leadership performance in the world will not have the desired affect if followers are more concerned with their well-being, their physical comfort, or if the leader does not have the attention of the follower in the first place. I am sure there are many people who attended the Bobby McFerrin concert who would not have the same view that I had about the beauty of the man’s leadership style. However, the many smiles I met on leaving the Hall, and the general sense of pleasure and good will exuded by many concertgoers seemed to be indicative of a similar response to the concert. From the way in which people talked with one another and shared smiles and laughter, I was left with the impression that we had all been affected by our encounter with McFerrin and the other musicians on stage that afternoon. Which leads me to reflect on the ‘What for?’ question—‘Why might leading beautifully be of value to organizational leaders?’

Why Lead Beautifully?

Aspiring leaders are not short of a theory or two telling them how they might enhance their leadership style. But although they are exhorted in contemporary times to be ‘transformational’, ‘quiet’, ‘servant-like’ or even, still, ‘charismatic’—these are still largely behaviourally based theories which suggest that if a leader performs enough acts which are aligned with one of these frameworks, they will BE transformational, quiet, etc.

Leading beautifully, I am suggesting, is not about what a person DOES as a leader—but it is about the way they ARE as a leader. Leading beautifully
speaks to a quality of being—one honed through the development of self-
mastery, and quickened through the alignment of one’s unique character with the
purpose of one’s acts. And, leading beautifully—whether you do so or not, is
solely determined by your followers. You can’t say whether or not you are, it is
only they who can tell you if you lead in this way, and the effect it has on them.

Why aspire to leading beautifully? Because to do so is inspirational. To do
so nourishes the souls of followers in a way that charisma does not. Because
contributing to the overall quantity of grace, elegance and beauty in the world is a
valuable aspiration. Because beauty is inextricably linked with ideas of ‘the good’
and as such brings a worth and value of its own wherever it is created and
experienced. As those holding positional, coercive, and reward power within
organizations, it could be argued that leaders are also often best placed to set
the aesthetic tone of their organizations. To that extent, creating a climate
wherein beauty can flourish, along with the good, could be seen as a moral
imperative of leading within organizations.

Closing thoughts and Future Directions

We speak of a leader’s vision, their ability to motivate and influence—but
there is rather less written about the embodied way in which leaders accomplish
the communication of that vision or the role their bodies play in inspiring others.
Personally, I find beauty, wherever I perceive it, inspirational. It is perhaps
dangerous in our secularized times to speak of the soul, but if pushed to
explicate what part of me felt nourished by the concert in the Albert Hall, I’d have
to say it was the part of me I’d identify as my soul.
Whether it is acceptable or not to talk about, certain leaders do stir something beyond our imagination or our intellect. I propose that one way they do this is through beauty—the beauty of their self-presentation, the beauty of their gestures and inflections, the beauty of the presence to the precise here and now moment, the beauty of their authentic expression of themselves. Not every leader may aspire to enact their role beautifully, and it may not be appropriate in every circumstance (what style of being is?). But for leaders who would aspire to such an aesthetic, I’m interested to explore the things they could be encouraged to attend to. I’m suggesting here that three things might contribute to the enactment of beautiful leadership:

- **Mastery:** both a mastery in understanding one’s context and domain and mastery of the self. This would also include attention to the here and now and the possibilities inherent within any given moment;

- **Coherence:** expressing the authentic self through forms which are congruent and wholistic, and which take into account one’s emotional, spiritual and embodied realities, attending not only to what one says but the way one says it;

- **Purpose:** attention to the ethical implications of actions and their consequences, aligning oneself with goals which are worthy of the best of the human spirit and capabilities.

Finally, considering the possibility of leading beautifully firmly puts followers within the leadership dynamic. Without followers who are attentive to
the aesthetic dimension of their organizational realities, the beautiful is not experienced. This perhaps adds an additional challenge to the leader who aspires to this way of being—that is, how to wake up followers to their aesthetic sensibility, how to make organizations places which are conducive to the spirit being awakened, rather than an-aesthetised. In fact, for the aspiring 'beautiful leader', this might be the most practical place to start.

However, here it may be best to heed the advice of James Hillman, who suggests in his article, 'The Practice of the Beautiful' (1998) that lifting our cultural repression of beauty cannot be done directly—to do so ‘relies on the power of the rational will—which in itself is the instrument of repression. Instead, we must move indirectly--The road to beauty means for the ego to enter conditions like those of beauty’ (270). Hillman suggests two key conditions which enable this indirect evocation of beauty. The first is pleasure. Hillman refers to Santayana’s account, who writes: ‘Beauty is pleasure objectified…We do not see beauty as such, we perceive pleasingness, delight, sensual joy.’

The second, is stopping. Beauty arrests motion. The quick intake of breath upon seeing a flash of vivid red amongst trees—links our physical experience of the aesthetic to the root of the word itself—the Greek Aisthesis, which in turn goes back to the Homeric aiou and aisthou, which means ‘I perceive’ as well as ‘I gasp, struggle for breath’ (Hillman 271). Hillman poses the question—‘does this not mean, that if beauty is to appear, we must be stopped still; the eye’s roving perceptions, the body’s habitual forward thrust, the mind’s ceaseless associations arrested?’ (271) A challenge, indeed for many hard-
pressed and time-poor leaders. And yet—is there something too, about the ability of beauty to slow time, to change its very structure?

I’d like to end now with seven suggestions Hillman makes for ways to approach the practice of the beautiful from an indirect way of being. Many of these fly in the face of the way in which contemporary leaders and managers working in organizations experience their reality. However, I offer them here as possibilities for a different kind of engagement, one that might nourish followers and leaders alike as they undertake their organizational roles. They are:

- Abandon irony
- Be courageous—have the courage to fear
- Turn toward, rather than away from, the ugly
- Risk gorgeous or exquisite intensity, risk excess
- Do not neglect of forget the gods
- Anchor the mind in non-human values
- Allow the heart to be open.
References


