

Seeking Wisdom through Love: A Leadership Philosophy

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When asked during the first class in my Gonzaga journey to share my philosophy of leadership, I considered who I had been as a teacher and a school executive director, as well as my experience as a restaurant manager through the pandemic. I had been away from the classroom (virtual or otherwise) for more than 20 years, and I was struggling to see myself through an academic lens, after all the majority of my days were spent selling wine, making food and pouring coffee, not demonstrating meaningful leadership – or so I believed at the time. The values I identified were those of *courage*, *empathy*, and *integrity*. Through the lens of Goleman and Boyatzis' model of emotional intelligence I linked all three values together, explaining that true self-awareness and vulnerability takes great courage, empathy is required to be aware of, and have the desire to, address the issues and needs of an organization and society as whole, and managing oneself and one's relationships with others in accordance with one's values is at the heart of integrity (as cited in Northouse, 2021, p. 39). As I approach the end of my time in the ORGL program, while I still believe those values are necessary for any leader to be truly effective, I have been able to dig deeper into what I believe to be my true center – that place where my desires, skills, and the needs of the world meet. I have also come to understand that my leadership choices as a restaurant manager are as valuable to my communities as those I made as a teacher or administrator. Horsman (2018) states that servant-leadership encompasses both *being* and *doing* (p. 10). When I examine what is meaningful in my life – the core of my relationships, the values that guide my decisions and actions as a leader and a human – they are that I am a *seeker*, I am a *caretaker*, and I am a *storyteller*.

I am a Seeker

During my ORGL journey, a word which has strongly resonated with me is *seeker*. Greenleaf (2002) explains that it is seekers who make prophets through finding and responding to their voices. He makes the point that while we see through the schema of past wisdom (because we are products of our own history and experience), we can choose to meld the advice of old and new prophets and apply what we learn to real life situations. He further expresses his belief that is one is a servant, either leader or follower, then one is always searching (pp. 22-23), and that it is searching which provides the necessary environmental conditions for the emergence and growth of what makes us unique and significant (Greenleaf, 1998, p. 69). Thompson (2000) puts forth that before we can reshape our organizations, we must first reshape ourselves though seeking inner transformation and value alignment (p. 9).

As I progressed through the ORGL program, I realized how strongly the pandemic effected my leadership path, and I began to weave that experience into my narrative. Every day during the pandemic felt like a battle of my values and duties – the need to serve my community by remaining in business, my

duty to my coworkers to keep them employed, my need to keep my mother and husband safe, my duty to society to do everything possible to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. I felt like no matter what I did I was failing – failing as a leader, as a worker, as a spouse, as a daughter...as a good person. Palmer (2017) defines a divided life as one in which our inner and outer works are not in harmony. He points out that when the demands of the institutions we inhabit are at odds with our hearts, it can become pathological, and can only be overcome through finding a new center for our lives (pp. 173-174). The *seeking of knowledge and growth* became my new center. As a servant-leader-in-training, I am seeking a deeper level of self-awareness and spiritual growth, seeking an expanded and integrated worldview, and seeking to keep my spirit lamp, my *entheos*, lit, to ensure I remain open to growth, knowledge and understanding (Greenleaf, 1998, p. 72). I was, and am, also seeking to ensure that I serve my communities effectively and seeking self-healing, in the way Greenleaf (2002) presents it, being made whole through the healing of society (pp. 234-235).

As a leader, I have the responsibility to seek knowledge and understanding so that I may best work with my communities to co-create a better future. As a servant-leader-in-training, that process includes inviting alternative ideas and perspectives, as the greater the diversity within a human system, the greater its capacity for healing, creative learning, and resiliency (Horsman, 2018, p. 85). Leaders must seek to understand and to adapt to the needs of those who follow them (Wheatley, 2006, p. 24); to listen to their needs and speak in their value language, while modeling and articulating the values and vision of their organization (Horsman, 2018, p. 74). Sinek (2021, October 21) explains that true listening, which is a vital aspect of seeking, is not the act of hearing the words spoken, but the art of understanding the meaning behind the words, and further, is about creating an environment in which the other person feels heard and seen (0:00-0:40).

If you watched the Marvel series *Ms. Marvel* you heard the phrase, “*what you seek is seeking you.*” Attributed to 13th century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Rumi, the line is from an older translation of one of his most famous poems. Rumi’s poetry focuses on the human desire for the ideal as well as how to seek knowledge and live life through love. One understanding of the line is that one cannot escape one’s destiny. After reading Block’s (2009) philosophy of inversion (pp. 67-70), I interpret this line as meaning that just as we create our future, our future is creating us. Chittister (2010) says the quality of our future depends entirely on what we bring to it ourselves, and that to create a future that is no longer fragmented, we need real community (pp. x - xiii).

I am a Caretaker

Empathy is one of the core pillars of Servant Leadership, and to me, empathy in action is caretaking. I believe that true caretaking, motivated by love, takes vulnerability and courage. Chittister (2010) believes that those who are truly creating and safeguarding our future are those who bring an open heart to a closed and clawing world, who live well with those around them, and who take responsibility for their communities (pp. 12-15). My mom used to tell me that we are all born with wings, and that a parent's job is to help you learn to fly. Sinek (2014) points out that there is very little difference between a leader and a parent in that good ones of either act with love, and are responsible for the care of other humans (2:00 – 6:50). Sinek further explains that the only characteristic necessary for both good leadership and good parenting, regardless of style, is courage (2014, 8:35 – 10:00). Brown (2010) reminds us that the root of the word courage is “*cor*,” the Latin word for heart, and its original meaning was to speak your mind with your whole heart (11:00-11:15). I aspire, as a leader, to work towards being whole-hearted and, through authentic connection with others, to support them in doing the same.

Palmer (2015) states that human beings are the greatest thing in any organization (0:53 – 1:17). He goes on to say that, for many, work has become the equivalent of a battlefield where their identity and integrity are treated with violence in order for an organization to reach a goal (1:28 – 1:50). Arendt (as cited in Palmer, 2017) says that the root of evil in our society is our failure to find *the other* worthy of respect (p. 114), something I experienced first-hand during my more than nine years as a restaurant manager and twelve years as a teacher. From the parent who screamed at me in my office that I ruined her daughter's life because I held her accountable for following school policy or the district administrator who patted my cheek to show me praise, to the customers who spit at us and wore cameras around their necks to show how oppressed they were due to our mask policy, service workers do battle every day. As a leader, through deliberate caretaking and modeling the way of respecting the other, we build relationships which is the first step in building and maintaining community. According to Palmer (1993), when we open up our hearts and minds to the world views of others, learning what their senses and logic tell them rather than remaining embedded in our own versions of reality, we can then work together to create a better world (p. 13). Wheatley (2006) sees relationships as the key determiner of everything from the largest of systems to the smallest quantum interactions (pp. 10-11). When we are open to the insights which come from those around us, we become more than we ever could on our own (Chittister, 2010, p. 27). Simultaneously, by taking part in these caring and respectful interactions we are having conversations we have never had before, allowing us to experience insights that lead us

to question our values, positions and very way of being in the world, and ultimately have the power to change the very future (Block, 2009, p. 15).

I am a Storyteller

I believe that everyone has a story. Everyone has experiences that make us who we are and effect how we perceive and make sense of the world around us (Carey, 1999, p. 39; Wheatley, 2006, p. 65). Adichie (2009) explains that the existence of or belief in a single correct story is dangerous in that it leads to stereotypes, emphasizes differences, and robs others of their dignity (13:02 – 14:00). Stories forge connections between the teller and listener, they can make us think, make us feel, and even elicit a physical and spiritual response (Silverman, 2003, pp. 1-2). According to Bruner (2004), one way to characterize a culture is by examining the narrative models it makes available (p. 694). Stories can be individual, communal, cultural, even universal – stories tell us what is possible, what we see, we can be.

My job as a leader is to work towards the creation of a space and a future in which we all feel safe and inspired to share our stories and truly listen and learn from one another, thus co-creating a better world. I am inspired by Block's (2009) sharing of Erhard's assertion that all transformation is linguistic, and that if we want a change in culture, we must have conversations we have not had before (p. 15). He builds on this by defining conversation as not only speaking and listening, but also "the architecture of our buildings and public spaces, the way we inhabit and arrange a room when we come together, and the space we give to the arts" (p. 32). When we do the minimum, when we take part only with our words, when we do not walk the talk, we are in compliance, and compliance kills – both us and the community whose one heart is fractured by those who hold theirs back (Chittister, 2010, p. 72).

A prominent narrative model in our world is the belief that different is lesser. An education system primarily based on the banking model has created generations of humans who do not question what they are taught (Freire, 2000, p. 72). I have spent countless hours studying education standards for middle school and high school, and I can tell you that with minimal exceptions, what students were required to learn about minorities and non-European countries certainly fit the "one-story" mold, presenting a narrative leading directly to decreased creativity and increased credulity, and serving the interests of the oppressors (Freire, 2000, p. 73).

In my original Leadership Philosophy, I shared the story of when, as a first-year principal in a brand-new school, I chose to stand beside my English teacher to defend the standards-and-researched-based syllabus of texts addressing teen issues including eating disorders, cutting, and LGBTQ experiences. The course was designed to engage students who were 2-3 years behind in their reading abilities. The eleven families who expressed the concerns which led to the meeting I called had all

previously home-schooled their children for religious reasons. They also represented about 15% of our enrollment that first year, and about a third of their students were enrolled in the course in question. Had they chosen to exercise their school choice option, that year would have been our last due to the challenging finances inherent in public school funding. My goal with the meeting was to create a holding environment during which the families and my teacher would feel heard and keeping the focus on our shared goal of student success (Northouse, 2021, p. 289). At the end of the meeting, I informed them that the syllabus would stand. I reminded them that they each had the right to choose the best educational environment for their child, as well as the right to appeal my decision to our board of directors. I thanked them for their trust in choosing our school, expressed that I expected there would be some bumps during their students' transition from home-school to public school, and assured them that my door would remain open. Of the fourteen students represented at the meeting, twelve stayed with us through graduation, and a number of those families became strong community advocates and student recruiters for our school.

While I originally shared this story to demonstrate my values of empathy, courage, and integrity, revisiting this story through the lens of what I have learned these past two years has allowed me to analyze it at a deeper level. Each of the eleven families had chosen to homeschool their students prior to enrolling them in our school. The stereotypical "one-story" of why this occurred is that they did not want their students exposed to alternative views and values, but had no choice once the science and/or math became more complex. In reality, every family who chooses to homeschool has their own reasons – religion is certainly a common one, but other families do so due to bullying issues, mental health issues, school quality concerns...the only truth is that for each of these eleven families, something had led them away from public school, and something was now leading them back. By taking the time to respectfully listen to them, offering them options, explaining our reasoning, and remaining true to the mission and vision of our school, we were able to move forward together.

Brown's (2010) research found that the critical factor which determines whether or not someone feels a sense of love and belonging is whether or not they believe they are worthy of love (7:40-8:00). I have come to accept that as Palmer (2017) says, wholeness is not perfection, but the act of becoming real through acknowledging the whole of who we are (p. 14). When we truly internalize this, when we accept that everyone's story, including our own, is valid, we will realize that listening to and truly understanding someone's story will provide us the strongest possible foundation for a relationship with them.

Leadership Growth Goals – A Journey of Meaningful Detours

I originally discovered my calling to education when, as a college junior, I found myself at a 24-hour Perkins explaining linguistics to a classmate. Through the act of explaining, I suddenly understood it better. I did not choose to teach for the love of a subject but because for me there is nothing better than helping people grow and experience “a-ha moments.” My journey to today has not been a straight line. Feiler (2020) shares that while society tells us our lives have an ideal shape and timeline, the reality is that there is no one right way, and that we must find the path that is authentic to us. After earning my first MA in 2001, I accepted a detour to become a college instructor rather than continuing on to my PhD. That detour led me to twelve years of teaching students from college level communication to sixth grade remedial math. My path led me to a divorce and then introduced me to the love of my life and deepest source of support: my husband Chris. Together we created a grades 6-12 school in 2008 which opened the door of college to highly at-risk students in Colorado – a school that is still going strong today. In 2012, I embraced another detour, moving Chris and I (along with our dog and three cats) to central Wisconsin to become a core caregiver to my aging and ailing parents. Being at my mom's side through the passing of my father and helping her discover the next phase of her life has been at once one of my most challenging and rewarding experiences. For nearly the past decade, I have managed a small, locally-and-female-owned café, wine bar & boutique. During this time not only have I been able to train and mentor more than 50 women and men in areas ranging from food service and effective communication to small business human resources and law, I have internalized the true value of customer service in a way many never have the opportunity to experience.

Ongoing examination and analysis of my leadership strengths and weaknesses as well as the alignment of my core values and actions is necessary in order to work towards becoming the leader I want to be. When I took the SLPI, I anticipated that I would score high in Encouraging the Heart and Modeling the Way, as I saw the behaviors in those areas to be aligned with my core values. Conversely, in part because field I am in (customer & food service), I did not anticipate high marks in either Inspiring a Shared Vision or Challenging the Process. In point of fact, the results were the exact opposite. I realized that while my teams (past and present) have seen me as a respectful and encouraging role model I need to do a better job with individuals who are not aligning with the standards and practices of the organization. I can think of two very clear examples of when this was the case, and when my failure to do so damaged the team. The first was with a student dean we hired at the school we started in 2008 who, due to differences in our age and experience, as well as some personality traits that became more apparent over the years, I was too intimidated to address effectively. The second was a long-term

employee at my current place of employment whom I was not given the authority to address effectively. After receiving the results of the SLPI I set a goal for myself to address misalignments with organizational values with greater immediacy, courage and transparency. I believe this goal and my experiences through the ORGL program directly led to my ability to work with our owner to create and implement a plan for the employee in question, which, while it eventually led to her termination, it also led to a vastly improved work culture.

In order to create communities that develop the sense of belonging and connection needed for us to discover our whole selves, and then use that knowledge to change our world, we must consider the weight of what we spend our lives doing and ensure that our actions align with our core values (Block, 2009, pp. xii – 1; Chittister, 2010, p. 9). With my ORGL graduation only weeks away, I have made the decision that it is time to return to the beginning, to return to education and have applied to Gonzaga's DPLS program with a goal of becoming a college professor. I believe this future will continue to nurture and challenge me as a seeker, a caretaker, and a storyteller, and I am excited to see where it leads and how my leadership philosophy continues to refine over time.

A Final Thought

We use the term *philosophy* to reference an explanation of our fundamental beliefs about ourselves and our world in relation to a subject – in this case, leadership. As a logophile, or word nerd, I prefer to contemplate philosophy at its base definition, a “love of wisdom.” Chittister offers up two ideas which permeate the Rule of Benedict to assist those who aspire to become true open-hearted leaders: that love is the motive, and wisdom is the goal (Chittister, 2010, p. 69). Just as the Velveteen Rabbit became real through the nursery magic created by the love of his boy (Williams, 1922, p. 62), what makes us really, deeply, and authentically human are the threadbare and beautiful spots in our hearts and souls that come from loving even when it is difficult. As a servant-leader in training, I aspire to be a leader who seeks the real in herself and others in order to better serve the needs of my followers and our communities.

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