

Beware of unicorns!

*ethical leadership
and the power of
imagination*

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ABSTRACT: Ethical leaders are those who search for unicorns in the vast, often cold and impersonal worlds of post-modernity. It requires an immense leap of faith — and no small amount of courage — to pass one’s own familiar boundaries into new and uncharted territory, and to navigate situations which hold unpredictable and possibly calamitous risks. Ethical leadership means being able to take on these dangers with a clear and unwavering ideal in mind — just as the unicorn has always been the emblem of purity, nobility and grace — and never to lose sight of it, no matter how traumatic or stressful the journey may be. And while the perils of such a role are great, the rewards are even greater.

Some years ago I was traveling on a country road in Richmond, Indiana where I noticed an unusual sign at the entrance of an old farm. It read: “Beware of unicorns!” At first, I was struck by the incongruence of this language against the backdrop of our post-modernist culture: a crazy time filled with displacement and ambiguity, mocked by the marred marvels of scientific technology and the ancient dilemmas of human existence.

“What in the world,” I asked myself, “is a unicorn doing out here?” This imaginary creature, with one spirally horn protruding from its head seemed out of place in the picturesque American gothic countryside. “Beware!” the sign read, signalling danger to anyone who dared trespass beyond the weathered white-picket fence. I remembered once when I was 11 years old, a friend and I climbed a huge fence with a sign that said “Beware” — and a vicious Great Dane greeted us. I shall never forget how quickly our young, agile bodies literally leaped backwards over the fence, out of harm’s way. “But this

is different,” I said to myself. “A unicorn doesn’t bite. Its huge horn is magical – it can either hurt or heal. The unicorn guards the secrets of the imagination; and the imagination both blesses and curses, it can bring freedom or bondage – it all depends on what we do with it. In fact, the sign, while signalling danger, is really an invitation to the freedom of the imagination.” The unicorn represents that ever-thin line between realities as they are given to us and the realities we dare to bring into being through the power of imagination.

We may never know whether there is a “real unicorn” behind the fences of an old Indiana farmhouse or in the enchanted environments of the soul unless we dare trespass into forbidden territory. Yes, trespassers beware of unicorns— mythical animals born of the creative imagination hiding in the protective venues of lonely Midwestern landscapes and in the deeper recesses of the human spirit.

“How shall I meet the unicorn?” I thought to myself. “How shall I meet my freedom?” These are also questions born of imaginative journeying and are at the heart of spirituality, ethics and leadership. Ethical leaders, therefore, are those who search for unicorns in the vast, often cold and impersonal worlds of post-modernity. Empowered by imagination, leaders become visionaries who are willing to enter the no-trespassing zones of systemworlds and to recognise the inherent potential for transformation within and around them. In fact, the practice of imagination is a summons to leaders who dare to go beyond white-picket fences into dangerous territory without a map. In remembering, retelling and reliving personal narratives, leaders are also empowered to think, feel and create new possibilities within organisations, teams, and other structured environments that call out for character, civility and courage.

IMAGINATION AND CHARACTER. Marianne Williamson’s edited volume *Imagine What America Could be in the 21st Century*, is a great example of what is at stake for leaders across various disciplines and domains who dare to use imagination as a tool for envisaging possibility. In one of the articles written by Peter Senge, he suggests that imagining new futures allows us to see

possibility beyond the fixed patterns of the Machine System, which has been the dominant paradigm since the Industrial Age. He suggests three ways of thinking about the future: (1) extrapolation – to conceive of the future as an extension of the past; (2) to imagine what might be, independent of what is, or as free of the influence of the present as one might become; and (3) to cultivate awareness and reflectiveness – to become open to what is arising in the world and in us, and continually ponder what matters most deeply to us. The

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third option, he thinks, is the way of the future and such a journey requires creative use of the imagination.¹ Awareness and effectiveness with heart and head are both integral to the practice of imagining. The cognitive faculty is not in alien territory in imaginative adventures, as is often thought; rather, it is a key asset. But the domination of calculative and technical reason without the affective, emotional centres out of which we also think, feel and work is equally important. The imagination calls both the heart and the head into action – it is also a summons to meet the unicorns within us.

One’s character, horizon of meaning, the way one understands his life and role in the larger whole, are related in large part to the ways in which one has been shaped by early childhood experiences, family, significant others, traditions, institutions and the society of which one is a part. Character, in this sense, is the narrative script that defines the individual; the stories that name the individual’s experience; the “inner experience” or core philosophies espoused by the individual². Alasdair MacIntyre describes character as “the unity of a narrative quest”³. Ethical leadership is related to traditions and how the stories of those traditions tend to shape leaders’ understanding of character, civic responsibility and the ways in which we live together. For it is in the interlocking stories of a

people that ethical leaders acquire their sense of values and an understanding of their place in the world. Interestingly, the etymology of “character” and “ethos” in the Greek are spelt alike, with one small inflection that determines their distinction. In fact, Aristotle noted the common roots of character and ethos (habit) in his *Nicomachean Ethics*⁴. Leaders find their sense of identity and purpose within the context of traditions which are the bearers of memory and stories that fund moral wisdom.

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Consequently, the leader’s understanding of morals and ethics has much to do with the lifeworlds that precede and determine her perspectives. The world that one encounters is arranged, fabricated and designed before she becomes conscious that she is a part of it; and before she realises that she is also part of how it will continue to be and to perpetuate itself.

But the world that we encounter is not fixed and static; rather, it is flexible and its “reality” depends in large part on our interaction with it. James Baldwin, the great African American writer and cultural critic, observed: “Nothing is fixed, forever and forever and forever, it is not fixed; the earth is always shifting, the light is always changing, the sea does not cease to grind the rock”⁵. Baldwin was well aware of the power and the danger of meeting the unicorn within us, for it is in the shifting of the world and the re-imagining of possibility that the ethical leader finds his character.

IMAGINATION AND CIVILITY. Secondly, imagination allows leaders to empathise with the other. Empathy, trust and sense of responsibility for the other are essential to the development of a code of civil conduct. By providing leaders with opportunities to use their imaginations to enter the stories of the other, the public construct of an ethical centre, civility, is funded with empathy, trust and a sense of responsibility for the other. Civility is the psychosocial ecology of an individual; it is a certain

understanding or self-referential index of the individual’s place within a democratic social system as it relates to individual character⁶.

In a sense, civility is character in public space. How one understands oneself and one’s place in the larger whole determines largely how one responds to public life and practices. The public is the space where citizens meet and engage in meaningful discussion and action about values; and where they hold one another accountable for what they know and value⁷.

Leaders in the new century must be aware of the intersection of public and private spaces as they interact with others about the future and destiny of democracy – for democracy, after all, is fundamentally an ethical practice; a contentious debate about goods (values) that define our larger social vision of equality and freedom⁸.

Stephen Carter compares civic life with a train ride in the company of many passengers with competing needs and interests. He argues therefore that: “Civility... is the sum of the many sacrifices we are called to make for the sake of living together. When we pretend that we travel alone, we can also pretend that these sacrifices are unnecessary. Yielding to this very human instinct for self-seeking... is often immoral, and certainly should not be done without forethought. We should make sacrifices for others not simply because doing so makes social life easier (although it does), but as a signal of respect for our fellow citizens, marking them as full equals, both before the law and before God”⁹.

The empathy and respect that Carter calls for in this imaginative analogy is wrought by bringing to consciousness our inter-relatedness, or a sense of community. Imaginative projection that puts one in another’s place become central to leader’s repository of tools that allow him to maintain an ethic of balance and justice in public life.

Again what is at stake in this imaginative use of story is the appeal to the leader’s ethical centre, his awareness that sacrifices must be made for the sake of the whole.

IMAGINATION AND COMMUNITY. Thirdly, imagination has the potential to empower leaders to transcend damage

wrought by powerful systems of injustice through a sense of community.

A contemporary example of ethical leadership, in this respect, is the story of Nelson Mandela. Though physically imprisoned, his sense of character imbued with an imaginative quest for human community allowed him to survive and transcend the political bondage meted out against him and his people. Much of this power, Mandela suggests, was rooted in the combination of moral will and imagination. Perhaps, the greatest contribution of Nelson Mandela for the future of ethical leadership was his ability to hold in critical relief the vision of a community wrought by courage, justice and reconciliation. Community, in this sense, is the ideal that serves as the goal of human existence and the norm for ethical judgment. Concretely expressed, it is the mutually co-operative and voluntary venture of persons in which they realise the solidarity of humanity by freely assuming responsibility for one another within the broader context of civil relations¹⁰.

During the summer of 2005, I led a delegation of students sponsored by Oprah Winfrey to South Africa to study ethical leadership within the context of the South African democratisation process. After a visit to Robben Island, the prison facility where Mandela spent most of his 27 years of incarceration, one of the students wrote in his diary:

“The impact was strongest when I stood directly in front of Nelson Mandela’s cell, number five in the B section, which was reserved for political prisoners. Sections A and C housed criminal prisoners. What affected me most was to hear how these prisoners were actually treated. It was heartbreaking to look at the cement floor where Mr Mandela slept without a cot or anything for a cushion. It was enormously troubling to look at the five-gallon bucket that Mr Mandela had to use for a bathroom because there was no toilet in his cell. Who can imagine having to smell something like that two feet away from you all night long until the following morning, when you were allowed to empty and clean your waste bucket?”¹¹

Leaders who are able to stand at the intersections of personal reality and possibility (character), social

reality and possibility (civility), and spiritual reality and possibility (community), and consciously set goals and implement life-affirming resolutions, are what we term ethical leaders.

Training a new generation of leaders will require a methodological emphasis on the power of stories and the practice of remembering, retelling and living of these stories through imaginative journeying to meet the unicorn. Such an undertaking will require a discussion of the place of spirituality, ethics and

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leadership as a broader interpretative framework for the kind of training essential to stimulate consciousness and mould character, civility and community as three principle dimensions of the work of ethical leadership. ■

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2. (Fluker, 2003).
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4. *Nicomachean Ethics* I. i. 1.
5. James Baldwin (1985), “Nothing Personal” in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Non-fiction, 1948-1945* (New York: St Martin’s/Marek), p393.
6. (Fluker, 2003).
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