

Transforming Leadership Through the Power of the Imagination

Michael Jones

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We are on the threshold of a renaissance in leadership practice—the challenges ahead are not technical but transformational. Letting go of our industrial age myths will require not just intellectual understanding but the full power of the imagination.

Michael Jones

My Business is Circumference

My business is circumference, Poet Emily Dickinson writes. This is also the business of leadership.

To understand the significance of circumference we need to acknowledge the new mindset required of leaders for integrative whole mind learning. As we struggle with new discontinuities, fragmentation and sudden change it is vital for leaders to think in more complex and holistic ways. This involves a shift in focus from a narrow and reductive emphasis on individualism based upon an industrial model of managing where the leader is the strong dependable self-made individual or hero towards a style of leading which expands the circumference within which the leader leads.

In the future leaders will not be remembered for their professional, technical or cost cutting skills but for their wisdom, empathy, presence, intuition and artistry. It will be a way of leading that is more relational focused and based upon creating an empathic resonance with others as a networker, connector and convener of webs and communities. We could imagine this new relationship to be like the musician's open stage where individuals with diverse voices come together in an ever-widening circumference of collective engagement and where—even when they are 'strangers' to one another—create beautiful musical collaborations together.

For leaders to engage in the shift of mind from being heroes to artists involves cultivating new disciplines for accessing the subtle power of the imagination. It involves understanding that while strategy and tactics may help leaders be effective technicians, in order to be good artists they need to also listen deeply and get a feeling for things—in other words to be attuned to the unheard melody that is emerging in the space between the notes. Emily Dickinson brings to light this unheard melody—of the sense of being touched from another place—when she writes – This world is not a conclusion; A sequel stands beyond, Invisible as music, But positive as sound.

Listening for The Unheard Melody

Her words bring to mind a line from another poem, one that describes, “The beast of sound caged within the music bars”. These words offer a contrasting world in which what

speaks to us from that another place is not wild and free but contained and caged behind the bars. It is a world where, if we are to maintain order and predictability, the wild and unruly elements—the beasts—of the imagination must be constrained. Too often we assume a Faustian bargain—one in which we willingly trade off the promise of a sequel, of something greater and more beautiful just beyond—for the assurance of certainty, clarity and predictability in the moment.

Yet most if only at a young age have experienced the power of the imagination—we have tasted the sweet elixir of being set free and unconstrained—riding on the fresh wind, the doorway flying open wide and... ‘Life rushing in’.

As a friend said to me after reading the lines of the poem about the beast being caged behind the music bars....

“You don’t cage the animals do you? You dance with them!”

And it is true that as a pianist the melody I listened for was not only in the notes but also in the pauses, the tone, the rhythm, the feeling and the sensitivity of touch—the dance that lay in the spaces between. In order to be attuned to the deeper music, to let go and let be, I learned to listen and be open and responsive to whatever was coming next, to be alive to the moment and to every possibility. The surroundings, the listeners, sense impressions everything that danced along the periphery of my attention became a part of the melody and inspiration I heard in my mind and heart.

There is so much that inspires the free flow of the music beyond the physical notes, a stream of conscious and emergent creation which cannot always be anticipated or planned in advance. This is the artist’s work, to make the invisible visible through being alive to their own felt experience including all that they have seen and been nourished by. With this aliveness they can be responsive to what the moment calls for.

In a time of rapid and unexpected change when so little can be understood or controlled in advance, this is the work of leadership as well.

The Leader as Artist

So the shift from the leader as hero to the leader as artist involves a transformation in awareness from performance to presence, from the visible to the invisible, from answers to questions, from lines to circles, from uniformity to uniqueness, from abstraction to beauty, from efficiency to improvisation and from a focus on language that is instrumental for achieving certain goals and outcomes to the expressive power of stories and the authenticity of one’s own personal voice.

These are disciplines that awaken the power of the imagination. They help transform our mechanistic or industrial view of our world to one that is more subtle and sustainable—a transcendent vision that is more creative, organic and whole. This is how an artistic viewpoint can be helpful to business leaders. It enables them to accept their own

vulnerability and not knowing—of living into the deeper questions and embracing a world of uncertainty with a much greater unknown.

Yet even as we sense this possibility why is it so difficult for us to hear it most of the time?

In part it is because we are the inheritors of a story that is our legacy from the industrial age myths from the near past. In this story we often experience our own spontaneity and creativity caged behind the music bars. It is as if from the moment we stepped onto the schoolyard we also stepped into our own mechanistic cage. Being in this cage educates us to a very specific and particular reality, one so sharply illuminated that it is difficult even impossible to see beyond this story we have been given, and believe there is something more.

This became apparent to me some years ago when my partner Judy and I decided to sell our Toronto home and travel for six months or so. While we trusted our decision, we struggled with how to proceed. So we planned our route and called ahead to friends and left voice mails to let them know we were coming and might stay for a while. They didn't call back! A colleague, sensing our difficulties said, "This is a unique opportunity—a time to travel with the light of a candle rather than a flashlight." These simple words changed everything, not only for how we traveled, but also for how to live and how to lead in uncertain times. Stepping out of our life, as we had known it helped us see more clearly the cage we were in.

The Myths We Live By

The cage I am referring to is an old story—one composed of a set of myths that, like the imperviousness of steel bars—inhibit the free flow of imaginative experience. They have been inherited from the legacy of our industrial past. And because we are still being educated for the industrial age, these myths are still very much with us—in our work, our families, our communities and organizations and our way of being. Like the fish swimming in the sea, they are often so much a part of our assumptions regarding how to think, act and feel that we don't know that they are there. Yet they contribute to a world view based upon false certainties, excessive control, limited possibility and imagined fears—fears that are reinforced through the telling and retelling of a story that we have been conditioned to believe is true.

These myths include...

Perfection and The Myth of the Absolute Truth

With this myth we give up our inner knowing in deference to the credentials or experience of an external authority. We are given to believe that there is a right answer to everything and for others to be right we must be wrong. Behind this belief is the prevailing fear that if others don't conform to our view, chaos will ensue. When we accept this myth as true we give over control to experts and specialists, to policies,

outside authorities and standards that we believe have perfected this truth to which we try to subscribe. This flashlight world pushes us towards the hunt for one all encompassing perfect Truth with a large “T”. The assumption that this truth exists, and our search for it, blinds us to the subtlety and presence of the truth of our gifts and sense of self. This latter is the truth with a small “t”. By serving as stewards to our own innate potential even if it is through increments both imperfect and incomplete, we also shift the focus of attention from authority to authenticity. In so doing we learn to lead from our gifts and inner wisdom rather than from external edicts and what the expert said. Ultimately what reinforces this myth is the fear of risking being wrong, of our own sense of inadequacy, and that our own uniqueness will, in some fundamental way, not be accepted by others.

Isolation and The Myth of Separation

This search for the absolute truth compresses our world into what is immediately before us and near at hand. We have no patience for ambiguity and uncertainties—and this separation often leads to the neglect of the ‘other’ or anything that is not in direct relationship to the absolute truth we seek. In this myth we objectify our world, negate the other and force movement towards a predetermined goal or end state. We also risk seeing those who disagree with us as being ‘not like us’—and therefore also being not fully human. This forms the basis for creating insiders and outsiders, of clans and tribes whose differences become insurmountable. This leads, in turn, to a sense of disconnection from the whole, from a sense of beauty, of belonging and connection to place. In its place we become addicted to the celebration of busyness, to a sense of personal entitlement, a turning away from the stewardship of the commons and public good and a preoccupation with our private life. The myth of separation is based upon the fear of being excluded and an apprehension that disconnects us from the source of our own inspiration, sense of belonging and connection to home and to who we naturally are.

Control and The Myth of Efficiency

With the myth of efficiency we believe that everything is up to us. This myth implies that it is possible, even preferable, to bring all of life’s unruly elements under our direct control. The belief underlying this notion is that we fear that if we don’t use planning, logic, control and strategy to force and hold things together everything will spin out of control. When we give up our trust or relationship in the other then it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; whatever grace and cooperation may be available to us is overshadowed by our need for dominance through planning, measurement, analysis and/or control.

Limits and The Myth of Scarcity

With the myth of scarcity we assume there is not enough to go around. We assume that creative ability and original thought are thinly distributed and therefore for one person to succeed, one or more must lose. With this myth we live in a capricious and unpredictable universe. Life itself becomes a zero sum game in which limits abound and there will never be enough to go around. Under these conditions, the whole must give way to the

interests of the parts. The fear of not having enough distorts the deeper truth that while we must work within certain limits of balance—when we act in a spirit of abundance and generosity—the universe is replenished not diminished by the creative demands we place upon it.

Changing the Light We Lead By

John O'Donohue in his poem *Fluent* writes; I would love to live/Like the river flows/Carried by the surprise/Of its own unfolding.

At the present time we are between stories—too often we lead by rote, by script by credentials, by strategy or tactics, by our five-year plan or by what the expert says. We subscribe to the flashlight world and make absolute its qualities of purpose, direction, focus, willfulness, action and clear sightedness. We miss how, as these qualities when they fall put of balance, become absolutes. They reinforce the myths of perfection, absolute truth, separation, efficiency, scarcity and control. We hunger for what the candlelight brings—for landscape, music, art, subtlety nuance and the gifts they bring of ambiguity, trust, silence, courage, surrender, willingness, connection and risk.

So the leader needs to balance not one, but two-bottom lines. The first is strategic, focused on assessing, prioritizing and reporting. Most leaders must learn to succeed in an outcome oriented, mission based and document driven world. But there is also another bottom line, one that speaks to our own longing and to the timeless needs and wisdom of the heart—what we may think of as 'leadership by unfolding' (1) The leader's work is to somehow find balance between the intellect's passion for strategy, action and outcome with the heart and the imagination's affinity for the unknown. These myths are a natural result of an over emphasis on cultivating the strategic mind without at the same time cultivating the intelligence of an empathic and imaginative heart.

In speaking of this world out of balance, author Joseph Chilton Pierce offers this caution, "Should the intellect win the battle with the heart's intelligence then the war will be lost for all of us...we will be just an experiment that failed."

Finding Meaning in a New Story

In other words we cannot rely upon the intellect's understanding to find our way to the other side of a world that is of its own invention. Nor can we apply the same strategies to change our world that we used to create it. For this experiment to succeed we will need to be guided by a fresh set of images and questions, ones that connect us to the roots of our own aliveness and creative imagination.

For example the myth of perfection invites the deeper question, who am I really? The myth of separation, where is home? The myth of efficiency, how do I let go and let be? And the myth of scarcity, what is enough?

These are candlelight questions—the answers are not immediate but instead awaken the heart to new possibilities and encourage us to reflect and connect more deeply with our own unfolding nature.

As we do so, new and more opaque figures, images that are often impossible to see in a flashlight world, begin to emerge from the shadows. These are the ‘powerful strangers’ that were lost to us when we began to hold the imagination suspect—caged the beast—and systematically disenchanting our world. As they come into full presence they may serve as wise guides to help make visible a hidden world of interconnection and wholeness—a complex mythic world rich with archetypal symbols and imagery which liberate the imagination and awaken the heart.

The Steward—Finding Inspiration in Our Own Life

For as long as the gift is used people will live.—Black Elk

For example, behind the myth of absolute truth is an archetypal image, the Steward. The Steward provides the connective tissue that brings us together. It connects us to the sense of our own truth, integrity, wisdom and intuition. It holds the space of possibility for our gifts and talents and the courage to be true to one’s own calling. This includes the gifts of identity, insight and finding faith and inspiration—the music—in one’s own life. The Steward takes a stand in service of our own inner truth and for the gift and uniqueness we hold for ourselves and others. With the Steward we find the wisdom, inspiration and courage to let go of ideological truths in favor of our own embodied truth and inner knowing. This archetype of the Steward establishes, protects and holds the integrity of boundaries of the whole. It tends the rich soil to keep our vision and dreams rooted in a sense of and significance of place. It aligns us with our own inner nature and true path to leadership and helps us act with coherence and integrity in service of our deepest work in the world.

The Enchanter—Discovering Our Own Way of Seeing Things

My dad could name one hundred miles of coastline by the taste of the air.—Annie Proulx

Behind the myth of separation is the archetypal image of the Enchanter. The Enchanter helps us discern the almost imperceptible distinctions and nuances between things. It connects us to the transcendent. It is the gentle defender of beauty. Beauty helps us see—it offers us the gifts of perception and adaptivity so that we may make finely tuned adjustments in the moment. The Enchanter also helps establish an empathic connection to our world. It connects us to place, to nature and to inner stillness, to patience and to receptivity for ‘otherness’ as embodied in the company of strangers and new experiences. In a time of dislocation, the Enchanter instills a sense of hope, belonging and inspiration. By acknowledging the centrality of Eros, the sensual and the aesthetic, the Enchanter also brings into being a sense of balance and wholeness. This protects us from the isolation that an adherence to an absolute truth often imposes upon us.

The Weaver—Discovering What Our Life is Trying to Be

There is a thread you follow that goes among the things that change. —William Stafford

Behind the myth of efficiency is the Weaver. The Weaver draws the threads together and weaves magical fabrics of shared meaning and emergent possibility. It sees the world from many different angles and invites new possibilities in a spirit of generosity, detachment, perspective and novelty. In this manner, the Weaver dances along the boundaries and in so doing perceives webs of connection across different worlds and perceived difference and does so with infinite mastery, ease and grace. Just as a musician knows that when they are playing, they are also being played, the Weaver holds and accepts the many alternative definitions of what is true. Through an expanded awareness and discernment, the Weaver helps us recognize that we cannot control everything—that our hyper-efficiency and excessive control will inevitably lead to unintended consequences. By suspending our certainties and accepting the ambiguous nature of our world, we are available for surprise and the natural emergence of unforeseen opportunities.

The Visionary—Finding Authority in Our Own Subjective Experience

The boundaries of our language are the boundaries of our world.—Ludwig Wittgenstein

The fear of scarcity conceals the archetype of the Visionary. The Visionary is the teacher and purveyor of language who transforms our reality through the power of story and voice. The Visionary does not just speak but is brought to speech through allowing what is most deeply personal to speak through them. In so doing The Visionary sees vision not as an ultimate goal or end state but as a powerful instrument for the articulation of our deepest vocation, which carries the same root as voice. In so doing the Visionary gives meaning to our dreams and possibilities and offers hope and perspective where everyone else sees despair. This is the aspect of the imagination that embodies the energy of language not only to inform but also to transform and therefore serve as the source of abundance, of blessing, wholeness, affirmation, order, integration and new life. The Visionary is the voice of recognition and aspiration. It sees and calls out the gift of abundance in the other. In so doing it sees and articulates the shared intention, aspirations and common voice of the whole.

Awakening the Commons of the Imagination.

When we discover what leads to us feeling more alive, we will have found the key to bringing the commons alive.—

Michael Jones

Together, the presence of these archetypes by whatever name we give them helps to awaken a commons of the imagination. As we free these deep archetypal figures from their cages the energy they release opens doorways to new patterns and pathways to leadership. Pathways that, while they may be understood through the intellect, can only

be manifest through experience. Together they offer new and imaginative forms and ways of acting and being. They remind us that we cannot always force the river, that our strength is also found in waiting, sensing and listening in order to hear how the river speaks to us. Through working with the subtle, as well as the strong forces, of leading from behind and being attuned to the nature of time's natural unfolding, we begin to unfold the true vocation of the artist—leader.

While awakening the commons is the work of now, it is also the work of a lifetime. It is in the nature of the imagination that in one moment there is nothing and then there is something. We can make explicit everything in the creative process but this—yet it seems that it is this—the mystery in how and when the power of archetypal energies make their appearance that makes the difference between actions that truly interconnect and move us forward and actions that don't. This suggests that at some very early and critical stage in the creative process there is a need to release and let go of oneself. Like the artist, it involves a willingness and trust to lead—and to also be led. This opens the door for the insights of these subtle forces to come in. In other words they are paradoxical in that they are both very powerful and also very shy. If we bring too much of the critical attention of the strategic mind in search of them, they are no longer there. So to shine the flashlight in search of concrete evidence of the existence of these imaginative forces may cause the very thing we are looking for to retreat and hide.

Yet when these ancient and timeless archetypes are awakened in us, we can see beyond our experience of fear and limitation. Through their collective eyes and ears we can see and engage a world of infinite complexity. In their presence we may also restore to the world of myth its true purpose, which is not to promote false truths or limit our actions through fear and isolation, but instead to re-enchanted our world with the experiencing of wonder, awe, enchantment and possibility. Most important, it becomes possible to communicate intangible realities that cannot be passed along in any other way.

So to transform our leadership we need to respect and understand the nature of the gift in art and learn to be good stewards of the soil of the commons so that our true potential as leaders may take seed and grow. We are very practiced at setting goals, defining outcomes and managing our time, but less so in creating fertile ground for balancing action with gestation—with time for seeding, rest, reflection, absorption, walking, dreaming, questioning, noticing, practicing and being.

Poet William Stafford writes;

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should consider—
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
the signals we give—yes or no, or maybe—

should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

William Stafford's words remind us that for years our world was illuminated not by the flashlight but by the opaque shadows and crackling light of the fire—our circumference enlarged not through our roles as managers, executives, employees or consultants, but through our presence as storytellers, teachers, warriors, stewards, poets, musicians, enchanters and weavers. Through the language of music, story, poetry, myth, prophecy and song we appealed to a voice to light our way in the darkness. As we awaken the power of the imagination we may turn again to those same timeless voices in the shadows from our past and—by uniting together modern thought with ancient wisdom—make a new appeal.

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Note:

1. "Leadership by unfolding" is found in the words of Psychotherapist Carla M. Dahl where she writes, "When I am tempted to lead by role, by technique or worse, someone else's compass, John O'Donohue's poem 'Fluent' reminds me of the way the river has to trust its own unfolding. No leader can see the end from the beginning, no matter how strategic the plan." As found in Sam M. Intrator and Megan Scribner, *Leading from Within: Poetry That Sustains the Courage to Lead* (San Francisco, Jossey Bass, 2007) P 82 f.

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Michael Jones is a Canadian pianist, composer, leadership educator and author. He is Senior Research Fellow with The James McGregor Burns Academy of Leadership, University of Maryland; Leadership Fellow and Associate Faculty at The Center for Professional Excellence, College of Business, University of Texas, San Antonio; a Charter-Consulting Member with The Society for Organizational Learning (SOL) at MIT; and a member of the Leadership Council for The Flow Project, a non-profit organization that conducts research and education in art and leadership. He is best known as the founding artist of Narada Records where his many CD's of original piano recordings including *Pianoscapes*, *Touch* and *After the Rain* have served as benchmarks

for the emerging genre of contemporary instrumental music. Michael is the author of Creating an Imaginative Life and Artful Leadership: Awakening the Commons of Imagination and integrates his musical performances in keynote presentations and workshops on Leading Artfully. His works can be purchased on-line from <http://www.pianoscapes.com/>