

A RITUAL FOR LEADERS

Three ancient practices that revitalize everything

By Daniel Holden

In the days leading up to the American presidential election I can easily lapse into feeling that forces much greater than me are at play and threaten to take me where I do not wish to go. I struggle to remain awake, open to new information and yet discerning, too. How can I consider what history shows without being imprisoned by it. Can I be present and see each person and circumstance anew and not merely default to my memory of past interactions with them? How can I remain genuinely open and curious about what wants to happen today and yet not be naive and stupid in the process? Is it possible to find simplicity in the midst of complex, turbulent times without overlooking important, interlocking dynamics and tough realities?

While my own questioning has been exacerbated by the election, these issues are the kinds of matters leaders I work with face every day. I write this while on a temporary break from a singularly exhausting period of work and travel. I'm unsure how I contributed to a calendar that clearly violates all of my most

cherished values around work-life balance, reflection and spiritual renewal, family time and the importance of remaining close to the natural world, one foot on the next hiking trail or ocean beach. The pace, volume, intensity and impact of change in my life and work have made this period unlike any other I have faced. I am like those I coach.

'There are no easy answers', we are told, yet there are practices that have stood the test of time. William Stafford (1914-1993) one of the great poets of the last century and former Poet Laureate of the nation, reminds us of three of these practices. Here is what he says to us all.

A Ritual to Read to Each other

*If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.*

*For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood
storming out to play through the broken dyke.*

*And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park,
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.*

*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.*

From *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems* © Graywolf Press.

PRACTICE ONE: KNOW YOURSELF.

You know you're already in trouble if you are tempted to skip over this section. The greatest barrier to self-knowledge is, after all, the belief we already possess it. That what we know about ourselves is not just true but is all there is to know about us. Today, as an example, it is possible to pass through most MBA programs with no coursework required to assess and improve your own self-awareness as a leader! It is possible to sponsor or lead many large-scale organizational change models on collaboration, innovation, facilitative leadership, teamwork, customer service, quality improvement, and patient satisfaction and not be expected to look closely at your own level of self-awareness and assess its likely impact on the change effort you will take part in. And, if you're a senior leader, you will only get (and apparently only need) the two-hour overview; it's assumed you already know the rest! Self-awareness is seriously underrated.

William Stafford warns us if we don't know who we are "*...a pattern others made may prevail in the world and, following the wrong god home, we may miss our star.*" We can easily be led astray when we don't know who we are and miss what is truly important. For leaders who pride ourselves on self-reliance, autonomy and resilience, the ease with which we can be led astray may feel exaggerated. Here is how simply it can happen.

Recently, I got stranded in an airport unable to get to an important meeting the next day. I am not happy. I board a hotel van along with other stranded ones. I know I feel impatient, frustrated and tired. I am unaware of my own arrogance and selfishness as I make sure to sit in the front seat of the van so I can be first in the hotel check-in line. I don't care about anyone else on the van. I'm tired, after all, and a very important person! As we are about to pull away I notice an older man using a walker and dragging a suitcase while making his way slowly towards our van. He won't make it.

We all know it, on the van, and none of us move. A pattern of watching out for our own self-interests prevails with nobody needing to say anything.

Something in me stirs. I've seen this man before, in the terminal. He wears a hat that I recognize as a Marine Recon veteran, Viet Nam era. I yell to the van driver to open his doors. I grab the man and his luggage and help him into the van, quietly fuming the process has been slowed down by this man. I help him through the hotel check in process, resigned now to having lost my first place in line.

The next morning I arrive in the lobby early, hoping again to get the first seat in the first van heading back to the airport. The entire stranded group is there before me! So is my Marine. I help him onto the van; someone else grabs his luggage while another offers him his seat in front. At the airport, we assist him through security. The others say goodbye and head for the gate. I buy him breakfast and eat with him before helping him board, where we say our goodbye. "I won't forget you," he says. "It's been an honor to be with you," I say. We don't see each other again.

I have turned away in my own self-preservation more often than I care to admit. This story, regrettably, is the exception not the norm with me. I tell it here because it illustrates the impact of what our poet says to us. If we don't know who we are a *pattern others made may prevail in the world*. We all will be made the lesser for it.

As an executive coach to business leaders there are several action items built around self-awareness and understanding others. Among these are the following:

- Know your strengths as well as your default tactics where you go when under stress or duress.

STRENGTH	DEFAULT
Achieving results; pushing hard for improvement	Excessive control, abusive power
Strong relationships & team effectiveness	Acquiescence and silence; refusing to stand up when things get tough. Violence expressed (behind closed doors) as demeaning career and character assessments of those not present.
Intellectual brilliance, conceptual adroitness. Seeing through complexity	Belittling others for their stupidity and foolishness; endless criticizing “lesser beings” whose opinions differ from your own. Aloofness.
Courageous authenticity & candidness	Self-righteousness and arrogance; strident ridicule of others who hold a different perspective.
Systems awareness and political savvy	Cowardice and secrecy dressed up “living to fight another day.”
Openness to learning and personal change	Arrogance and resistance to those in other camps; “my way or the highway” mindset.

• Know what drives your actions. This is life long work made easier when we accept as true two plausible realities:

1. *We never react for reasons we think we do.* We think we are reacting to external events, circumstances and people. Yet unless we have a measure of self-understanding we invariably react to *an inner story we have made up about these external conditions.*
2. *We make up a world in our mind and then react to it all the while treating it as reality we had no part in creating.* I feel impatient and frustrated on the hotel van because I made up a story that... *I was late...others were holding me up...my performance with my client would be impacted...and I would lose credibility if I were not on my game.* Find your story and you'll find your leverage and power to change. You won't be the one elephant that leads the others astray.

- Know the impact of your actions on others; this is more important than knowing your good intentions. Few if any of us act out of intentions that are not warranted, in our perspective. Even the most outrageous action usually makes sense to the one authoring it. Getting clear about intentions is monologic action: I know my reasons and may have no need or imperative to engage anyone is conversation about them. To assess the behavioral impact of my behavior, however, requires a dialogic response from me. I must engage other humans to find out what my behavior did to them. No further explaining or re-explaining my intentions is needed; no yes-but rebuttals, no justifying and no lectures on the virtues of my behavior are required here. Just be curious and open. That's all. As if it is easy.

PRACTICE 2. DO YOUR PART

Even if others don't. Up to this point our leadership conversation has been personal we must know one another and ourselves. Now, the story shifts.

*For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood
storming out to play through the broken dyke.*

*And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park,
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.*

Forces that are very old drive us at times. We are then betrayed by forgotten or un-examined patterns *sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood storming out to play through the broken dyke*. We know this happens and yet don't acknowledge the fact that we play a role. The impact is that we wander and take others with us; we collectively miss the park. My silence and desire to fly under the radar *a childhood pattern* made it easier for everyone else on the hotel van to remain in their silence as well. My speaking up made it easier for others to step up.

The next day I am working with an executive team. We begin to create a plan to build a new culture in their organization, beginning with this team. Start where you are. We carefully spell out what each person needs from the others in order to thrive. We detail our commitments, what others can count on us for, when the going gets tough, when there are disagreements and conflict. Resources are scarce, pressure from the board for better results is strong and getting stronger. The heat has been turned up and everyone feels it.

We finish our work and begin working on the first strategic item on the agenda. Within minutes the CEO abruptly cuts off one of the junior women. In the next several moments we collectively manage to violate all of the agreements we had made only a short while ago! I am again sitting on my hands, as I was the night before on the hotel van. I know this moment is a big deal to the junior member and to the new culture trying to be born. I decide to call a “Stop action” (one of their agreements). I point out what just happened. The CEO advises me we need to move on. I disagree. “The new culture gets built right here, in this moment,” I say, “Or the old culture gets further entrenched. You must choose now.”

The CEO, to his credit, acknowledges that he has been triggered by something he thought was said. He briefly shares his reactive default, asks what the impact was on her and apologizes to the offended person. The two leaders reconcile. But we are not yet done. I turn to the other members of the senior team and ask, “How many of you knew something went off, in that moment earlier?” Every hand went up. “Let’s talk about your silence.” A courageous conversation ensued. We each humbly acknowledged how easy it is to get caught up in the moment; how in our earnest desire to get tasks completed we easily forget the trail we leave behind us. The remainder of the day was ‘one of the most productive talks this team had ever had with each other’, they would say. And it was.

True confession: I am older now. I have lost my desire to change the world. I no longer think about my legacy or the lasting impact my words and work will

have in the world. Who can know whether this intervention will even change the senior team? I do my part because it is what I know to do. That's all. Nobody will ever notice or even care; that's fine with me. I have lost two family members over the past three years, a mother who lived a long and full life and a sister, who died young and too soon. Their memories fade more in me each day. I once thought they would remain with me forever; now, I doubt it. This is simply the way of life, or the way of my life. The memory of my life will also fade quickly, like a figure in a dream, in those I leave.

*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.*

I try and do my part because it's what I know to do. I don't concern myself with what others do or don't do. Every time I look to others to join me I create my own powerlessness. Just a look in their direction is enough to lull me back to sleep. Why waste time trying to fool one another? I decided it makes more sense to be a *tipping point* wherever I am. The *shadowy voice within me, that remote important region* that prompted me to get off my butt and make the way smoother for the Marine at the airport, or prod the senior team, is what I want to appeal to in others and myself. When I am able to do this I feel alive. I feel awake.

PRACTICE 3. WAKE UP

This article draws attention to two moments in my recent life: sitting on a hotel van and participating in a business team session twelve hours later. These are not unusual or extraordinary moments. I have drifted mindlessly through many moments like this in the past with whatever professional skill set I could muster. There is a lot going on in the present moment, however, if we are awake to it and learn to follow its leading.

*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.*

Waking Up doesn't appear on the list of leadership competencies of any organization I know of. Yet, it underlies all real movement in the direction of genuine, sustainable change. "Wake up!" is the shortest most powerful action plan for leaders today. In any meeting, board session, project review, strategic planning session, talk with your kids, or conversation with your spouse or partner, waking up can revitalize that particular moment. I have to admit that even though I work at remaining awake, what I fail to see or that which I overlook altogether could, if somehow assembled end-to-end, fill up the distance between here and Jupiter.

The angel disguised as a Marine vet at the airport reminded me that *the darkness around us is deep*. He silently called out to me, "What will you do today?" I answered without words. *Today, I will make my yes, no and maybe clear*. And you? What will you do?