

MEANING-MAKING AND THE NATURE OF LEADERSHIP

The golden rule: give and take that is the way the world was created so that everyone should influence others and be influenced in kind. Any one who does not embody both of these qualities is nothing but a fruitless tree. (Rabbi yetzchk Eizik of Zilitzow)

INTRODUCTION.

First of all, I would like to briefly introduce myself in order to provide a context for these reflections. I am a veterinarian with master and doctoral degrees in virology and microbiology, respectively, and with 25 years of experience in teaching and research in schools of veterinary and human medicine. Currently, I am spending a sabbatical year at the University of Wisconsin – Madison, where I came with the idea of studying the organizational structure and the philosophical principles which move this university system. My previous experiences and the dynamics of this institution brought to my attention the movement of academic leadership; its nature, its impact, its pedagogy, its ethics, and how the subject of leadership is becoming endemic in universities and colleges throughout the United States, and abroad.

What is leadership? is it teachable? is it a movement promoted by the business world to make the future working population more docile to the CEOs and their

group of managers? Is it a fad or does it represent a true option to improve our educational processes across the board? These and other questions would be addressed to contribute to a discussion which, I consider most important and pertinent.

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF LEADERSHIP

To lead means showing the way by going ahead. But before showing the way to others, one has to find the way oneself. Therefore I want to think of leadership first, and after all, as a very personal force which invites me to discover my unique way. Each one of us is unique, therefore our patterns of thought are unique, our goals are unique (or should be), and a unique end necessarily requires a unique pathway.

Individual goals and pathways interweave themselves in a social fabric and then, there is space for a second category of leadership involving groups, institutions, communities, nations, etc. I can see a fractal structure in leadership. The repeating motive here is the individual and his/her own leadership (see below).

What capacities are there behind the idea of individual leadership? First, we should be conscious of characteristics common to all human beings: wisdom and dementia, love and hate and other dialogisms which are an integral part of manhood. It is here where we find the basic repertoire for our actions. Discretion and risky behaviors, self control and climax, attachment and

detachment...paraphrasing Edgar Morin... I would like to think that the leader has to find his way, therefore he must enjoy running risks (but he/she shall exercise discretion). He knows and enjoys ecstasies (but with self control); and he practices and promotes detachment (but honoring the ties to friendship and love). To run risks thoughtfully means having the capacity to anticipate outcomes; that is, capacity to foresee a future, and the leader has the thrive and enthusiasm to go for it. Leadership is the process of construction of our own personality, from which the present, and the future, are dependent!

BIOSEMIOTICS AND MEANING-MAKING

My approximation to this idea comes from the biosemiotics as discussed by Hoffmayer. We, living creatures, live in a sea of symbols, which arrive to our brains throughout our senses and receptors. Only those signs and symbols which make sense; that is, those for which we have complementary structures (both biochemical and conceptual) are filtered in, and finally, it is with them that we construct our selves. Our selves are therefore, mirror images of the environment which has shaped our brain, our bodies and our minds. Each individual is an integral part of the environment, for everybody else, and viceversa; it is here when, and where, the "meaning maker" comes about: leadership is a relational or ecological concept.

When we focus the discussion to humans, that species whose instincts have shrunken in favor of a learned behavior (thanks to a long infancy and a slow maturation) the "meaning maker" becomes more interesting because the repertoire of signs and symbols multiplies ad infinitum, and in a unique way, in each individual. Since many years before birth (as a matter of fact, from the very early origin of life), and all the way along our individual lives (and eventually further beyond), we "sift and winnow" and sediment through this magma of signs and symbols making sense (contacts) here and there; and in so doing shaping the landscape and shaping ourselves. It is clear that in the human context the concept of biosemiotics has to be expanded to BIOPSYCHOSEMIOTICS. (I wish I were able to fully develop the concept!)

LEADERSHIP AND THE LEADER

My unique way is what makes sense for me. How do I find my way through? Through the active process of sending and receiving messages. Through this active process of "meaning making" I make my own road; I discover my personality. Once this step is well on the way (but it would never be finished) certain humans may become meaning maker superstars: those whose meaning-giving and receiving has developed the sensitivity, the affinity and the reactivity to trap (thoughtfully or not, correctly or ill intentioned) the spirit and energy of others (the individual leadership of others) to a common cause; hopefully to a common good. A leader superstar is a leader's leader: this should be truly a meta-leader in a leader-full environment.

FRACTALITY IN LEADERSHIP

Fractal structures are those built on the basis of the iteration of a given simple structure. It has been found that nature, the great diversifier, makes diversity of shapes, as we see it, by recurring to this "simple" trick. Take a shore, or a tree as an example, or more clearly a fern. The repetition of small bays within large bays, the repetition of small branches within large branches; or the repetition of the little leaf-like structure within the large leaf-like structure in the fern; all giving rise to beautiful landscapes where the monotony of the iteration disappears. (Wouldn't it be interesting to dwell on the subject of the esthetics of leadership?)

That simple structure (the repeating motif) in leadership, is the personal leadership which each one of us construct by meaning making with the environment. This individual (there could not be individual without leadership, could there be? Are personality and leadership cognate terms or are they synonyms?) may be drafted, along with others, to coalesce in a leadership field of common interest. Is not there a beautiful shape in a society which structures its landscape in leadership fields: individuals, groups, institutions, states, through a net of active, thoughtful and flexible meaning making?

A fractal structure of leadership is a beautiful analogy because fractal structures are versatile, varied, flexible and eventually more comprehensible. The flaw may be at the individual level because a single failure in one of the repeating motifs (the individuals) alters the shape,

eventually the function and also the esthetic value... Let me then formulate my utopia: the beauty of a human society depends on the perfection of the repeating motives; that is, the adaptation through meaning-making (perfection) of each one of its individuals. How far are we? How long would it take for us to connect all humans beings through meaning-making in a global network?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Leadership is a characteristic inextricably associated with life, in the form of instincts which guide the survival of the individual and the species. But in humans, where the instinctive load has decreased, and a protracted infancy has developed, leadership takes a cultural dimension, and the shift is central to the ontology of the human in and of him/herself. Let's propose then that leadership is a constructive process which builds upon our biological nature in a continuum – but not in a break – between nature and culture with a major component of the second, when the work is well done!

The argument that leadership is an unfortunate word to convey these ideas is well taken. Leadership in most minds is associated with historical recollections of wars and holocausts, and presently with status quo and moral dismay. The bottom line is that leadership, as a personal and universal possibility, is claiming for a better strategy to connect all humanhood in a network of meaning-making awareness; and this, it seems to me, represents a major upward bent in the evolution of the human species.

Finally let me remain a very practical and profound answer to the question who is wise? "Who is wise? one who learns from everyone" (Baal shem Tou. Mishnah, avot 4:1). Nobody can relinquish his/her capacity to influence the other; therefore, each one of us, at the same time, teach and learn through meaning-making. It is therefore possible to become wise!

Note added in proof: I had come this far in my reflections when I had the happy chance to run across B. Sievers and his book "Work, death and life itself" (1994). Here I found the widest and deepest critique to the currents trends in the treatment of leadership: motivation as a surrogate for meaning, the meaning of meaning, the myths of leadership, leadership and immaturity, and the management of wisdom. The next step in my personal development in this field will be to study this master peace.

Finally to honor his work and to acknowledge his wisdom I want to quote, among hundred of beautifully expressed thoughts, one which summarizes and profoundly enriches my humble contribution: "If Leading, as the underlying quality on which a concept of leadership has to be built, is understood as a special subdimension of Managing, then it has to be referred to as **THE GENUINE ABILITY OF EVERY MATURE HUMAN BEING TO GIVE MEANING TO HIS LIFE** in a particular role vis-à-vis a commonly agreed upon primary task in the context of other human beings in their respective work roles" (ib id, page 247).