

“Aslan,’ said Lucy, ‘you’re bigger.’

‘That is because you are older, little one,’ answered he.

‘Not because you are?’

‘I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.’”

-C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian*

If leadership can ever be entirely conquered or attained does that mean it is also in time retired or graduated from? If so, doesn't that assume that leadership is inherently limited to title or position? Instead of a prize or status to be worked for and attained, I think it wiser to reflect on leadership as an exploration, a never-ending search and sensemaking process. Moreover, my notions of leadership now look far different, vaster, than they did ten years ago. I assume ten years from now my present understanding will be trivial in light of ideas to come. To consider the sources, people, and experiences that influence my current personal leadership philosophy is to delve well beyond my mere twenty years. As one of my favorite quotes above alludes, I believe I encounter leadership much like Lucy encounters Aslan in C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*. As I get older and add knowledge and experience to my own repertoire, I find that it is not leadership itself that is becoming more complex, only myself and my ideas of it that are opened and expanded upon. The expanse and elusiveness of leadership has remained for centuries. Great thinkers throughout history, most far more philosophical than I, have attempted to refine its essence: however, if each arrives at a different core, could it be that there is no true core to be found? This suggests, rather, that the essence of leadership is tailored to the individual. For me, it is rooted in faith, fostered in family, and refined through personal hardship.

In the *Chronicles of Narnia*, C.S. Lewis writes of a magical realm and follows fictional characters as they explore its struggles and history. While most have heard of, watched, or read

this series, its parallels to biblical references are often overlooked. Throughout the books, Aslan, a large, ruling lion, takes on the character of Jesus. Lucy, a young girl who has multiple personal interactions with Aslan, finds him to be bigger and more complex upon each encounter, much like my own experience in the faith and in understanding leadership. The faith I hold is not one that was found alone. I was fortunate to be raised in a household that has passed on the torch of knowing God personally for generations. Along with a belief in a God that loves his people and detests sin comes a set of collected morals and unwavering convictions. These have been the upmost important material in the foundation upon which I build my own understanding of leadership. It is a foundation that has been polished, tested, and buttressed by generations in my own family, and also by centuries of Christians before me. In my own philosophy of leadership, I believe it critical to not plagiarize the heavy lifting of instilling morality and ethics in me that was done by those in the past. From the first Christians who witnessed the crucifixion of Christ to the generation immediately before me, I find beauty in being next in a long line of believers who have endured hardship and yet still cling to the promise of the Gospel. To me, tradition should be highly regarded and is something to be thoroughly grateful for, even if I come to disagree with parts of it. It is necessary to consider where I have been, where those before me have been, in order to gain a clearer understanding of where I want to go.

Stemming from my faith specifically, I find the main purpose of leadership to be serving others. This is expressed in the core of the Gospel, being to love God and love others above all else, in that order. A main supporting idea for incorporating service into my personal leadership philosophy can be derived from *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* by Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky. In this book, the concept in leadership of “Staying Connected to Your Purposes” is addressed. It mentions that when “you lose touch with your purposes, you lose your capacity for

finding meaning in your life”. Purpose is what provides inspiration and motivation to actions. Furthermore, being grounded in my faith is one of the best ways to avoid being caught up in chasing a position or status, like mentioned in the beginning, as I instead pursue the goal of putting others first. For if I am consumed with “achieving” leadership, I am forsaking my entire purpose, rooted in faith, behind participating in it- to love and support those around me best.

Going deeper into the subject of remaining faithful to purpose arises the importance of aligning ambitions and aspirations with purpose (Heifetz, 2009). It is explained that aspirations are the “what” of your future work; the ambitions are the “why” of that position. Aligning these to match, not only yields effective results, but also personal satisfaction. Practically, this could look like a circumstance where I am offered a higher paying job that has little personal interaction. To evaluate what I should do, I need to consider why I would take the job. If my why does not align with my purpose of expressing my faith by serving and loving others, I am failing to uphold my leadership philosophy and should reconsider labeling myself as a leader.

As I continue my exploration into the expanse of leadership, I must acknowledge my current shortcomings in regard to my purpose, stemming from my faith, of serving others. It cannot go unsaid that a common pitfall relating to integrating ambitions and aspirations can be to appear self-righteous (Heifetz, 2009). This is one I must ashamedly admit I stumble upon frequently. At times I have realized, usually long after the fact, that I believed my own eminence to be radiating, when reality would identify such behavior as conceit. To correct this deficiency, the virtue of humility should be more relentlessly pursued; although the irony of humility is as soon as one believes they have fully grasped it, they have lost it entirely. I often am most humbled upon participating in volunteer work around my community for causes I care about and through my own dealings with a medical diagnosis.

Continuing on in my personal discovery of the boundless concept of leadership, I have increasingly become aware of the role my family has played in forming my personal philosophy. I grew up in a very loving home with a strong father, gentle mother, and two very competitive older brothers. My father is very industrious with his numerous businesses and often works at home, so I got a front row seat growing up to witness his immense determination and grit. Even through hard times, my dad remains diligent in tending to his work and his family. My mother, equally as driven and committed, took a few years off of work to spend more time with our family. During that time and well beyond, I have been deeply poured into and encouraged as she bends over backwards to accommodate and support my activities and ambitions. My oldest brother lives in New York City and works at a large merger and acquisition consulting firm. As his position may suggest, he lives life incredibly fast paced and relentlessly pursues the goals he sets. I greatly admire how he set his sights high and felt confident in reaching those goals. My other brother lives a more laid-back lifestyle with many different hobbies and a burning desire to continually learn. He seems to know much about nearly any subject one can imagine and has a natural knack for being good at any sport, game or puzzle that he does. From him, my desire to be the best at whatever I did was aroused. Overall, a result of this unique combination of individuals raising and teaching me, I toughened both inside and out and grew in conscientiousness.

Being a competitive individual integrally, I espoused the idea that hard work will always pay off and that I could do anything I set my mind to. These ideas were heavily reinforced by my parents and brothers. I always strive to be the best I can at anything I engage in and I am not one to give up easily. Conscientiousness, loyalty, and grit have been cultivated in me through my

childhood and serve to be rare amongst my generation. These strengths though, without moderation, can actually serve to hinder my ability to lead just as much as they may help it.

My ambition, paired with my naturally assertive and dominant personality, led me to forego some friendships over the years as I prioritized tasks over relationships. For example, this could be seen in my goal of graduating high school in three years. I was so ready to get onto the next “thing”, I dismissed the notion that I would miss the friends I had or the people I knew. Therefore, I never invested in having lasting friendships as my sights were set on what was beyond. I likely manifest this mindset in leadership roles as I often direct attention to accomplishing tasks over tending to relationships. Additionally, in practical terms, I repeatedly focus on my own ability as a leader, because of my internal drive and grit, to find success, rather than the inclusion of the entire team. I often can come off as overconfident, failing to consider or value the advice and skills of other, more experienced or knowledgeable people around me. This ambition, which can be taken to extremes, often serves as counter-intuitive to leading as I pursue my own plans rather than considering the interests of the group.

From the book *The Deep Blue Sea: Rethinking the Source of Leadership* by Wilfred Drath, my understanding of where leadership comes from was challenged. This book is a case study where the leader of a piano company is retiring as his daughter steps in to lead the firm. The father, who is highly respected and revered as a great leader, seemingly leaves a void that his daughter struggles to fill. In the end, she learns a new understanding of leadership that is comprised of principles including: personal dominance, interpersonal influence, and relational dialogue. Before this book, I assumed being a leader meant you did something *to* a group of people. In contrast, this book explains that leadership is what you do *with* a group of people. I knew I had the portion of personal dominance figured out and nearly mastered, but I increasingly

realized that I was seriously lacking in my ability to consistently influence others in a positive manner and facilitate constructive dialogue in a team setting.

From this realization, I looked deeper into these areas of improvement, I learned that there was one of the three leadership tasks that I struggled with significantly more than the other. The tasks laid out in Drath's book include: setting direction, creating commitment, and facing adaptive challenges. In order to be a better leader, it is imperative that I improve my ability to foster commitment in a group. Although I believed in the past that I alone had enough ambition to cover the entire group, I failed to consider that such a belief could be the very root of apathy towards success, or even resistance of it, within a team. By overlooking opportunities to include others' opinions or interests I sabotaged the capability of success. Ways to begin amending this flaw in my leadership practice would be to seek out diversity of opinions in an attempt to expand the pool of options and solutions for better decision making. Otherwise, an echo chamber of ideas leads to groupthink, which fails to be the most rationale and unbiased method of problem solving. Additionally, providing followers with the latitude and freedom to disagree would not only propel the group forward, but also serve to check my own motivations and actions.

The last significant discovery I have made as I explore the immense, complex frontier of leadership relates to my own personal hardships. Moreover, while I have adopted servant leadership from my faith and personal dominance from my family, it is my dealings with a medical condition that had taught me balance in these qualities through means of humility and empathy. In my younger years, I reveled in the bliss of ignorance as to how my diagnosis in utero would touch and shape my life to come. Even from very early on, I understood that I was different, having to take medication when I ate and do treatment at the end of every day, but I

was carefully shielded from having to encounter a harsh reality regarding my prognosis at too young of an age. Through middle and high school, I came to learn more of my condition and what was expected in years to come. At the time, the life expectancy for a Cystic Fibrosis patient had just reached 35 years old. Had I been born decades earlier, I likely could not have had the luxury of waiting until high school to learn such a reality, as it might have been too late. While I am an incredibly blessed individual to not currently experience the eventually debilitating effects of such a genetic disorder, still I experience discomfort, pain, loneliness, sadness, and embarrassment every day in ways that cannot be fathomed by others. In contrast to other genetic disorders, mine goes unseen by the naked, assuming, and judgmental eye. My variances in behavior, habits, or ability are not automatically excused by my visual appearance, and I find rarely are they of enough concern to others to inquire of before having judgement expressed upon me. This recurrent experience, however, opens my eyes, ears, and heart to considering the concealed struggles of others. I grow most in empathy when I face my most personal struggle. Through quiet and private challenges with my health, my heart is softened and my ego deflated in light of realizing that most people in life, including myself, are not as great as I might hope, nor as bad as I might assume.

In the words of C.S. Lewis, “Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less.” As mentioned previously, humility is the most elusive of all virtues. As soon as it is believed to be attained, it is entirely forgone. While I naturally find myself falling into beliefs of self-righteousness or dominance, it is often my medical condition that pulls me hardest back to the reality: I need other people desperately and I am far from perfect. Through this lens, I am able to see leadership in a kaleidoscope of colors. For in the times that I do lead from a place of sincere humility, which is not continual, I am able to see and embrace the beauty of diversity

through ideas, worldviews, and peoples within a group. When I consider that most people, just like myself, fight unseen battles every day, I am reminded of the importance of leadership.

The concept of empathy is profoundly described in a book called *Respect* by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot as she argues that empathy is a vital pillar in the process of gaining respect. She opens her book explaining the challenge of defining respect. It is much like leadership in that it is easily identifiable, especially when there is a lack thereof, but difficult to define, or confine to a single person's understanding of it. After spending significant time with those who serve others, ranging from midwives to priests who comfort AIDS patients in their last days, she accumulates her experiences to highlight the necessity of empathy in leadership. Ranging from birth to death, it is those who have sincere hearts for the struggles of others that are considered worthy of respect, worthy of being followed and therefore considered a leader.

If my purpose of leadership is to serve others and I will seek to express it through a balance of personal dominance and interpersonal influence, the heart of it all needs to be empathy. In a famous TED Talk called "How Great Leaders Inspire Action" by Simon Sinek, it is said that "people don't buy what you do, they buy why you do it." In my own leadership philosophy, my "what" is to serve others; my "how" is through personal dominance and interpersonal influence; and my "why" is because my heart beats with empathy for those around me.

Rounding out my venture into the frontier of leadership, I acknowledge my current philosophy is just that, current. To look prospectively or retrospectively would be to potentially find different values that influence what I define leadership as. Upon my first attempt at understanding leadership, I felt tentative and overwhelmed, as if looking into the eyes of something I knew was far bigger than me. I knew it was not something I could conquer or

accomplish, but as I made my way closer to its aura I learned that leadership is not something I needed to try to “win”. Merely to grow in understanding throughout my life would be more than enough, as long as I so chose to apply it and pursue it. Just as Lucy from *Narnia* finds Aslan to be more complex and larger upon every interaction and, in wonder, pursues learning more, I understand that my introspection on leadership now is a mere stop on the way of a lifelong journey to explore the vastness of what leadership’s core is to me through my life. I hope that I never reach a point in my life where leadership, though innately expansive and multifaceted, appears to stop growing or becomes dull to me. At the end of my race may I hear that my leadership of those put in my life was worthy of hearing a “well done, my good and faithful servant.”

Citations

Lewis, C. S., & Baynes, P. (2009). *Prince caspian: The return to narnia*. Galaxy.

Heifetz, R. A., Linsky, M., & Grashow, A. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world*. Harvard Business Press.

Sinek, S. (n.d.). *How great leaders inspire action*. Simon Sinek: How great leaders inspire action | TED Talk. Retrieved April 19, 2022, from https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action?language=en

Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. (2000). *Respect: An exploration*. Perseus Books.

Drath, W. (2001). *The deep blue sea rethinking the source of leadership*. Jossey-Bass.