



## Dena's 'word-bites'

### Leadership: Pure Poetry

Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books written in a foreign language. Do not now look for the answers. They cannot now be given to you because you could not live them. It is a question of experiencing everything. At present you need to live the question. Perhaps you will gradually, without even noticing it, find yourself experiencing the answer, some distant day.

*Rainer Maria Rilke: Letters to a Young Poet*

Sometimes it's hard to put words to your feelings - and sometimes it's hard to find your feelings at all! This is particularly true when you find yourself in unusual circumstances with no prior knowledge or experience to inform or guide you.

Leadership is such an unusual place. It is a place where you have to negotiate uncharted territory intuitively. It is a place of few precedents and it is a place, often, of isolation. Not only this, but when you are at your most alone and uncertain, as a leader, you have to place meaning in people's hearts and engage their motivations to achieve something that they otherwise would not.

So, how can leaders access a language that enables them to find meaning in such places and communicate this meaning to those around them?

Poetry is a literary art form that bridges the gap between feelings and knowing. It creates meaningful metaphor through symbols and forms which so easily escape the more literal, descriptive language.

I am going to begin with the poem ***For a Leader*** which was written by the late John O'Donoghue, 1954-2008 (<http://www.jodonohue.com/>)

May you have the grace and wisdom  
To act kindly, learning  
To distinguish between what is  
Personal and what is not.

May you be hospitable to criticism.

May you act not from arrogance but out of service.

May you work on yourself,  
Building up and refining the ways of your mind.

May those who work for you know  
You see and respect them.

May you learn to cultivate the art of presence  
In order to engage with those who meet you.

When someone fails or disappoints you,  
May the graciousness with which you engage  
Be their stairway to renewal and refinement.

May you treasure the gifts of the mind  
Through reading and creative thinking  
So that you continue as a servant of the frontier  
Where the new will draw its enrichment from the old,  
And you never become a functionary.

May you know the wisdom of deep listening  
The healing of wholesome words,  
The encouragement of the appreciative gaze,  
The decorum of held dignity,  
The springtime edge of the bleak question.

May you have a mind that loves frontiers  
So that you can evoke the bright fields  
That lie beyond the view of the regular eye.

May you have good friends  
To mirror your blind spots.

May leadership be for you  
A true adventure of growth.

In an interview with Elizabeth Essex and Charalampos (Babis) Mainemelis<sup>1</sup>, David Whyte, a poet who has worked in the organisational context for at least two decades, says:

'I feel that poetry grants you amazing participative powers with the world. It brings you into conversations with forces for which, hitherto, you had no language. And therefore, it is immensely useful and immensely neglected. I do look for the silence amidst all the noise of corporations and corporate communications and try to bring out the timeless motifs that are present there, and which people are quite amazed to see elucidated through the poetry.'

This is what David Whyte has to say about the art of poetry. It is called: ***Good poetry begins with the lightest touch*** and it comes from his book 'Everything is Waiting for You'.

Good poetry begins with  
the lightest touch,  
a breeze arriving from nowhere  
a whispered healing arrival  
a word in your ear,  
a settling into things,  
then, like an hand in the dark,  
it arrests the whole body,  
steeling you for revelation.

In the silence that follows  
a great line,  
you can feel Lazarus,  
deep inside  
even the laziest, most deathly afraid  
part of you,  
lift up his hands and walk toward the light.

There always has been lots of ambiguity and uncertainly swirling around organisations, but today, this seems to be accented by the acceleration of globalisation, climate change and sustainability. In these circumstances, Poetry helps us make sense of our observations and experiences. It helps us articulate our doubts and bewilderment. It brings expression to confusion, clarity to chaos and hope to a sense of hopelessness.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Essex and Charalampos Mainemelis. (June, 2002) Learning from an artist about organisations: The poetry and prose of David Whyte at work. Journal of Management Inquiry. Pps 148-159

This sentiment is echoed by others who believe too, that we are living at a time where there is much confusion, chaos and helplessness and, as Dr Margaret Chan<sup>2</sup>, Director-General of the World Health Organisation says in respect of climate change and health, we are preparing for unprecedented challenges:

'All around the world, health is being shaped by the same powerful forces of globalisation. Urbanisation is a global trend, with rates growing fastest in the developing world. Demographic and epidemiological transitions are global trends, now joined by behavioural and nutritional transitions.

Industrialisation of food production, globalisation of the food supply and its distribution and marketing channels mean that all of us are increasingly eating similar unhealthy diets. With the massive move to cities, lifestyles are increasingly sedentary. Obesity has gone global.'

Nicholas Burns<sup>3</sup>, Undersecretary for Political Affairs speaking of the leadership challenges brought about by globalisation:

'Think of globalisation this way. There's a bright, positive side and there's a dark side.

The bright side of globalisation is the power of the information age. It is mobile phones and personal computers and i-Pods. And it's the power that gives people a degree of personal freedom never experienced before in all of human history.

Think of the medical advances that give us the realistic prospect of eradicating malaria and polio and the other insidious diseases that are a fact of life. Think of the energy research that promises to free us from our carbon-based economy. Think of the space research that could take us beyond Mars.

But there is also a dark side, and we've all seen it. We're witnessing the rapid development of negative forces that threaten the way we live and that threaten, in some cases, our very existence on this planet.

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<sup>2</sup> The 2007 David E. Barnes Global Health Lecture, Bethesda, Maryland, USA, 10<sup>th</sup> December 2007. ([http://www.who.int/dg/speeches/2007/20071211\\_maryland/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/dg/speeches/2007/20071211_maryland/en/index.html))

<sup>3</sup> R. Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs, The Clough Colloquium at Boston College, Newton, Massachusetts, April 11, 2007 on the subject of America's Global Leadership Challenge in the 21st Century. (<http://www.state.gov/p/us/rm/2007/85332.htm>)

I think the greatest dangers that we face in our country and the world are all these trans-national challenges. And it's going to form the way we act and interact with the rest of the world.

What are those challenges? Global climate change for sure, we can't deny the global climate change is going to have a powerful impact on the way we live and the way we work; trafficking of women and children in many parts of the world; the sale of young women in bondage is a major human crisis in the Balkans, in the Middle East, in Africa, in parts of our own country here at home; the spread of pandemic diseases; think of HIV/AIDS, the pandemic in South Africa; the proliferation of chemical and biological nuclear technology and the really harrowing prospect that that technology might be joined with Osama bin Laden or any other radical or terrorist you would care to identify who would use those weapons with their incredibly destructive power against us.'

These are heavy agendas and they (somewhat poetically) spell out the challenges that we must tackle if humanity is to survive – and we have little to assist us. Most of us feel inadequate to the task. It is too big. It is too daunting. It is too important. If we feel ungainly in our enterprise, read this poem, *The Swan*, by Rainer Maria Rilke which has been translated by Robert Bly. It speaks of the awkwardness we so often feel as we encounter those things that are not natural to us; that exercise our doubt and our fears until we let go, trust in our natural abilities and take to the truth as if it were water to a swan.

This clumsy living that moves lumbering  
as if in ropes through what is not done  
reminds us of the awkward way the swan walks  
and to die, and to die, which is the letting go  
of the ground we stand on and cling to everyday  
is like the swan when he nervously lets himself  
down into the water which receives him gaily  
and which flows under and after him wave after wave  
while the swan, unmoving and marvellously calm,  
is pleased to be carried, each moment,  
more fully grown, more like a king, farther and farther on...

Where do we go with all of this? Joseph Campbell being interviewed by Bill Moyers in 1988.

'Mythology is the homeland of the muses; the inspirers of art and poetry. And to see life as a poem and yourself participating in a poem

is what the myth does for you. A poem is a vocabulary in the form, not of words, but of acts and adventures which connotes something transcendent of the action and yet informs the whole thing so that you always feel in accord with the Universal being.

Poetry breaks open the bewildering and impenetrable dynamics of the day and makes them accessible and manageable. It also helps you access your own deeper truth and puts words to the complex being that you are. Through an instinctive resonance with words, you can 'know' yourself better.

Every myth, every religion, is true as metaphorical of human and cosmic mystery – but when you get stuck to the metaphor, you are in difficulty. The literal translation of the symbols; the *mistaken* reading of the symbols in terms of prose instead of poetry creates confusion. That's reading a metaphor in terms of the denotation instead of the connotation. It's purely a literary problem.

The poetry gets to the unseen reality, that which is beyond even the concept of reality, that which transcends all thought. It's putting you there all the time and then in some way giving you a line to connect with that mystery which you are, and the myths do it. By gosh, they do it!

Good leaders transmit meaning to their followers. These followers are likely to have different values and beliefs to their leaders, but where they can meet, where they can interpret aspiration similarly, is in metaphor. This is beautifully conveyed in poetry. Of course, I'm not advocating leaders walking around speaking iambic pentameter, but rather using a poetic mindset to inspire and create ambition and action where there was previously little, or none. This means, taking oneself out of the equation. It's not about 'you as a leader', per se, it's more about what you think and how you inspire. This short poem by Patrick Kavanagh illustrates the importance of 'getting out of your own way'.

Me I will throw away  
me sufficient for the day  
the sticky self that clings adhesions  
on the wings to love and adventure.  
To go on the grand tour  
A man must be free of self-necessity

And this, is my favourite poem. It speaks of the unknown and the sturdy resilience with which someone with vision approaches it. I

found it on the wall of the underpass between Waterloo station and the IMAX cinema. It used to be called 'cardboard' city and housed the many people in London who slept in cardboard boxes because they were homeless. Princess Diana famously visited it in secret (if that's not a contradiction in terms) with her young sons to show them how others' fortunes compare with their own and to lay out their responsibility as servants of the Realm. It is called ***I dream of a Green Garden*** by Sue Hubbard.

I am not afraid as I descend  
step by step, leaving behind the salt wind  
blowing up the corrugated river.

The damp city streets, their sodium glare  
of rush-hour headlights pitted with pearls of rain;  
for my eyes still reflect the half remembered moon.

Already your face recedes beneath the station clock,  
a damp smudge among the shadows  
mirrored in the train's wet glass.

Will you forget me? Steel tracks lead you out  
past trains and crematoria,  
boat yards and bike sheds, ruby shards

of roman glass and wolf-bone mummified in mud,  
the rows of curtained windows like eyelids  
heavy with sleep to the city's green edge.

Now I stop my ears with wax, hold fast  
the memory of the song you once whispered in my ear;  
its echoes tangle like briars in my thick hair.

You turned to look.  
Seconds fly past like birds.  
My hands grow cold. I am ice and cloud

This path unravels.  
Deep in hidden rooms filled with dust  
and sour-night breath the lost city is sleeping.

Above the hurt sky is weeping  
soaked nightingales have ceased to sing  
dusk has come too early. I am drowning in blue.

I dream of a green garden  
where the sun feathers my face  
like your once eager kiss.

Soon, soon I will climb  
from this blackened earth  
Into the diffident light.

So, go from this relentless, drab world 'into the diffident light' and lead with courage and imagination!

**Post script.** After finishing this 'word-bite', I went into the visitor's reception area at a client's Head Office. This is a large organisation in the financial services sector. There, on the elegant glass table amongst the 'easy' chairs, was a booklet full of poems written by the employees of the organisation. It was part of the Arts@Work initiative that was being run in-house by the organisation to celebrate a significant anniversary. Now that's imaginative - and that's poetry!