Essay

A Leadership Trope over Troubled Waters

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Success is Counted Sweetest
Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple host
Who took the flag to-day
Can tell the definition
So clear, of victory,

As he, defeated, dying,
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Break, agonized and clear.

Emily Dickinson

The Snow Man
One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;
And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter
Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,
Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place
For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Wallace Stevens
Introduction

What if we were to erect a pantheon to honor the American presidents and the interior were arranged to reflect leadership ability? Who among our leaders, past and present, would be honored with the most favored position? Many would argue that such a position should be given to Abraham Lincoln. As historian Richard Striner has observed, Lincoln was not only the “Savior of the Union, the Great Emancipator, and a leader of remarkable character,” but, perhaps more importantly, Lincoln was the positioner of the United States as a “world colossus.” (Striner, 2010) But whose statue would be near the rear of the building, occupying either the forty-third of forty-fourth spot (depending upon the method of counting employed)? Clearly the last spot (and those in neighboring spaces) would be a great place to have a private conversation or to read in silence as the foot traffic and other such unwelcome distractions would tend to be minimal in and around the “hall of shame.” Such presidents are not perceived typically as real leaders; they are seen as offering only a perverse lesson, i.e. the nature of failure, and as such, are held as not worth the investment of our time or interest.

At a facile level, we tend to define leaders in terms of how much success they can be demonstrated, make that, quantified, to have. While success is “counted sweetest” differently by the various silos within leadership studies, e.g. the trait tribe wants to quantify the presence of the ideal set of personality characteristics within the leader as the traits make the leader (Bennis, 1986), the situationalists contend that successful leadership is measured in terms of the leader’s ability to change in accordance with contextual demands (Blanchard, 1985), the transformational team looks to quantify the change ushered in by the leader as the mark of
success (Burns, 1978), and finally complexity scholars might deny the linear reality assumed by the other schools while asserting a quantifiable emergent adaptive reality as the “summum bonum,” (Marion, 2008) etc., all of these schools mentioned (and those unmentioned) suffer from a common set of ontological and epistemological assumptions. Despite differences in method and analysis, they all assume, as good citizens of the post-Enlightenment world seem obliged, that the universe is knowable, meaning is stable and quantifiable, and that success, however defined, is a universal, singular, and enduring constant. The fixed vantage offered through such assumptions affords leadership studies the illusion that we can assess, without error, what leadership means (and how to quantify that meaning) across any given point in time and across any conceivable context. Such loftiness often results in leadership practitioners publishing a guaranteed map to success – all within “x” easy steps. Given these assumptions, we should have the sorest need to comprehend the singular and proper nectar of leadership, i.e. success.

In the face of such wisdom, what if we were to return to the presidential pantheon and rest for a while in the shade of the least favored spot? Let’s assume that Franklin Pierce, typically considered one of the least successful presidents within American history to date, has been enthroned in the depths of depths within the hall of ignominy. What can be learned from stepping outside of the stream of accepted assumptions and jumping into some troubled and troubling waters?
Breaking the Ice

The situation waiting for Pierce upon his inauguration in 1853 can be described as a leadership scenario in which he had to choose between using his newly invested power towards the abolition of slavery or towards the preservation of slavery. If he used his power to abolish slavery then the so-called “slave” states would most likely leave the Union. The economic impact on both the so-called “free” states and “slave” states would be devastating as, within such a scenario, the south would be a largely agrarian state without an industrial base and the north would be a largely industrial state without an agrarian base. The Union would be dissolved and war could (and indeed did) result. Avoiding war (and thereby preserving the Union) entailed the preservation of slavery among “slave” states – a compromise position unacceptable (for many noble and ignoble reasons) among “free” states. In short, Pierce was a leader caught between the horror of slavery and the rage of war.

Our current “common-sense” informs us that obviously slavery is an egregious and horrific evil. Slavery is never an acceptable option. We can therefore view the above disjunction as not only offering a potential preferable course of action (as being a “solvable” problem) but as offering an obvious solution: if Franklin Pierce were a real leader, then he should have sided with the Abolitionists. History informs us that Pierce fostered southern sympathies. Perhaps his legacy of failure is a just reward for not “seeing” the obvious? Current leadership models, blinded as they are by their philosophical assumptions, might respond that Pierce lacked the appropriate traits of a genuine leader or simply did not have the ability to understand the context and adapt his approach.
On the other hand, war is equally horrific. It is the deliberate, savage, and relentless pursuit of human life. The indisputable cost of any war, in the least, will be human lives. The toll is often rung in ways that defy human imagination and sensibility. The service person killed in action, regardless of the war in question, does not return home. Only the casket (in some cases), a flag, and perhaps some “chest candy,” i.e. medals, are returned to the family. Such a dark rite would be repeated well over 600,000 times over the course of the American Civil War. Pierce, although blind to the “obvious” choice in above, was prescient enough to foresee the human cost, to feel the undeniable tragedy and loss, which the pending war would demand. He sought to avoid what he perceived as a “cruel, heartless, aimless, [and] unnecessary war.” (Wallner, 2005, p. 37) Jefferson Davis, in a farewell letter to Peirce upon the secession of Mississippi, also wrote that the prospect of “Civil War has only horror for me.” (Davis, 1861) Poignantly, leaders from both sides of the conflict were united in their hope to avoid the destruction that they knew the war would reap. One current leadership model, blinded as it is by its philosophical assumptions, might respond that Pierce’s sympathy towards slavery demonstrates that he could never become a transformational leader (like Lincoln) because what he valued was (and is) necessarily divorced from the set of values that will usher in transformation.

Perhaps the complexity of the issue, unlike the “good-for-what-ails-you” tonic so often peddled by current leadership models, however, suggests that the lived experience of leadership de-centers the abstract and illusory notion that the realities encountered by leaders will involve categorically “solvable” and therefore, in all cases, present potentially “win-able”
scenarios. Pierce’s dilemma has no desirable “end-game.” While abolishing slavery and avoiding war are obviously desirable ends, they do not apply within this scenario because, within this scenario, each acts as a cause of the negation of the other. If you abolish slavery then you bring about war. If you avoid war then you preserve slavery. How could any leader, any human being, be “successful” in such a setting? Any viable leadership model must offer a credible response to such dilemmas; a meaningful response cannot and will not include a prescription for success, as, in this scenario (as in so many instances in life) success is not an option. Even if the dilemma itself can be dismissed, the possibility of a “no-win” scenario still lingers. How will each approach address such scenarios? Given the ontological and epistemological assumptions at work in most current theories, e.g. that the universe is stable, knowable and predictable and that meaning (in this case the meaning of “success” and “leadership”) is an antecedent and unchanging reality, the probable result is that most current leadership models will not be able to treat adequately such a scenario.

A secondary reason for introducing the Pierce dilemma is to bracket (and ultimately to de-center) why we feel so compelled to view leadership scenarios as subject to reason (henceforth referred to as “reasonable”)? The reality, the actual and lived human suffering reflected within the scenario, was not and will never be “reasonable.” The causes in play are not necessarily determinate, knowable, or simple. We cannot always easily weigh our options, measure a course to success through a crafty application of reason and the appropriate tools, and then navigate the troubled waters ahead expertly. The forces of good and evil, of profit and loss, are not readily identifiable and do not neatly line up on opposing sides - except for the
cold and sterile pages of a ledger. The reality of leading in an ambiguous and chaotic world is often outside of the abstract and reasonable worlds as assumed and regurgitated by the majority of leadership theory and pedagogy. As such, reason may play a role in mapping leadership theories but it should not be the only tool employed. A fully human model of leadership should be exactly that – a model that incorporates all of the different aspects of being human, e.g. mood, emotion, beliefs, inconsistency (even within an individual’s perception of a single event), etc.

**Failure as Founding**

A fully human model of leadership, one grounded in lived experience and not abstract sterility, should also learn from the experience of failure as well as the often cited goal of success. Such importance is reflected in the biography Nathaniel Hawthorne, a friend of Pierce since their shared undergraduate at Bowdoin College, wrote of Pierce for use in Pierce’s campaign. (Wallner, 2005, 33) Early within the biography, Hawthorne reports that Pierce’s first case as an attorney “was a failure, and perhaps a somewhat marked one.” (Hawthorne, 2010, p. 10) Only a friend would be so kind! Hawthorne, a keen observer of human nature and psychology, comments that “It is in moments of defeat that character and ability are most fairly tested.” (Hawthorne, 2010, p. 10) Hawthorne is reminding us that defeat, or failure, *fortunately*, is not only an ever-present part of our experience but it is a vital developmental experience.
But what is meant by defeat or what has been rephrased as failure? A working definition would have to include the notion that an antecedent goal or predetermined expectation was not met. Although the personal experiencing of failure ranges from the mildly frustrating to the catastrophic, the reality of failure, if we are being honest, constitutes a significant portion of most of our lives. What sense can we make of leadership theories, then, whose ontological and epistemological assumptions force the theories to either disvalue or exclude failure? Given the reality of failure, we should demand that leadership schools seek not merely to dismiss the phenomenon, or as “closet Augustinians” treat failure as a negation of success, but should somehow incorporate the experience as central to leadership because of the vital and ever-present role failure plays in being human.

Lost in Translation

Perhaps even more significant than the notion that not all leadership scenarios are “solvable,” or the notion that all leadership scenarios are “reasonable,” or the notion that leaders should never fail and leadership theory need only concern itself with success, is the troublesome notion that the meaning of leadership might not be fixed and unchanging; as if there is one universal meaning that applies across all places and times.

One possible contrary assumption can be found within the work of noted anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Geertz argued against not only the existence of a meta-structure, upon which all knowledge could be interpreted meaningfully (such as the one assumed by much of
leadership studies), but, even more radically, that even the human thought process itself varied among specific communities and cultures. He therefore called for a “practical epistemology,” (Geertz, 1983, p. 151) which recognized the binding and delimiting impact of culture and role on the knower.

Central to the plausibility of Geertz’s call for a practical epistemology is his claim that we are unable to “get at the curve of someone else’s experience.” (Geertz, 1983, p. 156). Pierce supplies us with ample evidence that his is a world far removed from our own, i.e. that we cannot “get at his curve.” For example, consider Pierce’s reaction to Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. On the day after the Proclamation was issued, Pierce wrote that “the most obvious dictates of humanity, honor and common honesty, to say nothing of patriotism, commands the withdrawal of support [from Lincoln] promptly and irrevocably.” (Pierce, 1863)

For a reader from our context, Pierce’s treatment of Lincoln is absurd. As noted above, Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, is clearly one of our most successful leaders. Yet Pierce’s examination of the very same issue calls for the exact opposite conclusion. He reasons, “… the Black race… [will] rise and with the barbaric features which must be inseparable from a successful servile insurrection to slay and devastate without regard to age or sex, without any condition of restraint…” (Pierce, 1863) Later on within the same letter, Pierce declares that the “civilized world” will “say justly” that the “crime” of Emancipation is on a level “never before contemplated by any nation civilized or barbarous.” (Pierce, 1863) These are not the words and sentiments of a fringe radical or a “sociopath;” Pierce’s words unflinchingly reflect the
"common-sense" of a distant time and strange place. The rage flowing from the letter is beyond racism as we understand it. It reflects a view in which race was equated with ontological status.

Equally, Pierce’s words demonstrate Geertz’s call for an epistemology that respects such radical strangeness and distance. Within such a radically contrary epistemology, leadership is not a solvable puzzle that, once determined and all of the pieces fitted together, we can simply refer to the completed puzzle as the only meaningful map forevermore. Geertz’s call is for constant and reoccurring mapping and admits that not all mapping will fit neatly with the set of other maps. While current state leadership theory offers us a single map (or perhaps a limited set of maps) and the siren’s song of harmony, experience (and leadership modeling based on experience) sees through the transparency of such approaches and offers only an opaque alternative. No map is possible on such a terrain but perhaps some trail blazes may be left in order to offer the visitor to this terrain some way to go on.

The Nothing that Is

What of our presidential pantheon? A circular interior in which no ranking was assigned is not completely dissonant with the observations made above. It would require a visitor to assess each and every president while admitting of the limitation encumbered by the views and weight of the visitor’s time and place. Perhaps a barrier between the statues and the viewing space could spatially reinforce the distance caused by our “curve of experience.” But does the barrier turn us enough, such that, we are moved from focusing on reasonable and abstract
features and are refocused on the failures, the successes, in short, the *fullness* of the person being viewed by the *fullness* of the person viewing? We should not be mere spectators passively strolling through the pantheon, the proximity of the statues or the grandeur of the building somehow magically enriching us. Maybe the desire to enshrine our leaders in likenesses captured in stone and displayed within wonderfully impressive buildings is understandable and quite reasonable but, ultimately, a distraction. If we wish to reawaken ourselves and our approach to leadership, it should not be “by mechanical aids” but through “an infinite expectation of the dawn.” (Thoreau, 1985, p. 394) Within the openness of a pantheon constantly under construction and reconstruction *within us*, we play the role of visitor. We should be actively creative visitors, i.e. constantly engaging, perpetually assessing, and tirelessly acting as a result. Leadership theory should reside within that sort of pantheon and strive to be that sort of visitor.
References


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