

LEADING FROM WITHIN

by Parker J. Palmer

Note: This piece comes from Chapter V of Parker Palmer's book, *Let Your Life Speak*. As such you'll notice some references to earlier chapters in the book.

Back to the World

From the depths of depression, I turn now to our shared vocation of leadership in the world of action. This may seem more like a leap than a turn, but none of the great wisdom traditions would look upon this segue with surprise. Go far enough on the inner journey, they all tell us—go past ego toward true self—and you end up not lost in narcissism but returning to the world, bearing more gracefully the responsibilities that come with being human.

Those words are more than a device to weave these chapters together—they are a faithful reflection of what happened to me once I passed through the valley of depression. At the end of that descent into darkness and isolation, I found myself re-engaged with community, better able to offer leadership to the causes I care about.

“Leadership” is a concept we often resist. It seems immodest, even self-aggrandizing, to think of ourselves as leaders. But if it is true that we are made for community, then leadership is everyone's vocation, and it can be an evasion to insist that it is not. When we live in the close-knit ecosystem called community, everyone follows and everyone leads.

Even I—a person who is unfit to be president of anything, who once galloped away from institutions on a high horse—have come to understand that, for better or for worse, I lead by word and deed *simply because I am here doing what I do*. If you are also here, doing what you do, then you also exercise leadership of some sort.

But modesty is only one reason we resist the idea of leadership; cynicism about our most visible leaders is another. In America, at least, our declining public life has bred too many self-serving leaders who seem lacking in ethics, compassion, and vision. But if we look again at the headlines, we will find leaders worthy of respect in places we often ignore: in South Africa, Latin America, and eastern Europe, for example, places where people who have known great darkness have emerged to lead others toward the light.

The words of one of those people—Vaclav Havel, playwright, dissident, prisoner, now president of the Czech Republic—take us to the heart of what leadership means in settings both large and small. In 1990, a few months after Czechoslovakia freed itself from communist rule, Havel addressed a joint session of the U.S. Congress:

The communist type of totalitarian system has left both our nations, Czechs and Slovaks...a legacy of countless dead, an infinite spectrum of human suffering, profound economic decline, and, above all, enormous human humiliation. It has brought us horrors that fortunately you have not known. [I think we Americans should confess that some in our country *have* known such horrors.—P.J.P.]

It has also given us something positive, a special capacity to look from time to time somewhat further than someone who has not undergone this bitter experience. A person who cannot move and lead a somewhat normal life

because he is pinned under a boulder has more time to think about his hopes than someone who is not trapped that way.

What I'm trying to say is this: we must all learn many things from you, from how to educate our offspring, how to elect our representatives, all the way to how to organize our economic life so that it will lead to prosperity and not to poverty. But it doesn't have to be merely assistance from the well-educated, powerful and wealthy to someone who has nothing and therefore has nothing to offer in return.

We...can offer something to you: our experience and the knowledge that has come from it. The specific experience I'm talking about has given me one certainty: consciousness precedes being, and not the other way around, as the Marxists claim. For this reason, the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and in human responsibility. Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better...and the catastrophe toward which this world is headed—be it ecological, social, demographic or a general breakdown of civilization—will be unavoidable. ¹

The power for authentic leadership, Havel tells us, is found not in external arrangements but in the human heart. Authentic leaders in every setting—from families to nation-states—aim at liberating the heart, their own and others, so that its powers can liberate the world.

I cannot imagine a stronger affirmation from a more credible source of the significance of the inner life in the external affairs of our time: “consciousness precedes being” and “the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart.” Material reality, Havel claims, is not the fundamental factor in the movement of human history. Consciousness is. Awareness is. Thought is. Spirit is. These are not the ephemera of dreams. They are the inner Archimedean points from which oppressed people have gained the leverage to lift immense boulders and release transformative change.

But there is another truth that Havel, a guest in our country, was too polite to tell. It is not only the Marxists who have believed that matter is more powerful than consciousness, that economics is more fundamental than spirit, that the flow of cash creates more reality than does the flow of visions and ideas. Capitalists have believed these things too—and though Havel was too polite to say this to us, honesty obliges us to say it to ourselves.

We capitalists have a long and crippling legacy of believing in the power of external realities much more deeply than we believe in the power of the inner life. How many times have you heard, or said, “Those are inspiring notions, but the hard reality is...”? How many times have you worked in systems based on the belief that the only changes that matter are the ones you can measure or count? How many times have you watched people kill off creativity by treating traditional policies and practices as absolute constraints on what we can do?

This is not just a Marxist problem; it is a human problem. But the great insight of our spiritual traditions is that we—especially those of us who enjoy political freedom and relative affluence—are not victims of that society: we are its co-creators. We live in and through a complex interaction of spirit and matter, of the powers inside of us and the stuff “out there” in the world. External reality does not impinge upon us as an ultimate

constraint: if we who are privileged find ourselves confined, it is only because we have conspired in our own imprisonment.

The spiritual traditions do not deny the reality of the outer world. They simply claim that we help make that world by projecting our spirit on it, for better or for worse. If our institutions are rigid, it is because our hearts fear change; if they set us in mindless competition with each other, it is because we value victory over all else; if they are heedless of human well-being, it is because something in us is heartless as well.

We can make choices about what we are going to project, and with those choices we help grow the world that is. Consciousness precedes being: consciousness, yours and mine, can form, deform, or reform our world. Our complicity in world-making is a source of awesome and sometimes painful responsibility—and a source of profound hope for change. It is the ground of our common call to leadership, the truth that makes leaders of us all.

Shadows and Spirituality

A leader is someone with the power to project either shadow or light upon some part of the world, and upon the lives of the people who dwell there. A leader shapes the ethos in which others must live, an ethos as light-filled as heaven or as shadowy as hell. A *good* leader has high awareness of the interplay of inner shadow and light, lest the act of leadership do more harm than good.

I think, for example, of teachers who create the conditions under which young people must spend so many hours: some shine a light that allows new growth to flourish, while others cast a shadow under which seedlings die. I think of parents who generate similar effects in the lives of their families, or of clergy who do the same to entire congregations. I think of corporate CEOs whose daily decisions are driven by inner dynamics, but who rarely reflect on those motives or even believe they are real.

We have a long tradition of approaching leadership via “the power of positive thinking.” I want to counterbalance that approach by paying special attention to the tendency we have as leaders to project more shadow than light. Leadership is hard work for which one is regularly criticized and rarely rewarded, so it is understandable that we need to bolster ourselves with positive thoughts. But by failing to look at our shadows, we feed a dangerous delusion that leaders too often indulge: that our efforts are always well-intended, our power always benign, and the problem is always in those difficult people whom we are trying to lead!

Those of us who readily embrace leadership, especially public leadership, tend toward extroversion, which often means ignoring what is happening inside ourselves. If we have any sort of inner life, we “compartmentalize” it, walling it off from our public work. This, of course, allows the shadow to grow unchecked, until it emerges larger-than-life into the public realm, a problem we are well-acquainted with in our own domestic politics. Leaders need not only the technical skills to manage the external world—they need the spiritual skills to journey inward toward the source of both shadow and light.

Spirituality, like leadership, is a hard word to define. But Annie Dillard has given us a vivid image of what authentic spirituality is about:

In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters down, if you drop with them farther over the world’s rim, you find what our sciences can not locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good, and evil its power for evil, the unified field:

our complex and inexplicable caring for each other, and for our life together here. This is given. It is not learned.²

Here, Dillard names two critical features of any spiritual journey. One is that it will take us inward and downward, toward the hardest realities of our lives, rather than outward and upward toward abstraction, idealization, and exhortation. The spiritual journey runs counter to the power of positive thinking.

Why must we go in and down? Because as we do so, we will meet the darkness that we carry within ourselves—the ultimate source of the shadows that we project onto other people. If we do not understand that the enemy is within, we will find a thousand ways of making someone “out there” into the enemy, becoming leaders who oppress rather than liberate others.

But, says Annie Dillard, if we ride those monsters all the way down, we break through to something precious—to “the unified field, our complex and inexplicable caring for each other,” to the community we share beneath the broken surface of our lives. Good leadership comes from people who have penetrated their own inner darkness and arrived at the place where we are at one with one another, people who can lead the rest of us to a place of “hidden wholeness” because they have been there and know the way.

Vaclav Havel would be familiar with the journey Annie Dillard describes, because downward is where you go when you spend years “pinned under a boulder.” That image suggests not only the political oppression under which all Czechs were forced to live, but also the psychological depression Havel fell into as he struggled to survive under the communist regime.

In 1975, that depression compelled Havel to write an open letter of protest to Gustav Husak, head of the Czech communist party. His letter—which got Havel thrown in jail and became the text of an underground movement that fomented the “Velvet Revolution” of 1989—was, in Havel’s own words, an act of “autotherapy,” an alternative to suicide, his expression of the decision to live divided no more. As Vincent and Jane Kavaloski have written, “[Havel] felt that he could remain silent only at the risk of ‘living a lie,’ and destroying himself from within.”³

That is the choice before us when we are “pinned under a boulder” of any sort, the same choice Nelson Mandela made by using twenty-eight years in prison prepare inwardly for leadership instead of drowning in despair. Under the most oppressive circumstances, people like Mandela, Havel, and uncounted anonymous others go all the way down, travel through their inner darkness—and emerge with the capacity to lead the rest of us toward community, toward “our complex and inexplicable caring for each other.”

Annie Dillard offers a powerful image of the inner journey, and tells us what might happen if we were to take it. But why would anybody want to take a journey of that sort, with its multiple difficulties and dangers? Everything in us cries out against it—which is why we externalize everything. It is so much easier to deal with the external world, to spend our lives manipulating material and institutions and other people instead of dealing with our own souls. We like to talk about the outer world as if it were infinitely complex and demanding, but it is a cakewalk compared to the labyrinth of our inner lives!

Here is a small story from my life about why one might want to take the inner journey. In my early forties I decided to go on the program called Outward Bound. I was on the edge of my first depression, a fact I knew only dimly at the time, and I thought Outward Bound might be a place to shake up my life and learn some things I needed to know.

I chose the week-long course at Hurricane Island, off the coast of Maine. I should have known from that name what was in store for me; next time I will sign up for the

course at Happy Gardens or Pleasant Valley! Though it was a week of great teaching, deep community, and genuine growth, it was also a week of fear and loathing!

In the middle of that week I faced the challenge I feared most. One of our instructors backed me up to the edge of a cliff 110 feet above solid ground. He tied a very thin rope to my waist—a rope that looked ill-kempt to me, and seemed to be starting to unravel—and told me to start “rappelling” down that cliff.

“Do what?” I said.

“Just go!” the instructor explained, in typical Outward Bound fashion.

So I went—and immediately slammed into a ledge, some four feet down from the edge of the cliff, with bone-jarring, brain-jarring force.

The instructor looked down at me: “I don’t think you’ve quite got it.”

“Right,” said I, being in no position to disagree. “So what am I supposed to do?”

“The only way to do this,” he said, “is to lean back as far as you can. You have to get your body at right angles to the cliff so that your weight will be on your feet. It’s counter-intuitive, but it’s the only way that works.”

I knew that he was wrong, of course. I knew that the trick was to hug the mountain, to stay as close to the rock face as I could. So I tried it again, my way—and slammed into the next ledge, another four feet down.

“You still don’t have it,” the instructor said helpfully.

“OK,” I said, “tell me again what I am supposed to do.”

“Lean way back,” said he, “and take the next step.”

The next step was a very big one, but I took it—and, wonder of wonders, it worked. I leaned back into empty space, eyes fixed on the heavens in prayer, made tiny, tiny moves with my feet, and started descending down the rock face, gaining confidence with every step.

I was about halfway down when the second instructor called up from below: “Parker, I think you better stop and see what’s just below your feet.” I lowered my eyes very slowly—so as not to shift my weight—and saw that I was approaching a deep hole in the face of the rock.

In order to get down, I would have to get around that hole, which meant I could not maintain the straight line of descent I had started to get comfortable with. I would need to change course and swing myself around that hole, to the left or to the right. I knew for a certainty that attempting to do so would lead directly to my death—so I froze, paralyzed with fear.

The second instructor let me hang there, trembling, in silence for what seemed like a very long time. Finally, she shouted up these helpful words: “Parker, is anything wrong?”

To this day, I do not know where my words came from, though I have twelve witnesses to the fact that I spoke them. In a high, squeaky voice I said, “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Then,” said the second instructor, “it’s time that you learned the Outward Bound motto.”

“Oh, keen,” I thought. “I’m about to die, and she’s going to give me a motto!”

But then she shouted ten words I hope never to forget, words whose impact and meaning I can still feel: “If you can’t get out of it, get into it!”

I had long believed in the concept of “the word become flesh” but until that moment I had not experienced it. My teacher spoke words so compelling that they bypassed my mind, went into my flesh, and animated my legs and feet. No helicopter would come to rescue me; the instructor on the cliff would not pull me up with the rope; there was no parachute in my backpack to float me to the ground. There was no way out

of my dilemma except to get into it—so my feet started to move and in a few minutes I made it safely down.

Why would anyone want to embark on the daunting inner journey about which Annie Dillard writes? Because there is no way out of one's inner life, so one had better get into it. On the inward and downward spiritual journey, the only way out is in and through.

Out of the Shadow, Into the Light

If we, as leaders, are to cast less shadow and more light, we need to ride certain monsters all the way down, understand the shadows they create, and experience the transformation that can come as we “get into” our own spiritual lives. Here is a bestiary of five such monsters. The five are not theoretical for me; I became personally acquainted with each of them during my descent into depression. They are also the monsters I work with when I lead retreats where leaders of many sorts—CEOs, clergy, parents, teachers, citizens, and seekers—take an inward journey toward common ground.

The first shadow-casting monster is insecurity about identity and worth. Many leaders have an extroverted personality that makes this shadow hard to see. But extroversion sometimes develops as a way to cope with self-doubt: we plunge into external activity to prove that we are worthy—or simply to evade the question. There is a well-known form of this syndrome, especially among men, in which our identity becomes so dependent on performing some external role that we become depressed, and even die, when that role is taken away.

When we are insecure about our own identities, we create settings that deprive other people of *their* identities as a way of buttressing our own. This happens all the time in families, where parents who do not like themselves give their children low self-esteem. It happens at work as well: how often I phone a business or professional office and hear, “Dr. Jones's office—this is Nancy speaking.” The boss has a title and a last name but the person (usually a woman) who answers the phone has neither, because the boss has decreed that it will be that way.

There are dynamics in all kinds of institutions that deprive the many of their identity so the few can enhance their own, as if identity were a zero-sum game, a win-lose situation. Look into a classroom, for example, where an insecure teacher is forcing students to be passive stenographers of the teacher's store of knowledge, leaving the teacher with more sense of selfhood and the vulnerable students with less. Or look in on a hospital where the doctors turn patients into objects—“the kidney in Room 410”—as a way of claiming superiority at the very time when vulnerable patients desperately need a sense of self.

Things are not always this way, of course. There are settings and institutions led by people whose identities do not depend on depriving others of theirs. If you are in that kind of family or office or school or hospital, your sense of self is enhanced by leaders who know who they are.

These leaders possess a gift available to all who take an inner journey: the knowledge that identity does not depend on the role we play or the power it gives us over others. It depends only on the simple fact that we are children of God, valued in and for ourselves. When a leader is grounded in that knowledge, what happens in the family, the office, the classroom, the hospital can be life-giving for all concerned.

A second shadow inside many of us is the belief that the universe is a battleground, hostile to human interests. Notice how often we use images of warfare as we go about our work, especially in organizations. We talk about tactics and strategies, allies and enemies,

wins and losses, “do or die.” If we fail to be fiercely competitive, the imagery suggests, we will surely lose, because the world we live in is essentially a vast combat zone.

Unfortunately, life is full of self-fulfilling prophecies. The tragedy of this inner shadow, our fear of losing a fight, is that it helps create conditions where people feel compelled to live as if they were at war. Yes, the world is competitive, but largely because we make it so. Some of our best institutions, from corporations to change agencies to schools, are learning that there is another way of doing business, a way that is consensual, cooperative, communal: they are fulfilling a different prophecy and creating a different reality.

The gift we receive on the inner journey is the insight that the universe is working together for good. The structure of reality is not the structure of a battle. Reality is not out to get anybody. Yes, there is death, but it is part of the cycle of life, and when we learn to move gracefully with that cycle a great harmony comes into our lives. The spiritual truth that harmony is more fundamental than warfare in the nature of reality itself could transform this leadership shadow—and transform our institutions as well.

A third shadow common among leaders is “functional atheism,” the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with us. This is the unconscious, unexamined conviction that if anything decent is going to happen here, we are the ones who must make it happen—a conviction held even by people who talk a good game about God.

This shadow causes pathology on every level of our lives. It leads us to impose our will on others, stressing our relationships, sometimes to the point of breaking. It often eventuates in burnout, depression, and despair, as we learn that the world will not bend to our will and we become embittered about that fact. Functional atheism is the shadow that drives collective frenzy as well. It explains why the average group can tolerate no more than fifteen seconds of silence: if we are not making noise, we believe, nothing good is happening and something must be dying.

The gift we receive on the inner journey is the knowledge that ours is not the only act in town. Not only are there other acts out there, but some of them are even better than ours, at least occasionally! We learn that we need not carry the whole load but can share it with others, liberating us and empowering them. We learn that sometimes we are free to lay the load down altogether. The great community asks us to do only what we are able, and trust the rest to other hands.

A fourth shadow within and among us is fear, especially our fear of the natural chaos of life. Many of us—parents and teachers and CEOs—are deeply devoted to eliminating all remnants of chaos from the world. We want to organize and orchestrate things so thoroughly that messiness will never bubble up around us and threaten to overwhelm us (for “messiness” read dissent, innovation, challenge, and change). In families and churches and corporations, this shadow is projected as rigidity of rules and procedures, creating an ethos that is imprisoning rather than empowering. (Then, of course, the mess we must deal with is the prisoners trying to break out!)

The insight we receive on the inner journey is that chaos is the precondition to creativity: as every creation myth has it, life itself emerged from the void. Even that which has been created needs to be returned to chaos from time to time so it can be regenerated in more vital form. When a leader fears chaos so deeply that he or she tries to eliminate it, the shadow of death will fall across everything that leader approaches—for the ultimate answer to all of life’s messiness is death.

My final example of the shadows that leaders project is, paradoxically, the denial of death itself. Though we sometimes kill things off well before their time, we also live in denial of the fact that all things must die in due course. Leaders who participate in this

denial often demand that the people around them keep resuscitating things that are no longer alive. Projects and programs that should have been unplugged long ago are kept on life-support to accommodate the insecurities of a leader who does not want anything to die on his or her watch.

Within our denial of death lurks fear of another sort: the fear of failure. In most organizations, failure means a pink slip in your box, even if that failure, that “little death,” was suffered in the service of high purpose. It is interesting that science, so honored in our culture, seems to have transcended this particular fear. A good scientist does not fear the death of a hypothesis because that “failure” clarifies the steps that need to be taken toward truth, sometimes more than a hypothesis that succeeds. The best leaders in every setting reward people for taking worthwhile risks even if they are likely to fail. These leaders know that the death of an initiative—if it was tested for good reasons—is always a source of new learning.

The gift we receive on the inner journey is the knowledge that death finally comes to everything—and yet death does not have the final word. By allowing something to die when its time is due, we create the conditions under which new life can emerge.

Inner Work in Community

Can we help each other deal with the inner issues inherent in leadership? We can, and I believe we must. Our frequent failure as leaders to deal with our inner lives leaves too many individuals and institutions in the dark. From the family to the corporation to the body politic, we are in trouble partly because of the shadows I have named. Since we can’t get out of it, we must get into it—by helping each other explore our inner lives. What might that help look like?

First, we could lift up the value of “inner work.” That phrase should become commonplace in families, schools, and religious institutions, at least, helping us to understand that inner work is as real as outer work and involves skills one can develop, skills like journaling, reflective reading, spiritual friendship, meditation, and prayer. We can teach our children something that their parents did not always know: if people skimp on their inner work, their outer work will suffer as well.

Second, we could spread the word that inner work, though it is a deeply *personal* matter, is not necessarily a *private* matter: inner work can be helped along in community. Indeed, doing inner work together is a vital counterpoint to doing it alone. Left to our own devices, we may delude ourselves in ways that others can help us correct.

But *how* a community offers such help is a critical question. We are surrounded by communities based on the practice of “setting each other straight”—an ultimately totalitarian practice bound to drive the shy soul into hiding. Fortunately, there are other models of corporate discernment and support.

For example, there is the Quaker “clearness committee” mentioned earlier in this book. In this process, you take a personal issue to a small group of people who are prohibited from giving you “fixes” or advice, but who, for three hours, pose honest, open questions to help you discover your inner truth. Communal processes of this sort are supportive but not invasive. They help us probe questions and possibilities but forbid us from rendering judgment, allowing us to serve as midwives to a birth of consciousness that can only come from within.⁴

The key to this form of community involves holding a paradox—the paradox of having relationships in which we protect each other’s aloneness. We must come together in ways that respect the solitude of the soul, that avoid the unconscious violence we do when

we try to save each other, that evoke our capacity to hold another life in ways that honor its mystery, never trying to coerce the other into meeting our own needs.

It *is* possible for people to be together that way, though it may be hard to see evidence of that fact in everyday life. My evidence comes in part from my journey through clinical depression, from the healing I experienced as a few people found ways to be present me without violating my soul's integrity. Because they were not driven by their own fears, the fears that lead us either to "fix" or abandon each other, they provided me with a lifeline to the human race. That lifeline constituted the most profound form of leadership I can imagine—leading a suffering person back to life from a living death.

Third, we can remind each other of the dominant role that fear plays in our lives, of all the ways that fear forecloses the potentials I have explored in this chapter. It is no accident that all of the world's wisdom traditions address themselves to the fact of fear, for all of them originated in the human struggle to overcome this ancient enemy. And all of these traditions, despite their great diversity, unite in one exhortation to those who walk in their ways: "Be not afraid."

As one who is no stranger to fear, I have had to read those words with care so as not to twist them into a discouraging counsel of perfection. "Be not afraid" does not mean we cannot *have* fear. Everyone has fear, and people who embrace the call to leadership often find fear abounding. Instead, the words say we do not need to *be* the fear we have. We do not have to lead from a place of fear, thus engendering a world in which fear is multiplied.

We have places of fear inside of us, but we have other places as well—places with names like trust, and hope, and faith. We can choose to lead from one of *those* places, to stand on ground that is not riddled with the fault lines of fear, to move toward others from a place of promise instead of anxiety. As we stand in one of those places, fear may remain close at hand and our spirits may still tremble. But now we stand on ground that will support us, ground from which we can lead others toward a more trustworthy, more hopeful, more faithful way of being in the world.

Palmer, Parker J. "Leading from Within," Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation. Copyright © 2000 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

This material is used by permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. www.wiley.com