

Character, Wisdom and being a Leader

OLDER INSIGHTS FOR MODERN LEADERS



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INTRODUCTION

I'm delighted to be here with you this morning. During this week you have heard various people provide their answers to the question, "What will you face as a leader in this country?" Whatever your walk of life, and whether you enjoy a high or low profile, what issues will you have to deal with as a leader in this nation?

This morning I want to raise another question, "What will it take for you to make a difference?" I want to focus on one area that I believe will count the most in the long run. In doing so I want to share with you a framework that helps me to answer the question. Perhaps you will find it helpful too.

There are two preliminary questions to get out of the way. The first is: "Why should I be speaking to you?" When I saw the list of speakers, I recognised many of the names. But who is Mark Strom? This prompted me to write my somewhat tongue-in-cheek CV that Roger introduced me from. I am not a household name on leadership. In many respects it is somewhat accidental that I earn my living advising leaders on leadership. For a long time I felt that the oddity of my own story and background made me unsuited to do much more in life than to drive a truck – which I loved – to build houses, to dig ditches, to work on farms and to do the many other labouring jobs of my early adult life.

Yet my whole life has led to moments like this, though not perhaps in the ways one might expect. I stand before you today, not as a guru with a guru's CV, but as one who learnt to lead in obscurity. I did not set out to become an adviser to leaders. It was the leaders I advised who taught me to value what I was doing for them. I spent the first 15 years of my life as often as not chronically ill in bed, sometimes fighting to stay alive. I missed slabs of schooling. Without the benefit of a full school education, I unknowingly taught myself how to think in many sleepless exhausting nights, reflecting upon life to escape the maddening sounds of my own breathing and heaving. For too long I judged my life and story by the canons of 'normal' success and accomplishment. I thought I had very little to offer. But

through the generous mentoring of some very special people, people who saw things in me that I did not fully understand, I came to realise that I had something worth sharing. Now I work with leaders to encourage them to do two things – to lead with greater integrity of character and relationships, and to lead with greater rigour and clarity of thought.

Apart from meeting a handful of you over breakfast, I do not know you. I have not seen your CVs. I know that some of you already have significant public profiles and have already done things that have brought you wider attention and acclaim. I would imagine others of you feel nothing like that. You may feel intimidated by your peers here this week and wonder, “How did I get here? I don’t have a story like them. I haven’t done those kinds of things.” You may be tempted to take a very limited view of the influence you can have in the world. If you do, I particularly want to encourage you. I don’t know you, but there would have to be some pretty healthy egos in this auditorium this morning. Some of you may already believe you are somebody’s gift to everybody. Perhaps what I have to say might help to temper your self-assessment, not to dissuade you from striding out to make a difference – not at all - but perhaps to temper your confidence with a hint of humility. So perhaps my unusual and inadequate background serves as a reminder of what it takes and doesn’t take to be a leader. *Leadership is not the preserve of an elite.* So much for “Why me?”

The second question is, What is leadership? We could of course debate this for days. We could also grab textbook answers and you have probably heard plenty of those. Let me offer a simple definition that will serve our purposes this morning. *Leadership is influencing people to change themselves or the world.* John Maxwell says there is only one measure of leadership – the influence we have upon others.

You can lead for good, or you can lead for ill. You can lead as someone who regards all people as being of equal and high value. You can lead in a manner that reflects this value. Or you can lead as a tyrant. The choice is yours. I’m interested in the kind of leadership which makes the world a better place to live, whether in a family, a community, an organisation, a government, a nation, or across the globe. I seek to encourage the kind of leadership through which people may live well without fear of poverty or violence, starvation or discrimination.

Never confuse leadership with your position in the food chain. Your leadership stands independently of your rank and status in the world. If we influence one person in our lives to engage with life in a manner that shows integrity and the valuing of other people, then we have been significant leaders.

We are ready to tackle our primary question: What will it take for you to make a difference?

There are many factors we could consider. We could talk about competencies. We could talk about networks of relationships. We could talk about many other things. But this morning I’m going to pin the difference you will make in the world on the question of the depth of your own character – *on the priority and energy you give to the deepening of your character, to the nurturing of your soul, and to the getting of wisdom.* When we ask what will make a difference over the long haul, I believe nothing compares to the leader’s personal depth. In the words of Peter Koestenbaum, “Human depth makes business sense”.

In saying this, I realise I am pushing a very large stone up a very steep slope. Character sounds so old-fashioned. Throughout the twentieth century we became preoccupied with personality. Business and society seem more interested in personality than in character. We put job applicants through a barrage of psychological testing believing this will help secure a wise appointment. Too rarely do we consider whether a person shows integrity, perseverance, kindness, or courage. Personality profile will matter a lot less in the long run than whether or not a person is trustworthy. We need conversations about what matters most.

Have you seen the film *Dead Poets Society*? It’s a touching but troubling film. In an early scene John Keating, the English teacher played by Robin Williams, cajoles his new students to leave their class room and follow him into the foyer. There is a wall of photographs of old boys from this posh American private school. He asks the boys to read from a poem by Walt Whitman titled *To the Virgins to Make Much of Time*. They twitter with embarrassed amusement at the title. A student reads the first lines of the first stanza: “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, while time is still a-flying.”

He tells them the Latin term for this sentiment is *carpe diem*, “Seize the day.” Drawing them closer to the photographs, he asks them what they see in the faces of those long departed. Did they wait too long to realise their potential? Did they wait too long to make a difference? For they are all now fertilising

daffodils. They are all food for worms. Moving behind them, he breathes to them, “Carpe diem. Carpe diem. Seize the day, boys, seize the day. Make your lives extraordinary!”

Seventy years from now people might walk past photos of you. “This was the Foundation for Young Australians class of 2001. They went to Launceston bright-eyed and full of hope, ready to make a difference in the world. Did they wait too long? Did they think they needed further prestige or credentials or networks before they could make a difference in the world. Did they wait too long?”

“Make your lives extraordinary.” I want this to be true in my own life. It’s something I hope you can say unapologetically. In my own case it is coloured by 15 years of living with the sense of death being close at hand. Life is precious, and death makes us realise it. Death has a way of reorienting us like no other aspect of human experience. Reflecting on the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, William Barrett once wrote:

“So long as death remains a fact outside ourselves, we have not yet passed from the proposition “Men die” to the proposition “I am to die.”... The authentic meaning of death — “I am to die” — is not an external and public fact within the world, but an internal possibility of my own Being... Only by taking my death into myself, according to Heidegger, does an authentic existence become possible for me... Though terrifying, the taking of death into ourselves is also liberating: It frees us from servitude to the petty cares that threaten to engulf our daily life and thereby opens us to the essential projects by which we can make our lives personally and significantly our own.”

We don’t have to have been near death to feel the pull of those words.

Imagine your funeral. Whatever is said there will make no difference to you. You’ll be gone. But what would you want people to be saying as a consequence of how you have lived? I would hope that at least one person will say of me, “I’m glad he was here. He made a difference for me.” Great leadership begins at this level in one’s gut. We can have theories, knowledge, technical ability, connections ... whatever. But if you cannot say, “I know I will die and thus I want my life to count,” then you will never seek the depth of character that can sustain your life and leadership.

Think of your lives for a moment from an economic perspective. What is your greatest asset? What will yield the greatest returns for you and for other people? People will say your greatest asset is knowledge. Knowledge *is* a crucial asset — far more than qualifications or even experience. But I put it to you that your character is your greatest asset. Where are we when our actions and words have destroyed others’ trust in us? How can we make a difference, how can we influence others when we have sunk that low? We talk big about vision. But people do not only buy a vision. They buy into the person who has the vision. If you don’t buy the person, you are unlikely to buy the vision.

An ancient king and sage once wrote, “Wisdom is supreme; though it costs you all you have, get understanding.” Leadership is inseparable from responsibility. We tend to talk about rights, and we need to when so much abuse of natural rights endures. But the topic of leadership must take us beyond rights to responsibility. Our conversation this morning is not about asserting our personal rights to anything in the world, but about reminding ourselves of the responsibilities we accepted for the wellbeing of others when we took up the leader’s mantle. That choice, no matter how informal or casual, put us on a knife-edge. We are saying that a leader may know what others need. Many leaders have rationalised abuse in the naming of knowing what people really need. But it is no answer to avoid leadership for fear of misusing it. *Leadership is about responsibility, and the exercise of responsibility requires wisdom.* How am I to discharge my responsibility? The greater the responsibility I carry, the greater my need for wisdom.

So what is wisdom? Only a brave or foolish person offers a definition of wisdom. The moment I offer mine, we will think of other ways to define it. But here it is: *Wisdom is reading oneself, others and the world with insight and acting with integrity.*

Wherever I read in the wisdom traditions, I find two emphases about wisdom: *to possess the faculty to read life well and a character to match.* A wise man or woman reads what’s going on around them insightfully. They are not easily taken in by appearances. They look beneath. They are not so easily tricked. They read life well. The flip side is the question of character. I may face a deal of some kind and everything in my gut is telling me to be cautious. Everything in me is saying, “I don’t know about this. I’m not sure about this. I don’t trust this person.” If I read all that and then make a decision that goes against not only what I could discern in the circumstances, but what also goes

against the grain of key values in my own life, you would never say that I was wise. You might say that I read it well, that I was clever even, but you will never call me wise if I acted in a way which was contrary to my values. *Wisdom is both the capacity to read life well and then to act with integrity.*

Enough background. It's time to introduce a framework for our quest to deepen character and to lead wisely in the world.

A FRAMEWORK FOR WISE LEADERSHIP

The framework for leadership I use derives from the ancient world. I am a social historian and an historian of ideas. My framework for leadership, then, derives from the past. My particular starting point has been the ancient Greek, Roman and Near Eastern worlds.

The framework begins with an ancient philosopher whose thinking both inspires and irritates me. Aristotle. I want to draw your attention to a few ideas derived from his works on ethics and, particularly, his work titled *The Politics*. The book is not about politics, as we think about it. In fact, it's not even a book. It's a collection of lecture notes which became one of the most influential treatises on leadership in western history. The title comes from the word *polis*, the Greek word which roughly translates as the city-state.

The Politics is driven by questions of leadership as much as anything else. What does it mean to lead a society? Aristotle pushed the question further back. What *is* this thing I'm leading? His answer lies in his definition for the *polis*, as "a partnership...in living well" (Book 3, Chapter 9). That strikes me as a wonderful characterization of what any social grouping may become. Think now of the groups in which you are a leader as partnerships in living well. Aristotle coined the phrase, "Man is a social animal." His starting point was that humans prefer to stick together than to be hermits scattered over the hills. It's better to be together. That's the phenomenon to which leadership has to be directed. How do I lead? It has to be in such a way that I create partnerships that enable, at the end of the day, people to live better.

Aristotle then asked the obvious next question: What does "living well" look like? Like most of his peers he appealed to three ideals: truth, beauty and goodness. There was also an ideal of finding unity within diversity through the people being part of a

purpose bigger than any individual. My friend the American philosopher Tom Morris was drawn to these marvelous little words – **Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and Unity** – in his reflections on excellence and success.¹ I had also pondered over the significance of truth, beauty and goodness and the challenge of unity-in-diversity in my research and work on leadership. To me, truth, beauty, goodness and unity form the *Intent* of wise leaders. It is worth us pausing to consider this Intent one by one and their bearing on what it means to live well.

Can people live well if they can never be sure if they are being told the truth? We can't sustain a good life under those conditions. Or what effect does it have to place people in ugly environments? We know the impact it has on people to make them live and work in an ugly environment versus one that has beauty. We can't sustain a good life under those conditions. Or think what life would be like if we had no social contract to preserve life. We cannot live well if we fear being harmed. We can't sustain a good life under those conditions. Finally, what is it like to have no sense of purpose? When we feel there's no point getting out of bed in the morning. We can't sustain a good life under those conditions. But where there is truth, where there is beauty, where there is goodness, and where there is unity, we may live well.

If that is a reasonable and helpful picture of my *Intent* as a leader who seeks to lead wisely, as one who seeks to create and sustain partnerships in living well, then what *Outcomes* should I see in myself and in others? What would I see if I did lead wisely?

I think we would see these four *Outcomes* – **Clarity, Elegance, Strength, and Heart**. I sometimes think of Clarity, Elegance, Strength, and Heart as audit points for wise leadership. Has my influence upon other people led to greater clarity, elegance, strength, and heart for them and for me? Let's take them one at a time.

If we lead well towards truth, then we would expect to see people who are clearer about who they are and what they are doing. We would see much less of the vagary which bedevils organisational life – the nonsense of projects that meander along for weeks, months, even years where people wonder what it's all about. We

¹ See Tom Morris, *If Aristotle Ran General Motors: The New Soul of Business*, New York: Owl Books, 1997.

would have people who are clear, or who at least know how to become clear.

If we lead well towards beauty, then we would expect to see people bringing the very best of their talents to the making of great ideas, products, and solutions. Earlier I sat in on one of your conversations. It was about the arts and one of you held out a vision of people sensing more clearly the artistry of their lives. That's what I mean by elegance. Not elegance in the sense of superfluous glamour. I mean the elegance that arises even in mundane things from the artistry of people's lives. As leaders we would assist people to create and sustain environments in which they can bring forth the very best of who they are. Our solutions would fit well with the context. We would see people have the joy of knowing that the way they are able to live and able to contribute to other people brings out the very best in them. They can be proud of, and find delight in, the works of their hands and minds.

If we lead well towards goodness, then we would expect to see people who are strong in character. Ethics has found its way to the corporate and social agenda in the last little while. We have organisations like the St James Ethics Centre doing good work. But in many respects the conversation about ethics is too defensive. It's too often making sure we don't stuff up and get ourselves into trouble. We've seen plenty of examples in the corporate world. I'm talking about ethics beyond being defensive. I'm talking about ethics in the sense of aspiration. Of what we long to build in ourselves such that do not want to act cynically, or maliciously, or deceitfully. I'm talking about building strength of character.

Why is there so little conversation that builds character? Let me mount the soapbox for a moment. What is the most watched show in Australia at the moment for viewers aged 16 to 39? *Big Brother*. What we see in *Big Brother* is partly the participants as they really are, and partly what the program producers want us to see. Either way, we are served a diet of banality (with the occasional moment of genuine humour and interest) spiced with gossip, dishonesty, unfaithfulness, slander, manipulation, pouting, scheming, etc. In a word, *immaturity*. And we call it *reality TV*. Maybe it is. Forgive me if I sound like an old fart. I'm not pining for the 1950's. *Big Brother* is merely symptomatic of our voyeurism. I want to ask what happens to a people who lose the capacity to have public and private conversations that build character.

If we lead well towards unity, then we would expect to see people who have heart for what they do, people with a reason to get out of bed in the morning, people with a sense of being connected to something larger than themselves that gives them purpose and hope.

Four simple words for the *Intent* of wise leaders – **Truth, Beauty, Goodness, Unity**. Four *outcomes* wise leaders seek to bring about in their own lives and in the lives of others – **Clarity, Elegance, Strength, Heart**. I want to give you one more set of four words to complete the framework, my *Windows for Wisdom*, ways of seeing the world wisely in order to lead wisely.

I think of this final set of four words as the Arts of the Wise Leader™. Four interdependent ways of thinking and behaving as a leader who wants to lead wisely and ensure partnerships in living well. My four *Arts* are – **Story, Brilliance, Promise, Grace**. The three sets of words link up like this:

Truth >> Clarity >> Story
Beauty >> Elegance >> Brilliance
Goodness >> Strength >> Promise
Unity >> Heart >> Grace

I want to walk through the four *Arts* – Story, Brilliance, Promise, and Grace – one by one. Keep in mind though that these are not independent. My belief is that wise leadership, great leadership, arises from the interplay of these four *Arts*.

STORY

Stories connect us very deeply to who we are. If you and I were to choose to get to know each other better, how do we do that? What is the exchange? We tell each other stories. We all have certain stories we do not reveal, at least not until we have first trusted and tested one another with less private stories. I give you a bit more of my story, and you give me a bit more of your story. That's how relationships grow.

The great leaders of history, both those whose names are known, and those whose deeds are more obscure, have been story tellers. They connect deeply with people. They tell stories that touch the heart and the imagination. They paint a picture with words about the past and about the future.

You are putting together a plan for Australia in 2050. Nobody will be moved by your Power Point slides. Your bullet points will not

inspire the nation. A vision devoid of story will not inspire. You will need to be able to say, "Imagine if Australia was like this. Imagine if our relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples were like this... Imagine if our relations between people of different ethnic origins were like this... Imagine... Imagine... Imagine..."

Story is a mark of leadership. But we face a great problem here. We largely do not know our own stories as Australians. It is as though we were bereft of stories. We are not. We have great stories, but too few of us know them and tell them. People often ask me about the differences I see between American and Australian leadership. Americans as a whole exude far greater confidence as a nation and as individuals than Australians. I lived in the USA for three years and I'm well aware of the caricature of the brash American. That gung-ho spirit has fostered some ugly things in the world. But we should look deeper at what they have going for them.

If there was a Foundation for Young Americans — I don't know if there is — but if there was, they would be running scores of these conferences all over the country. They would have waiting lists a mile long. Someone on the list would create their own Foundation! That's the difference. Where does this confidence derive from? It derives in large part from their story-telling. Americans, and particularly American leaders, know and tell their stories. We may not like some of the stories, we may disagree with how they interpret their history and leading characters, but they know them and they tell them! The Pilgrim Fathers, the War and Declaration of Independence, the writing of the Constitution, the Spanish and French-American wars, the transcontinental railway, the Civil War, and stories of leaders like Washington, Franklin, Lincoln, Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, and Kennedy to name but a few. We may cringe at the garishness of American hype. But the simple point is that these stories are vivid and powerful in the American mind. They never tire of telling them. And those stories shape the psyche of the nation. Those stories tell every American man, woman and child that the world does not have to be as it is and that they can make a difference. Consequently, Americans on the whole display greater national and personal confidence than us.

Australians, by comparison, are embarrassed by leadership. We do not know what to do with it. Talk of leadership, of noble purposes, of passion and of being extraordinary, makes us feel awkward. We have stories but we do not tell them. For the most part, we do not know them. We have stories going back 40,000

years but we do not know them. We have more recent stories of extraordinary deeds by both indigenous, convict and immigrant men and women, but for the most part we do not know them. At best we make popular appeal to two stories — Gallipoli and Ned Kelly — both failures. [I mean no disrespect. My own grandfather was making ready to land at Gallipoli when the evacuation was ordered.]

Australians by and large don't know what to do with leadership. We are afraid of it. It frightens us because we've seen how ugly it can get. It's etched into our story of invasion and penal settlement. We know how elitist leadership can be. We know how abusive it can be. We know how dehumanising it can be. We know how leaders can strip the heart and dignity out of people. But it's time we grew up. It's time we faced our fear of leadership and got over it.

We need generations of young Australians, beginning with your own, who are no longer embarrassed about leadership. Young people who are not ashamed to be passionate for a noble purpose, who will stand and be counted when it matters. The key to inspiring people is not five bullet points. The key is a passionate story validated by its openness to scrutiny and the integrity of the story teller. We need leaders who will know and tell our old stories and who will make new ones. That's why you're here. That's the point of the 2050 exercise.

Begin with your own story. All of you have them. The story of what has brought you to this place. Not the story of your nomination, but of the 20 or 30 years that led someone to nominate you. If you don't think you have a story, look harder, because you do. You've got stories that reveal hearts that long to enthuse and inspire other people to live in a better way. Learn your own story. Create great stories wherever you go.

BRILLIANCE

My second frame is brilliance. How many of you here are designers in the formal sense? Choreographers? Artists? Interior designers? Architects? Graphic designers? Musicians? Industrial designers? The rest of us need you. We need you to show us the heart and mind of your craft. As leaders we want to see new things made in the world. New structures. New systems. New relationships. New values. New processes. New environments. That is what your craft can teach us.

I want to lift the arts and potential of design to a higher plane. We've all heard the question, "What is the meaning of life?" It's a bit of a dumb question. Better to ask, "What gives life meaning?" In the Hebrew tradition of creation, man and woman are created first and foremost for relationship and then to be creators themselves. Relationship and creativity. This morning someone said, "Imagine there was no art." It was said to provoke, and so it should. Imagine too that there were no relationships. Imagine a world in which there were neither relationships nor making. I think those two things go to the very heart of what it is to be a human being — our capacity for intimacy and our capacity to create. Our capacity to enter the world of others and our capacity to create new things in our minds and with our bodies — *our capacity to make a world we wish to share*.

This is the bigger picture behind my choice of brilliance as one of the frames of wise leadership. To create and sustain partnerships in living well, I believe we must infuse our tasks of design with our capacity for brilliance and intimacy. *We need fully human experiences and processes of design to make a genuine difference in the world*. But here enters the problem. Our working lives are full of poor substitutes for design. We are trying to influence people to make the world better. Yet we end up stuffing about in committees!

Let me tell you a story about committees. I was once asked to help out with a committee of a federal government agency tackling a large national problem. My client asked me to act as a design mentor to get clarity and speed into the committee's work. I joined them on their 3rd meeting. A committee of over 20 people. They had flown in from all over the country. How often would you think they had been meeting? Once a month. How many of those people had been to all three meetings? A handful. Most of the original group were sending people in their place, and not always the same people. How many in the group had a solution in their back pockets? Many of them. How many had Power Point slides ready to go? At least one. We know it's nonsense. Those of you who are designers know a good design process, and you know that this isn't it. There is no continuity of conversation. There is no developing picture of the world. The group is actually at a very early stage of a true design process, but it acts and talks as though it is ready to roll out a solution. No one is creating the necessary space for design. It's like running a marathon or a sprint in a dinner suit with flippers and a rucksack! It ain't normal!

Committees are an awful substitute for a design team. Likewise, surveys and consultation can be an awful substitute for a genuine user focus in the design process. It is of course politically correct to speak of inclusiveness and consultation. I buy that at one level. But not as a design exercise. What can anybody do with the data from asking 500 or 5000 people about what their company structure or culture should be? It looks like we have dignified people by asking for their input. But even with the best will and intent, we cannot possibly design from 30 focus group transcripts, or 500 or 5000 survey answers. We cannot reflect their input. Most people will not recognise anything of their input in the final design. Some of you are architects. How would you react to a brief to design a major new building on the wishes of 500 people? It would be a dog's breakfast.

So how do good designers operate? They listen to those who hold the key to the intent of the finished product. They will learn from those who will use the product. They draw out the story behind the product. They play with ideas quickly and freely. They sketch and model and play to give physical shape to their early ideas. This shape provokes the next iteration of conversation. They engage again with the community of use. A design emerges from the iteration. The process is purposeful, provisional, physical, fast, focused, and user based.

Organisations rarely design this way. Too often the ethos is to rush to solutions, to gloss up half-formed ideas to look complete, to lumber away in meandering meetings, to presume that a good design must take weeks, months and years, to avoid real dialogue with user groups (not the same as surveys), and to proceed on the basis of an abstract statement of topic without a clear articulation of purpose. Part of my role in organisations is to kill off committees like these. They are nonsense. We cannot change the world through committees like these.

But what stands behind all this talk of design is the need for people to recognize their own brilliance — their capacity to shine. As leaders, we need to create the spaces for people to shine.

PROMISE

My third frame is promise. What is a promise? *A promise is when I speak in a way that you can justly base your expectations upon what I've said*. If I say to you that I am happy to meet with five people after this session, you have every reason to presume that this will happen. If I don't do it, you will have every good reason

to feel annoyed that I have broken your trust. At the start of my talk, I mentioned that my work focuses on deepening rigour and integrity. I want to hark back at this point to the question of integrity.

I routinely find two symptoms in organisations: dishonesty and immaturity. Don't get me wrong; I also see a lot of great stuff. By dishonesty I do not mean that I see lots of people deliberately being deceitful and mischievous. I have certainly seen some bad characters, but generally that's not the problem. It's rather that people find themselves caught up in a system where they feel as if they can't speak the truth.

One outcome is the bizarre pantomime of some executive meetings called to look at project progress in the face of impossible targets. You may have seen one of these. The CEO goes around the room, one by one, asking his or her exec to report on project status. Most execs dutifully announce that everything is basically OK and will be delivered on time and on budget. But imagine that the executive saying all this knows full well that he or she can't deliver. And his or her peers also know it. And so does the CEO. Yet the pantomime may be played out one by one around the room. They are conforming to the conventions of dishonesty. Then a week or a month or a year later somebody has to mop up because they weren't straight with each other. Fear drives dishonesty that reinforces a culture of immaturity that limits the bottom line. It becomes a way of life.

There should be a film called Email Wars. Last year I received what I thought was a fairly simple cc'ed email from a client organisation. Being busy, I opened the email and hit the print button without reading the note. A glance at the printer window showed it crunching its way through three, four, five, six - what? - seven, eight, nine pages. Nine pages! So what was in the email? Forwarded e-mails. Nine pages of forwards. What was going on? Somebody was really annoyed with something or somebody. Why was I copied into this? Because someone had the dubious idea that if the recipient knew that I read it too they might feel more heat on them to act. What was driving this? Immaturity. People who couldn't deal with one another as human beings. People who would not go to someone and work out a problem face to face.

The Chilean philosopher, Fernando Flores says,

"Most people speak without intention; they simply say whatever comes to mind. Speak with intention and your

actions take on new purpose. Speak with power and you act with power... We aren't aware of the amount of self-deception that we collect in our personalities... People talk about changing their thinking, but they have no idea what that is, let alone how to do it. The key is to stop producing interpretations which have no power."

Like Flores, my framework is heavily influenced by the so-called hermeneutical philosophers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer. Their concern was to understand the processes by which individuals and groups construct meaning. At heart is the intriguing correlation between language and reality. In important ways it is true to say that we construct our worlds in language. If we accept this, we understand the urgency in Flores' admonition: "The key is to stop producing powerless interpretations". This is a major responsibility of leaders – to challenge self-deception, to neutralise powerless interpretations, to stop speaking about the world in a way that means we can't act, and to model a richer more intentful way of speaking and making sense of the world.

I feel I must dissociate what I am saying here from certain kinds of motivation. I have a hard time with many in the motivational industry. It's not just the vacuity – the aura soon passes – it's the cruelty of preying upon vulnerable people. Having said that, Flores is right: we construct our realities in language. It *does* make a difference whether I say things which limit me. My speech plays a powerful role in either inhibiting or liberating me, and those whom I lead.

That puts an enormous emphasis on a leader's speech. This is why every wisdom tradition places great emphasis upon the tongue and its power to give life or to destroy. We know that in our own lives. We have all said something we regretted the moment the words left our mouths. Those words changed everything. [I have often felt I am an expert in this area – I have plenty of experience of foot in mouth disease.] We also know what it's like when someone speaks a kind or strengthening word to us. It enriches our lives.

Allow me to run a quick exercise with you. Think of a person you know whom you would say has sadly limited their life. Perhaps a sibling, parent, teacher, friend, or colleague. Tell me the things you hear them say? "It's not fair." "I wish." "If only, if only, if only." "There's not enough time." "I can't wait for the weekend." "It can't be done." "It doesn't matter." "Who cares?" "Poor me." "I can't afford it." "It's alright for you." "I'm scared." "How would you know?" "You don't know what it's like." "It sucks!" Wow! You

guys have got some sad friends! Now tell me, what do these words do to these people? What does that language actually do to that person? Yes, it becomes their reality, it limits them, it boxes them in. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. It builds a wall around them. Every phrase puts another brick in the wall. And it's very hard to climb out.

Now, what do you hear in your communities and workplaces? In the media? What are some of the words which reveal the prevailing powerless interpretations of our times? Just a few. "There's no leadership." "They'll never let us." "The unions will never let us do that." "Management will never let us" "Politicians are useless." "It's too hard." "Not enough money." "It's not my problem." "Let's go back to the good old days." "Someone else will do it." "Life wasn't meant to be easy".

So what do we do to ourselves as families, as communities, as corporations, as governments, as nations, when we keep saying this stuff to ourselves? What does it take to speak differently? Powerfully? I am not talking about glib motivational phrases. *Leaders must challenge this self-deception, these powerless interpretations, beginning with our own lives.* We must speak and act in ways that say we can make a difference. "There's no leadership." We must challenge this. What are we talking about when we say there is no leadership? Leadership is influence. Is there any room for us to do good things and influence others? There almost always is. We must face and overcome the fear which paralyses us and the words which keep us in that state.

GRACE

My last frame is grace. It's a simple old-fashioned word that doesn't figure much in our vocabulary. Grace. Here's my simple definition: *Grace is to extend kindness and dignity to another irrespective of their rank or merit or your own.* In other words, it is to ignore one's place in the great chain of being. It is to circumvent the system with kindness. To overthrow mindless bureaucracy and sophisticated pettiness with small acts of gentle dignity. Grace is meeting as equals and acting accordingly. Time has gone and I'm going to have to compress what I would have loved to have talked about here.

Grace is a radical idea. To show grace is to circumvent the system. To bypass every indicator of merit. To show grace is to ignore educational attainment, wealth, physical appearance and prowess, popularity, fame or success as marks of a person's

value. It is to stand as equal to equal, and to act accordingly. Leo Tolstoy once wrote:

"It is a mistake to think that there are times when you can safely address a person without love. You can work with objects without love - cutting wood, baking bricks, making iron - but you cannot work with people without love. In the same way as you cannot work with bees without being cautious, you cannot work with people without being mindful of their humanity. It is the quality of people as it is of bees: if you are not very cautious with them, then you harm both yourself and them. It cannot be otherwise, because mutual love is the major law of our existence."

Great leaders, known or unknown, leaders who engage the hearts and minds of people with integrity and imagination, exhibit two deep qualities in tandem. There is no trade off between them. Strength *and* gentleness. Grace reframes strength. It becomes strength in weakness. It becomes nobility with humility.

I am but a speck. I am the pinnacle of creation. That is humility and nobility. That is the spirit of grace. That is true depth of character. That is the greatness of soul that makes a profound difference in the world through even the smallest acts of grace.

The passion to believe something deeply. To stand up and be counted. To endure the scorn of those of small minds, self-deceived and given to mean and measly speech. It takes a great heart to carry a grand purpose with a dignified presence. It takes grace to refuse to erect a monument to one's ego. It takes humility to remain open to dialogue. To allow public scrutiny of one's ideas and dreams. Humility calls us to recognise the enormity of what we are asking of people. We are asking them to trust us. We must never take that lightly.

So how can you cultivate grace in your life? The process is practical not magical.

Find mentors who will challenge you to live with integrity. Identify close friends and colleagues who will keep you honest and grounded. Identify what you have personally loved or hated others doing to you; then commit to doing/not doing the same to others. Read widely in the lives of the humble and the great. Take time to appreciate and enjoy people deeply. Tom Morris suggests a poignant question with which we may audit our lives: What sort of people are we becoming by the decisions we are making?

Small acts of grace (and avarice) can have wildly disproportionate influence. Four little sayings have stuck with me through the years (my dad taught them to me but I have no idea of their origin). First, “take care in little things”. Second, “big doors swing on little hinges”. Third, “faithful in little things, faithful in big things”. Fourth, “leave people better than you found them”. Put them together and we can learn to never depreciate the little things in our lives and others. Put them together and we learn to drive out of ourselves to bless others.

Face anxiety and grow in it. Every genuine decision entails anxiety. Anxiety puts us on a knife-edge: to face it and grow, or to run away and regress. In any hard decision we may choose to treat even the undeserving with dignity. If we do, we grow in character and we build trust and respect. Or we may choose to treat others with malice, indifference and condescension. If we do, we diminish our integrity and create fear and contempt. Again, learn to examine yourselves: What sort of person are you becoming by the decisions you are making?

Grace in no way softens the need to be strong. Leaders must assign accountabilities and hold people to them. The question is how we do this. *Grace redefines strength*. Grace is the antithesis of control. Those who lead by grace do not employ controlling or manipulating behaviours. They do not need to control others to assert their own place in the world.

In the long term nothing will make as much difference as the depth of your own character. Nothing will mark you as a leader to be heard, to be believed, to be respected, and to be followed, as the marriage of strength and grace in your life.

CONCLUSION

I must close.

I began by asking a question: “What will it take for you to make a difference?” My answer has been to point you to the deepening of your character, the nurturing of your soul, and the getting of wisdom.

I have suggested a vocabulary to guide your journey:

Truth, Beauty, Goodness, Unity (with thanks to Aristotle and Tom Morris)

*Clarity, Elegance, Strength, Heart
Story, Brilliance, Promise, Grace*

Four ideals. Four outcomes. Four arts of the heart and mind. Simple, old words. Think of each word as a starting point for conversations that will build character. Think of them when you ask what difference you can make. Think of them when you recall these words of Gandhi:

“We must first become the changes we wish to see”.

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