



Unvisionary Vision

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When I was told that I was going to be recognized as the Visionary Leader of the Year (2007) for the Oregon Health Forum, I was taken aback. Taken aback because I do not consider what I do to be 'visionary.' What I do is a form of leadership that is far from visionary. In fact, I might call it *Unvisionary*.

Leadership as I experience it is not a function of the eyes or seeing, nor is it a function of knowing or knowledge. To me, it is a function of the heart.

Let me explain.

When I was maybe 15 or 16 years old, in high school, my Dad would say, "Dave, a leader is one who knows where he is going, and can take others with him.' Over the last 40 years or so, I turned his statement of leadership over and over in my mind, because it sounded true. And I have concluded it may be for some, but is not quite true to my experience. For me, the statement turns on the phrase "one who knows where he is going." It is in the 'knowing' that the difficulty arises.

In the Army, I learned compasses and maps, during college I learned statistics and forecasting, during my business career, I learned Balanced Scorecards and strategic business planning as tools to frame and navigate traveling across space and time. These are wonderful tools of our trade to discern and hold the future in a working framework, artful professional constructions for our action. But in the end, they are merely intellectual constructions, Useful, yes. True? Only partially. The constant truth is that the future is unknowable and uncertain.

But as leaders, that reality does not acquit us from the duty of action. Rather, uncertainty informs the limits of our maps, forecasts, scorecards and results so that we do not misbelieve what leadership action truly is: an act of the heart, informed by faith, hope, trust and the respect of those we both lead and follow. The true act of leadership may be informed by tools and constructions of the mind, but no values are greater than those of the heart. For it is the heart's values of passion and compassion that drive leadership and following, particularly in our health and healing work.

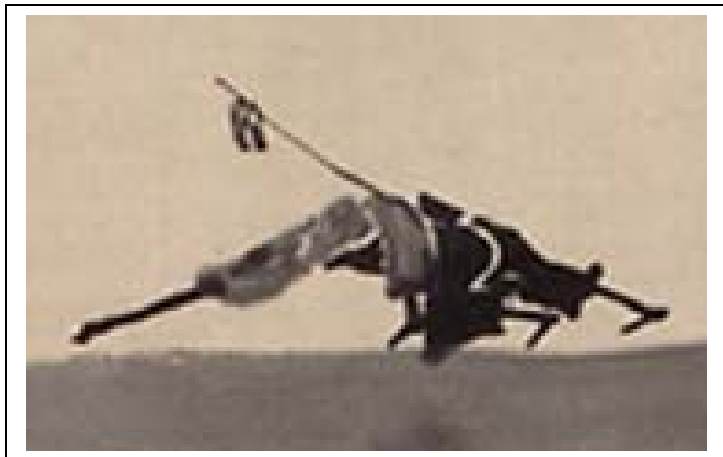


Perhaps the best metaphor for me to explain my point of view is a 300-year-old ink painting by a Japanese Zen Abbot by the name of Hakuin. According to that font of all contemporary knowledge, Wikipedia, Hakuin did not begin painting until he was 60 years old and he painted until his death at 83. This is also the monk who articulated the koan “What is the sound of one hand clapping?”

When my wife, Phi, and I came across this painting, about 15 years ago in a Seattle Art Museum, I fell into Alice’s Wonderland just like the white rabbit. It spoke to me of our human condition and my personal experience of leadership, even then. I felt that whoosh of insight – “Oh, that’s the way it is” – that we all feel at moments when some greater truth breaks through our preoccupations.

Here two blind men tap, tap, tap, their way across a log to the other side of a river gorge or chasm. The log is in a mountain forest high above a river (see the lines for the river and Mt. Fuji, perhaps, in the distance). These two men are intimately linked; you can almost hear them talking back and forth as they move forward. One is on point, the other follows.

Now, take a close look at the guy in front. Let’s call him Zatoichii after the spunky blind yakazu/samurai character of the Japanese film series. Ichii is upright but stretched out on all fours with a thick stick in his right hand probing every inch of the log ahead, alert to dangers or obstructions, ready to micro adjust each movement.



He obviously got onto the log with planning and ‘foresight,’ (OK, maybe not Excel charts and a Balance Scorecard). His blind man’s cane is tied to his obi, jutting skyward, his straw sandals dangling in the air for when he reaches the other side, his bare feet gripping the bark. He has a heavy stick as his feeler for knocking off limbs or

obstructions, more a tool or weapon than his cane. He 'knows' there water below by sound or mist on his cheeks but is focused on the act of crossing. He is confident in his physical condition as he is not straddling the log and shimmying across along an inch at a time. Instead his bare toes and fingers feel the bark underneath him.

Before he got on the log, he sized up his circumstances with his friend. He 'believes' or has hope or faith, that there is a better 'future' across the log that is worth the risk of 'their' lives. This was not a singular choice of one man, but mutual. This choice was a product of sensing, not of sight.

It is not an act of desperation, but rather one of will. No one forces these men onto the log. Neither is it an act of courage. Although they are aware of the river below, that is not their preoccupation while crossing the log. If Ichii were afraid, he would have shimmed across, and that would have been courage to act despite his fear. And he's not foolhardy, to carelessly risk his life by crossing upright. He simply has made up his mind, with all factors available to him, and is in the act of doing what he set out to do, uncertainty and risk taken into account.



Now, look at the follower. He/she is a friend, a wife, one's Board, staff, employees. The follower metaphorically up on the log with us is our community, personal or at large. Sometimes we too are the follower. The follower decided to climb up on the log as well. The leader and follower are not so different, if at all, separated only by a few feet on the log.

See the posture of the follower? He is fully upright on his two feet, albeit bent. Why? Why is he crossing with less caution than his predecessor or not waiting until

Ichii gets all the way across and on the ground before climbing onto the log? Is it because Ichii is saying, "Sanjero, the log is dry, no slippery moss or snags sticking up or bobcats up here"? There is a connection to the 'sacred between', between 'I' and 'Thou', among these people.

Nobody is forcing Sanjero to cross against his will. Both agreed to cross before they started. Something was so compelling, adventurous, curious, and gainful, that they both traverse the log at the same time. Maybe it went something like this, "OK, Zatoichii, I'll flip you to see who goes first" and Ichii responds, "Hell, no, Sanjero, I'm better at this, you got us lost yesterday, follow me!"



Both are men of the world. They know the treacheries of potholes, teasing children and indifferent adults as they feel their way through the darkness of life. Still, they act effectively within danger and risk with hope and friendship. The spring in the second man's posture almost implies a haughty, humorous zest for the adventure they are undertaking. Leadership is not a singular act of individuality, but has in it a covenant of concern and awareness; it is an act of mutual respect and trust. These, too, are aspects of the heart, rather than the mind or eyes. These are not naïve or foolish men acting with foolhardy disregard for danger. No, they are thoughtful men and have taken the danger into their evaluation, as information and part of the preparation, not as reason *per se* to stop and become paralyzed from action, full of dread, doubt and fear. They have the capacity to balance and weight the whole situation and conclude a course of action. Some of my friends would say that they can act within the polarities of hope and fear or the reality between emptiness and compassion.

Some may see this simple ink painting as sad, scary, maybe even depressing: Blind guys lost, alone in the cold forest having to risk their existence to 'cross the log'; the 'blind leading the blind'. Others may see it as full of hope, accepting the limits of our human condition, as trust in the fundamental good nature of reality, as good companions with hope and humor of those traversing the log together. I see it as capturing the unvisionary, the unknowable nature of leading and following from the mysterious nature of our own heart traveling within the spectacular world of risk, opportunity and human companionship with all our sensibilities and spirit at full attention tap, tap, tapping together to a better future.

I suggest we are all traveling 'the log.' Each of us is a blind man or woman. I suggest rather than secretly desponding over that reality, we take that as a given and get up on the log, upright, together in the spirit of hope, anticipation, humor and companionship and cross together.

I have often wondered what the monk who painted this had in his mind. It is doubtful that 300 years ago, he was contemplating existential leadership in Portland, Oregon \. Maybe he was thinking about the log as our life, a pathway before us of limited and narrowing dimensions, that we must assent to climb up onto with all our heart's, mind's and spirit's strength to tap, tap, tap across together. And to do it with vigor, mutual support and caring despite our blindness and uncertainty. Maybe that is what we are all called on to do with our lives.

For me and all of us working together, we are called to cross over a raging chasm of health care difficulties, without knowing or seeing, truly, what is on the other side. We do sense that the other side may be, will be, better, but have gotten up on the log and are tap, tap, tapping there together despite our doubts, uncertainty or the obvious and secret dangers. It is not an act of seeing or knowing, but of the heart. Our hope is that we all here in this room, and our colleagues, not here tonight in the Northwest corner of the country, Oregonians in particular, can first climb up on 'the health care log' and cross

together to a more effective, safer and more equitable system of health care in the future for our citizens.

Unlike the “wandering the desert looking for the Promised Land” metaphor, for us Oregonians, “crossing the log” is a fitting Pacific Northwest metaphor. It is nice and linear: point ‘A’ to point ‘B’. We like that. We have played and crawled over logs as kids on picnics or at camp or as Boy and Girl Scouts. The playful fun is, we know, that this is a risky crossing, but it is solid and stable, too. The danger is not the chasm or the strength and stability of the log; it is the surface slipperiness, the snaggy limbs sticking up or our own fear of heights.

I thank you for this honor, and hope, at least from my point of view, that you may view visionary leadership not as an individual, singular act of ‘seeing’ or ‘knowing’ the future. Rather, see it as mutual will, hope, faith, trust and respect. It is up, up, up onto the log, then the consensual tap, tap, tapping together across the log for the benefit of the community and all whom we serve.