

Chapter One

The Anatomy of Leadership

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Therefore, if one administers the empire as he cares
for his body, he can be entrusted with the empire.

Lao Tzu

Metaphor, Embodiment, and Personal Mythology

Metaphors are deeply entrenched in our everyday language. We explore untested waters by getting only our feet wet rather than diving right in, enjoy the fruits of our labors, and get all nerved up when things are up in the air. When metaphors ring true, they help us make sense of our lives. Because metaphors are plentiful, a fallacy exists that they are just words, that they are not important. Although they typically operate below conscious awareness (Johnson, 2007, p. 139), the nearly six metaphors per minute (Geary, 2011, para. 3) we use in our everyday language dictate to a large degree how we live our lives.

The words we use to describe our experiences reflect the physical structures and functioning of our bodies. We say *we grasp an idea* or *love slips through our fingers* because our hands and fingers are anatomically made to hold and let go. Two metaphors of embodiment that have been used to describe leaders, for example, are *having one's feet on the ground* and *holding one's ground*. The ability to solidly hold up well on two feet has to do with the “great significance” we give to “standing up, rising, and falling down” (Johnson, 2007, p. 137), which, of course, have to do with the body's basic ability to maintain verticality and balance. The ability to stand upright

and maintain balance, actually and metaphorically, can ensure a leader's survival. We trust leaders who are upstanding or who take a stand.

Cool-headed, *hands-on*, *tight-fisted*, and *cutthroat* are a few more examples of the nearly infinite number of metaphors of embodiment that can be used to describe a leader's performance. Self-referential metaphors of embodiment like *I'm just a pretty face* or *I've got a good head for numbers* hint at and reveal essential aspects of our autobiographical selves, our personal mythologies. Personal mythologies evolve from memory and imagination. Acting as narrative blueprints, personal mythologies are the "vibrant infrastructure[s] that inform" one's life (Feinstein & Krippner, 1988, p. xi). They are brought about by significant pleasurable and painful events we are certain did happen, events that we may be uncertain about having happened, things that we had hoped would happen but did not, and events that did happen but that we wish had not.

Rather than an accurate historical record, our personal mythologies are experienced as a Gestalt from which not only the meaning of our lives can be made, but upon which we base our actions. Sometimes our personal mythologies are inaccessible to us—our psyche holds them at arm's length; at other times, they are in our face. Stephen Wolinsky (1991) proposed that people create self-image identities that reflect "core beliefs about [their] performance and worth" (p. 220). Self-image identities manifest as specific behaviors (p. 221) that can be either life affirming or life negating. By early adulthood, we become so identified with these "patterns of behavior" (p. 8) that we actually become them. We perform our lives according to these identities that we ourselves have written and embody. Our "attention becomes reduced to those few inner realities that define the identity" so that we "experience all the thoughts, feelings, emotions, and sensations of that limited state/identity" (p. 221).

As a physical, literal, and concrete living structure that takes up space and moves through time, the entire body takes in and chronicles data from the outside world, then interprets and stores them. Our bodies contain our entire life stories just as surely as “they contain bones, muscles, organs, nerves, and blood” (Halprin, 2003, p. 17). If we purposely attend to and examine our own metaphors of embodiment, we can apprehend them as linguistic indicators, vignettes, of the internally held stories of our lives. The person who reports many experiences of love slipping through his or her fingers may develop a personal mythology based on the core belief that he or she is, indeed, unlovable. The person might then intentionally or unconsciously embody the personal mythology of unlovability in ways that will ensure that romantic love will be elusive. Metaphors of embodiment, then, are simple linguistic indicators of deeper, complex personal mythologies.

A convincing argument has been made that metaphors have real-life consequences like “war and peace, healthcare, environmental issues, and other political and social issues” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 246). It makes sense, then, for people in positions of leadership to attend to the self-referential metaphors of embodiment that spill from their lips. When leaders disregard these metaphors as just words, they are likely to disregard the personal mythologies that accompany them, and the roles both play in their performance of leadership. When we listen closely to the metaphors of embodiment we use and then consciously seek out the stories behind them, we open the way to self-understanding and apprehending our deepest reasons for doing what we do.

The leader who declares that he or she stands firm on his or her decisions, or who is known for holding his or her ground, for example, may have a personal mythology more tied to an aversion to appearing weak in public than to any inborn quality of stubbornness. Standing one’s ground only becomes a negative quality for a leader when it results in an inauthentic performance of self.

Self-referential metaphors, then, can manifest in life-affirming or life-negating personal mythologies.

Dualism and Embodied Metaphor

Rational philosophic thought has conceptualized thinking as coming from a disembodied intellect that we call the mind (Johnson, 2007; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999). Dualism traditionally divided human experience into mind and body. On the one hand, the mind became the seat of logical thinking—the place where Absolute Truth could be sorted out. The body, on the other hand, was linked to the “imaginary, unreal, [and] unscientific” (Pert, 1997, p. 18), the “devil’s handiwork, animal instincts, and lower forms of life” (Hanna, 1987, p. 9). Hunger, thirst, exhaustion, elimination, reproduction, and illness are some of the body’s never-ending list of baser functions in which the loftier mind seemingly has no interest or involvement. The mind has been conceived of as rising above the messiness of the body. Emotions—also messy—arise from the physical body, get us all stirred up, and cloud our judgment. Finally, the body ages, dies, and decays.

When we say that someone needs to *use his or her head*, has *lost his or her head*, or is *out of his or her head*, we are really referring to the person’s mind. The notion that the mind is located in the head, where the brain is, and where thinking is thought to occur, is conventional wisdom (although Empedocles once taught that the heart was the seat of intellect and Aristotle thought the brain was the body’s cooling system) (Gross, 1995). According to dualism, abstract concepts like consciousness, morality, and time, and more concrete concepts like language and leadership, arise from a purely reasoning human mind, and are “in no way dependent upon our embodied, phenomenal selves” (Johnson, 2007, p. 7). If we believe that language springs spontaneously from a pure and disembodied mind, it becomes easier to believe that the self-referential metaphors leaders use are merely linguistic

symbols—extensions of disembodied thinking—and that the body plays no role in a leader’s deeply personal ways of being, decision making, and acting. The idea that thinking takes place somewhere in a mysterious inner space of the body called the mind is so ingrained in Western thinking that it is almost impossible to “think about mind in any other way” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 266). It makes the notion that the body thinks and has a logic all its own seem absurd.

Embodied Minds, Enminded Bodies, and Many Minds

While dualism has contributed significantly to our understanding of the world, we seem to be embracing more holistic attitudes toward and accounts of mind and body. Contemporary science is engaged in “refuting traditional” ideas of dualism by “validating accounts of consciousness that relate body, self, mind, and emotion” (Fraleigh, 2000, p. 55). Language is now thought to depend on a “core consciousness” that is envisaged as a spiraling “bodymind axis” (p. 61). Psychoneuroimmunology has furthered the nondualistic basis of phenomenological inquiry, which has traditionally rested upon the concept of “the lived body” and the sentiment that dualism has been an error, that the “traditional division of body/mind [is] false” (p. 55). Cogent arguments for the embodiedness of mind (or enmindedness of body) have been provided: “What we call ‘mind’ is really embodied. There is no true separation of mind and body. These are not two independent entities that somehow come together and couple. The word *mental* picks out those bodily capacities and performances that constitute our awareness and determine our creative and constructive responses to the situations we encounter. . . . Mind is part of the very structure and fabric of our interactions with our world” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 266, italics in original). “There is no disembodied logic at all” (Johnson, 2007, p. 181).

Perhaps we do not have one mind but many. Research suggests that the mind “travels the whole body on caravans of hormone and enzyme, busily making sense of the compound wonders we catalogue as touch, taste, smell, hearing, vision” (Ackerman, 1991, p. xix), and kinesthesia. Mind, then, might be conceptualized as numerous embodied biological systems that extend into and derive information from the world. Data are stored in the filing drawers of organ, bone, muscle, and nerve. Our organs and musculoskeletal, nervous, cardiovascular, respiratory, and endocrine systems, then, can each be conceptualized as having minds, and stories, of their own.

Metaphors of embodiment are evidence of the enmindedness of the human body. Our hair stands on end, chills run up and down our spines, and our skin crawls when we are fearful. We love people from the bottom of our hearts, we get choked up, and no one makes it through life without feeling as though his or her heart was breaking at least once. Our blood runs cold, we waste our breath, we get cold feet, and we feel things in our bones. We become flushed with love and feel the heat of anger. We change our minds.

That self-referential metaphors of embodiment provide “true statements about our inner lives” suggests that these metaphors “conform in significant ways to the structure of our inner lives as we experience them” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 288). Leaders perform real actions in the world, with good or bad results, and the metaphors they use contextualize and explicate to themselves and others why they do the things they do. It makes sense, then, to pay close attention to the metaphors of embodiment that come from and circulate around a leader. If listened to carefully, they can become a leader’s best teachers.

One leader might describe the experience of leadership as doing battle, while another may describe it as an improvisational dance. Each metaphor indicates vastly different subterranean personal mythologies, and each is likely to result in wholly different actions, experiences, and consequences for the leaders and those

they influence. Leaders know if and when their outward actions are consistent with their inner lives. Congruence between a leader's implicitly held personal mythologies and explicitly expressed metaphors of embodiment and his or her outward actions allows a subjective experience of well-being to occur within the leader (Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2005, pp. 265–266). The opposite is experienced when a leader does not act in accord with his or her internally held values (Erickson, 1995, p. 124), when the story he or she tells him- or herself and others is actually a lie.

The metaphors other people use to describe a leader can also indicate whether the leader's outward manifestation of leadership is congruent with his or her privately held experience. "Speaking softly and carrying a big stick" summed up Theodore Roosevelt's presidency. This mutually agreed-upon metaphor of embodiment, by Roosevelt and the world, garnered fear and respect for the man and America throughout his tenure in political office. It seems to be a "stroke of genius" when a leader's own metaphors and stories of embodiment "coalesce, as in a dream—when, as the poet William Butler Yeats would have it, we cannot tell the dancer from the dance" (Gardner, 1995, p. 37). When there are no disparities between the metaphors leaders use to describe themselves and those that others use, an interconnectedness, or "synching up," between leader and self and leader and follower occurs.

Heroic Journeys, Toads, and Monsters

We often first encounter metaphor as children through fairy tales and myths. A really good metaphorical story draws us right into the narrative. We become engaged on every level of human experience: emotional, intellectual, imaginal, and physical. Our imaginations allow us to become one with the story's characters. Outrage, fear, shock, joy, and grief are experienced in our very bodies, viscerally, as we become one with the flow of the story's events.

The oldest myth is the heroic *monomyth* (Campbell, 1949/2008). In this story, a hero or heroine travels to a land of once-upon-a-time and far-away. In this liminal time and place, the hero or heroine does battle with monsters, solves tricky riddles, and/or completes a series of monumental tasks. These challenges necessitate the mustering up of extraordinary, internally held powers by the main character. Heretofore unaware of their existence, the hero or heroine is able to access superhuman powers by penetrating the “causal zones” of the “psyche’s interior” where, of course, the “*real difficulties reside*” (Campbell, 1949/2008, p. 12, italics added).

Masquerading as metaphorical monsters, from unseemly little toads to the truly horrific, the real difficulties for the protagonist rest in the inability to reconcile his or her personal mythology with the outward performance of self. A disconnect exists between the authentic hero or heroine within and the imposter that is disclosed to the world. The discrepancy has to do with the hero or heroine’s dysfunctional personal relationship with his or her personal mythology. Perhaps the story has been inadvertently or purposely repressed. Perhaps the protagonist sees little value in unearthing trauma or sadness that occurred years before. Perhaps basic self-knowledge is nonexistent. Regardless, deeply disturbed by subjective feelings of being unfaithful to the true self, the hero or heroine understands at some level that the essential self has been violated (Erickson, 1995).

The heroic journey, then, is really about embracing the authentic self, toads and all. Taming monsters, solving riddles, and completing Herculean tasks trigger the process of transformation within the protagonist and compel the main character to come into his or her own. The monomyth, then, is really a story about becoming comfortable in one’s own skin, about increasing the capacity for self-love, and about moving on. The myth ends with the hero or heroine returning to a waiting community where he or she proceeds to “teach the lessons” of a “life

renewed” (Campbell, 1949/2008, pp. 15, 30), often as the new leader (Pearson, 1998, p. 4).

The Big Lie: Hero as Leader

A society makes leaders out of its heroes because they are perceived to “actually embody the qualities” (McLennan, 1994, p. 113) most revered by the society and with which the society most wants to be identified. Deeply embedded in humankind’s collective story across all cultures (Campbell, 1949/2008; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), our society’s cultural, historical, and emotional investment in the leader-as-hero myth is significant. And therein lies the rub: leaders are heir to and culturally invested in precisely the same cultural mythologies as those they lead. Our contemporary leader-heroes regularly appear in electronic form and often hail from the arenas of entertainment, sports, politics, and big business (Bennis, 2003; McClennan, 1994). Leader-as-hero misperceptions are “formed by myths and fallacies about how a person becomes a leader” promulgated by the media (Martinek, Schilling, & Hellison, 2006, p. 142). Combined with “egocentric self-aggrandizement” (Campbell, 1949/2008, p. 10) and other psychological gratification needs of many contemporary leaders (Kets de Vries, 2003; Stech, 2004), some individuals will attain positions of leadership for the wrong reasons.

Many adolescents, for example, believe leaders must “first be good-looking, athletic, wealthy, or smart” (Martinek and others, 2006, p. 142)—in other words, be considered to be heroes or at least appear heroic—before even considering the idea of assuming a position of leadership. Equating leadership with heroism assumes that leaders will behave with others’ best interests at heart. But by following an “icon of unattainable perfection” (Kerfoot, 2006, p. 116), hiding behind a façade of pretense, “inhabiting a role, [or] playing a part that imprisons them,” leaders move away from their best selves and “what they are inwardly

experiencing,” and their subsequent suffering can be “devastating” (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002, p. 19).

The Posturing Imposter

When leaders drive themselves to be something they are not, they can “set into motion entire operations founded on distorted perceptions, with serious consequences” (Kets de Vries, 2003, p. 11) for themselves, the organization, and society. Rather than attending to the “requirements of the task at hand” or to the good of the communities they serve, the “vast majority of persons” already in or seeking positions of leadership do so to fulfill their own personal gratification (Stech, 2004). Manfred Kets de Vries (2003) called these leaders “imposters.” A self-identified imposter’s own words provide a good example: “I have another characteristic, something that I feel inside me, some kind of insecurity in my abilities or in who I am. . . . All the time I try to prove more and more. . . . I live with this dilemma, how people perceive me and my lack of confidence that says, why do they look at me so highly, when I am . . . less than that, I live with this . . . gap” (Shamir & Eilam, 2005, p. 406).

Leaders dealing with fragile self-esteem “are especially caught up in how they feel about themselves and will take [any] variety of measures to bolster, maintain, and enhance” (Kernis, 2003, p. 3) feelings of self-worth. Fear, combined with the fact that “so much of the language of leadership is doing and action,” causes leaders to worry that taking the time for deep personal reflection might appear to others as incompetence or indecisiveness (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002, p. 110). When given a choice between donning a mask of competency and performing leadership transparently and vulnerably as a “deep expression” (p. 19) of oneself, it is easy to understand why a leader might choose the former over the latter. Masked leaders, though, become irrational and neurotic (Kets de Vries, 2003). The wrong

move, the wrong word, will reveal deeply held feelings of undeservedness, fraudulence, and worthlessness that all the posturing and accoutrements of success disguise. The never-ending internal drama and heavy, privately held anxiety of being found out by followers (Kets de Vries, 2003, p. 116) is nightmarish.

The warning, that the “emotional and spiritual underdevelopment” of our leaders would eventually become a problem not only for organizations, but for society as a whole (Maccoby, 1976, p. 108), has been borne out in past decades and recently. We are no longer shocked or surprised to read of corporate scandals; personal, political, and fiduciary indiscretions; or environmental calamities visited upon the Earth by spiritually bankrupt leaders. Future leaders, Michael Maccoby predicted, would not “possess the moral strength to know right from wrong, [or] the courage to act on those convictions” when given a choice between the two (p. 108).

Plunging into the Psyche

More and more, though, leaders are being held accountable for their actions. They have been asked to unmask and reveal their innermost selves by being consciously “transparent with their intentions” so others can recognize that “a seamless link” (Luthans & Avolio, 2003, p. 242) exists between who they say they are and what they actually do. Leaders would be wise to take the inner, psychic journey, particularly if they wish to retain their positions of influence and authority. On the way, they will surely come upon those nasty little toads and horrific demons that every hero or heroine who undertakes the psychic journey encounters. They will be compelled to solve difficult riddles and undertake Herculean tasks that must be completed before they restore themselves to their most authentic, essential selves.

When an individual rejects the story of his or her past as irrelevant, the rejection makes self-transcendence impossible.

It causes a “self-stultifying travesty” (Taylor, 1991, p. 22) from which the true self cannot emerge. The contribution that our past histories make toward the living of our lives is significant: “We can never liberate ourselves completely” from those persons and events that “shaped us early in life” (p. 34). So we strive to make sense of our life stories. The “afflictions of our lives” permit access to our very souls, and the heroic journey takes us “step by step into [our] own undiscovered reality” (Moore, 2004, p. 26). The journey opens the way to self-knowledge and permits self-transcendence. The journey itself is not transcending; rather, it is how we respond to the monsters and how we allow them to teach us that cause self-transcendence.

The heroic journey allows us to slip-slide in and through the realms of the embodied, affective, and analytic. It permits self-transcendent experiences, those “episodes, insights, dreams, and visions that have a numinous quality” and that seem to “expand our comprehension” (Feinstein & Krippner, 1988, p. 185) of self. Even the darkest personal mythology can be instrumental in revealing our “best” selves, selves that we often unwittingly move away from during the course of our lives.

It is truly “difficult to look directly into dark and difficult terrain” (Halprin, 2003, p. 177) of our deepest selves, but there is no way out of our inner lives (Palmer, 2000, p. 80). We must take the downward and inner psychic journey and listen to the wisdom of our bodies if we are to find out who we truly are, how we might come into our own, and how we might best serve others. While the journey toward self-knowledge is a spiritual one, “it is *not* a transcendental movement upward toward the light and an ecstatic union with all of creation” (Plotkin, 2003, p. 10, italics in original): “In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters deeper down, if you drop with them farther over the world’s rim, you will find what our sciences cannot name or locate . . . the unified field, our inexplicable caring for each

other, and for our life together here. This is a given. It is not learned” (Dillard, 1988, p. 19).

Transcendent work of this sort is directed primarily by the body. To ignore the self-referential metaphors of embodiment that reveal our personal mythologies is to neglect a most basic tool a leader has at his or her disposal for developing self-awareness and self-knowledge. Granted, embodiedness is not the only means by which the intricacies of leadership can be understood, but to discount the body as an essential resource gives credence to the notion that leadership is a purely intellectual activity, that heart and guts, for example, play no part in its expression. It really is true that how we live in “our body is how we live in the world” (Strgar, 2012, para. 4). When we peremptorily dismiss the role the body plays in leadership, we risk making decisions based only on intellectual processes—things like the bottom line, corporate expansion, or increasing stock value—rather than what is best for ourselves, the community, and the environment.

Countering the Postmodern Megamyth

British Petroleum, Halliburton, Goldman Sachs, ExxonMobil, Walmart, and Monsanto, among some of our most powerful corporations, have each contributed to the idea that corporations are, or soon will be, running the world (Korton, 2001), that the individual is but a tiny cog in their machinations. A new and ominous societally held megamyth has arisen in this postmodern era. This myth “supports material progress and the control of nature, rather than attunement and participation with natural cycles” (Feinstein & Krippner, 1988, p. 6) and service to the community that characterized the monomyth (Campbell, 1949/2008). Phrases like “corporate greed,” “environmental catastrophe,” and “capitalist imperialism” are at the heart of this megamyth. Greed and scarcity, terrorism and war, eroding markets, and environmental collapse are the monsters that populate

the megamyth. As individuals, we cannot escape the “distinctive mark” (Feinstein & Krippner, 1988, p. 5) that it has exercised upon our own personal mythologies. Nor can it be denied that some leaders’ actions reflect this new megamyth “in microcosm” (p. 5). To some extent, each personal mythology incorporates a culture’s collective mythology. As individuals, we have become as adroit at building personal mythologies founded on fear, scarcity, war, and eroding markets as multinationals and conglomerates.

We can succumb to the tyranny of the new megamyth, or we can begin to question how we ourselves are contributing to it simply because we have neglected to take our own heroic, psychical journeys. It takes real courage to drop off the edge of the known world and venture into the underbelly of one’s own shadow. It takes steely nerves to seek out, ride, and tame one’s demons, to deliberately puncture the “well-constructed façade of ego” (Halprin, 2003, p. 177). But even though they may have been put out of mind, our privately held toads and monsters cannot be put out of body. Leaders’ worldviews, relationships, and physical and emotional expression are adversely affected when they consciously or unconsciously arrange their lives around their woundedness, when they “armor” themselves, or assume “compensatory behavior” (p. 180). This is what Parker Palmer (2000) meant when he asserted that a leader must take “special responsibility for what’s going on inside him- or herself,” so that a leader brings more good than harm to the world (p. 5). It is what Shirley Baugher (2005) referred to when she stated that a leader’s internal incongruence can easily manifest as “anger, depression, withdrawal, inaccessibility, controlling, and/or reactive defensive behavior” (p. 15).

The journey, then, requires each of us to claim ownership for the expression of our own internal and external lives, to bring that which is unconsciously directing our lives into consciousness, and then to do something about it. It requires that a leader’s

“outer self” be in full compliance with the leader’s inner, highest, most real self (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 282). The global need for egoless leaders who “do not fake their leadership” and who are not consumed with “developing an image or persona of a leader” (Shamir & Eilam, 2005, p. 382) is critical.

The “transformational power of being deeply understood” by others as well as by one’s own self is remarkably “underestimated” in our society (Rogers, 1993, p. 7). Yet people in many organizations are seldom rewarded for possessing self-knowledge. They are, rather, rewarded “for proving themselves” (Bennis, 2003, p. 24). As such, they often are unable to “fully deploy” themselves as authentic leaders of character and vision (p. 24). When leaders shy away from the “quest to journey inward, [they] experience non-life and, accordingly, call forth less life in the culture” (Pearson, 1998, p. 4). This “is the experience of the wasteland” (p. 4). The postmodern megamyth will most certainly take us to a collective wasteland. Our own unexamined personal mythologies will deliver us into our own private hells.

The journey, though, does not require leaders to become something bigger than they already are; rather, it requires a willingness to restore themselves to their most authentic selves and to grow from there. Leaders cannot be expected to “solve the great political, social, and philosophical problems of our time” (Pearson, 1998, p. xii) until they have examined their own personal mythologies and appropriately released the monsters that populate them.

Many leadership development programs, intended to bring about positive growth and change in individuals, focus on the “acquisition of concepts, skills, and behaviors” (Shamir & Eilam, 2005, p. 409) rather than positive growth and profound personal change. The delightful fact remains that the body already has all the tools it needs to solve the problems facing us today—problems that have come about largely because of humankind’s almost exclusive use of the intellectual domain, our choice to

ignore the urgings and wisdom of the body, and our misguided disregard of what is going on below the neck.

The human body cannot tell a lie. Those sometimes startling self-referential metaphors of embodiment are not slips of the tongue. They are the wisdom of the body speaking out loud. When we listen to the words our bodies speak, we can interrogate the personal mythologies the words reveal. Attending to our embodiedness and self-referential metaphors of embodiment has the potential to remove us from the postmodern megamyth of narcissism, ego gratification, and greed. Our bodies can lead us to life-affirming leadership that will restore us one leader at a time to a collective ethic of service.

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