

A Trans-Cultural Perspective on Leadership and Leader Development

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Abstract

Culturally limited theories and models of leadership are prevalent and generally arise in the western world. There is a potential for a perspective on leadership that spans cultures. Joseph Campbell's work on mythology covered a myriad of cultures across vast span of prehistory and history resulting in the description of a transformative journey involving the stages of separation, initiation, and return. A synthesis of stories from the many cultures produced a monomyth in which initiation involves a series of trials and temptations. Upon return, the individual becomes a hero and possibly a leader: a world redeemer, warrior, or tyrant. The monomyth suggests that leadership development requires a transformative journey which is possible in any culture. Carol Pearson's six archetypes are also culturally universal and are suggestive of leadership types. There is no guarantee that an ethical leader emerges from the journey. Campbell does suggest that the transformed leader experiences an inspiring vision that opens up to the wonder and awe of the world.

Current theories, models, and perspectives on leadership are culture-specific and for the most part based on values of and knowledge in the western world. To a great extent the field of leadership is biased toward the proactive, forceful, and rational leader stereotype. There is a need for a trans-cultural perspective, one that allows for the variations between cultures and is not limited to the Western ideal of the aggressive and unemotional superordinate. Further, the perspective should permit leader development in such a way that the outcome is compatible with the culture of the person undergoing the developmental process and does not require the adoption of values and skills from another culture.

The premise underlying the perspective described here is that there is a body of knowledge in comparative mythology that extends across cultures and also spans the history of humankind from prehistory into more recent times. Joseph Campbell (1997, 1-9) made the case for comparative mythology as a basis for cross-cultural studies in a university. Campbell (1997, 10) specifically noted "...such themes as ...the Resurrected Hero have a worldwide distribution, appearing everywhere in new combinations, while remaining, like the elements of a kaleidoscope, only a few and always the same." There is a common thread, a single over-arching story, to be derived from the study of comparative mythology. A synthesis of the stories resulted in what Campbell (1990, 30) believed was the "monomyth." and is the basis for the trans-cultural perspective on leadership and leader development presented here. The outcome of the journey described in the monomyth is an individual who can and often does become a leader.

Joseph Campbell's Studies of Mythology

Campbell collected and utilized stories from a wide variety of places and cultures. Furthermore, the collection of myths represented a vast span of time from prehistory, using oral transmission of stories, to historical written tales.

Sources for the myths Campbell studied ranged across the earth representing twenty-five distinct cultures. Geographically the stories came from the New Hebrides, Nigeria, East Africa, Central Africa, Tanganyika, Egypt, Sumeria, India, old Persia, both the Old and New Testament of Christianity, Russia, Finland, China, Japan, Ireland, England, Denmark, Canada, Australia, Melanesia, ancient Rome and Greece, and the Native American Navajo, Apache, and Algonquin people (Campbell, 1990, 49-228).

Fifteen of the sources represented anthropological reports of stories that were a part of the oral traditions of indigenous peoples. The remaining myths came from historical works such as the writings of Homer, Dante, Ovid, and Plutarch and most recently of the works of the Grimm brothers from Germany.

Across all the cultures and times there is an inherent sexist tone to most of the myths. Almost all of Campbell's work concerns a hero, a male figure who undergoes a series of trials and temptations. There are few examples of heroines. This is a natural result of the myths arising in patriarchal cultures with the male as warrior and ruler. However, women in our modern societies can undertake the journey described in the monomyth and become leaders. We can and must leave behind the sexist bias in the stories and apply the monomyth to the world as it exists today.

The Hero's Journey

The monomyth involves a hero's journey. The essential elements are separation, initiation, and return (Campbell, 1990, 30). An important feature of the journey is that it occurs as a break from the regular existence of the individual, a hiatus. There are trials and temptations in everyday life, but the hero's journey involves special trials and temptations, versions that go far beyond those found in daily life. This suggests that one

form of leadership development across cultures might involve a deliberate hiatus in the life of an individual during which she or he would undergo tests and seductions in order to attempt a transformation.

The journey begins “at home.” The individual lives in a comfortable situation and there is no need to leave it behind. Yet at some point and for some reason the person gets “a call” to adventure (Campbell 1990, 49-58). Some refuse the call and are condemned to an ordinary life. The refusal often arises from a fear of the unknown and anxiety over unknown and unpredictable outcomes. Those who opt to venture must cross the first threshold and thereby enter into a zone of darkness (Campbell 1990, 90-94). The hero often feels that there has been special aid offered in crossing the threshold, aid coming from a source beyond friends, family, and peers, perhaps a shaman or guide (Campbell 1990, 69-77).

In the stage of “trials and victories of initiation,” there are a series of trials represented by dangers and crises. Having gotten past those, the hero achieves a state of simplicity and naturalness. Then comes the great temptation, in the myths from paternalistic cultures this is always a temptress (Campbell 1990, 120-126). Again, today we can envision many kinds of temptations that might occur during the journeys of both men and women. Having perhaps succumbed to the allures but then rejecting them, the hero confronts a great authoritarian figure, in paternalistic cultures the father, and is able to negotiate with and receive the wisdom of that figure (Campbell 1990, 126-149). Having survived trials, attained simplicity, resisted temptations, and become a partner with the great authority figure, the next step is apotheosis, reaching a special state, a feeling of transcendence, peace, and enlightenment (Campbell 1990, 149-169). At the end of this portion of journey, the hero receives “the ultimate boon,” (Campbell, 1990, 172-192). It is immortality not physically but in the sense that the hero becomes part of the universal and timeless, “at one” with whatever basic principle might exist in the universe: God, the Tao, or the Great Spirit.

Now comes what can be the most difficult part of the journey: “return and reintegration with society.” (Campbell, 1990, 193-228) Some who experience the adventure refuse to move back across the threshold. It is better to continue to feel peace and enlightenment and not have to face the troubles of daily life. Yet many do come back understanding that they have been given a special commission. The return may, however, require help from without, often the same kind of assistance needed to traverse the threshold in the first place. Re-crossing the threshold can be painful; it is a movement from the realm of visions and dreams, of ideals, to the land of human needs, conflicts, and limitations.

Having come back over the threshold, the hero is now “master of two worlds” and has attained “the freedom to live.” (Campbell, 1990, 229-243) The master of two worlds is able to move back and forth between the realm of the ideal and the land of limitations, balancing the two. It is, in fact, impossible, having completed the journey, for the hero to go back to life the way it was. She or he is forever changed, having been charged with a mission or, in the religious vocabulary, a vocation. In addition, the hero gains the freedom to move forward, to accept change, and to attempt the difficult.

Along with that result, the hero finds himself or herself with memories of the journey and the possibilities that were seen in that process while still living and working in a here-and-now where there are real human beings, resource limitations, and practical constraints. The ideal world that is seen during the journey must be tested in the profane world.

Both the freedom to live and the need to straddle two worlds represent burdens as much as rewards. The freedom to live has the unfortunate effect of requiring the individual to make conscious decisions and difficult choices. The need to live alternately in the two worlds of the possible and practical or to attempt to integrate them implies that the individual cannot exist in either. Being able to live in either is much safer and easier but shirks the mission.

The Freedom to Be within a Culture

The study of myth and the synthesized monomyth suggest that the journey results in the development of a leader. This is vastly different from the common conception of leadership training in which individuals are taught appropriate behaviors or critical skills. Leadership training, in that sense, results in people who are able to “act” as leaders. They can play the role. However, they are not leaders in a fundamental way. The appropriate way to act may or may not be consistent with the personality, needs, and values of the individual.

In addition, such leadership training imposes constraints on the individual by recommending certain kinds of behaviors and skills and discouraging others. The behaviors and skills will inevitably be those of the culture of the trainer and the training facility or organization. The acquired behaviors and skills may or may not be consistent with the values of the culture from which the individual comes and to which he or she must return.

The “freedom to live,” using Campbell’s phrase, suggests the individual can be authentic because there is congruence between inner values and external behaviors. There is no need for such a person to act or to “put on” a role.

Being a leader, in this sense, produces someone who leads without conscious effort. Such a person is true to her or his inner self. Furthermore, because the journey occurs in the individual’s culture, it is appropriate for the contexts and conditions the person is likely to encounter. There is no attempt to import or adopt the values, beliefs, and methods of another culture. Leader development in this sense permits the individual to express her or his inner self and at the same time do so within the context of the surrounding culture.

Potential Outcomes

Campbell projected five possible outcomes for someone surviving the transformational journey: the warrior, lover, world redeemer, saint, and also emperor and as tyrant (Campbell, 1990, 334-354.) These are in addition to the “freedom to be.” Only three seem applicable in terms of leadership: the emperor and possible tyrant, the world redeemer, and the noble warrior.

Some persons will return and cross the transformational threshold with a sense of self importance. Historically these have been such empire builders and emperors as Alexander the Great, Caesar Augustus, Napoleon, and Frederick the Great. More currently there are examples across the globe of men who have turned into tyrants and rule with absolute authority and without regard to the well being of the citizens of their countries. The emperor as a transformed individual believes in the application of power but only to further a dream first seen toward the end of the journey. For some the dream fades during everyday existence, and they then apply power for its own sake.

World redeemers have also existed and are exemplified, historically, by Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad. One of the features of the world redeemer’s message upon return to the profane world is that salvation, redemption, nirvana, or enlightenment requires abandonment of the trappings of everyday life. Parents, family, children, and friends have to be left behind in the search for the universal and absolute.

Finally it is possible to produce a noble warrior. These are individuals who are motivated to achieve. Such people can be inventors, entrepreneurs, financiers, elected officials, association directors, and others who are adept at getting things done. Their goal is victory but, interestingly, it is not to defeat someone else. It is victory over odds, limitations, and challenges. In the words of the mythologists, the noble warrior, the knight in shining armor, is on a mission to slay the dragon.

These three images offered by Campbell were replicated in the work of Perry (1976, 134) who found that his patients in the process of psychotic episodes and recovery from them existed in one of three states: leader-founder, world reformer, or heroic defender.

Becoming a Leader

The monomyth suggests that the development of a leader is not a matter of education and training in the usual sense. Certainly people can be taught about the various kinds of leadership, an entirely cognitive process. Such individuals can describe leadership traits, behaviors, skills, and styles, but there may be little or no effect on their own behavior. It is also possible through role-playing and other involvement techniques to influence how a person acts as a leader. Furthermore, such attempts at educating and training produce persons who have learned the appropriate ways of leading within their own culture, often within even a limited subculture such as the corporate world, the political world, or the world of the arts.

The monomyth requires that the hero-leader, the person who is a leader “from the inside out,” must go through the process which begins with a hiatus from everyday life and

includes the deliberate courting of trials and temptations. There are many ways in which that can be accomplished in the western world (Stech, 2004, 171-192) and probably as many in other cultures.

Activities and processes in the western world include various kinds of retreats and courses that challenge a person and take her or him away from ordinary existence. The process may also occur from unplanned events such as a serious illness, accident, the death of a close relative or friend, or a near-death experience. Such events impose a hiatus from normal activities and duties. They offer an opportunity to re-evaluate life and its meaning. It is important to recognize, however, that such life-changing events sometimes have only a temporary effect. The person must embrace the experience and use it to move forward.

A transformative journey is possible in every culture. The details will vary. Trials in one culture may not represent challenges in another. The temptations of one culture may be accepted behavior in another. The nature of the authority figure who must be confronted differs from one culture to another. The nurturing figure who induces the feeling of bliss will also vary from one society to another. But in every culture it is possible to cross a threshold from ordinary life into adventure, to face trials and temptations, to deal with the bringer of bliss and the wielder of power, to experience transcendence, and to receive the ultimate boon.

Whether the journey is deliberately chosen or imposed by external events, a person has the option of choosing to embrace the experience or reject it. If taken on, the adventure has a particular danger: the outcome is unpredictable. There is no way to predict beforehand in which ways an individual will be changed. The only certainty is that at the end there will be a feeling of freedom, Campbell's "freedom to live," and the burden of knowing what is possible while living in a world of cultural limitations and restrictions.

Because the outcome cannot be forecast, leader development through the monomythical journey cannot be imposed but must be chosen by the participant. The person who forces someone else to undergo the adventure is then liable for the consequences. A naïve trainer or leader-developer might think the adventure can be invoked hoping for a particular outcome. However, the result of the journey is not predictable. It depends entirely on the individual's needs and values and the culture within which it occurs.

Archetypes and the Journey

Carol Pearson (1998) developed a set of archetypes based on Jungian psychology. Archetypes are "deep and abiding patterns in the human psyche that remain powerful and present over time" (Pearson, 1998, xi). Jung's work and that of Pearson is based to a great extent on the analysis of myths and also on the examination of themes in the dream lives of individuals. Dreams are believed to be manifestations of underlying and often unexpressed needs and values (Freud, 1913; Jung, 1961). Campbell was able to find many of the monomyth themes in dreams reported by psychological investigators (Campbell, 1990, 3-25).

The six archetypes described by Pearson are assumed to be universal and not specific to any one culture. According to her “Your culture will water those archetypes it values and, likely, weed out those it disdains.” (Pearson, 1998, 240) However it is possible through reading, analysis, and reflection to become aware of the archetypes that represent the patterns of past behavior and guides to future thoughts and actions. Thus, an individual can find the plot line of his or her life through an assessment of the archetypes and the influences they have had and could have on one’s life.

The six archetypes are the Innocent, Orphan, Wanderer, Warrior, Altruist, and Magician, and Pearson suggests that they represent life stages (Pearson, 1998, 223-4). The Innocent exists in a perfect world, unmarred by evil. As a child matures, such innocence is left behind and the result is the Orphan, alone in the world, required to deal with all the problems and complexities of day to day existence. In adolescence, the Wanderer archetype comes to the fore, and the task is to explore the world and find a place in it. As an individual moves into adulthood the Altruist and Warrior archetypes come in to play, the Altruist as the supporter and nurturer and the Warrior as the achiever, the archetypal expressions needed to deal with family and job. For some and at some point it is possible that the Magician archetype becomes preminent, and it seems to be another way of describing Campbell’s hero at the end of the adventurous journey.

The Magician may be a transcendent archetypal state, one in which the individual is able to observe her or his own behaviors, needs, habits, and tendencies and to keep them in balance. If the notion of archetypes as underlying universal deep structures of the psyche and of culture is valid, then they also represent a way to develop leaders. The process requires the potential leader to achieve insight into her or his own archetypal structure, that is, which archetypes predominate and which are more recessive, and then to chart a future journey to take that structure into account.

A Caveat on Ethics

Coming out of the adventure, the hero brings back a dream, ideal, or vision. There is no guarantee that the vision is necessarily good for family, community, nation, or human race. It is possible to envision and attempt to create a family in which the parent is absolute ruler and acts without restraint, to have a dream of great personal wealth, to have a vision of a world in which the might of one nation makes right, or to hold to an ideal of the human race cleansed of certain races or creeds.

It is also possible that the returned hero will have a vision of a good, peaceful, and healthy world. The dream may be of communities in which people are able to solve problems mutually; nations are able to support all their citizens in their endeavors, and a world in which nations resolve their conflicts without war.

However, Campbell (1993, 257) argues that “mythologies...are great poems and...point infallibly to the ubiquity of a ‘presence’ or ‘eternity’ that is whole and entire in each.” He goes on to stipulate that “where such an inspiring vision” occurs, everything and every

creature in the culture with such a myth is alive and serves to open the eyes of participants to the wonder and awe of the world. If that is true, then this trans-cultural perspective should result in leaders who will have a positive effect on their organizations, communities and nations.

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