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Classic Book Notes #16

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On Leadership
Part Three

Editor's note: As the Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy and Raimy Fellows embark on their 2023 program, we are reprising four classic Book Notes on leadership by Dr. Andrew Roth. Following is Part 3.

For the past two weeks we've been exploring leadership. In the process, we've discovered that leadership isn't something one ***does***, it is something one ***is***.

Leadership is a way of ***being*** and that is a question of ***character***.

So, how does one develop a ***character*** that will cause, I hesitate to say inspire, that will cause others to follow you?

By mastering oneself and the world around you.

"The world around you" sounds ominous and almost too large to grasp much less master. No, what is meant by that phrase is mastering the context in which you find yourself, be it an ever so humble work group in a larger organization, or the larger organization itself, or the city of which you seek to be mayor.

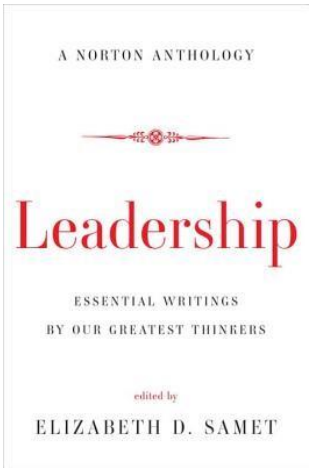
Regardless of the scale of your endeavor, you must master the context in which you will serve.

How? To begin, one masters oneself through self-reflection. Borrowed from Ignatian spirituality, at the end of each day I used to spend a few moments reflecting upon what I did that day, what I did well and what I did that I might have done better. Particularly, what might I have done better working with the team? For example, in that brief encounter with a colleague I might have been slower to respond, been less curt, shown more respect, and simply listened. I might still have disagreed, but they would have felt more valued and more likely in the future to tell me something disagreeable that I needed to hear.

Self-reflection – it's simple, really, and ever so valuable. You can keep a journal, but it's not required. Just find some time to reflect, to meditate upon the day and what lessons you can draw from it.

Mastering the world, mastering the context within which you operate sounds more complicated, but it, too, requires only that you pay attention.

To what?



In ***Leadership: Essential Writings By Our Greatest Thinkers***, Elizabeth Samet suggests, as we saw last week, that leaders need to pay attention to "taking responsibility," to "studying the system," to the heroes they "emulate," and to the risks inherent in attempting "revision." Regarding risking revision, attempting to change a work procedure, an institutional culture, or the culture of a nation, Machiavelli reminds us that change is difficult.

Why?

Because Machiavelli tells us "(T)hat we cannot thus change at will is due to two causes; the one is the impossibility of resisting the natural bent of our characters; and the other is the difficulty of persuading ourselves, after having been accustomed to success by a certain mode of proceeding, that any other can succeed as well."[1]

Samet also says leaders and those who aspire to become leaders need to attend to "knowing the way," to "cultivating trust," to "negotiating the world and self," to "learning from failure," to "resisting the system," and to "disciplining desire." Ultimately, even the most successful leaders need to learn the value of "letting go."

In some ways, "knowing the way" is Samet's most elusive concept, for it involves seeking to know how to behave, how ***to be***, in a given context. One can't study a system, decide who or who not to emulate, or what needs changing until one has mastered the ***"Way"*** of a given situation. It is not simply a question of skills but of the proper balance between ***technical*** skills and ***deep*** skills.

Technical skills are the craft skills particular to any job or profession. *Deep skills* empower one to navigate a culture by working with its people. They are acquired through study.

Study does not mean enroll in a school or course; it means to ***pay attention***. Samet includes a passage from *Tao Te Ching* to illustrate her point*:*

Ancient masters of Way
all subtle mystery and dark-enigma vision:
they were deep beyond knowing,

so deep beyond knowing
we can only describe their appearance:

perfectly cautious, as if crossing winter streams,
and perfectly watchful, as if neighbors threatened;
perfectly reserved, as if guests,
perfectly expansive, as if ice melting away,
and perfectly simple, as if uncarved wood;
perfectly empty, as if open valleys,
and perfectly shadowy, as if murky water. [2]

Be still; listen to the wind rustling the ferns outside the window – like a poet, pay attention to the ***is*** that ***is***.

Or, from a perhaps more utilitarian view, Samet offers Francis Bacon, who says in *Of Studies*: "Studies serve for delight, for ornament and for ability. Their use for delight, is in privateness and retiring; for ornament, is in discourse; and for ability, is in judgment and disposition of business." [3] Leaders, Bacon continues, need to study for "…(studies) perfect nature, and are perfected by experience: for natural abilities are like natural plants, that need proyning by study; and studies themselves do give forth directions too much at large, except they be bounded by experience. ***Crafty men contemn studies, simple men admire them, and wise men use them."*** (Emphasis added). [4]

This is not idle or antique advice. Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) "craftily" demonstrated its continuing truth when he "contemned" epidemiologist Anthony Fauci as "merely" an expert whose advice need not be heeded. Paul, an ophthalmologist, whose patients I assume he hopes heed his advice, clearly needs an irony infusion.

How to study? How to *read*, which as we said in *Part Two*, means not only to read books, but to listen, to watch, and to observe. For people and places, like books, do not all merit your deep attention. Bacon says, "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read but not curiously; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention."[5] Similarly with people, leaders must realize some are frivolous, passing acquaintances; others become friends, but only a few become allies and partners, who, as Marcus Aurelius says in *Meditations,* help leaders take actions "for the sake of common kindred." [6]

Samet includes a selection from Tolstoy, who thought it ultimately impossible to know anything definitive about the "***Way***"; hence, like Lincoln in Koehn's ***Forged In Crisis***, he counseled *Time and Patience* recognizing that not every problem needs to be solved, that not every problem needs to be solved *N*ow and, sometimes, the best policy is to simply wait, as Elizabeth I did in her *Replies to Parliamentary Petitions*. [7]

But what if there is no one like you in the ***Way*** to emulate, from whom you can learn? What do you do? Aspirant leaders need then, Samet implies, like Barbara Lynch in *A Woman's Place Is Running the Kitchen,"* to forge your own ***Way.*** Lynch is a master chef, but professional kitchens are, or were until recently, a male domain. Lynch created her own path to success and now serves as a mentor to other women aspiring to be master chefs. [8]

Samet is especially fine in discovering obscure but telling readings. Regarding women finding their ***Way***, she offers Christine de Pizan (1364-1431), a contemporary of Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Chaucer, who, as Samet notes, when her husband's unexpected death forced her to earn a living, de Pizan became Europe's first woman professional writer. Her *About the Good Sense and Cleverness of Queen Dido*, tells the story of Dido, who blending courage and guile escapes her murderous brother's clutches and founds Carthage. It comes from de Pizan's ***The Book of the City of Ladies*** (1405), "an allegory," Samet says, "in which the narrator, guided by three goddesses – Reason, Rectitude, and Justice – builds a city worthy of women stone by stone by mining myth and history for tales of women of learning and abilities…" [9] In the process, di Pizan seeks to answer "…why on earth it was that so many men, both clerks and others, have said and continue to say and write such awful, damning things about women and their ways…" [10]

Or, why do men so fear women?

Perhaps because down very deep (maybe not that deep) they fear that women are smarter. In "Cultivating Trust" Samet includes a selection from ***The***

Arabian Nights (ca. 850) *The Tale of King Yunan and the Sage Duban*, which is one of the tales within a frame story.

It is the frame story that is of interest here. As Samet summarizes, "Shahrayer, king of India and Indochina, having been tricked by an unfaithful wife, kills her, and concludes, 'Women are not to be trusted.' The king thereafter weds a new woman every day and executes her after only one night. In a heroic attempt to save her people, Shahrazad weds the king and proceeds to outfox him through the art of storytelling." Each night Shahrazad "embarks on a riveting story that always remains unfinished at daybreak and therefore must resume the next night. Thus Shahrazad serially postpones her death." A superstition attaches to ***The Arabian Nights***: to finish reading the tales is to die along with Shahrazad. [11]

Samet asks "What is trust?" Quoting Annette Baier, she answers "Trust, the phenomenon we are so familiar with that we scarcely notice its presence and its variety, is shown by us and responded to by us not only with intimates but with strangers, and even with declared enemies." [12] As I noted in the margins of my copy of Samet's text, trust is why we so blithely walk into Wegmans or Walmart with scarce a thought about our fellow shoppers' intentions. But, in the age of mass shootings – in 2019 there were more than one-per-day in the United States [13] – our vague dread, that only marginally aware suspicion at the edge of consciousness, results from trust's fundamental violation.

Society is built on trust.

A leader's most valuable asset is the trust their followers invest in them.

Although "Who Do You Trust?" was once a television game show that first made Johnny Carson famous,[14] it is not an idle question. People no longer so readily trust their leaders.

Why?

Because trust is first earned, then granted.

How is trust earned? Ironically enough, by first granting it yourself – by trusting your followers, who, not always, but more often than not, will return it by trusting you. The point is well illustrated in George Stevens, Jr.'s *Interview with Jean Renoir*. Renoir trusts his actors; he trusts his collaborators because "I (Renoir) don't like to make the important decisions alone." [16] *I don't like to make decisions alone*.

Renoir, like other leaders whose creations endure, implicitly understands the wisdom of the African proverb that 'one head does not a council make."

A frequently remarked misquotation of Hemingway's asserts "If you want to know if you can trust someone, trust them." [17] In "Con Artists," Samet explores the irony that one can only be deceived, one can only be tricked, if one first trusts the deceiving trickster. The phrase con-man comes from an early 19th century New York city thief who talked people into giving him their watch, by asking them "Don't you have confidence in me?" [18]

So, if followers have confidence in their leader, when is it acceptable for a leader to deceive her followers?

Never?

Hmmm? Perhaps not, as illustrated in *In the Hands of Destiny* when the General Nobunaga tricks his vastly outnumbered troops into an offensive by telling them he will flip a coin. If it comes up heads, the gods are with us and we will win. It came up heads. They attacked; they won. Only later did Nobunaga reveal that coin had heads on each side. But the trick does not always work, as Plutarch reveals in *Patching Out the Lion's Skin*. [19]

Leaders, Samet observes, are always negotiating. They negotiate with themselves as they wrestle with a decision; they negotiate with their teams as they decide tactics; and they negotiate with followers and adversaries. One might say that the art of negotiation is second only to the art of communication in a leader's tool kit. Zadie Smith's *Speaking in Tongues* is a brilliant analysis of a marginalized person negotiating their relationship with the surrounding majoritarian culture; Red Cloud's *Speech at St. Nicholas Hotel, Speech at Cooper Union* sketches the frustration of the weaker party in an unfair, imbalanced negotiation in which the only victory results from maintaining one's dignity.

As so often, Francis Bacon provides timeless advice. In his brief essay *Of Negotiating,* every sentence could serve as an entire essay's thesis statement. In this sentence for example, Bacon outlines an entire course in rhetorical audience analysis: "If you would work {persuade} any man {sic}, you must either know his nature and fashions, and so lead him; or his ends, and so persuade him; or his weakness and disadvantages, and so awe him; or those that have interest in him, and so govern him." [20] Just as in "studying the system" and "knowing the Way," Samet reminds us, for leaders to persuade anyone of anything, they must first *know* them.

But, on occasion, a leader has to know when not to negotiate. In her *Latin Rebuke to the Polish Ambassador*, Elizabeth I reveals it is better to not negotiate at all when the other party lacks honesty, lacks the authority to make decisions, lacks competence, or, worst of all, lacks all of the foregoing. She tells the humbled go-between, "I was certified by letter that you were an ambassador, but I have found you an herald." [21] That is, he is not an ambassador, one who can

make decisions, but simply a messenger. The practical lesson for leaders from Elizabeth's experience is, as any car salesperson can tell you, in any negotiation first learn who has the power to decide.

Samet closes her work with sections on learning from failure, resisting the system, and disciplining desire. The latter is a profound examination of a leader's ethical obligations: to whom do leaders owe their loyalty; what is a leader's duty to the oaths they swear? Samet chooses what is to me a too obvious but still effective choice. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* can be read from a variety of perspectives. It can be read as an existential meditation on the meaning of life; as a quirky look at one of Anglo-American culture's first "power-couples;" as a study of the character forming, the character distorting, impact of ambition. Ambition – that two headed-monster without which one gets nowhere and with too much one loses everything.

From Samet's point-of-view, *Macbeth* serves all these purposes, but its chief lesson to aspirant leaders constitutes a rumination on duty and loyalty. As Macbeth says, contemplating the many faceted loyalty he owes the King he will murder and whose crown he will usurp:

"He's here in double trust:
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself." [22]

As a leader you are obligated to fulfill your duties, whether the banalities of a job description or an oath sworn on a Bible. Regardless, a leader's integrity is a measure of their fidelity to both their people and to their duty.

It's a cliché of leadership handbooks to say that failure does not count, that falling down is to be expected. They exhort one that it's what you do next that matters. Do you whine, do you make excuses? Or do you pick yourself up and continue? Regardless, leaders, as observers of the world can learn a great deal from their own and others' failures. We learn from Plutarch's *Alexander* that vanity will always be exposed; we learn from Czeslaw Milosz's wonderful evocation of *Orpheus and Eurdyice* to never look back, or, more precisely, never second-guess yourself; and we have already learned from Babur that even if lost in the Himalayas a leader can learn how to survive.

The most *Valuable Lesson* in learning from failure that Samet includes comes from Ulysses S. Grant's memoirs. After a battle that ended indecisively, as he approached the Confederate General Harris' position only to discover it abandoned, Grant writes "It occurred to me at once that Harris had been as much afraid of me as I had been of him. That was a view of the question I had never taken before, but it was one I never afterward forgot." [23]

How many times have leaders failed to do something because they were afraid? Except for comic book superheroes, honest leaders will confess to it more than once. What's the cliché? You can't do it if you don't try. Leaders need to remember, as Grant learned, everyone else experiences the same insecurities.

Never fail for fearing to attempt.

In "Resisting the System," Samet explains that while you must study a system to know it, it does not follow that every system merits your loyalty. She offers Moses resisting Pharaoh, Nelson Mandela saying *I Am Prepared to Die,* and Gandhi's *Statement to the Court* that rather than renounce his position he will submit to the court's decision. But the finest example she offers of resisting the system is Frederick Douglass's *Taking the Ell*. An "ell" is an old measurement, roughly equal to six hand-widths, but Douglass uses it as a metaphor. He will take the "measure of this system of slavery," he will "go to the balcony" to understand it, and in understanding it, he will defeat it. After his fight with the slave-breaker Covey, Douglass says "My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact." [24]

Most leaders will never find themselves in such profound and challenging circumstances. But all leaders as they assume direction of an enterprise – a work group, a team, a company, or an organization – must "study the system" and must "know the Way" but must also be strong enough, if necessary, to "resist the system."

A real leader needs to know the system but not succumb to it.

So, if from Koehn and Samet we learn that leadership is a question of character, how do we put that lesson to work – how do we think about becoming a leader?

In **Part One**, I said my take on leadership consists of ***Four Cardinal Principles:***

1. Nothing happens until someone makes it happen – leader know thyself.
2. No one does anything alone – it's all about the team;
3. It's amazing what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit;
4. A leader must be a risk taker – possessed of ingenuity and open to new ideas.

There is not space here to tease out all the connections between my principles of leadership and Koehn's and Samet's insights, but leaders make things happen by

going to the balcony, like Martin Luther King, Jr. in *Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution,* studying the system and knowing where they are, with whom they work and where they want to go.

Because no one can accomplish much of anything alone, leaders build teams, like Babur, by caring for their people; like Lincoln by listening to their dreams and needs and building the future upon those aspirations; like Jean Renoir and John Wooden by having the humility to know their colleagues might know more than they, and unlike Isadora by never getting too far in front of their followers and unlike Alexander by never thinking they alone have all the answers. Because of their humility, effective leaders unleash the power of "it's amazing what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit."

Lastly, leaders are risk takers – not bungee jumpers, not gamblers – but takers of calculated risks, like Dido founding Carthage, like Grant learning from fear, like Robert Oppenheimer at *Los Alamos*, like Frederick Douglass *Taking the Ell*, and like Mary Wollstonecraft unmasking *The Tyranny of the System* and setting in motion the struggle for women's rights.

Leadership – it's not something you ***do***; it's something you ***are***.

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End Notes

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4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Marcus Aurelius, *"Meditations"*, in Elizabeth Samets, Ed. ***Leadership: Essential Writings by Our Greatest Thinkers***. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), p. 191.

7. Elizabeth I, *"Replies to Parliamentary Petitions",* in Elizabeth Samets, Ed. ***Leadership: Essential Writings by Our Greatest Thinkers***. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), p. 262-264.
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10. Ibid.
11. "The Tale of King Yunan and the Sage Duban", from The Arabian Nights, in in Elizabeth Samets, Ed. ***Leadership: Essential Writings by Our Greatest Thinkers***. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), p. 274.
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13. *There were more mass shootings than days in 2019",* **CBS NEWS** (January 2, 2020) available here accessed June 30, 2020.
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15. *"The Monkey's Heroic Self-Sacrifice",* from the **Jataka Tales** in Elizabeth Samets, Ed. ***Leadership: Essential Writings by Our Greatest Thinkers***. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), p. 271-274.
16. Stevens, Jr. George, "Interview with Jean Renoir", in Elizabeth Samets, Ed. ***Leadership: Essential Writings by Our Greatest Thinkers***. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), p. 294.
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24. Photo from here

In Case You Missed It

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The Wider World | The Land of Azawad written by President of DC Analytics **Diane Chido**

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