

The Imaginative Leader

by Ryan J. Lawrence

Graham Greene writes in the opening of his novel *The Power and the Glory*: “There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in” (Greene 2001, 12). As I have sought to understand my own philosophy of leadership, my first and foremost task has been to arrive at my starting point - the belief or idea from which all my other beliefs and ideas about leadership radiate. At first, I thought to begin with the Old Testament prophets, as no Biblical figures shape my ministry more. But while the prophets play a pivotal role in my leadership, there is an influence even more fundamental. As I have traced my thinking back I have arrived not just at a foundational idea, but at a foundational experience. The kind of experience Greene describes in the quote above.

The clearest early memory I have is of my mother reading to me. This was our nightly ritual, and since I am dyslexic and took a long time learning to read, it is a ritual we enacted for many years. We began with classic children’s books, such as the works of Dr. Seuss and Robert Munsch, but as I grew older we ventured into more mature books, such as *The Hobbit* by Tolkien and *The Chronicles of Narnia* series by C.S. Lewis.

I distinctly remember us reading *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*. While it was far more text-heavy than a typical children’s book, it still had pictures. I would ask my mother to see the pictures right away, as soon as we turned the page. But she explained that this would stop me from using my imagination. It is far better to use your own imagination than to rely on someone else's. At the time (and at the present) there was no earthly authority wiser or more trustworthy than my mother, so I believed her wholeheartedly. Thus began my belief in the importance of the

imagination, a belief that has fundamentally shaped me as a person and a pastor, and which forms the foundation of my philosophy of leadership.

While I learned to treasure the imagination at an early age, it would be some time before I came to value it on anything more than a personal level. For years, the imagination was merely something to enjoy. It was fun reading and making up stories. It even seemed virtuous in a way I could not defend but felt intensely, but it was not something necessary or useful. This was enough for me. I loved the imagination for its own sake. But short of becoming a novelist - which I did aspire to for many years - I saw little practical use for the imagination in life.

But then, in my second year of university, while unsurprisingly studying English literature, I was assigned to read the great Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye's Massey Lectures entitled, *The Educated Imagination*. In the lectures, Frye makes a case for the value of studying and teaching English literature (Frye 1963, 1). His main argument is, as one can tell from his title, that literature educates the imagination; however, in order to make this argument work, Frye first builds a case for the importance of the imagination (*ibid.*, 57).

The starting place for understanding Frye's defence of the imagination is how he defines the term. The imagination, according to Frye, is that part of us that is able to form "a vision of possibilities which expands the horizon of belief" (*ibid.*, 55). We tend to give credit for all our mental activities to reason. But, Frye argues, much of our thought life actually depends upon the imagination. Anytime we go beyond the crunching of raw data, trying to look past what is to what can be, we are beyond reason and in the realm of the imagination. This means, as Frye points out, that "in practically everything we do it's the combination of emotion and intellect we call imagination that goes to work" (*ibid.*, 57). We need to use our imaginations far more than we realize.

Frye gives an illustration of how frequently we use our imagination:

I recently went past two teenage-girls looking at the display in front of a movie which told them that inside was the thrill of a lifetime, on no account to be missed, and I heard one of them say: 'Do you suppose it's any good?' That was the voice of sanity trying to get its bearings in a world of illusion. We may think of it as the voice of reason, but it's really the voice of the imagination doing its proper job. (*ibid.*, 59)

These girls were attempting to look beyond what was in front of them. They were trying to see what the future might bring. As such, they were operating beyond reason and using their imagination. I find this illustration compelling precisely because it is taken from everyday life. If we cannot decide whether to see a movie without using our imagination, then is there any area of life to which it is not essential?

Frye argues for the utility of the imagination by highlighting its use in what we might consider the most rational of fields. He argues that: "Imagination is certainly essential to science, applied and pure. Without a constructive power in the mind to make models of experience, get hunches and follow them out, play freely around with hypotheses, and so forth, no science could get anywhere" (*ibid*, 39). This is an argument confirmed by Einstein, who writes: "Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution. It is, strictly speaking, a real factor in scientific research" (Einstein 2009, 97).

If the imagination is essential even for the sciences, then is there any sphere in which it is not needed? I wholeheartedly agree with Frye's assertion that, "when you stop to think about it, you soon realize that our imagination is what our whole social life is based on" (Frye 1963, 57). The imagination is not just a fanciful indulgence, the source of stories and daydreams. It is essential to everything we do, including leadership.

Frye defines the imagination as that which allows us to form “a vision of possibilities which expands the horizon of belief” (*ibid.*, 55). What is leadership if not guiding people and institutions to new horizons? Indeed that is how I define leadership: as guiding people and institutions to new horizons. To lead implies movement. No one needs to lead unless we are going somewhere. Nothing could be more essential for such a task than the imagination. Without imagination, we cannot reach beyond where we already are, and if all we are doing is staying in place, in what sense are we leading anyone or anything?

The imagination may not be at the heart of every minister’s philosophy of leadership. But the imagination is so important, any leader who neglects it risks being incapable of guiding anyone anywhere. Every leader must, to some extent, be an imaginative leader.

References

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