

Palmer, P. J. (1994). Leading from within: Out of the shadow, into the light. In J. A. Conger, Spirit at work (pp. 19-40). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

# Leading from Within

## Out of the Shadow, Into the Light'

Parker J. Palmer

In the last decade or two, we have done a lot of moaning about the lack of moral, humane, and visionary leadership in the public arena. But today, if we have eyes to see, we can look around the world and find those moral, visionary, humane leaders. We can find them in South Africa, we can find them in Latin America, and we can find them in eastern Europe.

I want to begin these reflections with the words of one of those people, someone whose credentials for leadership are far more authentic than mine. Vaclav

Havel (playwright, dissident, prisoner, and then president of Czechoslovakia) addressed the U.S. Congress in early 1990. It was surely one of the most remarkable speeches ever delivered on the floor of our national legislative body.

As long as people are people, democracy, in the full sense of the word, will always be no more than an ideal. In this sense, you too are merely approaching democracy uninterrupted for more than 200 years, and your journey toward the horizon has never been disrupted by a totalitarian system.

The communist type of totalitarian system has left both our nations, Czechs and Slovaks, as it has all the nations of the Soviet Union and the other countries the Soviet Union subjugated in its time, a legacy of countless dead, an infinite spectrum of human suffering, profound economic decline, and, above all, enormous human humiliation. It has brought us horrors that fortunately you have not known. [I think we Americans should confess that some in our country *have* known such horrors.—P.J.P.]

It has given us something positive, a special capacity to look from time to time somewhat further than someone who has not undergone this bitter experience. A person who cannot move and lead a somewhat normal life because he is pinned under a boulder has more time to think about his hopes than someone who is not trapped that way.

What I'm trying to say is this: We must all learn many things from you, from how to educate our offspring, how to elect our representatives, all the way to how to organize our economic life so that it will lead to prosperity and not to poverty. But it doesn't have to be merely assistance from the well-educated, powerful and wealthy to someone who has nothing and therefore has nothing to offer in return.

We too can offer something to you: Our experience and the knowledge that has come from it. The specific experience I'm talking about has given me one certainty: Consciousness precedes being, and not the other way around, as the Marxists claim. For this reason, the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and in human responsibility. Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better in the sphere of our beings as humans, and the catastrophe toward which this world is headed—be it ecological, social, demographic or a general breakdown of civilization—will be unavoidable.<sup>2</sup>

I doubt there has ever been, from a more remarkable source, a stronger affirmation of the link between spirituality and leadership than Havel's words, "consciousness precedes being" and "the salvation of the world lies in the human heart." He points us toward

the heart of the matter—the formation of the human heart, the reformation of the human heart, and the rescuing of the human heart from all its deformations.

Material realities, he tells us, are not the fundamental factor in the movement of history. Consciousness is. Human awareness is. Thought is. Spirit is. Those are the deep sources of freedom and power with which oppressed people historically have been able to move immense boulders and create remarkable change.

But let me say something that Vaclav Havel was too polite to say: It is not only the Marxists who have believed that matter is more powerful than consciousness. It is not only the Marxists who have believed that economics is more fundamental than spirit. It is not only the Marxists who have believed that the flow of cash creates more reality than does the flow of ideas. We capitalists have believed these things too, and Havel was simply too nice to say it. But we can say it to ourselves. We can remind ourselves that in our own system of thought we have a long and crippling legacy of believing in the power of the external world much more deeply than we believe in the power of the internal world.

How many times have you heard or said, "Those are good ideas, inspiring notions, but the *reality* is . . ."? How many times have you heard people trying to limit our creativity by treating institutional realities as absolute constraints on what we are able to do? How many times have you worked in systems based on the belief that the only changes that really matter are the ones that you can count or measure or tally up externally? This

is not just a Marxist problem. This is a human problem, at least in our twentieth-century, technological society.

We are not victims of that society, we are its co-creators. The great insight of our spiritual traditions is that external reality does not impinge upon us as a prison or as an ultimate constraint. Instead we *co-create* that reality. We live in and through a complex interaction of spirit and matter, a complex interaction of what is inside of us and what is "out there." The wisdom of our spiritual traditions is not to deny the reality of the outer world, but to help us understand that we create the world, in part, by projecting our spirit on it—for better or worse.

Vaclav Havel has said some hard things to his own people about how they conspired in the domination of a tyrannical communist system through their own passivity. We too are responsible for the existence of tyrannical conditions, of external constraints that crush our spirits, because we too co-create reality through the projection of our internal limitations. Our complicity in world-making is a source of awesome and sometimes painful responsibility and at the same time a source of profound hope for change.

The great spiritual traditions are not primarily about values and ethics, not primarily about doing right or living well. The spiritual traditions are primarily about *reality*. The spiritual traditions all strive to penetrate the illusions of the external world and to name its underlying truth—what it is, how it emerges, and how we relate to it.

In my own tradition, I have been rereading some of Jesus's sayings that I was taught as ethical exhortations, as guides to what we *ought* to do: "The person who seeks life will lose it; but the person who is willing to lose life will find it." But that is not an ethical exhortation. It is not an "ought" statement. It is simply a description of what *is*. Time and again, things Jesus said that we take as ethical pronouncements are simply his statements of what is real. That is the nature of great spiritual teaching.

The insight that I want to draw from the spiritual traditions, and from Havel, may be best summarized in a word from depth psychology: *projection*. We share responsibility for creating the external world by projecting either a spirit of light or a spirit of shadow on that which is other than us. We project either a spirit of hope or a spirit of despair, either an inner confidence in wholeness and integration or an inner terror about life being diseased and ultimately terminal. We have a choice about what we are going to project, and in that choice we help create the world that is. Consciousness precedes being, and consciousness can help deform, or reform, our world.

### Leaders Have a Shadow Side

What does all of this have to do with leadership and with the relation of leadership to spirituality? Here is a quick definition of a leader: A leader is a person who has an unusual degree of power to project on other people his or her shadow, or his or her light. A leader is

a person who has an unusual degree of power to create the conditions under which other people must live and move and have their being, conditions that can either be as illuminating as heaven or as shadowy as hell. A leader must take special responsibility for what's going on inside his or her own self, inside his or her consciousness, lest the act of leadership create more harm than good.

I want to look here at the shadow side of leadership. Many books on leadership seem to be about the power of positive thinking. I fear they feed a common delusion among leaders that their efforts are always well intended, their power always benign. I suggest that the challenge is to examine our consciousness for those ways in which we leaders may project more shadow than light.

By *leaders*, I do not mean simply the heads of nation-states. I am talking, for example, about a classroom teacher who has the power to create the conditions under which young people must spend half of their waking hours, five days a week, week in and week out. We know that there are classrooms where the leader projects a welcoming light under which new growth flourishes. But we also know of classrooms where the leader casts an ominous shadow under which nothing can grow. I am talking also about a parent who can generate the same effects in a family, about a clergy/person who can create a congregation that lurks in the leader's shadow or thrives in his or her light. I am talking about the CEO of a corporation who faces the same

choice every day but who often does not even know that a choice is being made, let alone know how to reflect upon the process.

The problem is that people rise to leadership in our society by a tendency toward extroversion, which too often means ignoring what is going on inside themselves. Leaders rise to power by operating very competently and effectively in the external world, sometimes at the cost of internal awareness. Leaders, in the very way they become leaders, tend to screen out the inner consciousness that Vaclav Havel is calling us to attend to. I have met too many leaders whose confidence in the external world is so high that they regard the inner life as illusory, a waste of time, a magical fantasy trip into a region that does not even exist. But the link Havel makes between consciousness and reality, between leadership and spirituality, calls us to reexamine that common denial of the inner life.

I think leaders often feed themselves on the power of positive thinking because their jobs are hard. They face many external discouragements and they get little affirmation. Thus they feel a need to psych themselves up even if it means ignoring the inner shadow. Of course, leaders are supported in this by an American culture that wants to externalize everything, that wants (just as much as Marx ever did) to see the good life more as a matter of outer arrangements than of inner well-being.

I have looked at some training programs for leaders, and I am discouraged by how often they focus on the development of skills to manipulate the external world

rather than the skills necessary to go within and make the spiritual journey. I find that discouraging because it feeds a dangerous syndrome among leaders who already tend to deny their inner world.

### The Nature of Spirituality

Spirituality, like leadership, is a very hard concept to pin down. These are probably two of the vaguest words you can find in our language, and when you put them together you get something even more vague.

So let me share a remarkably concrete quote from Anne Dillard's wonderfully titled book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. Never have I read a more evocative description of the inner journey:

In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters down, if you drop with them farther over the world's rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good, and evil its power for evil, the unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for each other, and for our life together here. This is given. It is not learned.<sup>3</sup>

Anne Dillard is saying several things that are very important for a spirituality of leadership. She is saying, first of all, that the spiritual journey moves inward and downward, not outward and upward toward abstraction. It moves downward toward the hardest concrete

