

Proceedings of the 2014 International Followership Symposium

Introductory Remarks

I used to tell my wife that someday my tombstone should read, “He did not go quietly.” I am not sure if that was meant to be a future warning to the world in which I had lived for so many years or if it was a call for those who were still living in that world to strive to do something significant with the life that they had been granted.

Recently, I reconnected with those thoughts while reading a passage from Parker Palmer’s (2000) soul searching book *Let Your Life Speak*. Many things that Parker Palmer writes resonate with me. On my bucket list of things to do someday is to write my own book that will hopefully stir the souls of others.

For now, I stand before you as someone who, only a few short years ago, decided that a topic on which I was researching and attempting to write needed to be heard by more in the world around me. I literally stumbled across that topic as a doctoral student while researching about how the verbal communication of a leader impacts those whom they lead - and how those whom they lead, in turn, lead others. As described in much of the literature that I was reading at the time, the “others” were commonly described by such terms as subordinates, associates and, at times, even underlings (for Pete’s sake).

On the one hand, there was an argument that could be made in favor of existing *positive* organizational relationships between bosses and subordinates. The question remained of whether we could do better by being more cognizant of the labels that we used to describe our research and practice. Beyond the power-based context of the message being conveyed, each of these terms seemed to be somewhat devoid of relational value.

While reading one day, I paused to ponder the name of one of our more popular leadership theories over the past 20-25 years. That theory is leader-member exchange (commonly referred to as LMX theory). With the utmost respect for the authors who coined the expression, I could not help but also notice that the label attached to the theory seemed problematic given the perceived importance of the exchange that was being described. The term *leader* appeared to receive more emphasis, although much of the work that resulted from the proposed exchange was being done by those who were nebulously described as *members*. It was as if the name of the theory was split between *the important* and the maybe *not as important* although the exchange itself remained critically significant. This dichotomy became an interesting sticking point for me to further explore.

My search was for something more in line with what Meg Wheatley (2006) described in *Leadership and the New Science* as the “both/and” that is all too often missing in our approach to leadership vs. the “either/or” approach to leadership so often experienced in today’s organizations. For that reason, I resorted to defining leader-*member* exchange as leader-*follower* exchange in what I was attempting to write, while still referencing the excellent body of knowledge which supported the theory we have come to know as LMX theory.

It was during this time that I also began to consider the writings and other edited works of some of the people in this room, as well as others who will be speaking in the days to come at the 16th Annual ILA Global Conference – namely Ira Chaleff, Robert Kelley, Barbara Kellerman, Jean Lipman-Blumen, and Ron Riggio. To each of these people, I say, “Thank You”. Thank you for opening a door through which I needed to pass - a door which helped to lead me in a direction that my mind had first wanted to go in December 1983, six months prior to completing my undergraduate degrees in the sciences. Some 30 years hence, what you had eloquently

written became an open door to new possibilities informed by what I had experienced during those formative years.

Earlier, I mentioned the writings of Parker Palmer and I thought that it would be appropriate for us to consider a passage from his writings as we begin this journey into the 2014 International Followership Symposium. In *Let Your Life Speak*, Palmer (2000) writes:

Vocation at its deepest level is not “Oh, boy, do I want to go to this strange place where I have to learn a new way to live and where no one, including me, understands what I’m doing.” Vocation at its deepest level is, “This is something I can’t do, for reasons I am unable to explain to anyone else and don’t fully understand myself but that are nonetheless compelling (p. 25).

He goes on to tell the story of an event that happened in Montgomery, Alabama on December 1, 1955. That was the day a seamstress in her early 40’s named Rosa Parks chose to do something “dangerous, daring, and provocative” that the world around her told her not to do (p. 32). It was on that day in American history that Palmer (2000) says Rosa Parks embraced “her true vocation” because it was during this time that she found the courage to act on her convictions.

As Palmer (2000) suggests, the Rosa Parks of the world should never be looked at as extraordinary people, but as those who are instead ordinary and simply come to understand and find the courage to act on the nature of their calling, their passion, or their purpose. As I think about the cause for which we have assembled today, may we all come to better understand what Palmer writes in the context of the balanced message of today’s event, as we seek to know and help others to understand the same.

After all, leading is about following, and following is also about learning to lead.

Thank you.

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References

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- Wheatley, M. J. (2006). *Leadership and the new science: Discovering order in a chaotic world* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

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