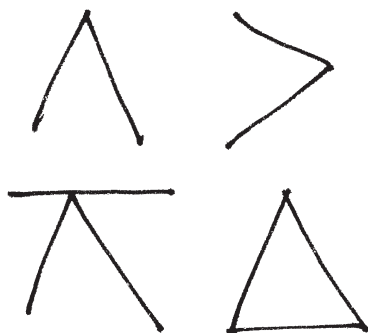


KARL MARTIN



THE CAVE, THE ROAD,
THE TABLE AND THE FIRE

LEADING FROM A DEEPER PLACE



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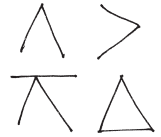
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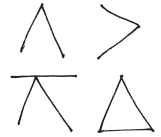
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FOREWORD



‘Jack, I want you to meet a guy I know, he’s different. I think he possesses what you are looking for.’

I first met Karl in extraordinary circumstances. I had been looking for an ‘executive coach’ for almost five years and had never found the right fit. I had just about given up the search – resigned to gathering whatever wisdom I could from books, courses and occasional interactions – when the Covid-19 virus hit the planet. It was then that a mutual friend introduced us. While I never want a global pandemic to ever devastate us again, I am extremely grateful that it led me to the coach I knew I needed and couldn’t find.

BOOM... one Zoom call and thirty minutes later, I was convinced Karl and his coaching was exactly what I had been lacking. Quickly, we decided to pursue a connection that turned into a contract and has become a real partnership. From day one, my interactions with him, his understated wisdom and direct challenge have made me a stronger, more confident, relational leader. As you engage with his writing in this book, my hope is that it will do the same for you.

Quite early on in our engagement, it became clear to me that Karl’s style and system was going to have a powerful impact, not only on my personal leadership journey but also for my team, my organization and even my family. At Toyota, Karl has helped me build ‘The Super Six’ which is my entire Toyota/Lexus leadership team. Karl has become a sought-after resource for our entire company, and I can’t stop recommending him and his consultancy to other executives. Perhaps most importantly, Karl has become my friend; a great friend and a golf partner as well as a thought partner. In the book you are about to read, Karl talks about ‘influences’ and describes a city, asking you to decide who gets access to you and how. He and his wife Niki

have gained access to my life – my wife, my kids, my friends – and we are all richer for it. I’m beginning to think that that’s the superpower at work here – clients become friends; colleagues become friends; even readers become friends. It feels a little counterintuitive even to type this, but perhaps that’s what happens when, as Karl puts it, ‘you lead from your soul’ and encourage others to do so too.

I’m not sure exactly how to describe his leadership style and system to you and you will gather more as you read, but let me have a go.

As you read *The Cave, the Road, the Table and the Fire*, you will encounter not just an author who could become your friend but an incisive and provocative executive coach. When I started working with Karl I realized, as our introducer had intimated, that he was different. When you meet him, in person or in the stories written here, you will meet a strange amalgam of personal mentor, intellectual provocateur and spiritual guide. He’s wholehearted, bold and a relationally brilliant leader; his business bleeds this stuff and so does the book. Reading it, I can quite literally hear his voice in my head. It took me back to conversations we had and lessons that I’d actioned. It is not often that a book sounds like the one who wrote it ... this one does. It’s even less common for the words on a page to be as impactful as a coach in a room, but I think the words in this book just might be.

What I know you will find in the pages that follow is a philosophy and practice that is deeply personal and truly bespoke. Karl’s approach is not the normal, ‘here are my ten steps to success’ or ‘this is my program; just follow it’. Instead, his system is all about personal responsibility, empathic wisdom, and radical contextualizing. It starts where you are and moves you to where you want to be, where you need to be, for you to lead in the room and in the way you were made to lead.

In some ways, I guess this book is like so many others: full of useful models, concepts and tools that will grow your skillset. Yet,

in other ways, it is like the author: different. I believe what it's really trying to do is to invite you into a True, Brave, Kind and Curious leadership revolution; one designed to reframe the very nature of leadership and promising to bring about the kind of change that is desperately needed in our chaotic culture. If you engage with it, as I have engaged with Karl, I believe it could have the same effect on you as he has had on me.

And it needs to!

Leadership, as Karl puts it, is the greatest of human gifts. I have always thought so and built my career trying to grow mine and the leadership of those around me. As Karl points out later in this book, I have always carried a belief that people are our greatest asset. In business, and in life, your people are more important than your profit. In truth, it is the only way you get one. I guess that the virtues taught here would, traditionally, be regarded as 'soft skills'. However, I have come to regard them as 'vital skills'. Sadly, these vital skills are rarely mastered by, often missing from, and badly needed in corporate America at this time.

As you read and study, you will discover a 'fixing of the soul' that is deeper than a solving of a problem. You will find that the principles and patterns in this book are ancient and yet deeply relevant; they are at times spiritual (his personal faith clearly underpins his thinking), but they are always practical – above all, they work!

This really works!

Since meeting with Karl and working with him, I have been promoted to EVP of Toyota North America and President of Toyota, USA. My direct reports are benefiting hugely from the insights in this book and have become more aligned and focused as a result. Even my family has been encouraged (my golf – not so much) but THAT is a whole different story.

In the chapters outlining 'the Table' Karl unpacks what was perhaps the most impactful conversations that he and I have had

around the nature of trust: how you grow it and how you measure it. *Did my team trust one another? Could they? Did they trust me?* I had always believed that the amount of trust in a team or company was the key factor in determining the performance of the group, but the discipline of unpacking and applying that conversation and coaching session has become the central component to my Toyota team's subsequent development. You will find it laid out in this book as an equation:

$$\text{Trust} = \frac{\text{Credible} + \text{Dependable} + \text{Relatable}}{\text{Selfish}}$$

As I studied this with him and then read it again here, what I realized is that Karl lives this stuff and that this book is full of it. Credible; Dependable; Relatable. He wants you to KNOW you and it allows you to know him.

Friends, if you read this book carefully, apply the learning and adopt the patterns, you will lead better. How much better, I truly believe is on you. Trust the book, the author and the process.

Let me end by offering a public health warning:

This book will change you, IF you let it! Karl is a disruptor! Concepts will challenge you, stories will move you and models will guide you, IF you let it! Your work and your personal life will be expanded and enhanced, IF you let it!

Karl makes the point, towards the end of the book, that some of us are just not teachable, just not curious enough to grow, just not ready to 'let it'.

Folks, I am encouraging you to go for it! Go hard after the lessons articulated here and allow yourself to be your best you.

As he says, ‘you are the project’. In my experience that’s always the case. Please take this on; take it to mean it’s on you before it is on anyone else. You will grow your leadership if you truly embrace this book. SO? Buckle up, strap yourself in, let’s read and then let’s lead ... better.

Jack Hollis

EVP, TOYOTA NORTH AMERICA AND PRESIDENT, TOYOTA USA.

Texas, October 2023

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To my team, Arable, by name and nature.

To S, my publisher and the best editor a writer could have. For wisdom, skill and collaboration.

To J & K and J & J, supporters and challengers. Friends who have become family.

To L, K, A, S and E. Your leadership makes me proud, your potential makes me hopeful.

And to N, my '*cymbrogî*', my soulmate. Without whom none of this works.

Thank you, thank you.

THE PROJECT



'You are the project.'

He almost whispered, but I heard it as a roar.

'The project is not the project; you are the project. The product is not the project, the strategy is not the project, the vision is not even the project. YOU ARE.'

He was a man I'd admired from afar – revered, an expert, possibly the best in his field. And that was his best opening?

I sat confused, offended, among a few hundred other young leaders, all ambitious and keen to learn and master any new approach to the art of influencing people. And this just messed with my head. It directly challenged my assumptions, my disposition, and exposed my natural inclination to short-cut my way to success with soundbites, new ideas and a few smart tactics.

That moment effectively ruined me for any other perspective on leadership.

I am the project.

What he was pointing out was that leadership doesn't exist without a leader; it's a person before it's ever a concept or a system. If you strip away all the leadership noise – the podcasts streamed, the books read or written, the strategies adopted – you're left with a leader.

This is about that.

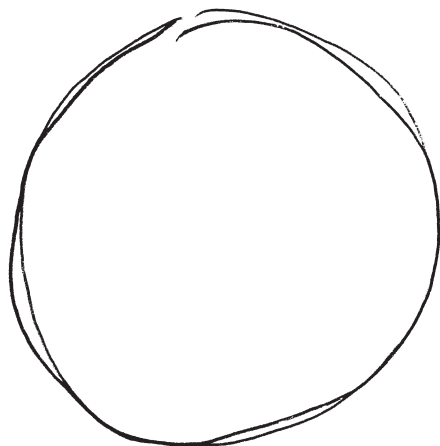
This is about unearthing who you really are; unlocking the very deepest part of you; this is about unveiling what I like to call soul. (I'll get down to explaining this more in the coming chapters.)

The project *is* you.

SO...

Draw a circle on the ground.

Don't stop reading because it just got practical. Do it – draw!



If you happen to be on a beach, do it in the sand. If you're on your patio, do it with a chalk stone. If, as is likely, you are neither, draw your circle with your finger – just imagine the circle on the floor in front of you. Now, step inside it. And own everything within the circle.

What I'm asking is, before you address anything outside the boundary, will you take responsibility for all that is inside of it? Will you address all that is in yourself? All dreams, all fears, all possibilities, all limitations, all wounds, all merits, all gifts.

All.

The tale of the circle maker¹ has different central characters, depending on which tradition you're storied in. It might be a Rabbi called Honi, who prayed for rain, or a preacher called Gipsy, who asked for favour. It might be a real story or made up. But the point is the same: It's on you. You are responsible; You are your first responsibility.

It's the best starting point for all that follows. Get in the circle. Put yourself in the story. You are the project. And stay there. Staying is an act of focused ownership.

I don't care whether you sit, so as to say, *'I will not move from here. This is the project.'* Or whether you stand, posturing, *'It's on me. I am the project.'* Or whether you kneel, acknowledging, *'This is a moment. I submit myself as the project.'* What we're aiming at is a humble ownership that comes from a much deeper place. The transformation that could flow *from* you must grow *in* you.

The project is leading yourself, so you can lead others. And then groups of others, who lead others. It requires a digging, it will be challenging in every good way and then worth every effort you make. This is, after all, about leadership. The greatest skill you could ever develop. The ability to influence, inspire and transform; to grow people, manage systems and organize structures.

For some reading this, it will sound like an overstatement, but my experience tells me leadership is all. It's everything. Everything you need to grow something, inspire someone, change someplace. Show me a great team, and I'll show you great leadership. Whether that team is a national government, a business, a charity, a sports franchise or a family – the success or failure of that team is largely dependent on the quality of its leadership. The quality of its leader. Show me chaos, infighting, underperformance, a victim or blame culture, and I will show you a failure of leadership. Of a leader.

1 Mark Batterson, *The Circle Maker: Praying Circles Around Your Biggest Dreams and Greatest Fears* (Zondervan, 2016), pp22–25.

Criminally, this greatest skill is usually learned as a catch-up measure or a reverse engineering exercise. Acquired accidentally or incidentally ‘on the job’, often only taught intentionally, far down the road, as gaps are revealed. The greatest human skill has been relegated to a ‘nice to have’. Or a ‘soft skill’. We teach technical skills as a logical expedience and neglect the most transformational of callings.

And so, we have a generation of leaders equipped to manage process, but not to lead people. Leadership has become positional – all about a title. It’s become suffocatingly superficial – all about a product or a profit. It’s barely functional, flimsy and broken.

But it could be so much more.

And it must be, because the stakes are high. We’re talking about you fulfilling your life’s potential. We’re also talking about you leading others to do the same. But more broadly, you are reading this in a moment of leadership crisis where people are avoiding formal positions of influence, and when they fall into them, are ill-equipped to deliver health. Leadership itself is in crisis.

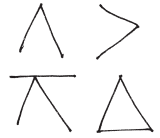
If you don’t believe me, read the newspaper. Every day for a week. Allow me to summarize what you’ll find: politicians with flimsy morals, populist agenda and a culture of massive polarization. Sports managers given payoffs and system-wide corruption. Financial leaders bullying and eroding trust in big business. Religious leaders abusing power, and becoming increasingly compromised. Heads of state whose personal lives and ethical choices are undermining their ability to call anyone to a higher standard.

The role of leadership in the workplace, in the family, and in the community has eroded, and is even resented.

‘You are the project’ – is the Truth that whispers and then screams, refusing to allow us to shake our heads, wring our hands, justify our position or blame someone else.

No! Stay in the circle and a different kind of leader might emerge.

INTRODUCTION



21 GRAMS (AND YOUR DOG MISSED OUT)

The weight of your soul is 21 grams.

That is, at least, according to Duncan MacDougall, a physician,² and Alejandro Iñárritu, the director of a film of the same title, *21 Grams*, starring Sean Penn.³ In 1907, MacDougall attempted a spurious scientific experiment to measure the weight lost from a human being when the soul left the body. One of the six bodies experimented on lost $\frac{3}{4}$ of an ounce or 21.3 grams. So, he hypothesized, your soul exists! He later set up an experiment with dogs, discovering nothing was lost postmortem and concluding dogs did not have souls, while human beings did.

I'm pretty sure MacDougall's pseudo-science or Iñárritu's artistic point that your soul has mass you can weigh isn't true. And one can't avoid the controversy around how MacDougall happened to be present at the death of so many dogs! The desire to show soul as a foundational part of human life was a noble one, but to prove it by measuring its mass seems absurd. For something to be of vital influence in our lives, it does not need physical mass. The power of thought, feeling, emotion, culture and tradition all impact us in ways many of their material counterparts could only dream about.

Here's my own hypothesis. The core of you is soul. Deeper than personality, and much more than a body responding to a material world through the activity of five senses. That soul is reflective consciousness; it is, right now, informing mind, will and emotions. The immaterial you directing the material you.

2 Rachel Armstrong, Simone Ferracina, Rolf Hughes, *Liquid Life: On Non-Linear Materiality* (Punctum Books, 2019), p245.

3 Alejandro González Iñárritu, dir., *21 Grams* (Focus Features, 2003).

As such, the soul is not only the essence of who you are, it also carries the truth of who you might become. It is the noblest, bravest and most creative and collaborative part of us; as such, soul leadership changes relationships and circumstances for the better. It brings dreams to life, enriches communities, offers safety and hope. Soul leaders raise soul leaders.

But we don't teach about soul. Or advocate for it in the leadership conversation. Perhaps it is too religious in overtone or too woke in undertone. And we are reaping the results.

We tend to believe that an organization can lose its soul. And we know this is a bad thing. A building can be soulless, and we don't want to live there. We know exactly what we mean when we say, 'he sold his soul' and have witnessed the devastating aftermath of those kinds of transactions. We instinctively know searching one's soul is to look in a deeper place, in search of something better. But we don't talk much about the essential influence that comes from this deepest of places. The best of leaders digs down, tends and keeps that place healthy, and then leads from there. From a well-watered soul. I call this 'soul leadership'.

We could just call it 'leadership', but we would miss something essential in doing so. The very mystique of soul, the enigmatic quality, forces us to dig – and that's the point. You have to dig deep for it. Soul is the foundation of 'the project'. All you lead, all you build, starts there. From your soul. As long as you allow it, and acknowledge it, and tend it.

RECOVERING THE SOUL

Of course, the thing about foundations is that people don't really care about them until they fail and whatever you made slides or subsides, crumbles or collapses.

Recently, I found myself in a pretty dark place. I had just left a role that I loved, leading an organization I had helped birth, which had grown significantly and made some remarkable impacts.

I had given more of myself to that organization than I probably should have. I knew leaving was the right move; I was asking some hard questions about the institution itself and I was stagnating as a leader. To be really honest, the organization I had founded was beginning to do so, too. So, I left. At the age of fifty-one, I began to pivot my life.

I was prepared for disappointment from some, for the speculation of others, and for questions as to the motive of this change. I hadn't lost my faith, wasn't renegeing on my calling, and certainly didn't need to leave for any relational or moral reason. I was truly doing the right thing – for me, for them, it would be better for all – and yet change is always hard to embrace.

What I wasn't prepared for was the pain of misunderstanding from close friends and colleagues, those I'd worked alongside and sought to encourage over decades. It felt like abandonment and rejection and took me to a bleak corner in my mind. I had written books and run courses on leadership and had been regarded as a leader in the very subject area that was now under the microscope. The relational influence I had always enjoyed felt like the very area I'd failed. It devastated me.

As I took time to process, two equal and opposite reactions began to emerge in me. Both, I now know to be toxic.

First came the impulse to beat myself up. The internal narrative went like this: I was the leader, things didn't go the way I imagined they should, it's my fault. Entirely. Therefore, I'm not the leader I think I am, not fit for the leadership I thought I was, and I should stop trying to lead. Ever.

After I had sat for a while in the dust, with the worms, feeling useless and then a little sorry for myself, another, equally strong emotion began to rise up in me. Indignation.

My narrative now acknowledged that I had not been treated well. That a story was being passed around that just wasn't true and that others were using for their own ends. When people we love break

agreement with us, something breaks within us. I was determined not to defend myself, so when I was attacked, I stewed in solitude.

Neither one of these reactions was wholly right or completely wrong. But as I sat with these emotions, I realized that this moment – although not life and death for me – contained within it the potential to make or diminish me.

I thought I was on a journey to reboot my life; I was actually on a quest to find my soul again – I just didn't have the words for it at the time. I began to see that if this moment was to have any redemptive outcome, the only posture of value was to address all causes in myself. Not the self-flagellation of my first reaction, but a more measured and curious sense of seeking to understand more deeply how I'd contributed to the current state.

The problem, as I began to unpack it, was not in my mind. I understood the principles of leadership well. The problem was, equally, not in my heart. I loved people well. The problem was to do with soul. I had begun to lead and live from another place – not from a shallow place, but something had been lost. It wasn't initially obvious, to me or anyone else. It wasn't intentional. It was accidental. And that was the problem. If you don't fight to lead from your soul, you won't.

You'll react, rather than respond. You'll deal with the urgent and neglect the important. You'll leave no margin to reconnect with your essence and purpose. Everything around you will conspire to draw everything within you to lead from a lesser place. You'll find yourself soulless. I hadn't come close to selling my soul, but I might have misplaced it, somewhere in the middle of trying to do things. Mostly good things.

Our leadership problems are most often found in the soul. They're most often solved there, too. You must do all you can to find your soul if you want to lead well. This is hard stuff, not only because it is hard to conceptualize and materialize, but it's also challenging to measure. And yet, we know it's possible; we know leadership of this kind does exist. It is rare, but it exists.

Much is being spoken, written, and advocated about self-care and how to prioritize your mental and physical well-being. These practices might well be soul-care. I have sought to define what the soul is; the question becomes how can we care for it effectively?

George Fuechsel, an early IBM programmer and trainer, popularized the acronym GIGO to describe the limitations and the power of a machine: Garbage In Garbage Out!⁴ I'd like to offer up an alternative to describe the limitations and power of a leader: HIHO. Health In Health Out.

What is *in*, is what will *out*. The project is you. Not your skills (not firstly). Not your strategies. Not the newest idea from the latest leadership playbook. Not your doings ... but your being. This is a book about you – and about you making some commitments. Some agreements with yourself.

In my own dark place, I discovered something that I now understand to be the key for cultivating leadership and leading from a place of soul; I unearthed four characteristics that I want to be the legacy of my ongoing leadership; traits that come from my soul and cannot be attained unless I intentionally excavate and mine them from deep within myself. I have determined to make agreements with myself and I challenge you to do the same.

Agreements to be the leader you could be and to lead others to the same end. Agreements to be:

TRUE and to provoke authentic and integrous leadership in others

BRAVE and to encourage courageous and focused leadership in those around you

4 William Lidwell, Kritina Holden, and Jill Butler, *Universal Principles of Design, Revised and Updated: 125 Ways to Enhance Usability, Influence Perception, Increase Appeal, Make Better Design Decisions, and Teach through Design* (Rockport Publishers, 2010), p112.

KIND and to spread that connected kindness so that it is caught by leaders who follow you

CURIOS and to catalyze creativity and growth in all those who look to you to lead them

Even as you read, as you stand in the circle (which we talked about earlier in ‘The Project’), as you become the project, I’m going to ask you to make an agreement to make these agreements.

These qualities, we will discover, are found and forged in practices, in a rhythm, in some deeper places:

THE CAVE: The quest of the True

THE ROAD: The way of the Brave

THE TABLE: The art of the Kind

THE FIRE: The pursuit of the Curious

Habitually.

And as you live these agreements, I’m going to ask you to begin to practise this rhythm. This intentional rhythm – borrowed from my Celtic heritage, practised, and proven over centuries by those who led from a deeper place – is offered to empower a different quality of leader.

The Cave, the Road, the Table and the Fire is a pattern for your project, a beat for your days. Not a rhythm you have to march to. But a groove you can find. Leaders who find this kind of groove have a competitive advantage. They own the future. I know this is difficult stuff, but stay with me.

Draw a circle
Take responsibility
Make agreements
Keep agreements
Find your groove

In this book we will consider what it means to lead from your soul. Not from value statements or playbooks, but from a deeper place, from the core of who you really are. And we will consider how to care for and maintain that place.

This is not a book for the fainthearted. It is, of course, written to be read. But it is also written to be marked up and underlined. It is written to provoke, equip and to be disagreed with. It must, in parts, be disagreed with. If you find nothing to disagree with, I probably haven't done my job.

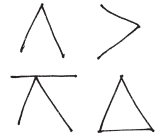
Nor is it reserved only for those graced with particular personality types, leadership styles and privileged backstories. The agreements are birthright for all of us and the spaces are available to any who want them enough.

This is for you. And then it is for them. *All* of them – those who will be impacted by your leadership.

You are the project.

It's just four words, but it might just be a life sentence.
It's just four letters, and it just might be the point of the project.

HIHO.



AN ETCHING

FIXING THE CHARACTER OF OUR TIMES

I sank deep into an antique armchair (probably a Howard and Sons) by the open fire and picked up my journal. This library, in an unspoilt English stately home, was almost certainly the very room where William Wilberforce had gathered with his Clapham Sect⁵ to dream, to conspire, and to work tirelessly, year after year, towards the abolition of slavery.

That evening, I shared this historic reading room with remarkable men and women – leaders of emerging talent. They were would-be politicians, early-days business leaders and gifted writers. So much potential in such a portentous room.

On the one hand, there was little unusual about gathering a group of next generation leaders, as Niki, my wife, and I have been trying to prioritize these moments all our lives. But on the other there was something uncommonly pertinent about the moment, the hunger and the space.

We'd been exploring the power of influence. As we reflected on what we'd learned, breathing in the atmosphere of ancient leather, woodsmoke and whisky, we talked of a different kind of leadership.

The fire cracked and sighed, the Lagavulin 16 glowing in the heavy crystal tumblers, and Rob (at twenty-three, already the veteran of two start-ups), fresh from his first significant failure and in the throes of debt and the fear of redundancies, murmured:

5 Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain* (Lion Hudson, 2010).

‘What kind of leader is that? What kind of leader is it who “fixes the character of their times”?’

A pause. We all recognized the allusion. I had referenced it earlier in the day – an inscription in the north choir aisle of Westminster Abbey, a tribute to a remarkable leader. A leader who had changed the way things were.

To the memory of William Wilberforce (born in Hull August 24th 1759, died in London July 29th 1833); for nearly half a century a member of the House of Commons, and, for six parliaments during that period, one of the two representatives for Yorkshire. In an age and country fertile in great and good men, he was among the foremost of those who fixed the character of their times.⁶

The memorial goes on to talk specifically about Wilberforce’s involvement in the abolition of slavery and his leadership of culture at the time.

‘Don’t forget,’ countered Alice, ‘there was nothing perfect about the record or character of Wilberforce, or any of the “great and good men” – or indeed, women – that the country was then fertile with. Wilberforce opposed some reforms which would have seriously relieved poverty. There is much that might be questioned about the philosophies and practices of many of these privileged people.’

It was the kind of comment that Alice often made, justice-conscious as she was, always provocative, sometimes right.

‘No doubt,’ continued Rob, ‘Wilberforce was flawed. But to make the slightest impression, the least dent on your culture, to

⁶ Westminster Abbey, ‘William Wilberforce & family’, Westminster-abbey.org (accessed 10 August 2023).

have someone remember your name beyond your generation is a huge thing. And to “fix the character of your times”? That seems monumental, like another order of huge.’

I jumped in, grasping the moment to suggest that, at that time ‘fix’ didn’t mean ‘mend’ – it didn’t mean to put a new screw in a door hinge, or a drop of WD40 to solve an annoying squeak. The word has come to mean a temporary mend: the supergluing of a broken mug handle. But when the memorial was engraved, ‘fix’ probably meant something more like ‘to set’. To set the character of our times.

I couldn’t have planned the evening better if I tried. The fire was playing its part. As the flames danced, our minds turning over the ideas and events of the day, we went deeper. Alice had put aside her prejudice and this was the moment to make the salient point. I spoke again:

‘That’s exactly what great leadership does. All the time. The character of leadership sets the character of society. As it is in the character of leaders, so it is in the characteristics of our culture. Any culture, any business environment, any public office or any family. As it is with the leader, so it goes for everything the other side of that leader. It takes character to fix character.’

I leafed back in my journal to a note I’d written earlier.

‘The word “character” comes from the Greek “kharakter,” which means a stamping tool.’⁷ It came to describe the mark left on a coin during its manufacture. It describes an etching or something that is deeply embedded.’

⁷ John Frow, *Character & Person* (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp7, 248.

An embedding of character. An etching of the soul. Somehow, in the dimly lit room, it felt as if we'd meandered into one of the most significant conversations any of us could have. On the character of leadership and how it is formed. On the quality of culture and how it is tended. On where these two concepts are linked and whether they could ever be 'fixed'. And if any of us could lead in such a way that would have lasting, etched impact.

And as we talked later into the night, feeding the fire at various lulls, it became clear, at least to those in the room that perhaps never had this conversation been more needed or relevant.

Let's step away from that room for a while to try to understand our leadership moment, at least a little.

V U C A

Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous. VUCA was a term used by leadership experts Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus in their book, *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge*,⁸ to describe the context of the US Army War College's response to the ending of the Cold War. Bennis and Nanus point out that this term can be aptly applied to the challenges facing strategic leadership of all kinds in every arena of culture since.

What Bennis and Nanus anticipated was the instability of a deeply confused world that could comprehensively destroy itself in the rise of a rogue nation or a terrorist cause by the press of a button. They almost certainly didn't have the data set to imagine a civilization run largely by Artificial Intelligence and all the terrifying implications of that possibility. Or the growing body of evidence that our ecosystems have become untenable, and that our planet itself is now subject to unsustainable forces likely to destroy

⁸ Warren G Bennis and Burt Nanus, *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge* (Harper Business, 2007).

it. When Bennis and Nanus shared the term VUCA the world had little appreciation of the power of a world wide web – or the far-reaching societal changes that would follow, for good or ill. Nor had they just experienced a Covid-19 pandemic that put life as we know it on pause, and placed an already beleaguered leadership in the spotlight as never before.

If they were writing now, the ‘A’ trait in VUCA might be described as ‘anxious’ and ‘angry’ instead of ‘ambiguous’. What is clear is that leadership in this VUCA world is under more pressure and greater scrutiny than it has ever been. And that, more than ever, we need clarity to arise amidst ambiguity; simplicity amidst complexity; stability amidst uncertainty and peace amidst volatility.

This will take a ‘fixing’. Not only will this require a different quality of leadership, it’s going to need to come from a deeper place – deeper spaces. A better approach toward leadership as a whole.

When French conservative thinker Joseph de Maistre observed that, ‘Every nation gets the government it deserves,’⁹ he was making a statement about the nature of democracy. But he might as well have been making a statement about the conditions we create for leadership. We get the leaders we deserve.

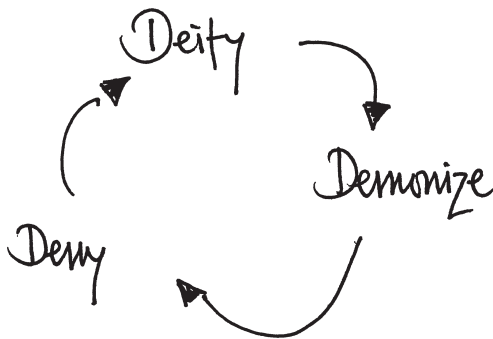
We might well argue that not only is our context VUCA but our attempts at leading our way through it is VUCA, as well. We appear to be stuck in a cycle – an understandable but sabotaging pattern that undermines the very leadership we need. A cycle repeated over time. We deify, then we demonize, then we deny.

Deify: We raise up leaders, expecting much of them, then take a ring-side seat and watch them fail to meet our unrealistic expectations and their overreaching claims. As leaders, we collude by believing our own press, or even creating it! Feeding our minor messiah complexes.

9 Richard J. Ellis and Michael Nelson, *Debating Reform: Conflicting Perspectives on How to Fix the American Political System* (CQ Press, 2020), p101.

Demonize: We respond to failures of leadership by tearing down the very same people we wildly promoted. Eagerly citing all that is wrong in them and discrediting even that which is good. We gossip about and deride those we once followed. As leaders, we can so easily believe *we are* the failure we've experienced; our inability to separate our personhood from our position takes us down.

Deny: Consequently, we blame the office of leadership or at least become deeply cynical of anyone who chooses to take responsibility. We then fail to teach leadership as of primary importance, and the resultant 'leadership phobia' means we sabotage even our own leadership potential. Good people with great ideas and strong character then run a million miles away from formal leadership.



And we end up with the leaders we deserve.

Our society does this on repeat. What is more, the opportunity our social media-obsessed world affords us to do this is unparalleled. Maybe the problem is not more pervasive today, just more public. None of us are purely victims in this populist farce. In fact, we create, enjoy, endure and then perpetuate it.

This moment is a circle moment. We owe ourselves, and those who come after us, a different conversation about leadership – a better conversation about leadership. The old models seem defunct and the current solutions deficient. But the right response can't be to

simply blame leadership as a concept; to cancel it, resign from it, to leave it broken for someone else to fix. We get the leaders we deserve and the culture that is the overspill of them. We become the leaders we choose to become. The problem is more complex than it has ever been; could the solution be as simple as it's always been?

Back to the library...

'Those who penned the original tribute to Wilberforce deliberately used the word character as the descriptor. They might have understood it to be an etching of the soul,'

'We might not use those specific words, and yet we know implicitly that great leadership comes from a deeper place. It owes less to tactics, policies and models and far more to qualities like integrity, honesty, resilience, dependability, bravery and humility. These are core to you – your character.'

'What if the essence of you, the soul of you, could determine the impact of you? And that you can train that soul, tend that soul, so its health flows from you to those around you; could that fix the character of the times?'

I left them with that thought. We moved from the library to our respective rooms, conversations paused for another day.

Perhaps for *this* day. *This* conversation.

Sit with me – let's poke the fire and drink this in. Your soul can become etched with the kind of qualities that fix the character of our times.

John's got it. We'll call him John, it's not his real name. I think we all have a John or a Jane in our minds – or they might be an amalgamation of the Johns and Janes we know. You might have met them in parts, in different people. Your John. Your Jane.

My John is grounded and centred – not in an arrogant way, but in a way that makes you feel more at peace when he is there. At ease in

boardrooms, in company and at home with himself. When he talks to you, he's truly interested in you and nothing else seems to matter. When he speaks about the things he's passionate about, he moves the dial, he changes atmospheres and he wins the room. When he decides he does so wisely, definitively and effectively. When he brings about change, he does so kindly. There is something about John. People love to be around him. Leaders want to follow him.

Jane has it, too. She isn't perfect – and she's not trying to pretend she is. She has weaknesses, she's working on some and celebrating others. Jane looks after herself – body, mind and spirit – but lives with others in mind. When Jane's life is torpedoed by the kind of thing that does that to lives – sickness, loss, rejection (you could add to the list) – she more than survives, she thrives. Jane gathers people and they follow gladly. In truth she has that almost unnatural ability to turn life's losses to wins, not just for herself, but for her people as well.

You might not know what to call it or be able to put your finger on it. But you've seen it in them and you want it for you. It's a deeply attractive thing. It fixes things, it sets things and it changes things.

What is it that makes these Johns and Janes? We may have known more driven leaders with bigger acclaim, greater wealth and more letters after their names. We probably know better dressers with sharper haircuts. But John and Jane carry themselves well. There is a grace and a pace to life that is almost grooved. It leaves a mark, indelibly, like a stamping tool. It changes things, for the good. People want to be around this life. I want to be around this life. We all want this to be *our* life.

And I asked myself, what is the secret to such a life?

And the only answer I could muster was an etching of the soul.