



MAGIS LEADERSHIP: TOWARD AN ACTIVE ONTOLOGY OF THE HEART THROUGH APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AND SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

—KAREN NORUM
GONZAGA UNIVERSITY

There are many emerging models of leadership. Transactional, transformational, command and control, facilitative, situational, contingency, charismatic, servant, relational, strengths-based, values-based, and principled are but a few of them. Many of these models focus on the person who is the leader: the one who is in charge, whom others follow, who holds a certain position in a hierarchy, or who has some sort of influence. The models tend to outline characteristics, behaviors, and attributes of leaders with the focus on individualistic and positional aspects of leadership (Heifetz, 1994; Schall, Ospina, Godsoe, & Dodge, 2004). While this is useful, the focus on the individual as a leader and what needs to be done or learned in order to become an effective leader tempts us to “resort to superficial ‘formulas’ for how to lead effectively” (Senge, 1999, p. 19). The myth of the hero-leader is subtly reinforced (Badaracco, Jr., 2003; Heifetz, 1994; Nielson, 2004; Senge, 1999; Wilson, 2004). In addition, Heifetz maintained that this myth fortifies isolationism, creating an image of “the solitary individual whose heroism and brilliance enable him to lead the way” (1994, p. 251). Badaracco, Jr. (2003) articulated three serious problems with this mental model of leadership. First, it promotes the idea of leaders at the top and followers at the bottom. Second, “it ignores everyday right-versus-right problems” where the advice to do the right thing is “irritating and irrelevant” (p. 1). Third, it is not helpful to those working in a constantly changing business environment, attempting to plan for uncertain futures. He suggested “small, unglamorous, everyday efforts. . .are



almost everything” (p. 5). Additionally, Heifetz pointed out that leadership takes place daily and is not “the traits of the few, a rare event, or a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity” (p. 275).

This article is an attempt to focus on the work of leadership rather than the work of leaders. While this is a fine distinction, it is a significant one. Asking the question, “What is the work of a leader?” is considerably different from asking, “What is the work of leadership?” (Schall et al., 2004). While the first question tends to focus on the leader as an individual and leadership as an act, the second question focuses on the space (personal and collective) that needs to be created for the work of leadership to occur. The focus is on the process and experiences associated with the work of leadership, drawing attention to the idea that leadership exists at multiple levels, “not just in the individual who is publicly recognized as a leader” (Schall et al., 2004, p. 154). Heifetz (1994) defined leadership as an activity that anyone could engage in; this paper explores leadership as a way of being that could be adopted by anyone. This particular way of being engenders a certain kind of space, one that is life-affirming and trusts that “somewhere at the center of life is something ineffably and unalterably right and good, and that this ‘rightness’ can be discovered” (Whyte, 1994, p. 293), as well as expanded.

Block (1998) raised a concern about the energy we have for the topic of leadership, advising that we question the power of the “leadership industry” that has been created (p. 88). The emphasis on solutions and commodification has led to an assumption that “leadership can be packaged, and thereby be sold and then purchased” (Block, 1998, p. 88). Block went on to suggest that if we “lost interest” in focusing on the leader as an individual and leadership as an act, we would look at leadership differently. The leadership model that tends to reinforce a certain kind of person as the leader more than the space that needs to be created is no longer as effective (Badaracco, Jr., 2003; Block, 2002; Cooperrider, 2001a; Heifetz, 1994; Meyerson & Ely, 2003; Quinn, 2000, 2004; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004; Wheatley, 2004, 2005; Wilson, 2004). Nielson (2004) went



as far as suggesting that we no longer need leaders; however, we do need leadership. This new form of leadership does not depend so much on a single extraordinary individual; rather, it depends more on a way of being that is life-affirming and a belief that at the core of all systems (including people) lies a positive center that can be engaged (Cooperrider, 1999; Quinn 2004; Senge et al., 2004; Wheatley, 2005). This article explores the work of leadership by sketching a type of space that can be engendered through this way of being. The space created is life- affirming, nourishing, positive, and generative on both an individual and a collective level. The work in this space is directed toward identifying and bringing out the “more” of people, organizations, and systems so that strength can be fused with strength. Thus, it will be referred to as *magis* leadership.

THE WAY OF BEING

The “magis” in magis leadership describes a way of being that is oriented toward the positive. This way of being is based on the premise that there is a positive core at the center of personal and collective systems that can be developed and brought to maturity. Such living unveils a passionate spirit that chooses to dwell in hope, possibility, goodness, imagination, and courage. It seeks to deepen the health of the system by connecting it to its positive essence. In the process of connecting to itself, the mystical “more-ness” (Atlee, 2001) of the system is brought out. Strength fuses with strength.

Magis

The word *magis* is Latin for “more.” The word *majesty* has its roots in magis: major, more, greater. Magis is associated with grandeur, dignity, inspiring awe or reverence, elevation of manner (KJV Dictionary). Magis is closely associated with Ignatian Spirituality (Lowney, 2003; Modras, 2004; The New Orleans Province Jesuits, n.d.). However, it is not only about “more” in a quantitative sense. As used by the Jesuits, magis means



going further than wholehearted service (Lowney, 2003). This is done by “paying attention to means and ends and discerning what is ‘more conducive’ to achieving the end results desired. It’s a matter of discriminating between options and choosing the better of the two” (Modras, 2004, p. 49). While going further than wholehearted service sounds like a recipe for burnout, seeking the magis discourages burnout because of its emphasis on choosing the “better” option, and burnout is not a “better” option (Modras, 2004). The idea of making the more noble choice is integral to the concept of magis. Silf explains, “In every choice for life (for ourselves and for others), we become a little bit more fully alive. In every choice that is life-denying, for ourselves or for others, we die a little. We are becoming what we choose” (2005, p. 62). Choosing the magis should also be a life-affirming choice, bringing energy to rather than draining it from the system.

Silf (2005) contended that “more” sometimes means “less.” Occasionally, seeking the magis means to relinquish things that may be inhibiting progress. In a prayer of Ignatius, he returns the gifts of liberty, memory, understanding, and his entire will to God (Silf, p. 102). Silf postulated the reasoning behind this prayer. Liberty can be abused and tempt us to choose the lesser good. Bad memories can trap us in old resentments. Believing we understand can blind us to new explanations. Our will can keep us from considering the better option. In letting go of the “less,” we are free to pursue the “more.” Magis, then, is not simply doing or adding more things; sometimes it means doing fewer things and deeply plumbing their depths.

Seeking the magis is characterized by a restless drive to imagine that even better things can be accomplished (Lowney, 2003, p. 121). Its energy “is pointed always toward some better approach to the problem at hand or some worthier challenge to tackle” (Lowney, p. 208). According to Spitzer (2000, p. 144), “we are constantly striving for ways to achieve the more noble, the greater good, the higher ideal.” Magis is directed toward bringing out the “more” in people and situations by making the most of the circumstances, finding the silver lining in the cloud, and continuously moving toward goals that will enhance the individual and/or the collective (Lowney,



2003; Modras, 2004). It seeks the more universal good (Decree 26, 1995b). Instead of wishing things were different, the energy of magis drives us to either make them different or make the most of them (Lowney, 2003).

Not only is magis about desiring and choosing the strategic option that is more conducive to goals; it also is about the confidence that the “more” is there waiting to be discovered (Lowney, 2003, p. 209). Therefore, in order to seek the magis, faith that there is something better is required. This is a faith that believes “no matter how unlikely, how apparently fallen or broken, [people and] institutions are capable of reawakening to their own best possibilities” (Specht with Broholm, 2004, p.184). They simply need to be reminded of their own best possibilities and called back toward recommitment to this potential (Specht with Broholm). It is a faith that believes in “fundamental and precious human goodness” (Wheatley, 2005, p. 57). Every system has a positive core, also referred to as a spirit, soul, birthright nature, true self, big self, best self, inner light or teacher, spark of the divine, identity, integrity, fire within (Palmer, 2004, p. 33; Quinn, 2004; Rolheiser, 1999). Seeking the magis is about putting individual and collective systems back in touch with their positive core and bringing out more of it. It can be described as an “active force that catapults us out of our narrow perspectives and pitches us into the realm of the finest” (Dunne, 1985, p. 83).

This requires the use of an appreciative eye. Artists do not paint what they see; they see what they paint. Michelangelo “saw” David in the stone. Thus, the appreciative eye is one that sees what is rather than what is not (Cooperrider, 1999). The idea that there is a positive core in every system that can be touched and intensified has spiritual roots: God declared creation to be “good,” giving an “original blessing, [a] gaze of appreciation” (Rolheiser, 1999, p. 239). The Jesuits believe, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994), that all creatures possess their own particular goodness and perfection; the universe itself is harmonious and beautiful. Spitzer (2000, p. 83) contends that “the human capacity to seek the ultimate, infinite, eternal, and unconditional in love, goodness, truth, beauty,



and being” exists whether one believes in God or not and will manifest itself even if we try to ignore it. Arendt (1968, p. 21) described this positive essence as a kind of poetry that we constantly expect to erupt. Seeking the magis calls for the belief in the existence of goodness and that people basically desire to do good. Lonergan explained,

The good is not an abstract notion. It is comprehensive. It includes everything. When you speak of the good, you do not mean some aspect of things as though the rest of their reality were evil. The good is a notion that is absolutely universal; that applies to whatever exists. (1993, p. 28)

As described here, magis leadership is based on a belief in the existence, consistency, and profound nature of goodness.

Choosing the Good

To trust in a basic goodness of personal and collective systems and to believe that they desire to do good does not necessitate ignoring the bad. People behave in dysfunctional and destructive ways. Theologians and philosophers admit the existence of evil. For example, Lonergan wrote, “Human good is not apart from evil, but in tension with it” (1993, p. 27). To trust in essential goodness does not require a Pollyanna-like sense that everything is fine when it is not. It does require a belief that good can come from evil and that there is goodness perhaps lying dormant, waiting to be tapped. Gandhi (n.d.) said,

When I despair, I remember that all through history the ways of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants, and murderers, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fall. Think of it—always.

This is to have confidence that “everything we have been given in life is always for the best” (Madonna, 2004, p. 11).

James (2002/1902) suggested that “much of what we call evil is due



entirely to the way men [*sic*] take the phenomenon” (p. 74) and that whether something is good or bad depends upon how we think about it. James called this “adoption of an optimistic turn of mind” (p. 74) healthy-mindedness and argued that it is not absurd to conceive of “good as the essential and universal aspect of being” (p. 73). He provided the following illustration that reveals the slippery nature of perspective:

We divert our attention from disease and death as much as we can; and the slaughter-houses and indecencies without end on which our life is founded are huddled out of sight and never mentioned, so that the world we recognize officially in literature and in society is a poetic fiction far handsomer and cleaner and better than the world really is. (p. 75)

Thus, to see the individual or collective good is a choice. We can choose to focus on a variety of things: joy, sorrow, inspiration, depression, mediocrity, excellence, etc. We make such choices all the time. As Longergan offered, “If the doctor knows enough medicine to be able to cure you, he also knows several very neat ways of killing you. . . . If you know how to build a bridge, you also know the most effective place to put the explosive if you wish to destroy it” (1990, p. 227). Arendt (1958, p. 240) suggested that we are more inclined to choose the better option when she went as far as stating, “Crime and willed evil are rare, even rarer perhaps than good deeds.” This is supported by her conclusions about Adolf Eichmann’s actions as a member of the Nazi regime. Arendt (1971) explicated that rather than being motivated by a malevolent will to do evil, Eichmann operated thoughtlessly, unaware of the effects of his actions. For Arendt, while thinking is an ever-present faculty in everyone, “a life without thinking is quite possible” (1971, p. 191) and is the result of failing to reflect upon the nature of one’s actions (Yar, 2005). Therefore, Eichmann’s actions were not the result of an active, deliberate choice. While it could be argued that not making a choice is a choice, this is different from making an active, deliberate, thoughtful, aware choice. In Arendt’s mind, this is what makes “willed evil” rare.



From an ontological perspective, the idea that we can choose what to focus on and co-create our reality is based on the understanding that reality is not out there waiting to be discovered; rather, it is co-created. Because we can choose what to focus on, by our choices, we co-construct our realities (Bushe, 2001a; Follett, 2003a; Gergen & Gergen, 2004; Wheatley, 1999, 2005; Zander & Zander, 2000). Palmer (1998, p. 199) explained,

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.

The realities created reflect our beliefs. Thus, the issue is not so much whether the reality constructed is true or false; the issue is the types of actions that are supported by the reality (Gergen, 1999, p. 156). “Standing before us is a vast spectrum of possibility, an endless invitation to innovation” (Gergen & Gergen, 2004, p. 12). We choose what to focus on in this spectrum of possibility. As choices are made, certain kinds of realities or spaces are created. These spaces prompt certain kinds of action. This is the Pygmalion effect (Bushe, 2001a; Cooperrider, 1999): if the belief is that people are fundamentally good and desire to do good, they are likely to be treated accordingly and in return, are likely to act accordingly. “We become what we behold” (Quinn, 2004, p. 36). While we are free to choose what to focus on, “it seems evident that sharing joy is absolutely superior. . .to sharing suffering” (Arendt, 1968, p. 15). Zinn (2004) reminded us that

to be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. (p. 71)

This ability to consciously choose what to emphasize is “one of the most



powerful and under-acknowledged capacities at our disposal” (Srivastva & Barrett, 1999, p. 386).

Magis leadership uses an appreciative eye to discover and focus on the positive core of an individual or collective system. As demonstrated in an exchange between Dr. Gregory House and his patient, a Senator, in the end, it is a choice to believe in the goodness of people. In the television show *House* (Witten, Every, & O’Fallon, 2005), Dr. Greg House is a cantankerous, abrasive, cynical, bitter, rude, irreverent, arrogant, but exceptionally brilliant doctor who is called upon to solve perplexing cases. In this situation, he is called upon to diagnose a senator who appears to be dying from a mysterious illness. Dr. House has just accused the senator of lying about his medical history.

Senator: It must be miserable, always assuming the worst in people.

House: Cut the crap. You’re dying.

Senator: You’re clever, you’re witty, and you are a coward. You’re scared of taking chances.

House: I take chances all the time—it’s one of my worst qualities.

Senator: On people?

House (after hesitating to respond): Wanting to believe the best about people doesn’t make it true.

Senator: Being afraid to believe it doesn’t make it false.

House: Well, that’s very moving. It’s a shame I don’t vote.

Senator: This is who I am. I believe in people. I’m not hip-ly cynical and I don’t make easy, snide remarks. I would rather think that people are good and be disappointed once and again.

In the work of magis leadership, while we may be disappointed once and again, we are more likely to be energized, motivated, inspired, and encouraged as personal and collective systems are put back in touch with their positive core and strength is fused with strength.

The Unity of the Positive Core

As stated earlier, every system has a positive core. This core is not



simply something that the system *has*; it is something that it *is* (Rolheiser, 1999). It gives the system energy and is the “adhesive that holds [it] together” (Rolheiser, 1999, p. 13). This is a generative center (Co-Intelligence Institute, n.d.) that is an integrating force, seeking harmony and coherence. It provides clarity and embodies our history, values, actions, beliefs, competencies, principles, purpose, mission (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996). It contains positive potential, housing a reservoir of beneficial forces.

The positive core at the center of a system craves wholeness: “we are always reaching forth for union” (Follett, 2003b, p. 259). “Our conscience is expansive” (Dunne, 1985, p. 83), indicating that we are aware of something that transcends ourselves. The desire for unity is also a desire for health, completeness, and growth. There is a “natural tendency to move toward better functioning or health” (Wheatley, 2005, p. 93). This movement is both inward (deeper toward the core) and outward (reaching out to others). Quinn (2002) described this as being inner directed and other focused. As the system moves inward and deeper toward its core, it gains better understanding of itself. At the same time, the system becomes aware that it is part of a “universal consciousness,” a “great interconnected whole” (Gardiner, 1998, p. 117). Because all systems are part of larger systems, there is movement outward to connect with the bigger system. Thus, Wheatley (1999) advised, “to bring health to a system, connect it to more of itself” (p. 145).

This unifying force is reflected in people’s longing to be part of something bigger than themselves. Spitzer (2000) attested to this desire when he reflected,

Throughout history great philosophers, theologians, and psychologists agree that we have an innate desire and tendency to make a net positive difference with our lives. We strive not merely to make the most out of ourselves, but to make the most for the world. There is something intrinsic to all of us that wants to make our time and energy positive and purposeful. (p. 80)



The movement inward and outward described above is called into play. Each person has unique gifts and talents to contribute to the larger whole, and the larger whole needs those gifts and talents to be healthy and complete. Similarly, Silko (1981, p. 7) described the “long story of the people” as one that is created by each person remembering a portion and by all remembering what they have heard together. An interdependence is revealed (Daft & Lengel, 1998). Touching and expanding the positive core results in both personal and social benefits. Palmer (2004) asserted, “Every time we get in touch with the [positive essence] we carry within, there is net moral gain for all concerned” (p. 19). A symbiotic connection is forged.

Atlee (2001) claimed there is a mystical “more-ness” that characterizes wholeness, synergistic in its energy. As more of the system is connected to the positive core, strength multiplies strength. Positive forces such as creativity, compassion, generosity, hope, joy, inspiration, courage, and passion burst forth, generating greater health. In any individual or collective system, these positive forces exist, waiting to be discovered and released. The work of magis leadership concerns itself with identifying and bringing out the “more-ness” of people, organizations, and systems.

THE SPACE CREATED

“Leadership” in magis leadership refers to the work of creating a life-affirming space such that the positive core of the system is amplified and fanned (Bushe, 2001a, b). “We do not call forth the best from people, including ourselves, by naked force, by threat, or by subtle manipulation” (Vaill, 1998, p. 195). Rather, the best in personal and collective systems is discovered and intensified through creating a space that welcomes what Lincoln (1861) referred to as our “better angels.”

This space “honor[s] and make[s] use of the great gift of who we are” (Wheatley, 1999, p. 14), helping us to grow as persons and meet the great call of servant-leadership, to live in ways that compel us and others to become healthier, wiser, freer, and more autonomous (Greenleaf, 2004). The activation and release of positive energy leads to upward spirals of



optimal functioning and enhanced well-being (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2003; Fredrickson, 1998, 2003). As the poet activates the energy of words and the painter activates the energy of paint (Richards, 1995), the work of magis leadership activates the energy of the positive core. The philosophy behind servant-leadership and the process of Appreciative Inquiry lend themselves especially well to this work.

The Philosophy of Servant-Leadership

Block (1998) observed that servant-leadership may provide the bridge needed to transition from studying the work of leaders to examining the work of leadership. With its focus on bringing out the best in others, the philosophical foundations of servant-leadership are congruous with those of magis leadership.

The test of servant-leadership is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived? (Greenleaf, 2002a, p. 24)

It is this philosophy and way of being that provides the possibility of creating a life-affirming space that allows the best in others to come forward. To embrace the premise of servant-leadership is to embrace the belief that there is enormous capacity in every system and that capacity can be brought forth (Wheatley, 2002, p. 354). As described earlier, all systems seek wholeness and health. Wheatley (2002) suggested that because systems naturally move in this direction, they don't need to be made healthier; rather, we need to believe in the healthfulness that is already there. The task then is to evoke that healthiness, the positive core. This may call for having more faith in the system than it has in itself. When this happens, the "great gift of who we are" (Wheatley, 1999, p. 14) ventures forth, and if we allow it to blossom, it will "take us on an adventure into a dimension of life that is



perhaps larger and more profound than we could possibly envision” (Jones, 2002, p. 39).

Greenleaf (2002b) identified the words *beauty*, *momentaneity*, *openness*, *humor*, and *tolerance* as

marking some dimensions of a lifestyle that is rooted in an inward grace: sensitive and aware, concerned for the ever-present neighbor, both the well-fed one next door and the hungry one on the other side of the earth, seeing and feeling what is right in the situation. (p. 316)

Greenleaf had specific definitions of these particular words in mind. Beauty did not refer to physical beauty but instead, referred to penetrating the unknown, opening up new insights, and advancing knowledge (p. 312). Momentaneity spoke of appreciating the moment, the here and now (p. 313). Openness meant listening attentively, to be open to the “widest possible frame of reference” (p. 313). Humor was explained as that which allows us to have an inward, loving smile, prompting self-acceptance and, in turn, acceptance of others (p. 315). Tolerance had an older meaning for Greenleaf: “the ability to bear suffering with serenity” (p. 315); to see the silver lining in the cloud. For Greenleaf, these five words described a way of being that would tend toward making the nobler choice, selecting the better option, choosing the more universal good. This is a way of being embodied by the old retired jeweler who was called upon to repair the king’s large, unusual ruby that had somehow acquired a scratch. All the palace and town jewelers assessed the damage and concluded that the ruby could not be repaired. Receiving word of an old retired jeweler, very experienced in working with damaged gems, the king called for him. After inspecting the ruby, the old jeweler told the king he could not repair the ruby, but he could make it more beautiful. The king allowed him to go to work on it. Some days later, the jeweler brought the ruby back to the king. Upon the precious ruby, the old jeweler had carved a most delicate rose, using the scratch for its stem (Dewar as cited in Silf, 2003).

The inner grace characteristic of servant-leadership is both inner



directed and other focused (Quinn, 2002). The inner direction comes from a sense of spirit that emanates from a deep center, moving the system outward rather than inward. We become other focused, and Wheatley (2002) proposed that this is a function of love: Love is expansive, not constricting. This way of being takes us from a focus of trying to break things apart for analysis to a process of unifying (Wheatley, 2002), activating the energy of the positive core. We are opened to “a [space] of possibilities, a [space] of predictable miracles and synchronous events, a [space] in which we can create the future into which we are living” (Jaworski, 1998, p. 267). Gardiner indicated that “connection with one’s core and with that of others is the key” (1998, p. 121) to creating a life-affirming space. Appreciative inquiry is a process that fosters a positive connection to self and others, helping us to find beauty in flaws.

The Process of Appreciative Inquiry

A process based on the concepts of valuing (appreciative) and discovering (inquiry), an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an inquiry into what is valued or good about a system (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003; Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2003). It assumes there is a positive core that can be accessed through asking unconditionally positive questions (Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 2001). More than a technique, AI is “an intentional posture of continuous discovery, search and inquiry into conceptions of life, joy, beauty, excellence, innovation and freedom” (Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 2001, p. 191). There is an assumption that what we want more of already exists, even “if only in tiny quantities” (Bushe, 2001a, p. 168). Because what we pay attention to grows and we can decide what to pay attention to, AI proposes that we choose to pay attention to what is valued and good in a personal or collective system (Bushe, 2001a; Cooperrider, 1999; Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 2001). Additionally, systems move in the direction of what is studied (Bushe, 2001b; Cooperrider, 1999); thus to choose to study the good in the system is also a choice to move in a positive direction. Such movement allows systems to dwell in the realm of



possibility, engaging their vitality, imagination, and strength. As positive forces are engaged, they are also intensified. Bushe (2001a, 2001b) referred to this process as one of amplifying and fanning.

This process begins with clarifying what it is we want more of, the kinds of things we value, hope for, and desire. Once that is identified, it is tracked by constantly looking for it. To find it requires a belief that it is there to be found, which sometimes calls upon faith if what you are looking for does not exist in abundance (Bushe, 2001a). However, once we start to look for something, we generally find it. Once it is found, more of it appears through amplification. These are actions that increase the amount or frequency of what we want more of. By simply paying attention to what we want, we amplify it. Fanning is what allows us to get even more of it. It is like blowing air on a small flame to turn it into a roaring blaze. Praise, blessing, thanking, and asking for more (Bushe, 2001a; Spitzer, 2000) are examples of fans that feed the fire of positive potential and fuse strength with strength.

The appreciative process of amplifying and fanning does not depend on knowing where we will find what we are looking for. In fact, it depends on not presuming where it will be found and being open to “subtle clues and tiny instances” (Bushe, 2001a, p. 179). Thus, the inquiry part of AI comes into play. AI is not about having answers, but about asking good questions. “Good” questions engage the imagination and heart, allowing for possibilities to emerge that “will lead us to things we could not have planned with the strategic part of our mind” (Jones, 2002, p. 41). Thus, the work of magis leadership is the work of discovering the positive core through asking good questions so that more of the positive core can be engaged.

The Questions We Ask

The questions we ask reveal what we are studying. And because systems move in the direction of what is studied, the questions asked become



critical. Moreover, as Adams, Schiller, and Cooperrider (2004, p. 106) put it, “questions are fateful.” So it is that the questions asked create the space or reality we have. Asking different questions will create different spaces: “We can only know the aspect of reality that we are looking for. Our answers will always be answers only to the questions that we ask. And if we ask different questions, we shall get different answers” (Zohar & Marshall, 2000, p. 202).

In a co-created world, the questions we ask are co-created. They are formed from “our relationship with ourselves, others, and the world around us” (Adams et al., 2004, p. 107). The questions we ask are dynamic, not static or even neutral, prefiguring the future that is created. For example, in debriefing an event, the question, “What went wrong and why?” will lead down a different path than, “What worked well and how do we get more of it for next time?” The first question leads down a path of negativity, criticism, and “spiraling diagnosis” (Cooperrider, 2001b, p. 186). It also presumes that there is a correct answer to the question. The second question takes us toward wonder, learning and “appreciative curiosity” (Adams et al., p. 116). It conjures up the possibility of multiple answers.

Where these different paths lead is important to consider. The path that leads to a course of spiraling diagnosis implies that problems call for solutions and can be solved. Once solved, there will no longer be a problem. In addition, once we believe it is solved, we tend to stop asking questions. Bateson explained, “It is precisely when we think we understand that we *stop* asking questions” (2004, p. 341). The other path, the one that leads toward appreciative curiosity, recognizes the potential for expansive opportunities. It allows for exploration and fuels the imagination. Accordingly, it is possible for the questions we ask to drive us to despair, inactivity, and failure, or toward curiosity, inspiration, and energy (Adams, 2004). Which path we experience matters.

In her study of positive emotions, Fredrickson (1998; 2003) found that positive emotions broaden people’s modes of thinking and action, whereas negative emotions constrict and narrow modes of thinking. For example,



Fredrickson (1998) maintained that joy creates the urge to play; interest leads to exploration; contentment prompts the need to savor and integrate; love triggers additional and recurrent cycles of positive emotions. Each results in outcomes such as skill acquisition, an increased knowledge base, an expanded self and world view, and strengthened social bonds. This is significant in that a wider array of options come to mind when positive emotions are aroused. A wider array of options means that responses will tend to be novel, creative, innovative, integrative, flexible, and even playful (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2003; Fredrickson, 1998, 2003). Fredrickson (1998) submitted that positive emotions broaden the scope of attention, thinking, and action while building physical, intellectual, and social resources. She calls this the Broaden-and-Build Model of Positive Emotions (1998). In a “changing world [that] requires much less certainty and far more curiosity” (Wheatley, 2005, p. 211), this is a valuable finding. Fredrickson’s work prompted Cooperrider and Sekerka (2003, p. 236) to ask, “Could it be that finding ways to cultivate positive emotions will more quickly forge paths toward positive change and serve prominently as active ingredients in an upward spiral toward [individual and collective] well-being?”

Another way the path we experience matters is in the space that is created, for the space is conducive to certain kinds of actions (Gergen, 1999). Wheatley (1999, p. 15) described fields as “invisible forces that occupy space and influence behavior.” Thoughts and feelings could be regarded as invisible forces. This then means that the way we think about people affects them (Bushe, 2001a). The thought does not have to be spoken for it to have an influence. “Our self is not separate, in fact, but rather a field within larger fields” (Gardiner, 1998, p. 121). At the same time, we co-construct our reality. Choice then still comes into play. What you think or say about me affects me only to the degree that I allow it to (Bushe, 2001). Srivastva and Barrett (2001) asserted that we can decide what we will know and experience, and how we will live. In the dance of co-creation, while other forces influence me, I also make choices in how to respond



to those forces. Likewise, I make choices that influence others. If I am aware that even my thoughts and feelings are creating a type of space, I can be mindful of my thoughts and feelings, moving them toward the creation of a positive space. Furthermore, if I am aware that how I choose to respond to other forces creates a type of space, I can be discerning about those responses, making beneficial choices to create a positive space.

Adams (2004) posited that we think in questions, whether we are aware of it or not. For example, when dressing for the day, we may ask questions such as: What do I want to wear today? I wonder what the weather is supposed to be like? What will I be doing today? Are these socks clean? The answers to those questions are the outfit we wear. In this example, we end up wearing the answer (Adams, 2004; Adams et al., 2004). As argued above, our questions matter because they foreshadow the reality created. In this way, the questions may be more important than the answers.

Creating a space where the positive core of the individual or collective system is called forth and intensified is the work of magis leadership. Such a space is not created through having answers, but by asking unconditionally positive questions (Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 2001). These questions are expansive, bold, energizing, inspiring, life-affirming, ambiguous. They touch the heart, head, and hands. They are questions that are bigger than life (Jones, 2002, p. 41). They surprise and delight us, forcing us to view things from a different paradigm (Adams et al., 2004, p. 122). The reality that is co-created through the asking of positive questions is conducive to certain types of actions (Gergen, 1999, p. 156) and moves the system in a specific direction. The positive core of a system embodies a “life-force [that] wells up for expression—to direct it is [our] privilege” (Follett, 2003b, p. 253).

FORMATIVE CHOICES

The view that sees reality as a co-construction heeds the type of choices we make. For “whatever we create in the world is also recreated



inside of us” (Block, 2002, p. 146). We can choose to see things with an appreciative eye, one that beholds a positive essence at the center of each system. What we “see” will shape the images we hold of the system, as well as what we think and say about it. Our beliefs are consequential. They form a distinct reality and “determine our lives” (Zinn, 2004, p. 71).

A premise of social construction is that our beliefs form the face of our realities. They also form our own faces. Rolheiser (1999) explained, according to Sartre, that when a baby is born, its face is not all that unique and gives little indication as to the kind of person the baby will become. The beauty in the face is almost entirely genetic. However, over each hour, day, and year of its life, this changes. Sartre claimed that these changes culminate at age forty. This is the age at which the person has the essential lines of his or her face and looks different from anyone else in the world, even an identical twin. “Our physical beauty has begun to blend with our general beauty so that we are now judged to be good-looking or not more on the basis of who we are than on the simple basis of physical endowment” (p. 103). Rolheiser went on to clarify that what is of particular interest is what actually forms our face. Genetic endowment tends to dictate our looks until age forty, which is why we can be angry, selfish, arrogant, and so forth and still look beautiful. He warned that from age forty onward, “we look like what we believe in. If I am anxious, petty, selfish, bitter, narrow, and self-centered, my face will show it. Conversely, if I am warm, gracious, humble, and other-centered, my face will also show it” (p. 103). The choices we make are formational in more ways than one.

The ontology of magis leadership places it in a world that trusts in the basic desire of individual and collective systems to do good and positively contribute to something larger than themselves. This is a stance that believes every action we take has the potential to change the world, if only in the way of an infinitesimal nudge (Whyte, 1994, p. 265). While there is recognition that the world may not conform to one individual’s specific vision of how it ought to be, there is faith that “if I can just keep circulating those [positive] visions, they’ll have some effect” (Bateson, 2004, p. 337).



The certainty that every system, personal or collective, has a positive core waiting not only to energize but also to erupt, and that things happen for the best, shatters limitations and allows us to live into the deep dreams we have for ourselves and our world. Flaws become works of art.

For the Jesuits, *magis* is connected to the motto *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam* (AMDG): to the greater glory of God (Wikipedia, n.d.). Yes, the work of *magis* leadership may be done to the greater glory of God, yet whether one is spiritual, agnostic, or atheistic, an ultimate driving force becomes evident in the ontological perspective underlying *magis* leadership. For those engaged in it, this is work that cannot not be done. Once we experience the power of our own positive core, we want others to experience the finest in them as well (Dunne, 1985). The ontological perspective described here associates *magis* leadership with autotelic individuals and systems. Discovering and expanding the positive core of a system, bringing out the more, is done as a natural activity; it is intrinsically rewarding. Quinn (2000, p. 212) describes autotelic systems as those that do things for their own sake, for the joy of doing it. “It is believing in something for its own sake, a rediscovery of innocence in the best sense” (Block, 2002, p. 62). Dunne (1985) described it as a dance between benevolence and appreciation. Benevolence has to do with desiring someone else’s welfare, focusing on the good that can be done. Appreciation focuses on the good that someone is. The two alternate: appreciation emphasizes the goodness that exists, while benevolence seeks to have even more to appreciate. They “continually replace one another as [we] seek to have ever more value to appreciate” (Dunne, 1985, p. 107). The autotelic way of being is open to wonder, awe, and surprise, choosing to expect to be delighted rather than disappointed in people and the world around us.

The space that is engendered through autotelic actions is one that supports the procreation of strengths. It is a space where the awareness of interconnectedness is promoted, soliciting active, thoughtful, deliberately positive choices. Growth, learning, imagination, and health are fostered, drawing us toward the greater health, wisdom, freedom, and autonomy



Greenleaf (2004) envisioned. Dynamics that lead to extraordinary performance, resilience, and excellence on personal, organizational, and global levels are cultivated. The space reminds the system of its own best self (Norum, Shearer, Prindle, McClellan, Albert, 2005), allowing it to re-engage and recommit to its positive potential (Sprecht with Broholm, 2004). Shared, lasting system goodness is promoted (Decree 2, 1995a). The spark becomes a brightly burning flame through the actions of praise, blessing, thanking, and asking for more (Bushe, 2001a; Spitzer, 2000). There is an “endless amplification of the positive” (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2003, p. 239). The scratch on the ruby is transformed into the stem of a delicate, beautiful rose. The poetry within erupts (Arendt, 1968; Richards, 1995).

Drucker has declared, “The central task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths such that weaknesses are no longer relevant” (as cited in Mantel & Ludema, 2004, p. 324). This is what magis leadership does.

MAGIS LEADERSHIP: AN ACTIVE ONTOLOGY OF THE HEART

This article began with the premise that while many models of leadership exist, there are calls for more discerning ways of looking at leadership. More discerning ways of looking at leadership do not focus so much on the person who is the leader, but on the work of leadership. They see leadership as existing at multiple levels (Heifetz, 1994; Schall et al., 2004). With a focus on the work of leadership rather than on the work of leaders, this paper lends more understanding regarding a way of being that engenders a certain kind of space, conducive to certain kinds of actions. It is called magis leadership and can be adopted by anyone. Magis leadership forms a nexus of purposeful action that integrates the depth and perseverance of servant-leadership and the intentional pursuit of the positive core represented in Appreciative Inquiry.

Based in a belief in essential goodness, magis leadership is fairly simple to understand. It emanates from the deliberate choice to seek the good



in personal and collective systems—a choice anyone can make. Knowledge of deep theories, years of studying, a particular title or position, or certain traits are not required. Yet it is not simplistic. In a constantly changing, interdependent world, the choice of “healthy-mindedness” (James, 2002/1902) has complex ramifications.

The business of doing good in the world is a moderately, but not impossibly, complex process that is simultaneously individual and social, subject to bias and yet naturally expansive to overcome not only the erring that is so human but the malice that is so human as well. (Dunne, 1985, p. 89)

A distinct kind of space is created by the built-in positive energy of magis. It is a space that “impels us toward continual self-transcendence in a search for wisdom, harmony, and peace, that will have its effects in the way we love, contribute to others, achieve, and live” (Spitzer, 2000, p. 84).

Adopting magis leadership calls for choosing an active ontology of the heart. It is active because thoughtful, deliberate, aware choices are made. There is an awareness of the interdependence of systems, making us “obliged to act from the sense of being a part of a larger whole” (Bateson, 2004, p. 398). The ontology is a worldview that sees reality as a co-construction and by making positive choices, we make a positive reality. In the vast spectrum of possibility before us (Gergen & Gergen, 2004, p. 12), we can choose to focus on the negative or the positive. This ontological perspective chooses to emphasize the positive. Greenleaf’s call to serve is the central alignment necessary for purposeful movement in the positive core of lasting leadership. Because it is a way of being, magis leadership comes from the heart and is autotelic in nature. The passionate, restless drive that assumes there is a positive core acts as a force to plunge us “into the realm of the finest” (Dunne, 1985, p. 83) for its own sake. When belief in the possible and the intrinsic value of personal and collective systems is honored, positive forces cascade, benefiting individuals and society.



Karen Norum is an assistant professor of leadership studies with the doctoral program in leadership studies at Gonzaga University, Spokane, Washington, United States of America. Her work in Appreciative Inquiry and other generative forms of leadership has achieved national prominence, and her inquiries in social science, her scholarly essays, and her presentations have engaged audiences in venues worldwide.

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