



## BEYOND THE PARADOXICAL SHADOW OF A *DOUBT*

### *A Powerful Bond That Sustains Servant-Leaders in Their Struggle for Truth and Justice*

—DUNG Q. TRAN

LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY—CALIFORNIA, U.S.

The comprehensive study of leadership phenomena matters. Reasons abound for the need of both formal and informal leadership research in various contexts. Spears (1998) recognized the emergence of a significant “leadership and management paradigm for the 21st century” (p. xix). Jackson and Parry (2008) claimed that “leadership is widely seen as both the problem and solution to all manner of contemporary issues” (p. 9). A key buzzword in our modern times, leadership has “become a major issue in all forms of organizations” (Doohan, 2007, p. 1). In the world of higher education, Greenleaf (1998) identified a “serious crisis of leadership in colleges and universities” (p. 79). Wheatley (2006) echoed this concern by the noting the lifeless nature exhibited by many organizations. Harvard business professor John P. Kotter (1999) offered the following scathing indictment of organizational leadership: “I am completely convinced that most organizations today lack the leadership they need. And the shortfall is often large. I’m not talking about a deficit of 10%, but of 200%, 400%, or more in positions up and down the hierarchy” (p. 1).

Palmer (1996) articulates this leadership deficit in qualitative terms:

Whether we think of Congress or the courts, business or industry, the news media or mass entertainment, the church or other voluntary organizations, many of us feel a deepening despair about the capacity of our dominant institutions to harbor a human agenda, to foster human purposes. (p. xi)

Doohan (2007) reaches a similar conclusion: “In many organizations, leader pathology is a serious problem. Recent decades evidence examples of



leaders overwhelmed by ego, greed, blindness, lack of compassion and lust for power” (p. 10).

Despite the regularity of corporate scandals and other leadership challenges, Kouzes and Posner (2003) declare that “we’re living in a time that holds great promise” (p. xix). They maintain that great promise is realized with the hope of a promise kept. In order to keep that hope alive, “bold leadership is required” (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, p. xx). Doohan (2007) in his inquiry into spiritual leadership concludes that “studying leadership is an energizing and mysterious undertaking” (p. 14).

At the individual level, Heifetz and Linsky (2002) claim that “every day the opportunity for leadership stands before [us]” (p. 1). In fact, they go as far as describing leadership as a perilous and dangerous enterprise, especially in a post–September 11, 2001 “world of uncertainty and vulnerability” (p. 3). After decades of consulting and research, Blanchard (2009) defines leadership as “the capacity to influence others by unleashing their power and potential to impact the greater good” (p. xvi). Understanding leadership as an influence process toward a greater good, Jackson and Parry (2008) assert that “leadership is a fundamentally important human experience that can have a very significant bearing on the conduct and the quality of our everyday lives” (p. 8).

Indeed, the presence, prevalence, and profound influence of leadership phenomena on various aspects of human experience merit extensive and thoughtful attention. Gardner (1995) offers sound reasoning for broadening the scope of leadership studies: “I believe that we are more likely to secure responsible leadership in the future if we can demystify its constituent processes. In that sense, enhanced knowledge about leadership may go hand-in-hand with more morally desirable forms of leadership” (pp. 297–298). An in-depth inquiry of the manifold processes involved in the practice of leadership from various intellectual vistas can result in new depth of meaning and understanding.

The far-reaching impact of leadership allows for a variety of application and study from a broad range of disciplinary domains. Leadership appeals to a wide range of endeavors including politics, business, education, sports, religion, psychology, and history, among others, making it a “master discipline that illuminates some of the toughest problems of human needs and social change” (Burns, 2003, p. 9). Diverse disciplinary and methodological perspectives can result in a better understanding and practice of leadership (Jackson & Parry, 2008).



One area receiving attention in recent years is the intersection of leadership education and the arts (Pillai & Stites-Doe, 2003; Palmer, 2004; Taft-Thomas, 2008). In delving into creative disciplines such as the arts, leadership researchers attempt to ascertain essential elements or themes of leadership. Some studies have focused on management of meaning (Smircich & Morgan, 1982), the transformation of hearts and minds of followers (Bass & Avolio, 1990; Seteroff, 2003), and sense-making (Weick, 1995, 2007; Pye, 2005). According to Jackson and Parry (2008) sense-making “comes from face to face personal contact...delegation, not control. It enables people to act and not just react; it enables them to take risks and not just avoid risk; it enables people to initiate change and not just accommodate it” (p. 106).

One creative realm where sense-making and the study of leadership can occur resides in the artistic world of drama and film (Alan-Selby, 1978; Clemens & Wolff, 2000; Neilson, Pillai, & Watson, 2003; English, 2008). In a world that is increasingly visually oriented and more comfortable with consuming information via mobile electronic devices than books, film is becoming an important pedagogical tool in education. This is especially evident in contemporary interdisciplinary fields such as leadership studies. Jackson and Parry (2008) offer the following metaphor in their case for leadership sense-making through film:

Just like actors in a movie...as a leader, you play a part, have a role to play, a script, costume, audience, plot, setting, an emotional impact on the audience and finally the sense-making you want the audience to take away. Hopefully it will be a profitable production. This is leadership. (p. 110)

An extreme appropriation of this metaphor would be to forgo the authentic self and assume another identity. Urging caution, Jackson and Parry asserted that “if potential followers think they are trying to impersonate someone else, they will lose credibility and therefore, their following” (p. 110). The challenge is to lead authentic lives and yet maintain a sense of openness to “difference” and a willingness to explore new ways of thinking, being, and acting. For Carey (2005), a quality film “allows students of leadership to experience vicariously the tribulations of conflict without also experiencing the actual consequences of the choices made” (p. 257).

Indeed, film is a powerful tool. At its best, film is a deeply engaging form of storytelling. It is a means of communication and instruction that has the transformative capability of widening one’s horizon of meaning. According to film critic Richard Alleva (2010), regardless of technological



capabilities, every film has the “potential to reach our imaginations through the eyes, stir our emotions, and remain in our memories long enough to affect our lives” (p. 19). In some ways, a filmmaker “is a creator of culture, and through their creative work they have the potential to transform lives” (Shaull, 2000, p. 33). In Carey’s (2005) view, a good film offers insight into “the way things really are [and] can teach us something about leadership because leadership is about conflict, choices, and integrity” (p. 257). More importantly, “as students consider what they see happening to the characters in a film, they are actually discussing what they see happening to themselves in their own lives” (p. 257).

Pramaggiore and Wallis (2008) capture the deep impact of film with the following summary:

Whether people watch a film in a movie theater or the digitized version at home on a DVD, they...immerse themselves in the lives of fictional characters, develop opinions about historical events, and become captivated by artistic combinations of color, light, and sound. Because films engage viewers on an emotional level, some people criticize the cinema as escapist entertainment. Yet others praise it as an imaginative art form that allows people to realize their dreams and fantasies. The reality is that films do both of these and more. (p. 3)

One recent film that has managed to capture the imagination of many is the critically acclaimed film adaptation of John Patrick Shanley’s (2005) Tony and Pulitzer Prize–winning fictional Broadway play, *Doubt*.

Written and directed by Shanley (2005) and produced by Scott Rudin (2005), the Academy Award–nominated motion picture features former Oscar winners Meryl Streep and Philip Seymour Hoffman, who square off as suspicious Sister Aloysius and the perhaps guilty of something Father Flynn, respectively. The story is set in the autumn of 1964 at a Catholic Church and elementary school in the Bronx, New York. The film focuses on the suspicions of the stern school principal, Sister Aloysius, that the well-liked priest and chaplain of the school, Father Flynn, is taking an unhealthy interest in one of the students (who just happens to be the first African American student ever admitted to the school). A particularly moving performance that highlighted issues of race, class, and oppression was turned in by Tony Award–winning actress Viola Davis. The film explores an array of issues including the struggle for leadership authority and the pursuit of certain truth. Layered within the plot are a number of social justice issues such as gender, race, class, and sexual orientation that provoke more than a





few questions and leave the viewer with uneasiness and an uncomfortable sense of *Doubt* (Feaster, 2008).

This modern parable (Mondello, 2008) has much to teach us about the practice of servant-leadership in challenging organizational settings. The power struggle between Sister Aloysius and Father Flynn is one cloaked in paradox (Dargis, 2008). In her role as principal, Sister Aloysius is the leadership authority of the Catholic elementary school, but within the confines of Catholicism's institutional hierarchy, Father Flynn outranks her. Yet by virtue of their committed lives as Catholic priest and sister, they have both taken vows to let their lives speak in a manner that embodies the noble ideal of servant-leadership. Even though they have committed to a life of virtue and austerity, both Sister Aloysius and Father Flynn approach and respond to Greenleaf's (1977/2002) visionary call to servant-leadership (Spears, 2004, p. 9) in very different ways.

With all of this in mind, the chief purpose of this film analysis through the lens of servant-leadership is threefold. First, I will provide an overview of the historical context and offer examples of the leadership struggle in the film *Doubt* to illustrate and explore the contemporary social justice shadows of leadership as well as gender inequity. Leadership elements pertaining to the institutional hierarchy within the Catholic Church will be briefly discussed. Second, I will identify and examine the servant-leadership characteristics of listening, healing, and persuasion. Particular attention will be paid to the leadership power struggle between Sister Aloysius and Father Flynn as well as their interactions with others, especially with Sister James (Amy Adams), a young, innocent, and congenial sister and Mrs. Miller, the mother of Donald, the African American student that Father Flynn has taken a special interest in. Intertwined in this paper will be elements of paradox, uncertainty, and doubt in the examination of servant-leadership and social justice issues. Finally, I will conclude with a brief personal reflection on my own struggle of remaining faithfully Catholic while the institutional church struggles with its own paradoxical servant-leadership shadow.

#### HISTORICAL CONTEXT, PLOT OVERVIEW, AND SURVEY OF LEADERSHIP STRUGGLE IN *DOUBT*

"What do you do when you are not sure?" (Shanley, 2008, p. 5). This eloquent question posed by Father Brendan Flynn (Philip Seymour Hoffman) sets the tone for a provocative and suspense-laden journey into the complex



world of Catholicism at Saint Nicholas' Church and elementary school in the Bronx, New York, a predominantly Irish-American parish circa 1964. The notion of uncertainty and ambiguity runs deep in writer/director John Patrick Shanley's screen adaptation of his Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning play *Doubt* (Dargis, 2008). The film powerfully highlights, without overstating, the confluence of the many complicated political, religious, and social issues of the 1960s. This time period was marked by winds of change. Cries against conformity, war, and racial segregation, among others, were at the forefront. Just as Martin Luther King Jr. had just finished articulating his hopeful dream for equality, America's first Irish American and Catholic president, John F. Kennedy, was assassinated, casting a dark pall over the American people (Shachtman, 1983; Knight, 2007). Meanwhile, the Catholic Church had just convoked the Second Vatican Council, an ecumenical meeting of bishops charged with moving the Catholic Church into the twentieth century (Madges & Daley, 2003; Wilde, 2007; O'Malley, 2010).

Within this historical context, *Doubt* invites the viewer to step into an uncomfortable and shadowy world full of uneasiness marked by transition and change. This uncertainty is amplified by the film's explicit and implicit examination of church structures, authority, hierarchy, educational pedagogy, race, class, sexual orientation, the exercise of power and leadership, and the primacy of discipline and order (Malone, 2008). Even more moving is the film's reminder of the Catholic Church's dark chapter of scandal and pedophilia (Dargis, 2008).

This dramatic tone is set during the opening scene when Father Flynn concludes his sermon about facing one's doubts and sharing them in community with the following closing statements: "There are those of you in church today, who know exactly the crisis of faith I describe. *Doubt* can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty. When you are lost, you are not alone" (Shanley, 2008, p. 6).

The heartfelt preaching and inviting demeanor of Father Flynn is contrasted by the stern, steely, and always suspicious eyes of Sister Aloysius (Meryl Streep). While Father Flynn is preaching his homily, Sister Aloysius patrols the aisles and reprimands inattentive children. As principal of Saint Nicholas' elementary school and superior of the convent, she believes in strict discipline, strikes fear in every student, and expects appropriate decorum and formality. She is not afraid to rule with an iron fist as evidenced by the swift slap to the back of a drowsy student asleep in the pew! This opening scene positions our two antagonists on a collision course over moral, social, and religious affairs.



In many ways, both Sister Aloysius and Father Flynn represent the bifurcation that Catholicism was undergoing at the time (Dargis, 2008; Feaster, 2008; McCarthy, 2008). Sister Aloysius constantly wears a scowl and is an advocate for tradition and authority. She is greatly disturbed by any hint of secularism. For instance, she is gravely concerned about the abysmal state of penmanship and outlaws ballpoint pens. Sister Aloysius expresses a strong disdain at the thought of including a secular song in the school's Christmas pageant, and abhors sugar because of its morally corruptive power. She is especially critical of Sister James (Amy Adams), a young, naive, and idealistic nun who prefers projecting a joyful and positive demeanor to the students entrusted to her care. Sister Aloysius represents a rigid and inflexible approach to the moral, social, and religious instruction of children (Mondello, 2008).

Sister Aloysius comes off as unattractive, unappealing, and unlikable as opposed to the warm, caring, and charismatic Father Flynn. He symbolizes the fresh and progressive winds of change in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (Malone, 2008). Father Flynn favors a more open and friendly interaction with his congregation and with the school's students. He exhibits a charming wit and seems genuinely concerned about the intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual development of his flock. In many ways, Father Flynn is the antithesis of Sister Aloysius's Catholic worldview. He is willing to entertain the notion of having the students sing *Frosty the Snowman*, wants to take students on camping trips, coaches the school basketball team, and even offers dating advice over lemonade and cookies during casual chat sessions with the male students (Feaster, 2008).

Another dimension to their contrasting styles of relating with the secular world is the complicated Catholic hierarchical chain of command. In one sequence, we have contrasting dinner scenes that characterize the type of lifestyle led by Catholic priests and nuns at the time. Over at the rectory, Father Flynn, Monsignor Benedict (Tom Toner), who is Father Flynn's superior, and another priest are situated in a cozy dining room, collars loosened, laughing and enjoying a roast along with cigarettes and wine.

Meanwhile, across the way at the convent, a different meal unfolds. The sisters are eating their meal in full religious garb and in silence. The mood and conversation is firmly controlled by Sister Aloysius. In one exchange, the young Sister James seems to not enjoy a piece of her dinner and tries to discreetly dispose of it. Sister Aloysius immediately flashes her trademark stern scowl, resulting in a defeated Sister James who re-consumes her food.



Even though Sister Aloysius is the authority and leadership figure at the school and convent, it becomes clear that in Catholic religious circles, the man is in charge. After some peculiar interactions and behavior with the school's only African American boy and altar server, Sister James reluctantly reports her suspicion to Sister Aloysius. This sets off a contentious series of confrontations between Sister Aloysius and Father Flynn, with troubled Sister James caught in the middle and uncertain of whom or what to believe. The first confrontation occurs when Sister Aloysius invites Father Flynn for a meeting about the school's Christmas pageant. Father Flynn bounds into Sister Aloysius's office and immediately sits at her desk and expects Sisters Aloysius and James to serve him tea with sugar. Sister Aloysius visibly blanches, but reluctantly acquiesces to the expectations of a tradition with oppressive elements.

This scene illustrates Freire's (1970/2000) assertion "that during the initial stage of their struggle the oppressed [are]...conditioned by the myths of the old order—the shadow of their former oppressor is still cast over them" (p. 46). Even though Sister Aloysius is the school's leadership authority and is responsible for the welfare of the children, when confronting Father Flynn about his peculiar behavior, she is conditioned and constrained by a Catholic institution where the male cleric is the ultimate authority. The shadow of an oppressive element of the hierarchy is cast upon Sister Aloysius's authority and responsibility for the students entrusted to her care.

The contrasting ways Sister Aloysius and Father Flynn interact with the schoolchildren, along with the dining experiences the religious men and women share in the rectory and the convent, respectively, suggest a gender hierarchy and divide (Feaster, 2008). In my view, the contrasting dinner scenes and interaction in the principal's office amount to what Macedo (2000) termed as cultural schizophrenia. In his introduction to Freire's (1970/2000) seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Macedo noted the following: "[B]eing present and yet not visible, being visible and yet not present...is a condition [of] constantly juggling the power asymmetry of the two worlds, two cultures, and two languages" (p. 11). In usurping Sister Aloysius's desk in her office and expecting the sisters to serve him tea, and by their reluctant acquiescence to this hierarchical expectation of gender roles, the nuns and priests in *Doubt* find themselves constantly negotiating the power asymmetry between two worlds and cultures that speak different dialects of the same religious language. The stark contrast between the two worlds is further evidenced by the dinner scenes. At the rectory we find a



bright and gregarious dinner party full of laughter and camaraderie among the priests. Yet, just across the way in the convent, we encounter a very different dining experience. The sisters are sharing a silent, subdued, mundane, and formal dinner presided over by Sister Aloysius. The battleground where negotiation between the two worlds that Macedo speaks of seems to take place at the elementary school, where the contrasting worlds collide.

Back in Sister Aloysius's principal's office, what Father Flynn believed was a meeting about the school Christmas pageant turns out to be an interrogation. When Sister Aloysius inquires about Father Flynn's unusual interest in Donald Miller, Father Flynn explains that Donald needs a supportive mentor because he feels alone and different (there is a scene where Donald is walking in the hallway and other students knock his books to the floor and Father Flynn comes to his assistance and consoles him). The priest insists that Sister Aloysius leave the matter alone, but upon learning that Miller may have helped himself to the altar wine, per school policy, Miller is removed from the altar servers. The great irony is that we later discover that Miller's father beats him because of a homosexual nature, and even if Father Flynn has violated a boundary, Miller's mother, too, wants to leave the matter alone, for many understandable reasons.

First, as a person of color in the 1960s, Mrs. Miller is more concerned with maintaining the little opportunity she has in a racist society. After learning that Sister Aloysius "doesn't see anything standing in the way of Donald graduating with his class" (Shanley, 2008, p. 45), Mrs. Miller makes plain, in an emotionally and issue-packed conversation with Sister Aloysius, that her only concern is for her son to graduate from Saint Nicholas elementary. Graduating from a well-regarded elementary school in the Bronx "would give him a chance to get into a good high school and that would mean an opportunity at college" (Shanley, 2008, p. 45). As far as Mrs. Miller is concerned, if nothing is preventing her son from graduating, then there is nothing further to discuss.

Secondly, after learning of Sister Aloysius's concern that Father Flynn "may have made advances" (Shanley, 2008, p. 45), Mrs. Miller submits that she understands the molestation Sister Aloysius is alluding to but "doesn't want to get into it or cause any trouble" (Shanley, 2008, p. 46). For Mrs. Miller, if any impropriety has occurred, her son is just an innocent twelve-year-old boy. Blame should be assigned to the "man." Sister Aloysius readily agrees with Mrs. Miller, who quips, "You're agreeing with me but I'm sitting in the principal's office, if you know what I'm saying and you'll



excuse my bringing it up” (Shanley, 2008, p. 46). Mrs. Miller goes on to acknowledge the gender disparity between Father Flynn and Sister Aloysius by saying, “Sister you ain’t going against no man in the robe and win, Sister. He’s got the position” (Shanley, 2008, p. 47). For Mrs. Miller, even if Father Flynn has molested her son, “Let him have ‘im then. It’s just till June” (Shanley, 2008, p. 47). Sister Aloysius expresses dismay at Miller’s parental conclusion, but in a 1960s cultural climate where African Americans are viewed as second-class citizens, she has little choice.

Thirdly, what makes this scene and situation even more compelling and complicated is the revelation that Donald’s father physically abuses him because of a homosexual “nature.” In an exasperated, yet controlled diatribe, Mrs. Miller offers Sister Aloysius a deeper glimpse into the difficult circumstances surrounding her son:

That’s why his father beat him up, not the wine. He beat Donald for being what he is. I’m talking about the boy’s nature now, not anything he’s done. But you can’t hold a child responsible for what God gave him to be. His father don’t like him, he comes to your school, kids don’t like him—one man is good to him, this priest. Does the man have his reasons, yes, everybody does...but do I ask the reason why this man is good to my son? No! My son needs some man to care about him and to see him through where he wants to go. I thank God that this educated man with some kindness in him wants to do just that. (Shanley, 2008, p. 48)

Again, Freire’s (1970/2000) assertion that the oppressive shadow conditions the oppressed during their initial struggle rings true. Mrs. Miller is constrained by the shadow of her challenging reality and circumstances. Her words and delivery say it best: “You accept what you gotta accept and you work with it. That’s the truth I know” (Shanley, 2008, p. 48).

Unhappy with Mrs. Miller’s thinking, Sister Aloysius says that “this will not do” (Shanley, 2008, p. 48). After some more banter between the two, Mrs. Miller concludes her emotionally charged seven-minute scene with compelling testimony of unconditional love for her son:

Please leave my son out of this. My husband will kill my child over a thing like this. Sister, I don’t know if you and me are on the same side. I’ll be standing with my son and those who are good with my son. It’d be nice to see you there. Nice talking with you, Sister. Good morning [Mrs. Miller departs for work]. (Shanley, 2008, p. 50)

In many ways, Mrs. Miller embodies the tender affection of a “loving mother attempting to maintain her personal decency under intolerable



conditions” (French, 2009). Viola Davis’s portrayal of Mrs. Miller was lauded by Mondello (2008) as “the film’s most wrenching scene.” In French’s (2009) judgment, Davis “makes an indelible impression in her single scene.” McCarthy (2008) heralded Davis’ performance as “devastatingly great” and praised the whole scene as “superbly written and the film’s highpoint.” This scene challenges and invites the viewer to consider the role of compassion and human understanding as “a troubled mother is forced to voice her own uncomfortable views about her lonely, ostracized son” (McCarthy, 2008). Mrs. Miller’s firm resolve and unwavering commitment to her son is expert testimony that “[l]ove is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause—the cause of liberation” (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 89). Liberation for Mrs. Miller’s son is the hope for access to a quality high school and college education. Nothing short of death itself can stand in the way of this mother’s courageous love in the face of intolerable circumstances.

The film concludes with Sister Aloysius going to great lengths to have Father Flynn removed. Father Flynn’s superior finds no credibility to Sister Aloysius’s allegations because they are based on her intuition of certainty of Father Flynn’s relational impropriety. Sister Aloysius then purports to contact nuns from Father Flynn’s previous parish assignments. His response is very telling about power relations in the Church: “You have no right to act on your own! You are the member of a religious order. You have taken vows, obedience being one! You answer to us! You have no right to step outside the church!” (Shanley, 2008, p. 54).

This dichotomy in the Catholic culture, hierarchy, and authority concretizes Palmer’s (2000) assessment of the spiritual life: “The spiritual journey is full of paradoxes” (p. 70). Sister Aloysius’s alleged behavior circumvents the Catholic chain of command. It points to creative and perhaps progressive thinking that characterizes Father Flynn’s approach to relating with his flock. However, when it pertains to matters of faith, morals, and the priesthood, the authority resides in the men in black, and ultimately rests with the man in white, the pope, who along with his administrative staff of cardinals, archbishops, and bishops, is the final word (Allen, 2001; 2006; Rausch, 2009).

Even though Father Flynn is not legally charged or convicted of any crime, he ends up transferring to another church. This could speak to an unofficial admission of guilt, but as we see in the closing scene, even the certain Sister Aloysius struggles with doubt, which according to Feaster (2008) is



director and writer, John Patrick Shanley's point. She concludes that "we often never get the full truth and the torture is in never being sure."

With this brief historical overview and survey of key events and their social justice themes in mind, this preliminary analysis of the film *Doubt* now shifts its attention to the role of shadow in cinema and leadership in the midst of uncertainty and change in the human experience.

#### A KINGDOM OF SHADOWS: CHANGE, INJUSTICE, AND LEADERSHIP IN *DOUBT*

According to film scholars Maria Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis (2008), "Watching a movie takes most viewers out of their everyday lives and transports them to a different world, a realm that Russian writer Maxim Gorky called 'the Kingdom of Shadows'" (p. 3). When 35 mm (or in the case of IMAX films 70 mm) films are projected in a movie theater, a powerful beam of light shines onto the screen to produce those shadows, the larger-than-life-images on the big screen. Whether it is at the movie theatre, at home on Blu-ray DVDs, or on the small screen of an electronic mobile device, movie viewers continue to be transported into both familiar and foreign kingdoms where the illuminated shadows can trigger any combination of consolation, desolation, difficulty, and wonder (great films engage a combination of these emotions).

Gorky's "kingdom of the shadow" concept in film studies and the general image of shadow can serve as a powerful metaphor when exploring the intersection of film, leadership, spirituality, and social injustice. With regard to inner shadows and leadership, Palmer (2000) asserted that "[a] good leader is intensely aware of the interplay of inner shadow and light, lest the act of leadership do more harm than good" (p. 78). He also noted the dangers of ignoring our shadows:

[T]hose who readily embrace leadership, tend toward extroversion, which often means ignoring what is happening inside ourselves. If we have any sort of inner life, we "compartmentalize" it, walling it off from our public work. This, of course, allows the shadow to grow unchecked until it emerges, larger than life in the public realm. (p. 79)

In the film *Doubt*, our primary positional leaders, Sister Aloysius and Father Flynn, offer a glimpse of the interplay of two worlds, of shadow and light, in their approach to spiritual leadership. The case can be made that they both endeavor to do good and want the students entrusted to their care





to flourish intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. Yet, the case can also be made that they both could have been more attentive to their inner life. One could speculate that if both Sister Aloysius and Father Flynn had devoted more time and energy to their respective interior lives and approaches to the world, and dealt with their personal issues behind closed doors, the public realm might have been spared their heated disagreements.

Each has a different vision of what constitutes a good Catholic educational experience. For French (2009), the recent arrival of Father Flynn “represents the liberating spirit of Vatican II. He thinks priests should become a loving part of the larger parochial family rather than remain aloof moral exemplars.” As previously mentioned, Sister Aloysius favors a more formal, strict, and traditional school environment. This is evidenced in a conversation between Sisters Aloysius and James. Sister James cries out:

You just don’t like him! You don’t like it that he uses a ballpoint pen. You don’t like it that he takes 3 lumps of sugar in his tea. You don’t like it that he likes *Frosty the Snowman* and you are letting that convince you? Of something that’s terrible...just terrible...[Exasperated] Well I like *Frosty the Snowman*! (Shanley, 2008, p. 35)

One can infer from Sister James’s tearful outburst that ballpoint pens, the consumption of sugar or candy, and the suggestion of including a nonreligious hymn such as *Frosty the Snowman* in the school’s Christmas pageant, which are embraced by the progressive Father Flynn, are in Sister Aloysius’s judgment harmful and potentially dangerous innovations from secular modernity. The differing pedagogical approaches to education advocated by Sister Aloysius and Father Flynn affirm Palmer’s (2000) conclusion that “some shine a light that allows new growth to flourish, while others cast a shadow under which seedlings die” (p. 78). Even though Father Flynn’s interaction with the students is at times peculiar, especially with the boys, as a priest he is trying to offer spiritual leadership to children so that they have an opportunity to flourish and grow. Conversely, Sister Aloysius’s command and control approach to school leadership casts a long and dark shadow over the school. She effectively instills proper and orderly behavior, but as evidenced by the opening scene where she strikes a child asleep in the pew, the children are motivated to act out of fear. On the other hand, Father Flynn prefers motivating young people with love.

Palmer (2000) identifies five shadows that he became acquainted with during his bout with depression. These shadows are important to be aware



of since, “Leaders need not only the technical skills to manage the external world, but also the spiritual skills to journey inward toward the source of both shadow and light” (p. 79). The first is insecurity about identity and worth. More common among men, Palmer noted that “this syndrome...in which our identity becomes so dependent on performing some external role that we become depressed, and even die, when that role is taken away” (p. 86). One could conjecture that Father Flynn exhibits elements of identity insecurity. He seems to thrive on his charismatic and public persona as the likable and lovable priest. Yet there are moments in the film where he exhibits peculiar and perhaps even questionable behavior. At one moment, Sister James sees Father Flynn place a T-shirt in Donald Miller’s locker. In another peculiar situation, Father Flynn, who also coaches the boys’ basketball team, takes time during practice to educate his players on the importance of proper nail care. He also seems to focus his attention primarily on the school’s male population. There is one instance where he offers dating advice to one female student, but in another scene, Father Flynn has all the boys over at the rectory for a private chat session. Is Father Flynn merely being an open-minded and caring priest or is he drifting toward an ethical boundary violation with minors? As with all things in this film, we are left in *Doubt*!

Palmer’s (2000) second leadership shadow is “the belief that the universe is a battleground, hostile to human interests” (p. 87). In my view, Sister Aloysius fits this description. She prefers to hold fast to a strict, formal and traditional approach to education (French, 2008). As principal, she eschews any hint of secular posturing. Ballpoint pens, candy, and secular hymns need not apply!

Sister Aloysius also seems to fit Palmer’s (2000) third shadow, which he terms functional atheism. This shadow is “the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with us...if anything decent is going to happen here, we are the ones to make it happen—a conviction held even by people who talk a good game about God” (p. 88). Throughout the film, we find that Sister Aloysius embraces her two leadership responsibilities as principal and convent superior with great competence and commitment. Despite her strong and strict-minded approach to leadership, at times Sister Aloysius does extend kind consideration to the health and mental states of the older sisters as well as to the young Sister James. However, in certain moments, one could make the case that Sister Aloysius’s zealous attention to detail at the convent, the school, and church points to a bit of functional atheism.



Scene after scene, we find Sister Aloysius involved in almost every detail of every situation involving almost everyone. Her extreme busyness could make a good study for contemporary leadership experts to forecast the onset of leadership burnout!

The fourth shadow finds resonance with Sister Aloysius as well. This fear is “of the natural chaos of life” (Palmer, 2000, p. 89). A leader with this shadow “wants to organize and orchestrate things so thoroughly so that messiness will never bubble up around us” (p. 89). In a conversation with novice teacher Sister James in her classroom, Sister Aloysius finds a framed picture of the late Pope Pius XII. She proceeds to hang it slightly above the chalkboard. Sister James unassumingly observes that “he is no longer the pope.” Well aware that Catholicism has a new leader, Sister Aloysius explains that the framed picture will allow Sister James the ability to monitor her class even while she is writing on the board. This generous bit of teaching advice from Sister Aloysius ends up helping Sister James with classroom management, but when coupled with Sister Aloysius’s penchant for keeping dissent, innovation, challenge, and change at bay, one can see Palmer’s wisdom in identifying this shadow.

The fifth and final shadow is the denial of death itself (Palmer, 2000, p. 90). Leaders living with this shadow are in “denial of the fact that all things must die in due course” (p. 90). According to Feaster (2008), Sister Aloysius “seems to represent a grotesque fear of change and a frightening inflexibility.” With the changes brought forth by Vatican II, Catholicism is caught up in a moment of turbulent change and transition. The conflict between Sister Aloysius and Father Flynn represent the struggle between the new and old ways of being Catholic (Feaster, 2008; French, 2008; McCarthy, 2008). In that final scene where Sister Aloysius tearfully admits to her own feelings of doubt, viewers are left with a potential impression that the certain Sister Aloysius may be on the verge of receiving a gift from an inner journey. A gift that Palmer (2000) described as the “knowledge that death finally comes to everything” (p. 91).

Now that we have explored the role of shadow in the leadership of Sister Aloysius, this paper now turns its attention to the film’s other central leadership figure, Father Flynn. Robert K. Greenleaf’s (1977/2002) emergent and life-affirming theory of servant-leadership will be the analytical crucible through which Father Flynn’s leadership ethos will be examined.



## THE SERVANT-LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS OF FATHER BRENDAN FLYNN

After many years of thoughtful analysis of Greenleaf's (1977/2002) original writings, Spears (2004) "extracted a set of ten characteristics of the servant-leader that I viewed as being of critical importance" (p. 13). These characteristics are: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Spears, 2004).

*Doubt* explicitly depicts many, if not all of the servant-leadership characteristics identified by Spears (2004). One lead character, Father Flynn, exhibits servant-leadership characteristics in the intentional way he interacts and communicates with and teaches children at Saint Nicholas' elementary school. Particularly moving is the courageous way Father Flynn reaches out and befriends Donald Miller, the school's first African American pupil, during the racist reality of the 1960s. In the face of chaos, complexity, and doubt Father Flynn answers in varying degrees the call to servant-leadership (Spears, 1998).

The following is an exposition and examination of the characteristics of servant-leadership as depicted by Father Flynn. For the sake of brevity, this paper will only focus on listening, healing, and persuasion. I find these three evident in the film and embodied by a central leadership figure, Father Flynn.

### *Listening*

Leaders must maintain a deep commitment to listening intently to others. Noddings (2003) contends that "listening, that supremely important form of receiving is essential" (p. 121). Servant-leaders identify the will of a group and aid in the clarification of that will. Listening also requires attentiveness to the interior movements within. The practices of listening and regular reflection are essential to the growth of the servant-leader (Spears, 2004, p. 13). Greenleaf (1977/2002) stated, "I have a bias, which suggests that only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening first" (p. 31). He added that "true listening builds strength in other people" (p. 31).

Father Flynn, in his interactions with people, exhibited strong listening skills, especially with younger and more impressionable people. Every time children had questions or did not understand something, Father Flynn took the time to sit with them, listen to their concerns, and respond. One example



involved Father Flynn hosting a group of boys at the rectory for afternoon punch and cookies. He listened to their interests and responded to their inquiries about dating and with a bit of wit tried to build strength in them with his advice.

Father Flynn demonstrated listening in another conversation with a young female student. After noticing that she was smitten with a boy, Father Flynn took interest, listened to her story and extended a piece of dating advice. Father Flynn's listening in this instance helped the female student clarify her feelings and build her strength in order to express her feelings to the boy she liked.

### *Healing*

Spears (2004) writes:

Learning to heal is a powerful force for transformation and integration. One of the great strengths of servant-leadership is the potential for healing oneself and others. Many people have broken spirits and have suffered from a variety of emotional hurts. Although this is part of being human, servant-leaders recognize that they have an opportunity to make whole those with whom they come in contact. (p. 13)

Related to healing, Greenleaf (1977/2002) pondered:

Do those being served grow as person; 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? (p. 27)

For Greenleaf, the resulting behaviors and actions of followers is the ultimate judge of whether a leader embodies the essence of servant-leadership. Covey (1998) proclaims, "I believe that the overwhelming majority of people in this country, with the right kind of servant-leadership at all levels, most importantly at the family level, could heal our country" (p. xviii).

Despite the peculiar interaction between Father Flynn and Donald Miller, it seems that Father Flynn is trying to comfort and care for Donald since he is not accepted by his fellow students (Rudin & Shanley, 2008). As the school's first and only African American student, Donald is in some sense, the least privileged. In one scene, some of his peers intentionally bump



into him in the school hallway causing him to drop all of his belongings in front of everyone. Father Flynn sees this and immediately offers to help. However, instead of focusing on the material books and papers on the floor, Father Flynn pulls Donald in for a hug in a sign of comfort and care. Father Flynn recognizes the emotional hurt Donald is suffering from and the loving embrace is an effort toward healing.

Between the private meeting involving alcohol at the rectory between Father Flynn and Donald and the revelatory dialogue between Sister Aloysius and Donald's mother, the viewer is left to ponder whether Father Flynn's extended efforts at relational healing with Donald border on an ethical boundary violation. A case could be made for both sides of this story. Again, the film leaves the situation unresolved and viewers must draw their own conclusions.

### *Persuasion*

Persuasion is an appropriate exercise of power. Greenleaf (1977/2002) held that "[l]eadership by persuasion has the virtue of change by convince-ment rather than coercion" (p. 44). Servant-leadership favors developing the powers of persuasion and learning to obtain consensus (Desautel, 2008). Northouse (2010) highlights two types of power in organizations—position power and personal power. Position power is "derived from a particular office or rank in a formal organizational system" (p. 8). Personal power "is the influence capacity a leader derives from being seen by followers as lik-able and knowledgeable" (Northouse, 2010, p. 8). Greenleaf (1977/2002) favored the development of personal power for servant-leaders. Spears (2004) adds, "The servant-leader seeks to convince others, rather than coerce compliance. This particular element offers one of the clearest distinctions between the traditional authoritarian model and that of servant-leadership. The servant-leader is effective at building consensus within groups" (p. 14).

In my view, the charismatic and affable Father Flynn is very persua-sive, especially in his interactions with young impressionable adults, such as Sister James. In a conversation with Sister James, Father Flynn notes the following:

There are people who go after your humanity, sister. They tell you that the light in your heart is a weakness. Don't believe it. It's an old tactic of cruel people to kill kindness in the name of virtue. There's nothing wrong with love. (Shanley, 2008, p. 41)



Father Flynn, in my view, effectively persuades Sister James to recognize kindness as a gift of love and not weakness. He uses his personal power as a knowledgeable and friendly priest to convince rather than coerce. Father Flynn's persuasiveness influences Sister James to be less suspicious of Father Flynn and even results in a public defense of Father Flynn in a subsequent conversation with Sister Aloysius.

#### CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Prior to an in-depth look, *Doubt* was just another quality film that featured a talented cast of Hollywood titans. Needless to say, my impressions have drastically changed. Engaging this film through the concepts of servant-leadership, sense-making in film, liberation, and the role of shadow in leadership was an incredibly fruitful and edifying experience. It was the perfect film to explore the practice of servant-leadership in the midst of an uncertain, unjust, and at times ugly reality. I learned a great deal about diversity, courageous love, parenting, and resilience. Furthermore, this film was an affirmation of the manifold ways listening, persuasion, and healing can soothe and support the brokenness that can consume humanity.

For me, the powerful scene involving Sister Aloysius and Mrs. Miller captured the confluence of factors that has plagued the Catholic Church and hindered its potential for further positive influence in our world. At times, it has raised personal doubts about the spiritual faith tradition that I claim. How can a faith that proclaims love of neighbor allow certain people to abuse children? Why are some Catholic leaders not as forthright or humble in the way they lead? Why does the current pope and his administration seem more interested in defining, commanding, and emphasizing a more traditional and hierarchical way of living our faith? At times it makes me wonder how I can stay committed to a faith that I identify with and love so much.

Watching a film such as *Doubt* reminds me of why I choose to remain a Catholic Christian. The character in the film that I resonated a great deal with was Donald Miller. In my own way and time, my experience, though much more positive, was similar to his. For many years I was among the few people of color at my Catholic elementary school of over two hundred students. While other students had access to many material things, I had to make do with my family's humble means as my hard-working immigrant parents held several jobs, including that of evening janitor at the school



I attended (it was the only way that my family could afford the tuition for my sister and me). As in Donald's situation, generous and kind servant-leaders such as Monsignor John Birch, Mary Higgins, Sister Catherine Rose, Josie Saik, and Father Nick Reina extended their friendship and hospitality to me and my family. They helped form the strength of my character—they believed in me and furnished me with countless opportunities to thrive intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. Without their support, my life situation and understanding of truth and justice might have unfolded very differently.

After conducting this analysis from a servant-leadership perspective, there is no *Doubt* in my mind that this dramatic film is a cinematic masterpiece full of paradox and uncertainty that has a rich relevance and resonance for our times in our individual and collective servant-led struggle for truth and justice. It certainly has been that way for me.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dung Q. Tran is a native of Los Angeles. He is a lecturer in the Communication Studies Department and a resident minister in Student Housing at Loyola Marymount University as well as a library assistant at Mount Saint Mary's College. Previously, Dung served on the campus ministry team at the University of San Francisco and taught at Catholic secondary and elementary schools in Los Angeles. He is currently pursuing doctoral studies in leadership, holds a Master of Theological Studies degree from the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, a California Teaching Credential in History, a Master of Arts degree in Secondary Education, as well as two Bachelor of Arts degrees in Theological Studies and Communication Studies, all from Loyola Marymount University.

---

#### REFERENCES

- Alan-Selby, S. (1978). *The study of film as an art form in American secondary schools*. New York: Arno Press.
- Allen, J. L. Jr. (2001). *Cardinal Ratzinger: The Vatican's enforcer of faith*. New York: Continuum International Publishing.
- Allen, J. L. Jr. (2006). *The rise of Benedict XVI: The inside story of how the pope was elected and where he will take the Catholic Church*. New York: Doubleday.





- Alleva, R. (2010, January 29). Pokahokum. [Review of the film *Avatar*]. *Commonweal*, pp. 18–19.
- Bass, B. M., & Avolio, B. J. (1990). The implications of transactional and transformational leadership for individual, team, and organizational development. *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, 4, pp. 231–272.
- Blanchard, K. (2009). *Leading at a higher level: Blanchard on leadership and creating high performing organizations*. (Rev. and expanded ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: FT Press.
- Burns, J. M. (2003). *Transforming leadership: A new pursuit of happiness*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Carey, M. (2005). “Thus have we made the world”: Using the film *The Mission* to explore the choice for servant-leadership. [Review of the film *The Mission*]. *The International Journal of Servant Leadership*, 1(1), pp. 257–264.
- Clemens, J., & Wolff, M. (2000). *Movies to manage by: Lessons in leadership from great films*. New York: Contemporary Books.
- Dargis, M. (2008, December 12). Between heaven and earth, room for ambiguity [Review of the film *Doubt*]. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://movies.nytimes.com/2008/12/12/movies/12doub.html>.
- Doohan, L. (2007). *Spiritual leadership: The quest for integrity*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- English, F. W. (2008). *The art of educational leadership: Balancing performance and accountability*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Feaster, F. (2008, December 24). The whole truth: Shanley’s superb *Doubt* makes you ache with uncertainty [Review of the film *Doubt*]. *Charleston City Paper*. Retrieved from <http://www.charlestoncitypaper.com/gyrobase/film-review-doubt/Content?oid=1133591&mode=print>.
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. (M.B. Ramos, Trans.). (30th Anniversary ed.). New York: Continuum. (Original work published 1970).
- French, P. (2009, February 8). Meryl Streep and Philip Seymour Hoffman are compelling in a provocative film about Catholic guilt [Review of the film *Doubt*]. *The Observer*. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/feb/08/doubt-film-review>.
- Gardner, H. (1995). *Leading minds: An anatomy of leadership*. New York: Basic Books.
- Greenleaf, R. K. (2002). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. (25th Anniversary ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press. (Original work published 1977).
- Heifetz, R. A., & Linsky, M. (2002). *Leadership on the line: Staying alive through the dangers of leading*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Jackson, B., & Parry, K. (2008). *A very short, fairly interesting and reasonably cheap book about studying leadership*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Knight, P. (2007). *The Kennedy assassination*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Kotter, J. P. (1999). *John P. Kotter on what leaders really do*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.



- Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2003). *Encouraging the heart: A leader's guide to rewarding and recognizing others*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Macedo, D. (2000). Introduction. In P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.) (30th Anniversary ed.) (pp. 11–28). New York: Continuum. (Original work published 1970).
- Madges, W., & Daley, M. J. (Eds.). (2003). *Vatican II: Forty personal stories*. Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications.
- Malone, M.S.H., P. (2008, December 2). The Church in transition: *Doubt* [Review of the film *Doubt*]. *Independent Catholic News*. Retrieved from <http://www.indcatholicnews.com/news.php?viewStory=710>.
- McCarthy, T. (2008, November 6). [Review of the film *Doubt*]. *Variety Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117938945.html?categoryid=1263&cs=1>.
- Mondello, B. (2008, December 11). In “Doubt”: Adapting a parable proves problematic [Review of the film *Doubt*]. *NPR*. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=98101151>.
- Nielson, T., Pillai, R., & Watson, K. (2003). Blockbuster leadership: Teaching leadership using film. In R. Pillai & S. Stites-Doe (Eds.), *Teaching leadership: Innovative approaches for the 21st century* (pp. 3–30). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.
- Noddings, N. (2003). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*. (2nd ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Northouse, P. G. (2010). *Leadership: Theory and practice*. (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- O'Malley, S.J., J. W. (2010). *What happened at Vatican II*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Palmer, P. J. (1996). Foreword. In A. T. Fraker & L. C. Spears (Eds.), *Seeker and servant: The private writings of Robert K. Greenleaf* (pp. ix–xi). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Palmer, P. J. (2000). *Let your life speak: Listening for the voice of vocation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Palmer, P. J. (2004). *A hidden wholeness: The journey toward an undivided life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Pillai, R., & Stites-Doe, S. (Eds.). (2003). *Teaching leadership: Innovative approaches for the 21st century*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.
- Pramaggiore, M., & Wallis, T. (2008). *Film: A critical introduction*. (2nd ed.). Boston: Pearson.
- Pye, A. (2005). Leadership and organizing: Sense-making in action. *Leadership*, 1(1), pp. 31–50.
- Rausch, S.J., T. P. (2009). *Pope Benedict XVI: An introduction to his theological vision*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Rudin, S. (Producer), & Shanley, J. P. (Director). (2008). *Doubt* [Motion picture]. United States: Miramax Films.



- Shachtman, T. (1983). *Decade of shocks: Dallas to Watergate, 1963–1974*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Seteroff, S. S. (2003). *Beyond leadership to followership: Learning to lead from where you are*. Victoria, B.C.: Trafford.
- Shanley, J. P. (2008). *Doubt: A parable*. New York: Theatre Communications Group.
- Shaull, R. (2000). Foreword. In P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.) (30th Anniversary ed.) (pp. 29–34). New York: Continuum. (Original work published 1970).
- Smircich, L., & Morgan, G. (1982). Leadership: the management of meaning. *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science*, 18, pp. 257–273.
- Spears, L. C. (1998). Preface. In R. K. Greenleaf, *The power of servant-leadership* (pp. xix–xxiii). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Spears, L. C. (2004). The understanding and practice of servant-leadership. In L. C. Spears & M. Lawrence (Eds.), *Practicing servant-leadership: Succeeding through trust, bravery, and forgiveness* (pp. 9–24). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Spears, L. C., & Lawrence, M. (Eds.). (2004). *Practicing servant leadership: Succeeding through trust, bravery, and forgiveness*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Taft-Thomas, M. (2008). *Leadership and the arts: An inside view*. Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse.
- Turan, K. (2008, December 12). Doubt has a crisis of faith [Review of the film *Doubt*]. *The Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/dec/12/entertainment/et-doubt12>.
- Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Weick, K. E. (2007). Romancing, following, and sensemaking: James Meindl's legacy. In B. Shamir, R. Pillai, M. C. Bligh, & M. Uhl-Bien (Eds.), *Follower-centered perspectives on leadership* (pp. 279–291). Greenwich, CT: IAP Publishing.
- Wheatley, M. J. (2006). *Leadership and the new science: Discovering order in a chaotic world*. (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Wilde, M. J. (2007). *Vatican II: A sociological analysis of religious change*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.