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An Aesthetic of Imagination and Creativity for Leaders
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Abstract

The complexity of today's organizations requires creative imagination on the part of both leaders and organizational members. One way for leaders to face the complex environment and to influence creativity in their followers is through a biblical-theological aesthetic of imagination and creativity, which is concerned with values of beauty, truth, and goodness. Imagination and creativity are God-given gifts that allow human beings to evoke these values. Aesthetic leaders can cultivate these values within the organization by relating stories that stimulate both cognitive and emotive responses. The parables of Jesus offer an example of how leaders can imaginatively communicate a vision for the organization and inspire creativity in their followers.

An Aesthetic of Imagination and Creativity for Leaders

The nature of the world in which we live appears to grow more complex with each passing year. Once used only to manage military weapons systems, the computer has revolutionized our business and personal lives since the 1970s and 1980s, and in particular since the explosion of the Internet in the mid-1990s. Today, most people own multiple computers and shudder at the thought of not having instant access to their files and the free flow of information available online. How many times has work in organizations come to a complete standstill because the computers or network was down? Some of us reminisce about how life was simpler before the Internet and cell phones, but we cannot give up our addiction to instant everything. As Wheatley (2006) opined, “Chaos and global interconnectedness are part of our daily lives. We try hard to respond to these challenges and threats through our governments, organizations and as individuals No matter what we do, stability and lasting solutions elude us” (p. x). Organizations are facing a similar situation.

The complexity of today’s organizations requires creative imagination on the part of both leaders and organizational members. Indeed, creativity has come “to be seen as a key goal of many organizations and a potentially powerful influence on organizational performance” (Mumford, Scott, Gaddis, & Strange, 2002, p. 705). But how should leaders understand imagination and creativity in terms of their leadership? And how can leaders foster creative imagination among their followers? Mumford and colleagues have argued that leadership is related to creativity and innovation, and the type of leadership influences “people’s willingness to engage in, and the likely success of, creative venture” (p. 706). Leaders can face the challenges brought about by a rapidly changing global environment and influence creativity in followers by embracing a biblical-theological aesthetic of imagination and creativity, which is a response to our own createdness (Berdyaev, 2004) and has as its objective fulfilling a higher purpose.

An outlet for leaders to express their imagination and creativity is through storytelling. The parables of Jesus offer leaders an example of how stories serve to communicate a vision and stimulate the creative imagination in others. In the following pages, biblical and theological aesthetics is defined, and the relationship of biblical-theological aesthetics to both imagination and creativity is explained. A description of how aesthetics can be understood in the context of the organization, including which leadership styles are aesthetic by nature, is offered. Leaders learn how stories can help them communicate a vision for their organization and inspire creativity in their followers.

Biblical and Theological Aesthetics

Aesthetics, traditionally, is the study of beauty and the psychological responses to it (Webster’s New World College Dictionary, 1999), generated through the five senses. Many people think of art and artistic expression when the term aesthetics is mentioned. Biblical aesthetics, too, is understood in the traditional sense of what is beautiful (Dyrness, 1985; Davidson, 2003) in terms of God and God’s creation. Dyrness (1985) explained that images in the Hebrew aesthetic included multiple sensations and were understood as “comprehensive content, which . . . was a matter both of meaning and of beauty” (p. 430). This understanding stands in contrast to the modern Western view that images are simply visual representations (Dyrness). Davidson (2003) pointed out that the Bible is replete with aesthetic detail, the primary example being the poetic language used throughout. If we understand aesthetics as the psychological response to an encounter with the beautiful, then biblical aesthetics is easily apparent in the imaginative recounting of dreams, visions, and parables seen in, for example, the

Prophets, the Gospels, Acts, and Revelation. The whole aim of these aesthetic modes is to effect a transformation in the hearers (and readers). This transformation is always intended as a turning toward God (the beautiful) away from the ugliness of sin. Indeed, as Davidson (2003) affirmed, “The biblical aesthetic is a holistic discipline, affirming the whole being of a person. The senses, rather than being a peripheral aspect of human nature that is secondary to the mind, are the foundational means for grasping truth and knowledge” (p. 111). Accordingly, we can say that a biblical aesthetic is concerned with what is beautiful, true, and good.

It is a natural course that theological aesthetics has taken to address what is beautiful and also what has moral significance (Sherry, 2002). Theological aesthetics is “concerned with questions about God . . . in the light of and perceived through sense knowledge (sensation, feeling, imagination) . . . ” (Thiessen, 2004, p. 1). But why think of aesthetics in terms of leadership? Duke (1986) suggested that leadership aesthetics is about creating meaning for an organization’s constituents, meaning for the roles leader and followers play, as well as meaningful relationships between and among organizational members and their environment. McKenzie and James (2004) understood aesthetics as the search for new structures for working with uncertainty and ambiguity, by creating frameworks and opportunities for action. These “acts of leading”, noted Duke,

constitute a form of artistry and may involve a variety of creative endeavors. . . . As those who observe leaders are exposed to creative acts of leading, they may begin to experience leadership. This experience becomes meaningful to the extent that it evokes certain feelings that are valued by the observer. These feelings are associated with identifiable *properties of leadership*. Properties are aesthetic in nature . . . (p. 14)

It is from the imagination that these creative acts emerge. These acts serve, in turn, to capture the imagination of observers and followers (Duke, 1986). Imagination is the distinguishing feature of the aesthetic consciousness (McKenzie & James, 2004).

Aesthetics of Imagination and Creativity

Imagination and creativity are God-given gifts that allow us to envision and bring into being what is beautiful and aesthetically pleasing. “Scripture,” according to Green (1998), “is the concrete exemplar in the life of the believing community, by which it is enabled to imagine God, and hence to imagine the world in its essential relation to God” (p. 123). Creativity is a natural result of the imagination. Berdyaev (2004) argued that creativity is “God’s claim on and call to man. God awaits man’s creative act, which is the response to the creative act of God” (p. 277). The Bible provides evidence of the creative act of humans as a response to God. Bezalel and Aholiab, along with “all the gifted artisans,” were selected by God to construct and adorn the tabernacle (Exod. 31:2-11). The lead artisan, Bezalel, was “filled . . . with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship” (Exod. 31:3). Craftsmen, skilled in creating both beautiful and utilitarian objects, were hired by kings to build and decorate the temple (1 Chr. 29:5; 2 Chr. 34:11). Other individuals used their creativity to overturn negative situations. Queen Esther saved the Jews from execution with creative planning (Esther 5 and 7), and Joseph recommended to Pharaoh a creative strategy for mitigating the effects of a seven-year famine (Gen. 41:33-36). Jesus and the Apostle Paul were both creative storytellers able to stir up the imagination of their listeners while delivering important truths.

Our imagination allows us to be transformed and reformed continually (Burch Brown, 2004) and is the “source of creativity” (Mackey, 1986, p. 3). As Berdyaev (2004) asserted, “without imagination there can be no creative activity” (p. 280). In response, we reveal God to others through our creative acts. It is our creativity that “constitutes [our] relationship and

response to God” (Thiessen, p. 206). Subsequently, imagination and creativity are significant both for our understanding of God and for a proper response to God, which is to glorify him through our actions. In turn, the creative process, informed by our imagination in its desire to please God and glorify him, allows the leader a greater freedom in leading the organization through complex changes. Leaders are less constrained by rational processes and liberated to imagine creative solutions.

Aesthetics of Leadership

In terms of the organization, Degot (1986) considered management just as much an art as the traditional view a science, and thus the manager is an artist who creates works of art. These manager artists have “an acute sense”, a “vision”, of what is needed at that moment in the organization’s [hi]story (p. 20). “The manager himself is a creative artist, . . . who designs the action taken . . . [and who is] able to leave his personal imprint on it Unlike modern managers who make decisions based on rationality and logic, “the reality [is] that managers, and particularly senior-level managers, do and have to operate largely on aesthetic principles” (Dobson, 1999, p. 20). Subsequently, Strati (1999) was able to state that “creativity therefore plays an important part in the constitution of organizations and of the specific forms that they assume” (p. 176).

Contra the idea of aesthetics as synonymous with art or beauty, Hansen, Ropo, and Sauer (2007) defined aesthetics as sensory knowledge and felt meaning. “Aesthetics involves meanings we construct based on feelings about what we experience via our senses” (p. 545). Accordingly, they believed that an aesthetics of leadership

lies at the conjunction of two current movements in leadership research. The first movement . . . is leadership as the management of meaning . . . The qualities we highlight within these approaches are transformational/visionary leadership, charisma, and authenticity. The second movement is toward follower-centric models of leadership.” (p. 548)

Hansen and colleagues’ recognition and connection of transformational/visionary and charismatic leadership with an aesthetics of leadership resonates with the particular aspects of these theories, such as stimulating the intellect (through meaning creation using symbols and images), and inspiring visions of the future by appealing to feelings and emotions. As Hansen et al. explained, “transformational leadership involves creative insight . . . , and followers are also inspired to be more innovative and creative. . . [Consequently], aesthetics stands to bring new insights to these more inspirational and creative aspects of transformational leadership.” (p. 549). In a similar vein, charismatic leaders work to express a compelling vision of the future and “engage in personal image-building which produces favorable perceptions of themselves to followers that results in favorable outcomes for the organization” (p. 550). Empirical evidence (Jung, 2001; Sosik, Kahai, & Avolio, 1998) has shown that transformational leadership does influence the creativity of followers. Murphy and Ensher (2008) provided evidence that charismatic leadership may be an appropriate leadership style for leading creative teams.

Another vehicle for understanding the role of creativity in leadership, paradoxical leadership, as conceived by Regine and Lewin (2001), is both an authentic and a follower-centric model of leadership because of the centrality of mutual relationships between leaders and followers and between organizations and communities. The authenticity of leaders toward followers allows for a healthy feedback loop, which in turn allows for creative and adaptive solutions (Regine & Lewin) within the organization. Regine and Lewin proposed paradoxical leadership as a paradigm for leading organizations at the edge of chaos. They argued “paradoxes

are not problematic, something that needs to be solved. Instead, they create a tension from which creative solutions can emerge” (p. 19). The Bible, and the theological doctrines which evolved from it, is full of paradox, and Jesus’ leadership was replete with paradoxical actions, teaching, and stories. For example, Christians accept that Jesus was both equally human and divine (John 1:1, 14) and that to be reconciled to God humans must be “born again” (John 3:3). Jesus was the Son of God, yet he washed his disciples feet and sacrificed himself for others. To understand these paradoxical acts requires creative imagination to conceive of the truth behind these paradoxical conundrums.

Stories as Creative Use of the Imagination

The biblical parables provide a noteworthy example of the creative use of the imagination. Fodor (2008) explained that “the literary form of the Gospel parables both discloses to and invites the hearer/reader to participate in that which is . . . true, good, and beautiful” (p. 189). “Parables are stories about ordinary men and women who find in the midst of their everyday lives surprising things happening” (TeSelle, 1974, p. 630). As McIntyre (1987) suggested, “we can be sure that in understanding how [the parables] are structured and how they work, we are glimpsing something of how the mind of Jesus acts imaginatively” (p. 21). Moreover, as an extended metaphor, parables serve to disrupt ordinary reality and help the audience envision the extraordinary (TeSelle).

For McIntyre, the imagination is the means by which Jesus communicates imagery that people can understand. Jesus used parables to communicate his care for people, his vision and purpose. “It was his intention that his hearers grasp what he had to say in the terms in which he said it” (McIntyre, 1987 p. 31). Stories in general are an effective means of communication “because they conjure up complex cognitive images and can appeal to both emotions and intuition” (Forster et al., 1999, ¶8). Indeed, the hearers and readers of the parables are required to engage their imagination in order to comprehend the truth behind the parables.

Leaders can approach the parables two ways: first, as a means to get wisdom for leading, and second, as examples of how to stir up the creative imagination of their followers. In the first case, “seeking the will of God for a specific situation through ‘searching the Scriptures’ . . . is essentially an activity of the imagination” (McIntyre, 1987, p. 86). McIntyre described this activity as proceeding “from the understanding of a parable or a biblical situation which was quite specific and non-general in character, to a . . . specific course of action” (p. 86). This ability to apply biblical principles to the here-and-now “is conditioned by our being able imaginatively to enter into the intention of the original situation, and equally imaginatively to make the transition to a world and a time remotely distant from, . . . the original” (McIntyre, 1987, p. 86). For example, in Luke 14:28-30, Jesus invited his listeners first to imagine that they were going to build a tower and they started building without figuring the cost to complete it, and then to imagine how they would feel when they discovered they could not finish the project and were ridiculed by others. The listeners are invited to imagine how they would react if they discovered they did not have the resources they needed. This short creative parable provides a leader seeking God’s will for any business endeavor an immediate understanding of the wisdom behind strategic planning.

The second use of parable for the leader centers on the leader’s need to communicate the vision for the organization and to stir up creativity in followers that can be guided toward achieving that vision. One way to communicate a vision and inspire followers is through storytelling. As Forster et al. (1999) remarked, with the increasingly complex environment in which organizations exist,

Leaders have to be able to make sense of this fast changing world and convey this to their employees . . . Through their words and actions they have to influence the behaviours, thoughts and feelings of their followers. . . . [C]reating a mental picture . . . helps the listeners discover who they are, . . . where they are currently, and where they should be headed. (¶9)

Storytelling, then, “affirms a basic faith that our lives are not meaningless and lived out in a haphazard world. . .” (Leary, 1986, p. 486). A study by Taylor (2000) on the aesthetics of leadership storytelling found a correlation between a story’s performance and the felt meaning that derived from it. Storytelling serves to remind listeners of a shared experience, “allowing people to relate as humans with feelings” (Taylor, p. v). Not only is there a psychological response to the story, but also the creation of joint meaning, which serves to bind the organizational members together. Gardner (1995) explained,

Most individuals attach meaning and value to the ideas that they develop . . . about themselves and their group. . . . But most human beings also crave an explicit statement . . . on what counts as being true, beautiful, and good. . . . At times of stability, the accepted norms may be adhered to without discussion. But particularly in times of crisis or cataclysmic change, individuals crave a larger explanatory framework. (pp. 55-56)

Leaders provide this framework by relating stories that provide answers to important questions, such as the purpose of work (Gardner). The parables that Jesus told held a deeper meaning than was immediately apparent, but it was the telling that first got people’s attention and then the content that involved listeners in the story itself. Thus, leaders do not tell just any story:

What’s generated becomes a new narrative to live by, . . . and capable of being put into practice. The newly emerging narrative is constructed both from the ongoing stories of the people and their organization, and the new story put forward by the leader. It is born in the listeners’ minds as a more compelling version of their ongoing life stories. . . .

What the leader says is . . . a catalyst to a creative process going on inside the listener. (Denning, 2008, p. 14)

The way leaders express the vision for the organization (communication style), being able to inspire others by communicating that vision, the ability to provide meaning and purpose for the organization, and enabling others to act are all achievable through a carefully crafted story. These characteristics are what Kent, Crotts, and Azziz (2001) found to be the primary factors of transformational leadership behavior. Gardner (1995) called these master storytellers visionary leaders.

Imagination and Creativity for Leaders

For all its advantages, a leader’s creative imagination should be more than a means to an end. A leader’s creative “vision is the result of grace: of having our moral imagination and aesthetic sensibilities infused by the Spirit of God who enables a ‘right seeing’” (Fodor, 2008, p. 191). A creative vision should both sustain the organization during times of stability and through times of crisis and change. Furthermore, the creativity and the imagination that a leader brings to the organization should pervade throughout the system so that followers feel welcomed to express their own creative imagination, in the pursuit of both organizational objectives and personal fulfillment. The mutuality between the leader and followers’ creative imagination serves as a ballast to the chaotic environment in which the organization exists. Our human creativity is an expression of our response to God. Whether we are Christians or not, the creative act is an outgrowth of our own createdness (Berdyayev, 2004). “We express our being by creating. Creativity is a necessary sequel to being” (May, 1975, p. 8). Gardner (1995) suggested that “the

artful creation and articulation of stories constitutes a fundamental part of the leader's vocation" (p. 43). Subsequently, creativity and imagination are aesthetically proper for leaders as long as the use of the imagination and what is created is consistent with biblical principles.

It is both promising and possible, then, for organizational leaders to imagine themselves as *creators* of the organization's vision, as change *artists*, as *co-creators* of organizational products or services. Yet, leaders must take the understanding of creativity further. "Creativity is not only necessary for the innovation of new products and services; it is the conduit for knowledge to be generated, disseminated, utilized and managed throughout the organization. Moreover, it requires imagination to transcend the limitations of part-and-parcel thinking and envision the organization and its environment holistically. In order for leaders to think about the various systems of the organization and how they interact as parts of larger environmental systems, they must engage their creative imagination to see the "big picture." Green (1989) has noted that "when we seek "imaginative leadership," we are not looking for a leader who . . . sees things that aren't there, but rather for one who is especially gifted at seeing what *is* there and able to envision new possibilities for realistic action" (p. 63).

Creativity and imagination are not just about seeing, however. They are about perceiving what is good and true and beautiful through the other senses as well (Strati, 1999), what can be "heard, handled, [and] felt" (Cf. 1 John 1:1) (Green, p. 66). These "perceptive faculties" (Strati, p. 2) yield knowledge about the organization that is not necessarily recorded in a policies and procedures handbook, and allow the leader to take "intentional action" (Strati, p. 2). What results is the fruit of the leader's creative imagination. Indeed, Koestler (1981) defined the creative act thusly, "it combines, reshuffles, and relates already existing but hitherto separate ideas, facts, frames of perception, associative contexts" (p. 2) when faced by the "traumatic challenges to the environment" (p. 16). Hausman (1981) argued that

the creator must not only exercise critical judgment in deciding what to accept and reject when possibilities occur to him, but he must also form, refine, and integrate these, even though he knows only with a degree of imprecision what the final integration will be . . . and . . . he must assume responsibility for what he brings into being. (p. 85)

The creative leader, then, is not someone who takes to flights of fancy. Rather, imagination is "the whole mind working . . . involving perception, feeling, and reasoning" (Sherry, 2002, p. 113). The creative act is both a cognitive and emotive process driven by what McKenzie and James (2004) called "the imaginative faculty which ensures . . . that we desire to create and go beyond the given" (p. 35). The creative leader combines tacit knowledge, discernment, and the imagination for what could be into an intentional action without necessarily knowing the end. In a word, the creative leader is courageous. Courageous leaders beckon their followers to join them on the journey to discover the end together by creating a dynamic vision of the possibilities.

For leaders, then, it is not only important to create a vision, but also vital to communicate that vision in a way that followers can in turn imagine a positive future. McKenzie and James (2004) have asserted that

an 'aesthetic approach' and the development of an aesthetic attitude is essential for all genuine understanding of complexity. . . . In our efforts to understand the complexities of a chaotic world we admire intuition and imagination in problem solving. We admire creativity and we strongly desire to be creative ourselves. (pp. 36-37)

Consequently, the need is great for leaders to nurture their own imagination both in order to engage the imagination of their followers, and to prevail over complex challenges from the environment.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper it was recognized that complex organizational issues call for creative responses from all organizational members. Creative ideas allow the organization the flexibility it needs to respond to the challenges facing the organization in order to become a better organization. A biblical-theological aesthetic of imagination and creativity was suggested as a way for leaders to think about leading others to creative solutions. Leaders take the lead by imagining a dynamic vision and relating that vision with a compelling story in order to inspire creativity from their followers. The stories that leaders tell, like the parables of the Bible, contain images that are easy to understand but powerful enough to transform the listeners. A biblical-theological aesthetic of imagination and creativity frees leaders to create meaning and value for the organization with the confidence that the leaders themselves are fulfilling their purpose.

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