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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a pedagogic strategy that uses ancient texts for teaching college freshmen academic skills, habits of inquiry, and leadership. Applicability of these pedagogic ideas to a graduate course in leadership is discussed. Among the texts discussed are: (1) Gilgamesh; (2) "The Odyssey"; (3) "Oedipus the King"; (4) Sundiata; and (5) the Gospel of Luke." In a discussion of reading "Gilgamesh" with students the paper mentions the signs and consequences of organizational malaise which demonstrates a misuse of power, failure to take up a central responsibility of his kingship and failure to be "future-focused." The study of Oedipus is a vehicle for exploring the pride that goes before a fall and the tragic flaw that results in a sudden reversal of fortune. In the case of Oedipus the tragic flaw centers on the legitimacy of his claim to leadership. The paper's discussion of the Odyssey suggests that it offers two models of strong female leadership in the case of the goddess Athena who sets the plot in motion as the book opens and in the form of Nausikaa, a king's daughter who displays the poise essential to leadership and a talent for task organization. The paper closes by arguing that in courses on leadership which include many theories, models and research to cover, students are powerfully assisted by encountering elemental examples from ancient literature. (JB)

TEACHING LEADERSHIP:

GRADUATE STUDENTS AND FRESHMEN LEARN FROM ANCIENT LEADERS

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After a period of years teaching graduate students the rudiments of organizational behavior through courses in leadership, communication and supervision, I jumped at a chance to teach a section of a new freshman-level required course. Under the gnomic title, "Integrated Studies 111-112: Sciences and Humanities," this course was designed to use materials drawn from many disciplines to help freshmen develop academic skills, habits of inquiry and a broadened range of interests. The first semster, as it has evolved, uses Gilgamesh, The Odyssey, Oedipus the King, Sundiata, The Gospel of Luke and other texts ad libitum, leaving the individual instructor free to shape a theme and use materials and methodologies from as many disciplines as s/he chooses. From the outset I identified the hero's quest as the central theme to be pursued, and I relied on the kinds of materials and methods I had encountered as an undergraduate studying ancient languages and literature, but it wasn't long before I noticed myself increasingly dipping into leadership theory to explain or illuminate the behavior of various characters. At the same time, my graduate students began to notice examples of the gestae of ancient leaders popping up among the expected case studies of contemporary academic and business leaders. Of course, the graduate students weren't burdened with the Sumerian pantheon, the Homeric problem or the role of peripeteia and the undergraduates didn't have to explore the maze of Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Model or climb Vroom and Yetton's Decision Tree! In both instances, I wanted to focus on typical

leader behaviors and not become caught up in terminology. In this paper, I want to give some examples of considerations I've used in class by way of describing what I've found to be a useful pedagogic strategy.

The semester always begins for the freshmen with Gilgamesh because the story is accessible and compelling. Gilgamesh, ruler of Uruk, two-thirds god and one-third human, is a tyrant king unhappy in his loneliness. When Enkidu, a half-wild man who has run with the animals, comes to the city, Gilgamesh finds his life completed by friendship and persuades Enkidu to join him in earning undying fame by cutting down the Cedar Forest and slaying its guardian, Humbaba. On their return to Uruk, Ishtar, goddess of love and war, offers herself to Gilgamesh and, rejected, send the Bull of Heaven to lay waste the city. When Gilgamesh and Enkidu slay the bull, she brings death upon Enkidu. Devastated by the loss of his friend, Gilgamesh sets out to find the secret of eternal life. At length, Gilgamesh obtains a plant that will enable him to lead his life over again armed with the knowledge he has obtained on his quest, but a serpent eats the plant. Though it is a story simple enough for a child to follow, it poses questions and complexities to nourish a lifetime of thought. Let us content ourselves with considering the portrait of Gilgamesh that opens the story:

> Gilgamesh was king of Uruk,
> A city set between the Tigris
> And Euphrates rivers
> In ancient Babylonia . . .
> As king, Gilgamesh was a tyrant to his people.
> He demanded, from an old birthright,
> The privilege of sleeping with their brides
> Before the husbands were permitted.

Sometimes he pushed his people half to death
With work rebuilding Uruk's walls,
And then without an explanation let
The walls go unattended and decay,
And left his people dreaming of the past
And longing for a change.
They had grown tired of his contradictions
And his callous ways.
They knew his world was old
And cluttered with spoiled arts
That they defended but could not revive.[1]

This is a picture of organizational malaise that begins at the top. Gilgamesh is a tyrant, as witness three circumstances: his insistence on droit de seigneur, his care of the walls, the oldness of his world.

In the first instance, one may fairly ask why Gilgamesh insists on exercising the privilege of the first night. The symbolism is evident: the king is more powerful than any other male in the city. Here it is useful to recall the concept expressed in the ancient Hebrew word, herem, whose Arabic cognate, harem, is instantly recognizable. Something herem was absolutely reserved, absolutely set aside for a single person's use, or, as is the case of a burnt offering, for God's use (for if it is consumed by fire, certainly no mortal can use it). Thus the significance on the harem as a place where women are set aside for a single master. In Uruk, no man can be said to have this privilege but Gilgamesh. The sense that is conveyed in the phrasing, "He demanded, from an old birthright, the privilege . . ." suggests that the practice had fallen into desuetude in Uruk and Gilgamesh's unwillingness to let this practice be honored in the breach rather than the observance is at the heart of peoples' resentment. Why then does Gilgamesh in-

sist? Perhaps because power exercised is more impressive than power that is merely symbolic, but Gilgamesh is showing bad judgement as a leader. He is, after all, two-thirds god. There is none to challenge him and his people know this. He does not have to assert the prerogatives of his position. That he does paradoxically weakens him.

The walls are very signifiant. Uruk was in the southern part of Mesopotamia in a very vascular area, an alluvial plain subject to flooding. The walls are vital to the defense of the city, but they are made of mud brick and and susceptible to erosion. Gilgamesh accepts custodianship of the safety of the community and one expression of that is his attention to the state of the walls. Even if, in his considered judgement, the crumbling of the walls presented no serious danger to the city, he must still regard the care of the walls as touching the very heart of his mission as a leader and affecting his credibility. After all, to maintain the confidence of the people, the leader must be more conforming than average to the norms of the group, must be seen as taking seriously the central tasks of the organization and not vacillating. Not only is Gilgamesh careless of this dimension of leadership behavior, he compounds the difficulty by straining the endurance of his people in working them too hard.

Finally, there is that damning indictment of the oldness of Gilgamesh's world. If there is any characteristic that is central to leadership, it is that the leader must be future-focussed and

change-oriented, apprehending how the organization must move to meet emerging conditions and guiding that movement. Someone who does not fill this bill is a caretaker rather than a leader, and the organization is dying either speedily or slowly. Gilgamesh has no leadership agenda and his people know it. A ruler lacking direction, unable to bring himself to attend consistently to the central tasks of the community, who goads his people with arrogant disregard of their sensibilities, this is truly a tyrant rather than a leader.

Gilgamesh's mental state is characterized by depression, boredom, anomie and alienation. A psychologist might diagnose him as being clinically depressed. His trouble is that he is "a godlike man alone with his thoughts in idleness except . . . when he told his dreams to his mother, Ninsun."[2] This isolation is not only at the heart of his psychological malaise, it is a real leadership problem. The isolated leader is cut off not only from companionship but also from information, not only from reinforcement but also from any rigorous, growth-oriented criticism, not only from comfort but also from any alternative vision. Disturbed by dreams that adumbrate Enkidu's coming, Gilgamesh must turn to his mother as his only confidant:

> Gilgamesh woke anxiously from a dream
> And said to Ninsun: I saw a star
> Fall from the sky, and the people
> Of Uruk stood around and admired it
> And I was jealous and tried to carry it away
> But I was too weak and I failed.
> What does it mean? I have not dreamed
> Like this before.

She said: Your equal is the star
Which fell, as if a sign from Heaven
Had been sent which is too heavy
But which you will try to lift
And drive away, and fail.

But I have never failed before, he interrupted
Her, surprised himself at his anxiety.
It will be a person, she continued,
Speaking in her somber monotone,
A companion who is your equal
In strength, a person loyal to a friend,
Who will not forsake you and whom you
Will never wish to leave.

Gilgamesh was quiet at this interpretation
Of his dream.[2]

Could Gilgamesh confess jealousy, weakness and fear of failure to anyone else in Uruk? Of course not. He is trapped within his role, as so many in leadership positions are, fearful that any sign of weakness will provoke scorn and ridicule, if not attack. Scorn and ridicule are fatal to a leader, even one who is godlike, but the fear of them are just as bad. When Franklin Roosevelt observed that Americans in 1933 had "nothing to fear but fear itself," the unspoken corollary was that fear itself could destroy the nation. The anxiety that surprises Gilgamesh is potentially deadly, and it does not augur well for his success as a leader that only recourse to his mother can allay it.

That night he had a vision of an ax.
What does this mean, he said on waking;
The people stood around the ax
When I tried to lift it and I failed.
I feel such tiredness. I cannot explain.

Ninsun said: The ax is a man
Who is your friend and equal.
He will come. A graceful man
Who will lift you out of tiredness.

O Ninsun, I want your words to be true.
I have never known such weariness before,
As if some life in me has disappeared
Or needs to be filled up again.
I am alone and I have longed
For some companionship. My people
Also have grown tired of my solitude.[3]

The star and the ax, whatever other freight they may carry, are common leadership metaphors in our own day. If there is a star system in Uruk, Gilgamesh has been the only star. Wouldn't that arrival of another star threaten him as the arrival of a new star in any organization will threaten the established stars? And the ax that cuts the deadwood from a moribund organization is just as common a notion as the new broom that sweeps clean, and just as unsettling to those who harbor a more than sneaking feeling that they may be the very thing that needs to be cut out or swept away. Only the soothing interpretations given by Ninsun can make these predictions not only nonthreatening but a consummation devoutly to be desired by Gilgamesh. When Enkidu arrives in town, they meet in the main street like gunslingers in the Old West, they battle enthusiastically,

And quiet suddenly fell on them
When Gilgamesh stood still
Exhausted. He turned to Enkidu who leaned
Against his shoulder and looked into his eyes
And saw himself in the other, just as Enkidu saw
Himself in Gilgamesh.
In the silence of the people they began to laugh
And clutched each other in their breathless exaltation.[4]

It is no longer lonely at the top.

Studying Greek tragic drama is always useful for understanding at least one of the dimensions of leadership: the pride that goes before a fall. The protagonist in such a drama is destroyed by a tragic flaw centering on overweening pride. The tragic flaw results in peripeteia, a sudden reversal of fortune by which the protagonist is brought low. In the case of Oedipus the King, the tragic flaw has to do with his leadership position and how he came by it in the first place. The story is familiar. Oedipus, King of Thebes, is approached by his people who are suffering from a plague. They seek his help is finding out what uncleanness has brought this disaster upon them. He has rescued Thebes once before, answering the riddle posed by the Sphinx, thus ending its depredations and succeeding to the throne of Laios, the previous king. As Oedipus investigates, it becomes increasingly obvious that he is the source of the plague. Fleeing from his native Corinth in fear of a prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother, not realizing that the king and queen of Corinth were his adoptive parents, he has killed his real father, Laios, and married his real mother, Iocaste, Queen of Thebes. His own insight having revealed his crime, Oedipus gouges out his own eyes and embarks on the exile he had decreed for the malefactor. Well known to the audience before its dramatization, the play relies for its impact on dramatic irony by which the knowing audience is constantly confronted with statements of the characters that unwittingly cut close to the bone. At the very outset of the play, the words and actions of Oedipus

demonstrate how the reverse side of his leadership qualities will ensnare and doom him:

> My children, geenrations of the living
> In the line of Kadmos, nursed at his ancient hearth:
> Why have you strewn yourselves before these altars
> In supplication, with your boughs and garlands?
> The breath of incense rises from the city
> With a sound of prayer and lamentation.
> Children,
> I would not have you speak through messengers,
> And therefore I have come myself to hear you—
> I, Oedipus, who bear the famous name.
> [To a PRIEST:
> You, there, since you are eldest in the company,
> Speak for them all, tell me what preys upon you,
> Whether you come in dread, or crave some blessing:
> Tell me, and never doubt that I will help you
> In every way I can: I should be heartless
> Were I not moved to find you suppliant here.[5]

Oedipus is obviously a man proud of his status and fame, intent upon maintaining and extending it. Fame can be a source of great power for a leader: the quest for fame can be a turning aside from real leadership. More than simply being proud, Oedipus is here self-portrayed as a leader concerned for the welfare of his followers, not lacking the the dimension of consideration. Yet his reference to his people as his children contains that horrible irony: all of the people of a realm are symbolically the ruler's children, but the children of Oedipus will be found to be his siblings as well! Out of concern for his power and consideration for his people, Oedipus makes a rash promise that does not leave him the room for maneuver that a cautious leader would preserve: he will help his people in any way he can, a promise that dooms him.

The response by the priest is not only a heartfelt plea for assistance. It is nicely calculated to play upon the king's personal pride and his sense of leadership responsibility:

> You are not one of the immortal gods, we know,
> Yet we have come to you to make our prayer
> As to the man surest in mortal ways
> And wisest in the ways of God. You saved us
> From the Sphinx, that flinty singer, and the tribute
> We paid to her so long; yet you were never
> Better informed than we, nor could we teach you:
> It was some god breathed in you to set us free.
>
> Therefore, O mighty King, we turn to you:
> Find us our safety, find us a remedy,
> Whether by counsel of the gods or men.
> A king of wisdom tested in the past
> Can act in a time of troubles, and act well.
> Noblest of men, restore
> Life to your city! Think how all men call you
> Liberator for your triumph long ago;
> Ah, when your years of kingship are remembered,
> Let them not say <u>We rose, but later fell</u>—
> Keep the State from going down in the storm!
> Once, years ago, with happy augury,
> You brought us fortune; be the same again!
> No man questions your power to rule the land:
> But rule over men, not over a dead city!
> Ships are only hulls, citadels are nothing
> When no life moves in the empty passageways.[6]

The key to the power of this plea is not that it confronts Oedipus with the prospect of a loss of the vitality of his kingdom but that it addresses the roots of his power. He is king because of what he did before, solve a riddle that defeated others. His power flows from expertise, and if it is true that no leader can safely rest on aging laurels, that is especially true of the leader who wields expert power. Charismatic power that rests on simultaneous love and fear can be wielded indefinitely by a leader who knows nothing but

how to manipulate feelings, rewards and punishments. Referent power that derives from being perceived as a model of conduct can be preserved by the manipulation of images. But expert power finds the answer or evaporates. Oedipus is the prisoner of his own power. There is a bit more than that. Leaders have a tendency to attempt to replicate earlier successes. A college president who made a name by dramatic improvement of a school's physical plant will, on assuming a new presidency, find it almost impossible to resist concentrating on the new school's physical plant, even if physical plant problems at that school need far less attention than a wide variety of other problems. If part of any Greek tragedy is the inevitable grinding of remorseless necessity, here it must be said that there is an internal necessity to match the external: Oedipus is unable to act as a leader without destroying himself, but he is unable to act except as a leader. And it is as a leader that he responds:

> Each of you suffers in himself alone
> His anguish, not another's; but my spirit
> Groans for the city, for myself, for you.[7]

And he speaks more truly than he knows.

Odysseus is, of course, the very archetype of the strong and intelligent leader embarked on a vision quest. Virtually every page of The Odyssey affords leadership insights and examples. My own practice in using it is to suggest that among the women so sympathetically portrayed in it are two who show strong leadership

abilities: Athena and Nausikaa. Samuel Butler in his 1897 critical work, The Authoress of the Odyssey, and Robert Graves in his 1955 novel, Homer's Daughter, contended that the subtle and empathic portrayals of women in The Odyssey argued for a woman author. I have in mind something different, if related: that these two women are genuine leadership models.

It is Athena who sets in motion the train of events that finally brings Odysseus home to Ithaka. As the poem begins, Odysseus, the veteran not only of the Trojan War but of many other famous adventures, languishes marooned and restless on the isle of the nymph, Kalypso. Seizing on the absence from Olympos of Prometheus, Odysseus' enemy, Athena persuades Zeus to order Odysseus freed from his exile. The first mandate of leadership is task organization, and Athena proves a formidable task organizer:

> O Majesty, O Father of us all,
> if it now please the blissful gods
> that wise Odysseus reach his home again,
> let the Wayfinder, Hermes, cross the sea
> to the island of Ogygia; let him tell
> our fixed intent to the nymph with the pretty braids,
> and let the steadfast man depart for home.
> For my part, I shall visit Ithaka
> to put more courage in the son, and rouse him
> to call an assembly of the islanders,
> Akhaian gentlemen with flowing hair.[8]

So she sets her plot in motion, and will intervene frequently to nudge events along and see that things come to a successful conclusion. Thus when Odysseus finally reaches the shore of Ithaka, she appears to him to plan with him how he shall seize his own palace back from usurping suitors. The way that she addresses him

is clear indication that she is as adept at the other desideratum of leadership, concern for relationship, motivation and morale, as she is at task organization:

> Two of a kind we are,
> contrivers both. Of all men now alive
> you are the best in plots and story telling.
> My own fame is for wisdom among the gods-
> deceptions, too.
> Would even you have guessed
> that I am Pallas Athena, daughter of Zeus,
> I that am always with you in times of trial,
> a shield to you in battle, I who made
> the Phaiakians befriend you, to a man?[9]

No surprise, then, that Athena appears again at the very end of the tale to put an end to the blood feud between Odysseus and the kin of those he has slain in taking back his kingdom. Her leadership is the parenthesis enclosing the complex tale.

We meet Nausikaa, daughter of the Phaiakian king, when Odysseus is washed ashore in her land by a storm and Athena arranges for the girl to find Odysseus and bring him to the palace. Nausikaa takes her maids to the shore on a clothes-washing expedition, and they there encounter a fearsome Odysseus who has been sleeping in a thicket:

> He pushed aside the bushes, breaking off
> with his great hand a single branch of olive,
> whose leaves might shield him in his nakedness;
> so came out rustling, like a mountain lion,
> rain-drenched, wind-buffeted, but in his might at ease,
> with burning eyes - who prowls among the herds
> or flocks, or after game, his hungry belly
> taking him near stout homesteads for his prey.
> Odysseus had this look, in his rough skin
> advancing on the girls with pretty braids;
> and he was driven on by hunger, too.
> Streaked with brine, and swollen, he terrified them

> so that they fled, this way and that. Only
> Alkinoos' daughter stood her ground, being given
> a bold heart by Athena, and steady knees.[10]

Braced by Athena she may have been, but Nausikaa was raised in a king's household and has her own due meed of that poise that is essential to leadership. It isn't long before she shows she also has a real talent for task organization as she explains to Odysseus the necessity of his arriving at the palace under another pretext than their meeting by the river, constructs a story for this master of plotters and storytellers and instructs him in how to present himself:

> My father's great chair faces the fire, too;
> there like a god he sits and takes his wine.
> Go past him; cast yourself before my mother,
> embrace her knees - and you may wake up soon
> at home rejoicing, though your home be far.
> On Mother's feeling much depends; if she
> looks on you kindly, you shall see your friends
> under your own roof in your father's country.[11]

We see no more of Nausikaa, but we have no trouble believing that she was well equipped to rule bravely and wisely.

In the course of a semester, there's a great deal to master in a leadership course in the way of theories, models and research. The students taking the course profit from all of these, of course, but are naturally preoccupied with applications in their own work-place. Examples are particularly powerful, and there is something elemental about examples from ancient literature, some peculiar force lent by the strangeness of the setting, that seems to elevate these examples over the case studies of contemporary organizational

behavior. Perhaps it is that the stakes are so much higher than mere tactical victories in office politics. Whatever it is, I can assure you that the college administrators and human service administrators taking my leadership class are enthusiastic about Gilgamesh, Oedipus, Athena, Nausikaa and other ancient leaders. In the case of the freshmen, the effect seems to be one of taking these strange tales from a distant past and making them more real by likening them to the more familiar examples of men and women dressed in suits and carrying briefcases. Luke Skywalker and Indiana Jones on the wide screen seem easier for these freshmen to relate to than anyone on a printed page, let alone those whose adventures were led in the ancient world. Already preoccupied by the nexus between higher education and careers, they're eager to recast these ancient adventures into organizational paradigms so they can relate to them. If something is lost, I claim that a great deal is gained by both the instructor and the students. Why shouldn't freshmen and graduate students learn from ancient leaders?

NOTES

[1]Gilgamesh: A Verse Narrative, tr. by Herbert Mason (NY: Mentor, 1970), pp. 15-16.

[2]Ibid., p. 19.

[3]Ibid., pp. 19-20.

[4]Ibid., p. 24.

[5]Sophocles, The Oedipus Cycle, tr. by Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), pp. 3-4.

[6]Ibid., pp. 4-5.

[7]Ibid., p. 5.

[8]Homer, The Odyssey, tr. by Robert Fitzgerald (NY: Doubleday, 1963), p. 4.

[9]Ibid., p. 239.

[10]Ibid., p. 103.

[11]Ibid., p. 108.