Poets on poets

The truth of the heart

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From Plato on, leadership scholars have tended to be skeptical of poetry, concerned that its interest in human experience, emotion, and intimacy might overwhelm an analytic, rational approach to the study – and practice – of leadership. But poetry serves an important function in humanizing the rationalist imperatives of much leadership thought, and claiming primal space for empathy in both the study and the practice of leadership.

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In Book 10 of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates – after having described the composition of his carefully engineered ideal commonwealth and prescribed the step-by-step education and sifting-out of its leaders, the philosopher-kings – announces that, as a logical next step, it is necessary to banish poets from the republic. Poets, he charges, cannot be contained within the disciplined rational framework that yields the best human community. Poets claim false knowledge of human affairs and motives. They inflame our emotions. And they indulge us in the vicarious enjoyment of lust, wrath, envy, and other vices. For all these reasons, Socrates concludes – regretfully, he says – that his ideal city has no place for poetry. If anyone can make poetry safe for the republic, he says, he would gladly welcome it back.

We do not put the matter so baldly these days, but in a sense today's leadership scholars are Plato's heirs. Our ideal republic of social science has no place for poets, for many of the same reasons that Plato identified: they have no special knowledge of leadership phenomena, and they turn us away from rational understanding, to imagined emotional understanding and vicarious sympathy.

Yet it may be that the full study of leadership needs precisely these qualities of empathy, vicarious connection, and emotional awareness to help make us aware of the fullness of the leadership phenomenon. Leadership is a complex human relationship, and taking cognizance of men and women's motives, fears, hopes, and self-understandings is surely essential to making sense of leadership. The poet Richard Wilbur, as Jehanne Dubrow shows in our inaugural 'Poets on poets' feature, gently suggests in 'For the Student Strikers' that such empathetic reaching out to others is essential to the proper *practice* of leadership: his short poem is a kind of corrective to Plato's rigidly rational teaching in *The Republic* – ideology divorced from connection to real men and women, Wilbur suggests, leads to an impoverished leadership.

Literature is, for writer Salman Rushdie (1989, p. 11), 'where I go to explore the highest and lowest places in human society and the human spirit, where I hope to find not absolute truth but the truth of the tale, of the imagination and of the heart.' The truth of the tale, of the imagination, and of the heart: they do not supplant the

academic, social-scientific study of leadership, of course – but they add something of value, and something worth attending to.

Jehanne Dubrow is the author of four poetry collections, including most recently *Red Army Red* and *Stateside* (Northwestern University Press, 2012 and 2010). Her poetry, creative nonfiction, and book reviews have appeared in journals such as *Southern Review*, *The New Republic*, *Poetry*, *Ploughshares*, *The Hudson Review*, *The New England Review*, *West Branch*, *Gulf Coast*, *Blackbird*, *Copper Nickel*, and *Prairie Schooner*, as well as on the Poetry Daily and Verse Daily websites. The recipient of numerous prizes and fellowships, she serves as the Director of the Rose O'Neill Literary House at Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland.

REFERENCE

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