Book review

Nathan W. Harter, *Leadership and Coherence: A Cognitive Approach* (Routledge, New York, USA 2015) 186 pp.

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In his second book, *Leadership and Coherence: A Cognitive Approach*, Nathan Harter takes us on a fascinating and epic leadership journey, reaching across space, time and history. Starting with the leader, front and centre of the frame, he zooms out in ever-increasing concentric circles, until we find ourselves somewhat precariously perched at the outer limits of the universe. In doing so, Harter is challenging us, as leadership scholars, to stretch our thinking, about leadership, to its very limits. He is inviting us to stand where he stands (often on uncertain ground) and view leadership through different lenses, with new eyes and those eyes wide open. He evokes the idea of the investigator as spectator underpinned by Arendt's (1978) work on point of view (POV). He suggests that in this process there is the reciprocal obligation for the investigator to imagine the leader's point of view and vice versa. He is also saying that each of us operates from a unique point of view with regard to the same reality. This echoes Ladkin's (2010) perspectival approach to studying leadership. There is a sense that he is giving us permission to challenge orthodoxy as a means of finding new ways, many embedded in old, of making sense of leadership, and proposing a series of maps and tools to do so.

Harter embraces the complexity of leadership, and the many frames of reference brought to bear on studying it as a phenomenon, as healthy and interesting rather than problematic. He does however caution that 'sliding promiscuously back and forth without a focal unit can ruin good scholarship' (pp. 2–3). Instead he advocates for 'conceptual elasticity', which is the capacity to shift in and out, expanding and contracting the frame of reference around a subject or phenomenon. He expands on this idea by using a series of vignettes borrowed from history and a number of extended, sophisticated metaphors to elucidate his meaning. He suggests that this capacity to shift in and out can be confusing and exhausting. He conjectures that the artist, in this case using the example of Claude Monet, as he contemplates how to portray Rouen Cathedral in France, will inevitably have to settle on a single frame or focal point. However, he cautions against doing this before exploring and weighting all frames or options. For Harter, this 'conceptual elasticity' is not restricted to a single dimension and instead applies to any dimension you can imagine. In so doing, he demonstrates that he does not privilege one way of looking at leadership over another, but rather he proposes that, as leadership scholars, we need to look at leadership as a phenomenon from multiple perspectives. In order to have a holistic or integral leadership approach, he suggests we need to be able to hold, simultaneously, multiple perspectives and paradoxes. We also need to become very comfortable with the ambiguity and change – the incoherence – that is inherent in leadership.

Harter, like other heterodox leadership scholars, such as Ladkin (2010), advocates that rather than be frustrated by the myriad definitions for and theories of leadership, or indeed an inability to define it at all, we can choose to see this as a reflection of the complexity of leadership as a phenomenon. If we accept that leadership is a phenomenon, and a socially constructed one at that (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Gergen 1994), then phenomenology, as the study of the structures of subjective experience and consciousness, begins to provide a language and an approach to start unbundling leadership in a more complex and multi-dimensional way (Ladkin 2010). Applying a phenomenological approach to leadership research brings new voices to the leadership discipline, assisting not only in the further democratisation of the discipline, but also in the conceptualisation of leadership itself.

Harter is professor of Leadership and American Studies at Christopher Newport University in Virginia, USA. He takes a philosophical approach to studying and teaching leadership. His research focuses on Interdisciplinary Leadership Studies within the Liberal Arts, Philosophy of Leadership and the Liminality of Leadership, with a particular passion for Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset and German-born American political philosopher Eric Voegelin. Both philosophers play an integral role in shaping his thinking in the book, making appearances alongside many others, going back to the beginnings of western and eastern philosophy. Prior to joining Christopher Newport University, Harter was based at Purdue University for more than twenty years, where he taught various leadership courses. Before joining academia he practised law. He is the author of *Clearings in the Forest: On the Study of Leadership*, which was published by Purdue University Press in 2006. In that book, he explores the multifarious nature of leadership studies using the metaphor of becoming lost while walking in a dense forest.

Leadership and Coherence: A Cognitive Approach was published by Routledge in 2015 and is a collaboration with the James MacGregor Burns Academy of Leadership, under the umbrella of the *Leadership: Research and Practice Series*. In this lyrically written book, Harter tackles the complexity of leadership head on. In particular, he seeks to explore the 'inner space' of leadership and the idea that leadership is a distinctly human endeavour. Drawing on research from a number of disciplines, including psychology, philosophy, literature, sociology and ethics, Harter interrogates how leaders think, evaluate information and make judgments. Using three robust historical case studies or leadership exemplars, Harter further explores what happens in the epistemic space between leaders making decisions and followers signing up to be part of the action. He seeks to understand how the 'inward imperative' of the leader becomes shared with others, as the basis of a mutual purpose. Using a multi-layered, multi-dimensional analysis, Harter seeks to understand the processes leaders and followers employ to achieve this sense of mutual reciprocity.

For a relatively small book, at just 186 pages, Harter covers a vast territory. He calls into play ideas from different disciplines, such as knowledge, philosophy, art history and systems thinking and asks us to use them as interpretive tools in our work as leadership scholars. In the traditions of his beloved Ortega y Gasset, Harter goes on to develop a series of complex metaphors to help apprehend, comprehend and study leadership. Ortega y Gasset (1968, p. 33) is credited with saying: 'The metaphor is perhaps one of man's most fruitful potentialities. Its efficacy verges on magic, and it seems a tool for creation which God forgot inside one of His creatures when He made him.'

A key metaphor is that of the camera lens or telescope zooming in and out. Harter employs this imagery to explain his concept of 'conceptual elasticity' by using the

language of magnitudes, which is a central tenet of Voegelin's work. Harter is not the first to employ the metaphor of the lens to exemplify leadership. Other contemporary leadership scholars, like Grint (2005) and Ladkin (2010) have applied the metaphor of the lens to leadership. Grint (2005) suggests that traditionally four lenses have been brought to bear on leadership: we can look at it from the perspective of the person, the results, the position or the process. Asking questions from each of these perspectives brings a different epistemic lens into play, elucidating a different set of answers for each. Ladkin (2010) revisits the traditional questions about leadership through the lens of phenomenology. She too suggests that each different lens will bring to the surface different perspectives or give us a different view of leadership.

Harter uses the lens metaphor in a very different way. Rather than switching camera angles he is asking us to zoom in and out, thus changing our frame of reference. Like these other scholars, he suggests that each new frame brings a new perspective, uncovers a different set of answers. However, for him, these frames of reference, which can be represented by a series of concentric circles, are interconnected and each circle has the ability to influence another or all of the rest. Starting with the leader as the focal point, Harter zooms out to show the relationship with the follower in the next frame. This relationship is then nested in a network of relationships and situated further in the context of organisation, industry, markets and ever outwards. Harter does this because he believes that the leader, as the single unit of analysis at the micro level, is no longer appropriate or sufficient to explain the phenomenon. Instead he asserts that an investigation of leadership requires meso-analysis of the relationship between leader and led, as well as macro-level analysis of the context. Harter, all the while using 'conceptual elasticity' and the metaphor of concentric circles, delves into the idea that leaders are all situated in the *noösphere* (the man-made world), which operates within the *biosphere* (the natural world), which in turn operates in the *geosphere* or *cosmos*.

Another metaphor Harter explores throughout the book is that of smoke as a metaphor for leadership. Leadership, he suggests, is like smoke in its many forms, in so much as it attracts attention, it is mysterious, it is turbulent and it signals a hazard. After all, where there is smoke there must be fire. Harter claims: 'To the extent that leadership resembles smoke, leadership also challenges one's faith in coherence. Try as I might, I cannot grasp smoke ... nor can I grasp leadership' (p. 25).

He paints an elaborate picture of a stone incense box, from which the smoke arises, emanating from a source we cannot see. This is a metaphor from the well-spring of phenomenology, which seeks to study the essence of things, by attempting to reconstruct them by what is left behind after the phenomenological reduction has been performed (Gasper in Audi 1999). Smoke, like leadership, lingers for a time and then is gone, absorbed into the environment. However, he goes on to say that there is one very important difference between leadership and smoke: leadership occurs exclusively in the hearts and minds of individual human beings. This statement has Harter zooming back in to explore the 'inward imperative' or minds of three very different leaders, namely Greek philosopher Socrates (469–399 BCE), American President Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865) and Czech philosopher Jan Patočka (1907–1977). Patočka's thinking led ultimately to the Velvet Revolution of 1989, although he was long dead by then at the hands of the occupying Communist regime. In doing this, Harter shows us, as leadership scholars, how to utilise the various metaphors and philosophical tools he has introduced, throughout the book, to interpret the thinking processes of leaders. It is in this process of operationalising his metaphors and philosophical concepts in these case studies that I believe the real

power of this book lies. In effect, he is handing us a kit of very finely honed tools and showing us how to use them to best effect.

In his interpretation of the inner workings of the minds of these three very diverse leaders, all of whom became martyrs, Harter works within the phenomenological tradition. He concedes reality is subjective and cannot be apprehended directly. He draws on Polanyi's (1966) concept of 'indwelling', out of his work on tacit knowledge, and Habermas's (1984) 'intersubjectivity' as ways of 'accessing' the inner workings of another mind. He explores the 'inward imperative' of these leaders, by interpreting writing either by or about his protagonists. This is particularly interesting in the case of Socrates, who never wrote anything on leadership. What we know of his philosophy is all filtered through contemporaries who heard him speak, such as Plato and Xenophon, and who captured his thoughts in their writings, which are now thousands of years old (Harter 2013). Harter's approach is also very much in the philosophical hermeneutics tradition, which believes that understanding is interpretation (Gadamer 1989; Schwandt 2003). It is not a procedure or method for interpreting but rather an understanding of what is involved in understanding itself; every interpretation is an interpretation of an interpretation (Gadamer 1989). This epistemological stance rejects the interpretivist stance which emphasises the contribution of human subjectivity to knowledge while attempting to avoid sacrificing the objectivity of knowledge (Schwandt 2003).

Harter shows all three men grappling internally to make sense of the external context. These are not the heroic leaders they have become through the filters of history, but rather flawed characters searching for sense. In the chapter entitled 'The Shattering' (pp. 88–104), which directly precedes the three leadership exemplars, Harter explores in depth the idea that as humans we are all born broken. He suggests one of the defining characteristics of leaders is that they recognise this brokenness and the need for it to be fixed. He wraps up the chapter with a call to action, by inviting 'friends and colleagues with an interest in leadership to create and preserve a forum or vessel out of leadership studies as a place to provoke questions that might bring us all into closer attunement with that unseen order and help everyone ... flourish and feel more at home in a broken world' (p. 102).

Harter explores how leaders like Socrates, who can be seen as an indirect leader (Gardner and Laskin 1995), and Patočka, who is seen to be a combination of indirect and direct leader (ibid.), can nonetheless achieve like-mindedness with followers. To explore this idea of like-mindedness, Harter evokes the Greek word *homonoia* (p. 34). The Greeks believed that if a follower reached the same conclusion as a leader, so that they entered into a mutual relationship acknowledging the same basic imperative, *homonoia* was achieved. Harter explores this idea further by using Searle's (1998, p. 45) idea that leadership is 'an epistemically objective social reality'. From this perspective, Harter (p. 49) suggests that there is such a thing as 'collective intentionality' or the shared thoughts and feelings at the very heart of leadership. He explores the interface between the private, internal thoughts of the leader as to the need for a course of action and the juncture where others take up the call to action. He says that it is at this juncture that leadership begins.

Through his exemplars, Harter creates the picture of three men, who did not set out to win favour, but rather to challenge the system and lead by persuasion. Furthermore, they succeeded in influencing others because they demonstrated alignment between their words and their deeds. Harter says that Patočka taught by example as much as through the words of his philosophy. These statements, together with the ideas of *homonoia*, bring to mind the key concepts at the heart of Kouzes and Posner's (2008) five

practices for exemplary leadership, namely: model the way; inspire a shared vision; challenge the process; enable others to act; and encourage the heart.

Ultimately Harter (p. 158) returns to explore humanity as the basis of leadership, by entreating: 'Do not seek to lead; seek to become a person'. He sums up his belief that the best leaders work outward from the heart. They seek coherence or to make sense of what he refers to as 'a sack full of paradox' (p. 160), by looking outward all the way across the cosmos, accepting 'humanity broken as it is with nature, with one another, with the divine ground of being, and intimately within, in the field of contending forces we call selves' (p. 173).

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