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Monty Python's Lessons for Leaders: or how spirituality & leadership are close at hand

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"You are all individuals" exclaimed Brian as he tried to stop the crowds in Jerusalem from following him as their Messiah. The scene from Monty Python is particularly funny because it is painfully true: we often look to follow someone or something as an apparent solution to our ills. The film provides a helpful insight today, as the range of ills we face are set to increase from the impacts of climate change, while traditional ways of making sense of our lives are challenged. Will we start looking for saviours? Will we be led astray? Or could the coming challenges lead to a spiritual renaissance?

For years I have struggled to make a significant dent in our global problems. I say "struggled", not because of a lack of professional success, but because I interpreted my actions as struggle, and I felt sacrifices were necessary and important. Underlying this approach to my own "leadership" I had unexplored assumptions about what is leadership and what is good that probably did not make me more effective. I'll never know. But my struggle did lead me to neglect friends, family, health and joy. But suffering can be a great, if painful, teacher. As a result, I have been drawn towards alternative perspectives on both leadership and spirituality. As a result, I feel that a starting point for understanding both spirituality and leadership is to regard neither as exceptional or more suited for the "special" amongst us. They are open to all, and must involve all.

Upon its release in the 1970s, the film "Life of Brian" was controversial for lampooning how some religious people can, at times, focus on the mundane aspects of a religion and miss its spiritual core. A distinction between religion and spirituality is made often today, so is worthy of some clarification.

I understand "spiritual" to mean the quality of being aware of and, to various degrees, sensing, an underlying unity of all matter and energy, in a way that partly transcends fears about the ones own mortality, inspires natural active compassion for all that lives and encourages a faith that there is a meaning to life even if that meaning is not fully knowable through our language-based thought. Therefore, "spirituality" means a quality or state of being "spiritual" in the way I just described.

This view of spirituality is something I learned from experiences of heightened states of consciousness, as well as the mystic traditions of many religions, including Gnostic Christianity, Sufi Islam, Kabbalist Judaism and many strands of Hinduism and Buddhism. I have found religions to play a paradoxical role in both triggering spiritual insight and then potentially limiting it through an emphasis on liturgy and the claim to offer an exclusive truth. The idea of spirituality that I have described here does not even require religion, with the latest physics, biology and astronomy all being able to invite a sense of reality being sacred. Simply being in the wild outdoors, away from urban life, can also trigger a sense of wonder and self-transcendence, echoing how pre-modern animist philosophies invite us to experience all nature as sacred.

While it may be tempting to view spirituality as best detached from the cultural baggage of religions, it is important to be involved in communities that seek to translate spiritual experiences and insight into lives of active compassion. Otherwise our understanding of the practical meaning of spirituality in our lives will be shaped by the taken-for-granted assumptions of our time. This is reflected in the way some people describe spirituality as their belief in the power of phenomena which are currently unable to be measured by science, that can be accessed for personal gain, and does not need to be questioned for whether it is morally good or not. Some popular non-fiction and documentary films have taken this approach, aligning spirituality with positive psychology and self-help. I perceive that view of spirituality as problematic, because it is not self-transcendent and does not encourage states of universal love flowing into active compassion.

This active compassion is no less needed now than in the rest of human history. Poverty persists, with over a billion people hungry around the world. Climate change is now upon us in a fairly scary way. Inequality has become so extreme it seems peculiar there haven't been more revolutions. Perhaps all these factors culminate in the extremism and reactionary populism we see.

Faced with such huge problems it is tempting to think we need more leadership. Better still, more spiritually-inspired leadership. Learning and practising behaviours that enable groups of people to achieve significant outcomes, that they might not have otherwise achieved, is important work. That is what I mean by leadership. But after some years studying how leadership is promoted, I understand that some people are making assumptions about agency that actually restrict change and embody values contrary to the kind of spiritual awareness I described earlier. As a result, I now believe we should not seek to add more spirituality to leadership or add more leadership to spirituality, but challenge assumptions about "leadership" that may have added to the mess we find ourselves in.

Yes, that is quite a claim. So I must explain.

Most leadership training focuses on the actions of individuals in senior roles, as if only senior leaders exhibit leadership, and as if their leadership is always a key factor shaping outcomes. Psychological research since the 1980s has demonstrated that people, across cultures, always over-attribute significance to the actions of senior leaders, when compared to other factors shaping outcomes. Perhaps it is because we are brought up with stories of great leaders shaping history. It is easier to tell stories about an individual than a complex interplay of material factors, cultures and processes. This tendency is also apparent in our religions, most of which have exceptional individuals as their focal points. To be open to a more relational view of the key protagonists in Christianity and Islam, for instance, would be seen as heresy by some. Yet might Prophet Mohammed have learned a lot from his first wife Khadija, or Jesus learned a lot from his disciples? The insult some may experience from even hearing such questions emphasises the power of hero stories in religion.

The myth of the heroic individual saving situations is perpetuated by our business media today, which focus on how a CEO turned a company around, rather than a broader range of factors. The problem with such a view is that it can curtail our analysis of why situations exist, and it undermines the potential of the vast majority without senior roles, as the implication is that they can't shape outcomes. It also ignores that leadership is context-dependent rather than a fixed quality and behaviour of an individual. Your boss may be good at some things in some situations, but leadership is emergent, distributed and episodic, with different people contributing at different times.

The hero story can come in many forms, including the notion of servant leader, as it still focuses on the salience of a special individual with authority. One implication of this focus on the special individual, is the focus on what the desired traits, or personality characteristics, of a leader might be. Try a news search for leader traits and the popularity of this approach is instantly apparent. Yet it is flawed as most of the traits identified as key for leaders, such as empathy or self-efficacy, are key for anyone who is remotely capable. In addition, we aren't fixed beings but act in different ways in different contexts and evolve (or devolve) over time. A focus on traits leads some to suggest leaders are born to be the boss of a hierarchy and need to be selected to do so, rather than consider what forms of hierarchy or non-hierarchy can elicit the best group behaviours to achieve desired goals. People risk looking to follow "a Brian", rather than improve their abilities to work together.

Instead of a focus on heroes with great traits, to develop more spiritually-inspired leadership we could enhance our understanding of how to develop leaderful groups, where senior role holders act as hosts not heroes, and enable leadership to emerge from within the group. It means insights on group facilitation, group dynamics, system change and personal mindfulness are included in the courses we teach at the Institute for Leadership and Sustainability (IFLAS). Certainly there is no need to study the shoe or gourd of an imagined saviour.

In recent years leadership training has begun to look more at the development of the self. On the face of it, this provides opportunities for exploration of spirituality in leadership. Authentic Leadership training reflects this approach, where executives are encouraged to seek coherence between their life story and seeking or holding a senior role in a corporation. The potential benefits are more self-confidence, appearing more authentic in one's job, and enhanced skills of public oratory. Yet this is not true self-exploration, let alone self-transcendence. Instead, it is a form of self-justification, as the exploration of self is framed by the aim of constructing narratives that explain one's right to seniority within a corporation. Self-realizations that might undermine one's ability to work for certain firms, or transform the basis of one's self-worth, or challenge one's assumption of self-efficacy, are not encouraged on such training programmes. Yet if we think our existing social norms and economic structures are not helping either spiritual or harmonious living, then enabling each other to free ourselves from mainstream delusions about reality and success must be a starting point for self-leadership. It is why at IFLAS we sometimes offer, as one recent student explained, "an existential provocation, demanding full emotional engagement within a democratic and nurturing community."

The focus on heroic leadership, key traits, and self-justification in much leadership training arises due to the assumption that captains of industry must control, rather than liberate, normal people and nature. That is the managerialist mindset that identifies "us", the bosses, as people who need to manage "them", the unruly masses, to achieve goals, rather than celebrate and coach our participation in the evolving multitude of life. It is a mindset that is innately alienating ourselves from each-other and nature, thus, away from our spiritual selves. Instead, leadership development can be offered to people at any level of a hierarchy, and focus on effective team work towards common goals. Accordingly, spiritual leadership development could encourage collective exploration of both those common goals and our motivations for seeking them.

There have been many prophets of doom throughout human history, so it is right to be sceptical of the latest. But as we continue to witness monthly records in global temperatures, the climate

science becomes scary and suggests we will enter a tough era. In response, we best avoid looking for saviours or taking on great struggles alone. Just as mystic traditions suggest we need not seek to acquire spiritual qualities but rather let go of our false attachments and fears, so the same applies to leadership. Because leadership will only emerge by freeing ourselves from our limiting assumptions - one of which is that someone has to be special in order to lead, rather than us all leading intermittently as needed. So whenever we read stories of spiritually-inspired leadership, let's be inspired by the greats of history and of today, but also seek the simpler greatness all around, that can be expressed everyday. This 'collective enlightened leadership' will be needed more than ever in a time of climate crisis.

Oh Brian of Nazareth, we are indeed all individuals, and each capable of spirituality and leadership in everyday life.

Dr Jem Bendell is a Professor of Sustainability Leadership and teaches University courses and wilderness retreats on sustainable leadership. This Spirituality and Transformative Leadership series was launched as a response to the need to bring 'higher order' principles into leadership today and to spark an ongoing discussion on the role that spirituality, as distinct from religion, has in today's world. It is a curated series that invites both Young Global Leaders and others with an interest in leadership to contribute to a discussion on the role that spirituality plays in leadership today.