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# Pilgrimage in Leadership

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Humans are universally drawn to the act of pilgrimage and current research informs us that the call to pilgrimage is increasing globally. In many cases pilgrimage is associated with religious ritual or a healing process. However, when pilgrimage is understood as archetypal behaviour, it becomes clear that an inner or outer pilgrimage can serve as a powerful metaphor for the development of transformational leaders. Exploring the works of important writers and researchers in pilgrimage, mythology, religion, history, psychology, philosophy, art and leadership development, this paper will demonstrate how the act of pilgrimage is a foundational symbol for leadership development. When leaders consciously engage with the archetype of pilgrimage from this perspective they activate the flow of creative images necessary for psychological development in ways necessary to their individual growth. Additionally, when viewed through this lens, pilgrimage can help advance our understanding of the unique pathways leaders must take in order to increase self-awareness through the rich resources of the psyche. Through both actual and metaphorical pilgrimage, leaders can attain increased understanding of their own personal patterns and opportunities for growth. We know that the most motivational and successful leaders are those who not only have clear ethical boundaries, but also have the courage and creativity to lead the way into the wilderness of the unknown. In an increasingly fast-paced, complex, technological and global world, this capability to find the courage to lead the way forward and to facilitate the new is more critical than ever before. The creative use of images, such as that of the pilgrim, contributes toward developing the qualities essential to becoming a sustaining and transformational leader.

**Key Words :** Pilgrimage, leadership development, hero's journey, self-development, organizational behaviour, transformation.

## Introduction

Linking pilgrimage to leadership development may seem incongruous. How can a topic that has such a strong association with spiritual experience be identified with something that is generally assumed to be secular?

We know from history and observation that humans seem to be naturally drawn to pilgrimage and as those of us who are interested in the subject of pilgrimage know, pilgrimage is increasing globally. Separately, we know that in '[t]he last two decades we have witnessed something of an explosion in leadership development' (Hernez-Broome *et al.*, 2005:25). This interest has created new ways of discussing, experiencing and understanding what the term 'leadership' actually means. This interesting dialogue has created fresh insights into the topic that are much broader, diverse and inclusive than ever before. However, in spite of the significantly increased interest

in leadership, we also seem to have a corresponding increase in leadership disappointments and failures.

It is my belief that the foundation of all viable leadership development must be constructed from a sacred commitment to growth as a human being. Complicating matters is that accessing that advancement in a meaningful way is a creative endeavour. This is because there is no language or training program that provides us with a guaranteed answer on how to integrate the uniqueness of our individual being into successful leadership. With this observation in mind, leadership development requires

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us to commit to continually self-examine and accept increasing responsibility for who we are in the process of becoming. By accepting such responsibility, we are in a much stronger position to make certain commitments that will support increasing our leadership effectiveness. Engaging with a process in this manner creates a path whereby leadership development becomes a lifelong journey.

Likewise, pilgrimage is a journey of some type that is usually associated with religious ritual or a healing process; however, when we examine the behaviour of pilgrims, we can see that what they are doing can be understood as a sacred *archetypal* behaviour that can occur either as an inner or outer process. When pilgrimage is viewed as an archetypal behaviour, it can have a significantly broader meaning beyond its traditional roots. One fresh way of viewing pilgrimage is as a metaphor that can be usefully applied to understanding an important element of individual development; namely leadership. In essence, by engaging with pilgrimage as an archetypal behaviour it has the potential to stimulate the type of creative integration that can be very useful for transformational leadership development.

Pilgrimage is sacred for a number of reasons. One important aspect is that the types of transitional passages that are inherent in pilgrimage can serve to initiate a uniquely individualized form of self-development. This lies at the core of all leadership growth, the type of growth that has the potential to be transformational. This association is possible through an examination of the nature of pilgrimage; an intentional journey that invites surrendering to an experience that has the capability to take you outside of the boundaries of what you already know. This is exactly what leaders need to have the courage to do, to lead the way forward, particularly during times of change.

Pilgrimage is also about having a method to go outside the normal boundaries of our everyday lives so that we can reconnect with the parts of ourselves that have become lost, bored or traumatised due to what has become decayed, unanswerable or intolerable. When we engage in a pilgrimage we may find in that liminal space the next piece in our personal puzzle. To do so, similar to Harry Potter's Room of Requirement (Rowling, 2000:417-8) we need a creative container outside the confines of our everyday cares and responsibilities, that will provide a malleable space that allows for a transformational experience. The space created by an experience such as a pilgrimage is

essential because it is very difficult to surrender to a transformational experience when surrounded by everything that is familiar and habitual.

Based on factors just discussed, pilgrimage is important for reinvigorating the imagination, that deeply sacred space within ourselves where we regenerate our lives through our creativity. When leaders consciously engage with pilgrimage, they can hear the calling of their imagination which supports psychological development in ways that encourage personal growth and transformation.

If we look at examples of transformational leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, Nelson Mandela, and so forth, they all engaged in framing their lives by responding first to their own inner calling. By doing so, they were instrumental in inspiring others to collectively further develop and manifest a new reality. This capability is essential, as it is impossible to transform our outer world if we are unable to first transform ourselves. To do that we first need to be able to surrender what we currently know in order to experience rebirth. When viewed from this lens, working with pilgrimage as an archetypal behaviour can help advance our knowledge of how to better understand the unique experiences that leaders must undergo to increase self-awareness through the rich resources of the psyche.

Through actual and metaphorical pilgrimage, leaders can attain increased understanding of their personal patterns and opportunities for growth. This understanding can translate into capabilities that can illuminate better ways to work together with others toward meaningful solutions to seemingly intractable problems. Why is this important? For most of us, our lives are powerfully influenced by leaders. Also, as mentioned earlier, by viewing the abundant racks of popular literature, training programs and conversation devoted to the subject of 'leadership', 'leadership development' and 'self-help', it is easy to see that the question of how to become an effective leader is a subject that many are personally concerned with. Most importantly, in an increasingly complex and global world that is facing monumental environmental, social, economic and political problems, finding ways to effectively lead has never been more urgent. This is important for self-leadership as well as for those who aspire to a position of formal leadership.

## The Challenge in Leadership

Current research on leadership development indicates that the competencies of self-awareness, emotional intelligence and influencing are key attributes to successful leadership. This means having the capability to not only know ourselves well but to have the psychological fortitude and access to experiences that invites new perspectives, allows us to engage productively with a wide range of people, and the ability to quickly use our intellectual and emotional capabilities to stimulate new ideas.

The rapid pace of change means that no leader can allow themselves to rest on their previous successes and failures; they must have the ability to lead by venturing forward into the new. This includes the ability to facilitate teams of diverse people, behavioural styles and cultures to motivate, inspire and focus on working toward results that are meaningful. They have to be able to work together with others while also finding time to step back to assess the bigger picture.

To be such a leader is to take personal responsibility for actively engaging in a lifelong journey of self-development with increasing consciousness of one's impact on the environment. Pilgrimage provides an experience that can facilitate development in each of these key areas.

To confirm the theme of pilgrimage as an archetypal pattern in leadership development, I evaluated leadership in mythology, religion, history, depth psychology and the business environment. In so doing, I found it to be a useful metaphor for deepening understanding of what leaders must undergo to become transformational. For the purposes of this discussion we will briefly look at two of these areas: mythology and business.

### Pilgrimage in Mythology: The Path to Reflection

Many myths, regardless of time or culture, often share two common denominators: a hero and a journey. Whether it is Inanna, Gilgamesh, Sindbad, Odysseus, Parzival, Ishmael or Frodo, the journeys described in mythology are sacred representations of an individual's emotional and spiritual growth gained through underworld experiences. It is by continuing to move forward, regardless of the hardships encountered along the way, that the individual learns how to become a wise leader worthy of their position.

The cycle of a mythological 'pilgrimage,' has been a consistent pattern in all great stories. For example, Dante Alighieri, in the midst of a mid-life crisis, wakes up to find himself lost in a 'shadowed forest.' Using the symbolism of a spiralling descent and ascent, he begins his poetic pilgrimage on the path to his beloved Beatrice and his centre - Paradise. His journey takes him through the gates of Inferno and Purgatory where finally purified, he is able to experience the light of Paradise. This is the place where he perceives

*he cannot reach, through thought on thought,  
the principle he needs [but his desire could only  
be moved] by the Love that moves the sun and  
the other stars (Alighieri 1995:136-45).*

What myth can teach us is that a pilgrimage, to a place experienced as sacred, has the capacity to instigate moving us from one state of consciousness to another. It can reconnect us with the sacred within ourselves by harmonizing outer with inner movement. Furthermore, when we venture out on a pilgrimage we do not know what we will encounter along the way or what the healing will be, therefore, trust in a calling, a higher Self, our fellow humans and nature are needed.

Pilgrimage takes us out of ordinary time so that we can integrate a new perspective which is essential to leadership. Through the stages that are evident in all myths - innocence, awakening, the journey and return - we learn how to be reconnected and reborn, thereby able to return to start afresh. In myth, the returning heroes *reflect* their personal growth into the betterment of humanity, the ultimate goal of leaders. As a result, a transformational shift is also graced upon those who are connected to them.

Therefore, through these stories we have the opportunity to understand that the journey, or pilgrimage, is a sacred doorway instigated by the soul, to breathe life into situations that have become mired in repetition, dullness or when whatever is happening is too big to integrate; the usual way of doing things no longer suffices. In viewing mythology from this perspective, we can understand the essential type of leadership development that leaders can draw from a pilgrimage. As myths portray, regardless of how outwardly successful we may be, to go to the next level of development a sacred journey must be undertaken.

## Pilgrimage in Business: The Path to Truth

Similarly, the road undertaken by any business can be metaphorically compared to pilgrimage. For most leaders, responding to the environment requires intelligence, courage and vision. One thing is certain: things are changing with increasing rapidity, often facilitated by events that are outside of a leader's control. Environments that used to range from calm to turbulent are now primarily turbulent.

A prevailing theme in leadership research indicates a problem with a fundamental principle - seeing and acting upon reality. Seeing, accepting, and taking appropriate decisions based on reality is core to successful leadership. However, reality is shaped by many factors that include our expectations, desires and experiences. As a result, habits, self-deception and self-preservation can undermine our ability to see a version of reality that is useful and integrative. When we access fresh experiences, such as through pilgrimage, we have an opportunity to recharge our ability to become more objective. We also signal that we are open to change that is not entirely under our control. In such a way, we can access truth. The foundation of reality rests upon truth and, truth is not static but rather a relationship, which is a process in learning how to live in integrity (Palmer 1993).

Leaders must be willing to take responsibility for their actions. To do so, they must also be willing to look deeper into themselves to align with their personal truth and their emerging self. From such a self-assessment comes greater clarity. That the journey to truth is a pilgrimage can also be inferred from the work they must undertake in order to access a deeper understanding about their mission in life - understanding why they do what they do and what is holding them back from a fuller expression of their capabilities.

Leaders have to access their inner truth in order to objectively see the truth of situations they are facing. This skill allows them to see with greater clarity external events and assess their impact so they can make calls at the appropriate time, regardless of the impact on them personally.

That engaging the psyche is both sacred and difficult work is evident as developing consciousness is a process of individuation that is essential to leadership. This is the territory of transformation - a pilgrimage into consciousness.

## The Path to Legacy

Leadership is answering the call to individuate. Answering such a call is undertaking the hero's journey which correlates with the journey of the pilgrim.

Carl Jung wrote that individuation is:

*[The] process by which a person becomes a psychological 'in-dividual,' that is, a separate, indivisible unity or 'whole' (Jung 1970:490).*

The more psychologically 'whole' we become, the stronger our ability to access an expanded vision or perspective of the world in which we operate.

Answering the call to individuation is an act of leadership. It is not only an act of self acknowledgment, but beginning a gradual process of coming into fuller acquaintance with our disowned parts so that we can steadily unveil over the course of our lifetime the answers to the questions 'Who am I?' and 'What is my purpose?' This leads to increased self awareness which contributes to inner harmony and resilience. From this state arises the ability to gain a greater understanding of the world around us which can help connect and build relationships essential to leadership.

Looking at those individuals who are defined as great leaders, each in their own way went through an internally driven process of individuation. Each followed a uniquely personal path that is consistent with the pilgrim pattern. Focused attention devoted to self-understanding shed additional light on what gave their life meaning and clarity on a goal that was greater than their individual self. These qualities are the hallmarks of leaders whose stories continue to resonate regardless of the passage of time.

The leader as pilgrim is compelled by legacy. Leaders step into their role, picking up where others have left off, emanating from a larger sense of purpose that is connected to benefiting humanity. Similarly, sacred pilgrimage sites are reached via paths that have been shaped over time by humanity in search of individual and collective transformation.

The pilgrimage of a transformational leader is the journey toward building, embodying and strengthening the skills required to lead. As a metaphor for leadership development, pilgrimage can be undertaken on the inner planes. Myth is the teacher of leaders as the

capacity of myth to not only teach, but also stimulate the imagination, is crucial. But the stories also emphasise that however powerful working the inner process may be, there is no replacement for also undertaking a physical journey. It seems important to go on the outer journey in order to facilitate the inner journey; which makes sense that if we wish to be fully in harmony with ourselves and also nature, then the act of the outer pilgrimage corresponding to an inner pilgrimage is a way to bring about this integration. Thomas Merton argued that it is better to do both the inner and outer pilgrimage, stating,

*The geographical pilgrimage is the symbolic acting out of an inner journey. The inner journey is the interpolation of the meanings and signs of the outer pilgrimage* (Merton 1967:72).

An example of a leader who used an actual pilgrimage to facilitate his ability to change is Malcolm X. When he recognized that it was time for a metamorphosis, he made the *hajj* to Mecca, alone, without family or friends. He was transformed by his experience. The pilgrimage took him out of his known experience and forced him to evaluate circumstances differently, thereby opening the door for him to find answers that he innately understood could not be found within the context of his normal environment. As a result of his journey, his former worldview shifted radically; he was able to see the larger world and understand how to begin the process of going about his work in a completely new way. As he wrote:

*On this pilgrimage, what I have seen, and experienced, has forced me to re-arrange much of my thought-patterns previously held, and to toss aside some of my previous conclusions* (Malcolm X, 1964: 364-347).

Moving the body in concert with the mind and soul sends a signal to the Self that the intention to harmonise into an integrated being is active thereby inviting a hero's journey. It is also useful to remember that it is easy to be led astray in the inner world of self-reflection and, ultimately, leaders must be focused on taking action at the appropriate time. Physical movement associated with a pilgrimage allows us to stay grounded in reality while we access the unfamiliar territory within, which is crucial to retaining balance. Lastly, having the opportunity to move outside of the confines of our everyday environment ensures that we will encounter new people and experiences that build endurance and compassion for all life which, as mentioned earlier, is essential for leaders. Unlike organised trips where we are safely surrounded by

planned activities or friends, on a pilgrimage we humble ourselves, moving out of our minds and into our hearts, with the hope that we can experience something sacred. Leadership is a sacred undertaking and, like the hero's journey, there is no greater opportunity for self-development than undertaking a pilgrimage.

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