**Why is Inquiry Crucial to Educational Leadership?**

As the title indicates, this short chapter will talk about the crucial importance of inquiry to educational leadership. At the risk of sounding dogmatic, however, I wish to say right away that there is only one leadership paradigm that allows the exercise of inquiry, and this is democracy. Democracy is the only system of governance and social arrangement that has a philosophy not based on top-down exercise of power. While it may recognize the wisdom of the elder and value cultural institutions of authority and expertise that hold and share knowledge and skills with the public, these elders and institutions of authority do not dictate, let alone oppress, fellow citizens. With this clarification made, then, let’s move on to discuss why democratic leadership needs to be in-formed by inquiry and what obstacles there are to its realization.

My previous work, “What is Inquiry?” (Bai, 2005) characterizes the world as very complex and life, full of uncertainty. Navigation through this life and world is characterized by constant change and coping with unknowing and unknowns. While knowledge and skills can be had that help with navigation, they are not of the nature of certainty and exactitude. Given this contingent nature of life and world, we have two basic approaches or attitudes available. The first way is Control and Command: set up the world in such a way that you can tightly control it and predict what will happen. The second way is Track and Follow: move with the flow of contingency and become increasingly proficient in joining in the play of life. Democracy as a form of governance and social arrangement moves closer to the second way than the first way. Leaders committed to creating and maintaining democratic culture and society would need to learn, then, the way of tracking, following, and joining. Important dispositions and abilities for such a way are curiosity, sensitivity, and care. This is the Dao of Inquiry.

Inquiry as a *modus vivendi* invites us to be *curious* and engage each other in dialogue, instead of the usual host of dazzling things we tend to like to do to others: mind-reading (“He must be happy”), assuming (“Since she did not respond, I will assume that she does not like me”), pre-judging (“He’s got to be the guilty one”), and predicting (“He is going to fail”). Note how these things we do, mostly unconsciously, represent a form of control we exercise on the world: on situations and people we encounter. We *decide*, in our mind, what is the case, and we act based on unquestioned assumptions. We haven’t bothered to find out, through inquiry, what is going on--with people and with situations. But why don’t we ask? “Oh, hello, what is going on there? What are you experiencing?” Instead of finding out, through inquiry, we have already decided what might, would, could, and should be the case. In fact, often the idea of asking does not even emerge in one’s mind. We are seeing our own projections and taking them as reality.

Children are born full of curiosity: full of wonder and questions. All too frequent experiences of reaction that children receive, like, “Curiosity kills the cat,” “It is none of your business” and the like, insidiously teach them that it is not prudent or safe to be curious and to inquire. Children learn to stay out of trouble and avoid emotional hurt by not showing curiosity. They learn to do what parents, teachers, and others in positions of authority—those who know better--told them to do or to be. We need not attribute any ill motives and bad intentions to these figures of authority. In most cases, they genuinely meant well and wanted us to be protected, safe, and do well in the world. But the unintended consequence of this way is creating distance and disconnection in all relational dimensions of one’s being: in the self-other intersubjective relationship and in the self-to-self intrapsychic relationship. Increasingly, in our inner world we say: “I won’t ask; I will just figure it out myself. I don’t want to ask: what am I going to do if what I find out doesn’t suit my purpose or my wish? It is better not to ask.” Little do we know that these little conversations we have with our selves in the service of survival and belonging build up our distrust and disrespect of others, and that increasingly we become disconnected from human and more-than-human others. Moreover, in the process, we end up splitting our selves and practising inner oppression of one part by the other: for, we have the original part that is all about natural curiosity is now opposed by a split-off part that was created, under the circumstance of external prohibition (e.g., “Curiosity kills the cat”), to protect the part with natural curiosity. This is how fragmented or alienated consciousness is created.

By the time many of us become leaders in various arenas of public life, it most likely will not be our curiosity that has won us these leadership positions. In fact, we may have gotten to our leadership position on the strength of our clear and clear-cut communication, decisiveness in judgment and action, and sure-handed control and command. Now, I am not insinuating that any of these are inherently problematic. I am all for clear communication, and I think decisiveness in some situations is definitely needed. And there might be times when I as a leader will need to take control and command. But it would be the paucity of inquiry and lack of genuine curiosity that will tell me whether genuinely democratic leadership is practiced or not. In my experience, leaders often unconsciously foment the very circumstances that justify the negation of curiosity and inquiry, and justify the very controlling and authoritarian actions that occur.

Democracy, if it is to be authentically practiced, that is, not as a procedural democracy, requires a culture of inquiry wherein people (*demos* in Greek) practice showing genuine interest in each other—what they are thinking, feeling, perceiving—and regularly dialogue, consult, and deliberate together, and frequently collaborate. The source of power (*kratos* in Greek) in democracy (demos+kratos) is precisely people mutually sharing their subjectivities (that is, being inter-subjective), attuning to and resonating with each through their empathic capacities (Bai, 2001). They navigate the seamless flow of self-other mutuality. For democratic citizens, including leaders, self and other are not disconnected. Hence conflict is never an end point but only a starting point that brings people together to inquire and undertake an adventure of creative exploration and novel resolutions. Democratic leadership becomes an art of expanding circles of hospitable awareness to include and accommodate greater diversities while maintaining a sense of cohesiveness and integrity. Uniformity and conformity certainly is not the crop that grows in the garden of democracy. Corresponding to bio-diversity, democracy is a social eco-system in which diversity is a marker of resilience as strength.

Inquiry is invitational not demanding. Inquiry starts with “I wonder,” not “I need to know.” “I wonder” goes hand-in-hand with being relaxed, calm, friendly, and even (or, I should say, *especially*) playful. Inquiry is at home in a state of reverie, respect (etymologically, “to look again”), and even reverence. Inquiry does not take things for granted, does not write anything off, and does not explain away. Inquiry grows best in the beginner’s mind. “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few” (Suzuki, 2006, p.1).

Indeed, inquiry is a challenging practice in a culture and society driven by the greed for speed, worship of technology, cult of efficiency, assessment and evaluation mania, and the orgy of production and consumption. Our actions are dominated by fear of failure, anxiety about non-conformity, survival stress, and the dire need to relieve our unbearable stress through distraction and addiction. In such a culture, inquiry seems like a luxury we can’t afford. “Don’t ask; just do it” has become the *modus operandi*.

Leaders committed to democracy must carefully and persistently work on bringing inquiry back into everything they do, which foremost includes reclaiming their birthright of great curiosity. Let’s inquire how we may do that.

**References**

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