The Inward Journey of Leadership

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For most people, becoming an effective leader is a lifelong effort that requires an enormous amount of work and commitment. Few individuals reach their full capacity as leaders but not because they lack in technical abilities. Becoming a world-class leader involves much more than becoming a more proficient manager or a better strategic thinker. Most fundamentally, the process is about a personal transformation. All great leaders are on a continuous inward journey of self-discovery and self-growth to transform themselves and their organizations.

Rainer Rilke, the renowned German poet, once commented, “There is only one journey. Going inside yourself.” For an increasing number of people, however, the focus is outward, on looking good and standing out. At the same time, they experience an inner restlessness, a growing sense that something is missing in their lives, though it is not clear what. Troubled by the isolation of their personal values from their careers, many people are tempted to detach (sometimes even compromise) their most deep-seated beliefs from the workplace, even though such compartmentalization is inconsistent with their basic principles.

Sadly, many of us would say, “I don’t have time for self-discovery and introspection. I’m too busy. My work is more hectic and demanding than ever.” We don’t set aside much time to “go inside” ourselves to reflect, to make our personal growth a priority. Rilke’s advice, however, is especially useful for leaders in academic medicine who have experienced the turmoil and anxiety that have permeated academic medical centers (AMCs) over the past decade. During such turbulent times, when their most genuine convictions are often tested, most leaders look to their fundamental values and ideals as the ultimate source of deep-seated purpose and truth when making choices or setting priorities [1]. To effectively lead others, leaders must be clear about the principles on which they base their actions. Great leaders know that leadership is, at its core, an affair of the heart, not the head. They are connected to an energy deep within themselves that is the source of their leadership. That energy becomes for them the essence of who they are and who they become. Their values, their dreams, their hunger for growth, their ability to overcome adversity, and ultimately their transformation all come from this energy.

Unfortunately, leadership development is often seen as an external process. We tend to think of leadership as being about a person in charge who wields power, stands apart, and “acts” on others (followers). Our view of leadership tends to center around visible individuals and their talents, their contributions and their measurable achievements. Because the impact of leadership is externally manifested as specific results and quantifiable outcomes, the notion that leadership development is tightly linked to a quiet, often private, inward journey is frequently overlooked. Sadly, the commercialization of medicine has contributed to this orientation, one that hinders the personal journey of transformation and contributes to the lack of fulfillment that exists in much of the workplace today.

Our health care system is losing direction and purpose and is in urgent need of restoration and revitalization. In recreating a health care system that truly cares for its patients and fulfills its physicians, we must begin by conveying a clear sense of what we value in health care and what kind of medical profession we want to have. The continuous development of principled leaders and moral leadership will be critical to achieving these goals. Although the foundation for this

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personal leadership is poured during childhood, the path is a lifelong one that requires considerable inner work. Before they can help their organizations become more effective, before they can commit to a set of enduring core values, leaders must first understand themselves. The pages that follow provide an overview of the deeply rewarding but invariably challenging, always humbling, sometimes agonizing and often disquieting inward journey of leadership.

FOUR PRACTICES OF THE INWARD JOURNEY

The inward journey of leadership, while personal and private, is not a mysterious, unintelligible journey. It involves discipline, integrity, focus and hard work. Our ability to mature as leaders is rooted in our ability to grow as persons. The journey of leadership begins on the inside by asking several key questions: Who am I? What do I stand for? Where does my leadership come from? How do I become a more effective leader?

I have found that four practices (habits) have been especially useful in making the inward journey rewarding for me personally and improving my effectiveness (hopefully) organizationally. These practices are: 1) construct your life story; 2) know yourself; 3) confront your inauthenticity; and 4) get in touch with your spirituality. Practicing these habits on a daily basis creates new opportunities for personal growth and transformation. These practices, which are intimately linked to one another, are continuous through out life. Getting connected to them (one never fully completes them) is essential to becoming an effective leader.

Construct Your Life Story

“No need is so compelling,” said futurist Willis Harman, “as the need we all feel for our lives to make sense, to have meaning. We will tolerate almost any degree of austerity or risk in this indomitable quest for meaning” [2]. To make meaning of the world we live in, each of us authors a unique life story and from it we draw and make meaning. Our life story provides us with a self-concept (our concept of who we are and how we fit into the world) and an identity from which we can lead [3]. A narrative approach to the study of leaders’ life stories places less emphasis on facts, on actually what happened, and more on the meaning-making system that leaders use to make sense out of life experiences. Understanding our story and the way we (as leaders) make meaning out of the experiences that we select from it can provide us with a foundation from which to lead. Telling that story to others is an important leadership behavior.

Leaders are persons for whom the identity of a leader is a fundamental part of their self-concepts [4] and for whom the exercise and enactment of leadership is central to their self-expression [5]. For example, it is from stories of the leader’s commitment to core values (e.g., respect, open communication, teamwork) that followers learn of the leader’s integrity and consequently place their trust in the leader. When Nelson Mandela was willing to go to jail for the ideals he talked about, it became clear that he stood for them as well. His word in action was his most fundamental expression of his true self. Needless to say, it would be difficult for individuals who did not perceive themselves as playing a leadership role to lead effectively.

The stories leaders tell about themselves are important vehicles by which they convey to others who they are, their values and convictions, and by which they attempt to justify their leadership of the group and their right to represent the organization and its values [3]. Abraham Lincoln, for example, revealed his values and principles regularly in his stories and speeches. As a young boy, Lincoln was unusually kind to birds and animals and he insisted that others be kind to them as well. If, when you were a youngster, your friends put hot coals on the backs of turtles to entertain themselves by watching the turtles’ reaction, what would you have done? You could have gone along with the fun. You could have ignored the matter. Perhaps you would have walked away. Or, you could have done what 10-year-old Abraham Lincoln did: You could tell your friends that what they are doing is wrong; scolding them, explaining that it causes pain. And you might even, as young Lincoln did, expand on the larger moral principle, write a composition—cruelty to animals is wrong—and argue publicly on its behalf in your one-room school [6].

The process of constructing one’s life story from defining moments and experiences leads to some relevant questions [3, 7]: How have I become a leader? Why have I become a leader? The leader’s life story provides useful insights into the answers. Leaders pick specific incidents, occurrences and experiences from their life and they selectively ascribe meaning to them such that they provide them with a self-concept from which they can lead. Martin Luther King witnessed enormous prejudice in his life but was able to use these experiences to articulate a vision that inspired others, thus creating a foundation from which he could justify his leadership. Dr. King told of a time when he and some of his friends were being harassed in Alabama, their lives in danger: “We wanted to run for safety’s sake,” he said, but then he added: “The more we heard their hate, the more we realized we had to stay, take on the hate, for their sakes as well as ours. We fell on our knees before that crowd. We prayed to the Lord to protect us, but even more to watch over those men and women. They weren’t born to hate like that. They wanted to make us victims, but they were victims—of all of the malice, the meanness of mind and heart they’d been taught to feel. So we prayed for them, for all of us—we thanked them...
for the lessons they were teaching us, and we asked God to help them learn what had happened to themselves” [8]. King used events like this to shape his identity as a moral leader who advocated meeting violence with nonviolent resistance.

Life stories are not a series of events similar to what one would observe on videotape. Yes, they are constrained by “what happened,” but the storied construction has less to do with facts or events and more to do with the meanings and interpretations the leader confers on those experiences [9]. In other words, life stories may be seen as interpretations that create meaning in life. We only become aware of the significance of our experiences by telling stories about them and combining them with other stories that allow us to construct meaning and make sense of our lives and the world we live in. In this sense they are enormously empowering and beneficial. Our life stories are somehow important for our identity—they tell us who we are.

At times, however, the events and incidents that we select to construct our life stories can get in our way, hold us back and hamper our growth and development. Sometimes our identity gets constructed from life stories that we made up in response to something some- 

one said or did that we interpreted as meaning we were unaccepted or not good enough [10]. They can sometimes be harmful interpretations of past events that are far from what really happened, but nonetheless become reality for us. When this happens, the story can become disempowering and an enormous weight in our lives, limiting relationships and sapping our energy. When we are able to separate what really happened (e.g., my NIH grant didn’t get funded) from our story or interpretation (I’m a second-rate researcher), we discover that much of what we considered already given (i.e., my reality) may not be the truth. Views (of self, of others, of relationships, of situations) that may have been perceived to be unalterable now become open to change.

What’s the point here? Quite simply: construct your life story. Examine your past and organize your life experiences into a story that clarifies your self-concept of a leader. You are your own active autobiographer, who interprets, reinterprets, selects, deletes, and integrates your experiences, attributing meaning to them to create a life story starring yourself. Let go of the stories that are holding you back, those that are misinterpretations of something someone said or did. Once you can begin to not confuse your true self with your story, you can walk away from letting your past dictate what’s in your future [10].

Great leaders use difficult situations, trials, and tests in their life story to extract meanings that shape their self-concept [11], which understandably shapes the commitments they make in life. These challenges, which may appear insurmountable, are often where leaders tackle head-on their self-doubt and fear of failure. They must be willing to deal with all of the defenses they erect to preserve their self-image. As they work through these painful situations, they develop a better understanding of themselves and a stronger sense of identity, what their values are and what matters to them in life. Nelson Mandela says in his autobiography, “I had no epiphany, no singular revelation, no moment of truth, but a steady accumulation of a thousand slights, a thousand indignities, a thousand unremembered moments produced in me an anger, a rebelliousness, a desire to fight the system that imprisoned my people. There was no particular day on which I said, From henceforth I will devote myself to the liberation of my people; instead, I simply found myself doing so, and could not do otherwise” [12]. Collectively, these defining moments formed Mandela’s political consciousness, his view of himself as a “freedom fighter,” and his commitment to free his people.

These same principles apply to learning from role models [7]. Effective leaders take the lessons they learn from their mentors, teachers, and coaches and weave them into a portfolio made up of selected and assembled learning experiences. From these they develop greater clarity about who they are, what they believe in, what they ache for, and what they want to accomplish.

Know Yourself

How would you respond if someone asked you, “Just exactly who are you?” You might reply, “Who I am is Joe Blow, born and raised in Chicago, the son of a salesman and school teacher. I went to college at [insert your favorite here] and graduated with a degree in engineering. I subsequently went to medical school and completed a general surgery residency, which included two years of basic science research, followed by a vascular surgery fellowship. I’ve been on the faculty in the Division of Vascular Surgery at [insert your favorite medical school here] for the past five years. I am 37 years old, married for ten years and a father of three. I’m on call every fourth night—I wish I had more time for my kids. We used to go to church regularly but the time demands of my job make that impossible today. I did over 250 major vascular reconstructions last year and I hope to be put up for promotion next fall. I’ve published four papers in the past fifteen months, two as first author. I probably don’t eat as well as I should and my cholesterol was high last time it was checked. My job is pretty stressful but . . .” Yadda, Yadda, Yadda.

Identity is, simply stated, a personal sense of one’s location with respect to the possibilities of life [13]; it is who you are for yourself at the level of your personality. It is frequently expressed in the form “I am [this]” and “I will be [this].” We “locate” ourselves in terms of
career choices, memberships, social status, preferences, and so on. If identity is vital to exercising leadership, it is important to know more about how leaders represent and “play back” their identities, to themselves and other people. When you construct your life story, it serves as an internal model of “who I was, who I am (and why), and who I might become”—more precisely, my identity [13].

If you are like most physicians (and probably most people), who you understand yourself to be is very much a function of your education and training, your achievements, your title, your income and perhaps your CV. Who you are (to yourself and to many others) is very much wrapped up in the things you know, have and do [14].

Consider that this is not really who you are. The essence of who you are is not your name, your upbringing, your career, your title, your age, your marital status, your weight, your possessions, your religious affiliation, your habits, your body, your mind, your fears, your thoughts, or your feelings. We integrate these things and call them our identity; they become our reality. These are things you have and things you do, but they are not truly who you are [10].

How did we come to “see” or “distinguish” ourselves largely as what we know (intellect, fund of knowledge), what we have/possess (an impressive CV, a big house, a prestigious title, a good salary), or what we do (research, teach, operate, parent)? How did this identity get created? The process of acquiring an identity begins in childhood as we adopt ways of being and acting to deal successfully with things that didn’t quite go the way we thought they should [10]. Perhaps your grades didn’t live up to your parents’ expectations, perhaps you didn’t turn out to be the athlete your father wanted you to be. As a consequence of those perceived shortcomings, maybe you learned to be industrious, maybe you learned to be controlling or cautious. By the time we reach adulthood, we have assembled a set of behaviors and attributes and ways of doing things that seem to give us a certain measure of success. These contribute to and shape our personality, who we consider ourselves to be.

So who are you, really? Consider that, most fundamentally, you are the commitments that you make in life. People commit to things—their children, their beliefs, their work—because they value them. As Margaret Farley said [15], “The history of the human race, as well as the story of any one life, might be told in terms of commitments.” Your abilities (what you know, have and do) are what allow you to translate your commitments into action and meaningful results. Rosa Parks, for example, was committed to racial equality. She took a stand, in December of 1955, when she refused to give up her seat on a city bus to a white passenger. She was convicted of violating a local ordinance. Her act sparked a citywide boycott of the bus system that raised the visibility of an unknown clergyman named Martin Luther King, Jr. Over the next 40 years, she helped make her fellow Americans more aware of the civil rights struggle. Her stand was who she was and it remains an inspiration today.

Knowing who you are begins with self-awareness, the foundation for three emotional competencies: 1) emotional awareness (recognizing your emotions and their effects); 2) accurate self-assessment (knowing your strengths and weaknesses, coming to grips with your fears, vulnerabilities and insecurities); and 3) self-confidence (possessing a strong sense of your self-worth and abilities) [16]. Occasionally breakthroughs in self-awareness come from “aha” moments, but these are uncommon. Developing awareness requires both self-reflection and receiving honest feedback from others. Self-reflection involves setting aside private time to mull over our conversations, decisions and choices and asking questions (of oneself) such as: How could I have handled that situation differently? Do I have anything to clean up with that person? Was I being true to my word? From such contemplation, we gain insights into ourselves. Expanding our self-knowledge changes how we think and how we act.

Colleagues who provide us with feedback that addresses issues we have control over, is totally honest and kind, and is non-judgmental are worth their weight in gold. I highly recommend identifying two or three peers who will give you routine, honest feedback. The goal of feedback is to increase our self-awareness, to see ourselves as others see us. Candid feedback provides us with perspectives we can never fully acquire by ourselves. It expands the breadth and depth of our understanding especially when we acquire insights into ourselves that we didn’t know we didn’t know. When provided in a safe and caring manner, it opens up the possibility for learning, change and growth. Feedback is a critical means by which people avoid repeated failures and derailment.

Virtually all human beings listen through a lens of judgment, deciding whether what they hear is right or wrong, to be agreed with or not. We have designed ourselves not to listen, but to evaluate and judge what people say. As our self-awareness increases, we improve our ability to receive feedback and to listen generously. Transformation becomes possible.

Confront Your Inauthenticity

There is much talk these days about authenticity. And with good reason. It is in short supply. Corporate scandals, the focus on materialism, and the increasing emphasis on the bottom line have left many people asking: What’s happened to honesty, integrity and ethical behavior, the trademarks of authenticity?

Authenticity is not an option; it’s a must. A person cannot be authentic on his or her own; rather, authenticity is defined largely by what other people see in you.
We are all inauthentic to one degree or another. Our inauthentic behaviors range from making phony statements like, “That’s a nice tie” to being deceitful or outright malicious. Few of us are aware of all of the things we do and say that are inauthentic because we are so conditioned to be that way. Authenticity begins with acknowledging our inauthenticity [10].

To live authentically means to be aware of yourself, of your circumstances and your world, and of your responsibility to create yourself [18]. Each of us begins with different raw materials, which include our genetics, our social status, and our upbringing. We take those beginnings and create ourselves through the choices we make. Conventionality is the most common form of inauthenticity [18]. It involves living a life of conformity and hollow materialism. If you can manage to be like everyone else, you need not make your own choices. You can turn to others for advice and direction and avoid making tough decisions on your own.

Children have no problem being real. They question the way things are all of the time because of their need to understand how the world works. At some point, however, it becomes clear to us, at a fairly young age, that to get along in the world, sometimes we need to suppress our opinions, go along with the party line, and perhaps even ignore blatant injustices. A lifetime of conditioning can leave us living life automatically and unquestioningly. Authenticity, then, involves a struggle against conventional truths and inherited belief systems. As Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

Why is it so hard to be authentic? Our need to stand out, measure up, and look good drives inauthentic actions and behaviors [10]. Will Smith, the actor, once observed, “All too many people spend money they don’t have on things they don’t want, to impress people they don’t like.” Everywhere we look we see people doing things inadvertently to be accepted by others as a valid human being. Our society places a tremendous emphasis on achievements, appearance, and affluence [19], to which I would add admiration (the need to be liked, popular, and accepted) and authority (the need to dominate and/or display clout and control). These 5As are the key measures of success in our culture—we work hard to acquire them because they make us look good, stand out, and be accepted. This approach to living works well if the game we play is determined by rules like, “You only go around once in life” or “It’s a dog-eat-dog world” or “You don’t win silver, you lose gold.” It’s a strategy that isn’t very effective if our goal is giving ourselves fully to all of life.

There are harmful consequences of being inauthentic, the most important of which is a negative impact on trust. People are less likely to share ideas or information the leader needs to know. They are more likely to be suspicious of the leader’s motives. They are less likely to commit to the organization. Eventually, organizational performance suffers.

Shamir [7] suggests that authentic leaders exhibit four defining characteristics. First, they do not fake their leadership. Their identity as a leader is a central component of their self-concept. Leading is a self-expressive act. Second, authentic leaders do not take on a leadership role for status or personal reward. Instead, they lead from conviction. They want to make a meaningful difference. Third, authentic leaders are originals, not copies. They hold their values to be true not because they are politically correct, but because they have experienced them to be true. Finally, their actions are based on their values and convictions. Their words and deeds match. They have a high titer of integrity.

Get in Touch with Your Spirituality

Among human beings, there are enormous differences in our understanding of why we exist, of what purpose life has. This understanding is our spirituality. Because everyone has some worldview, no matter how narrow or nonconforming, everyone has a spirituality. We tend to define spirituality as including belief in God or membership in a church or synagogue or mosque. Everyone has clear or not so clear views about what the world is all about. Do you view the world as a cruel place, one where you have to look out for yourself, or as a place where others share and are caring? Do you envision the cosmos as having a purpose or do you see it as a vast stretch of empty space that is cold and impersonal? Do you see the universe as being ruled by a stern taskmaster who keeps score or as a creation governed by love? Our spirituality is revealed by how we answer these questions.

In the most general sense, spirituality has to do with how we experience ourselves in relation to what we designate as the source of ultimate power and meaning in life and how we live out this relationship [20]. Spirituality is not merely inner feelings; it has to do with the integration and coherence of ourselves as experiencing and acting persons. Whether we acknowledge it or not, the yearning for a relationship with this ultimate truth resides within each of us—it is the “essence of the human spirit; it is the origin of our highest hopes and dreams” [21].

Great leaders get in touch with and embrace their spirituality. It becomes the foundation upon which they hammer out their values and ideals; it shapes their character, informs their choices, and crystallizes their commitments. As they grow, this relationship becomes more intentional, more fundamental, and it begins to transform their lives. They live up to and live out their values and principles because they know what they stand for. Like you and me, they too have their vulnerabilities, their shortcomings, and their hang-ups, all of which drive their inauthenticity and attachments. But
they are continuously taking on their insecurities and fears, grappling with their inner selves, and discovering their humanity—in the process they develop the necessary conviction and resilience to confront whatever life hands them. They become more centered, more grounded, more forgiving, and more human. Nelson Mandela underwent such a personal transformation. After many years in jail, Mandela said of one of the most cruel and barbaric commanding officers on Robben Island, where he was imprisoned, “There was another side to his nature, a side that had been obscured but that still existed. It was a useful reminder that all men, even the most seemingly cold-blooded, have a core of decency, and that if their heart is touched, they are capable of changing. Ultimately, [he] was not evil; his inhumanity had been foisted upon him by an inhuman system. He behaved like a brute because he was rewarded for brutal behavior” [12].

Spirituality is creeping into the workplace. It is not about being a hermit or a shaman or a new-ager; rather, it is about recognizing that employees have an inner self that they no longer want to check (like luggage) when they come to work. Disturbed by the insulation of their spiritual values from their occupations, people are asking: Can I be who I am, the same me, the real me, wherever I am—at work, at home, in my church or at a party? When people feel that they can be genuinely self-expressed and are part of something larger than themselves, they are much more likely to find meaning in their work, professionally and personally.

**OUR COLLECTIVE LIFE STORIES**

I began this commentary by suggesting that each of us has a unique life story that provides us with a self-concept (our concept of who we are and how we fit into the world) and an identity from which we can lead. We selectively choose events and experiences from our past and ascribe meaning to them. Stories are interpretations of life in which the meaning of life is spelled out—in telling them we try to make sense of life.

In this section, I would like to broaden this narrative framework to the level of our shared humanity. My claim is that we as a society are “living out” three macrostories that we have constructed over the years from our history; they reflect how we make sense of the world we live in. In a very real but subtle way these stories shape how we “live and be” collectively as a society (and to a growing extent as a human race). Regrettably, these stories paint the human saga as one that has a worrisome if not bleak future. We tend to accept this gloomy future, assuming that the world is the way it is, believing that effecting meaningful change is probably a pipe dream. In some sense these macro messages become our identity as a human race.

**The World is an Unsafe, Uncaring Place**

This macrostory is so much a part of our worldview that, like the air we breathe, we take it for granted. We live on a planet where injustice, famine, bigotry, and war are widespread. We are constantly bombarded by media coverage, which reinforces our mental models. We grew up in a world where we are taught to not trust certain people, to avoid homeless people, to accept what we are taught and to conform.

This view also exists because the world occurs to us as unforgiving with little margin for error—we are constantly being judged. Borg [19] traces this perspective back to how many people think about God, what he calls the “monarchical” view. In this view, God is lawmaker and judge, a referee who keeps score. Life is about “meeting requirements.” Our eternal destiny depends on how well we perform.

Sadly, we have accepted that the world is this way. It is a context from which we live. Think about it: how much different would the world be if we each stood for the possibility of creating a world that was safe, just and compassionate?

**I Have to Look After Myself**

If the world is an unsafe, impersonal, uncaring place, then I’m on my own and I had better look out for myself. Things are scarce—it’s a zero sum game, you versus me, us versus them. The 5As are what matter: life is about looking good, standing out, and measuring up. EE Cummings once wrote, “To be nobody but yourself— in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.”

Langdon Gilkey’s *Shantung Compound* [22] is a captivating account of his experiences in northern China during World War II, when he and some 2,000 other men, women, and children were imprisoned in a civilian internment camp for two years. Their subsistence was safe and comfortable enough to create and maintain a small society, but their lives were sufficiently close to the margin to provide glimpses into human nature. When quarters became tight or when food became limited, Gilkey noted that people did things not “because it would be reasonable or moral to act that way; but because that course of action suited their self-interest. Afterward, they would find rational and moral reasons for what they had already determined to do” [22]. This process of legitimizing self-interest is often subconscious.

**Despite My Successes, Something is Missing**

Despite achieving the successes that society says are important, more and more people are aware that something is missing in their lives. They are realizing that
success by itself is insufficient; it isn’t very fulfilling. People are concluding, “Where I’m headed now is not really where I want to end up.” Despite the comforts of our lives, we are left feeling empty. For many physicians, their work (which once was regarded a vocation or calling) has become a paycheck, if not a chore. “One of the clearest dangers in modern society,” observes John Gardner [23], “is that men and women will lose the experience of participating in meaningful decisions concerning their own life and work, that they will become like cogs in the machine because they feel like cogs in the machine . . . They tend to accept the spectator role and to sink into passivity.”

This predicament is real; it may cause us to experience the “anxiety of meaninglessness—anxiety about the loss of an ultimate concern, of a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings” [24]. Of course we try to cope, but we frequently feel overwhelmed. Confronted with the disconnect, it is often easiest to anesthetize ourselves to the rift we feel, and chalk it up to one of the costs of human nature; but few of us escape unscathed.

TABLE 1
The Paradigm in Which We Get to Be Human

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. The world is unsafe and uncaring, so I’m on my own</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● It’s you or me, us vs. them (things are scarce)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. It’s all about standing out, measuring up, looking good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Success = the “5As” (achievement, appearance, affluence, authority, admiration)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Something is missing, but I’m not sure what</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● I don’t feel fulfilled very often</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Life is a struggle</td>
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</tbody>
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Our Rock and Our Hard Place

Sadly, these collective life stories have become the paradigm in which we get to be human (Table 1). By the time most of us are teenagers we have bought into it. It is a paradigm that we all too frequently accept, saying resignedly, “That’s just the way it is.” To provide more effective leadership in academic medicine (and in the world), we must become more cognizant of these stories, how they are interconnected and how they impact the medical profession and all of humanity.

The inward journey of leadership, which in many ways is a spiritual journey, is about opening the self to the possibility of transformation. In a very real sense, it involves a process by which one is blown apart spiritually and re-assembled as a totally different human being. This process on a mass scale is necessary to transcend our self-centeredness and transform the world.

When we are able to separate the facts, i.e., what is (e.g., our health care system is broken) from our interpretation (e.g., our health care system is unfixable), we discover that our macrostories are only human constructions. They need not be our reality. The world need not be an uncaring place. We can choose to create a health care system that provides everyone with care that is safe, effective, patient-centered, timely, efficient, and equitable [25]. We can choose to create a nation where some 45 million uninsured Americans are not on their own. Similarly, I can choose to be freed up from the 5As. When I don’t need to be their prisoner, I can create the possibility of living a more fulfilling life.

The current emphasis on the 5As fits with the macrostories that we have collectively constructed. The messages we get from our culture are individualistic: living well, looking good, standing out [18]. When we think about health care, we think individualistically: the reason the uninsured are uninsured is because of individual failings, not because of flawed health care policies. The solution is individualistic as well: the uninsured need to get jobs and embrace our values, which include rugged individualism. We argue that we shouldn’t have to provide free care for the well being of our society as a whole.

Advocates of individualism would ask: How, within a health care system based on incentives and rewards, does one ensure quality, accessible, and affordable care for all? Advocates of universal health coverage would reverse the question and ask: How, within a health care system that provides quality, accessible, and affordable care for everyone, do we build in appropriate incentives and rewards for individual performance?

This paradigm (Table 1) is operational in our AMCs. The primary measures that are used to keep score are NIH standing, memberships in the National Academy of Science, ranking by U.S. News and World Report, hospital margin and size of endowment. While these conventional indicators of performance should not be discounted, there are others that seem to me to be critically important: How well does an academic medical center partner with insurance companies and other businesses to transform health care in its region to create a healthier public? How much of its research is actually being translated into products and services that make a difference to patients? These metrics are generally ignored. This paradigm (Table 1) also challenges the doctrine that medicine is a profession that values service rooted in unselfishness above financial reward [1]. Many physicians report losing touch with the values that drew them into the profession in the first place. The tensions between humanistic values and performance-oriented values are major challenges for leaders of AMCs [26]. These clashes and other work-related stressors appear to be creating significant levels of depression, anxiety and job dissatisfaction, especially among younger faculty [27]. There is unequivocal evidence that American
understand the meaning and purpose of his life. He would ask why the universe was created. He would then reply that he would ask God how the universe was created; knowing that he could calculate all of the mathematical equations that went into the process. Upon further thought, however, Einstein changed his mind—he would ask why the universe was created. He would then understand the meaning and purpose of his life.

The existentialist Martin Heidegger [30] was similarly concerned with what he considered the most important human question: What does human being entail? He used the provocative term “thrownness” to characterize our inevitable submission to existence itself. We are “thrown” into a world that we do not choose and often seems indifferent to our concerns but we must find meaning in that into which we are “thrown.” In a sense it’s like the old saying: you can choose your friends but you can’t choose your parents. Jim Morrison (The Doors) expresses this predicament in the line from his well-known song: “riders on the storm—into this world we’re thrown.”

The inward journey of leadership is the path for discovering purpose in our thrown humanity. It requires discipline and courage—there is a great deal of fear associated with the journey because it shatters our illusions and reveals aspects about ourselves that we wish we didn’t know and don’t want to deal with. All great leaders understand this. Where they go first to discover their voice is within. It is here that they learn what they truly care about. They see the inside journey as the way to truth and authentic power. This is not something they learned from a book or at a plush resort. They learned it on the journey itself.

How does one get started on the inward journey? Whether you are aware of it or not, you’re already on it—the goal is to make it more conscious and more of a priority by embarking upon the four practices (see Sidebar, The Inward Journey in Action). Begin by con-

WHY IS THE INWARD JOURNEY NECESSARY?

Albert Einstein was once allegedly asked [29]: If you could ask God one question, what would it be? Einstein replied that he would ask God how the universe was created; knowing that he could calculate all of the mathematical equations that went into the process. Upon further thought, however, Einstein changed his mind—he would ask why the universe was created. He would then understand the meaning and purpose of his life.

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SIDEBAR: THE INWARD JOURNEY IN ACTION

JB (a fictitious character) was a successful academic surgeon, a rising star. He was NIH-funded, a superb clinical surgeon, and a fine teacher. He had a passion for his work. Like many of us, his identity was very much wrapped up in his work: his title, years of training, accomplishments, and work ethic. But he had a sense that something was missing in his life. Despite his successes, he would ask himself now and again: Is this all there is?

It was when his marriage started to unravel that JB realized that his life wasn’t working. When his wife insisted they see a marriage counselor, he resisted. To JB, having to see a marriage counselor was a sign of weakness and failure. When his grant wasn’t funded, he questioned his ability as a researcher and blamed it on the study section. Things weren’t going his way at work and it showed. His chair arranged for some coaching. A 360 degree feedback evaluation was sobering. Others viewed him as being overly demanding, lacking in self-awareness and self-centered. His words and deeds didn’t always match.

Being resolute, JB used these breakdowns in his life as openings for action. He began to confront his self-doubt, insecurities, and inauthenticity. He discovered that his fear—of being inadequate, of not looking good—had become part of his identity. As a consequence, he learned to work harder, to do whatever it took to be accepted and to stand out. When things didn’t go his way, he became impatient and difficult to work with. In a nutshell, he designed himself to have a set of behaviors and ways of doing things that allowed him to achieve his concept of success.

In confronting these issues, JB began to deal with all of the defenses he had erected to preserve his self-image. He developed a deeper understanding of himself and what truly mattered to him in life. When he realized that he didn’t have to stand out and get the credit to be liked, he was able to let go of the behaviors he had acquired that he thought were necessary to be accepted by himself and others. He recognized that achievement and admiration were the 2As that were his Achilles’ heels.

All that energy that had been spent on trying to look good and measure up could now be redirected to things that were more fulfilling. In reviewing his life story, he remembered vividly how his mother, a social worker, had comforted her patients and advocated for the uninsured. It became clear that these experiences had left their indelible imprint on his life and fostered his commitment to medicine. JB was freed up to redesign his self-concept as a leader, one that included standing for integrity and responsibility. He spent more time mentoring the junior faculty and residents. He was asked to play a wider role in his institution and led several quality initiatives. His marriage got back on track and his life started to work. He began to experience joy and a sense of being fully alive.
structing your personal narrative (life story) so as to familiarize yourself with your identity anchors and the experiences that shaped you. Acknowledge your insecurities and your inauthenticity. Increase your self-awareness by soliciting 360 degree feedback from colleagues who will be straight with you. Get in touch with your spirituality. “Spiritual discipline,” notes Parker Palmer, “has nothing to do with floating off into some other dimension; it has a lot to do with getting your feet planted firmly on the ground in the real world” [31].

In the end, the inward journey is our destiny. It is a journey that leads from a life governed by the 5As to a life of personal transformation. Such a radical personal reorientation is essential for the transformation of our planet. It calls into question fundamental questions such as: What is my responsibility as a human being? What obligations do I have to those that are less fortunate? What role do I play in transforming our health care system? Responsibility begins with the willingness to be cause in the matter of one’s own life [10]. It means recognizing one’s self as the answerable author of one’s actions and behaviors. It is a context from which one chooses to live; it becomes activated when we recognize the awesome privilege of being human, a privilege we all too frequently do not fulfill on.

The inward journey of leadership, once undertaken, leads to a journey outward. Without the inner journey we cannot fully connect with the suffering of others, and we lack the wisdom and will to tackle the problems facing health care today. Yet, when our inner work is isolated from others, it implode upon itself leading to futility and meaninglessness. Sadly, the commercialization of medicine has encouraged an external orientation—one that impedes the inward journey of transformation and contributes to the lack of meaning and purpose that permeates the workplace today.

When we transform ourselves, we are free to let go of our need (attachment) to be admired, to look good, to be liked, to stand out, to measure up, or to get approval. We become free to be who we truly are. Huston Smith once wrote, “As human beings we are made to surpass ourselves and are truly ourselves only when we are transcending ourselves.” When we let our true selves break through, it justifies life and gives it purpose. We are not burdened by it as some sort of obligation or chore. Rather, we experience joy and the feeling of being fully alive.

REFERENCES

10. This distinction is made clear by the Landmark Education Corporation. http://www.landmarkeducation.com/.
25. These six goals for improving patient needs were identified by the Institute of Medicine in its March 2001 report. Crossing the Quality Chasm: A New Health Care System for the 21st Century.