

**"WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE
PHILOSOPHER-KING:
THE LEADER'S ADDICTION TO POWER"**

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WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE PHILOSOPHER - KING:

THE LEADER'S ADDICTION TO POWER

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ABSTRACT

This article postulates the existence of a number of conscious and unconscious forces which make leaders reluctant to relinquish power. It is suggested that a major reason for the unwillingness to let go is the transference effects of leadership. Both mirroring and idealizing transference reactions are discussed. In addition, there is the aging factor which may contribute to the addictiveness of power, since aging can evoke a strong need for compensatory strivings. The talionic principle - meaning in this case the conscious or unconscious fear that the loss of power will be followed by some form of retaliation for previous acts - may be another factor contributing to power's addictiveness. In this context the role of envy is emphasized. Finally, the existence of a "fear of nothingness" is postulated, that is, a form of anxiety which leads to a need to defeat death by leaving some kind of legacy. It is suggested that holding onto power is linked to the fear that this legacy may be destroyed.

I took the lamp and, leaving the zone of everyday occupations and relationships where everything seems clear, I went down into my inmost self, to **the deep abyss** whence I feel dimly that my power of action emanates. But as I moved further and further away from the conventional certainties by which social life is superficially illuminated, I became aware that I was losing contact with myself. At each step of the descent a new person was disclosed within me of whose name I was no longer sure, and who no longer obeyed me. And when I had to stop my exploration because the path faded from beneath my steps, I found a bottomless abyss at my feet.

Teilhard de Chardin (1957)
Le Milieu Divin, Fontana,
pp.76-77

It was Plato's conviction that power would continue to corrupt unless philosophers became rulers and rulers philosophers. If not, trouble would ensue. According to him, only the philosopher-king could be expected to possess a higher level of moral goodness; only the philosopher-king would be able to create a just society. To use Plato's words:

...there would never be a perfect state or society or

individual until some chance compelled the minority of uncorrupted philosophers, now called useless, to take a hand in politics, willy-nilly, and compelled society to listen to them, or else until providence inspired some of our present rulers and kings, or their sons, with a genuine love of true philosophy (1955, p.261).

So strongly did Plato believe that the philosopher-king would overcome the common pitfalls of power and transcend self-interest, that in 386 B.C. he initiated what can be called one of the first leadership training centers. At the Academy a new type of statesman would be formed. Rhetoric, the art of self-expression and persuasion, mathematics, dialectics, and political and moral theory were among the core subjects. It was a demanding program which also included a long practical preparation. Given the nature of the curriculum, only after the age of fifty would those participants who had successfully gotten through all the stages be ready to assume leadership.

Plato also learned about leadership firsthand when he was asked to intervene in Syracuse in politics by becoming the tutor of the tyrant Dionysius. It was an ideal opportunity to apply his leadership theories and transform the ruler into a philosopher-king. Unfortunately, the adventure turned into a failure and, according to some sources, almost cost him his life.

In retrospect, we can conclude that Plato may have been too idealistic in making his prescriptions about effective leadership. He may have underestimated the extent to which power can transform a leader's behavior. He may not have identified all the conscious and unconscious forces which come into play when an individual becomes a leader.

All too often we can observe a strange metamorphosis in behavior after a person acquires a position of leadership and power. All too often we are confronted with the familiar saga of a person desperately clinging to power, continuing a regime which has atrophied over the years and is in bad need of rejuvenation. The "President-for-Life Syndrome" is an all-too-frequent reminder of this phenomenon.

Such behavior patterns beg the question of what really happens when an individual attains a position of leadership and power. How does power affect a person's mind? What makes for power's addictiveness? What can cause pathological behavior?

It almost seems as if a leader's addiction to power parallels that of an addict to his or her substance. Referring to the latter, we are all familiar with the fact that substance abuse follows a certain rhythm: first there is an instant high, then a spiral of dependence, and finally an inevitable crash accompanied by painful withdrawal symptoms. Continuing the addiction analogy, we also

know that there are serious behavioral changes which accompany the more or less regular use of addictive substances and which may lead to impairment of social and occupational functioning. In such instances, antisocial behavior patterns can even come to the fore. Furthermore, intense feelings of anxiety and depression may be experienced. Moodswings and paranoid reactions are quite common behavioral changes, all of which may contribute to violent action.

In looking at addictions, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (APA,1987) lists such specific substances as alcohol, barbiturates, opioids, amphetamines, cocaine, cannabis, and tobacco. Given this manual's particular outlook, it comes as no surprise that power, a less tangible entity, is not to be found on the list. Studying leaders' behavior, however, we may conclude that power is no less intoxicating. Moreover, power shows remarkable similarities in the course taken by those who are addicted. We also notice a high and, in case of its loss, painful withdrawal symptoms. In some instances we can also observe how powerholders show a radical change in functioning after attaining a position of leadership. Displays of erratic and impulsive behavior, suspiciousness, and inappropriate expression of aggressive feelings can regularly be observed. What is most noticeable, is the extreme dependency of leaders on power. Their desperation in hanging onto power, often against all odds, may be symptomatic of their realization - conscious or unconscious - that

with its loss painful withdrawal symptoms may follow.

Given power's addictiveness and given the importance of leadership to society, the objective of this article is to look at the various conscious and unconscious forces which make leaders reluctant to let go of power. In doing so, I will discuss a clinical concept called transference and its various forms. Other factors being reviewed are the effects of aging, the meaning of the talionic principle and of envy in the context of leadership, and the fear of nothingness, the latter leading to a strong desire to leave a legacy.

In following this analysis, however, one also has to keep in mind that a critical component of leadership is the quality and intensity of the leader's narcissistic development. If there is one personality constellation to which leaders tend to gravitate, it is the narcissistic one. But in making this observation, we should realize that ambitiousness, the need to stand out, and the desire to take initiative and control are quite legitimate. But, it is the easy slide toward excess that goes with narcissism which becomes so worrisome. The all-too-frequent transition from healthy narcissism toward its addictive forms, as symptomized by tenacious holding onto power, warrants this investigation.

THE HALL OF MIRRORS

Freud, in writing about some character types met in psychoanalytic work, calls one group "The Exceptions" (1916). In taking Shakespeare's drama Richard III as a point of departure, he describes the extent to which this particular group of people is characterized by a sense of entitlement. These individuals claim special privileges and some form of compensation because of having experienced certain injustices. As Freud says about the meaning of Richard's soliloquy: "I have a right to be an exception, to disregard the scruples by which others let themselves be held back. I may do wrong myself, since wrong has been done to me" (1916, pp.314-315). Given their perceived sufferings, such people believe that the ordinary rules of conduct don't apply to them.

In seeing the latest play of the Swedish playwright Niklas Rådström entitled The Roots of Hate or the Childhood of Hitler (1987), we are left with a similar impression. Influenced by the work of the psychoanalyst Alice Miller (1981), the playwright shows us the linkages between Hitler's early interpersonal relationships, the development of an inner world populated by violent imagery, and his later behavior. The intrapsychic "theater" of "The Exceptions" is really preoccupied with narcissistic injury, which can lead to a revengeful wish for power and blind ambition. Because of this development of a very special

inner world, such people may end up with the conviction that they are exempt from existing moral laws. Given their defective personality development, these "laws" have never been adhered to. Phase-appropriate internalization of values and the setting of boundaries have never occurred. Hence, their behavior has an archaic narcissistic quality whereby stark violent imagery dominates their intrapsychic life.

The question of narcissism in the context of a ubiquitous psychological process called transference is at the core of the powerful forces which affect leaders, contributing to what to bystanders may seem rather irrational behavior patterns. Transference can really be described as a new edition of an old relationship: what is meant here is that all relationships are colored by previously experienced interactions. Here the specific type of relationship pattern which developed with the original caretakers plays a significant role. Transference is a revival of the situations, fantasies, and conflicts of infantile life; it is a reliving of thoughts, feelings, and behavior originating in the past but acted out in the present (Freud, 1912; Langs, 1976; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984; Luborsky et al, 1985). Transference is an essential determinant of all psychic reality.

Freud was the first to identify and recognize the importance of this process which makes for a confusion between past and present. He described it as a "false connection" (Breuer & Freud,

1893-1895). A close investigation of interpersonal processes shows that transference stands for stereotyped, constantly repeated behavior patterns which remain the same over long periods of time. As such, transference is an organizing activity, demonstrating the continuing influence of the person's early formative experiences.

Although most noticeable when it is artificially exaggerated in psychotherapeutic settings, transference is active in any relationship. As significant authority figures, leaders are prime targets of these reactions. The "great man" is very likely to evoke these reactions (Kets de Vries, 1988b). Leaders easily revive previously unresolved conflicts with significant figures from the past concerning authority. Hence followers may endow their leaders with the same magic powers and omniscience which in childhood they attributed to parents or other significant figures.

In the context of this revival of significant conflictual childhood relationships from childhood, the psychoanalyst Kohut (1960,1971,1977) postulates the activation of two main kinds of narcissistically invested reactions: mirroring and the idealizing transference.

Mirroring originally corresponds to the parent's recognition of both the emerging capabilities of the child and the appropriate responses. As seen by Kohut, mirroring becomes "the gleam in the

mother's eye" as she actively and positively reacts to the child's exhibitionistic displays. When the parent is sensitive to the child's wish for confirmation and phase-appropriate responses occur, so that the needs, capacities, and vulnerabilities of the child are duly appreciated, and when frustration is given in tolerable doses, the "grandiose self" is gradually transformed into the healthy ambitions of the adult. In case of empathic failure - when there is a lack of phase-appropriate confirmation of the adequacy of the self - this process of transformation may not occur. Archaic configurations may linger on and reactive narcissistic patterns may prevail (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1985). The adult may retain a lifelong hunger for acceptance and confirmation.

Leaders, having a more-than-average narcissistic disposition, are particularly susceptible to this "mirror hunger". And their followers oblige by reactivating and reinforcing this need due to another developmental pattern: the idealizing transference reaction. The basis for this particular process is the illusory wish (as a way of coping with feelings of helplessness) to "merge" with what is perceived as an omnipotent and perfect other person (originally the parent) and thus acquire his or her power. To realize the intensity of this wish we need only recall, difficult as it may be, how it was being a small child living in a world of grown-ups - a world of giants and confusion. We may no longer remember how much at that time we were looking for

supporting figures to decrease our sense of insignificance.

In normal development, the idealized parent image eventually is internalized and becomes the matrix for one's own ideas and guidelines. Since as authority figures leaders induce regression and reactivate dependency needs, followers may be inclined to reinstate this illusion of all powerfulness and use their leaders as a screen to project their wishes and fantasies. Acting in this manner, followers will extend their own grandiosity through identification with the leader.

The end result is a mutually reinforced pattern of interaction whereby idealizing and mirror transference reactions become complementary. Because of these idealizing tendencies, followers will frequently do anything to applaud, please, or charm the leader. And the pomp and circumstance attached to the office may aggravate the situation. The followers may begin to behave as if under the spell of the pied piper.

Unfortunately, not all leaders possess a sufficient degree of self-criticism and distance from themselves to realize that they are in reality not as wonderful as others think they are. Some may eventually start to imagine that these reactions are their due and that they really deserve this kind of attention. Consequently, they may get stuck in a vicious circle of self-delusion about their own importance and capabilities. Regressive processes may

come to the fore whereby the leader - like the infant - feels exempt from the rule of law. Regression to a stage where boundaries were not yet established may easily lead to abuse of power.

Since in adulthood a person has supposedly reached a more mature stage of development -- being able to hold his own -- the continuous search for the "gleam in the mother's eye" may turn into an aberration. The craving for applause becomes an addiction. If that is the case, continuous confirmation is needed to "nourish" such leaders' vulnerable grandiose self. Hence, sycophantic behavior on the part of followers is encouraged. Those who don't oblige will be removed. The leader will overestimate his or her capabilities, living in a hall of mirrors and doing anything to maintain the illusion. Letting go of power and thereby losing this "fix" becomes a very unattractive proposition.

THE ULTIMATE NARCISSISTIC INJURY

In 1907, Adler published his study of organ inferiority and constructed a whole system of psychology around the theme. His argument was that inferiority feelings are universal and that specific defects play a major role in compensatory striving. Although some of his ideas have been seriously questioned as overly simplistic, in making this inference he drew attention to

the significance of organic defects in affecting psychological attitudes. For Adler, the root of the presumed universal feeling of inferiority is the biological fact of the helplessness of the human infant. According to him, this condition supplies the motive for the compensatory striving for superiority, which becomes a way of making up for feelings of insecurity and anxiety and a vulnerable sense of self-esteem.

However, we can go one step further in building on the idea of organ inferiority and make the argument that the feeling of inferiority and the need for compensatory striving are not merely a characteristic of childhood. On the contrary, they can easily be reactivated later in life when due to the effects of aging, subsequent, physical defects will become a preoccupation. In this context we should realize that, in the development of the individual, the self is foremost a body self. When the body malfunctions, all other parts of human functioning are affected.

An increased preoccupation with physical defects arises in middle age. It is a time when hypochondriacal concerns become more manifest, a symbolization of heightened self-concern (Butler & Lewis, 1977). Usually this coincides with that period in time when individuals attain a position of leadership and acquire power. Particularly in view of the leader's intense narcissistic investment in the self, we can infer that the effects of bodily decline may have a greater psychological impact than would be the

case for common mortals.

What actually happens at mid-life? What kind of changes are we talking about? The kind of bodily changes we are referring to are such things as periodontal problems, wrinkles, gray hair, balding, the need for eye glasses or a change of glasses, and the development of a paunch. Here we should realize that, according to clinical research, face and genitalia play a special role in the maintenance of one's sense of self and the vicissitudes of self-cohesion (Castelnuovo-Tedesco, 1981). Problems concerning the latter, particularly in the form of a decline in sexual ability for men, can be especially devastating for self-esteem (Masters & Johnson, 1970). As to be expected, these physical changes are usually accompanied by a set of emotional reactions such as fear, anxiety, grief, depression, and anger (Erikson, 1950; Atchley, 1972; Kimmel, 1974; Fiske Lowenthal et.al. , 1975; Vaillant, 1977; Levinson, 1978; Gould, 1978; Kets de Vries, 1980a; Butler, 1985). It is a period when one starts to look at life in a different way, as time-left-to-live as opposed to time-since-birth (Neugarten, 1964, 1968). The underlying issue is really that at this time one has to come to grips with one's own mortality (Jaques, 1965; Kets de Vries, 1980b). Although the fantasy of immortality is hard to give up, the realization of life's transience breaks through at mid-life, not only on an intellectual level but also on an emotional one.

The ultimate narcissistic injury - the realization of one's mortality because of the aging of the body - may reactivate a sense of inferiority. Narcissistic individuals (and as we have said earlier, leaders tend to be among this group) are especially self-conscious about the deterioration of their body. Changes are easily experienced as a catastrophe, a defect in the realm of the grandiose self. This confrontation with the self may result in unmodified emotional reactions, such as outbursts of seemingly irrational rage and vengefulness, when no appropriate mirroring responses are forthcoming. Moreover, bodily changes may trigger off distortions in reality testing.

The sense of defect makes the search for substitute outlets even more of a necessity. For some people -- and leaders are prime candidates given the positions they occupy -- the wielding of power becomes an important sublimatory activity. (Zaleznik & Kets de Vries, 1985). Henry Kissinger hinted at power's relationship to sexuality when he used to say in a half-joking fashion that "Power is the greatest aphrodisiac"! Given all the losses which are corollary to aging the message is that letting go of power is a singularly unattractive proposition. Power will be hung onto as long as possible. What we can observe, particularly in the case of leaders, is an intentness, singlemindedness, and persistence in keeping a power base. We can hypothesize that this is one way of compensating for the effects of the narcissistic injury inflicted by the decline of the body.

THE TALION PRINCIPLE

The talion principle derives from early Babylonian law, which reasons that criminals should receive as punishment exactly those injuries they have inflicted upon their victims. This principle of exacting compensation, of rendering "an eye for an eye" or a "tooth for a tooth," has been the law in many societies up until today. Although in modern society other forms of compensation and retaliation have been found to indemnify a claimant, this "law" is still very much operative in the general and individual unconscious (Fenichel, 1945; Racker, 1960). That it is in force can usually be seen in the manifestation of guilt feelings, as well as in a general fear of retribution for defying certain principles, that is, that all forms of injury - accidental or intentional - will be punished in kind. What often seems to happen is that, in a very subliminal way, positive actions are followed by positive reactions and negative actions by negative reactions. Again, we are talking about very elusive phenomena. Usually these patterns of interaction don't reach the level of consciousness. Whatever indication we have that such processes are operative may be in the form of certain mood states, free-floating anxiety, depressive reactions, or, at times, diffuse stress symptoms.

Given the existence of this "law," we should never forget when inflicting something perceived as negative onto another person that, in spite of all forms of niceties and rationalizations about the appropriateness of the act, intrapsychically the expectation that eventually a debt has to be paid may linger on. It is assumed that ultimately some form of retaliation may follow. The "management by guilt" syndrome, (Levinson,1964), i.e., the tendency of executives to go to great length to avoid or to smooth over conflict in order to prevent the arousal of anger in others, is symptomatic.

Given the position they are in, leaders necessarily have to make unpleasant decisions; these decisions cannot always be gratifying. They cannot avoid hurting some people. Hence the fear of retaliation in kind for certain acts is somehow always present. It comes therefore as no surprise that paranoia and leadership are so closely intertwined. Leaders always live with the expectancy that someone will get even. Power thus becomes like a protective shield for them. Giving up power may be accompanied by the anxiety that retaliatory acts perpetrated by those who have been hurt may follow.

Given this linkage between the lex talionis and paranoid anxiety, we can see how leaders can get caught in a vicious circle of escalation of aggression. Because of their paranoid fear of

retaliation, they will hang onto power and even resort to "protective reaction." They may take destructive initiatives in the hope that by crushing their opponents or assumed opponents they may neutralize them even before there is any indication that the opponents are on to something. Some may even engage in aggressive acts on an escalating scale.

Apart from the fear of others getting even for real or imagined action, we can also look at the lex talionis in the context of envy. Envy is part and parcel of the human experience and, as a main source of motivation, affects all of our actions (Kets de Vries, 1988c). Leaders, being in a position of power with all its privileges, are ideal subjects of envy. Here again, both consciously or unconsciously, leaders may fear the envy of others. Early in life they have become familiar with the basic human equation that a common corollary of envy is vengefulness and vindictiveness. Occasionally, the preoccupation with the consequences of the envious reactions of others comes through in the form of self-defeating acts or illness. Individuals to whom this applies seem to be prone to a fear of success, (Zaleznik & Kets de Vries, 1985). By "snatching defeat out of the jaws of victory," the individual protects himself from envy by paying off his "debt," as it were, on an installment plan basis. Consciously or unconsciously, it is felt that standing out is dangerous. Failing -- and we have to remember that this is not necessarily a conscious act -- becomes the solution.

Although this kind of self-defeating behavior can occur at times, more common is a behavior pattern whereby the leader tries to shield himself by holding onto power. Somehow, there lingers on an unconscious assumption that he or she is highly vulnerable in light of the accumulated "envy debit account" and the lex talionis. Therefore, the last thing such leaders want is to give others the opportunity to have a vindictive triumph, to take revenge and "clear the account". Holding onto power becomes like an insurance policy.

THE EXPERIENCE OF NOTHINGNESS

In the tenacious effort of some leaders to hold onto power, another factor which sometimes plays a role has to do with the fear that loneliness and depression will follow if power is lost. Having had the experience of being in a hall of mirrors --of being surrounded by sycophants -- what is dreaded most of all is the loss of power. The sudden silence, with nobody being interested any longer, evokes anxiety. The late President Truman was quite candid about that when he said, shortly after his term was over: "Two hours ago I could have said five words and been quoted in every capital of the world. Now, I could talk for two hours and nobody would give a damn" (Graff, 1988,p.5). What intensifies this fear of the loss of office is that while in power, because of the

sense of isolation which comes with their position and their subsequent behavior, leaders may have lost the only true friends they ever had. Their actions may have estranged them. If they step down, there are very few they can turn to for emotional support. Fearing an experience of nothingness after a loss of their power base, leaders may prefer to hang onto their position even if it limits their social contacts to interactions with sycophants.

This fear of depression and nothingness (or, as Churchill expressed it, the "black dog days") is accentuated by the need to leave a legacy, which can be seen as a narcissistic externalization of the self (Kets de Vries, 1988a). A common preoccupation of leaders has to do with the question of whether their successors can be relied upon to respect their legacy, those tangibles or intangibles that distinguished their regime. The looming suspicion is that one can never be sure. Too many examples are around of leaders seeing destroyed that which they had so carefully built up.

This practice is very noticeable in the political arena. Nowhere can we see its execution more dramatically than in communist countries where the whole history of a period may be obliterated. The most recent example is the government campaign in the USSR, initiated by Gorbachev, to eradicate the collective memory of Leonid Brezhnev. Just as Brezhnev had consigned Krushchev to

political obscurity (and Krushchev had done to Stalin before him, starting with removing his body from its place of honor beside Lenin in the tomb in Red Square), now it seems to be his turn. Recently we witnessed how Brezhnev Square was dismantled and renamed and how Brezhnev's name was dropped from a city east of Moscow and an intersection in Leningrad (Taubman, 1988, pp.1-2).

For many leaders, the fear of not having their legacy respected becomes a strong force motivating them to hold onto power for as long as possible. After all, many leaders are familiar with what happened to Shakespeare's King Lear. To leave behind a reminder of one's accomplishment can be equated symbolically to defeating death. All of us have, if we really delve deeper, a carefully guarded wish to believe in our own immortality. As we have said, the ultimate narcissistic injury seems to be the realization of the inevitability of death. Thus, everything possible is done to hang onto something tangible to postpone this painful encounter with the self.

CONCLUSION

Although Lord Acton had a point when he said that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, what we have seen is that the real danger is the addictiveness of power. Having once drunk from power's well, it becomes very hard to let go. And, following

the careers of many leaders, we can see that this particular behavior can have very detrimental consequences. Hence the question becomes what can be done to prevent or limit power's intoxicating influence. How can one avoid getting trapped in an unconscious agenda over which one has very little control?

There are no easy answers to these questions. The sirens who represent power can seduce all of us. Time after time history has shown how hard it is to withstand the forces which accompany power and leadership: many people succumb and, like the sorcerer's apprentice, are swept away by the force of power. What these incidents tell us is that the real acid test of character is the way a person acts when in a position of authority. The way an individual handles power is what characterizes true leadership.

The Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius - no stranger to the vicissitudes of power - warned in his famous Meditations that "...malice, craftiness, and duplicity are the concomitants of absolute power" (1964, p.38). From his life history, we can infer that he somehow had the strength of character to withstand the darker sides of power. In his behavior and actions he was somewhat of a philosopher-king. His sense of humanity shines through in his writings. His advice to the powerholder can be found in his musings on life and death, ideas which he put into action himself and which are valid to this day. To use his words:

Men seek for seclusion in the wilderness, by the seashore, or in the mountains - a dream you have cherished only too fondly yourself. But such fancies are wholly unworthy of a philosopher, since at any moment you choose you can retire within yourself. Nowhere can man find a quieter or more untroubled retreat than in his own soul, above all, he who possesses resources in himself, which he need only contemplate to secure immediate ease of mind the ease that is but another word for a well-ordered spirit. Avail yourself often, then, of this retirement, and so continually renew yourself (Aurelius, 1964, p.63).

The message is quite clear: in order not to be swept away by the juggernaut that is power, one has to strengthen one's self-reflective, empathic and listening capacities, as well to accept the transience of one's role, acknowledge different views, and most difficult of all, face succession. Moreover, one has to take pleasure in vicarious gratification, that is, in finding a sense of continuity through others. But we should realize that all this will not be easy, given the primitive forces which come into play when power is at stake.

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