

PROLOGUE

How can anyone's welfare depend on such as I am?

Sophocles, "Oedipus at Colonus"

Once upon a time, the world was a simpler place. In that simple world leaders faced simple challenges, and therefore had to cultivate and exhibit a limited set of capabilities. King George V (Michael Gambon) reflects on this in the movie, "The King's Speech," when he informs his son, King George VI (Colin Firth), "In the past, all a King had to do was look respectable in uniform and not fall off his horse." Simple.

King George V was very good at that—looking respectable in uniform and not falling off his horse. Then, suddenly the radio—or the wireless—arrived, and the world became uncomfortably complex. He still needed to look respectable and stay mounted, but now he had to *do* more, and *be* more. He advises his son, "Now we must invade people's homes and ingratiate ourselves with them... We've become actors!"

Purists may jut their jowls at the above example because it is from the world of cinematic art. However, since life imitates art, it is only fitting that we derive key similarities between the

dilemmas faced by the two King Georges and the leadership ideas discussed in this book. First, invading people's homes through the radio required the two Kings, George V and VI, to become bigger men and get in touch with their own humanity. Because, essentially, it was human beings with all their frailties (the movie was about a King who overcame his stammering) who were doing the invading. Second, it required them to seek out new teachers, because the teachers who taught them to look respectable and not fall off a horse couldn't teach them to be warm, accessible, kind, and neighborly on the radio. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the two Kings, George V and VI, had to search for wiser ways to successfully confront and manage conflicts they had previously not experienced, especially those within themselves. When a new and complex world forged by the radio revealed and pitted different aspects of themselves—monarch, human being, actor—against each other, achieving and maintaining internal harmony required learning new knowledge and skills. It also required humility and effort. Invading people's homes through the radio was palpably more difficult than mounting their trusted steeds. The Kings had to learn to keep their egos in check, deal with doubt and failure, and persevere. In short, as the world became more complex, King George V's and VI's humanity became disproportionately and substantially more important to their effective functioning as Kings than their kingliness.

Something similar is happening in the world of leaders and leadership today. Simpler times have departed, and they haven't left a forwarding address. We live in a VUCA world (a term coined by the US Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, USA):

Volatile – unexpected, unstable challenges of unknown duration

Uncertain – change is certain; degree, direction, and extent are not

Complex – an overwhelming number of interconnected parts and variables

Ambiguous – precedents don't exist; a world of unknown unknowns

Like the two Kings, leaders are having to *do* and *be* a lot more. And just as the Kings discovered, today's leaders are fast learning that it's not their "kingliness"—how they show up and whether they have all the necessary accoutrements typically associated with leaders—that determines their effectiveness in dealing with the myriads of complex and multifaceted conflicts confronting them. It's not even the smartness and brilliance of their minds. Or whether they've attended executive development programs at Ivy League schools, whether they believe in the Jack Welch way or the McKinsey way, or some other "Guru-of-the-day" way. That's not enough, and in many cases irrelevant. In today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world (VUCA), leadership success is a function of something deeper, something more enduring than technical knowhow and leadership skills. It's a function of the leader's humanity—who they are, what they stand for, what they are willing to fight for, and what they are willing to accept and endure. Because what's in the leader's head may be smart and potent, but what's *within the leader* that guides what's *in the leader's head* is even more potent, because it is wiser.

Accordingly, the most important asset of leaders is not the smartness of their minds, it's the wisdom of their souls. In "The

Symposium,” Plato suggested that one of the greatest privileges of a human life is to become a midwife to the birth of the soul in another—a wiser soul to make the world a better place. Leadership, too, is a privilege. It has the potential to change the world and make it a better place. But for that potential to materialize, a significant shift has to take place first: leaders have to experience an inner awakening, a renewed sense of self-awareness.

To cultivate and nurture this inner awakening and self-awareness, like the two King Georges, everyday leaders need to augment their existing knowledge and skills by seeking out and learning from a new set of teachers. Traditional leadership training alone, albeit impressive, isn’t sufficient, because it targets mainly the leader’s head. Granted, talk of EQ (emotional quotient, or emotional intelligence) is widespread. But emotional sensitivity and empathy for others and one’s own needs, is not the same thing as inner wisdom. What today’s leaders need are teachers who can help them travel deep within, and reveal to them their own humanity. This book regards the world’s immortal poems as peerless in this regard, hence the title, “Awakening A Leader’s Soul: Learnings Through Immortal Poems.”

The primary goal of an inner awakening is nudging leaders to reimagine and reshape their thinking on the nature and dynamics of leadership. This rethinking on the role and consequences of leadership should, in turn, guide leaders to adopt a wiser calculus on how they exercise their privilege of power and resources, and for whose benefit. This entire system, from inner awakening to a conscious desire to use power and resources to increase the well-being and prosperity of the greater many, not just the privileged few, is what this book calls “soulful leadership.” Accordingly, the

book's main goals are to acquaint readers with the idea and practice of soulful leadership, and encourage them to embrace its practice.

At this juncture, some readers may wonder if these goals—and hence the book—are relevant only for people holding traditional leadership positions in business, politics, non-profits, and other civic institutions. No doubt, this book is relevant for them. *But not only for them.* This book's themes and ideas are relevant for all individuals, or groups of individuals, who have access to power and resources and the opportunity to use them. From this perspective, even though parents, teachers, priests, and nurses may not be considered leaders in the traditional sense of the term, they are in fact leaders because they have the potential to use their power and resources for purely selfish gains, or to make the world a better place. Consequently, they, and others like them, are also an audience for soulful leadership ideas and behaviors discussed in this book.

Other readers may reflect on the book's principal theme, "soulful leadership," and wonder what lies ahead. After all, "soul" is an intellectually-charged, emotion-filled word. It evokes spontaneous thoughts of morality, righteousness, and ethics – good vs. bad, right vs. wrong, ethical vs. unethical. But this book doesn't deal with any of the above-mentioned pieties. This book is not about spirituality or religion, it's not a sermon on ethics, and it's not a monologue on corporate social responsibility (CSR).

This book has an unabashedly pragmatic focus: wellbeing and prosperity. Not just of the privileged few who control power and resources, but of the greater many. This book asks a simple, but extremely pragmatic and relevant question: "Is it possible to have a meaningful discussion on leaders and leadership without inquiring whose needs leaders aim to fulfill, and whose needs they sacrifice?"

This book says, “NO.”

The principal passion of this book is scripting a new narrative for leaders and leadership. A narrative that obsesses less over leader’s traits and decision making style, such as charisma and empowerment, and significantly more about generating wellbeing and prosperity, and overseeing its distribution in an equitable and responsible way. Because if it’s always—and only—the privileged few who stand to gain and prosper, then the needs of everyday employees will always be sacrificed. Because everyday employees need the money, they will show up for work, but pass through the working day unengaged and uninvolved, their bodies present, but their imagination, creativity, and enterprise absent. Surely, leaders and leadership can do better than that.

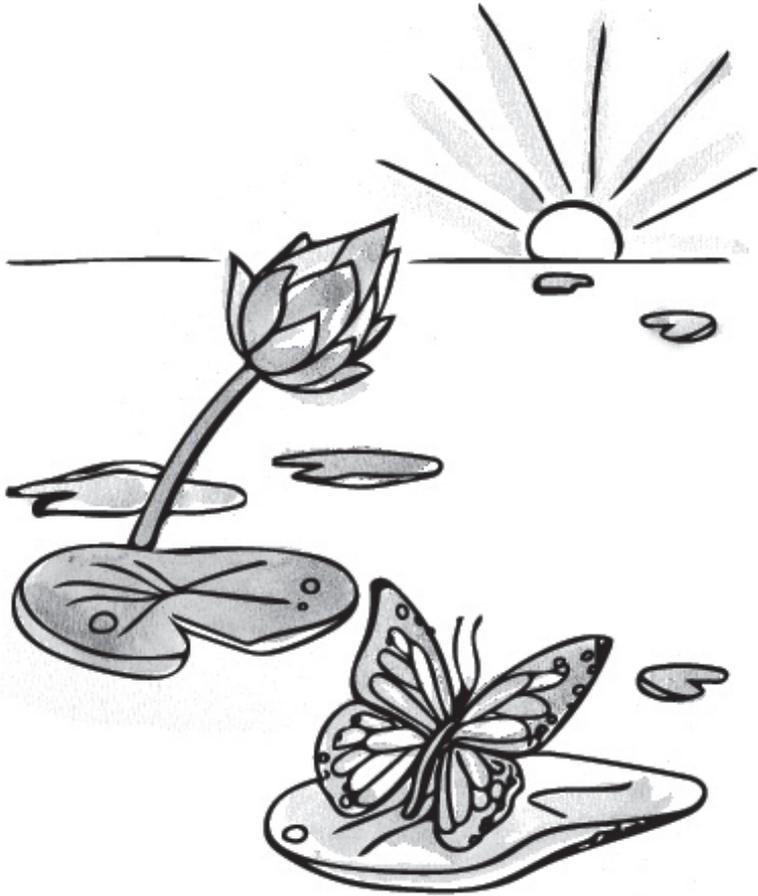
The book scripts its intended new narrative of leaders and leaderships through several essays that address characteristics of soulful leadership, like in-check egos, the importance of doubt, and the value of perseverance. Though the essays are independent and stand alone, the characteristics they discuss are interlinked and intertwined. They work together and holistically. Two examples: “doubt” helps rein in the “ego” and keep it in check, while “self-reliance” promotes “substance, healthy risk taking, and experimentation.” In this regard, this book is different from others. The various essays don’t merely speak to a checklist of characteristics and values. They address a holistic system of reimagining the nature and dynamics of leaders and leadership. The characteristics work in concert, so paucity in one area can’t be compensated by abundance in another.

Each essay is structured to enable readers to journey within, rethink and reimagine their humanity, and emerge committed to

embracing and practicing soulful leadership. Each essay features poetry and is anchored by a preeminent poem written by such immortal poets as William Shakespeare, William Blake, T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Jalal ad-Din Rumi, and a few modern poets worthy of immortality, such as Rainer Maria Rilke, Kahlil Gibran, Czeslaw Milosz, and Wislawa Szymborska. Briefly, the goal of the poems is to illuminate the value and importance of the soulful leadership themes of each essay in a way that can't be accomplished by merely appealing to the mind. An entire essay later in this book is dedicated to explaining why poems and poetry are peerless new leadership teachers.

I am acutely aware that an ideal pairing of soulful leadership characteristics and immortal poems is extremely difficult—if not impossible—to achieve. There will always be soulful leadership characteristics that readers feel should have been included, or omitted. Similarly, with poems; some readers may be disappointed at the omission of a poem, and others with the inclusion of one. My apologies to all such readers in advance. But disappointment needn't cause despair. The last section will suggest opportunities for readers to expand the journey that this book has started. There is room for more.

Each essay is also accompanied by a custom, hand-drawn sketch. The goal of the sketches is to offer readers a chance, literally, to float away. Pictures trigger our imaginations and send us on unanticipated journeys. And since one of the avowed goals of this book's journey is to help leaders reimagine their humanity, the sketches are offered as additional vehicles for augmenting readers' engagement with the primary themes of the essays, and with the essence of soulful leadership.



The essays are grouped into four sections:

- The first section introduces the idea and practice of soulful leadership. It makes a case for why today’s world needs more of it, and explains how immortal poems can serve as a new set of teachers to help incumbent and future leaders embrace soulful leadership.
- The second section focuses on characteristics of leaders and how they relate to the practice of soulful leadership—who the leader is, how the leader thinks, and how the leader acts.
- The third section takes readers beyond the world of leaders to worlds that soulful leaders should engage with—people, communities, cultures, and the planet—if they are to make the world a better place.
- The last section is about “faring forward,” because the journey is long and demanding.

So Krishna, as when he admonished Arjuna

On the field of battle...

Not fare well.

But fare forward, voyagers.

T.S. Eliot, “The Dry Salvages; Four Quartets”

The seeds for faring forward are sown throughout the book. At the end of each essay, readers are encouraged to *Think About*, *Talk About*, and *Act On* the essay’s theme. Through these simple acts of thinking, talking, and acting on the various characteristics of soulful leadership, readers can, in their own sphere of existence, embrace its essential ideas and practice them in personally meaningful and relevant ways.

This prologue is an invitation to begin a journey. I hope, dear readers, you will accept it and stay till the end. The essays, every line of every poem, and the sketches are eager to say hello and share their messages of soulful leadership with you. Let's meet them.