

Prologue

WATER

The Significance of Water as Life-Metaphor

In time and with water, everything changes.

– Leonardo da Vinci¹

Water, in all its forms, is what carries the knowledge of life throughout the universe.

– Anthony T. Hincks²

Ever since I was a young child, I have paid attention to the elements around me, having an acute response to sounds, visual aesthetics and the interplay of light and dark in the world. I now realize how much my lifelong fascination with natural surroundings has shaped this approach to leadership in my more than two decades serving as an academic and a practitioner in the field of leadership studies and development. I studied environmental biology and theology stemming from this love of natural systems and the mysterious significance of the relationship of the elements to each other. Earth, fire, air, water and the organisms dependent on them, intermingle and sometimes clash with each other to create ever-evolving landscapes, in their extremes either stunningly breathtaking or devastating beyond measure.

On occasion, as I scroll through tens of thousands of nature photographs I have taken over the years, I note that most pictures focus on some aspect of water: waves, rivers, rain, glaciers, icebergs, clouds, boat wakes, landscapes punctuated by water-flows or reflections shimmering up from mirrored surfaces. I am indeed keen on this one element above the others, even as a land-dweller, though I never wish to separate it from the complexity of its life with its companion elements. Water loses its meaning and purpose without interplay with earth, fire and air, like hot springs evolving from interaction with volcanic lava, creating steam, moisture, and in large areas, whole weather systems. The cycles of the elements flow together much like liquid itself.

Strangely, water in its three primary forms exhibits the properties of all the other elements: the translucence of cloud as vapor, or invisible steam (like air), the solidity of ice (like earth) and flowing transience (like fire).³ Water in its liquid and vapor states also does not have noticeable form of its own above the molecular level; it takes the shape of whatever contains it. At the same time, it does not dissipate unless it manifests as vapor or steam. So, while water holds together as hydrogen and oxygen, it also flows. It shows structural integrity of make-up and is agile and, at times, unpredictable. The element of water exhibits myriad paradoxes: it is both contained and free; it is both gentle and strong; it is buoyant and heavy; it covers and reflects; it has depth and breadth; it nourishes and erodes.

Water is the foundation for life because it can nurture, but it is an element almost always in flux. It has the power to give and sustain life and to carry pieces of the planet, including humanity, from here to there. It also has the power to flood and destroy in massive, turbulent strength. Lack of water also devastates all life, allowing wind to do its erosive work on the land to create desert, where very few species are able to dwell.

This substance also evokes a human response in us. As poet-writer Eila Carrico says:

We have an innate sense that the place where land meets water is a liminal space, a space with a personality and an agenda of her own. She acts as a

gatekeeper between the surface layers of awareness and the less traversed depths of our individual psyches. It is she who chooses when and how and why to open that carefully guarded threshold. If we spend enough time at the edge of the water, she will consider this an invitation to splay open our souls, and we will eventually have to confront the unseen depths of our watery past.⁴

Two summers ago, I picked up a beautiful green and red-layered stone the size of my hand from a beach on the western Scottish island of Iona. It shone in the waves and I was enamored with its uniqueness. The waves played happily with it, and yet I was acutely aware that this stone had been shorn off its parent rock sometime not so long ago, judging from its rough edges. There were no other stones around like it in shape but there were many larger rocks with the same deep, startling color patterns, worn smooth. Somehow, this stone was brought to shore in its new and lovely form, like the other stones but, before its journey, it had “experienced” a split that seemed sudden and harsh based on the ragged gouges on its edges. The power of water to split stone and move it is much akin to Carrico’s words: water can splay open not only rock but our own souls, particularly when we are confronted by pressures and changes.

In Celtic traditions, bodies of water are thought to be imbued with the qualities of healing, purification, wisdom and transformation. Rivers connect to poetic wisdom-sayings and divine inspiration. Wells or springs are associated with sacred knowledge and yet can cause harm. Whirlpools, waterfalls and sacred vessels carry prophesy and other divine qualities.⁵

In several Native American traditions, water is connected with feminine roles and symbolism:

While men would typically hunt for game, women were expected to gather water and conduct ceremonies to preserve this vital resource. Water’s life force was symbolized by its rush from the mother preceding birth. Protecting the purity of springs is still a deep

spiritual responsibility felt by Sokaogon people, who believe that surface water and groundwater represent the lifeblood of *Nookomis oki*, or Grandmother Earth.⁶

All major world religions understand water as the medium for purification, either before rituals or at times of great change. Some use water as a symbol or means for rites of passage in the faith, as in Christian baptism. Hinduism declares daily ablutions an obligation; pilgrimage is always to a holy place near rivers or other bodies of water, and funerals are conducted at burial sites next to water. Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, several African religions and Islam have water purifying rituals for the body after death. Prayer traditions in Judaism and Hinduism connect to ritual washing. Ultimately, water has mystical implications for spiritual and religious traditions and rituals, in addition to providing a necessary element for life and a metaphor for life's journey.

I chose water as the metaphor signifying paradox for the conversation in this book. We human beings live in similar paradoxes – contained and free, gentle and strong, buoyant and heavy, hiding and shining forth, living in our soul-depths and at other times expansively. We are nourished or diminished. In between the seeming contradictory states of the paradox⁷ is the “and,” the fluid ability to hold two things in one space at the same time. This flow of life cannot be denied. In the flow, we experience thresholds where we pass over particular points or spaces into new space and time. It is the threshold and the in-between, or liminal, space that transitions us forward along the connecting line of our paradoxical points. Like water, we are always moving, transitioning from “this” to “that.” Traveling through transition, or threshold of change, has its own challenges and it is in this liminal time and space that the essence of water can instruct us.

Leaders Moving into Unknown Waters

In the midst of the human desire for safety and certainty, and the fearful suspicion that often arises when that security seems absent, this study calls for a new kind of leadership.

Human beings seem to keep seeking ultimate control of physical, emotional and spiritual concerns, affecting the state of the planet through a particularly anxious lens of ethical and moral decision-making. My hope is that my words will be in conversation with your spirit so that together we learn to live and lead differently in our spheres of influence.

I invite us into an awareness of the movements in our lives, with particular focus on the liminal, or in-between spaces, where transitions are afoot. The threshold-crossing⁸ nature of liminal space creates potential for learning-adventure. In this space, to extend our water metaphor, we can ride the waves or swim deep into the depths. We encounter our need for the other elements (air, solid ground, heat) while we are buoyed by water's nurture. We "intersect" with our own bodies and elements that are not part of us, though we carry water inside of us.⁹ Water flows through us and also carries our beings to new places. Paradoxically, we retain who we are while we change at the same time.

How we learn to flow is critical for formation and maturing into flourishing. This book itself moves through liminal space, starting at equilibrium (where we start), moving to threshold space (liminality) to a new home (future equilibrium). Part I explores why attending to liminal space matters for experiencing meaningful transition. Discussion about starting the journey and creating openness to the entry of threshold space follows. We begin the separation from the familiar and move into middle space. Each chapter in Part II covers a facet of water as metaphor, namely, as a way to imagine being and leading in liminal space as we traverse the moving waters of transition. Part III brings us home with transformed understandings of ourselves in relation to others, incorporating us in new ways in previous contexts.

My intent is to focus on persons who are in leadership roles in a variety of capacities and contexts, calling them to create awareness through their own journeys so that they might invite others into similar space. Leaders who do not do this awareness work are disingenuous if they wish to evoke such work in others. Therefore, there are two purposes that can be utilized here: immersion for leaders attending to transitional

spaces; and subsequent invitation for those whom they lead to enter these spaces for the purpose of powerful, positive change in one's place of work and in relational connections. Inviting groups of people into liminal work invites them into a particular kind of innovative and transformative space for agile, creative movement in business, social, and religious enterprises.

This book invites you to enter liminal space by crossing from certainty into a threshold of adventure as a way to experience transitions toward richer relationships, higher awareness, expansive productivity, deeper meanings, greater resilience and intersections yet undiscovered. Its purpose is to counter the polarization that is now the norm in our world with development of a third way of leading and living that embraces paradox for the benefit of relationships, well-being and greater freedom.

Unlike many books on group dynamics and conflict, this is not a book of checklists designed for a quick fix. I presume that journeys into the liminal are not prescribed with outcomes based on skill sets alone. My intention in these chapters is to create a "container" for meaningful work that good leader-facilitators can take and use for their own purposes and in their own fashions. The work is based on dialogue and intentional participation in liminal space, with water as our guiding metaphor, pointing to creating a greater good for our work and our societies.

As we begin, poet David Whyte invites us into the water:¹⁰

Where Many Rivers Meet

All the water below me came from above.
All the clouds living in the mountains
gave it to the rivers,
who gave it to the sea, which was their
dying.

And so I float on cloud become water,
central sea surrounded by white mountains,
the water salt, once fresh,

cloud fall and steam rush, tree roots and
tide bank,
leading to the rivers' mouths
and the mouths of the rivers sing into the
sea,
the stories buried in the mountains
give out into the sea
and the sea remembers
and sings back,
from the depths,
where nothing is forgotten.

SAMPLE