



Contemplating compost: Leadership lessons from the natural world



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An everyday compost bin may seem a long way from popular images of leadership, but a bin in our garden provided an insight from the natural world about leadership. For two years, we had gradually filled one up with waste and leftovers, rejected and unloved vegetable matter. Last Spring, I tentatively removed the bottom flap. My garden fork dug into a marvellously vibrant organic growing medium. After a long period in the dark, this rejected matter provided a rich opportunity for new life. If leadership is about creating an environment where people can thrive, compost has something to tell us.

This wasn't the first time I had found images from the natural world helpful: some years ago, I wrote an article for MBA students suggesting that the tangled web of a rainforest might provide a more sustainable model for our organisations than highly mechanised prairies.¹ This current article collects insights from a number of disciplines: from my own background as a geologist studying ecosystems to insights from complexity theories and psychology. But we start with theology.

On being comfortably out of control

I wonder how much our understandings of leadership are influenced by traditional readings of the first creation story in Genesis. A cosmic deity separates light from darkness, dry land from water. The project of controlling chaos and imposing order is even split into neat phases. Contrast that with a view that welcomes the chaos and sees the creative potential of emergence.² At an everyday level, we stare in wonder at huge termite mounds, with their ultra-efficient air conditioning and waste disposal systems. Yet they are the result of a self-organising system,

rather than a carefully planned construction project. If nothing else, a social media world of rapid dissemination of information encourages leaders to contemplate that they may not be in control. For leaders, the shift from a Newtonian world of cause-and-effect to a post-Newtonian world of emergence and self-organisation is a profound one. Leaders traditionally crave control, and the psychological need for a secure base in times of uncertainty is one to which we shall return.

Frank Barrett combines insights from careers as a jazz musician and management professor. Citing such diverse authors as Meg Wheatley and Ralph Stacey, he writes how *'systems are most creative when they operate with a combination of order and chaos'*.³ Barrett refers to the description of systems as 'chaordic', a term coined by Visa's founder, Dee Hock. The missiologist Alan Hirsch picks up the concept, referring to the need for a chaordic ecclesiology.⁴

Yet Newtonian images abound. A recent book, widely read in Methodist circles on both sides of the Atlantic, is explicit in discussing change: 'The advantage of using a lever is that we can move things that otherwise we could never budge.'⁵ Contrast this cause-and-effect world with one where leaders co-create secure environments where people can explore and new things emerge.

Disturbance is vital for health

The image of a deoxygenated stagnant pond reminds us that healthy ecosystems involve disturbance. Ponds with water flowing in and out survive and thrive. Yet how often do people crave to keep things as they are? The

prophets, from reformers such as Amos to today's people of God with a message, are ignored, silenced, rejected.

Writing from the discipline of family systems theory, Peter Steinke recognised the importance of this when considering what makes a congregation healthy. 'Some organic processes promote growth through decay, shedding, and breakdown. Some organic growth is downward – a deepening, a rooting, a maturing process.' He adds that, 'A healthy congregation is one that actively and responsibly addresses or heals its disturbances, not one with an absence of troubles.'⁶

Dissatisfaction with the status quo is often a key element of leadership. Complex adaptive systems show an ability to adapt, to learn, through continuous feedback. There is a close link between learning and leadership. But learning can happen in surprising ways. Consider two examples. First, Benedict's rule indicates that the abbot must call the whole community together when facing a big decision, because the Lord may reveal the way to the youngest member. Secondly, the respected design consultancy IDEO emphasises the importance of reverse mentoring, where senior executives are mentored by younger staff.

For all the benefits the positive psychology movement has brought, one criticism of this approach is that it makes unrealistic expectations about people demonstrating happiness, especially in an organisational setting (are churches exempt from this criticism?). In a review of emotions in organisations, Hillary Efenbein noted that, 'if we are happy all the time we will lose the evolutionary value of negative emotions'.⁷

'Change and decay in all around I see'

Whatever the pastoral and cultural significance of HF Lyte's hymn *Abide with me*, I am not sure how helpful his attitude to change has been. An Anglican bishop asked me what my work involved. On receiving the answer, 'I work with people going through change', the Lyte-inspired word association was immediate. 'Ah, change and decay', came the response.

Such an attitude is disappointing, and hardly scriptural. 'When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground' (Ps. 104.30). 'If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!' (2 Cor. 5.17) 'The one who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' (Rev. 21.5). Hebrew and Christian scriptures contain insights into both continuous and discontinuous change, affecting all aspects of the earthly environment. For a faith centred around death and resurrection, we should be more hopeful. As the opening reflection on compost shows, the rejected can bring new life. Those who have experienced redundancy, or other traumatic change to their lives, since the 2008 financial tsunami may recognise the scenario. Some may even be able to apply Jesus' words to themselves: 'unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds' (Jn 12.24).

One image that I have found particularly helpful in addressing this situation is the S-curve. Slow growth (perhaps hidden at first) is followed by a main period of growth. But, as spring and summer give way to autumn and winter, growth slows and leads to hibernation or death. The S-curve operates at many levels: you can map both individuals and organisations, indeed whole civilisations over centuries, against this framework. The period between S-curves can be the most turbulent. Yet, harnessing our earlier thoughts about chaos, this may ultimately be a creative period.⁸

Stability and exploration

Herds of wildebeest on the savannah have learned something over the evolutionary timescale. If they all stayed in the same place, they would use up their food source and die out. If they went looking for food individually, they would be picked off by their predators ... and die out. To survive, the herd needs to balance stability and exploration. We find echoes in two different traditions: psychology and the Rule of St Benedict.

Attachment theory originated with John Bowlby's work studying infants and parents. It has subsequently been extended to leadership, and the relationships between those deemed leaders and followers.⁹ A key concept, associated with Mary Ainsworth's anthropological observations in East Africa, is that of the secure base. A child thrust into the noisy environment of a birthday party may initially cling, often literally, to a parent or carer's legs. Yet when the time comes to go home, the child cannot be found. Their natural inclination to explore kicks in: the attraction of toys, other children and/or cakes enables them to leave their secure base. Latest research shows that such secure bases may not be people: I have observed actuaries finding security in their profession amid the turmoil of a three-way corporate merger.

The Benedictine tradition describes something similar, especially though the vows of stability and conversion of life. A former Abbot of Ampleforth captures the balance between stability and exploration in describing the latter rule as, 'a vow to change, to never remain still either in self-satisfied fulfilment or self-denying despair'.¹⁰ Note how this encapsulates what we have discussed above, both in terms of change and decay, and the link between disturbance and health.

It is vital to make explicit that a healthy team needs a mix of stability- and exploration-oriented people. There is often a social pressure to be more exploratory than we are, and to be more attached to people than our natural preference allows. But, as the parable of the sower reminds us, too rapid growth without depth of soil does not yield a sustainable crop (Mk. 4.3–20//). Or, as St Paul writes to the embryonic church in Corinth, they should be like a body with many parts (1 Cor. 12.12–31).

Boundary conditions

The importance of leading from the edge should not surprise followers of one whose earthly life stretched from the back of an inn to outside the city walls at

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1. T Harle, (2007) 'The Prairie and the Rainforest: Ecologies for Sustaining Organisational Change', *Business Leadership Review* 4.3 (2007), pp. 1–15. See also DK Hurst, *The New Ecology of Leadership* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

2. See C Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003).

3. FJ Barrett, *Yes to the Mess: Surprising Leadership Lessons from Jazz* (Boston, MA, Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), p. 70, italics original.

4. A Hirsch & T Catchim, *The Permanent Revolution: Apostolic Imagination and Practice for the 21st Century Church* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012), p. 218f.

5. R Schnase, *Seven Levers: Missional Strategies for Conferences* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2014).

6. PL Steinke, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach* (Herdon, VA: Alban Institute, 1996), pp. viii, 10.

7. Cited by J Lemmergaard & SL Muhr in *Critical Perspectives on Leadership: Emotion, Toxicity, and Dysfunction* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2013), p. 20.

8. For S-curves, including the powerful image of the salmon leap demonstrating the potential of transitioning curves, see PP Robertson,

Golgotha. Indeed, Jesus often seemed more interested in engaging with those whom society deems peripheral, if not literally outcast.

Boundaries are fascinating places. They are places of exchange and discovery. Yet boundaries are also places where we build (literal or metaphorical) walls to define who is inside and who is outside. An organisation's boundaries may be internal (silos) or external. Church leaders should pay attention not only to their physical boundaries, but also to their social media presence, where first encounters may occur.

Boundaries also form a key part of complexity theories, where sensitivity to initial conditions forms a crucial component. This is often referred to as the butterfly effect, after a pioneering conference paper by the meteorologist Edward Lorenz. He questioned whether the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil could trigger a tornado in Texas: complex systems theory suggests an answer in the affirmative is possible. From a leadership perspective, we can see the importance of initial interactions with customers or co-workers.

Seashores lead us etymologically to liminal spaces. Note the parallel with the period between the top of one S-curve and the bottom of the next: liminal periods are times when old certainties have been left behind, but new rules aren't yet in place. We encounter several examples in the scriptures. In Hebrew narrative and self-understanding, the wilderness wanderings can be seen in these terms, as can the exile: 'By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion' (Ps. 137.1) The Gospels record liminal times in the life of Jesus.¹¹

For some, liminal spaces offer a period of creativity and exploration; for others, a frightening period of lost unknowingness. Once again we see links with our earlier discussion: to the formless void of the creation narrative and the secure base in times of uncertainty.

I should add a point about where boundaries are important. In pastoral and professional situations, maintaining appropriate boundaries plays a vital role in developing healthy relationships.

Small things matter

Leadership is often associated with big things: sweeping visions, grand pronouncements, daring deals. Yet I have been increasingly struck how small things matter. Soon after hearing a visionary speech by the Chair of an international hotel group at the INSEAD business school in Fontainebleau, I had a mundane – but highly satisfying – exchange about ordering lunch at a hotel in Reading. It was only as I left that I realised that this hotel belonged to the same group I had heard about in France. This led me to apply the concept of fractals – repeating patterns seen at different levels – to leadership. The Chair and Receptionist had vastly different roles, but I noticed an underlying consistency in culture.

Like so many things we describe as discoveries, this is nothing new. Matthew's Gospel includes a parable of a king who was questioned about a future of feeding

the hungry and clothing the naked. The listeners had no recollection of such actions. 'The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me"' (Mt. 25.40). Leaders and others may, indeed, find themselves 'entertaining angels unaware' (Heb. 13.2, cf. Gen 18.1 ff.).

Consistency in small things is deeply theological. One of my favourite academic journal articles comes from two scholars who, as far as I know, have no faith allegiance. Yet the article's subtitle, 'the extra-ordinarization of the mundane', resonates with an incarnational faith.¹²

Consistency has another important impact. It helps create a zone of psychological safety, as Amy Edmondson has observed in her work with teams. Studying cardiac surgery teams, she noted the role of the leader in creating conditions for team learning. Modest surgeons, who were prepared to admit the possibility of making mistakes, produced far better results than world experts.¹³

Before concluding, we must address a criticism that can be made of this approach. What if the consistency in small actions leads to an outcome which does not constitute a moral good? We see examples from the pages of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* to the scandals in Mid-Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust and elsewhere. Ecological insights suggest two of the key features we have looked at need to be present. First, the importance of disturbance: where criticism is discouraged and dissent crushed, it is unlikely that the system will be healthy. Secondly, information feedback across boundaries is needed. Golding's young boys acted out their brutality on the closed ecosystem of an island. Too often, it takes brave whistle blowers (boundary spanning prophets) to expose such scandals.

Sabbath rest

As this article emerged, I realised it might end up with six main sections. This prompted a final lesson from nature. The need for rest. Ken Costa comes from the relentless world of investment banking, but he includes a perceptive quote from an anonymous author: 'One of the more distracting things about capitalist culture ... is that there is ... no time to vegetate. What I would suggest is more time wasting, less stimulation. We need time to lie fallow like we did in childhood, so we can recuperate ... I think we would benefit greatly from spells of vaguely restless boredom.'¹⁴

Summary

We started by contemplating compost, before moving on via a challenge to the traditional interpretation of the first creation story to surprising leadership lessons from jazz. We have looked at a number of interconnected lessons from the natural world, weaving in biblical and theological material as we go. Some lessons may be counterintuitive and/or induce anxiety, or they may be reassuring: we are not in control, disturbance is good, leadership often happens at the edge, consistency in small things matters. Whatever our reaction, I hope we also recognise the need for rest ... which may lead to a spell of gardening.

Always Change a Winning Team (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Business, 2005).

9. G Kohlireser, S Goldsworthy & D Coombe, *Care to Dare: Unleashing Astonishing Potential through Secure Base Leadership* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012).

10. T Wight OSB in K Dollard, A Marett-Crosby & T Wright, *Doing Business with Benedict* (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 201.

11. E.g. the period in the wilderness after his baptism (Mk. 1.12–13//) and the Garden of Gethsemane (Mk. 14.32–42//). For the latter, see WH Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting* (London: DLT, 1982). I am grateful to Michael Moynagh for introducing me to Vanstone's work, which resonates with many of the concepts we are considering, especially questions of control.

12. M Alvesson & S Sveningsson (2003) 'Managers Doing Leadership: The Extra-ordinarization of the Mundane', *Human Relations*, 56.12 (2003), pp. 1435–59.

13. A Edmondson, *Teaming: How Organizations Learn, Innovate, and Compete in the Knowledge Economy* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012).

14. K Costa, *God at Work* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 114. See also T Horsfall, *Working from a Place of Rest* (Abingdon: BRF, 2010).