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Book Review

Book review of *Leading Beautifully: Educational Leadership as Connoisseurship* (2016) by Fenwick W. English and Lisa Catherine Ehrich*

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In reviewing *Leading Beautifully*, it is only fair I come clean and reveal my bias, that is, I have a belief that the arts afford intrinsic value to humanity, and we have much to gain by engaging with the arts as producers and consumers.



Inevitably there are counter beliefs, along with provocative and worthwhile discussions, and rightly so. When bold statements and claims are made that something has value, or is good for us, questions need to be asked. Who is it good for? Who decides? In the case of the arts and humanities can we place the same value on how we experience an art object, a piece of music or theatre, a literary masterpiece, or a particular philosophy? (Carey 2006); and is it possible to claim that there is value in exposing educational leaders to the arts and humanities, to enable them to grapple with moral and ethical issues, when the marketplace model, based on rational choice theory, eliminates moral issues

from even being considered (p.195)? This is indeed a big ask and one that is explored in

*The artwork shown is *Seeds of Change* by Cathryn Lloyd

Leading Beautifully: Educational Leadership as Connoisseurship (2016) by authors Fenwick W. English and Lisa Catherine Erich.

While I hold a belief that the arts (as a maker and consumer), and humanities improve my life, I am mindful that this may not hold true for others – even though I find it hard to fathom. The provenance (Hill and Lloyd 2015) of this belief emerges from a long association with the arts, design and creative industries, and while I do not believe the arts are a panacea to all of societies woes and challenges, I do believe there is much to be gained by engaging with the arts and humanities.

And so, to review a book that investigates leadership, in particular educational leadership, through an artful and aesthetic lens is bound to pique my curiosity and garner my attention. In *Leading Beautifully* (already I have abbreviated the title of the book), research methodologies such as “portraits”, an ethnographic approach that uses interviews and narratives to create a “life drawing with words” (p.11), which seeks to capture and tell a story about the richness and complexity of human experience, Gestalt psychology and phenomenology are utilised to explore the concept of connoisseurship in relation to leadership. The textual portraits offer an insight into the lives of contemporary artists/creative practitioners, and how these practitioners come to understand their leadership, and the constraints they face in their professional work. These “portraits” are juxtaposed with educational leaders and how they understand their leadership and constraints they face in their professional work.

Other historical portraits are presented and have been classified into three Connoisseur types; (1) Connoisseurs of leaders, for example Giorgio Vasari, (2) connoisseurs of leadership performance, for example Frida Kahlo, and (3) those that are both connoisseurs of their own performance and of other leaders, such as Paul Keating, Winston Churchill and Nelson Mandela; Da Vinci is also included as the connoisseur par excellence who manifested a sophisticated discerning eye across many disciplines (p.10).

Philosophically I am aligned with the intent of the book and what the authors are endeavouring to do. The authors state that leadership is a human centred phenomenon and that “leadership connoisseurship” is a human activity worthy of investigation. Any conversation and attempt to inspire and move leaders from the wasteland of “managerialism” as best practice, to a more human approach gets my vote. We need leaders who think with their heads and hearts and are prepared to find ways that enable them to become better leaders.

The title of the book *Leading Beautifully: Educational Leadership as Connoisseurship* is an intriguing and somewhat complicated title. Leading Beautifully sounds a worthwhile mission. What does it really mean? If Leading Beautifully is an aspiration how can we support people to do that? The authors expose the reader to “dimensions of connoisseurship” and in doing so propose that connoisseurship is about leading beautifully as compared to the conventional notion of leading effectively, which by its nature is minimalist in application (p. xiii). The authors indicate that connoisseurs are not elite, rather that all humans are on a continuum leading to connoisseurship. But what is connoisseurship (I understand the concept from the viewpoint of having fine judgement in terms of art, food and wine), and so what does it mean when linked to leadership?

Within the context of *Leading Beautifully*, connoisseurs acquire a “mental discipline and predisposition to perceive what is before all of us which we don’t see” (p.3). Connoisseurship begins and ends within the mind and requires a discerning eye. The book has multiple ideas running through it and draws on a range of theories to explore the concept of connoisseurship. Through interviews and the development of personal narratives, textual portraits of selected artists and educational leaders are created, and provide an avenue to identify and explore “dimensions of connoisseurship”. For instance ten dimensions of connoisseurship are outlined which include identity, discipline, desire,

aesthetic vision, cultural awareness and reflexivity, understanding of practice, framing, competence experience and knowledgeable perception. The authors compare and assess the strength in which these dimensions are displayed by artists and educational leaders and what that means in terms of connoisseurship. The artists and educational leaders featured are assessed mostly as strong, and are therefore shown to be on a continuum toward connoisseurship.

The book also draws on Elliot Eisner's propositions about how the arts could enhance education (and by extrapolation – as the authors contend - educational leadership), his epistemic frames about the value of the arts, and the cognitive functions that Eisner identifies (p.82-83).

One of the other tables presented, that I find the most interesting, is the comparison of a connoisseurship model of leadership to that of a "managerialist" mindset or model of leadership. The table outlines twenty dimensions (taken from their research) that highlight the differences between the two styles. These include dimensions such as highest value/purpose of leadership, power, emotion and intuition, ethics, values, view of creativity and imagination. So for instance, the connoisseurship model of creativity and imagination is organic and part of the evolution towards artfulness; where as the managerialist model in relation to this dimension is mechanistic and narrowly defined (p. 164-165).

I think this table reflects the heart of what the authors main concerns are in relation to educational leadership, and it is reflected in the following – that managerial leadership as opposed to connoisseurship leadership offers no special sensitivities talents or aesthetic sensibilities. What is currently valued in educational leadership, the authors argue, is conformity and the "economic man", a vision of human decision making that eliminates human subjectivity and emotion, in the pursuit of an ideology masquerading as science, and in doing so dehumanises a vital and important human activity (p.162).

This is reinforced by the following "the penchant for test, test, test, as the sole bench mark for determining leadership efficacy not only misses the mark with leadership, but is singularly destructive and detrimental to the education of the young, not to mention teachers and support staff in the schools" (p. 204). None of this sounds very beautiful and is deeply concerning.

The last chapter is devoted to *Leading Beautifully*, and a call to restoring the human and embodied aspects of educational leadership, at least in equal partnership with the intellectual and cognitive models that prevail. However, before that can happen the authors present two obstacles. The first being "democratic deficit and the hollow state", and the second, the "presence of passive evil", a state in which leaders and administrators cease to ask moral questions due to economic imperatives, measures of efficiency and other benchmarks of alleged productivity.

Since the publication of this book (2016), we continue to see more evidence of "passive evil" where leaders become "moral mutes", cease asking moral questions, and in turn may cause harm (p.194). A recent example of this is the release of the Panama Papers, an unprecedented anonymous leak of documents and records, which implicate Mossack Fonseca, a Panamanian law firm, in the questionable activity of creating anonymous offshore companies around the world to provide financial tax havens for wealthy prominent figures – from politicians, to heads of states, celebrities and criminals. These tax havens and companies have also been linked to crime and corruption (The International Consortium for Investigative Journalists 2016; Süddeutsche Zeitung 2016).

So, how are we to restore a more ethical and human approach to leadership as the obstacles identified in *Leading Beautifully* not only manifest in the education profession? This is a question facing all professions. Our system is failing. Our leaders need help. If

leaders are to move from being one-dimensional, mechanistic, “disembodied automatons” without heart and soul, and evolve to being more humane and human, and ultimately connoisseurs, then exposure to more artful and aesthetic ways of being and engaging in leadership activity provides an alternative path. The authors’ research process, and lines of inquiry, began with artists because they believed that research on school leadership via social sciences would not provide new insights or ways to think about and do educational leadership. The desire to bring new eyes to old landscapes started with a study on creativity, outside of the educational system, and morphed into an exploration involving connoisseurship.

The 21st century is providing complex challenges. To navigate these challenges requires new models of leadership that incorporate head, heart and moral courage. We need, as the book outlines, fully functioning human beings as leaders that are both “rational and emotional”. We need leaders with the capacity and creativity to question, imagine, develop a discerning eye, deal with ambiguity and uncertainty, be able to grapple with ethical considerations, and apply aesthetic sensitivity to complex situations.

Artists often need to draw on more than rational capabilities in their work. They need to dig deep into their emotional repertoire if they are to make work that will move and inspire people. They need to tap a deep well of aesthetic sensitivity if they are to create a compelling story through their artistic endeavour and make a positive contribution to society. Artists have their own challenges – how to earn a living for one – and require resilience. We know of stories where the arts have not always been used for good. Carey (2006) asks the question do the arts make us better, and proposes a cool, rational look at the claims made for art. He argues that although ethical questions are by their nature insoluble we cannot avoid making decisions about them. The same is true for aesthetics, there are no absolutes, we get to choose, and like ethical choices how we view, and engage in the arts, and make art, shapes our lives.

At times there is too much going on in *Leading Beautifully* and possibly too many avenues taken in the one book. It is academic, somewhat slippery, and not easily defined. I question how leaders in their “busy” and demanding working lives would be able to easily take the concepts within the book and use them practically in their day to day leadership. I wonder how many leaders would value the opportunity to explore their leadership in terms of connoisseurship, and to contemplate where they are on the continuum of connoisseurship? And more importantly would they care? I can imagine some of the responses this would provoke. That type of inquiry requires a readiness and willingness to reflect and question one’s professional practice ... and yet we need leaders that are prepared to do just that.

From a practitioner, coaching, facilitative perspective, it is possible to take some of the themes from *Leading Beautifully*, and work with leaders to unpack the qualities of connoisseurship. The book can provide an avenue for reflection and discussion, a platform from which provocative questions can be asked to explore the qualities of leadership connoisseurship, and how it relates to their understanding of being and doing leadership. Another avenue is the exploration of leadership through the creation of textual and visual portraits or artefacts, an artful and aesthetic way for leaders to create a vision of themselves as connoisseurs of their own performance, as well as explore portraits of other leaders. The hands on creation of portraits in this way provides an opportunity for leaders to “get on the balcony” (Heifetz and Laurie 1997), develop an aesthetic and discerning eye, gain new perspectives and re-enter their leadership as a “composite portrait” (p. 203) of connoisseurship qualities inspired by the arts and humanities.

“Quixotic” is a descriptor I have seen for *Leading Beautifully*. The book may well be viewed in this way, partly because we are stuck in a particular leadership paradigm; partly because we have become cynical and sceptical about leadership. We want so much from our leaders and many seem to fall short of our expectations. What do we expect? The

times they are a changing – as they always have – many people argue we are living in far more complex times. If so, then new adaptive forms and styles of leadership are needed. The challenges we face cannot be solved by one group of people or a particular mindset. We have an opportunity to learn from other disciplines, to collaborate, and it is our responsibility to do so. We need to share stories and experiences from different worlds that will help us grow and become more thoughtful, creative, compassionate and possibly beautiful leaders.

The authors state the book is for educational practitioners, professors, policy developers and researchers who want to understand the process of leading. This was not a simple book to review; there are many threads to follow which in turn makes it a little convoluted and not easily digested in one sitting. That, in itself, may be a reflection on what is needed from leadership in the 21st century; an approach that is more nuanced, multi-dimensional and not easily categorised. Do leaders in our educational and corporate settings have time to consider such things, or believe there is value in stepping outside their existing landscape? Do they have the courage to venture on a new path when faced with the extreme rationalism that confronts them in organisational life?

My personal belief in the value of the arts (and humanities) led me (maybe not always beautifully mind you) to undertake a doctoral degree, that explored how and why the arts are worthy of being incorporated into organisational life; particularly as a pathway for learning and development (Lloyd 2011). At the time, one particular academic supervisor suggested that what I was talking about was a moral endeavour, a suggestion I quickly dismissed as being far too grandiose. I now appreciate more than ever that leaders of organisations are facing complex challenges that regularly require creative and ethical decision-making. What I do believe is that my own way of being and understanding the world is deeply informed and inspired by engaging in aesthetic experiences, and that the arts and humanities have the potential to deepen our understanding of what it means to be human, if we allow ourselves to go there.

Leading Beautifully begins the exploration of educational leadership from outside the constraints of its own field, which is significant. If we are to gain new insights this is a path we all need to take. The book provides some new perspectives and potential models to explore a well-trodden path. It's good to see some of the contemporary thinkers of aesthetics and leadership referenced (Adler, Taylor, Bathurst, Ladkin, Barry, and Strati). When it comes to theories, the question always, is how do we take these concepts, if we think they are worthy, and turn them into practice? Ultimately *Leading Beautifully* has the potential to be of benefit to anyone who is prepared to take the time, or realises the time has come, to reflect on their current leadership practice and take a road less travelled if they are to lead with heart and head.

Ten years on from when I started my doctoral research the literature investigating the links between the arts, aesthetics, management, leadership and organisational development has flourished. *Leading Beautifully* is another worthwhile addition to the oeuvre.

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About the Author

Cathryn Lloyd is Founder, Director of Maverick Minds Pty Ltd. Maverick Minds designs, facilitates and coaches powerful and flexible learning experiences for leaders, managers, teams and professional individuals to help shift thinking, gain new perspectives and create positive long-term change. Cathryn loves working with others to create a space for inquiry and learning. Her experience across the arts, design, education, and business management sectors provides the foundation for a unique approach to the design and delivery of professional development workshops and programs. Maverick Minds clients include government, corporate, not for profit, universities, individuals and groups. Cathryn holds a research Doctorate in Creative Industries. She is Australia's first certified creativity coach with the Creativity Coaching Association.

About the Artwork:

Seeds of Change by Cathryn Lloyd

The image included in this review is one of my artworks. It is from a series of experimental mixed media artworks, a composition of cardboard, textile, seeds and paint. While reviewing *Leading Beautifully* I returned to the artworks and this particular image spoke to me in terms of the qualities and ambiguities of what it means to be a leader. Leadership is not a linear path, it is an ongoing developmental journey, one that needs to be explored through different lenses.