

Casting Vision or Hurling Harpoons? *Avoiding White Whales in Leadership*



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“Blacksmith, I set ye a task. Take these harpoons and lances. Melt them down. Forge me new weapons that will strike deep and hold fast. But do not douse them in water; they must have a proper baptism. What say ye, all ye men? Will you give as much blood as shall be needed to temper the steel?”

— Captain Ahab in Melville’s *Moby Dick* —

Tempering the Steel With Blood

Hanging on my office wall is an old-fashioned whaling harpoon. It is neither the typical ornamental touch of a business workspace nor a comfort to the pupil who frequents my office for his less than virtuous character. The weapon certainly catches most people’s attention and elicits some questions, but it confuses most. As a symbol, the metaphorical meaning is meant to curb unwanted character. More specifically, the harpoon reminds me to keep my unhealthy ambitions at bay. Like captain Ahab, many leaders (myself included) have strong—sometimes intoxicating—desires to pursue a goal oftentimes at the expense of their shipmates, their team. Like the self-absorbed Narcissus, they are captivated by their own reflections in the water; they fail to see those around them, blind to those who may have long since drowned in all their “efficient” delegations. In tempering the steel to slay the beast of obsessive dreams and fantasies, drawing blood from the crew often proves fatal to the mission as a whole.

So why the strange whale-killing weapon? The occasional bibliophile might identify the literary reference and understand all its psychological significance, but the harpoon is mostly for myself. It confronts me daily with warnings against pride, ambition, and a disoriented sense of mission. Although these lessons are intended for me personally, I believe they speak to the temptations all leaders face. This is also where the harpoon serves a

further function: it reminds me that excellent leaders and heads of schools must absolutely read the classics. As important as the works of Partick Lencioni are, and as helpful as *Good to Great* is, we must read the classics, not simply for our students’ sake but also for ourselves and our staff.

Casting Vision, not Harpoons

The idol of respectability is many leaders’ White Whale, and narcissism is the wind in their sail. While some leaders should be casting vision, they instead hurl harpoons at allusive monsters shimmering not in the deep sea, but in the depths of their own hearts. In our context, these Leviathans take many forms. Legacy-building can become an obsession, resulting in a capital campaign, book project, or lecture circuit that takes leaders away from their staff and faculty who need direction and accountability. If unchecked, a desire for enrollment growth can result in a quantity mindset, resulting in a compromised admissions process that encourages parental abdication and discourages healthy school culture. The White Whale donor may seem the perfect solution to meet the many curricular, programmatic, or enrollment demands of our constituency, but such a donor may also require a seat at the table the next time the board revisits the school’s strategic plan. And stiff tuition increases may allow us to raise staff salaries, thus attracting and retaining talented faculty, but these same teachers may not love students or pursue learning for any motivation beyond their own interests. Campaigns, donors, growth, and credentialed faculty are all important things, but when we pursue them with a harpoon in hand, our ambition can blind us. Unsurprisingly, a narcissist imbued with the impetuosity and the psychological myopia of Captain Ahab can still hit a target as large as *Moby Dick*. However, his voyage will be circuitous and the result of too much navel-

gazing in his private cabin. Such self-absorption precludes his ability to cast a vision that both serves the team and keeps his ship resolute in its original mission. This is where acknowledging “reality” is critical.

Reality Is Your Friend

To be a visionary leader, one must “see” properly. This requires a firm grasp on reality and the ability to sit with pain in what may feel like a thankless role at times. Relationships are hard. Criticism is tough. And conflict can get messy. Inasmuch as visionaries struggle to process the pain and stress of school leadership in emotionally healthy ways, these same stimuli can tempt them to respond with Ahab-like “productivity.” Busy and well-respected they may be, leaders who operate from a position of insecurity often find themselves unwittingly tempering lances and hurling them at apparitions in the sea (e.g., upward social mobility). Wise stewardship may appear to be the reason for their mates’ wild rowing, but their final destination is anywhere but inside the Pequod. And this outward-focused pursuit becomes another White-whale fantasy world of disintegrated visionaries; their ambition blinds them to the real needs inside the whaleboat.

What might this look like? Leaders can report culture surveys selectively in their favor, enforce policy ambiguously, delegate aimlessly, and publish statistics disingenuously. When real people push back (parents, faculty, board members), they can easily find ways to justify their personal whale hunt. Or worse, they turn into faultfinders who rely on satire and other forms of psychological manipulation to get others to question their perception of reality. Tragically, though our ships may be taking in water, neurosis and tunnel vision can lure the best of us to hurl harpoons at monsters.

Fantasy is not bad in and of itself. Epics certainly have their place. We all need more myth and metaphor in our lives, especially in the face of tempests, madmen, and legacy addicts bent on thwarting the mission or breaking the fellowship. However, vision is only 20/20 when it corresponds

with truth, and myth is life-giving only when we have an accurate view of ourselves. If the truest myth is the incarnation, then leadership of the incarnational sort is the most life-giving kind. Life-giving leaders are emotionally accessible, personally approachable foot-washers who love and speak truth. In contrast, life-taking leaders allow selfish ambition to create a myth in which the real-world fades away, leaving those close to us in the wake of disordered desire. If we think to ourselves, “[A]ll my means are sane,” it does not follow that “the motive and object” of our success are not mad.¹ For if we think only about the *means* of the mission and not the *ends*—whether it be a concern for perfectly ordered org charts or through a punctilious HR director—we still could easily capsize our school, with Moby Dick nearby, snickering out of his blowhole.

Be Present, Be Starbuck

The ideal captain remains on his quarterdeck with monocular in hand and his crew in full view. When the storms rise, he stands at the helm grasping the wheel with death grips. Viewing each sailor as indispensable to the mission and much more than mere flesh and bone, he jumps into whaleboats with them when wakes and spouts are nearby. Consider Melville’s Starbuck, who in his scruples is both principled and virtuous. Starbuck knows the names, stories, desires, and loves of everyone on his crew. In short, he is a reliable, present, emotionally accessible leader. In contrast to Ahab’s unpredictability, Starbuck is an even-keeled man with razor-sharp vision. Hoisting his harpoon astern his whaleboat while following a mammoth baleen, “the sharp fixed glance from his eyes darted straight ahead of the bow, almost seemed as two visible needles in two unerring binnacle compasses.”² Starbuck’s verbal injunctions are also to the point and void of sensationalism; he literally gives his rowing orders in whispers. His entreaties are “soft” and welcomed.³ Starbuck does not need to rely on manipulation, threats, volume, or bribery to get his mates to comply. Grounded fully in the realities that surround him, Starbuck loves his sailors and risks his life for them.

1. From Ahab’s inward thoughts in *Moby Dick* (ch. 41): “[A]ll my means are sane, my motive and my object mad.”

2. Ibid. Ch. 48.

3. Ibid.



Delegation without direction is maddening. Direction without accountability is negligent. And accountability without direction is oppressive. Those Starbucks who run schools or who hold leadership positions know how to give orders from *within* the boat, and they do so after listening well. Even when feedback from their staff seems petty, wise leaders sincerely address the concerns that come to them. They are the kind of leaders with whom others feel comfortable enough to share their concerns and disagreements. With the best interests of the entire crew in mind at all times, they promote collaboration among the team, creating a safe space for all views to be expressed, heard, debated, and respected. No staff member or teacher feels like a pawn. Everyone feels visible, valued, and as if their human dignity and destiny matter.

Also, respites promote a Christian culture of leisure and sabbath that is vital for a classical educational institution, as well as for collaborative reflection and procedural fine-tuning. Breaks not only provide the space and time to recover from the many personal sacrifices offered to obtain the team's strategic goals but they also reorient us to more sacred purposes in our mission as Christ-like educators.

Starbuckian leaders also never jump ship, even in the face of conflict. Rather, they view conflicts as ripe *opportunities* for the team to find creative solutions that serve everyone involved. The degree to which a leader's presence is felt by others is not determined by mere physicality but by the leader's apparent regard for the souls around him or her. Whether it's through weekly tactical meetings with the leadership team, routine check-ins, staff meetings, or one-on-one conferences (planned and unplanned), present leaders go out of their way to

show genuine delight in getting to know their staff. They shouldn't be like Ahab who was locked up in his cabin ignoring peril⁴ or stretched out on his hammock hatching a monomaniacal plot.⁵ Generative captains eschew the faintest hints of narcissism by joyfully accommodating the needs around them. Rather than drain the sailors' blood to temper the steel, they are the lifeblood that gives strength and vitality to everyone on board.

Kill the Fatted Calf, Not Fatted Whale

A sense of purpose drives most human beings and, when potent, enables them to break seemingly impenetrable boundaries. We all want to believe that what we are doing is worth doing, but it's not enough to be told as much. In chapter 36 of *Moby Dick*, the "chick" in Ahab finally "pecks the shell," and he puts his charisma on display by delivering a rousing speech before his crew about his true intentions to hunt down the White Whale.⁶ He dramatically appeals to the sailors' blood lust, tempts them with Spanish gold ounces, and, with the consent of all but one to the newfound mission, celebrates with partying and drinking wine. As contradictory as it may seem, celebrations are vital for productivity, but there is no honor in celebrations that elevate the egoistic missions of mad visionaries or the ceaseless pace of a workaholic taskmaster. There are physical and emotional limits to the amount of blood, sweat, and tears one can offer to the god of productivity. The second mate, Stubb, once confronted his one-legged captain at night for his "heavy, lumber-like pace" upon the noisy planks immediately above the sailors' sleeping quarters. Ahab snapped with passionate scorn, "Down, dog, and kennel!"⁷ Although we are not likely to snap at our staff in the same manner, is it possible that our attempts to micromanage them may sound like the peg-leg poundings of Ahab?

A wise leader recognizes the basic human need for decompression, camaraderie, and the commemoration of attaining benchmarks. Celebrations have a way of making teammates feel human, as if their worth as a child of God, dignity in

4. Ibid. Ch. 28.

5. Ibid. Ch. 41.

6. "[T]he chick that's in him pecks the shell" are the words of Stubb in *Moby Dick*, ch. 36.

7. Ibid. Ch. 29.



being made in His image, and unique skills are an integral part of the team's missional success. Hosting a party, or authorizing a true break, communicates to our team, "I, as a limited human being, sympathize with your humanity." Also, respites promote a Christian culture of leisure and sabbath that is vital for a classical educational institution, as well as for collaborative reflection and procedural fine-tuning. Breaks not only provide the space and time to recover from the many personal sacrifices offered to obtain the team's strategic goals but they also reorient us to more sacred purposes in our mission as Christ-like educators. Highly talented people frequently attest that pressure suffocates inspiration. And teachers need inspiration. Transformative creativity—the kind that truly mobilizes people and organizations—requires breathing room and community, and nothing provides that better than feasting on the fruit of the community's labor. Visionaries who understand and practice this increasingly see their visions concretize before their eyes. The alternative is to squelch human flourishing.

Conclusion

Underneath the harpoon in my office is a quotation from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, which reads, "Now strange words simply puzzle us; ordinary words convey only what we know already; it is from metaphor that we can best ascertain something fresh."⁸ There is much to learn about leadership by analyzing leaders in the Great Books. Metaphor and myth can communicate far more profoundly than the world's best-selling books on leadership, many of which implicitly promulgate a nihilistic, destructionist, or fragmentary ideology. Yes,

visionary leadership must be practical and realistic. Yes, visionaries must be emotionally present with their team and cultivate environments that promote human flourishing. And yes, we all need courage. Lots of it! But leadership books and workshops are no replacement for the heart transformation requisite to endure the often thankless labor of a head of school. Consultations and retreats can be very useful, but rarely do they equip us with the grit and fortitude to engage constituents who are upset, frustrated, well-meaning (yet incompetent), and self-seeking, whether they are parents, teachers, students, board members, or donors. And the advice one seeks from fellow comrades can very often be contradictory, unhelpful, or egomaniacal. Great Books, however, speak wisdom to us from the past, providing not merely consolation for the present troubles but true vision for future development.

In addition to the efficacy of prayer and biblical counsel, the classics stand ready to stir our moral imaginations and cultivate in us the virtues necessary to exercise the Golden Mean in important decision-making. The classics allow us to pursue the true, good, and beautiful in the face of despair, and address our longings for certainty through the mysteries, symbols, and myths all around us. The leaders of our movement are not called to a prosaic way of life but to a poetic one. And as Clyde S. Kilby, the great Tolkien and Lewis scholar, reminds us: "The secret of poetry is the metaphor."⁹ It is one thing to say, "Leaders should not pursue goals at the expense of their team." It is something entirely different to hang a harpoon in one's office, or to understand what Starbuck, standing upon a sinking Pequod moments before his death, cries to Ahab, "It is thou, thou, that madly seekest [Moby Dick]!"¹⁰

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8. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1410b. 12-14.

9. Clyde S. Kilby, "The Lost Myth and Literary Imagination," in *Well of Wonder*, eds. L. Wilkinson and K. Call (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2016), 233.

10. Melville, *Moby Dick*, ch. 127.

