

“George Washington and the LLAMAS: Clues for Leadership in the 21st Century”

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In 1796, George Washington sat down to draft his “Farewell Address,” a document that holds its own with the Constitution and Declaration of Independence. According to Joseph Ellis’ Pulitzer winning book, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*, which I strongly recommend, Washington had three very important realities in mind:

- 1) He wanted to demonstrate, like all of us approaching retirement, that he had not “lost it” when it came to his mind or his abilities;
- 2) He wanted to carve out a middle course, with a moderate tone, that unapologetically and clearly addressed the shrill accusations, loaded language, and “throbbing moral certainty” of those who seemed intent on winning the political game to the exclusion of others, including many in his own cabinet; and above all else
- 3) Make his final departure the occasion for laying out his own understanding of what the American Revolution meant, something that he saw as being in real danger. For Washington, it was and always would be all about “hanging together as a united people, much as the Continental Army had hung together once before” as had the Constitutional Convention of 1787, both of these under Washington’s leadership.

Four years earlier, when Washington first intended to retire, he approached James Madison to help him write his valedictory address. Madison was a gifted writer and thinker who most think penned much of the *Constitution* and the *Federalist Papers* that helped convince the citizenry to support the Constitution. Washington also picked Madison because two of his most trusted cabinet members, Alexander Hamilton

and Thomas Jefferson, were right in the middle of the acrimony and disputes that Washington wanted to condemn.

But the major point I want to make, which frames my reflections tonight, grows out of the age old debate regarding just who furnished the words and was the “real and true author.” The “object of the hunt sits right in front our eyes,” as Ellis puts it. Namely, “the creation of the Farewell Address was an inherently collaborative process. Some of the words were Madison’s, some Hamilton’s; all were the ideas of Washington that grew out of a lifetime of conversations and collaborations with these two writers and colleagues. Madison wrote the first draft from extensive notes taken in three conversations with Washington about the speech. Then Hamilton, four years later, was given the draft and wrote most of the final version, with George Washington editing and revising extensively Hamilton’s final draft, wordsmithing and making 174 line changes out of 1086 in the text just before its publication.

Ellis contends that the Farewell Address is a metaphor, and so do I, for the kind of “collective effort [and leadership that] Washington was urging on [his successors and] the American people as a whole.” Hamilton had experienced this style of leadership as a staff member to Washington in the Continental Army and in the cabinet.

According to Ellis, for Washington, all major decisions were collective, in which each advisor, like spokes on a wheel, spelled out their perspective, often in writing. But in the end, the final decision came together in the center which was Washington.

So, just what were the central themes so important to Washington that I also hold up before you, along with the LLAMAS: 1) the critical importance of “subordinating sectional and ideological differences to larger national purposes;” 2) not being encumbered or having your

hands tied by external alliances that would prevent the new nation from the flexibility to do what it needed to do; and 3) something that Hamilton left out.

Hamilton convinced Washington to put it in his last State of the Union address instead. Washington proposed a National University, in the new capital. This was perhaps Washington's greatest dream—a place and space where young citizens from every state and region would come together, “and by degrees discover that there was not just cause for those jealousies and prejudices which one part of the Union had imbibed against another part.” Washington had seen the opposite happen, especially in his close-up experience with young soldiers in the Continental Army, as well as the Constitutional Convention, where all the soldiers and delegates from every region stuck together, with a common purpose, until they had accomplished their objectives.

Washington clearly wanted to pass on his legacy and his explanation of what the American Revolution meant to him and what would be required of citizens who, with all their differences could and “must hang together as a united people.”

I will return to George Washington again at the conclusion. But I trust you also see the implicit, if not explicit, qualities of collaboration and system thinking that played out in Washington's leadership approach, ideas that have been fleshed out by “research on” and “practice of” leadership over the years since Washington. And most of these elements are spelled out in the acronym: LLAMAS.

We start with LISTEN, which is the first among equals.

When Larry Spears of the Greenleaf Center created a list of the top 10 qualities of a leader, the very first one was “Listening.” Not just passive listening, but “on the edge of your seat,” and a leaning forward type of human engagement.

Those of you who have been in the “Creativity and Problem-Solving” class know that I have been deeply influenced by Myles Horton and the Highlander Center in Tennessee where “deep listening” is practiced almost as a sacred ritual. Deep listening underscores, among other things, that we have two ears and one mouth, suggesting that we should listen at least twice as much as we talk.

Myles Horton and Highlander remind us that we all need help and training in order to create social settings where real listening and growth can take place.

At Highlander, in order to address the tendencies of people like me who “open our mouths and begin to talk in search of an idea,” we sit in a circle of rocking chairs, and engage in what we call deep listening. Each participant offers her or his response to a question which zeroes in on the reason we gathered, with each person’s articulation based on their own lived experiences and current understanding.

The norm, and clear expectation, as we go around the circle, is that no one ever interrupts, responds, adds to, or questions the speaker who is given a reasonable amount of time negotiated initially by the group in light of its size. The next “go around” question might likely be: “OK, what did you learn from the others that adds to your understanding of the issue/problem that has brought us together?” The Native American “talking stick,” World Café, and the Art of Hosting movement are other examples of socially constructing effective arrangements for social interaction that help us learn more effectively how to listen more deeply to others.

It would appear that George Washington, even as an aristocrat, General, and President intuitively knew and practiced his own version

of “deep listening,” something I keep learning about in other effective leaders, including our current President.

Listening is closely linked to LEARNING

Peter Senge, building on the wisdom of his mentors, Donald Schoen and Chris Argyris, all at MIT, also expands on the critical importance of listening if leaders are to turn their work places into “learning organizations.” At the center is a deep listening that results in what Peter Senge likes to call “dialogue.” Dialogue is more likely to lead to learning, according to Senge, than debate or even discussion, because those engaged in dialogue engage in listening assuming that the conversation will indeed transform their own thinking. So, instead of seeking out conversation partners who will reinforce one’s own perceptions, participants anticipate that their understanding will be changed by a dialogical conversation with the others. Everyone in a dialogue is asking the others for help in “seeing their own seeing,” as Senge puts it.

Another aspect of “learning organizations” is a systems thinking orientation, stressing connections to the whole, insisting that we look beyond the immediate context and appreciate the impact of our actions upon others, such as seven generations from now as our Native American friends invite us to do. “Seeing from the whole” is how Senge and his colleagues put it.

ASKING is closely linked to listening and learning from others

If a leader is not genuinely “curious” and eager to learn what others know and see, I truly doubt that dialogue and growth will occur.

At Highlander, one of the primary tasks of the leader-facilitator is to frame good questions that invite members of the group or team to “learn from their own experiences” and current understandings.

Paul Tillich, one of the 20th Century's greatest philosophers and theologians, contended that good questions, grounded in human existence and reality, are usually far more valuable to our learning than the answers themselves.

Or, as Elie Wiesel recalls about a mentor who helped him survive the Holocaust:

“He explained to me with great insistence that every question possessed a power that did not lie in the answer.”

— [Elie Wiesel](#), *Night*

Poetically, Rilke seems to say much that needs to be said about the importance of **asking** and **questioning**:

“Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books written in a foreign language.... At present you need to [simply] live the question. Perhaps you will gradually, without even noticing it, find yourself experiencing the answer....”

— [Rainer Maria Rilke](#), *Letters to a Young Poet*

It is critical that leaders create the settings and cultures where questions and asking are welcome, safe and expected.

Peter Senge and his colleagues propose that effective leaders, engaged in dialogue, put their own best thinking and assumptions out “on the table.” Then, leaders **ask**, with utmost seriousness, that their colleagues and staff “help them see their own seeing,” especially its weaknesses and underlying assumptions. Leaders probe, as full participants in the group, **asking** and **being asked**.

It is just this kind of genuine collaboration and openness, paradoxically done with self-confidence and humility, that puts flesh on the first,

second and third letters of Llama. Leadership, I am convinced, requires that leaders authentically engage in **Listening, Learning and Asking**. This is not “rocket science.” But as my friend, Ira Harkevny at Penn says, “It’s more complicated than rocket science.”

I hope that you are now asking: “How does a leader, or anyone, move from Listening, Learning and Asking to **action** and exercising **agency**?”

MEDITATE, my friends, meditate.

Something else is emerging in the literature and the practice of leadership. Buddhists call it “mindfulness,” others “meditation” or “deep reflection,” or “prayer.” Much to their amazement, many, if not most of the leaders interviewed for the book, *Presence*, engage regularly in some form of disciplined meditation or contemplation.

Centering, mindfulness and “letting go of the need to control” become both personal and collective practices that Peter Senge and his colleagues underscore for LLAMA leaders. Senge, who rarely talks about it, walks his own talk and meditates one hour every day. The importance of “being present” in mindfulness is so central to their U-Theory of leadership that the title of their book is **Presence** and has given rise to a global movement, The Presencing Institute at MIT. Presencing is “given legs” locally by the Bush Foundation and known as InCommons. I have a handout on the U-Theory & *Presencing* available for any who would like to learn more.

ACTION or ACTING actualize our AGENCY, which is a verb, not a noun

Anthony Giddens, a prominent sociologist and advisor to the Prime Minister of Great Britain, along with most sociologists, reminds us that human beings have the capacity for agency. Agency, we contend, is the gift of being able, as individuals and groups, to socially construct and reconstruct the realities in which we operate, with one huge caveat:

Some people and groups have a lot more agency than others. Some are more and others are less privileged—it's not a level playing field. And that is where leadership comes into play.

As Harry Boyte, our colleague at the Sabo Center for Citizenship and Learning stresses, we all, especially leaders, can and should attend to the “development of efficacy [i.e., a sense of agency], not only in oneself, but in those most affected by a problem.”

In leadership terms, that means that it is critical for leaders to foster and cultivate a sense of agency in our colleagues so that they also come to see themselves as having both the right and the capacity to have a say and influence in our common work, as Harry puts it. And it is “work,” but good work, as Harry also reminds us.

The authors of *Presence* are quite specific regarding Agency and Action. In the context of ongoing Listening, Learning, Asking and Meditating, they emphasize Prototyping and Institutionalizing. LLAMA Leaders, I am suggesting, engage in and encourage others to experiment, to “act and fail with a sense of purpose.” And this kind of courage and audacity is usually based on listening, both to one’s inner voice and the transformational learning that comes through *dialogue* and *listening*.

Senge and his colleagues underscore why sociologists devote so much of our attention to “institutions,” those enduring patterns, relationships, structures and networks that enable humans to address the timeless needs that all societies and communities experience. The U-Theory, as you can see in the handout, posits a dynamic understanding of institutionalization and emphasizes “embodying our new insights and realizing them through transforming action and institutions.”

Exercising our agency, and emboldening others to do the same, can save us from continually reinventing the wheel because institutionalizing, without succumbing to rigid bureaucratizing or formulas, allows us to address what can make society and our organizations more humane, equitable and just. Prototyping and institutionalizing, when done in the spirit of Agency and Llama leadership embrace and embody a transformational process that is continually renewing and engaging in a never ending journey.

And now, as I move toward an end to these comments, note that Llamas is plural. As promised, we return to George Washington, with a little help from Robert Greenleaf.

When asked how one will know that one has been a Servant-Leader, Greenleaf put it this way:

“Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?”

It is really all about SHARING and passing it on.

Llama Leaders share who they are and what they know.

George Washington’s dream was to pass on a legacy of “hanging together as a united people...subordinating sectional and ideological differences to larger national purposes” and mobilizing all our differences in ways that indeed might make the new democracy a beacon on the hill worthy of emulating.

And Washington was a good sociologist, even before the discipline existed. He knew that such a vision needed to be “institutionalized.”

Washington envisioned a National College where, as noted earlier, young citizens from every state and region, from all walks of life, would

come together just as he had experienced first-hand with the young soldiers in the Continental Army and the delegates to the Constitutional Convention. I find it interesting that the closest we have ever come to this seems to be our Military Academies and the military overall. They are more integrated socially, racially and in sexual preference than almost any other institution in our society, thanks to two successors of Washington, namely Harry Truman and Barack Obama.

Yes, Washington espoused sharing and passing it forward through a National University, an institution dedicated both to the growth of the individuals who attended and committed to building democracy and strong, resilient communities, marked by both diversity and unity.

And this leads us to our final letter, a second “S” mirroring LLAMA which begins with two LLs.

Dynamic institutionalizing requires SPACES:

LLAMA leaders, like Washington, know that there is a need for safe and inviting spaces, environments where creativity, problem-solving and growth can happen.

Steven Johnson, in *Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation*, assessed hundreds, even 1000s, of inventions and problem-solving. He concluded that the single most important variable was **space**, environments for thinking and networking with others.

Yes, you and I, as Llama leaders, can exercise human agency and, like Washington, “create and maintain environments and spaces, where we listen and learn from each other, spaces and places for meditation and contemplation, where transformation is more likely to happen.

Highlander, the World Café, the Art of Hosting, Dialogical Conversations, and the Presencing Institute are five expressions of this new wave of “institutions” that are committed to equipping leaders who create safe **spaces** where people can address the complex realities we face in our diverse, polarized and conflicted world.

And I also want to name one reality that is often ignored or “brushed over” by Senge and Greenleaf--namely power. Llama leaders, I am convinced, know it in their very being, or learn, that the symbols and reality of power and privilege are real. With this insight, they seek out or create spaces and places that significantly “level the playing field,” instead of gravitating to spaces that underscore their own power, privilege and authority. One simple example would be going to someone’s office to talk about an issue or problem instead of inviting, or summoning, them to yours. Similarly, it might mean convening on the turf of those who work with you instead of a more opulent conference room in the executive suite. Being continually conscious of power and symbols of power makes a significant difference. LLAMA leaders know that “place and power matters.”

I have had the good fortune to live with someone for the past four decades who understands and models this day in and day out for me and those with whom she works.

My favorite new book, along with *Founding Brothers*, is entitled *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?*

I strongly agree with Brian McLaren, the author, that the answer to that intriguing question looks a lot like a collection of Llama Leaders.

McLaren and I both think these four would cross the road to find or create a new space, a neutral and safe place, where they could share with each other, learn from each other, meditate and be transformed

themselves. As a result, each of them could and would be better able to build up their next generation of followers in ways that would also lead to harmony and dialogue as their followers interact with each other and with those who follow the others in never ending growth and change.

Toward the end of the book, McLaren offers a quote by Vincent Donovan, that I adapt to close: [p. 254]

Leaders who are LLAMAS do not leave others where they have been. But neither do they try to bring those they lead to where they are at present, as beautiful as that place or way of doing things or thinking might be... Rather, LLAMA LEADERS invite others to go with them to a place where neither the leader or the followers have ever been before.

May we all be so fortunate as to have this a reality in our own lives.