

On the Value of Poetry

I'm occasionally asked, what value poetry can have in leadership, or organisational life. My usual response is to say "none whatsoever" because the question implies a quantifiable value that somehow misses the point. In mellower moments I say that a poem is a gift, offered free from any expectation of return; a gift which connects us to others, to the world, and to some alienated parts of ourselves. As such it operates in a different, parallel system of exchange, where 'value' is replaced by 'worth'. Thus a poem, like a prayer or a vision, may have very little value but huge power and significance.

What poetry can give us is a regular access to those parts of ourselves which tend to become dried out in the busy world of "getting and spending". It can re-awaken our compassion, remind us of our grief, re-confirm the presence of love, or death, or any of the things that invisibly matter in our lives. Just as importantly, it can break our relentless, sometimes blinkered focus on outcome and profit – the kind of driven focus that gave us, Northern Rock, Lehman Brothers, and Collateralized Debt Obligations.

In leadership terms, poetry means more than a piece of pop wisdom. Great leaders the world over have always respected that rare ability of poets to enlighten and re-connect people. Tyrants fear and suppress their poets, while visionary leaders turn to theirs as a resource and inspiration. President John F Kennedy, for instance, acknowledged poetry's power to curb man's folly and re-establish the old human verities. But he didn't just talk the talk. At the height of the Cold War he sent his favourite poet, Robert Frost, to meet Russian premier Nikita Khrushchev. Leaders know that poetry matters!

In the work that Olivier Mythodrama has developed over the years, poetry has earned an honoured place. A poem's ability to clarify an issue, to get at the human realities behind the jargon, never ceases to astonish those we work with. Quite often a leader will ask for a copy of a particular poem that's touched or inspired them. Such a poem can stay with that person for years; its lines recurring again and again, like a riff from a song, or a scene from a movie. It hangs on a wall or sits in a drawer, offering itself at odd moments, providing support or a space for reflection – an oasis of inspiration in a humdrum day, a reach of clear water above the rapids.

William Ayot

