

The following *'Living a Gifted Life'* is an excerpt from a Keynote Address Michael gave to delegates at the 10th Annual Conference at **The Greenleaf Center For Steward Leadership, Indianapolis**, June 2000.

(an audio/video tape of this presentation, including two musical performances, is also available)

## The Leader's Journey and the Imaginative Life

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I have been interested in the nature of the gift community and how our gifts are seen by others, often not by ourselves. In the honouring of the other person through the way we see the gift living in them, we can be the moon that reflects back to them the light of their own sun.

I think we're very familiar with the market economy, since that has been a dominant part of our culture. Many of us have been inducted into that from the time we first walked into school. But a more invisible part of the economy has been the economy of gift exchange, the sense that we bear gifts and that those gifts are an important part of how we touch the heart of another. These gifts reach others because we were made for this purpose by nature beyond anything else we might do. So, while we may see our skills and abilities as part of what we bring to the marketplace they are not always our primary strengths. There are also these more transcendent qualities, qualities which are often invisible to us because they're so close to who we naturally are. And yet when we live our life from these gifts, magic happens, perhaps because as the Italian Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino says "Heaven favours those things it has itself begun".

I can remember how this sense of reaching others happened for me several years ago. I was at the Esalen Institute in California for part of a winter. My wife and I were travelling, on the road for about six months, and we kept trying to anticipate where we were going to be each week so we could figure out with whom we might stay. We would make phone calls, but nobody would call back, so we were getting a clue that maybe this wasn't working. A friend of ours had said before we started this trip, "Travel with a candle rather than a flashlight. See if you can live your journey in the same way that you live your music." So we travelled through the country with a candle, only looking ahead about twenty four hours at a time. In fact whenever we tried to plan further things simply didn't work out. And we did this - following the leadings of the candle - down through Florida, across the South, into California and then to the Esalen Institute.

Because I was also travelling to Japan to do some concerts, we stopped for a time in California so I could rehearse and get ready for the trip. One evening, a young man came up to me while I was sitting at the piano. As I was getting up to leave, he stopped me and said, "I really enjoy your music." I thanked him. Then he said, "There's just one thing.", "What's that?" I asked, "Well," He said "You sound too much like Michael Jones." Knowing he had my attention now, he started to lecture me saying, "You have to develop your own style. You can't sound like somebody else the rest of your life. You have to find your own musical voice." By this time he had developed quite a head of steam. I was getting progressively more uncomfortable however, and not quite sure how to respond. I finally I stopped him and said, "Look, really. My name IS Michael Jones." He looked at me for the longest time. "No, you're not." He said emphatically. And I knew he was serious.

So we sat on the piano bench arguing about who I was. It was an important moment for me, because I realized that I had spent almost all of my life, more or less, in a place of exchange with other people. Others knew me. I knew them. In my work as a consultant, that's largely how my life had worked. But a couple of years before, I had started to record my work, and it had captured the interest of many people. Now people were meeting me on the road who had already met me in my music. In a sense, they felt they knew me better than I knew myself, through the time they had spent with my music.

I also realized that this kind of interchange with someone who knew me through my music would not happen in Canada, at least not in my experience. I had a cousin who became a very famous playwright in Canada, who says, "What happens when you become a famous playwright in Canada? Nothing." I was not used to the kind of meeting where somebody would engage with me the way this young gentleman had. His comments provoked me to reflect upon the events that had led me to be in this place at this particular time, to have taken a different road that created the circumstances for this meeting to have taken place? I had been an organizational consultant for many years. Although I had studied music for about fifteen years and loved it, I felt--as many of us do--it was time to move on to assume a more responsible, adult life. I couldn't figure out how music might fit into that. I also had a background in psychology, which led to professional work in leadership development and organizational consulting. I spent a lot of my time doing that kind of work, often in off - site retreat settings.

Once I was in a hotel outside of Toronto with a group of financial managers for a week. At midweek we decided to take some time off. We were in a wonderful little town with good restaurants, so a group of us went off to eat. I came back

to the hotel early so I could prepare for the next day. There was a little spinet piano near the registration desk; the hotel looked relatively empty, so I thought I might sit down and play for a while. If you're a pianist you might recognize the impulse--you can't walk by a piano without touching it. So I sat down and started to play. At that time I felt that my own music was a little too personal to share in public settings, so I had worked up cover arrangements of popular tunes, and I relied on those to draw from whenever I played in a setting like this. I did that for a while, but then, because nobody was around, I shifted into my own music, then back into some cover tunes, and back and forth. After about twenty minutes, I had a sense of somebody moving towards me from the lounge down the hall. I looked up and saw an older gentleman weaving towards me with a glass of red wine precariously perched between his thumb and his forefinger.

As he got closer, I became uneasy. I thought, Oh, he's going to ask for a request, and it will probably be a song I haven't learned, and this is going to be uncomfortable. I was really looking forward to some quiet time to relax and reflect. He grabbed at the piano to steady himself, plopped down in an easy chair just beside the instrument, and listened as I continued to play. When I stopped, he asked me, "What was that music?" I said, "Well, I think that was probably a little bit of 'Moon River.'" And he said, "No. No, there was something before that. What was that music?" I thought for a moment and I said, "I think that was probably a little of my own music." He said, "Well, I really enjoyed that. But you are wasting your time with..." I said, "I think what I was playing was 'Moon River.'" "Well, you're really wasting your time with Moon River," he said. I was taken aback by his directness, and we talked for a bit. He said, "Do you work here at the hotel?" I said, "Oh, no, no, no. I'm a consultant. I'm busy trying to change the world." To my disappointment he didn't seem at all impressed by that. Then he asked, "How many other people do this kind of consulting work that you do?" I said, "Well, probably twenty or thirty, I would guess, in the Toronto area." And then he looked at me, and at that moment what I most recall about that meeting was how clear and sober his eyes appeared, from how he seemed a few minutes before. He said, "Who's going to play that music if you don't play it yourself?"

I felt that question drop in a way that I had not heard a question drop inside of me before. I realized it was a question for which I had no answer. We just sat and looked at each other. It was one of those silences that are immense, filled with meaning. Then he stood up, a little uneasy, and steadied himself by putting his hand on my shoulder, and said, "This is your gift--don't waste it." Then he picked up his wine glass and pointed himself back towards the lounge and -- weaving unsteadily across the lobby floor -- disappeared from sight.

Meanwhile, I sat there on the piano bench, stunned by the question and the sense that it had just changed my life.

Who WILL play my music? I asked myself. I realized that for many years I had been reluctant to ask myself that very question. I remember, in fact, reflecting to friends, "I'd like to do something creative so that there's some memory of me when I'm gone... like taking up poetry or sculpture or something." And people would ask, "What about your music?" And I'd say, "No, I mean something really special." I realized how much I discounted that very thing I had been made for and which had been so much a source of love and pleasure when I was a child. It's as the American Painter Georgia O'Keeffe once said, "That which is most precious to us is often so close to us that we don't know that it's there." It seems so ordinary that we can't imagine why anybody would want to pay that much attention to it. And maybe this 'ordinariness' is the source of our salvation. It keeps our gift within human dimensions and protects us from the hidden dangers of some overblown inflation.

But within the ordinariness of the gift, there is something else that IS extraordinary. Something which is not in the territory of ego inflation but rather in the domain of the imagination. If we follow our gift -- in the way that I had followed the candle -- it will take us on an adventure into a dimension of life that is perhaps larger and more profound than we could possibly envision when we began. And I realized that that was what was behind the resistance I had to bringing the music more into the centre of my life: I had a sense that it was going to take me into parts of myself and parts of the world that I didn't think I wanted to go. For example, it might take me into a more public life of stages and audiences and media attention that would be very uncomfortable because the music was very personal for me. I was also very shy and introverted, very inward. I wanted to make a difference but do it from behind the scenes. I don't think there was ever a stage I saw in my life that I did not want to avoid! The idea that I might go back to music, and the prospects of where it might lead me, were the reasons I'd not asked myself that question. Yet Pablo Neruda, the Chilean poet, writes in his *Memoirs*, that sometimes we are warned: when we get so far off track in terms of where our real life purpose is that somebody or something calls us back.

I felt in that moment I was being called back to the centrality of my own life. As the gentleman from the hotel lounge disappeared, I found some new thoughts turning over, and some other familiar ones started to surface as well. I had thoughts about "Well, if I do what he's suggesting, I'm probably going to go broke. Secondly, I'm not that good. Thirdly, I don't think..." --and so on. I went off in search of him to tell him, "Look--let's have a discussion about this!"

Of course, he was nowhere to be found. (When I shared this story some years later, a friend said, "I hear that angels come to us in the forms of drunks and children." So perhaps I'd had a visitation that night.)

But several other things also unfolded from that evening. First, I never played "Moon River" ever again. In fact, I didn't play anybody else's music after that night. I know there are wonderful ways we bring our creative interpretations to other people's work, but he reminded me that something was coming through in my own work that didn't seem to be evident in playing anyone else's. I started to see that it was a matter of devoting myself to the articulation of a voice that was uniquely my own to bring forth. The second thing was that I realized I could not bring any believability to my work if I wasn't living it in my own life. I was meeting with a group the following morning -- I was still a consultant leading retreats, after all -- and the topic we were exploring was vision and purpose. But my work had become abstract. I was talking the words but somehow I wasn't living the spirit of the work, because I had been avoiding it in my own life. As a result, I began to think differently about my consulting practice. As contracts wrapped up I didn't try to renew them. Instead I took advantage of this 'found time' to play the piano instead.

The third thing I found was that I had to learn to wait, because the answer to that question was not going to be coming in any immediate sense. I didn't have any idea what the form of the music might be, what it might look like, what it might lead me to. The best I could do was simply wait and see what might come to me. In that waiting, I found some guidance by turning to poetry, because I discovered that poets understand something about waiting upon the imagination and entering into this other dimension of life that was just opening up consciously for the first time for me. My psychology background was not much help to me here. It seems true that at times the skills that bring us to a certain part of our life are not the same ones we need when it comes to changing our life. We need to open up to new metaphors, new ways of seeing possibilities. I think it was Sigmund Freud who said once that no matter where his research lead, a poet had already been there before him. Poets are articulators of the life of the imagination.

And that's what this waiting was teaching me. By not trying to make something happen based on what what I thought ought to happen, but instead learning how to sense into and follow what was already happening naturally, I was learning to do the work of the imagination.

The thread of continuity for me since that evening was always the question, "Who will play MY music?" I believed that as long as I held on to that

question, the question would do the work, leading me into what, in a sense, was the life I was here to live. With such questions we find that we fail not because the questions are too large, but because they are too small. Henry Moore, the sculptor, said, "You need to hold questions that cannot be fully completed or lived out within the span of your own lifetime."

Beethoven is an example of a composer whose questions were larger than his own life. You hear it in the greatness of his music. The greatness is in the question. If he had composed his music with the answer already set in his mind, he would not have as great a composer and his music would not have pulled us in as deeply as it does. From my experience as a composer, it is the question - this ongoing inquiry into life's eternal mystery -- that is the imagination's instrument for attracting us deeply into life. I have noticed that when I am no longer in the question, I am not as sensitized to the nuances of movement and touch, and soon the music stops as well.

How often we find there's some significant, precious part of ourselves that somehow doesn't go with us in the morning when we travel to work. It can't seem to find its place in what we're doing. In many ways, it may be the most precious and -- what might we say? -- most gifted parts of ourselves that are left out. There is no answer to this dilemma for most of us. There is only the question. And, if we can hold it as a question, playing with it, inquiring into what the answer might feel or look like, and being curious about its possibilities, it will lead us to things we could not have planned with the strategic part of our mind. Being here, speaking and performing with you this afternoon, is not part of a long term strategy. I could never have put all these elements together. But through holding the question of what it might mean and feel like to bring this deeper integration into my life I have discovered that I am now able to bring ALL of myself - the piano, the music, the stories, the ideas - everything that makes up my own voice -- into the room at the same time!

Another thing about "living in the question" is that it heightens the sense that we live in an ever-present terror that we're on the precipice of the unknown -- of this void or abyss -- in which we are not sure of our footing or what stands in front of us. In the life of the imagination, this doesn't change! As a friend said to me once, "Remember music is NOT your career, teaching is." Through being improvisational and heartfelt -- and true to the feeling of your music -- you are discovering how to bring that same quality into your words. So you can expect that by allowing the words to come from same place you play, you're going to have those moments when you feel lost and don't know what to say next. The question is, How do you handle that moment? Will you keep going? Even though those moments seem to come up more and more frequently as you hold

your conversations -- and your life -- at this frontier where the familiar and the unfamiliar world meet?

Perhaps this explains why one of St. Augustine's favorite words for heart was 'abyss.' It is through this experience of being lost that the imaginative, sensing, feeling heart comes most alive. We are familiar with the courage of the lion heart and the endurance of the heart committed to long days and hard work. We know the sentimental -- and sometimes compassionate heart -- that expresses itself through pop songs in its expressions of care and loss and love. We are less familiar with the imaginative heart, the heart that sees deeply and arises from having an aesthetic attitude towards our life and our work.

It is in this moment of being lost, when we have no choice but to 'stand still' that we discover the true dimensions of the aesthetic heart. It leads us instinctively to finding our way back to that "sense of place" we knew as a child. It was a way of being in the world in which we had no plans, no agendas, we simply met the world as it presented itself to us. This is the way of being present to world that the poets speak of, the sense that wherever we are, is the place of the heart and therefore can be called home. We hear this sense of being present to the moment beautifully expressed in the words of Spanish Poet Antonio Machado when he says; "You walking, your footprints are the road and nothing else, there is no road walker, you make the road by walking."

That was the challenge the old man presented to me that night in the hotel. In asking the question, he was also saying; its time to find your own path through life, a path that cannot be imitated or lived out by anyone but yourself.

And that path offers itself only one step at a time. If we can see the road winding far ahead it is very likely that we have stumbled upon someone else's road and need to find our way back to our own. In other words in the life of the imagination there is no goal. The road is always just beneath our feet. If we follow it, we will recognize that we are in the right place, but we will do so only AFTER we have arrived.

Through the music I was finding the key to that sense of place that was home to the imagination for me. About that time I came across a commentary by the Canadian poet Dennis Lee, who was inspired by something similar. Lee was describing one of the greatest gifts he was given by a mentor of his, a philosopher in Canada by the name of George Grant. Grant helped him to see the rightness of "loving our own" -- in Lee's case, this affection was found in the few acres of land on a lake north of Toronto where he spent summers as a boy. By loving our own, he says, we come to find that place of the heart, that

feeling of belonging, which we can grow out from, the place where the life of the aesthetic begins. That place of the heart for me was similar to Dennis Lee's: It was the unforgettable craggy shorelines, the inviting feeling of diving into cold, deep lakes, the chorus of loons at night, the sparkle of sunlight on water, the wind whispering through the great white pines. What gave me the most delight as a pianist was discovering ways to find a musical expression for that. I wanted to not only represent this sense of place in a conceptual way, but also in a way that would evoke what it might be like to be rain, to be wind. I wanted to merge with the very thing I was trying to recreate an impression of, so I could BE the thing I was playing and speaking. An aesthetic sensibility involves this willingness for breathing in or taking in the world. To receive life in all of its many ways.

As I think of the life of imagination and its relevance for leadership, I believe we are called to reclaim the aesthetic as our central vocation or calling. If the world is to have a future, it will have an aesthetic future. I believe that aesthetics -- the capacity for imaginative sensing, for feeling and seeing deeply -- is the primary new work for leaders. When I speak of aesthetics I am thinking of it not as a conceptual framework, but as a lived experience.

Robert Greenleaf who is the founding spirit and inspiration for bringing us here today said that "One qualification for leadership is the ability to tolerate a sustained wide span of awareness so that the leader sees it (and I believe by 'it' he was referring to the world) as it really is" This experience of the aesthetic precedes its understanding. And to know it truly we need to begin with our own life, in our own unique way of 'knowing' things, in the qualities of movement, smell and touch, and through those activities and relationships that most bring alive for us that sense of what the love of place means for us. Marcilio Ficino, the Renaissance Philosopher I spoke of earlier, says that; "it is useful for us to search for that region which best suits us, a place where our spirit is advanced and refreshed, where our senses remain thriving and where things nourish us." This is a physical place, but it is also a disposition of the imaginative heart. And we come to this disposition when we let go of what we believe ought to be happening and in so doing come a deepening awareness of what is already trying to happen naturally in our life.

This animal sense or developing a nose for the innate intelligence of things -- one which our rational mind often fails to detect -- expresses itself most commonly through a life dedicated to practices that bring us into closer proximity with an expressive language, with beauty and place, by living without a script and, sharing with others those gifts that are unique to them and to ourselves.



The root of vocation is 'vocare' which means voice. Every life is, I believe, a journey into discovering our own voice. We do this through recognizing the restorative power of an expressive or living speech. A living speech IS music, it is a way of speaking in which the words are no longer simply an instrument for getting things done. Rather, WE become instruments for the expression of the Word, of our own truth, of the atmosphere of our own mind, our own authority and unique viewpoint that reflects of seeing the world. We find this atmosphere by placing ourselves in the presence of beauty, so that the words themselves become the heartfelt expression of praise for the the many ways life is acting upon us. Artists often begin their work from this inner place of knowing. As Dennis Lee says; "it is by allowing ourselves to be claimed by this childhood place of the heart that we find the ground to move ahead from. It equips to love lesser things later on."

To move towards the world with an imaginative heart helps 'bring the country up'. It instils the leader with an elevated perception for seeing not only the far hill but also what lies behind. By training the hand, the eye and the nose to sense truly what is real, they are able to intuitively make the right moves that keep the larger interests of the world in view.

To conclude, I believe that servant-leaders are also called to be leaders of the aesthetic and, as such leaders of the imaginative and sensing heart. They can do this through embracing such practices as; listening for the restorative power of language and story, of keeping faith with the living word; of making a home for others through the appreciation of beauty and place; of developing the sense of seeing gifts in others through first being committed to calling up and living out the gifts that are themselves.

By learning to "live in the question," and lead without a script , through being open and responsive to the emergent as it is revealed through what the world is already trying to be, leaders can learn to let life live them rather than feeling they must always be trying to make things happen through attempting to grasp the future or reaching out.

By serving the imagination in this way, we are also being served by it. As Marsilio Ficino said; "Heaven favors things that it has itself begun" And what heaven begins are found in those inexplicable sparks of inspiration that fire the imaginative heart and cause us to act.

It is appropriate that we should draw upon a Renaissance philosopher to begin and conclude this talk because the sensibility I am speaking of has, at its root, a Renaissance sensibility. As we embrace the aesthetic in our life and

work, we join the company of many others, known and unknown to us, who have accepted a similar challenge in embracing their own giftedness and furthering the work of the imagination. Through this imaginative labor we may experience what it means to truly belong and feel at home in the world again.

*Who will play your music if you don't play it yourself?*