



LEADING ONESELF: THE JOURNEY WITHIN

Wiley Souba, Jr., MD, ScD, MBA; Introduction by Richard L. Byyny, MD, FACP

The journey within: Learning to be a leader

A core tenet of Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society (AΩA) since its inception has been to “improve care for all by encouraging the development of leaders in academia and the community.”

Physicians, based on their unique knowledge and experience in professional values fundamental to medicine, are ideally suited to serve as leaders. Their professional experiences in serving and caring for people and working with colleagues in health professions provide a solid foundation for leading others. As medical education, medicine, and health care have become progressively more complex and challenging, the need for physician leaders in medicine, health care, community, academia, and society has become a necessity and professional responsibility.

In 2012, AΩA developed a year-long Fellows in Leadership program based on essential professional and personal values, and a commitment to servant leadership. The program’s curriculum is focused on educating mid-career physicians on the element of exceptional leadership, and on how leading others requires the ability to look inward and lead oneself first—the inward journey.

AΩA Fellows gain experiential leadership through a personal project with mentors, AΩA faculty, and ongoing reflection. The program recognizes that the work of leadership involves developing a community of practice of leaders. It focuses on servant leaders, how they live, lead, and act on a foundation of values based on what is right. These values start with an obligation and commitment to serve and care for people by adopting high moral

and ethical values. Servant leaders inspire and develop the best in others. Servant leaders and their teams dedicate themselves to a higher purpose, cause, or principle rather than focusing on themselves. They derive joy, self-respect, and integrity by serving others and contributing to an important purpose. They demonstrate character, trust, trustworthiness, fairness, respect for others and serve as role models for others. Servant leaders celebrate the work and success of those contributing and serving, and express appreciation regularly. They mentor, educate, empower and develop people on their team, in the organization, and throughout the community.

Great leaders listen, communicate, and inspire through a shared vision, creativity, and a life of the mind. They build greatness using a blend of empathy, humility, professional will, competency, dedication, and indefatigability. They recognize that everyone can make a difference through their contributions. They build community. They focus on getting the resources needed and surround themselves with the right people who do great work. They have an awareness by vigilantly observing events and interactions, recognizing what is happening and then drawing inferences from what they observe. They are mindful and perceptive in using their knowledge and experience. They are intuitive and demonstrate stewardship through careful and responsible leadership.

In medicine and health care, it is imperative that leaders set a positive example and tap the ideas and passions of their teams, and the people and patients they serve.

Dr. Wiley “Chip” Souba, Jr., MD, ScD, MBA (AΩA, University of Texas McGovern Medical School, 1978) prepares leaders based on a structural framework for exercising leadership and provides a foundation for being a leader. He stresses the fact that leading is a “way of being.”

Self-reflection and the inward journey

Becoming a leader is much like becoming a physician. It involves experiential learning and reflection with mentors. AΩA Fellows in Leadership develop a year-long, or longer, project that advances them and their team, organization, unit, and community. Through the project, they actively serve as a leader with the support of mentors and AΩA faculty liaison. Their ultimate goal is to learn and develop using the lessons of reflection, experiences (successful and challenging), adversities, and accomplishments.

“You have been leading yourself for most of your life. You began leading yourself by setting goals, staying on task, and learning self-discipline. You constructed your own implicit leadership from experiences as a way of

making sense of leadership, your own mental model of what leadership is about and how it works,” Souba explains.

Leading and leadership result from knowing yourself, reflecting on your life story, and aspiring and learning to lead others. The journey is about understanding and knowing yourself to uncover your innate self-expression, values, and true sense of joy.

The inward journey is about discovery, who you are for yourself, what you are about, and your personal and professional identity, and values. What you stand for, what you aspire to be, and identifying your most important priorities. The inward journey is about your way of being human.

The process of becoming a leader involves moving from legitimate peripheral participation to full participation in leading and leadership, which is the acquisition of the identity of a leader. In addition, reflection on individual experiences with observation, role models, and mentors is fundamental to learning how to be a leader.

Dr. Souba has long been a great physician and leader, and communicates the introspection and concepts of the inward journey of leadership. He understands and shares the science and practice of leadership that is achieved through first experiencing the inward journey. He explains that it is through focusing on a broader way of being, thinking, speaking, and acting that leaders become more effective in dealing with the challenges for which conventional strategies are inadequate.

We are fortunate to have Dr. Souba as a member of the AΩA Board of Directors, and as a faculty member to the AΩA Fellows in Leadership program. His insights, intelligence, instruction, and leadership are invaluable to AΩA, our members, and our Fellows in Leadership.

Leading oneself: The journey within

Dr. Souba (AΩA, University of Texas McGovern Medical School, 1978) is Professor of Surgery, Dartmouth School of Medicine; Former Dean of Medicine and VP for Health Affairs, Dartmouth College, and Immediate Past President, Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society.

Editor's note: This article builds off of a 2006 article by Dr. Souba (Souba W. The inward journey of leadership. *J Surg Res.* 2006; 131: 159–67).

In medicine, we tend to think of leadership as being about a person in charge who stands apart and wields clout. The word leader may bring to mind vivid images: the technically-gifted surgeon; the brilliant researcher; the superb diagnostician and teacher; the charismatic,

Leading oneself: The journey within

larger-than-life department chair. For most of the 20th century, our concept of leadership in health care has centered around visible individuals and their talents, contributions, and achievements.

This way of thinking about leadership is limited. The focus is on the individual not on the activity of leadership. The end game of leadership is not about a person, it's about serving the people that hospitals and medical schools were created to safeguard—patients, learners, communities, and colleagues. While few would contest this mission, the barriers and deterrents can be overwhelming. Hospital and medical school politics can be petty and vicious; the emphasis on hitting performance targets is unrelenting; time is in short supply; burnout is rampant, and the brain is wired for survival, not for reality. It is too easy to become stuck in the corporate matrix and not know it. The very essence of the medical profession—placing service above reward—takes a back seat as an overemphasis on profit contributes to the depersonalization of the doctor–patient relationship, physician moral distress, and patient dissatisfaction.

The solution to this dilemma is not to sign up for another retreat, get another degree, read another book on emotional intelligence, or just suck it up. Those interventions may be useful, but in and of themselves they are insufficient. What is missing in all of these strategies is that leadership begins by taking a hard look at oneself, a practice that is the key to building a solid leadership foundation that grounds one's professional identity. The fundamental questions, which are almost invariably neglected, are, "Who am I? What does it mean for me to be a physician?"

We call this look on the inside the inward journey of leadership. Rather than emphasizing knowledge as the source of actions and effectiveness, the inward journey allows us to explore the possibility that our actions and interactions (and our subsequent effectiveness) stem from our way of being human. It is inward as it requires each of us to go inside ourselves and dig and discover, somewhat like an archeologist. It is a journey in that it is a lifelong undertaking filled with unexpected turns and surprises. And, it is an exercise in leadership because it is about leading yourself to uncover your innate self-expression, your deepest commitments, and your true source of joy.

Each of us must lead ourselves. "Only human creatures lead their lives," writes Oxford Professor Stephen Mulhall. "Although this practical relation to one's existence can be repressed or passed over, it cannot be transcended; for refusing to consider the questions it raises is just another way of responding to them, a decision to go on living a certain kind of life."¹

The inward journey of leadership is not about acquiring the skills or expertise to attain a prestigious title or a position of authority within an organization. It is not about becoming proficient in strategic planning, budgeting, or conflict resolution. Rather, it is about discovering who you are, what you care about, what you stand for, and what drives you.

If self-discovery is the purpose of our lives, why aren't more people looking inside? Actually, they are. They just don't realize it as the search does not live in their conscious awareness. The inward journey of leadership is going on with everyone, but it occurs for most people as distant or elusive or fleeting. This apparent absence is not an intellectual issue, everyone is smart enough to make the journey. It's not an energy problem as the inward journey of leadership is a source of vitality. It is not a space issue, as everyone has room for it. It is not a time issue, because it is not time consuming. The issue isn't one of self-discovery, it is one of self-development. When you make time to embark on the inward journey, it becomes a top priority.

The inward journey of leadership

From a practical sense and a romantic sense, we are here in this life to lead ourselves on a voyage of self-discovery. This journey, once undertaken, acts as a guide and a foundation that grants us serenity and equanimity amidst life's frenzy. Without the inner journey, we cannot fully connect with others, and we lack the wisdom and will to tackle our most vexing global challenges. Yet, when our inner work is isolated from others, its full expression is suppressed, not fully shared. Sadly, the commercialization of our day-to-day existence has encouraged an almost exclusively external orientation—one that impedes the inward journey and contributes to a lack of meaning and purpose that permeates our lives.²

There is nothing mysterious about the inward journey. Personal transformation is about creating access to a broader range of ways of being, thinking, speaking, and acting in order to be more effective in dealing with those challenges for which conventional strategies are inadequate. Sadly, many people say, "I don't have time for reflection and self-discovery," but only by looking inside can we thoughtfully address our own baggage and the injustice that has infiltrated our planet. In Parker Palmer's words, "Good leadership comes from people who have penetrated their own inner darkness and arrived at the place where we are at one with one another, people who can lead the rest of us to a place of 'hidden wholeness' because they have been there and know the way."³

Most organizational transformation efforts are unsuccessful because they overlook the importance of personal transformation in enabling major systemic change.⁴ This oversight is at the root of many of our global challenges—health care disparities, climate change, poverty, religious conflicts, bigotry and discrimination, government and corporate corruption, and large-scale conflict. Many people in positions of authority would rather live with these problems than implement solutions that they don't like because those solutions require that they change. In short, they would have to reinvent themselves and be a different person. Transformation entails a shift in the way in which you and I show up each day—at work, at home, and in the communities in which we dwell. In the words of Peter Block, “If there is no transformation inside each of us, all the structural change in the world will have no impact on our institutions.”⁵

The United States' health care system is in urgent need of renewal. An exclusive external focus on winning, looking good, standing out, and measuring up contributes to our inner restlessness, a growing sense that something is missing in our lives. The herculean task of creating a world where everybody counts begins on the inside. Before leaders can help their organizations and communities become more effective, before they can commit to a set of enduring core values, they must first know themselves. The sections that follow describe four key practices for embarking on the invariably challenging, always humbling, sometimes disquieting but deeply rewarding inward journey of leadership.

Create your life story

We all have a life story. Our story is our life and our life is our story. In Emory Professor David Carr's words, our life narratives “are told in being lived and lived in being told.”⁶ Our life stories are important for our identity—they tell us who we are by providing us with a self-concept (our concept of who we are and how we fit into the world), and an identity from which we lead ourselves and others.

Our life stories have less to do with the facts of what took place in our past and more to do with the way in which those facts and events occur for us. Our life stories are interpretations and explanations from which we draw meaning. Bestselling author John Green reminds us that, “you do not remember what happened. What you remember becomes what happened.”⁷

Here's where we can get into trouble. Sometimes our identity gets forged from life stories that we constructed (usually in our childhood) in response to something

someone said or did that we interpreted as meaning we were not good enough. When this happens, the story (e.g., I'm not smart enough, I'm not attractive enough, I don't get enough attention) can become a belief, which can linger on for a long time, creating an enormous burden in our lives, limiting relationships and sapping our energy. The brain's account of an event (I flunked that exam so I'm a loser) is an inaccurate version of what really happened (I flunked), but the brain's interpretation (I'm a loser) becomes truth, hence reality. When we are able to separate what really happened from our story about what happened, we discover that much of what we considered a given may not be the truth. Beliefs (about self, others, and relationships) that may have been perceived to be fixed in stone now become open to change.

So, start constructing your life story. Examine your past and organize your life experiences into a story that clarifies your self-concept. You are your own active autobiographer, who interprets, reinterprets, and integrates your experiences, attributing meaning to them to create a story in which you are the protagonist. Confront the stories that are holding you back, the ones that tell you you're not good enough, and rewrite them.

We can intentionally shape our growth and evolution into more conscious beings. We don't need to wait for Darwin. We have to start with developing an understanding of how we became who we are today. We can rewrite our disempowering stories. We wrote them, we can revise them.

You can't change what happened, but you can change the way in which what happened occurs for you. When you take this on, you will start to see things differently, and that's the first step to transformation.

Get to know yourself again, for the first time

The ancient Greek aphorism *gnōthi seauton* (know thyself) was inscribed above the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi when it was built 2,700 years ago. The maxim was later expounded upon by Socrates who said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Socrates claimed that, of all forms of understanding, understanding oneself is our most important pursuit.

It may seem rather obvious that you know who you are. But the process is not so straightforward. Oscar Wilde reminds us that, “most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.”⁸ Wilde is pointing to the inexorableness with which we are all a product of our socialization and the extent to which most of us are crowd conformers.

Leading oneself: The journey within

There are at least two consequences of following the crowd and forgoing the inward journey of self-discovery. First, we defer to the crowd when it comes to discovering what it means to live the good life. In so doing, we absolve ourselves from any kind of inner work.

Second, we start to see one another as objects with properties, i.e., physical traits (gender, skin tone), internal traits (thoughts, feelings, personalities) and possessions (titles, positions). These properties determine our status in life.

The process of acquiring an identity begins in childhood as we adopt ways of being and acting to deal with things that didn't quite go the way we thought they should. Perhaps your grades didn't live up to your parents' expectations, perhaps you didn't turn out to be the athlete your father wanted you to be. Because of those perceived shortcomings, maybe you learned to be industrious, domineering, or cautious.

By the time we reach adulthood, we have assembled a set of behaviors and attributes and ways of doing things that seem to give us a certain measure of success. These contribute to, and shape, our personality—who we consider ourselves to be. This inauthentic way of being becomes automatic and non-reflective, except in terms of calculated designs, arbitrated to what society and the media tells us what is success. The measures of success—fitting in, looking good, belonging to the right country club, living in the right community—become our focus. The result of living such an inauthentic life may cause us to experience what Paul Tillich calls the “anxiety of meaninglessness—anxiety about the loss of an ultimate concern.”⁹

The inward journey of leadership is the venue for each of us to discover anew who we really are. But, it is not about discovering an inner self that withdraws from others and retreats to a spa in the mountains. Rather, it is about our willingness to take on our entrenched beliefs, our fears, and our vulnerabilities so we can lead ourselves and others more effectively. Only when we have done this will we be in a position to unleash our authentic self. This pursuit begins by examining two related questions: What is really important to me? What do I care about deeply?

Consider that, most fundamentally, you are a unique manifestation of the Universe. In other words, you are on display along with all the other forms of life (and non-life) that comprise the universe. Humans, however, can choose how they will be on display. We can choose how we show up each day. We can choose how we will spend our time, and we can choose the commitments we will make.

For each of us, this new way of understanding who we are—a unique manifestation of the infiniteness of life opposed to an object with properties—can only come from the inward journey of leadership. When we make this shift, it will be like getting to know ourselves again, for the first time.

Explore your spirituality

Spirituality is a polarizing word, which can make it a difficult concept to discuss. Because the word means different things to different people, it can trigger strong emotions and misunderstandings. In the extreme, these misconceptions have led to many of the atrocities that have become an almost permanent feature of contemporary life. There is, however, no need for spirituality to be so divisive.

Nelson Thayer's take on spirituality is impartial, informative, and useful. He writes, “In the most general sense, spirituality has to do with how we experience ourselves in relation to what we designate as the source of ultimate power and meaning in life and how we live out this relationship. Spirituality is not merely inner feelings; it has to do with the integration and coherence of ourselves as experiencing and acting persons.”¹⁰

Being spiritual is a very natural way of being human. Research by Andrew Newberg indicates that the human impulse to transcend and to connect with something larger than ourselves is rooted in the biology of the brain.¹¹

Since everyone has some view of how life and the Universe works, no matter how narrow or nonconforming, everyone has a spirituality. Our spiritual worldview is often reflected in the way in which we answer questions such as: Is the world a cruel place, one where you must look out for yourself, or is it a compassionate place? Does the cosmos have a purpose, or do you see it as a vast stretch of impersonal empty space? Is the universe ruled by a stern taskmaster who keeps score, or is it one big cause and effect?

Making time on your inward journey to probe these questions is important. Try to notice the extent to which your answers have already been taken for granted, thrust upon you by your parents, your peers, and social media. Often, the biggest hurdle is overcoming your reluctance to challenge what you've been taught. You need to find answers to these questions for yourself.

Delving into these enigmas is important for two reasons. First, getting in touch with your spirituality becomes the foundation upon which you discover and forge your values and ideals, which in turn shape your choices and commitments—in short, how you show up in life. You may conclude that you don't experience any ultimate

reality or power in the Universe and that life is a kind of one and done. Fair enough, that's your spirituality. It is as valid as anyone else's spirituality in virtue of being yours. Notice how your spirituality shapes the way in which life occurs for you.

Second, an increasing number of people are experiencing spirituality as complementary to science; as a method of discovering truth. Einstein told us nearly 50 years ago that, "science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind."¹² The inward journey can provide access to higher levels of consciousness—deeper truths about what is real and what is truly important. It can support people in taking on their insecurities and fears, enabling them to become more centered, more grounded, more forgiving, and more human.

Access to the arena of the inward journey has become more challenging. The two big external constraints are time and bombardment. The amount of information coming at us each day, both in terms of the demands at work and raw data inputs, is overwhelming. Much of our existence seems trivial and inexplicable, and yet we want it all to mean something. "Even as empiricism is winning the mind," writes EO Wilson, "transcendentalism continues to win the heart.... The human mind evolved to believe in the gods. It did not evolve to believe in biology."¹³

Let your authentic stand find you

"The history of the human race," wrote Yale Professor Margaret Farley, "as well as the story of any one life, might be told in terms of commitments."¹⁴ Our commitments in life define us—they reveal what we care about, what's important to us. They are how others remember us after we are gone.

Each of us is committed, often to several allegiances. We may be committed to our job, to our family, to distributive justice, and/or to work-life balance. Even those who are committed to beating the system or just getting by in life can have strength of conviction. In that sense, we are all taking a stand for some future.

There is nothing inherently wrong with committing to one's own personal goals (e.g., getting a promotion) but what makes a stand truly authentic and powerful is when that stand goes beyond one's personal agenda. An authentic stand is always about putting time and energy into creating a future that is bigger than ourselves. In Einstein's words, "Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile."¹⁵

In giving your word to these authentic commitments you bring them to life through your word in action. Living out your commitments gives your life purpose and joy.

A good way to start is to ask yourself: What do I ache for in this world? The first step in being authentic, writes former University of South Florida Professor Charles Guignon, "is the task of pulling yourself back from your entanglements in social game-playing and going with the flow so that you can get in touch with your real, innermost self. This task requires intensive inward-turning, whether such self-inspection is called 'introspection,' 'self-reflection,' or 'meditation.' The assumption ...is that there is a substantial self lying deep within each of us, a self with attributes that are both distinctively our own and profoundly important as guides for how we ought to live."¹⁶

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment."¹⁷

Taking your stand may come with risk. You might have to go out on a limb. You may be tempted to back down. That's why leadership can be a dangerous undertaking. Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., took a stand for justice and equality. It cost them both their lives. Nelson Mandela took a stand for the freedom of his people and ended up in prison for 27 years. While such big stands can have a far-reaching positive impact, much more common are those stands that are less public, less visible, and often go unnoticed. The physician who commits to providing his patients with the best care possible, is taking a stand for the inviolability of the doctor-patient relationship. The teacher who promises to provide her class with the best education possible is taking a stand for her students.

Stands are what make real leadership happen. The playwright Howard Sackler said, "To intervene, even briefly, between our fellow creatures and their suffering or death, is our most authentic answer to the question of our humanity."¹⁸

Our stands reflect our search to discover who we are. In taking an authentic stand, we find our voice. Discovering who we really are involves letting go of who we think we are. We may not find all the answers, but we will find meaning and purpose.

A mountain with no top

While no two inward journeys are the same, the four aforementioned practices can help everyone get started. They are not cumbersome—they are, in fact, freeing. If you stick with these practices, they will, over time, become second nature. This will allow you to create new linguistic distinctions, which, by virtue of enabling you to see things in a new light, become contexts from and through which you live and lead your life more effectively, which includes being less judgmental and more grateful.

Leading oneself: The journey within

On the inward journey, our taken for granted understanding of leadership begins to change. We start to see leadership less as being about a person in charge and more as a property of a living system, a kind of energy that circulates in the bloodstream of a person, an organization, a country, and a planet. This emerging view of leadership contends that language, as opposed to power, is the leader's most valuable resource. What leaders say and how they say it can make all the difference in the world. Imagine the diminished impact of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words if he had said, "I have a business strategy," instead of, "I have a dream."

The possibility of being a leader is not an end state or goal; it is not something that we will be someday. We are always becoming. We strive to put our best foot forward but do not always do so, which allows us to learn, grow, and evolve. We must be ever cognizant of both the virtuous and errant sides of being human—of our capacity for compassion and commitment that makes good leadership possible in the first place, and of our capacity for inauthenticity and injustice that makes it essential.

References

1. Mulhall S. *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Heidegger's Being and Time*. London: Routledge. 2005.
2. Souba W. Academic medicine and our search for meaning and purpose. *Acad Med*. 2002; 77: 139–44.
3. Palmer P. *Let Your Life Speak*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 1999.
4. Souba W. Health care transformation begins with you. *Acad Med*. 2015; 90(2): 139–42.
5. Block P. *Stewardship*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler. 1996.
6. Carr D. Narrative explanation and its malcontents. *History and Theory*. 2008; 47: 19–30.
7. Green J. *An Abundance of Katherines*. New York: Dutton Juvenile. 2006.
8. Wilde O. *De Profundis*. New York: Vintage Books. 1905/1964.
9. Tillich P. *The Courage to Be*. New Haven (CT): Yale University Press. 1952.
10. Thayer N. *Spirituality and pastoral care*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1985.
11. Newberg A, D'Aquili E, Rause V. *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*. New York: Ballantine Books. 2001.
12. Einstein A. *Ideas and Opinions*. New York: Crown. 1954/1982.
13. Wilson EO. The Biological Basis of Morality. *The Atlantic Monthly*. April 1998; 281(4): 53–70.
14. Farley M. *Personal commitments*. New York: HarperCollins. 1986.
15. Einstein A. Is Terse in Rule for Success? *New York Times*. June 20, 1932: 17.
16. Guignon C. *On Being Authentic*. New York: Routledge. 2004.
17. Ralph Waldo Emerson Quotes. <https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/ralph-waldo-emerson-quotes>.
18. Brodsky M. The viability of our humanity: Will the Supreme Court's abortion jurisprudence survive the challenge of embryonic stem cell research? *St. John's Law Review*. 2002; 76: 225–52.

The author's E-mail address is wiley.w.souba.jr@dartmouth.edu.