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first two pages of Foreword:

A Foreword

Poetry and Leadership in the Labyrinth of Work

For many contemporary poets, there's something disturbing about a foreword in a collection of poems. One becomes suspicious. Should there be such a thing at all? Surely everything worth saying could have gone into the poetry? One also gets the distinct whiff of narcissism. Who does this guy think he is, Keats? As a consequence, poets tend to flick through any foreword and get to the poetry as quickly as possible....

But then this book wasn't actually written for poets. It was written for people who are often estranged from poetry, who might not trust it, who may have been baffled, or irritated, or even turned off by it. It was also written for those who spend the better part of their time guiding others through the labyrinth of working life. This book was written for leaders. With that in mind, this foreword can be seen as an introduction to the strange dance that poetry has been having with work, and leadership, over the last decade. It also points towards the internal journey begun by every leader who accepts their first promotion.

It seems odd to me that so little poetry is written about work. We spend millions of working hours in this strange land called the workplace, and yet the poetry of work would fill a very small bookcase. American poets such as Weldon Kees, David Ignatow, James Autry and Ted Kooser have written wry, touching and incisive poems about the details of managerial life. On this side of the Atlantic, with a few notable exceptions like Dennis O'Driscoll, Gavin Ewart, and U. A. Fanthorpe, work, and particularly leadership, seem to be something of a no-go area. Perhaps this has to do with the corralling of poets into the folds of academia and creative writing faculties, but the fact remains that, compared to other important areas of our lives, work and leadership rarely get the poetic attention they deserve.

This is even stranger when you consider how many of the great poets of the last century had considerable leadership experience. Statesmen, bank managers, insurance executives, lawyers, and publishers all covered the bases of public and private sector leadership, yet they turned out very little poetry about what Phillip Larkin called 'the toad called work'. There's a gap on our shelves.

I worked for over twenty-five years in London's gaming industry. Having also written plays for years, and burned out as both a dramatist and a casino Pit Boss, I plunged, or rather fell, into personal development. I spent some years, working with psychologists and storytellers, shamans and poets, addicts and therapists. For one deeply uncomfortable year, I even gave up all thought of writing. I sat and I listened, I watched and I waited. What came back was poetry.

Not long after this, I was asked by Richard Olivier to join him and Nicholas Janni in founding Olivier Mythodrama, a creative consultancy that uses story and poetry to explore leadership issues through the medium of Shakespearean myth and theatre practise. We were soon working for business schools and organisations at a surprisingly high level. Spending time with leaders and decision-makers, helping them to unpick their all too real dilemmas and paradoxes, I found a new and interesting field opening up before me. Adding my own feelings about leadership into the mix — I became a company director and chairman en route — I was soon writing for and about the people that I was meeting in seminars and coaching sessions around the world. I became intrigued by leaders: by the different ways they communicate and embody their ideas, the ways they operate, and the lives they lead.

First three poems follow:-

You Guys

For B W

This is your time

For frosty mornings in towns you will never know,
For resentful receptionists and chirpy secretaries,
For flipcharts and outcomes, for plans and reports,
For too much coffee and too many words.

This is your time.

This is your time

For dressing in the dark and cars to the airport,
For planes and trains and railway stations,
For loneliness, for grief, for embracing doubt,
For keeping hard secrets in the face of love.

This is your time.

This is your time

For being what your people need you to be,
For managing fear while showing calm,
For being their mother, for being their father,
For holding the line, or the hope, or the dream.

This is your time.

This is your time

For sudden sunlight breaking through the overcast,
For sweet green spaces in concrete canyons,
For the care of strangers, for anonymous gifts,
For learning to receive little acts of kindness.

This is your time.

This is your time

For standing to be counted, for being yourself,
For becoming the sum and total of your life,
For finding courage, for finding your voice,
For leading, because you are needed now.

This is your time.

The Contract

A word from the led

And in the end we follow them —
not because we are paid,
not because we might see some advantage,
not because of the things they have accomplished,
not even because of the dreams they dream,
but simply because of who they are —
the man, the woman, the leader, the boss,
standing up there when the wave hits the rock,
passing out faith and confidence like life jackets,
knowing the currents, holding the doubts,
imagining the delights and terrors of every landfall:
captain, pirate, and parent by turns,
the bearer of our countless hopes and expectations.
We give them our trust. We give them our effort.
What we ask in return is that they stay true.

And This is the Deal

After Naomi Shihab Nye

Before you can call yourself a leader
you must come to understand failure,
embrace it like a sick, incurable friend
who looks at you in stark bewilderment.
You must see the edifice you created
crack and crumble, as in an earthquake;
witness the hurt and the disbelief, the shock
in the faces of those who trusted you;
feel their eyes on the back of your neck,
searing your skin as you drive away.

Before you put on the leader's coat,
you need to encounter your ruined rival,
see him stagger as he passes you by,
unheeding, rapt in the shame of his defeat.
You need to grasp that it could've been you,
sleepless, goaded by the need to win,
who crossed the line into recklessness
and lost a world on the turn of a card.

Before you know the lightness of leadership
you have to feel its suffocating weight,
to know that the sorrows of your people
are yours as much as the photos on your desk.
You have to plunge into the sea of their fear,
swim in the running tide of their anxieties —
dare to feel, dare to connect, dare to be
angry on their behalf — for until you have
shown them your tears and your weaknesses,
your power, like your kudos, remains a sham.

And then when the call to action comes,
when the e-mails fly and the questions get asked,

your people can show their hidden quality
by forming a hedge of trust around you.
Humanity, sown in time of quiet,
can reap hard work, long hours and loyalty.
The band of brothers can be a reality,
but the one who leads it has to be real.