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Foreword

This is a bold, radical book with unequivocal views of what it takes to be a wise and strong leader. Anyone courageous enough to climb to these heights will feast heartily at the more than ample banquets of reflection and discovery.

The first publication of David McCleary's *The Flawless Leader Papers* brings to mind two classic works: Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, and James MacGregor Burns' *Leadership*. Like Campbell, McCleary emphasizes the leader's lifelong quest for deep meaning and purpose, bluntly stating, "freedom...is always and only chosen by you." It is not something that anyone can give to you. Throughout this work, he uses the metaphor of imprisonment – both the imprisonment of embedded societal and organizational norms, as well as the self-imprisoning beliefs we harbor about our own limitations. McCleary emphasizes the truth of the unconscious and deeply personal limitations that spring from a history of unresolved psychological damage. These dark, unconscious patterns are revealed only when the going gets tough. The only escape from our binds is to explore our behavior, become aware of our dark legacies, and consciously choose to avoid these traps.

Much of McCleary's book is dedicated to exploring this reality. Without using psychological jargon, he describes many common dysfunctional patterns and aptly characterizes them: e.g. trapped in yesterday, scaling the walls of wounds, fear's sentencing, and captivity of indecision. The use of the author's own consulting experiences, working with leaders in the midst of these very struggles, is enlightening and grounding in a reality we can all appreciate. The questions he raises under the rubric of "Signs and Messages" also offer windows into self-exploration and insight.

McCleary asserts, rightfully, that self-examination and self-discovery is the work of a lifetime. As Joseph Campbell asserts under the heading of the adventure of the hero: "...the first work of the hero is to retreat from the world scene of secondary effects to those causal zones of the psyche where the difficulties really reside, and there to clarify the difficulties, eradicate them in his own case (i.e., give battle to the demons of his local culture)." (p. 17) Leaders who achieve hard-won personal liberation and become more mature and secure in their own identities are

able to lead cultural change in their organizations, consummately by their own embodiment of a more wholesome existence.

The second description of the “flawless leader” to which I strongly resonate has much in common with the seminal work on leadership by James MacGregor Burns. In his introduction, McCleary asserts, “That which is meaningful and lasting beings with and is pervaded by worthy purpose. Leaders fail when they dishonor that timeless truth.” He advises us that it is critical to engage in deep probing for purposes that are worthy and meaningful. McCleary goes on to say that, “Flawless leaders treat others as equals, not as objects or minions. Flawless leaders continue to hone their judgment in service of followers. Leadership is a trusting relationship, and followers inherently look to trust in a leader’s judgment and not be victimized by it.” Indeed, leadership is fundamentally an issue of sound, trusting relationships between leaders and followers.

In a similar vein, Burns asserts that “Some define leadership as leaders making followers do what *followers* would not otherwise do, or as leaders making followers do what the *leaders* want them to do; I define leadership as leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations – the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations – *of both leaders and followers.*” (p. 19) McCleary stresses that anything less than this mature view of leadership is nothing short of tyranny.

He also takes this mature view of leadership a step further, observing ultimately five critical elements that must come together in an effective leader: self-awareness, self-acceptance, self-accountability, open vulnerability, and strong connections with others. This is not a static picture. Once you have found the Holy Grail of leadership, it is not intractably yours forever. Challenges in relationships and in chosen purposes will always be in a dynamic flux, with small deaths and rebirths in constant reoccurrence. Leadership is an endless journey of liberation that requires a dedication to choosing your path and actively taking the next step forward. It is clear that the only leadership that could possibly succeed is that of an authentic leader.

Following the logic of Campbell, Burns, and McCleary’s arguments, it becomes clear that effective leadership is essentially autobiographical – a particular leader and his particular

A Peek Inside: *Leaving Prisons – Release Your Trapped Value!*

David McCleary

followers, mutually committed to a common goal. Rather than a single view of leadership, we really do have leadership with a thousand faces – authentic faces.

Tony Petrella

Arnold, MD ~ August 2009

Introduction to *The Flawless Leader Papers*

The Flawless Leader Papers guide and propel leaders through their badlands into their ultimate achievement: surrender to worthy purpose. *That which is meaningful and lasting begins with and is pervaded by worthy purpose.* Leaders fail when they dishonor that timeless truth. We choose inevitable defeat when we selfishly and fearfully choose not to subjugate to something greater and more meaningful than ourselves. To avoid certain failure, we must do that which we naturally strive so strenuously against: surrender. Leaders flounder when they fail to surrender to sacred intent, for surrender is more powerful than conquest. A leader's submission to a worthy objective is embryonic, birthing possibility and importance. Conquest alone cannot bring weighty consequence; only contribution offers the possibility of significance. Conquest takes; contribution gives. Conquest diminishes; contribution enlarges. Conquest too often commits crimes; contribution repents and restores. There is always lavish generosity within a leader's powerful surrender to the meaningful. The disturbing question that must remain rattling within us is "*what purpose is worthy of my surrender?*"

Regardless of either the depths of despair or the extraordinary successes, I find leaders constantly struggling to reach enhanced levels of both leadership and organizational outcomes; the prevalent assumption seems to be that these two are inextricably linked. I have also experienced the uncanny reality that, despite our achievements, we are all uniquely predisposed to *trapping the release of our full value in life*, our secret unseen talons securely withholding the full measure of our gifts to the world. And to complicate matters further, when the going gets tough, we all feel uniquely distressed and behave in peculiarly maladaptive patterns. These unseen and often unconscious forces form the true obstacles in our path, the jolts and stumbles along our journey. *That which is unconscious and unarticulated controls us and traps the value we would bring to the world.* Exposing and embracing the unconscious leads us to freedom's path, the path of the flawless leader.

The Flawless Leader Papers form a powerful compass to guide leaders along the journey of releasing their trapped value. A compass is an absolutely necessary companion on the path of the flawless leader. When you are lost in the woods, a compass helps you answer three critical questions: "Where am I?" "Where have I been?" and "Where am I going?" When we are not in

the woods, yet we are still unsure and even lost at times, these compass questions are still helpful. Answers to compass questions are personal and unpredictable, and the deep work to which these disturbing questions and reflections bring us must be honored in order for meaningful change to occur. These questions compel us to stop and reflect. They urge us to dispel fear, accept truth, capture insight. Wherever they are, when leaders have done this work, they are noticeably different. They are changed. They have released their unique value. These are not new or novel questions. Some of the world's oldest stories and manuscripts contain these questions. When Adam and Eve sinned, experiencing inner estrangement, Genesis records that God asked them to reflect on "Where are you?" and "What have you done?" To lead flawlessly, we must explore the often-uncharted territory of a leader's compass questions.

If you are looking for a fun, quick, and easy way to be a leader, you have come to the wrong book. These are not new ideas filled with novelty and the promise of self-help. Herein are collections of dusty old disturbing notions about the thinking and behavior of leaders. If you desire twelve steps, seven habits, Ten Commandments, twenty new rules, or fifty critical characteristics, put the book down now. Leaders are not in need of something "new and improved," or some new list of metrics to be proctored and calculated. I agree with Wendell Berry that novelty is a reduction of reality – a collection of "faint surprises [by] minds incapable of wonder." There are mysteries in life that, when reduced, make life smaller. When considering these mysteries under the spyglass of deconstructive analysis, we give a veiled voice to all sorts of unhelpful and sophisticated whining. These books do not contain tactful, accommodating, and diplomatically benign advice; they instead plunge us into staggering mysteries and overwhelming realities that our autopilot self-deceit normally ignores. Real leadership cannot be reduced to intellectual bromides and slick models, to then be merchandised in success stories. Flawless leaders are refined in revelations that can only be found in the tempests and torrents of adversity and affliction. No one becomes a better leader merely from reading a book; if you are looking for an injection of competence from a series of written words, your dream is incomplete. The books leaders read during their lifelong lessons unfortunately require the accompaniment of actually leading, and quite often through emotionally disturbing experiences. Despite the sheer tonnage of past paperback analysis, in many ways leadership joyfully remains a mystery. The intent of these books is to assist your necessary navigation of the difficult, mysterious and dusty old thoughts we too often avoid.

Our path to the release of our trapped value is paved with the bricks of our unconscious, controlling dysfunctions. Exposing and managing our flaws requires difficult reflections on deeply disturbing questions. These questions, even more than their reflections, hold the keys to our value release. These volumes are not mere advice and prescriptions; they are more like a collection of disruptively healing questions. My grandfather once told me to be careful when I argued against something because truth naturally invites scrutiny. In his opinion, if I were on the side of truth I would not argue; I would embrace criticism and dissent. This warning I regret to have too often ignored. Even though I did not always heed the sage advice, his admonition did the work of a great question: it has been rattling around inside me for decades. That is what great questions do. They disturb our sleep and disrupt our thoughts. Great questions are so edgy and personal that they stop us abruptly and change our direction. When I was about five years old I had been asking my grandfather a torrent of questions and finally, after one unknowingly insightful question, he turned to me and said, "That question is so important, I would never dishonor it by trading it for an answer." *These books aspire to honor the mysteriously customized work that great questions do in each of us.*

Central to these guidebooks are the series of unanswered questions that occur every few pages, called *Signs and Messages*. Depending on the particular stage in your journey, you'll have different realizations as you reflect and journal on the various questions. Great questions are edgy, disruptive and personal. Great questions are inherently haunting and cause us to look inward. And great leaders always hold tightly to great questions. I encourage you to write out your reflections on these questions. Knowing that most of you will resist that encouragement, I encourage you to do it despite your reflex resistance. In your writing you will find the awakening of insight and the release of trapped value. *Your words will become more important to you than mine could ever be.*

Carl Jung taught that those who look outward, dream; while those who look inward, awaken. Flawlessly leading is a lifetime journey. It is primarily a journey within, a journey of new awakenings. A leader is a disrupter, a fire-starter, someone who naturally goes around turning things right-side-up. This natural disturbance arises from beneficial internal unrest and anxiety, from an innate need to build purpose and right wrongs in the world. Making friends with the

lack of internal peace and contentment is a sign of true freedom's submission to worthy purpose, and is part and parcel of the journey of a flawless leader.

The notion of a flawless leader is best described in comparison to tyranny. We all struggle against the toxicity of tyranny and despotism. We all participate in the venom of tyranny and its many disguises. It started at birth, for we are all born tyrants. We are born with an innate desire for unilateral control over everything around us, and if you are a parent, you have witnessed the shadows of tyranny from the front row. I had thought that tyranny was just a form of manipulation, but in fact, tyranny has many forms. Sometimes it is outright forced compliance; sometimes it appears as benevolent dictatorship; sometimes patriarchy; sometimes paternalism; sometimes colonialism. In whatever size or shape it assumes, tyranny is undeniably the manipulative forcible coercion of others' free will. Tyranny can be a phone call from the lonely grandmother covertly dripping in guilt, the drill sergeant's demeaning scream intending to help keep you alive when you face battle, the selling of a human slave to be owned as property by another human, the state government requiring every person to buy health insurance, the boy who buys flowers and dinner hoping to have sex from his date at the end of the night, the business owner who raises commodity prices during a natural catastrophe, the minister using guilt to extort more money from parishioners, or the wife who uses sex with her husband to manipulate his actions or decisions. Regardless of tyranny's profile, to be an instrument of someone's will other than your own is dehumanizing. Human exploitation is the hallmark of tyranny. All this understanding is so uselessly comfortable until we begin to ponder the great question, "*When and in what ways do I exploit and dehumanize others as a means to my self-centered ends?*"

Flawless leaders are an irritation and an affront to tyrants, quietly representing a more restorative and enduring form of maturation. They stand in strong and subtle opposition to tyranny. Their lives project unforced rhythms of healing and humanization. To be a flawless leader is to be a force of nature, a power to harmonize, a balanced treaty of peace. Hierarchical position, coercion and adoration give a false sense of pseudo-power, and collude together to support the lie that power is a scarce resource to be hoarded. Power comes to those who bring others power. Power comes to those who bring hope. Creating power in others is one of the primary duties of a flawless leader. Power comes not to those to whom others have

surrendered. Power comes to those who have surrendered to a greater purpose. *At the core, a flawless leader is a living picture of restoration, responsible healing, and lavish service.*

These books begin to paint the picture of a flawless leader, but, without question, you are undoubtedly the culminating work of art. The notion of a flawless leader begins with a great concern for service rather than status. Flawless leaders respect others' free will more than they respect their own force. Instead of striving for the admiration that conquest brings, a flawless leader is passionate about creating enduring contribution. The path of a flawless leader is built solely through mutually submissive relationships. This type of relationship is not what most leaders initially desire. The relationships of a flawless leader stand out in quiet opposition to the power differential relationships of the ivory tower leader. Flawless leaders remain open to the influences of others; they do not seek protection or isolation from followers. *There is an undeniably fierce vulnerability to the flawless leader, like a little lighthouse standing firm in the perfect storm.* A flawless leader's vulnerability involves a commitment to transparency and openness. But the real foundation of a flawless leader is in doing what does not come naturally: surrender. Flawless leaders have surrendered to a meaningful purpose for their lives, and this surrender creates the passion to release trapped value in themselves and others.

Leadership is undoubtedly a fertile ground in which paradox will bloom, and the flawless leader is intimately acquainted with its counter-intuitive nature. Occasionally in leadership, it seems that for almost every common-sense reflexive approach, the opposite tactic is actually more effective. The following paradoxes are common fare on the buffet of the flawless leader.

Flawless

We are most authentic when discussing our hypocrisy.

We are most successful when we fully experience our great failures.

We are most honest when we say that we lied.

We are most accepting when we embrace our self-rejection.

We are most significant when we fully grasp our irrelevance.

We are most productive when we become unattached to outcomes.

We are most secure when we accept inherent risk.

We are most wealthy when we possess that which cannot be bought.

We are most alive when we live as though we will die.

We are most powerful when we empower others.

The most caring thing we can do is to care for ourselves.

The most holy thing we can say is that we are evil.

*The most whole thing we can say is that we are broken.
The most flawless thing we can say is that we are flawed.*
- David McCleary

Through authenticity and vulnerability we quietly stride onto the path of the flawless leader. We walk this painful path because we are submitting to worthy purpose and we realize that our most dangerous obstacles lie within. To be a flawless leader is to be a source of inspiration to others. To be a flawless leader is to be an irritant to those who naturally gravitate toward the use of fear, manipulation and coercion.

It is nice to meet you on the path.

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Charles Dubois said, "The most important thing is this: to be able at any moment to sacrifice what we are for what we would become." Adept personal change is one of the hallmarks of the flawless leader. Authentic meaningful change is the bountiful crop from the soil of self-inflicted wounds. Mr. Dubois's thought is significant because it distills the often ignored, yet defining aspect of leadership's most difficult challenge: change. The anxiety associated with the pain of personal transformation typically derails most leaders from reaching their most meaningful destiny. Personal change avoidance is the culprit that robs most leaders of their true potential. The unhinging of intended change is nestled snugly in our most deadly adversary: our comfortable prisons. A leader's prison is simply where they get stuck: their rigidity, their unhelpful and often unconscious thinking and behavior. *Failed leaders often thwart their careers and their organizations because they view change as what happens to everyone else.* In all the history of leadership, if there is a great sadness that demands our mourning, it is that countless leaders failed to meaningfully change the world because they were inept at self-transformation. Flawless leaders, however, continually and appropriately transform themselves and their organizations, knowing that the journey of personal change never ends.

M.K. Gandhi said, "You must be the change you want to see in the world." I say that all organizational and societal change begins with personal change. And personal change capability begins with an understanding of that which we leave behind: the prison of our former selves. This edition of *The Flawless Leader Papers* dissects and discusses many aspects of our chosen transformations, our exodus from our "stuckness," our self-releases from our prisons, our dropping of our chains to yesterday. Regardless of the situation, there is always a correlating personal transformation that, if actuated, will enable the leader to propel her organization toward the desired state. When that personal change is ignored, the organization follows the leader into a prison of immobility and confinement, and the results are what we all see so often: organizational cultures securely and obviously stuck in rigidity, lackluster productivity, disunity, and a general inability to live synchronously with their dreams and objectives. The immovable reality is that if leaders do not effectively change themselves, they will never be able to effect meaningful change in an organization without the organization suffering the diminishing effects that come from the use of immoral and tyrannical force.

Leaving your addictive prisons of dysfunctional behavior invariably releases trapped value in yourself and all those around you. These radical acts of freedom are testimonies to genuine accountability. The purposeful and reckless abandon of our previously helpful and credible existence is often necessary to achieve our dreams. Our future is at the mercy of our ability to skillfully discuss our fearful flaws and creatively choose a better way. The governing question to guide us in this highly customized and individual journey is, "Which thoughts and behaviors will I choose to leave behind, and which will I take with me in order to optimally serve my purpose in this world?" The discipline of these choices becomes our pathway for walking out of our prisons.

Authentic and sustainable personal transformation begins with the right conversation centered on the right question. Most of our conversations and questions are unfortunately weak and unproductive, and this leads into frozen forests of stagnation. Eventually our weak conversations help us to slip into unknown limiting prisons of dysfunction, as Shakespeare mused in his *Twelfth Night* that "no prison is more confining than those we know not we are in." No one can tell of what they are unconscious, but we can explore signs and symptoms through powerful questions that will lead to the exposure of and freedom from the unconscious limiting factors in our lives. *Find the right questions and the courageous vulnerability to explore those meaningful questions in dialogue, and your path out of your particularly personal, destructive, and addictive prisons will emerge.*

Chapter 10

Navigating the Mobile Jail

"What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves? This is the most important of all voyages of discovery, and without it, all the rest are not only useless, but disastrous..."

-Thomas Merton

The manner in which we reflexively navigate through life is holy. Our maneuvering habits are telling as to our freedom or our rigidity. As leaders, we take our jails with us in the air, on the road, or on the water as we travel. Consider the following three navigational archetypes of rafts, motorboats and sailboats, and reflect on your reconnoitering.

I worked with Ken some years ago. Ken's quintessential talent was that he always made sure he had someone to blame if anything ever went wrong. Behind his back, people called him Teflon-Ken, because nothing ever stuck to him. His accountability avoidance boomeranged, and after being promoted several times, he was eventually fired. Ken was a raft. Rafts adrift choose submission to the forces of nature, living at the mercy of wave whims. Subjugating to the fear of ownership and responsibility, we sometimes choose the raft of abdication. We choose to separate from our power and accountability. We choose to view our existence as effect rather than cause. At some point, life was just too difficult for the raft. To survive, the raft rejected birthright accountability.

Rafts blame others; rafts feel helpless. It is comforting not having to "show up," not having to be responsible, not being exposed. Rafts are nice places to hide. Rafts are frustrated and feel debilitated, but they salve that pain with whining. Whining is easier than the frightening freedom of living fully. Rafts are afraid to lose, to be wrong, to be evil, to live freely. Things happen to the raft. The raft doesn't happen to things. The raft's core assumption is that the elements around it, including people, are the cause of everything in their lives. To lead, the raft must manipulate the elements covertly. To complicate the matter further, the raft needs to hide its chosen victimhood when leading. Thus ritual whining and wailing is disguised in sophisticated analysis, approvals, and controls. The raft leader doesn't want the inherent ownership that comes with being alive; they have given away their power so that they are unable to empower others. The raft can only accomplish anything through rescuers. Rafts collect rescuers through playing helpless, fussing, murmuring, threatening, and spinning stories. Raft rescuers unwittingly become the powerless minions of the complaining, endangering raft. Unwilling to live its own life fully, the raft lives through micromanaging others' lives. The raft's prison is its separation from itself. It divorced its free will and created a vessel, a life, devoid of self-acceptance and self-accountability.

To be or not be a raft is not our only choice; sometimes we choose to travel through life like Barbara. People referred to Barbara as “the Tornado.” She was a high potential business leader who habitually left human debris and destruction in her wake. She ripped loudly through the environment. Instead of exhaust, she left behind toxic emotional residue and high body counts. After her staff meetings, most people typically felt demoralized, hated, worthless, and isolated. Regardless of the environment, she motored through it. Her agenda was paramount. It didn’t matter if a storm was already brewing and the waves were high. Her direction was predominant. It didn’t matter that the conditions were not safe to go on. Her opinion was the only one she accepted. Barbara was a high-powered motorboat, hell-bent for the perfect storm. Motorboats are cause, not effect. Motorboats, however, are oblivious to the fact that they are not the only cause. Motorboats don’t depend on or respect the elements around them; they use and abuse the elements. Don’t get in their way; they’ll motor right over you.

Sometimes we are Barbara. We are most important. Our will must prevail. We assume to know best. We motor, we steam-roll, we squash, we bulldoze, we drive, we muscle, we push. We must accomplish, we must succeed, we must win. It’s not about the team; it’s about us. We are tenacious and determined. There are acceptable sacrifices to our almighty goals. We must continually feed our insatiable dependence on accomplishment. People are the means to our end-goal. People become impersonalized objects to the motorboat, easily used, abused and discarded. Motorboats are highly articulate with a well-polished vocabulary, embedding the impersonalizing of others in everything they do. “Drive labor productivity.” “Maximize utilization of human resources.” “Optimize outcomes.” “Get rid of the deadwood.” “Upgrade the talent.” The motorboat hides its illogical wish to be God behind the veneer of controlling aristocracy. Everyone within reach is the attendant-slave of the motorboat. Through ascendant domination, they separate from humanity and sever any possible connection with those they pretend to lead. Whether the motorboat is benevolent is beside the point; they do not view people as equals, they view people as objects. They repel followers from within their prison cell of supremacy, where they have a room with a view, a point of view: they view humanity inhumanely.

While we may occasionally choose the raft or the motorboat, Vern chose otherwise. When in the presence of some leaders you just know instinctively that they are great, but when you

were in the presence of Vern, you knew that you were great. He possessed quiet strength and connected deeply with people. He respectfully interacted as though he were a part of them. As tender as he was fierce, he had a special awareness and wisdom that helped him to read people and the environment, and to know just how to set his sails. While his presence was powerful and often disruptive, it wasn't forced; it didn't feel foreign, it fit. Vern was intentional and inspirational, yet so flexible that it felt like he was part of the environment itself. Vern was a sailboat. He constantly matched his intentions to the power of the elements around him. He knew well the wind and the waves, and they knew him. He did not force his way through life. He smoothly engaged the elements, and the elements returned the favor. The wind filled his sails, and the waves propelled him forward. He was not separate or isolated; he was whole, part of the whole. He was fully a part of everything around him.

Through Vern's navigation, he found a way to restore his freedom while honoring others' freedom; he found his way to release his trapped value. He chose to tenderly, knowingly, and powerfully maneuver through his journey, and that made all the difference. Sometimes we are Vern. Sometimes we sail. We live in great respect and honor of the environment and of the people around us. We diagnose the elements and we adjust our sails accordingly. We value that we play a part, and we aspire to be flexible so that our part fits well into the whole. We respect the inherent freedom in every human, and that respect sets us free. We break the chains and crush the cages of separations and addictions. We restore brokenness.

Rafts, motors, sails. The work of flawless leaders is to consciously choose the manner in which we navigate through life. There are maneuvering methods that are prisons, and there are approaches that lead to freedom. There are times when we float adrift as a raft, there are times when we forcibly motorboat through and leave toxicity in our wake, and then there are times when we flexibly fit the situation and the wind fills our sails. The journey of the flawless leader requires awareness and choice. Read the wind, the waves, and the weather around you. Take your place within them. Look for the deep water. A ship in the harbor is safe, but that's not why ships are made. Feel the wind in your face. Taste the spray of salt water. See the sun on the horizon. Set your sails for restoration.

What accountability do you avoid?

What is in your wake?

What keeps you from sailing?

