THE ENTERTAINING LEADER, THE INTOXICATED FOLLOWER

by Jean Lipman-Blumen

Just when we think we have studied, perhaps overstudied, every aspect of the leader's hold on followers, it may be impertinent to suggest we have overlooked one critical way by which leaders keep us in their thrall. I am speaking of our need for entertainment—that is, fun, delight, thrills, and controlled terror—a need that plays a key, but often unnoticed, part in the leader-follower connection.

Entertainment as a Socially Induced Need

The primary purpose of entertainment is to create fun, to delight, enthrall, and perchance to thrill its audience. The leader as entertainer is tapping into a need induced by our parents and other early caretakers, who bonded with us by entertaining and delighting us, teaching us the sheer joy of fun—and a little bit of terror besides.

From our earliest moments, parents smile, coo, tickle, and sing to us. Before we can walk, they hold us in their arms and dance around the room with us. They go to great lengths to amuse us, to coax a smile from our infant faces, to spark our delight even before we can respond.

Before long, however, usually somewhere around three months of age, we learn to react by smiling and laughing. Later, our parents keep us entertained by reading to us, even when we are too young to understand much beyond the colorful pictures in those books. Developmental research suggests that children not entertained and cuddled, like many whose early months have been passed in orphanages, grow up with various deficits, often including an inability to bond with others.

But entertainment also holds terror, a controlled terror from which parents repeatedly rescue us. For example, parents play peek-a-boo, a game that mildly frightens but also delights us with the revelation that the hidden terror is no terror after all, only our fun-loving parent. Even before we become toddlers, our parents entertain us by gleefully tossing us up into the air, where momentarily we are suspended in fear and delight, and finally relieved when they catch us. This is one way in which we learn that the same parent who

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makes us laugh and smile is also capable of instilling fear in our hearts.

Through entertaining us, parents display their multifaceted power and, as passive children, we recognize the immense reaches of their authority, which we are unable to overcome. We learn that submission to the parental figures' demands will keep us safe. But we don't remain for long passive recipients of entertainment, with its Janus dual face of fun and terror.

Even before we become toddlers, we learn to reciprocate by entertaining parents with our own charming wiles and games, and thereby discover how to hold these powerful authority figures in our tiny palms and offset their overweening might. We also learn early on, or at least by adolescence, how to strike terror into their hearts as well, by taking forbidden risks and engaging in other behaviors that yank our parents' chains.

At the same time, parents teach us we can depend on them to keep us safe, to catch us from falling, even if that means we need to obey their wishes. In this early patterning, youngsters learn from authority figures to expect joy and delight, fun and entertainment, as well as thrilling fears and the promise of safety—a lesson that will stay with us as we grow into young adulthood and beyond.

In the first instance, this powerful lesson influences the types of entertainment we seek, from iPods, video games, and spectator sports to amusement parks with Houses of Fun, Houses of Horror, and scary roller coasters. If this socially induced need for entertainment only affected the kinds of films we watch and the video games we play, that would be reason enough to care about it. But its clear link to our intoxication with leaders makes it a topic of more serious concern. The entertainment lessons that we learn as children infuse our relationships with political, corporate, religious, and other leaders as we grow beyond the care of our parents and become the targets of authority figures, who, unlike our parents, may not always have our best interests at heart.

The entertainment duality that encompasses fun and fear, delight and despair, stirs a deep ambivalence toward those who can produce both sets of emotions. We develop ambivalence because the same people who entertain and delight us also sometimes threaten, control, and punish us. Many of us retain that ambivalence toward leaders throughout our lives.

Sometimes the negative side of the scale holds not only fear but also envy and resentment, even anger at being castigated or controlled by authority figures who seem to "have it all." While we not so secretly want to be like them, we also like to see that they can fall. Knowing that we might contribute to their demise helps to relieve our sense of powerlessness.

This ambivalence stands quietly in the wings, awaiting a cue for its entrance to center stage. Oftentimes it is the nourishment that our resentment needs to flower into full-blown resistance to a toxic leader.

Leadership as Performance: A Kissing Cousin, Not a Twin

Why, one might ask, do we need to consider "leadership as entertainment" when we already have an abundant literature on "leadership as performance"? So let me digress briefly to consider the difference between the two and thus the legitimate rationale for calling attention to leaders as entertainers.

The literature on "leadership as a performance art" does not completely encompass the entertainment aspect of the leader-follower link. Thus, while the "leader as

performer" may be the kissing cousin of the "leader as entertainer," it is not its identical twin.

Leadership as performance usually attends to ways that the leader, as actor, can move us, guide us, and comfort us, perhaps even reveal a fundamental truth. The leader is acting, creating a performance, pretending to be someone else or frequently covering personal feelings or intent in order to evoke certain responses from followers. The leader as performer is modeling behavior in the hope that followers will replicate it. Thus the leader may act calm even when feeling desperate, or may assume an air of confidence when uncertain, in order to help the followers maintain their own equanimity.

Let me offer one well-known example: on June 4, 1940, Churchill received a rousing response from the House of Commons to his famous "fight on the beaches" wartime speech—the one in which he declared,

> We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.

Several individuals standing close by Churchill reportedly recognized the disparity between Churchill's awareness of the reality Britain faced and the "performance" aspect of his words when they heard the resolute leader ask, *sotto voce,* "With what? Baseball bats, beer bottles?"

Leadership as performance is not limited to the "leader as actor" dimension. Leadership as performance sometimes calls upon the "leader as director" to set the stage, create the script, frame the issues, and create drama. When a leader assumes the role of director, then that leader frequently treats followers as actors who must respond to directorial suggestions or dictates.

True, performance often entertains, but that is not its sole, or even primary, purpose. Moreover, entertainment may involve a performance aspect, but its major *raison d'être* is to create fun and delight, even the chill of controlled terror.

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Leaders as Entertainers

Leaders as entertainers simply want to delight and entrance us. They are not trying to be anyone else. They may, however, wish to make themselves more fun to be with, more attractive, more charming, and more irresistible. In this respect, they are apt to call upon their deep reserves of what we currently label *charisma,* that is, charm, attractiveness, seductiveness, and magnetism, rather than Max Weber's more traditional usage of that term as "divine grace" based on "mana" or a gift from the gods.

This is not to deny that leaders as performers, as well as celebrities and other social heroes, also may exude charisma, that glittering aura that draws others into their charmed circle. Other entertainers—film stars, athletes, as well as military and other heroes—share this quality, but it does not, *by itself,* necessarily transform such individuals into leaders—although we frequently have difficulty distinguishing one from the other. Thus it is quite understandable that some larger-than-life corporate leaders, like Jack Welch or even a Donald Trump, become celebrities, whose autographs their fans seek, and that magazine columns and television shows are built around them.

Add to the mix that celebrities often use their fame, renown, and charisma to bridge the gulf between celebrity and leadership. In California alone, we have two such examples in President Ronald Reagan and Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who transformed their movie star celebrity into formal political leadership roles and power. We also have other entertainment celebrities, like U2's Bono, who have used their celebrity to become informal leaders spearheading worthy causes.

So it is not surprising that the lines between leader and celebrity, between leader and hero, as well as between hero and celebrity, become blurry. Many celebrities cross over that line to become leaders and vice versa, and heroes

attempt the same crossover maneuver, like astronaut John Glenn transmogrifying into Senator John Glenn. That special aura that attracts followers and fans clings to leaders, heroes, and celebrities, an aura that entrances us and often clouds our judgment, reducing our power to resist them, even when we see them as figures whom we should mightily resist. We catch a glimpse of how our need for entertainment and fun induces a profound delight and helplessness in the presence of these glittering figures in this comment by a harried but hooked real estate agent, who had spent six precious work hours showing one celebrity a home on which the "star" never made a bid: "[They] are celebrities for a reason. They have charisma, they generally are a lot of fun to be with, they have personality, they're adorable and you forgive them anything" (*L.A. Times,* February 19, 2006, p. RE 8).

Leaders as Entertainers and the Creation of Illusions

To understand leadership as entertainment, we must consider the leader as illusionist, maker of magic. What is the impact upon the follower, and how do followers become addicted to the delight or terror from which only the entertainer can release or rescue them? In leadership as entertainment, the leader is intent upon captivating the followers. They make us their prisoners, albeit charmed and intoxicated captives. To do so, the leader may utilize spectacle, even magic, and especially illusion.

Like many entertainers, most leaders, but particularly toxic leaders, are practiced illusionists. They create illusions that aim to quell our deepest fears, including the existential anxieties that arise from the certainty of death and the uncertainty of its circumstances. They foster the illusion that they can keep us safe from harm, possibly even from death. When physical death comes knocking, they then promise us symbolic life eternal, the memory that will exist simply in the minds of generations yet unborn, as Napoleon understood so well. Leaders offer us immortality by designing heroic—at least in their own eyes—enterprises in which we followers may participate.

One major problem with these tempting illusions arises from the sad fact that it is often difficult to distinguish

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between the truly noble visions of good leaders and the grandiose illusions of toxic leaders. Sometimes the grand illusion draws followers willy-nilly into toxic territory, but the intoxicated follower doesn't seem to notice. That is an issue I have dealt with in this journal not long ago (see *Leader to Leader* no. 36, Spring 2005).

Leaders often use illusion to hide other fearful daily realities, sometimes carefully administering measured doses they judge we can tolerate. In that way, they enable us to marshal our resources to confront and deal with crises and other difficult changes. Mayor Rudy Giuliani did precisely that in the hours following the terrorist attack of 9/11. He gave New Yorkers and Americans everywhere the bad news in small doses, without denying that the next dose might be "more than we can bear."

On the chilling side of entertainment, sinister leaders can use illusions to intimidate and ensnare us. In our terror, we are likely to turn to toxic leaders who create the illusion that they will become our saviors.

Intoxicating Centers of Action

Leaders entertain us in still another important way: they create centers of action, where important people congregate to consider and act upon the crucial issues of the day. The World Economic Forum at Davos, whose stated mission is "improving the state of the world by engaging leaders in partnerships to shape global, regional and industry agendas," is but one resplendent example. Originally designed as the meeting ground for "business and political leaders," Davos has evolved into the Cannes Festival of the business and political elite, adding to the glittering mix both international film stars and other celebrities. It is entertainment on a global scale.

Let's be clear: Not all centers of action are built on the Davos model. In fact, such hubs of action can take multiple forms, with local to global horizons, sectarian to nondenominational orientations, and centralized to decentralized leadership. Their common characteristic is the entertainment and excitement, not to mention high status, they offer those invited to participate.

Creativity and innovation sparkle in such centers, where participants feel they are not only at the epicenter of action, but the epicenter of the universe. The creativity that flows freely in these "happenings" is hugely entertaining. The eruption of new ideas and new possibilities offers titillation not readily available elsewhere.

The discovery of the new and the chance to participate in the implementation of the "latest" represent entertainment taken to the next level. The possibility of joining in decisions that shape "the world," be it the global community or the local neighborhood, is a heady experience. And, as with most entertaining experiences, the delight and exhilaration found at these centers of action glow even more brightly in the recounting to others who have only caught glimpses through the media's breathless coverage.

The primary leader (or leaders) around whom the center of action revolves assumes the role of the entertainer-in-chief, the creator of creativity, innovation, and fun, the chief inviter. For many participants, such centers represent virtual Gardens of Eden, intoxicating realms from which they strenuously resist expulsion, even when terror is temporarily injected into the mix. So the leader's hold over those intoxicated followers is great. They will acquiesce to virtually whatever the leader demands to remain regulars in good standing.

This essay is not the whole story on leaders as entertainers, only the beginning of the tale. But it is a cautionary tale, one that warns of a little-noticed way in which leaders delight, entertain, and even terrorize us as they render us their intoxicated followers.

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