



ARTFUL

LEADERSHIP

Retreat, Recenter, Rewild

Edited by

ALICIA D. CRUMPTON

**BUILDING
LEADERSHIP
BRIDGES**

ILA
International Leadership Association

Artful Leadership

“The focus on theoretical frameworks, evolving paradigms, and practical strategies within leadership literature often neglects the less tangible elements of humanity within the individual and community that serve as the foundation for leadership practice. *Artful Leadership: Retreat, Recenter, and Rewild* employs a holistic leadership approach by inviting leaders to consider the importance of art and creativity in their own lives and experiences. *Artful Leadership* effectively explores this topic through diverse perspectives and modalities of expression, inviting the reader to consider how creativity and the interconnectedness of our world might transform their lives and leadership. Challenging and inspiring, this work enhances the conversation surrounding what it means to be a leader.”

**Christopher B. Beard, PhD, Director – EdD in
Organizational Leadership, Abilene Christian University**

“As the world we live in seems to be more chaotic and unpredictable by the day, we need a voice that calls us to a more beautiful way amid the ugliness. In *Artful Leadership*, Dr Alicia Crumpton has given us a diversity of voices which invite us, both in theory and practice, on a journey toward an imaginative, courageous, and holistic way of living and leading in a world that is not as it was intended to be. May we heed the call.”

**Mark Nelson, Executive Director,
Three Rivers Collaborative**

“It is far too common for good leaders to become tired from endless activities, deadlines, and expectations, all at risk of losing themselves in the process. This book arrives as a lifeline weaving together artistic approaches, mindful practices, and ecological wisdom. Contributors share perspectives and practices not found in the traditional leadership literature on why and how leaders should and can take time to be still to reorient their souls. Practical exercises move beyond theory to immediate application, practices to help you develop presence, spark imagination, and rediscover joy in your leadership role. The book invites leaders to better understand and attend to their humanity, which as the authors demonstrate, is core to good leadership.”

**John R. Shoup, PhD, Professor, Leadership Studies,
Dr Robert K. Jabs School of Business, California Baptist University**

“Alicia Crumpton always does thoughtful, unique work with credible scholarship. Her unflinching judgment has provided the field of leadership studies with valuable perspectives, especially at the confluence of spirituality and art. This volume gathers overdue voices on overdue themes, importing into the literature more of the humanities and the creative arts. Leadership is ultimately a performance and thus more of an art than science. Scholars will read in these pages

more of what is possible as we study this phenomenon, and practitioners can reimagine their calling, lifting them from the quotidian into the truly visionary. And while they are at it, maybe both groups can recover a neglected sense of fun.”

Nathan Harter, Christopher Newport University (emeritus)

“Artful Leadership: Retreat, Recenter, and Rewild is a breathtakingly original and deeply needed contribution to the field of leadership studies. Edited by scholar, creative, and entrepreneur Alicia D. Crumpton, this interdisciplinary volume invites readers into a transformative journey – one that is not merely intellectual, but spiritual, creative, and embodied. In a world weary from disconnection, crisis, and over-reliance on mechanistic models of leadership, this book offers a healing alternative rooted in imagination, wholeness, and interconnection.

Divided into three thematic movements – Retreat, Recenter, Rewild – the book offers a graceful unfolding of leadership as a sacred practice. ‘Retreat’ invites leaders to turn inward, to cultivate silence and solitude as necessary conditions for wisdom. ‘Recenter’ explores how identity, creativity, and values come into alignment, while ‘Rewild’ dares us to recover our place within the larger ecology of life. Each chapter is accompanied by somatic, creative, and reflective practices that help readers integrate insights into lived experience.

Crumpton has assembled a remarkable group of contributors – scholars, poets, artists, spiritual directors, and educators – each bringing a unique lens to the question of what it means to lead in these uncertain times. From Charlotte Hardie’s exploration of equine relationality to Julian Norris’s systems leadership lessons drawn from wolves, the essays speak not just to the mind, but to the soul. Brendan Ellis Williams’ closing chapter, a philosophical and spiritual tour de force, reframes leadership as a metaphysical act of rewilding – one that calls us back to relationality, wonder, and the sacredness of all being.

This book is not leadership theory as usual. It challenges readers to move beyond linear thinking, transactional strategies, and individualistic paradigms. It dares us to approach leadership as art, as poetry, as spiritual practice. Leaders are encouraged to embrace creativity, silence, awe, improvisation, narrative ethics, and the ecological self – not as optional extras, but as essential dimensions of leading well.

What makes *Artful Leadership* truly remarkable is its capacity to hold both depth and accessibility. The tone is invitational, not dogmatic. The practices are adaptable, not prescriptive. And the language throughout is infused with poetic clarity and theological resonance. Crumpton has curated not only a book, but a space – a sanctuary for reflection and renewal.

In a time when many are asking what leadership can look like on the other side of exhaustion and disillusionment, *Artful Leadership* provides a compelling vision. It reminds us that leading artfully is not about perfection or control, but about presence, authenticity, and deep participation in the unfolding story of life.

I wholeheartedly commend this book to leaders, educators, spiritual guides, and culture-shapers of all kinds. It is a gift, a guide, and a gentle revolution. If you are ready to lead not just more effectively, but more soulfully, let this book be your companion. I highly recommend it.”

Gary David Stratton, PhD, Author of *The Jesus Climb: Journeying from Student to Disciple*. University Professor of Spiritual Formation and Cultural Leadership, Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, Johnson University

Artful Leadership: Retreat, Recenter, and Rewild is a must for everyone who cares about how the world should work – and wants to know why it does not. Rightly positioning leadership as an art, the book’s three parts revision leaders as authentic, wise, compassionate, collaborative, spiritual, ecological, integrative, and transformational. Above all, *Artful Leadership* means relinquishing the ego of Western modernity and recovering the arts of being and knowing through creativity and imagination. In a brilliant exposition, the artful leader retreats to quest for inner truthfulness, recenters collectively through collaboration and the sacred, and rewilds so that human beings can come home to nature. This book is a supremely practical ‘how to’ with a vivid and accessible ‘why to.’ It will guide readers and leaders into the art of engaged, mindful, creative life. *Artful Leadership* demonstrates that humans find joy through the art of visioning the world as it ought to be.”

Susan Rowland, Professor at Pacifica Graduate Institute

“The ensemble of thinkers, creators, and leaders featured in *Artful Leadership* reveal the surprising affinities between leadership, the arts and humanities, and creative expression. We are only surprised because our ideas (and experiences) of leadership so often center on hierarchies, unquestioned assumptions, competition, and control rather than on collaboration, curiosity, creativity, and spontaneity. Each essay in this book illuminates, in its own way, the oftentimes ignored, yet vital role of an ‘aesthetic sensibility’ or a ‘sincere cultural attunement’ for cultivating genuinely innovative, effective – and most importantly, moral leadership. In fact, the entire notion of ‘leadership’ is examined and shown to be related in many ways to acts of creative expression; at their best, both are *offerings*, acts of *service* that transform our world.”

Mary Antonia Wood, PhD, Chair, MA Depth Psychology and Creativity Program at Pacifica Graduate Institute, Santa Barbara, CA. Author of *The Archetypal Artist: Reimagining Creativity and the Call to Create*

Artful Leadership: Retreat, Recenter, and Rewild

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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About the Editor

Alicia D. Crumpton is an organizational and leadership consultant, PhD student research coach, researcher, and writer. She designed and founded the PhD in Leadership Studies Program at Johnson University, has been a member of the International Leadership Association since 2005, and is Co-founder of the Philosophy, Religion, and Worldview Learning Community. She holds a PhD in Leadership Studies from Gonzaga University, a Master's degree in Engaged Humanities and the Creative Life with an emphasis in Depth Psychology from Pacifica Graduate Institute, and an MS in Information Science from the University of Michigan. She co-authored *Architecture and Leadership: The Nature and Role of Space and Place in Organizational Culture*, which is included in the Leadership and Humanities Series (Routledge, 2024). For fun, she travels the world to take pictures of street art and graffiti. She serves as the lead editor for this volume.

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About the Contributors

Sarah Andreas is a mixed-media oil artist whose artwork explores themes of transformation, healing, and empowerment, deeply resonating with women navigating life transitions. She has extensive experience in business operations, sales, and training and is a public speaker, leadership development consultant, and researcher. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Business and Marketing, an MBA, and a PhD in Leadership Studies from Johnson University. An emerging scholar, her research and writing explore transformation, leadership development, and career advancement. Recent publications include *Exploration of Women's Leadership Development Challenges and Transformational Learning (Advancing Women in Leadership Journal/2021)*, *Exploring Leadership Development Experiences (dissertation/2019)*, and *Effects of the Decline in Social Capital on College Graduates' Soft Skills (Industry and Higher Education/2018)*.

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Aaron Monts is a scholar, writer, and executive director of a therapeutic, alternative high school. He believes that we are strengthened by and through constructive dialogue around the issues of faith and theology, justice and politics, and transparent yet gracious conversations about our shortcomings. Serving as a consultant, he serves internationally with leadership development, organizational change, and strategy formulation services. He holds an Executive Leadership Certificate from Harvard Kennedy School, a PhD in Leadership Studies from Johnson University, and an MA in Contemporary Theology and Philosophy. An emerging scholar, relevant scholarship includes his dissertation: *Racial Narratives: A Sociohistorical Analysis of Michael Brown and Ferguson, Missouri and "Critical Race Theory: A Prophetic Voice for the Church and the Stone-Campbell Movement."*

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Foreword

The landscape of leadership development has many modalities that are often experienced as polarities or tensions. For example, is the purpose of development to gain improved performance, or deeper meaning? Do we develop leaders through instruction or by experience? Such tensions have become particularly acute in our current era, described variously as a polycrisis, crisis of meaning, or crisis of consciousness. Traditional leadership models seem inadequate in the face of these challenges. We are constantly called to grow and expand our knowledge and practice of leadership. To do that, we need to look for influences beyond the usual theories and research to reinvigorate how we lead. Alicia Crumpton's *Artful Leadership: Retreat, Recenter, and Rewild* invites us into a modality that extends the range of our leadership thinking, feeling, and acting.

Having spent decades exploring the intersection of leadership development, adult development, and integral theory, I have witnessed many approaches that attempt to bridge the gap between effectiveness and authenticity. What makes this present volume distinctive is its recognition that genuine leadership transformation requires more than cognitive understanding or behavioral modification – it demands a fundamental shift in how we relate to ourselves, others, and the world around us.

Navigating such a shift is demanding. The three-stage journey that Crumpton articulates – Retreat, Recenter, and Rewild – helps us meet this demand. It does this by mirroring the process described by developmental psychology about how humans navigate major transitions of identity. The retreat phase acknowledges that transformation often begins with a dissolution of our previous sense of identity – who we were no longer fits current reality and we step back from it. We are then disoriented as we enter the liminal space of transformation.

Eventually we emerge from the liminal space. The expanded consciousness that emerges comes through a process of making sense of or integrating the new distinctions our transformed identity enables. This allows us to recenter. The new self becomes the source of leading. Our inner compass guides us to align action with deeper purpose.

However, this is not enough. The rewilding phase offers perhaps the most radical proposition: that we need to take one more step, to connect our inner compass with more than ourselves. We need to integrate our fundamental interconnectedness with all life. This ecological, even cosmological perspective challenges the anthropocentric assumptions that underlie much of our current leadership thinking and invites us into what systems theorists call “participatory consciousness” – a way of being that recognizes our embeddedness in and creation of larger wholes.

This is easier said than done. What strikes me most about how the approach this volume presents can help with this is its integration of multiple ways of knowing. The inclusion of artistic practices, somatic awareness, contemplative disciplines, and ecological wisdom creates what we might call a “transmodal methodology” for leadership development. This is not merely intellectual eclecticism but a sophisticated understanding that transformation occurs through and across multiple dimensions of human experience simultaneously.

The collaborative nature of this work, bringing together voices from diverse fields, embodies the very principles it espouses. Rather than presenting a single authoritative voice, it creates what we might call “polyphonic wisdom,” or multiple perspectives harmonizing around shared themes while maintaining their distinctive contributions.

For practitioners in the field of leadership development, this volume offers both theoretical depth and practical applicability. The integration of somatic practices, creative exercises, and reflective inquiries provides concrete tools for facilitating the kind of transformative experiences that lead to the deeper transformations described. For leaders, it offers a pathway through what can feel like an impossible maze of competing demands and expectations.

Perhaps most importantly, *Artful Leadership* arrives at a time when we take yet another turn in the evolution of collective consciousness. The ever-accelerating fragmentation the world presents for leaders to deal with requires thinking and acting from an ever-expanding wholeness. The crises we face are not just in the world, be they ecological, social, political, or spiritual. The crises are in us, requiring self-leadership that can hold paradox, navigate complexity, and inspire collective action while remaining grounded in authentic presence.

This volume is not merely about improving leadership effectiveness; it is about reimagining what leadership could become when rooted in creativity, connection, and care. It invites us to consider that our current leadership challenges may be evolutionary pressures calling forth new capacities for conscious, integral, and life-affirming ways of being.

I invite you to receive this work not just as information to be consumed but as a living invitation to your own transformation. May it serve as both mirror and map for your journey toward the kind of leadership our world needs.

Jonathan Reams

Co-founder and Chief Creative Officer, Center for Transformative Leadership
Editor, *Maturing Leadership: How Adult Development Impacts Leadership*
Associate Professor, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (2007–2024)

Preface

Leadership is a journey, one that weaves through uncharted terrains of challenges, creativity, and transformation. This book, *Artful Leadership: Retreat, Recenter, and Rewild*, is both a reflection of my own path and an invitation for others to embark on their unique journey toward authentic and holistic leadership. It emerges from a time when I, too, felt adrift – creatively numb, untethered from vision, and uncertain if the spark that had once fueled my life and work would return.

Rather than surrender to that sense of loss, I turned inward, seeking the roots of imagination, creativity, and wholeness. My journey led me to Pacifica Graduate Institute, where I explored the confluence of engaged humanities, depth psychology, and the creative life. There, in moments of vulnerability and discovery, I began to reimagine what leadership could look like when grounded in the wisdom of art, the power of images and storytelling, and the interconnectedness of all life.

This book is not just my story. It is enriched by the voices of contributors I personally invited to participate – an interdisciplinary group of scholars and creatives, many of whom are emergent scholars. It was important to create an opportunity for these emergent scholars' voices to be heard. To my delight, each person, when asked, said “yes,” generously offering their perspectives, insights, and experiences. Their contributions exemplify the kind of collaborative spirit and creative energy that this book seeks to inspire in leadership.

Artful Leadership is the culmination of this collective journey. Divided into three transformative stages – *Retreat*, *Recenter*, and *Rewild* – the book offers tools, insights, and exercises to help leaders explore the shadows of their knowing, reconnect with their creative essence, and embrace their role as stewards of a flourishing and sustainable future.

The arts, as this book reveals, are not merely esthetic embellishments but profound pathways to healing, growth, and transformation. By engaging with creative practices, fostering dialogue, and honoring the wisdom of natural systems, leaders can cultivate the presence, imagination, and interconnectedness necessary to inspire change – not just within themselves but within their organizations and communities.

I invite you to step into this journey with curiosity and courage. May you find, as I have, that artful leadership powerfully illuminates not only the path ahead, but also the beauty of our shared human experience.

– Alicia D. Crumpton

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Acknowledgments

The impetus for this book emerged reflectively following my experience of being part of a cohort exploring humanities, the creative life, and depth psychology at Pacifica Graduate Institute. I want to thank my instructors and fellow cohort members who held space for my retreat, recentering, and rewilding.

Thank you to Debra DeRuyver from the International Leadership Association, who guided the process, asked great questions, and encouraged throughout. Also, thank you to Fiona Allison from Emerald, who provided publication technical guidance and support.

Thank you to Jonny, my husband, who rolled his eyes and smiled when I said I thought I would propose an edited book. Rolled his eyes because at this stage of life, I could be eating bon bons and having fun, but instead I am driven to talk about something that I'm passionate about. He's my number one supporter in all things.

Thank you to Mom, who is the most creative person I know. She can look at a rock and a string and imagine possibility. Her esthetic eye is keen, particularly for wild color combinations. I love our conversations, which often begin with a question such as wondering how many colors of green there are. She inspires me toward esthetic sight, imagination, and creativity.

Finally, thank you to the contributors, who when I asked them to participate, said yes.

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Introduction

Alicia D. Crumpton

Abstract

This book explores artful leadership as a holistic integration of artistic sensibility, mindful presence, and ecological consciousness. A three-part journey leads a leader toward authentic, creative, and holistic leadership in an increasingly complex world. In Part 1, “Retreat,” readers step back from conventional leadership paradigms to explore the shadows of our knowing and being. Chapters examine art as a form of esthetic leadership, the transformative power of human–animal relationships, the unintended consequences of technology, virtue-based approaches to knowledge acquisition, and the sacred dimension of silence as pathways to deeper self-understanding and leadership presence. Part 2, “Recenter,” focuses on realigning leadership identity through creative practice, narrative power, and collaborative processes. Chapters explore how leaders can cultivate esthetic sensibility, harness the power of storytelling, reconcile internal values with external image, engage with inspiration through dialogue, employ improvisational techniques to navigate complexity, and explore art as a vehicle for social change. Part 3, “Rewild,” guides leaders toward reconnecting with their innate wholeness and the web of life. Through explorations of the ecological self as a foundation for leadership, lessons from natural systems, and the reclamation of metaphysical relationality, readers discover how leadership can foster resilience, creativity, and systemic transformation. Throughout, somatic, creative, and reflective exercises are provided to cultivate presence, spark imagination, and develop the capacity to lead from a place of authenticity, interconnectedness, and vision. Artful leadership is offered that honors human creativity and the wisdom of natural systems, ultimately guiding leaders toward creating more sustainable, just, and flourishing organizations and communities.

Keywords: Artful leadership; mindfulness; ecological consciousness; esthetics; inspiration; imagination; narratives; resilience; creativity

We live in an age where the unraveling of our social fabric, pandemic-related apocalyptic associations and memories, loss of trust in leadership, and erosion of

democratic norms contribute to profound feelings of alienation and disorientation. Grief and a sense of loss emerge as a person senses a loss of their capacity to imagine, create, and take necessary steps to affect one's surroundings. As [Margaret Wheatley \(2023\)](#) described it, we inhabit "the age of threat when everything we encounter intensifies fear and anger" (p. 8).

Leaders are not immune to these forces. They speak of wanting to quit, feeling disconnected, and experiencing a pervasive sense of disease. Many describe a state of exhaustion so complete they wonder if recovery is possible. We all desire connection, rootedness, and spaces filled with imagination and wonder – yet the weight of our collective challenges can leave us in what [Wheatley \(2023\)](#) called "survival mode ... [where] we can no longer stop the forces of harm and destruction that have been set in motion" (p. 8).

For such a time as this, many of us find ourselves at pivotal life moments, recognizing a deep desire to live, work, and play authentically – emerging from a renewed awareness of who we are and the life we are called to lead. Yet we struggle with the enchantment of habitual ways of being accompanied by the false comfort of success, power, and productivity. We experience tension between the safety of familiar identity and the persistent call toward new experiences of vitality and wholeness.

Within this darkness lies an invitation.

What if our current challenges aren't merely obstacles to overcome but portals to transformation? What if this moment of collective disorientation actually presents an unprecedented opportunity to rediscover what it means to lead with wholeness, creativity, and purpose?

As we collectively face uncertainty and flux, we can (re)discover our true selves. We can learn to unite soul, role, and calling – to experience an undivided life. The purpose of this book is to explore the healing power of artful leadership through the journey of retreat, recentering, and rewilding.

Transformative Journey: Retreat, Recenter, and Rewild

This book offers a pathway forward through three interconnected journeys: Part 1: Retreat, Part 2: Recenter, and Part 3: Rewild. There are 15 chapters and three poetic responses, one for each part.

Part 1: Retreat reimagines withdrawal as an intentional act that allows leaders to confront inner shadows emerging with transformative insights. Drawing on [Parker J. Palmer's \(2000\)](#) wisdom, retreat becomes a practice of spiritual engagement and self-exploration essential for illuminating interiority and leadership. Through explorations of esthetic leadership, equine relationships, technology boundaries, virtue ethics, sacred silence, and contemplative practice, Part 1 illuminates retreat as an integrative process of stepping away to confront, understand, and transform.

By engaging with art, Carol Burbank, in Chapter 1, reminds us that individuals step away from conventional hierarchies, entering a realm of imagination and possibility, sparking personal and societal evolution. This esthetic form of leadership models the essence of retreat – a movement away from the known to discover the transformative power of questioning, "What if?"

In Chapter 2, Retreat becomes an act of reconnection with embodied presence and instinctual wisdom, explored by Charlotte Hardie using the lens of human–horse relationships. Interspecies connections potentially heal the Cartesian mind–body split, offering a path toward psychological integration and authentic leadership.

Chapter 3 uses my study of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to explore the unintended consequences of technology design, where retreat is framed as an opportunity to reflect on technological impacts, recover balance, and create a healthier relationship with social media.

Michael R. Young encourages creating space in Chapter 4 for cultivating intellectual and moral virtues essential for knowledge acquisition and leadership. Retreat refers to our intentional reflection on our knowing and how we might reconnect with virtuous knowledge.

Silence is put forth as a sacred dimension of retreat, where a person transcends the “noise” of modern existence to rediscover connection to Being. In Chapter 5, I explore poet Octavio Paz and philosopher Max Picard’s writings, where silence emerges as a catalyst for metamorphosis.

In Chapter 6, Bradley D. Davidson explored mindfulness as a retreat, where contemplative practice recenters one’s identity and purpose.

In Part 1’s poetic conclusion, Danny Smith’s poem invites readers into the sacred slowness that true retreat demands – a counterpoint to our frantic world. Through lyrical imagery of winter’s necessary stillness, the poem reveals the wisdom associated with withdrawal, echoing the season’s invitation to come home to ourselves in ways that analytical prose alone cannot capture.

Together, the chapters in Part 1 illuminate retreat as an integrative process of stepping away to confront, understand, and transform. By engaging with shadows, silence, creativity, and mindfulness, leaders cultivate deeper awareness and authentic presence, enabling personal and collective transformation.

Part 2: Recenter explores the transformative power of aligning leadership with core values, creativity, and collaboration. Rooted in the metaphor of the potter’s wheel, recentering emphasizes shedding dualistic paradigms and stepping into wholeness. Drawing inspiration from Joseph Campbell’s wisdom on embracing life’s possibilities, Part 2 highlights how leaders can refine their identity and purpose through inspiration, creative practice, narrative power, inclusive collaboration, and improvisation. This part positions recentering as an integrative practice where creativity and collaboration become essential tools.

The role of creativity and esthetic sensibility in leadership is explored in conversation by Catherine Etmanski and me, emphasizing the importance of inclusive practices that celebrate diverse voices and perspectives. In Chapter 7, we explore leadership as an art form where collective creativity flourishes, fostering environments of inspiration and collaboration.

Aaron Monts underscores the role of narratives in shaping individual and collective realities. Recentering, described in Chapter 8 as “re-storying” and sense-making, harnesses narrative power to inspire positive change, unite communities, and foster deeper cultural and personal connections.

Images we hold of ourselves shape our identity. In Chapter 9, Sarah Andreas posited that leaders can recenter their identity through creative engagement and critical reflection, building resilience and fostering authentic presence.

Kevin D. Collins explored creativity in Chapter 10 as an intra-active process rooted in dialogue and collaboration. The idea of inspiration and the muse was revisited through Barad's agential realism, where recentering embraces relational creativity that transcends individual inspiration, emphasizing process over product and collective innovation.

Drawing on the principles of improvisation, Chapter 11 highlights the power of playfulness, adaptability, and presence in leadership. Eve Ridgway articulates how improvisation provides a model for recentering leadership in communal discovery, where creativity and intuition are cultivated in a shared environment.

Courage in Motion, presented as Chapter 12, refers to the personal journey of nonprofit *Life On Art* founder and artist Tracy Ferron. Rewilding as transformative effect achieved through art creation represents an outcome for the healing power of creativity. Creative expression becomes a vehicle for empowerment and collective liberation, and imagination inspires radical inclusion and resilience in addressing societal challenges.

Danny Smith's Part 2 poetic response, with its vibrant exploration of recentering as both artistic practice and leadership necessity, offers readers a glimpse into the transformative moment when scattered energies align and purpose crystallizes, mirroring the potter's wheel metaphor that shapes this part, revealing through verse finding one's center in a fragmented world.

Part 2 centers on the journey of realigning leadership identity, values, and practices to create balance and foster imagination. Using the metaphor of the potter's wheel, recentering emerges as shedding limiting dualities and embracing integration. Each chapter offers unique insights into how leaders can deepen their connection to self, others, and the creative forces shaping leadership.

Part 3: Rewild embraces a return to our original wholeness, activating a sense of interconnectedness with all life. Grounded in ecological, psychological, and metaphysical perspectives, rewilding challenges leaders to see themselves as part of an intricate web of relationships cultivating practices that honor creativity, responsibility, and inclusivity. Chapters explore transformation through art, the ecological self, lessons from natural systems, and metaphysical relationality – offering a vision of leadership rooted in the rewilding of self and society.

Drawing from ecology and Indigenous wisdom, Kathryn Goldman Schuyler introduces the concept of the ecological self in Chapter 13, which transcends anthropocentric worldviews to embrace interconnectedness with all living systems. Rewilding provides a way to address the current polycrisis and nurture collective flourishing.

Julian Norris used the reintroduction of Yellowstone wolves as a metaphor to explore how leadership can mirror natural ecosystems. In Chapter 14, leaders are invited to *rewild* their psyches, adopting relational and holistic practices that allow them to thrive amid complexity and promote systemic transformation.

Brendan Ellis Williams examines the philosophical divide between dualistic worldviews and relational, animistic ontologies, advocating for a metaphysical shift

honoring all beings as conscious agents within an interconnected web. Through contemplative practices and animistic perspectives presented in Chapter 15, leaders are guided to rewild their souls, fostering relationships that honor the consciousness and agency of all life forms, thereby contributing to a global *communitas*.

Danny Smith's poem *Woodspell* concludes Part 3 with a mesmerizing journey into the untamed terrain of the rewilded soul, where a poet ventures beyond civilization's constraints. The poem's vivid imagery of stormy woods and primordial wisdom beckons readers to experience the transformative power of rewilding, not just intellectually, but through the embodied, emotional language of poetry that mirrors the wildness it celebrates.

In its entirety, Part 3 offers a vision of leadership rooted in the rewilding of self and society – a call to return to the essence of our humanity while embracing ecological and metaphysical interconnectedness. Leaders are inspired to cultivate creativity, reimagine systems, and embrace relational practices that align with the natural world's wisdom. Together, these chapters build a roadmap for cultivating a leadership grounded in wholeness and collective responsibility.

Your Invitation to Artful Leadership

Interweaving insights from artists, activists, ecologists, contemplative practitioners, philosophers, religious leaders, scholars, teachers, and business and nonprofit leaders, you are invited on a leadership journey that honors your inner wisdom, imagination, and creativity.

Whether you're seeking renewal amid exhaustion, integration of your creative capacities, ecological perspectives on systemic change, or simply a more authentic expression of your leadership calling, the pathways of retreat, recentering, and rewilding offer practical wisdom for navigating these uncertain times.

This book invites you into a community of practice where artful leadership emerges through intentional withdrawal, creative recentering, and courageous reconnection with our fundamental wholeness.

Using Artful Leadership: A Guide to Personal Transformation and Purposeful Practice

This book is designed for leaders interested in personal change and transformation. Each chapter is written using an accessible tone, with each retaining the unique voice of its contributor to deliberately highlight the varying ways people from diverse disciplines approach these topics. Additionally, this book serves as both a source of inspiration and a practical toolkit; each chapter includes one or more somatic breathing, creative, and reflective practices designed to facilitate a deepening of each chapter's meaning and application to your life.

Overview: The book is divided into three parts: Retreat, Recenter, and Rewild. Each part represents a phase in your journey toward deeper self-awareness and purposeful leadership. A poetic response at the end of each part invites you to connect, engage, and explore the part's deeper meanings. Follow the steps below to support your reading and reflection.

Step 1: Create a personal space conducive to deep reading, introspection, and reflection. Attend to the esthetics and comfort within the space so that you are comfortable eliminating distractions (e.g., cell phones). Consider setting specific reading times and using mindfulness techniques to stay focused.

Step 2: Gather supplies such as a journaling notebook, pens, colored markers, sticky notes, highlighters, or digital tools for notetaking.

Step 3: Actively read a part's introduction and then a chapter. Each chapter is designed to stand alone. However, you are encouraged to consider the part (i.e., retreat, recenter, or rewild) within which the chapter is included to orient your movement through the journey.

Step 4: As you read, use your notebook to capture questions, aha's, or anything that comes to mind. Revisit and reflect on these notes periodically.

Step 5: Answer the following questions in your notebook after reading an article:

- What key insights or strategies are presented?
- What memories, emotions, or feelings are evoked?
- How does what you read align with or challenge who you are, your experiences, or how you lead?
- What new questions or thoughts does this spark about who you are or your leadership?
- How do you want to respond to what you learned from this?
- What actionable goals will you set based on your reflections?

Step 6: Practice one or more of the somatic breathing, creative, or reflective practices included near the end of each chapter. These activities are designed to help you embody a chapter's lessons and apply the content. Consider how to integrate these practices into your daily leadership activities.

Think of the book as a companion that leads you to uncover deeper self-awareness, reconnect with your values, and foster transformation. In an era of disconnection and disorientation, *Artful Leadership* invites you on a journey to retreat from the noise, recenter your purpose, and rewild your leadership – discovering the creative power that lies at the heart of meaningful change.

Your journey begins now.

References

- Palmer, P. J. (2000). *Let your life speak: Listening for the voice of vocation*. Jossey-Bass.
- Wheatley, M. J. (2023). *Who do we choose to be? Facing reality, claiming leadership, restoring sanity* (2nd ed.). Berrett-Koehler.

Part 1

Retreat

If we, as leaders are to cast less shadow and more light, we need to ride certain monsters all the way down, explore the shadows they create, and experience the transformation that can come as we “get into” our own spiritual lives. (Palmer, 2000)

To retreat is an overt act of trying to escape from a particular situation. Retreat also holds a connotation of retreating for a time to “get away.” We speak in terms of respite, vacating, being in nature, those opportunities where we cease what we are doing to spend time in nature, quiet, or solitude. We associate retreating, in this sense, with a reset, taking a break to recoup from the dailiness of life. Retreat, in this book, is considered in the sense of human understanding where a person suspends their usual ways of thinking, creating an opening to explore new possibilities and to gain new perspectives.

Part 1 reframes the concept of retreat as more than an escape; it becomes an intentional act of stepping away to examine the shadows that obscure clarity in leadership and life. Palmer’s quote from “Let Your Life Speak” underscores the necessity of engaging deeply with their inner “monsters,” shadows, and spiritual dimensions to illuminate pathways for personal and communal growth. Retreat, in this sense, transcends its superficial interpretation as leisure or respite and is instead elevated to a transformative practice rooted in philosophical inquiry; intentional withdrawal, and somatic, creative, and reflective practices.

Retreat is an exercise in suspending conventional ways of thinking, allowing individuals to explore alternative paradigms and access wisdom concealed by daily distractions. This involves confronting and understanding the impacts of technology on the psyche, acknowledging how modern life shapes perceptions of reality, and navigating the interplay between personal and collective consciousness. Shadows – representing unseen or neglected aspects of the self and society – are explored as a necessary counterpart to light, offering insight into the complexity of human understanding.

The retreat framework emphasizes the importance of silence, solitude, and nature as catalysts for renewal, inviting leaders to reconnect with their authentic selves and the deeper truths that guide their vocation. By retreating from noise and engaging with reflective practices, individuals uncover new possibilities for leadership and knowledge, paving the way for transformative experiences that resonate beyond the individual level.

Reference

Palmer, P. J. (2000). *Let your life speak: Listening for the voice of vocation*. Jossey-Bass.

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Chapter 1

Art as Esthetic Leadership: The Creative Power of the “What If?”

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Abstract

This chapter explores the concept of art as a form of creative leadership that operates through the radical question “What if?” Artists serve as leaders by creating works that mirror, challenge, and celebrate the human experience, inviting audiences into transformative relationships with their creations. Through this engagement, art establishes a liminal space where both individual and collective consciousness can evolve, fostering social change and cultural development. Artistic expression represents a form of leadership that transcends conventional hierarchies, offering a unique power to inspire transformation through authenticity, beauty, and witness. In societies facing crisis or autocratic control, esthetic leadership becomes particularly vital as both a refuge and catalyst for healthy change, providing spaces where empathy, curiosity, and creative possibility can flourish.

Keywords: Esthetic leadership; creative transformation; social imaginary; artistic authenticity; cultural evolution

Introduction

There is a reason that a healthy, active presence of diverse artists and writers reflects a healthy, evolving society. Artists mirror, challenge, and celebrate the human experience, with all its universal emotional power reflected through specific cultures. Artists lead from a place that is defined by possibility, supported by the willingness to start from the unknown to make something new. Those

possibilities live in the art itself, illuminating imaginary worlds that impact personal and social realities by awakening the liberating force of the “what if?”

“What if?” is the radical question at the heart of every creative vision. Whether the question leads us to explore abstract or personal storytelling, it tests our courage, resilience, and vision because the question asks us to live consciously. By helping us move into new ways of thinking and knowing, art invites us to explore creative ways of being present. This invitation is a vital form of leadership, often difficult to measure, but always transformative and engaging.

Thinking of art itself as creative leadership requires a shift in mindset. Normally, we elevate individuals as leaders and track their impact as personal or organizational. But leadership is always experienced in relationship – profoundly human, and at its best, innately improvisational. At the same time, the terms we use to define leadership are more about the process of living those relationships, with results connected to experiencing positive values like service, transformation, vision, creativity, and spirituality. If we consider art the dynamic expression of the artist leader, it doesn’t take a big leap to understand that art itself stands in as creative leadership. More specifically, because we generally interact with art as the representative of the artist, then we can say that the relationship between art and audience activates and embodies leadership. Through engaged reception and responsive interpretation, the relationship opens the potential for inspiration for shifts in mindset, beliefs, or actions.

With this turn, we redefine the usual roles of leader and follower, beyond conventional thinking about leadership hierarchies. By creating new narrative and visual containers for ideologies, identities, and insights, artists open a liminal space that is both public and private. Reception is an internal experience, unique to each person who chooses to connect with art, in whatever form it may take. This space cannot be regulated, although public access to the art itself can be pushed underground or closed off through censorship.

Over time, some artists become symbolic leaders, claiming a public leadership role because of their work. The more innovative or politicized an artist’s work, the more likely their personal identity will become a leadership brand, speaking to a circle of supporters and critics eager to confront or affirm their message and esthetic. In parallel, the work itself is highlighted as a leadership interface, increasing in controversy and influence, taking on a transformative leadership role, and establishing different relationships with different audiences. Artists and art gain power and visibility. By occupying what Chiara [Bottici \(2019\)](#) calls the social imaginary, a sociopolitical bridge between individual and collective spaces, art activates cultural mythologies that are negotiated, contested, and lived as part of social evolution.

The social imaginary is a space of invention and possibility where both art and artists claim a central leadership role in social change. The root cause of their influence is their ability to harness the “what if.” Creative innovation creates community consciousness in an evolutionary step toward complexity and away from inauthentic dogma. Audiences building a relationship with the “what if” in any genre take on a co-creative role, activating their own psyche as they connect with another’s vision dialogically, emotionally, and authentically.

Even art and writing that might be pigeonholed as propaganda, sharing a simple message meant to sway opinion, creates a potential dialogue of discovery, if it engages daily with expansive questions. Here, consider the British street artist, Banksy (n.d.), whose anti-authoritarian social commentary combines whimsy, pathos, and clear political messages that transform public spaces with provocative images. These offerings impact public and private symbologies, becoming memes, part of a cultural lexicon of self-expression, resistance, and community. In literature, George Orwell's (1949/1983) *1984* identifies a clear theme – totalitarianism depends on absolute conformity, at the cost of our humanity – with a complexity that has kept both the book and its ideas culturally relevant. The specter of Big Brother, for example, has become a meme adapted by artists, writers, reality-TV creators, and pundits, offering a shorthand for experiences of surveillance, pressures to conform, and the dangers of a single story to shape identity and behavior. We situate ourselves thanks to these experiences, adapting and learning.

The resulting depth of expression brings energy to communication and reception, making it possible for art itself to take a leadership role. This effect cannot be underestimated. It explains the power of certain works, which stand alone and are sustained both by form and message, sometimes long after the artists' death. Consider Picasso's (1937) *Guernica*, painted in response to the 1937 bombing of a Basque town, with long-term impact as both political and esthetic exploration of fascism and violence. In literature, Toni Morrison's (2007) *Beloved*, a sociohistorical, vividly surreal story of a former slave haunted by an impossible choice, also leads by representing the complexity of surviving brutality and bondage. This is creative leadership to inspire justice, grounded in witness.

But esthetic leadership is not limited to representing negative aspects of human experience. Beauty can lead just as powerfully. Art that holds a space for beauty brings us to a liminal space of grace, reframing the way we see the world, our experiences, and stories. Moving into a relationship with esthetic beauty can give us a different relationship with nature, people, and ourselves. Consider Robin Wall Kimmerer's (2015) book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, an intimate scientific & cultural history that deepens our connection with traditional plants and their relationship with native culture. In visual art, Georgia O'Keefe (n.d.) created remarkable images of flowers, landscapes, and cityscapes, moving beyond literal representation into heightened portraits and stylized and sensual portraits of human and non-human worlds.

Here, we also need to acknowledge the emotional force of music. For example, in the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* (Darabont, 1994), Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) locks himself in the prison office in an act of defiance against prison authorities and plays Mozart's *Duetto-Sull'aria* over the loudspeakers, creating a sense of the sublime throughout the grimly imagined prison yard. The 2024 film, *A Complete Unknown* (Mangold, 2024), tracks the power of music as countercultural community building through the story of Bob Dylan's rise to fame, becoming a voice for a generational moment, and a space for connecting emotionally with transformative leadership. Music inspires a fluid, often wordless connection with the imaginal, a generative and fundamental human creative force where collective and individual consciousness blend and energize our psyches and accompany our daily lives.

Of course, art can serve both beauty and witness, because craft and mastery bring esthetic power to an artist's purpose, and each masterwork has its own layers of meaning and style. In this process, familiar genres become powerful tools for persuasion, and experimental work articulates new architectures for understanding. Whether art is elevated as controversial, innovative, or beautiful, as long as it speaks with an authentic voice or vision, it carries the energy of transformation and pleasure. It leads us forward or inward, challenges our perceptions, and engages us in a world beyond pragmatic daily experience. As a result, the influence of art is non-linear, existing fluidly within and outside ideological or capitalist exchange, uniquely navigating the space of psyche and society. It often affirms or offends audiences in a specific niche, so measuring impact feels subjective, anecdotal, and very personal.

This challenging fluidity makes it easy to dismiss art and artists as fringe-dwellers. In a capitalist society, where money and fame equate with success and influence, art's non-transactional impact is often minimized as irrelevant and criticized as corrupt. Even artists whose work earns mainstream acclaim are objectified as special or different, and sometimes both. Within capitalism, art is othered primarily because it must be, in most cases, an avocation. Vocations make money and create economic security; avocations are hobbies, and therefore personal, not professional.

As a result, perhaps the only kind of leadership *not* represented in the creative space is transactional: trading money, goods, or services that codify leaders and followers in hierarchies of exchange. Art leads from a transformational impulse, fueled by questions that adapt, reframe, and challenge so-called certainties. Within that space, artists create works that offer leadership through service, vision, and other leadership values. When we experience the vulnerability and power of possibility, we recognize the personal, subjective experience of art as vital to our well-being. This experience offers leadership that can arguably only come from specific locations in specific communities, generated by cultural outliers who ask and answer big questions that inspire social change and long-term cultural evolution.

Trying to contain or control the "what ifs" generated in our liminal relationships with art is a symptom of autocracy. Even when creativity is simply celebratory self-expression, authoritarians are threatened by the pleasure and self-expression of authentic individual exploration. In *The Power of the Powerless*, Vaclav Havel (1978/1990) described Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution as evidence of the power of authentic art to challenge state-controlled ideology, which he called post-totalitarianism. Autocrats depend on citizens willing to live within the lie that justifies state control, imposing ritualized state doctrine that institutes "a profane trivialization of ... inherent humanity [in service of ideological] utilitarianism" and conformity (p. 145). Repression of the arts and exiling artists is "a desperate attempt to plug up the dreadful wellspring of truth, a truth which might cause incalculable transformations in social consciousness, which in turn might one day produce political debacles unpredictable in their consequences" (p. 150).

Masterful artistic expression is characterized by exploratory authenticity, a process of discovery and questioning, defining and renewing unpredictable internal truths. The “what if” is a space of freedom. Havel (1978/1990) wrote:

If the suppression of the aims of life is a complex process, and if it is based on the multifaceted manipulation of all expressions of life, then, by the same token, every free expression of life indirectly threatens the post-totalitarian system politically, including forms of expression to which, in other social systems, no one would attribute any potential political significance, not to mention explosive power. (p. 151)

In such a society where spontaneous public or private self-expression is distrusted and monitored, any authentic art, writing, music, or creative production, overtly political or not, becomes a potential site for dissidence. Even in democratic societies, art that highlights non-normative identities, viewpoints, or experiences can be controversial and is seen as disruptive. The “what if” expressed in art awakens a hunger for diversity, freedom, and self-expression. Artists lead by creating work that lives in that relational space of dialogic authenticity, creating a community experience of co-leadership.

This collaborative leadership reception and self-invention generates both collective connection and personal individuation. Psychologist Carl Jung defined individuation as developing self-awareness through active engagement with collective consciousness and an evolving, authentic Self. Like an artist’s work, which rises out of a process of evolving awareness, “the self is relatedness... The self only exists inasmuch as you appear. Not that you are, but that you *do* the self” (Jung, 1988, p. 73). Art and the Self are therefore enacted through simultaneous states of being and doing, making and receiving, experiencing and becoming. Through their relationship with art, audiences move into conscious relationship with the Self of the artist, through the leadership space where doing and being coincide in the imagination. What is perhaps most remarkable is that the artist need not be present, if their work is authentic; furthermore, the work need not be a masterpiece for the authentic experience to translate the “what if” into possibility.

Art’s fluid leadership power is even easier to see when we acknowledge that genres and venues change over time, forms subverted or reinvented to serve new purposes and tell different stories. Formerly innovative genres are adopted as mainstream expression. Impressionist paintings that now claim a place of pride in museums and collections were once damned as unfinished, careless vulgarities. The very name *Impressionism* was created as an insult to the paintings themselves, in a satirical article that mocked the suggestive brushstrokes and sketched details (Leroy, 1874/2019). That is why it’s so important to recognize that, whether a work is considered avant-garde or conventional, there is nonetheless a relationship established with the audience/viewer/reader, a moment of esthetic leadership engagement that is fluid through time and place.

With a long-term lens, we are less likely to dismiss art, writing, and music that is celebrated in mainstream culture as less powerful than art from the fringes of contemporary culture. We can see the power of esthetic leadership in the evolution of popular entertainment. Even the impact of art for pure entertainment's sake changes over time, mirroring and generating cultural change. Consider the sitcom, a genre Saul Austerlitz (2014) called a form obsessed with "the preservation of equilibrium ... the repetition compulsion of eternal sameness conjoined to a desire to overturn the established order; a profound esthetic conservatism bundled with an ingrained desire to shock" (p. 7). In short, this purposely banal genre of TV entertainment is a wolf in sheep's clothing, the Wonder Bread of early television that filled living rooms with episode after episode of mainstream *Father Knows Best* (James & Tewksbury, 1954–1960) stereotypes amounting to middle-class domestic comfort food. It has become an art form in its own right, with more and more social commentary embedded in the storytelling and increasing levels of meta-commentary signaling our discomfort with the conventions of child-man husband, harried mother-wife, and children in various comically redeemed states of disarray.

The most vivid recent example is the 2021 dark comedy, *Kevin Can F* Himself* (Armstrong, 2021–2023), launched as a direct attack on the most standardized versions of the sitcom, directly satirizing the particularly shallow flop, *Kevin Can Wait* (2016), widely dismissed by critics as "a terrible and unimaginative show" (Chaney, 2016, p. 1) that killed off characters, basic TV credibility, and good taste for cringe-worthy laugh-track humor. Any sitcom equilibrium is demolished in the recent grimly satirical version, in which Allison, the harried wife, plots Kevin's murder and her own escape from the laugh-track world of her husband's abuse. Scenes with Kevin are played in a brightly lit, standard sitcom set, with the husband's put-downs rewarded with a jarring laugh-track. Scenes outside his sphere of influence are naturalistic, but seem dark in comparison, documenting the bleak reality of Kevin's increasingly desperate wife. The blended storytelling is often masterful, combining suspense and entertaining contradictions that became more and more surreal and disturbing as the series continued to the end, when Kevin dies as a result of his own hapless sitcom unconsciousness.

This last example brings us into the messy territory leadership theorists also struggle to define: how to talk about leadership that offers positive processes and results (classically, Winston Churchill), as opposed to negative processes and results (classically, Adolf Hitler). In the world of esthetic leadership, ideas about good and bad artistic work are passionately debated, without the clear cultural markers that give Churchill's stabilizing leadership a moral high ground when compared to Hitler's devastating violence. For our purposes, it is enough to note that some artworks embody deeper values and purposes than others, depending on the artist's intention, vision, and abilities.

The most immersive esthetic leadership relationships activate specific audiences, invigorating community values and empathy by sharing stories that acknowledge differences as well as universalities. Here, consider the groundbreaking poetry by Diné writer, Jake Skeets (2019), shattering form into a landscape of beauty and devastation that is both highly literary and indigenous. Skeets' poetry