

# LEADERSHIP AND THE INNER WORK OF ART

*by John J. Cimino, Jr.*

As a man is So he Sees. As the Eye is formed such are its Powers.

*William Blake, English poet and painter (1757–1827)*

In her Fall 2012 *Leader to Leader* article “Cultivating Wisdom,” Jennifer Garvey Berger wrote with insight of the leader’s quest for wisdom, self-knowledge, and the path to self-authorship. My hope is to intersect with her wisdom via a journey with you through some adjacent disciplines, including aesthetics, neuroscience, and creativity. Let’s begin with a story about our distant ancestors, their cave paintings, and a certain whiskered poet of the open road.

## “I am Large. I Contain Multitudes.”

Not very long ago, I was invited to a high school in a remote region of New York’s Adirondacks. The setting was breathtaking in its natural beauty, but the community was in decline, losing population and, therefore, tax dollars in support of its schools. I was there to talk with some of the graduating seniors about leadership. I began, simply, “It’s about *leading our own lives*.” It’s about forgiving ourselves for past blunders, taking a good look at our attitudes, values, and skills, and what we might like to change, then opening ourselves to new experiences, new people, and new ways of thinking and engaging with the world—and then I flicked off the lights.

In the stillness of the semi-dark, I turned on a projector and we looked at an image of one of the Lascaux Cave drawings from 17,300 years ago. I asked them to tell me what they saw, and then how and why these pictures might have come to be in such a deep, dark place within the earth. They began to speculate. They said that the pictures are probably “life lessons about how to survive,” perhaps a way of paying homage to the animals their lives depended on. Then I asked them to imagine a place deep inside themselves where they keep their own cave drawings, their own life lessons and precious images. We talked about what they chose to let into that place, and how, over a lifetime, that space might enlarge to contain a vast collection of amazing things.

Enter Walt Whitman: “I am large, I contain multitudes.” We laugh at the boldness of this statement, then tack back to our discussion of the cave drawings and our own interior

Lascaux(s). Everyone makes the connection immediately. We talk about Whitman's life as a poet, his famous whiskers and love of the open road and how "to be Walt Whitman" was to be a listener, was to let people in so he could feel their joys and sorrows and find a place for them within *his* personal Lascaux. Slowly, we begin to realize that each of us, in our listening and letting one another in, was growing a little larger too in that space of quiet darkness and inner light.

## The Inner Work of Curating One's Personal Lascaux

The *inner work* prompted by this encounter began as students decided to enter a curious new space perfumed with possibility. Let's imagine their experience.

The first task is *seeing*, looking deeply and then opting to share your impressions and ideas. As the ideas of others enter your awareness, you notice that some are as interesting as your own. You also become aware of your feelings and the feelings of others. So far, everything is good, even a little exciting. So you give a little more of yourself and the powers that are *you* are now more fully in play. As Whitman arrives, something shifts. The metaphor of the Lascaux Caves becomes more three-dimensional. You recognize the uniqueness of your own interior Lascaux and your role as curator of that space—and that what you are *curating* is actually a multifaceted portrait of yourself. Your inner work of seeing, listening, thinking, and reflecting has produced *an inner work of art*, and that inner work of art is unmistakably *you*.

Leaders and those who coach and mentor leaders understand we are necessarily in the business of "forming the self who leads and serves." This is a future-oriented proposition. As we curate our personal Lascaux(s), we are taking responsibility for the full complement of images and insights we bring to bear any time a challenge, issue, or conundrum comes our way. William Blake's version of this idea, quoted at the top of this article, is metaphorically related and equally rich: "As a man is So he Sees. As the Eye is formed such are its Powers." It's up to us to be invested in boosting the power and

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*This is a future-oriented proposition.*

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acuity of our Eye—not just the visual, anatomic eye, but the Eye that is the mind, our inner Eye, the Eye of our imagination. And—let's change the spelling now—the I which is the self; that too. It is this inner Eye/I that takes the measure of what is possible, that sees the "not yet," the tacit and partially hidden, and works to expand the vision of the biological eye and, with that, participates richly in the formation of the self.

## The Arts as a Future-Oriented Proposition

Encounters with the arts can be catalysts for engagement, reflection, new perspectives, and new thinking. They can help us look inward and see ourselves differently, freshly, perhaps more compassionately, and give us permission to replace stale, limiting self-portraits with new ones better aligned with who we are now and who we choose to be.

"I know very well who I am, and who I can be, if I choose."

*I, Don Quixote, 1959 play, precursor to the musical "Man of La Mancha."*

Creativity applied inwardly is the way of the artist in the human being—and the way of the leader in the fullness of his or her mission and humanity. It is a future-oriented proposition.

## Habits of Mind: Leadership and the Mind Processes of the Arts

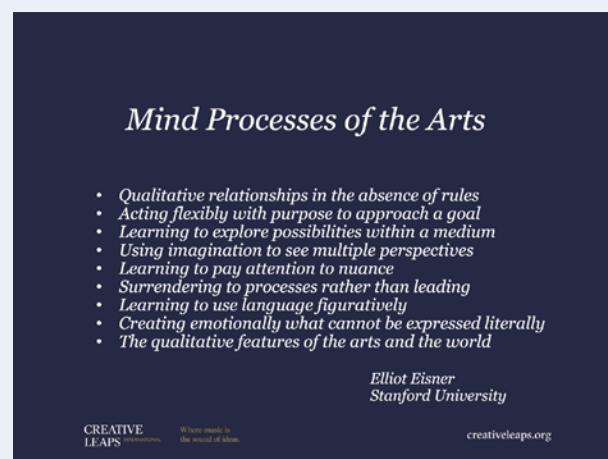
Studies at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) concerning the habits of mind of successful leaders

have pointed researchers and practitioners in a curious, somewhat unexpected direction. Those leaders assessed as among the most successful also rated highest for a set of traits and capacities clustered as aesthetic in nature (see Figure 1). This finding resulted in the design of a new CCL program, Leading Creatively, together with a book by investigators Charles J. Palus and David M. Horth, *The Leader's Edge: Six Creative Competencies for Navigating Complex Challenges*. For me, this was corroboration of anecdotal evidence gathered years earlier via our Concerts of Ideas and other arts-based programs dating back to 1992, often in collaboration with CCL.

Not long afterward, I was invited to a conference at the University of California Irvine where neuroscientists and other educational researchers were gathered to share findings on the role of the arts in learning and the development of the mind. It was here I met Professor Elliot Eisner (1933–2014) of Stanford University, who delivered a talk entitled “The Mind Processes of the Arts” (see Figure 2). I was captivated and afterward arranged to visit with him at his home the following weekend. I shared the research emanating from the Center for Creative Leadership, as well as my own anecdotal findings, and we marveled together at how evident it was that the mind processes embedded in the arts and arts education should match up so thoroughly with some of the key markers for success of leaders in business and the professional sector.



**FIGURE 1. AESTHETIC COMPETENCIES OF LEADERSHIP**



**FIGURE 2. MIND PROCESSES OF THE ARTS**

## Navigating Perception and Belief: The Leader's Challenge, the Artist's Playground

Everything we see hides another thing. We always want to see what is hidden by what we see.

*René Magritte, Belgian surrealist artist  
(1898–1967)*

It is no secret that perception is a trickster process. No two witnesses to an event seem to recount it in exactly the same way. The individual perspective may be a loaded proposition, unreproducible, unique. Of course, the trick lies not in the anatomy of our eyes. Rather, we get into trickster territory the instant we start “making sense” of what we see, interpreting it according to our beliefs, past experiences, and personal mind maps. The interplay of perception and belief is especially infamous. Belief informs perception, and it generally takes a good startle for new perceptions to percolate down far enough to alter our beliefs. Our beliefs and deeply ingrained habits of perception are supposed to be stabilizers of our experience, but in a world of rapid change and even more rapid interactions, our beliefs are often blinders to what is happening directly in front of our eyes. Blake called them our “mind-forg’d manacles.”

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## Artists are much more at home in this terrain.

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The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers.

*James Baldwin, American writer (1924–1987)*

Artists are much more at home in this terrain. Within their art forms—the visual arts, for example—the artist is an expert of nuanced perception who revels in taking advantage of the hidden workings of the eye, the mind, and the brain either to reveal beauty or to stretch, flex, and manipulate what we see. They do this not to fool us but to help us see differently, to see and feel something new and potentially important, and ultimately to refresh, sharpen, and expand our capacity for new perceptions and new sense making. The best leaders do this too, not necessarily by drawing pictures for us, but by helping us to see what no one else sees *yet*, to see differently, and to shed beliefs that may be blinding us to the future.

### Seeing Systems: A World in a Grain of Sand

Art and artists stimulate us to see more, hear more, and experience more of what is going on within us and around us.

*Edgar Schein, corporate culture pioneer, and  
Professor Emeritus, MIT Sloan School of  
Management (1928–)*

In “Cultivating Wisdom,” Jennifer Garvey Berger writes, “Seeing systems isn’t always the same as systems thinking. It’s about noticing patterns and interconnections—both the ones around you (throughout the organization) and the ones inside you

(the patterns of your own thinking and behavior).” What an important insight, to which I would add only that this capacity for seeing systems is without question an *aesthetic capability* linked to noticing subtle, qualitative relationships in the absence of rules. And no less related to our fundamental sense of wonder and curiosity! The child with the seashell, the caterpillar, or the grain of sand is captive to the same subtle noticing, the same search for worlds within worlds. Whoever looks with such eyes is in discovery mode, and the leader with this Eye intact is no mere observer of our world, but rather a *human catalyst for bringing into the world* what complexity theorist and evolutionary biologist Stuart Kauffman has called “the adjacent possible”: that which is one insight, one reaction step away from the actual.

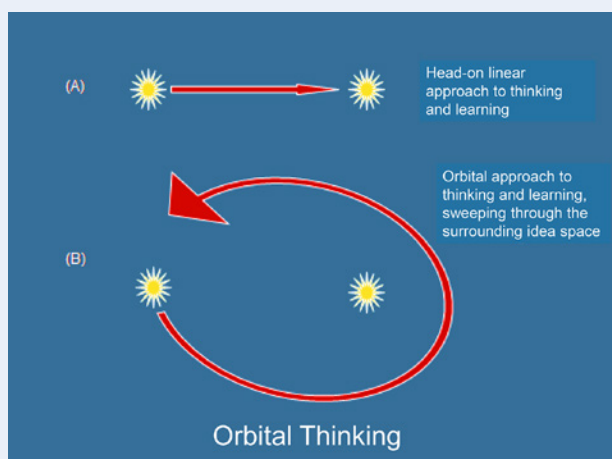
Art does not reproduce what is visible, it makes things visible.

*Paul Klee, German–Swiss artist (1879–1940)*

### Orbital Thinking: A Journey of Multiple Perspectives

In an age of specialization wrapped in complexity tucked inside an increasingly diverse global culture, the necessity of multiple perspectives is neither riddle nor mystery nor enigma. It is an undeniable sign of the times, and yet many of us resist, pushing back against the “other” and perspectives not our own. It is time to become more curious and less defensive, more inclusive of that which is not yet within the circle of our understanding or embrace. The view through multiple lenses adds depth and dimension to our vision, just as binocular views add three-dimensional depth to monocular ones.

Within Creative Leaps International, we have a kindred practice dubbed *orbital thinking* (depicted in Figure 3), which stands in contrast to the more commonplace linear, unidimensional approaches of direct inquiry. We define *orbital thinking* as “purposefully indirect, preferring to explore the surrounding neighborhood of ideas in order to get a feeling for what might lie at the center. It seeks context, field forces, the topography



**FIGURE 3. ORBITAL THINKING**

of the terrain, the perspectives of other disciplines, the culture of local highways and byways—all the time cultivating a measure of intuition for our point of focus, not unlike the meanderings of a shy boy in orbit around his ‘Juliet.’ The orbiting is deliberate and research-oriented, imagination is equally engaged, as we seek a multiplicity of perspectives on this very special subject of our fascinations.

## Wisdom and Metaphor

As her recommendations for “reaching toward wisdom,” Jennifer Garvey Berger offered us three habits of mind: (1) thinking differently and asking different questions, (2) taking multiple perspectives, and (3) seeing systems, each of which I have sought to amplify by drawing them into the light of neighboring disciplines, most especially the arts and aesthetics.

A still closer look suggests something underlying all three of these habits of mind, a dynamic akin to the workings of *metaphor*. Philosopher and essayist Jan Zwicky writes, “... the shape of metaphorical thought is also the shape of wisdom: what a human mind must do in order to comprehend a metaphor is a version of what it must do in order to be wise.” Let’s recall how metaphors work.

“The silver blue sea is in my love’s eyes.” “It is the East and Juliet is the Sun.” “It’s raining cats and dogs.” We

know that none of these are literally true, but it is only because they are not true literally that they can reveal something more elusive we are trying to say. It is the paradox of metaphor that gives it its power and renders it useful. Analogies are at work here, but they are selective, good-faith analogies, not strict ones. We know that my love’s eyes are *not* inhabited by leviathans. Leviathans are not the issue here, but rather something to do with the intoxicating color of the sea, its depth, the way the light refracts on its surface beckoning us to look deeper, perhaps to glimpse eternity or an image of our own bewildered selves. Metaphors send us leaping from one good-faith connotation or *island of knowing* to another. The whole process is improvisatory, especially as we shift from one metaphor to another. And the sum of our efforts? Just this: the painting of an increasingly rich and satisfying picture, an improvised, optimized *gestalt*.

Perhaps this is the shape of wisdom as well: a good-faith leap toward wholeness of vision, an improvised, optimized *gestalt*, the result of thought disciplines, and thought playfulness cultivated over a lifetime.

## The Self Who Leads and Serves

The Hero’s or Heroine’s Journey is a journey of empowerment, transformation and decision. Without the decision to serve, that woman or man can never be a true leader.

*Unless the Mind Catch Fire ... , A Concert of Ideas, Creative Leaps International*

The evening I met Maxine Greene (1917–2014) was blustery cold, an unforgiving night in the middle of January. She was speaking to a crowd of 500 packed into an auditorium at Columbia University. Maxine was legendary, without question one of the nation’s great lights, perhaps our greatest philosopher of aesthetics and education. This is how she began:

John Dewey (the 19th- and 20th-century American philosopher of education) said imagination is thinking of things as if they could be otherwise. It’s a defiance of the



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*“Imagination makes  
empathy possible.”*

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taken-for-granted, of the fixed. A kind of deliberate effort to break through what you assume to be true. To think of alternative possibilities. *And to believe that something more is possible.* In other words, you value what is “not yet” and work to bring it into being.

I approached her afterward and managed to garner an invitation to speak with her the following week over one of her famous baloney sandwiches. She was fascinated by my work with the arts in the business sector and probed with laser-like intensity into every aspect of our methodology, our philosophy, and how we had come to do this work. I was in awe of her encyclopedic knowledge, her kindness and intellectual tenacity. She was a social activist as well as a scholar and her heart was open to the stern realities of our world. She was famous for saying, “Imagination makes empathy possible” and that *that* was the beginning of social change. I am still striving to live into that wisdom. The last time I saw her, she reminded me, as she had reminded countless others throughout her lifetime, that “the opposite of aesthetic is *anesthetic*; aesthetic means ‘to feel’; to be without the arts is to be deprived of feeling, to become numb, and that’s where *evil* finds its way in, when there is no feeling.”

The aesthetic dimension of leadership is one of felt knowledge, felt relationships and deeply felt values. It is seeing through the Eye of Imagination and feeling the heartbeat of the world.



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