

How We Lead

Monthly musings for change agents in business and society
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Curious Leader at the Movies: The Obsession of “Roger Dodger”

Have you ever found yourself simultaneously repelled and intrigued by another person? Someone who speaks, acts, and moves in such a compelling fashion that even though your inner warning system is shouting “Red Alert” you cannot help but want to be around them? That is, until they so frighten or disgust you that you finally wake up, walk away, and mutter under your breath, “What in the world was I thinking?”

These questions crossed my mind more than a few times during “Roger Dodger,” a movie starring Campbell Scott as an advertising executive who attempts to mentor his nephew Nick (Jesse Eisenberg) in the art of seduction. Reviewers have compared the film to Neil LaBute’s two recent portrayals of male cunning and contempt, “In the Company of Men” and “Your Friends and Neighbors.” The parallel is apt, yet I found the character of Roger to be less vicious than the men in the other films (an assessment you may find difficult to digest unless you have seen them). And, as I will assert shortly, he provides a vivid example of a phenomenon that is core to the challenge of leading effectively and living joyfully.

First a quick summary of the film.

Roger himself is not a leader, but a “player.” The kind of person who views life as a series of seductions, who has the power to both intrigue and repel, often in the same moment. At work, his job is to sell his company’s products by pointing out what’s missing in people’s lives. (“I sit here and think of ways to make people feel bad.”) Outside of work, his attention is directly toward seducing women. Here his primary tools are chutzpah, a sharp wit, and a frighteningly ability to deduce from women’s faces their hopes and vulnerabilities. In one of the film’s early scenes, he meets a young woman at a bar. Within three seconds, he captures her attention. Within ten, he tells her whom he thinks she is, why she moved to New York, who she’s eyeing that night, and what will become of it. Within thirty, she senses the contempt behind his intuitive guesses (which may well be dead-on) and walks away.

The next day, sixteen-year-old Nick shows up unexpectedly with a request: teach me how to meet and attract women. Roger agrees. Soon they are walking down

the streets of Manhattan as Roger describes his theory of seduction: “Sex is everywhere. It’s all around us. Your job is to find alignment...You have to make sex a presence in your mind, in your life.” Then the two move into action. Roger sneaks Nick into a nightclub and proceeds to invite Andrea (Elizabeth Berkley) and Sophie (Jennifer Beals) to the table. The two women see right through Roger’s act and find themselves drawn to Nick, who is everything that Roger is not: sweet, transparent, and hopeful. It is almost as though two theories of love go head to head. Except for one thing: Nick isn’t pure innocence. Watch carefully and you’ll notice that he does play the game – not in a fully embodied way like Roger, but just enough to keep the conversation going. It is possible to miss this, because Nick catches himself quickly and regains his grounding. Not just with Andrea and Sophie, but later at a party hosted by Roger’s boss and ex-lover, Joyce (Isabella Rossellini).

There are many ways to interpret the meaning of this film. Reviewers have portrayed it as a “battle of the sexes,” a victory for sweetness and authenticity, and an “unraveling” of the slick cynicism of a “ladies’ man” to reveal the loneliness within. Walking out of the theater, I observed two women smile triumphantly at their male friend and say, “The guys were the stars, but the women were the ones in control all along.”

Fair enough. Yet, I wonder: is this all? Might not this entertaining film be about more than women and men, sex and seduction, even cynicism and naivete? Can we find within it an even larger meaning?

For several days after seeing the film my mind stirred in active inquiry. Exactly who is Roger? What is he an example of? Why is he important? What does all of this have to do with leadership? And so on. Until finally I hit upon the million-dollar question, the one with the potential to answer all the others:

How am I like Roger?

My first response was a belittling form of denial. (“How am I like Roger?” What an idiotic thing to ask). My second was reluctant admission: in certain circumstances and with certain people I can be bitter and cruel, often in thought and occasionally in deed. This explains why I was both drawn to and disturbed by Roger: he is part of who I am – dormant most of the time but poised, at a moment’s notice, to strike.

Taking the question one level deeper, I emerged with a third answer. More than any particular personality trait, Roger exemplifies a phenomenon that is so common in human beings and organizations that few of us give it much attention. I call this phenomenon “obsession.” By this term, I do not mean either a psychological diagnosis or the preoccupation with a particular person or thing. “Obsession” in this context is a way of being that directs one’s attention to a single aspect of life and excludes everything else. That aspect I call the “object”

of obsession. For Roger, the object of obsession is seduction. Not the sexual part, not the final result, but the entire process from start to finish.

And Roger is not alone. All of us – including the leaders and mentors we hold in the highest esteem – live this phenomenon. We obsess. Not necessarily about seduction, but about something. And we do this in very similar ways. Thus, even though the objects of our obsessions differ, the way we obsess – the structure of obsession – is strikingly similar. This is an important point. What it means is that the story of Roger Dodger matters even to those of us who do not identify with his character. It matters to people who obsess not about seduction, but about other things: being liked, winning, being unique, rescuing others, being rescued, avoiding conflict, being powerful, being weak, or avoiding certain emotions like sadness or anger. Once we understand the way Roger obsesses and the impact on himself and others, we can see ourselves in new ways. And, perhaps, discover how to lead more effectively and live more joyfully.

As you read my thoughts about the structure of obsession, I invite you to be open to the possibility that they describe...you.

- When we obsess, we pay attention to the object of our obsessions and little else. In short, our obsessions blind us to what is happening right in front of us. When Roger does his “player” thing, he misses opportunity after opportunity to connect with other human beings (including his nephew), ignores valuable feedback others send him about his actions, and loses contact with his own body and emotions.
- Obsessions have a way of feeding on themselves. They exist in self-reinforcing loops. First, consider the power of language. Seduction is the language Roger uses over dinner, in nightclubs, and even in casual conversation with Nick. Each comment and question reflects an intention to initiate, sustain, or end a seduction. As a result, Roger becomes that which he describes, more and more with each word and sentence. Second, we hang out with people whose interactions with us supports our obsessions. Roger knows who is up for the game and who is not. He seeks out the former and avoids the latter. Third, we spend time in places that remind us that these obsessions are all that really matters anyway. And we avoid everywhere else. Roger hangs out in bars and nightclubs and works in advertising. He stays away from places that do not allow him to seduce. Finally, we hold our obsessions in our bodies: in the way we walk, in our eyes, and in our postures.
- By the time most of us are adults, our obsessions are such a part of who we are that they seem absolutely plain, absolutely normal, the way things ought to be. It takes little thought or effort to express them. With the exception of his brief lecture to Nick, under no condition does Roger ever ask himself, “What would a seducer do in this situation?” Before the question can appear, he is already doing it.

- Our obsessions serve a very specific function: they keep us busy. By staying busy fixating our attention, we avoid that which we fear most: emotion. Not any emotion, but those particular emotions that painful early life experiences taught us to avoid. With Roger, my hunch is that somewhere within him lies an incredible amount of guilt and sadness. If he were to slow down, step off the seduction treadmill and remain quiet even for a moment, he would feel these emotions...fully. By remaining in a continuous state of pursuit, he skillfully avoids them.
- This, then, is the point of our obsessions. It is not to obtain that about which we are obsessing. Instead, it is to occupy the space that, when left vacant, our most feared emotions fill. Obsessions are the most effective filter of emotion. They work almost flawlessly. This is why we obsess.
- Obsessions are not completely impervious to life. When the world cracks open, when what was solid begins to melt, when the towers fall and the doctor says, “You have cancer,” we realize the utter triviality of that which has obsessed us. Breakdowns in life open our eyes to the way we have lived. The sight is not always pleasant. Notice how many corporate executives, in the aftermath of the September 11 tragedy, wondered aloud about the meaning of their work (“What I do is unimportant in the large scheme of things compared to the firefighters”)? Ever wonder why some people who know they are about to die feel more alive than they ever have before? One reason is that they have been freed of their obsessions. This freedom reawakens dormant feelings – not only the emotions they have avoided, but the joy they suppressed in the process.
- Our obsessions are resilient. They do not go away easily. Just because we realize their unimportance today does not mean that we will still realize this tomorrow. Indeed, given enough time, our obsessions will return even stronger, buoyed by their own power to numb us to our pain. How many of those corporate executives are still wondering aloud about the meaning of their work? How many instead have plunged back into the “rat race?” I don’t know the answer, but my guess is that there are more of the latter than the former.
- The way to resolve our obsessions is not to fight them but to become conscious of them: to transform them from subjects of our awareness (the person we are) to objects of our awareness (thoughts and sensations we can see, touch and laugh about). And then to start hanging around with people and in places that enable us to experience a new way of being. All the while using language and holding our bodies in ways that reinforce this way of being.

It is unlikely that the person who wrote Roger Dodger had these points in mind while penning the script. And I would be surprised if many people watching it constructed an interpretation similar to mine. This, of course, is precisely the point. When we obsess, we carry this way of being with us everywhere: into the movie theater, into our conversations afterwards, and even into our reading of movie reviews like this one.

Thus, if you want to know whether my statements here hold relevance for you, don't take my word for it. Check it out for yourself. Go see Roger Dodger (or any other movie) with friends, have a conversation afterward about what you saw, and then have a conversation about this conversation. What did one of you notice and the other one completely ignore? Which of the other person's comments did you like, and which really bugged you? What do these insights reveal about you...and a possible object of your obsession?

Go ahead. Give it a try. Perhaps you'll discover something that opens new possibilities in your life.

I welcome your comments and questions.

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