

How We Lead

Monthly musings for change agents in business and society

February 2003

By Amiel Handelsman

Curious Leader at the Movies: Adaptation A Story within a Story, A Thought within a Thought

“Adaptation” offers a clever and mesmerizing two hours. It is the story of screenwriter Charlie Kaufman (Nicholas Cage) and his agonized efforts to turn a book by Susan Orlean (Meryl Streep) about a Florida orchid keeper named John Laroche (Chris Cooper) into a movie. It is a book inside of a movie inside of a movie. Or perhaps the opposite. Or perhaps the inverse of the opposite. Whatever the case, “Adaptation” makes one appreciate the relative simplicity of Pulp Fiction and Memento – two movies that, although confusing in a temporal sense, at least adhered to a single narrative structure.

Fortunately, with “Adaptation”, the interweaving narratives make sense. No, let me rephrase that: they accurately reflect the nonsensical and discontinuous nature of life today. What do I mean by that? Read on and see if a meaning shows up for you.

Not long after leaving the theater, my own adventure commenced. I decided to do unto others as others had done unto me. I set out to transform Roger Ebert’s movie review into a column worthy of my readers’ attention.

"Adaptation" is some kind of a filmmaking miracle, a film that is at one and the same time (a) the story of a movie being made, (b) the story of orchid thievery and criminal conspiracies, and (c) a deceptive combination of fiction and real life.

I knew immediately upon reading this that “Adaptation” is also the story of a mind being made and unmade. It is a story about thinking and judging and misjudging. And, no doubt, about the stories we tell ourselves about who we are. And what happens when life challenges these stories. Do we pay attention?

Chris Cooper plays a con man of extraordinary intelligence, who is attractive to a sophisticated New Yorker [Susan Orlean] because he is so intensely *himself* in a world where few people are anybody.

These words puzzled me. I opened my journal and wrote, “How is it possible to simultaneously be a con man and be intensely oneself? Doesn’t being a con man entail hiding our authentic self from others? And isn’t that the con?”

I stopped writing, took a deep breath, and wondered what readers would expect somebody like me to say at this point. That...

1. We are all con men and women, covering our true selves with masks because we fear that if people saw who we really are, they would turn and run.
2. Our organizations encourage this con.
3. Blaming our organizations is as misguided as blaming ourselves. Indeed, each of us tends to go one of two ways: (a) It's all my fault or (b) It's all their fault. Neither is true, but life opens up when we stop bitching and moaning and ask ourselves: what am I committed to here? I cannot recall anywhere in "Adaptation" where Charlie states what he is committed to. Doing this would be a revolutionary act. It would actually make him into a different type of person.
4. What if it weren't the case that each of us has a true self that somebody (ourselves or others) is keeping down? Perhaps our "self" is not some fixed state of being but the way this being shows up each and every day in the language we use. Thus, if you want to know who you are, you don't need to go to the beach or camp in the woods. Instead, become intensely observant of what you say in everyday life and how you say it. Then ask yourself: what kind of person would utter these words?

The reason Susan is drawn to John is not because he is "intensely himself." It is because his form of con appeals to her form of con. His story of being a man who pursues his passions appeals to her story of being a woman who does not. It's not that he is this way on some essential level. It's that the actions he takes (switching careers, wading through swamp waters in search of a single flower) and the words he uses (rough and romantic) continually construct his story. Just as her actions and words (bemoaning the lack of fire in her life) construct hers.

[Charlie Kaufman's] narration creates the desperate agony of a man so smart he understands his problems intimately, yet so neurotic he is captive to them.

To understand this take on Charlie, I turned to my old friend, Tom, who also works in the leadership development field. A week earlier, Tom had made astute observations about "The Hours." I wanted to tap into his wisdom again.

"Tom, what do you make of this bit about Charlie being neurotic and captive to his problems? Do you agree?"

"Charlie is definitely captive to his problems, but I wouldn't say he is neurotic. At least not any more than most people. What I noticed was a very active inner critic. It was constantly criticizing him about his weight, his looks, not measuring up with women. Wasn't there a scene where his voiceover said how fat and ugly

he was? And how the woman he was interested in couldn't stand to be near him?"

"And you think that this is pretty common?"

"Yes, but we don't know it. I saw the movie in Miami with the woman I mentioned to you, my father, and one of his girlfriends. They all thought that the voiceover was bizarre."

"Bizarre that Charlie had such a voice in his mind or bizarre that the movie depicted it?"

"Bizarre that he had one. It's easy for people to not identify with that voice. It seems extreme. It seems neurotic. But if people were tuned in enough to notice it, they would find that it is quite similar."

I couldn't resist asking about his first person experience. "Did you notice your own voice, your own inner critic, while watching the movie?"

"No, I don't think so. I wasn't present enough with it. But I have found my own inner voice to be very similar – not in content but certainly in the way it criticizes."

I realized that the same is true for me. But I didn't think that mentioning this in the column would be valuable for readers. Indeed, I imagined people emailing me to cancel their subscription, pleading, "Enough about you! I thought this was about leadership, and all we get are your own neurotic thoughts!"

After writing these words, I paused for a moment, took another breath, and realized what I had just done. In less than a second, I had gone from describing the inner critic from a third person perspective to offering a shining example of it myself. Just look at the language: "Enough about you!" Or "all we get are your own neurotic thoughts!" These are the cognitive equivalent of slaps in the face or body slams. When I say them, I weaken myself, and it shows in my body. Where did these thoughts come from? My mind attributed them to readers, yet guess who was doing the attributing? That very same mind. Clearly, my own inner critic was alive and well.

The good news? Catching the inner critic in the act released me from its grip. It freed me to move forward with what I was doing (in this case, writing) in an effective way. And the faster I caught it, the sooner I felt free to act.

Now as for Meryl Streep, well, it helps to know (since she plays in so many serious films) that in her private life she is one of the merriest of women, because here she is able to begin as a studious New Yorker author and end as, more or less, Katharine Hepburn in "The African Queen."

My journal: "What a convoluted sentence. Does Ebert actually get paid to write this crap? Why doesn't somebody pay me to write this crap? I could do it twice as well at half the price."

Looking back at this paragraph, I asked myself the question I had encouraged readers to pose to themselves in order to become more effective self-observers: what kind of person would write these words?

- Response #1: someone who thinks he is better than others, who seeks out evidence of his superiority. Only this kind of person would criticize the writing of a famed critic with so much glee and so little embarrassment.
- Response #2: someone living at least temporarily in a space of resentment, who thinks he has been hurt and cannot do anything about it. Someone who, upon writing these harsh words about Ebert, actually feels worse himself. The act of criticism doesn't make him feel better. It makes him feel worse. And less trusting and hopeful. This vicious circle is how resentment survives in the world.

Which response is correct? Probably both. Does this mean that Amiel is arrogant and resentful? Yes, but only part of the time. Look at other evidence of his everyday language, and different qualities will be revealed. This is precisely the reason why it is misleading to claim that we are a certain kind of person or a certain kind of leader. It may be true in a probabilistic sense, but all it takes is an observant eye or ear to uncover disconfirming evidence. Meryl Streep may be the "merriest of women" in her private life, but don't believe for a moment she doesn't also speak the language of gloom, resentment or cynicism at sometime every week. It would be fascinating to observe her thoughts for a day. Imagine transcribing them and sending her the results. Think she might be surprised?

Its characters are colorful because they care so intensely; they are more interested in their obsessions than they are in the movie, if you see what I mean.

My journal: "The word 'obsessions' reminds me of an earlier column about the movie 'Roger Dodger.' In that column I suggested that each of us is obsessed with something, yet we are not aware of it, and every effort we make to name our obsession inevitably fails because it is a construction of the very mind that is obsessing. Does this have anything to do with 'Adaptation?'"

I wanted to ask Tom, but it was too late at night to call him.

Then I found an answer, one that again placed me at odds with Ebert. The reason the characters are colorful is not because they are interested in their obsessions. Indeed, it is quite the opposite. They capture our attention because they are so immersed in their obsessions that they cannot seem them, so nothing else seems important. This is true of Charlie's ceaseless comparisons with his

brother, Susan's quest for passion, and John's obsession with having a passion. Each character screens out everything going on around them that does not support the story of the type of person they claim to be. In other words, they screen out 90 percent of life.

And all the time, uncoiling beneath the surface of the film, is the audacious surprise of the last 20 minutes, in which--well, to say the movie's ending works on more than one level is not to imply it works on only two.

My mind started to race, first grasping for an understanding of this, then realizing the implications for my own project. I started to sweat. How could I possibly conclude a piece of writing with a bang worthy of the movie's ending?

The telephone rang. It was Sarah, a friend and colleague. I explained the situation, showed her what I had written so far, and asked for her advice.

"One thing is extraordinarily clear to me," she replied with characteristic boldness. "The only way to bring this to a close is to confess what you and I both know. And that is this: To say that your column is going to fail on more than one level is not to imply it will fail on only two."

Immediately, I knew that my friend had hit the nail on the head. No, not that my column would be a failure. There was no way of knowing this in advance, and this was not even her point. The reason she spoke these words was not because she believed them, but because of the impact she sensed they would have on me. Expressing out loud in an exaggerated fashion my own inner critic's judgments would instantly expose them as absurd, or at least ungrounded in evidence. And this would cause me to smile and laugh. Which is exactly what I did.

"Sarah," I remarked. "I have to thank you."

"For what? Didn't I just shred your muse?"

"No, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but you've done just the opposite. You have taught me three lessons I won't soon forget. One: my inner critic is no match for your outer critic. Two: never write a recursive and self-referential essay without contacting you first. Three: in the midst of human suffering and uncertainty in the world, there is always, always a place to pause, realize that life is but a play, and smile."

Finally, I had uttered something worthy of a concluding sentence. I glowed with pride.

"That's lovely," she interjected, "but you're not going to include that in the column, are you?"

“I’m afraid I just did.”

“That’s unfortunate.” She paused. “Promise me something.”

“What’s that?”

“Next time call me before you get yourself into such a mess. Before you start writing. No, before you pick the movie...No, even better: call me before you select a career path.”

I promise.

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