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Parental Leadership: The Mary Poppins Metaphor

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Existing theories on leadership are usually based on efforts we are familiar with in which leaders are easily defined (work, war, sports, etc). Little analysis to date has been placed on the role of parents as leaders outside of the social sciences where the focus of the research is usually an offshoot of psychology or childhood development. The parent as leader is a unique focus in that there are several qualities of the parent role that are quite different from that of the typical supervisory roles we normally discuss, while at the same time it would be foolish to think of parents as anything but leaders. The disconnect in this idea is evident in the ways western society regards employment as it relates to parenthood, specifically pregnancy and the inequities with which “stay-home” parents are regarded. Few job sites provide adequate pregnancy leave, or childcare opportunities, and western society in general tends to regard stay at home parents with contempt in terms of their contribution to our vocation oriented society in which accolades are usually work achievement oriented. Society in general The list below attempts to highlight a few significant differences which merit discussion.

Permanence-the role of parent is non-reversible-Regardless of how a parent sees themselves, there is no way to undo parenthood. This is very different from most leadership roles, in which one can simply resign or choose to stop leading.

Newness-the role of parent is always new and previously non-existent. By this I mean that the situation in which a new parent finds himself, is always different from any other situation encountered by any other parent, as the children in question are new and previously non-existent prior to birth.

Partnership-the role of parent requires a partner. Even if parents aren't biologically related to their offspring, the act of birth always requires two (egg from one, sperm from the other). Even if the original biological entities are not involved, the children carry genetic material that will in some way be a likeness of the original donors.

Uniqueness-the role is always unique from the role of either parent in as much as every second of every minute of every day is different with different individuals in the mix. Human experience is always unique and unrepeatable.

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Subordinate/supervisor relationship-in the case of parenting, regardless of how the supervisor (parents) or subordinates (children) see it, the roles of each are forever. This is not unusual to work settings in terms of required performance, but the unique difference here is that the role of “caretaker” is rarely written down and agreed to and is completely contingent on societal and individual expectations based on the nature of the relationship. I may dislike my parents and disagree with the way I was raised, but it is acknowledged that a time will come when our roles may be reversed and I will become parent (caretaker) to my parents. Regardless of this change in the status of our relationship, my parents will always be my parents and I will always be their child.

Protection/survival-the only role I can think of where a significant portion of the relationship focuses on actual survival as the subordinate is unable to take care of their basic needs for quite some time.

Because of these obvious differences not only in the role of parenting and the ways we recognize leadership, but also in the ways society regards parenthood, Parents, I would argue, are forced to look to metaphors which are based in fantasy. Though reality is the norm, there are few models that can be followed that are actually appropriate for the unique challenges that a parent faces. For this reason I will be looking at the movie Mary Poppins in terms of the fantasy leadership metaphor it provides for parents and specifically the role of Mary Poppins as perfect parent. Though in the movie, Mary is a nanny, she embodies many of the roles western society teaches us a parent must be, yet implicitly relies in fantasy to create the persona so many parents strive to be.

The Mary Poppins metaphor (MPM), as I refer to it is made up of several facets by which modern parents can be defined. Below I will begin with a brief summary of the movie’s theme and follow by stating each of these facets and explain how they work as a model of parental leadership.

In the Walt Disney movie “Mary Poppins”, Mary is a nanny that comes to an embattled home in which there are two children (Jane and Michael Banks) that are passed off on their nannies as their parents, Winifred and George, focus on their own individual pursuits (George as an executive of a bank and his wife Winifred as an advocate and active participant in the women’s rights movement). The movie takes place in England in 1910 as focuses on Mary’s relationship with the children in their parent’s absence. Throughout a series of events, Mary manages to convince both the children and parents that they need each other, and the movie concludes with the family united as a happy foursome or model family. The events and characters that play a role in this transformation, are all part of what I consider the MPM and will be discussed here.

1. **The problem**-The existing situation to which Mary is introduced can be easily seen as problematic. The ease of this analysis lends itself to a good vs. bad scenario where it is not difficult to arrive at a better answer for everyone: get the parents and children to realize they need and love each other. In parenthood, there are no perfect solutions. The fluid nature of the role dictates that several solutions

be enlisted in a “trial and error” format, in which the first solution is rarely the best and may well never be used again in a similar situation.

2. **Mary as part of the heavens**-Mary’s place of origin is in the clouds above England. The movie opens with a scene of Mary actually sitting on a cloud waiting to descend to the home that needs her. One immediately thinks of the heavens and the role of creation and how it plays into the life of a parent. This is of course speculation on my part based on my interpretation of the scene, but what is inarguable is that childbirth is creation. Regardless of your religion, the birth of children, your own or others, is the only time we can witness the creation of our species. Just like Mary, we see our children as special and from another place where everything is individual and unique. Mary descends from the heavens and is officially not of this world, yet we hope to do the same things in the lives of our children that she does. It is an unrealistic expectation doomed for failure.
3. **Busy schedules are still the norm**-The Banks are a busy, modern family. Much like any of us, they are forced to focus on their pursuits at the expense of their children, even unknowingly. They have two full time servants and even a nanny for the children. It is interesting to note that the children, even being of school age, never actually go to school during the movie, presenting them as even a greater obstacle. This is actually one of the parts of the movie that is still true to form for most western families. Survival dictates that we leave the care of our children to some other individual, even though we know we are supposed to be the ones that actually perform childcare.
4. **Mary as mystic**-aside from the fact that she descends from the clouds, the perfect childhood companion also separates herself from us mortals by being able to jump into chalk paintings and have them come to life, levitate and lift other objects, speak with animals and animated characters, and change the existing states of objects. Here is one of the places where our problems as parents begin. Mary is the ideal companion for our children, but to be so, she needs to be magical
5. **Mary is the champion of god vs. evil.** In order to save the children from being ignored by their parents, Mary must, in many ways, take on many of societies established institutions. Particularly, her actions cause a run on the bank, the workplace of the children’s father, resulting in him being fired. Again, difficulties for the modern parent striving to be Mary. We are more entrenched in our institutions in order to ensure the survival of our children. We can’t afford to lose our jobs and spend time with our children instead. The institutions that may very well be ill designed to actually assist our children, are the very ones we cling to as working parents: the public school system, healthcare, etc.
6. **Mary has a disciple**-Bert is Mary’s sidekick. He is a local “jack of all trades” who assists or accompanies Mary on her fantastic journeys with the children, but

does not possess her magical skills. He is just a regular citizen who cares for the children as well. Who is this person in the life of the modern parent? This I would argue is actually the closest thing in the movie to a realistic modern day nanny. He has several jobs (consistent with the lack of monies in modern childcare) and his interactions with the children can be dangerous depending upon what is on his agenda. While with Bert, the children find themselves being sucked up into chimneys and dancing on the roofs high above England's streets. This is the risk that all parents currently take with daycare and babysitting. One never truly knows anything about those that help with their children except that they could never care for or love their children with the same intensity that they do. This is a risky step down from the quality of parenting offered from actual parents, but often times, we have no choice.

7. **Mary fights for the common man and the downtrodden**-Mary is Bert's friend and Bert is blue collar England at its best. He has several jobs depending upon the need and is actually a street performer, creating chalk drawings and playing music in the park. Mary also applauds the efforts of the "bird lady", a poor woman who sells bags of breadcrumbs to feed the birds. In our attempts to be Mary we rarely have the time to emphasize anyone who is not in our immediate family unit. We rarely have the time or financial reserves to take up the causes of others, even though we widely acknowledge that it would be a good example to set for our children and something we hope they will someday do as well.
8. **Mary Poppins does not compromise**-Mary never compromises even when the children debate her. She holds firm and wins. However, when she wins it's usually as a result of her otherworldly abilities. She either resorts to magic or song in order to convince the children to do what she requests. Any parent would love to persuade their children with this kind of success, but we are obviously missing the tools necessary to do so. In the absence of magic and musical ability, the modern parent must cope with the lesser tools of compromise, reward and punishment. We intend the same results as Mary, but are often left with angry, unhappy children and must cope with the guilt of being far less effective.
9. **Mary, like grandparents, gets to go home**- Once everything has been restored to the order that results in a happy ending, Mary flies away and returns to the clouds. This is similar to grandparents that come bearing gifts and the peace that comes with knowing they get to leave. Parents don't have this luxury so every battle fought, stay with the combatants like a bad memory. The unpleasantness that often accompanies parental roles such as discipline and worrying, never go away. Unless you have a fetish, you know all too well that it is difficult to coexist with someone you spank and is kept in line by a system (often archaic and passed down from our parents) based on punishment and reward.

Conclusion

The uniqueness of the role of parent makes leadership theories difficult to apply. The Mary Poppins metaphor is just such an example. In as much as the focus of parenting is the relationship we have with our children, and since those children, and thus the relationship as a whole, is different from any other, every situation encountered by a parent is unique from any previously encountered by any other parent. As there is no model for success or even by which success can be determined (no model or existing role model) the new parent has to look to fictional accounts of perfection as most existing critiques come from their own childhood. As the outcome is survival, we tend to look in unconventional places for our role models because the methods we choose are seen for us as a matter of life or death. Surely parents will do anything for their children, much more so than we would do for others in our lives. And for these reasons we are often forced to strive for unattainable models of success which have come to us from fantasy. These lyrics from the song *A Man Has Dreams* from the movie "Mary Poppins" sums up this difficulty:

You a man of high position
Esteemed by his peers
And when your little tykes are cryin'
You haven't time to dry their tears
And see those grateful little faces
Smilin' up at you
Because their dad, he always knows just what to do

You've got to grind, grind, grind
At that grindstone
Though childhood slips like sand through a sieve
And all too soon they've up and grown
And then they've flown
And its too late for you to give
That teaspoon of sugar
To help the medicine go down

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