Imagination, Self-Knowledge, and Poise: Jim March's Lessons for Leadership

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ABSTRACT   James G. March was a founding father of modern organization theory, and arguably its most eclectic scholar. His elegant writings, which were underpinned by a behavioral view of organizations, spanned ambiguity and choice, rationality and decision-making, organizational change, organizational learning, and institutional theory, among others. In this editorial, we remember Jim March by reflecting on his lessons for leadership. It is structured into three parts, each portraying a key aspect of contemporary leadership: imagination, self-knowledge, and poise. March believed that these qualities were essential to leadership, and he embodied them to the fullest.

Keywords: March, leadership, imagination, self-knowledge, poise

INTRODUCTION

Jim March's unique approach to leadership was informed by a broader exploration of the fundamental issues of life (March & Schecter, 2003). In his view, the central problems of leadership are inextricably linked to the ambiguities of human experience (March, 2009), which imply that leaders often face situations that are less orderly, less comprehensible, and less malleable than they are often portrayed to be in mainstream characterizations of management and organizations. Ambiguity stems from the fact that the causal structure of experience is complex, and that the everyday world we encounter is noisy (Patriotta, 2016). Hence the link between experience and reality is tenuous and subject to interpretive flexibility. Furthermore, the qualities and actions of leaders are themselves ambiguous: there is ambiguity about priorities, there is ambiguity about outcomes and their desirability, and there is ambiguity about who is responsible for outcomes (March and Weil, 2005: 7).

It is in the context of ambiguity and noise that leaders make sense of the world and figure out who they are. Based on their own experiences, they create more or less credible stories through which they develop plausible interpretations of the situations they encounter and simultaneously convey these interpretations to others. Framing lessons of experience through stories allows leaders to make their deeds both meaningful and durable. At the same time, the ambiguities of experience generate dilemmas, paradoxes, and tensions that challenge the view of leadership processes as 'orderly exercises of human coherence' (March, 1994:175). Leadership is carried out in confusing worlds in which things are loosely connected, interpretations and desires are contradictory, and causality is unfathomable (ibid). As a result, the impact of leaders on organizations and societies is often elusive, and the link between their actions and decisions and the outcomes of those same actions and decisions is difficult to pinpoint. Similarly, leaders' reputations are precarious: they are negotiated among

a chain of intermediaries that include observers, journalists, academics, other leaders, competitors, friends, and enemies (March and Weil, 2005: 7).

Because the fundamental issues of leadership are indistinguishable from those of life itself, in order to have a proper discussion about leaders and their actions, one needs to reflect on the great dilemmas of human existence as they present themselves in a leadership context (March and Weil, 2005). In March's view, we can learn more about leadership by exploring the great works of literature that teach us about 'life' than by pursuing mainstream management research. Great literary works such as Othello, War and Peace, and Don Quixote – which March often used as a way of casting a non-conventional gaze on leadership – provide insightful meditations on how both ordinary and exceptional individuals make sense of their 'being in the world' when faced with questions and enigmas related to human existence (Heidegger, 1962; Patriotta, 2016: 557).

In this editorial, I draw on March's seminal ideas to reflect on his contribution to our understanding of leadership in organizational contexts. My aim is neither to review March's wide-ranging work nor to pin down his scholarly legacy; rather, I want to connect some of March's core insights in an evocative way with a view to stimulating further conversations that can build on, and expand, his inspirational thinking. The editorial is structured into three parts, each portraying a key aspect of contemporary leadership: imagination, self-knowledge, and poise. March believed that these qualities were essential to leadership, and he embodied them to the fullest.

IMAGINATION

'Imagination is more important than knowledge' – **Albert Einstein**

March proposed that imagination promotes visions that can guide our actions as an

instrument of change (March and Weil, 2005). His emphasis on imagination echoes celebrated statements from eclectic fields such as science, poetry, and business: Albert Einstein famously claimed that 'imagination is more important than knowledge'; William Shakespeare pointed out that 'imagination gives form to things unknown'; and Steve Jobs marked his successful return to Apple by launching a campaign inspired by the motto 'think different.' There can be no doubt that imagination lies at the core of leadership and entrepreneurial activity.

Imagination is the creative ability to form images and ideas in the mind, to see things that others cannot see. Leaders express this ability in the form of visions. To bring their visions to fruition, leaders engage others by creating and communicating shared meaning. From this perspective, leaders stand somewhere between their own imaginations and those of their followers. Furthermore – to quote Shakespeare again – leaders need to use their own imagination to give things 'a local habitation and a name', to translate undefined dreams and desires into worthy causes. In other words, they have to make their dreams 'workable'.

Imagination and vision are critical to leadership. We endorse imagination and praise the visionary leader. We think of leaders as the men and women who create and transform major companies or reshape societies. According to March, however, there are two conspicuous problems with imagination.

Most novel ideas are wrong. When we tell stories of leadership, we typically refer to 'triumphs of imagination.' They are usually stories of success, in which the leader had to face a predicament, endured challenging circumstances, fought hard, and emerged victorious. These stories feed our mythology of leadership. But instances in which novel and unconventional ideas have proved to be right are quite exceptional (March and Schecter, 2003). March's customary observation is that most novel ideas are bad, and that we cannot

tell the good ones from the bad ones until some time has passed (Augier, 2004; Coutu, 2006).

Imagination and vision are associated with risk, with picturing things that are not there, with dreams and fantasies. Jim once told me a story about his son, who when he was two or three years old, looked at the fire in their fireplace and said: "Fire is so beautiful, I wonder what it tastes like". Jim thought that this was an extraordinarily imaginative idea, but an unconditionally bad one. As a parent, he faced a problem: he wanted his son to be imaginative, but he did not want him to die. He wanted to reward his son's idea without encouraging him to persist with it. The parental problem with imagination is the same as the organizational problem with imagination. That is, organizations are ambivalent towards imagination: they need it, but have no control over its consequences, and hence cannot reward it. This ambivalence illuminates a second problem with imagination.

Organizations are not conducive to imagination. Organizations are not designed to support imagination, and this can sometimes generate myopia (Levinthal and March, 1993) and cause harmful consequences for both organizations and their leaders. Organizations need to sense and respond to surprises and unexpected events, both of which require imagination. Most organizations cannot reward imagination, however: they are designed to act in the interests of order, prediction, and uncertainty reduction (Weick, 2005: 433). They tend to be bound by norms of rationality, and to be dominated by plans, routines, and procedures. These elements of organizing may create fixed expectations and blind spots that suppress imagination, reduce the field of vision, and prevent leaders from 'seeing things coming'.

The executive summary of the 9/11 Commission Report includes the following general finding: 'Across the government, there were failures of imagination, policy, capabilities, and management…. The most important failure was one of imagination. We do not believe leaders understood the gravity of the threat." (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks

upon the United States, 2004a: 9). The possibility of a suicide hijacking operation was imaginable, and indeed had been imagined by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) before 9/11 (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 2004b: 345; Weick 2005: 425). It was, in fact, on a shortlist of plausible terrorist scenarios. However, it was judged to be unlikely because it did not offer terrorists the opportunity to negotiate the release of captive extremists held in the U.S. The possibility that terrorists might not be interested in dialogue at all, but only in destruction, was, in other words, 'unimagined.' (ibid). The 9/11 attacks illustrate in a dramatic fashion the harmful consequences of imagination in a double sense. The course of action devised by the terrorists was perversely imaginative and, from their perspective, successful. At the same time, the FAA's inability to anticipate that this type of attack could occur constituted a 'failure of imagination.'

The double-edge sword of imagination – 'imagination is essential to the production of novelty' vs. 'most novel ideas are wrong' – can be framed in terms of a tension between imagination and knowledge. Imagination belongs to the world of children: it is innocent, playful, and neglectful of consequences. These elements are essential to the production of novel and unconventional ideas, but imagination is also very hard to control. Furthermore, because visions refer to things that are not here, they can lead to self-deception and self-delusion. Conversely, knowledge is linked to the adult world. It comes from experience. It is about awareness, gaining control, and anticipating consequences. Now here is the tension: as we gain knowledge and experience, we learn to harness potential drifts of imagination. At the same time, effective learning and the lessons of experience have the potential to hinder imagination and the novel ideas it generates.

Navigating the tension between imagination and knowledge is, therefore, a critical challenge for the modern leader. For March, 'effective leadership implies an ability to live in two worlds: the incoherent world of imagination, fantasy, and dreams and the orderly world

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of plans, rules, and pragmatic action.' (March and Weil, 2005: 83). From this perspective, leadership requires a combination of passion and discipline, playfulness and tough-mindedness, and foolishness and considered judgment.

Societies, organizations and 'stolen' imagination

The dilemmas of imagination and leadership underpin March's conceptualization of organizational and societal innovation. Society needs new ideas in order to progress, so it has to find a way to get people to pursue new ideas, even though they may be mostly bad, and it has to recognize that for most people, pursuing novel ideas is a bad idea. The standard response to this is the creation of intellectual property rights, and very considerable pay-offs for good new ideas. Since most new ideas are bad, they have negative returns. The generation of novelty therefore requires considerable risk-taking, and imagination comes from risk-takers. Jim once told me a story of another son – a successful entrepreneur – who had interesting ideas for a product stolen by a well-known company. This is a rather familiar story of exploration/exploitation (March, 1991) that suggests a kind of division of labor in society between risk-takers, who come up with new ideas, and the 'solid' people who steal them, and between those who produce novelty and those who institutionalize it. Organizations play a major role in the institutionalization and dissemination of novelty. It is not absolutely obvious, however, that every organization should invest in imagination: it is more efficient for an individual organization to let others engage in imagination and to imitate the successful ones, and in substance, this is how most of the major successes in our modern world have come about.

But then a further problem for society is how to encourage risk-taking when good ideas are just going to be stolen when they become successful. If all organizations were to pursue exploitation strategies exclusively, there would be nobody to copy or steal from, and,

ultimately, no production of novelty (Levinthal and March, 1993). Drawing on the concept of absorptive capacity (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990), March suggests that in order to steal ideas, one has to engage in the same activities that generate new ones. Accordingly, organizations do not undertake explorative activities in order to generate new ideas directly; rather, they undertake these activities in order to steal the occasional good idea someone else might have. As a result, however, they are actually engaging in new ideas, not for their own sakes, but for the side effect of being able to copy others. This is one way in which society produces novelty, like a metaphorical genetic hitchhiker, with the ability to copy new ideas.

March's depiction of innovation processes highlights the complex interactions between imagination and knowledge – and the related processes of exploration and exploitation – that occur at several levels of a nested system: individual, organizational, and societal (March, 1994). Leaders play a role in creating a favorable climate for the production of novel ideas and steering novelty in their preferred direction. Their influence on the outcomes of novelty is limited, however. Rather than being the prerogative of individual leaders, the production of novelty pertains to the domain of collective intelligence: it is a joint endeavor involving the non-concerted efforts of a plurality of actors operating within a network of intermediaries (Becker, 1982; Patriotta and Hirsch, 2016). Furthermore, rather than being the outcome of deliberate development, novelty seems to emerge from a garbage can processes (Cohen, March and Olsen, 1971) that connects imagination with problems, peripheral risk-takers with mainstreamers, and planned activities with random side effects.

SELF-KNOWLEDGE

'This above all: to thine own self be true' - **Shakespeare**, *Hamlet*.

We associate leaders with strong personalities and transformative powers. We see them as producers of great actions that bring about significant changes in the world. The question is, therefore, what drives human action. Jim March famously proposed a distinction between a logic of consequences and a logic of appropriateness (March, 1994; March and Olsen, 1989, 1995). These logics provide alternative ways of making sense of the world and motivating choices.

Leadership presumes commitment, a willingness to devote time and energy to a course of action, and to accept the uncertain consequences stemming from it (March 1994: 264). The primary justification for action in contemporary life (including business) is consequential. Leaders who follow a logic of consequences are intentionally rational decision-makers with stable preferences and well-defined goals. A logic of consequences normally comprises the deliberate consideration of alternatives, and an assessment of their outcomes, and choices based on a calculation and comparison of expected returns (March and Simon, 1958). At the same time, an emphasis on consequences overlooks the role that intuition, faith, and tradition might play in leaders' decisions and actions. It also overestimates the role of human action in determining the course of history, which often leads to disappointment.

An alternative rationale for a leader's action derives from an obligation to identity – what March calls a logic of appropriateness. From this perspective, a leader's primary commitment is to giving meaning to purpose, to self, and to the complexities of social life (March, 1994: 271-272). Leaders who are motivated by their identity follow rules they deem appropriate to the situations they encounter. They ask: what kind of a person am I? What kind of a situation am I in? What would a person like me do in a situation such as this? (March and Schecter, 2003). Following a logic of appropriateness requires self-knowledge combined with a certain dose of risk-taking. Risk-takers are not concerned about the consequences of their imaginations, except to a minor extent. Their motivation for engaging in, or even

rationalizing, risk-taking behavior is that the exercise of imagination is valuable in its own right. For March, imagination is, in essence, what makes us human; it is an affirmation of human will. This also explains March's fondness for the likes of Don Quixote and for his proud affirmation of identity as a knight-errant: "*Yo sé quién soy*" (I know who I am) (ibid).

Self-knowledge involves understanding one's own nature, abilities, and limitations, realizing how one's own character, motivation, and personality can make a difference. Self-knowledge develops through learning experiences – often dramatic ones – that we internalize, and which become a driver for our actions. In his famous Stanford commencement address, Steve Jobs talked about three episodes that had profoundly marked his existence: being abandoned by his parents at birth; being fired by Apple, the company he had co-founded; and finding out about his pancreatic tumor. He explained how these three traumatic experiences had made him aware of who he was and been a driver for his leadership. Through these crucibles, he developed a passion for life and achievement. He said: 'you've got to find what you love' and concluded his speech with the famous motto 'stay hungry, stay foolish.'

Self-knowledge, the awareness of what drives one in life, and the ability to place one's own identity at the service of a worthwhile cause are essential elements of good leadership. On the other hand, March's depiction of leaders, even successful ones, highlights how a commitment to identity can backfire. These identity dynamics can be connected to dysfunctional consequences stemming from an escalation of commitment (Staw, 1981).

Escalation of commitment (a bias of identity)

Leaders often face situations in which they may experience a tension between who they think they are and what others expect of them. 'To thine own self be true,' says Polonius in *Hamlet*. This phrase is used widely as an injunction to encourage commitment and moral integrity. It is a reminder that we should stick to our principles and do what we believe in

under all circumstances. At a deeper level, however, it is also a form of self-justification: it appeals to our complacency, and not to our resilience. It expresses a bias of identity whereby we only accept situations that accord with our beliefs. It is an alibi for inaction and the conservation of the status quo. It is like saying: 'It doesn't matter what anyone thinks. The world is wrong. This is who I am, and I'm just being true to myself' (Clairmont, 2013).

A leader's commitment to identity may degenerate into an escalation of commitment that resists – or even rejects – alternative views and perspectives, and therefore becomes dysfunctional (Staw, 1981). This occurs when leaders impose their own principles as the sole lens for understanding a situation, and persist in a particular course of action even in the face of evidence that proves it to be unjustified. Leaders may persevere with a course of action because they do not want to admit their error to themselves or because they do not wish to expose their mistakes to others: no one wants to seem incompetent or lose face (Staw and Ross, 1987: 70). Furthermore, leadership comes with social expectations. Culturally, we see persistence in a course of action as a sign of leadership, and withdrawal as a sign of weakness (ibid).

Tony Blair was a very successful political leader, but his decision to go to war with Iraq cast a shadow over his reputation. Blair faced strong criticism when it emerged that evidence that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction had been fabricated. In an interview with the BBC he was asked: 'If you had known then that there were no WMDs, would you still have gone on?' He replied: 'I would still have thought it right to remove him [Saddam Hussein]'. Significantly, Blair added: 'I mean obviously you would have had to use… different arguments about the nature of the threat,' concluding 'When it comes to a decision like that, I think it is important that you take that decision… on the basis of what is right, because that is the only way to do it.' (The Guardian, 2009). In more recent times, the Brexit saga – involving Prime Ministers David Cameron, Theresa May, and Boris Johnson, among

others – offers a gripping example of the detrimental effects of escalation of commitment. The simple outcome provided by the referendum obscures the ambiguities caused by modern nation-states having to exist in the context of interconnected worlds; it creates an illusion of sovereignty. Under these circumstances, the empty mantra 'Brexit means Brexit' generates a loop that traps leaders within their own commitments (see Patriotta, forthcoming).

To avoid the pitfalls associated with an over-commitment to identity, March (1994) proposes that we should 'treat the self as a hypothesis': that is, challenge our own biases and preconceptions on an ongoing basis. Rather than considering preferences and identities as a given, leaders can learn what they want and who they are in the process of making decisions and experiencing their consequences. By observing and reflecting on their actions, leaders can discover their own values, aspirations, and self-conceptions. Treating the self as a hypothesis may facilitate intelligent transformations of preferences and identities into the pursuit of worthy causes – and this is the prime task of leadership.

At a broader strategic level, March's bold suggestion is that leaders should reconcile the logics of consequence and appropriateness within a 'technology of foolishness' in order to temporarily escape the constraints of consistency (in both purpose and identity) (March, 1971). The technology of foolishness emphasizes the essential role of playfulness in leadership and decision-making. From this perspective, leadership becomes a platform for discovery and experimentation. As was often the case with other seemingly counter-intuitive concepts in March's work, the technology of foolishness is neither trivial nor arbitrary. Rather, it is a balancing act that combines apparently contradictory aspects of intelligence: it relies on playfulness to explore alternative goals and visions while retaining a basic commitment to the necessity of order and seriousness (March, 1994).

Finally, it is worth pointing out that dysfunctional consequences can also arise from leaders' over-commitment to their followers. This occurs when leaders attempt to

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unconditionally meet the expectations of their followers in exchange for power and consensus. The explosion of populism in a number of countries is a case in point here. In a mediatized society, it can be tempting for leaders to test public opinion on an ongoing basis, pin down the preferences of the majority, and act accordingly.

To sum up, effective leaders maintain a commitment to identity through change rather than conservation. Strong leaders engage in 'identity work', the process of 'forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness' (Svenningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1165). They adjust their self-images and work orientations in order to achieve a balance between the 'self' and the social expectations related to their role (Curchod et al., 2014). They listen to others and cultivate the virtues of doubt as a vehicle for change. They learn by going through problematic situations and, as a result, they modify their identity. As agents of change, leaders must themselves be open to change. Learning to lead means, on one level, learning to manage personal as well as organizational change.

POISE

'The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others' – **Mahatma Gandhi**

March's belief that the ambiguities of experience are the 'material' of leadership is epitomized in his constant attention to tensions and dualities. Many of these are identified in his writings, in fact: they exist between exploration and exploitation, consequences and appropriateness, rationality and foolishness, imagination and knowledge, passion and discipline, cleverness and innocence, and poetry and plumbing, to cite just a few. Addressing these tensions requires poise, a calm confidence in a person's way of behaving,

a quality of grace and balance in the way a person conducts himself or herself (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2013). In the context of leadership, poise denotes the exercise of moral judgment based on an empathy for the concerns and aspirations of others rather than on the projection of one's own values on to others without respect for differences (Fesmire, 2003; Patriotta and Starkey, 2008: 325). Poise is expressed in the trinity of justice, truth, and beauty, which March sees as independent components of virtue (March, 2009).

Justice

Justice refers to moral integrity. It is the quality of being honest and upholding ethical principles. One important component of justice is a powerful belief in something outside one's self, a worthy cause that provides a moral compass for choices and actions (Bennis, 1989). The quote from Gandhi above combines the sense of self with service to others. Justice is also the basis of trust, and this matters to leaders because there are no leaders without followers, and there are no followers without trust (ibid: 153). A major challenge that leaders are currently facing is the erosion of trust generated by the epidemic of corporate and political scandals we are currently reading about in the news. A bottom-line mentality and short-term thinking undermine trust and ethical behavior. This often generates a widespread perception that the people at the top lack integrity and act unethically. Because leadership is a combination of talk and action (March, 1994), maintaining integrity requires a commitment to 'walk the talk', to setting up a climate in which leaders not only say something, but in which people also see that they mean it (Bennis, 1989).

The issue of justice highlights a tension between individual and collective motives: leaders are often individuals with strong personalities who enter organizations with personal agendas. They are frequently described as intelligently devious and secretive, portrayed as astute manipulators of resources and people, and praised for their cleverness (Augier, 2004:

172). Leaders are accountable towards their followers, on the other hand. They are expected to act on behalf of a collective, to work towards the production of public goods, and to be socially as well as morally responsible. The duty towards followers requires 'possessing an elemental innocence that overcomes the fatuous convolutions of clever people and goes instinctively to the essentials…. In this spirit, leaders are often praised for their openness, and for their ability to use honesty as a basis for inspiring and extending trust.' (ibid).

Undoubtedly, a leader has a political role. March conceptualized organizations as political arenas in which interest groups and coalitions engage in continuous bargaining-learning processes around different issues (Cyert and March, 1963). Leaders promote a sense of justice among organizational members by negotiating interests and resolving conflicts. Acting with poise in relation to issues of justice requires balancing cleverness and innocence, engaging in the politics of meaning as well as the politics of interests (Slavich et al., 2019), and practicing 'smart' politics (Butcher and Clarke, 2003). Smart politicians are able to put their own agendas at the service of a worthy cause and to leverage their own identity for a greater good.

Truth

In a world of ambiguity and uncertainty, truth is possibly the most elusive aspect of leadership. The actual impact of leaders on human events is difficult to assess, and most leaders exaggerate their control over their successes (March, 2005). And yet, historical accounts portray the deeds of heroic leaders. We create heroic narratives about leaders to make order out of the chaos of history. We attribute compelling storylines to these narratives that have a beginning, a critical moment of choice, and a resolution. The construction of coherent narratives confers rationality on equivocal events and allows us to understand what is going on.

March draws on 'War and Peace' to show that narratives of heroic leaders creating history are myths (March and Schecter, 2008), due to the fact that they are informed by retrospective biases. They filter unpleasant elements from events, remove ambiguities, and embellish the details of experience so as to allow us to remember things in the way we want to remember them. In other words, narratives often create convenient realities that exorcise widespread fears and conform to peoples' own hopes. Leaders have little control over historical events. Rather, history follows a random logic that stems from the non-coordinated efforts of millions of ordinary people engaged in mundane matters. Just like the production of novelty, the making of history is a collective endeavor that seems to follow a garbage can logic: it unfolds through encounters among participants, predicaments, solutions, and choice opportunities that occasionally converge and shape the form of historical events. Under these circumstances, truth and comprehension cannot be pursued: they come at great random moments that cannot be anticipated. In the face of the predicaments of history, innocence is preferable to cleverness. Ordinary competence in mundane matters is more important than genius. Plans and goals are less effective than going with the flow of history.

Do leaders' decisions matter, then? Leaders play a role in the process of the social construction of reality by orienting followers' interpretations in a preferred direction. They are sensegivers and worldmakers who mobilize social networks to promote cultural values that are passed on to future generations. Through their own storytelling, leaders develop visions and envisage the steps to be taken to realize these visions. Once a script has been written down, with its plot and characters, however, it takes on a life of its own. This phenomenon whereby leaders progressively lose control over their followers can be likened to the process of dissociation of an author from his or her own text (Patriotta, 2003; Ricoeur, 1991). Many novelists have highlighted the fact that they lose control in the process of writing, that they cannot arbitrarily make their characters do things because their characters

choose to do something else. In a similar manner, a film is not owned by a film director, and a music score is not owned by a conductor. Performances are created by a plurality of people and negotiated among them. Leaders develop visions, and ask their followers to act on them. Like novelists, film directors, and conductors, however, leaders do not have a completely free hand. The best leaders can do is to kick the ball in a particular direction, prompt meaningful interactions among their followers, and let the story unfold.

Beauty: Jim's poetic imagination

March proposed an aesthetic view of leadership in which leaders draw on the ambiguities of experience to augment understandings and pursue visions that are beautiful. The leader's role is to recognize and increase the beauty of everyday life: for instance through innovation, the pursuit of worthy social causes, and the promotion of cultural and artistic endeavors. A case in point is the renaissance patron Cosimo de' Medici, who was an able politician who also contributed to the production of beautiful art that would withstand the test of history and be passed on to future generations (March and Schecter, 2008; Padgett and Ansell, 1993).

Poise in the pursuit of beauty is reflected in an unassuming stance that downplays one's own ego and abilities in favor of more altruistic and durable undertakings. March liked to begin his classes at Stanford each year by saying 'I am not now, nor have I ever been, relevant.' (Coutu, 2006: 84), a statement that stands as a testament to the humility of a great thinker. Interestingly, it is also a statement about leadership. According to March, leaders should capitalize on their historical irrelevance by cultivating evocative ambiguity – a quality that has traditionally been attributed to poets.

Poetry was always Jim March's main occupation. He actually began writing poetry before he became an academic. There are many different forms of poetic imagination, but one that Jim was extremely fascinated with, including from a scholarly standpoint, was the

role of evocative ambiguity – the ambition to write something that stimulated more interesting meanings in the reader than the author had had in mind. March reports an anecdote about T. S. Eliot commenting on a critic who had tried to understand his poem 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.' The critic had tried to understand what the poem meant, regardless of what T. S. Eliot had actually intended it to mean, and for that he was grateful (March, 1994: 259-260). Just as poets enter into a language game with their readers, leaders engage in a narration with their followers in order to promote joint understandings of events. And like T. S. Eliot, good leaders should hope that their followers will imagine things that are more interesting than they could actually have anticipated. Darwin, Freud, and Marx were all relatively ambiguous, and it is only because others saw meaning in what they did that they were deemed to have imaginative force. A poem should say more than the poet knows. A leader's vision should say more that the leader knows.

Jim's poetic imagination informed his scholarly practice. He developed thought-provoking ideas that were beautiful and evocative. He cared that his ideas had some form of elegance or grace or surprise (Coutu, 2006: 84). He offered insights that invited reflection and could be developed further by fellow scholars. His view of evocative ambiguity resonates with the words with which the Swedish film director Ingmar Bergman chose to close his film 'Fanny and Alexander': 'Anything can happen, anything is possible. Time and space do not exist. On a flimsy ground of reality, imagination spins out and waves new patterns.' The kind of evocative ambiguity that permeates the work of great artists and is endorsed by March is also critical to organizations, to innovation processes, and to leadership. Evocative ambiguity is a suggestive statement of a vision, and visions are by definition not precise: they are evocative, in the sense that they invite further interpretations. It is because of evocative ambiguity that visions mobilize the collective imagination and enrich experiences with meanings that were not originally anticipated. From this perspective, evocative leadership is

about the transformation of what is knowable rather than the communication of what is known (March, 1994).

The virtuous leader engages in an ongoing quest for justice, truth, and beauty; however, these qualities are elusive, and often lead to dilemmas. Poise involves reconciling imagination with an awareness of reality, personal aspirations with public responsibilities, and ethics with aesthetics. Perhaps March's most original statement about poise is his assertion that leadership requires competences stemming from plumbing and poetry (Augier, 2004; Coutu, 2006). 'Plumbing' refers to a leader's capacity to deal with operational issues in order to keep the system functioning, while 'poetry' encourages leaders to leverage their emotions, imagination, and identity to explore unconventional paths and inspire others to contemplate and augment the beauty of life. This statement sums up March's view of leadership as the effort to find a creative balance in the face of life's dilemmas.

CONCLUSION

March's work emphasizes the dilemmas that arise from the ambiguities of experience. At the same time, ambiguity somehow provides the scope for leaders' agency. On the one hand, reality is complex and our knowledge of it is limited. Because of bounded rationality, we are not sure whether a particular action will reach our desired goal. On the other hand, reality is in part a human construction, a deliberate accomplishment, and interpretation and storytelling play an important role in this construction (March and Weil, 2005: 83). Effective leadership entails embracing the gaps that stem from the ambiguities of experience and using them as a platform for learning. Echoing Bennis (1989), it is possible to articulate three tests that can guide leaders towards keeping track of imagination, self-knowledge, and poise, and the tensions associated with each of them.

The first is a test of imagination: imagining the world as you would like it to be, experiencing the world as it is, and recognizing the difference between the two.

The second is a test of self-knowledge: knowing what drives you, knowing what others expect from you, and learning from the difference between the two.

The third (which is a combination of the other two) is a test of poise: having appreciated the differences between imagining and experiencing the world, and between what drives you and what others expect of you, are you able and willing to embrace the differences?

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