



A GIFT IN EXILE

Leadership and Creativity in Babette's Feast *A Film Review*

—DANIEL LOFTIN

I am a storyteller. One of my friends said about me that I think all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them, and perhaps this is not entirely untrue. To me, the explanation of life seems to be its melody, its pattern. And I feel in life such an infinite, truly inconceivable fantasy.

—Isak Dinesen

Isak Dinesen considered any work of art as a manifestation of its own unique inner laws (Whissen, 1973, p. 67). If we accept the quotation above as given, it is germane to ask what constitutes a story. A little farther on in the interview quoted above, Dinesen referred to her own life as an unfinished tale. While the statement may have been made lightly, it serves to underscore a powerful dynamic in which artist and creation stand revealed in symbiotic relationship. By exploring Isak Dinesen's relationship with the title character of the short story, "Babette's Feast," understanding of these dynamics may be gained. This, in turn, may enable the arts-based leader to understand the nature of influence that artistic creation exerts. There is also in the story a powerful dynamic of servant-leadership, in which Babette's investment of service to the villagers makes possible her more unique creative gift. The servant and the artist also stand in relationship in "Babette's Feast." In order to examine the relationship between the story and the storyteller, it is necessary to introduce the characters in our tale.



LIFE

The Baroness Karen von Blixen-Finecke (nee Karen Dinesen) was born in 1885 in Rungsted, Denmark, on the island of Zealand, where her family owned an estate (Migel, 1967, p. 8). Her father committed suicide in 1895 after being diagnosed with syphilis (p. 13). At the age of twenty, Dinesen began publishing fictional stories in Danish journals under the assumed name of Osceola (p. 29). Determined to marry into the aristocracy, in 1913 Dinesen became engaged to her second cousin, Bror von Blixen (p. 38), after an unhappy relationship with his brother (p. 210). In 1913 the couple moved to Kenya, starting a coffee plantation there with money borrowed from family (p. 45). In less than a year Karen contracted syphilis from her husband (p. 54). Although medical reports indicate that the disease was cured, she suffered a great deal from the aftereffects of the treatment (p. 73). There is also some doubt as to the success of the treatment, as the gastric ulcers from which she suffered later in life are considered symptoms typical of syphilis. Her mental powers, however, remained acute to the end. In 1925, the couple divorced (p. 75). In 1919, Karen had met Denys Finch-Hatton, who was to become the principal love of her life. The affair was never formalized, and came to a tragic end in 1931, when Finch-Hatton died in the crash of his de Havilland Gypsy Moth biplane (p. 85).

The worldwide depression had driven down coffee prices to the extent that it was no longer feasible to maintain the farm. The land had not proven suitable for coffee growing, being too acidic, and being situated at too high an altitude. A plague of locusts was the last straw. Dinesen sold the farm to a land developer, returning to Rungstedt.

In Denmark again, faced with the need to earn a living, Dinesen turned to writing once more (p. 93). Her first book, *Seven Gothic Tales*, was published in 1934 to great acclaim, followed in 1937 by *Out of Africa*, a memoir of her years in Kenya. She continued to write short stories, writing first in English, translating back into Danish, demonstrating great skill and precision in her use of language (p. 98).

In 1955, she had a portion of her stomach removed due to a gastric ulcer (p. 187). Eating became an ordeal for her, and she died in 1962, apparently from complications due to Anorexia Nervosa (p. 282).

THE FILM

The story line of the film is simplicity itself. A renowned French chef flees to a remote village in Denmark to take shelter with two pious sisters who



oversee their father's little flock of believers. After fourteen years she comes into money and prepares a lavish dinner as a way of thanking her hosts, who took her in as a refugee. The film is largely devoted to exploring the contrast between the villagers and the French chef who lives with them, and also the symbiotic relationship between the sensuality of her gift and the austerity of their piety.

The director, Gabriel Axel, takes a slow pace, giving us the time to know the characters. There is no subplot; all the characters are woven into one tapestry. The film gives the impression of straightforward narrative, although the director relies heavily on flashback techniques to fill in the story. The film is remarkably faithful to the tone and content of Dinesen's original short story.

Babette's Feast won an Academy Award in 1987 for the Best Foreign Language film, but it had a history long before that. The action is simple, but the thought that underlies the action is complex and elegantly presented. These ideas in the film can be traced back to the early 1800s, to Soren Kierkegaard, Denmark's unofficial Philosopher Laureate. Much of Kierkegaard's thought centered on the struggle between duty and sacrifice, as well as the contrast between faith and aestheticism. He was much concerned with themes of transcendence, but also with the need for the "return to the finite" as being important to spiritual growth (McDonald, 2009). In like manner, the movement between sensuality and piety animates much of the film. The cinematography emphasizes this movement, using drab gray tones when depicting the village, and sumptuous warm tones for the feast. Even the music of the film points up this contrast, ranging from austere protestant hymns to lush Brahms waltzes.

SYMBIOSIS

Both Dinesen and her created character, Babette, experienced extreme loss, which became defining events in their lives. Babette suffered the loss of her family, but in addition to that, she lost the social infrastructure that enabled her to exercise her creative gift. She had the bitter experience of serving dinner to a friend of the man who had murdered her family and drove her from the country. Babette was a Commune, a French revolutionary, who made her living serving haute cuisine to the denizens of the empowered elite, a class which owed its existence to injustice.

Dinesen suffered the loss of her husband, and six years later, the loss of the great love of her life in a tragic accident. At the same time, she lost the coffee plantation which had given her the independence she needed to build



her own life. The loss of the plantation rendered her dependent on her family once again, a kind of internal exile, just as Babette became a refugee, dependent on the kindness of strangers. Babette saw her gift to the villagers as an act of completion, a necessary reconnection to the life she had before her great loss. It is possible that Dinesen saw this same connection to her own losses in the creation of her characters of destiny (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 84). Wilkinson relates that Hannah Arendt considered that “storytelling plays a key role in the life of the polis” (Wilkinson 2004, p. 78). While storytelling will bring into focus an individual life, it will also create a public world of shared associations and implicit values. It is by this means that the storyteller, as well as the chef, will exercise creative leadership by “revealing meaning without committing the error of defining it” (Arendt, 1968, p. 105). In the same passage she goes on to state that “it brings about consent to and reconciliation with things as they really are, and that we may trust it to contain eventually, by implication, the last word which we expect from “the day of judgment.” If artistic creation seeks to bring about a state of unity through a process of reconciling previously unrelated elements, then it is possible that Dinesen’s creative work, as well as Babette’s, sought to bring about reintegration of those aspects of her life that were broken and scattered (Adajian, Fall, 2008). In Kierkegaard’s dialectic of esthetic morality, the ethical and the esthetic are simultaneously annulled and preserved (McDonald, 2009). By applying Kierkegaard’s thought to Dinesen’s creative work, the ethical element of his thought corresponds to the circumstances of Dinesen’s life, particularly the broken aspects that served to define her story. In turn, the esthetic element corresponds to the possibilities for creative reintegration which exist as potential.

A danger associated with such creative work lies in overidentification with one’s story to the extent that the creator is not content with describing the possibility, but attempts to enact the possibilities of the story. In Greek mythology, this is known as the sin of Icarus, who flew too close to the sun. Arendt points out the danger of trying to make one’s stories come true, rather than granting them their own existence (Arendt, 1968, p. 103). Dinesen, as a young woman, was determined to marry into the aristocracy. After a disappointing love affair, she married the brother of the man who dumped her. He gave her syphilis, once known as the disease of kings. She lost her health and her marriage, but kept the title of Baroness. Babette lost her marriage as well. While Babette was exiled to a foreign land, Dinesen was exiled from the land where she felt at home.



Babette was an artist in search of her identity. Dinesen seems to suggest that Babette found connection between herself and her past in the act of giving her creative gift, which also enabled her to make a greater contribution to her community. This does not demean the life of simple service that occupied the first fourteen years of her time in the village. The fourteen years she spent in domestic service were needed in order to build the degree of trust that would allow her to bring innovation to the sheltered villagers. However, it was Babette's unique gift, which Dinesen regards also as an act of service, which enabled her to make a change in the status quo of the religious community's life. It may be that Dinesen here is implying that the artist/leader must earn the right to contribute to his or her community. There is a quality of giving inherent to the act of receiving, in that the community is effectively saying, "We are willing to grant you the right to give to us." This is related to the paradox of servant leadership, in which a leader accepts the responsibility to invest supportively in the lives of those he or she influences (Greenleaf, 2004, p. 16). To an artist for whom creation is as necessary as life, it is a gift to be allowed to create. Dinesen herself seemed to have found a way to restore coherence to her life through her gift, storytelling.

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

Robert Greenleaf wrote about leadership based on servant-hood. Greenleaf held that an attitude of service is not incompatible with leadership, but is in fact conducive to effective leadership. He relates that reading the novella *Journey to the East* inspired him to begin formulating his understanding of servant-leadership (2004, p.1). In this novella, which is in fact a preliminary study for Hesse's last great novel, *Magister Ludi*, the narrator, along with a group of men, embarks on a mythical journey, aided by a servant, Leo. Leo attends to all their menial needs, but also provides spiritual sustenance and uplifting music. When Leo departs, the quest dissolves in disarray. Years later, the narrator arrives at the mythical destination the group had sought, only to discover that Leo was the head of the mystical order based there. Leo, had in fact, been assessing the group's readiness. Finding them lacking, he had aborted the mission. Greenleaf goes on to say that Leo had great leadership skills precisely because he was first a servant, secondly a leader. Servant-hood was Leo's nature, while leadership was his vocation. Greenleaf further states:



A new moral principle is emerging, which holds that the only authority deserving one's allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to, and in proportion to, the clearly evident servant stature of the leader. (Greenleaf, 2004, p. 3)

Babette, in serving the villagers a repast that was beyond their powers to understand or appreciate, was also performing an action that allowed her to reintegrate with her past, a connection that had been broken. Yet in so doing, she was able to open a door for the villagers into a larger realm of experience, which enabled many to reintegrate broken shards of their past. As has been stated before, it was Babette's fourteen years of simple domestic service that provided a framework of trust, which enabled the villagers to receive her creative gift.

ARTS-BASED LEADERSHIP

Michael Jones, a pianist and scholar of leadership, states that the emerging integration for leadership not only enables the creation of new perspectives for strategy and action, but offers "language to make apparent the invisible structures of wholeness that lie in the spaces between our thoughts and concepts" (Jones, 2006, p. xi). Creating a new extension of metaphor, Jones calls this space "the domain of the commons."

Considered in this light then, the creative task that confronts the leader is the emergent creation of language by which individuals may relate their experience in an emergent world to one another.

David Bohm describes a way of knowing which he characterizes as a "subtle intelligence" that seeks the wholeness which is behind presenting phenomena (Bohm, 1991, p. 13). This way of knowing is delicate, refined, and undefinable, holding in awareness things that may slip by the foreground of the mind. It is this mental state which Bohm identifies as the origin of the imagination. Bohm goes farther to specify that dialog utilizes this way of seeing and perceiving as a way of facilitating the emergence of meaning. Michael Jones, a musician, utilizes a musical metaphor to illustrate the same thought, writing, "So much of a leader's work today is not about playing the notes but listening for what's emerging in the space in between (Jones, 2006, p. 4). Jones also speaks of the conductor's ability to hear the music of the orchestra as a whole, rather than the individual parts, as being illustrative of Bohm's point.



Jones sees two predominant leadership paradigms operative in Western society today (2006, p. 5). One paradigm is predominantly instrumental and task-oriented. The other paradigm of leadership is emergent in nature, having to do first with ways of being with one another, and only secondly concerned with how individuals may act together (2006, p. 21). Creative imagination communicates first in a nonverbal manner, in that meaning is experienced first as sensation, only later emerging into language (2006, p.11).

As the creative process is primarily concerned with emergence in all its various forms, the same may be said of arts-based leadership. Writing in the context of musical improvisation, Jones states that being alive and responsive to the situation at hand allows the participant to invent and reinvent in the ongoing creative act that is life. Life emerges and reemerges, and the participant may creatively respond by allowing meaning to evolve responsively to life's changing patterns (Jones, 2006, p. 113). Participation in situations of social emergence has the benefit of raising issues of relationship to the foreground (Jones, 2006, p. 114). As symbolic meaning undergoes transformation in the process of creative emergence, nonverbal, sensory-based communication becomes primary. To Jones, this sensory communication relies less on emotional connection than upon mutual focus upon the phenomena at hand. A state of mind arises in which foreground and background are simultaneously help in awareness. Participants will focus primary attention to the emergent phenomenon at hand, but in the background will be the myriad nonverbal personal cues by which participants may respond to one another.

Efficiency in business often means that the dissimilar and unfamiliar are often held at a distance, but according to Jones, in the world of organizational activity, it is at the intersection of our differences where we are stretched into the unfamiliar, and creative emergence occurs socially (Jones, 2006, p. 115). The desire for control and efficiency, which is at the heart of modern business enterprise, influences participants to regard chaos and disorder as undesirable. Yet it is precisely this descent into chaos and the unknown that is necessary for creative emergence to occur (Jones, 2006, p. 116). Creative leadership does not bring answers, but interacts with others in such a way that emergence of meaning is enabled in others (Jones, 2006, p. 121).

Jones speaks of the use of language in arts-based leadership as transformative, rather than informative, in nature. In this manner, language becomes a means of facilitating the emergence of meaning in such a way that relationship is strengthened, rather than objectified. It may be said that meaning



is not inherent in language, but rather emergent through a complex process of gesture and response.

Jones cites a study performed by Eugene Gendlin at the University of Chicago. This study was performed in order to determine why counseling was successful for some and not for others. Jones relates that the individuals who experienced positive outcomes in their therapy were able to locate their emotions in their bodies, and speak from their physically perceived emotions (Jones, 2006, p. 148). Jones goes on to say that speaking out of one's immediate experience renders that individual available to him or her/self. Jones calls this finding one's "first word." He further relates that this quality exemplifies gifted speakers, who are able to relate to others experientially rather than through the transfer of information.

It is not that words are unimportant, but that the experience of the moment is the matrix out of which our words are born (Jones, 2006, p. 149). By this means, every individual becomes the storyteller of their own life (Jones, 2006, p. 143). It is the life experience that is conveyed through one's words that has the power to transform. Jones' use of the word *transform* here is instructive, in that the word itself carries the etymological connotation of bringing formation to one as a result of the process of moving across boundaries. To extend the image, the boundaries in question may be considered the "space in between," across which individuals in dialog negotiate shared meaning, as mentioned above.

Creative leadership has to do with people doing something that they hadn't done before. In this context then, all leadership is creative. Arts-based leadership is an indirect form of leadership, by which people can come to a new realization or a new conceptualization through the experience of an artistic work.

In his discussion of the philosophical base of leadership, Christopher Hodgkinson utilizes the language of mythology to identify archetypes of leadership, one of which is the Poet, of which Babette is an exemplar (Hodgkinson, 1983, p. 206).

Arts-based leadership leads by communicating transrational communicational content. This leader embodies, whether consciously or not, the archetype of the Poet (Hodgkinson, 1983, p. 178). Hodgkinson, speaking of the Poet, identifies this transrational voice as the voice of the Will, in a clear reference to Nietzsche's aesthetically based morality. Hodgkinson further identifies the archetypal voice of the will with the human desire for freedom, a desire that does not oppose rationality, but subsumes and transcends it.



Directive, or organizational, leadership often is oriented toward a communal goal, toward the fulfillment of which the leader must influence others to carry out requests and perform actions in support of that goal (Yukl, 2002, p. 141). In contrast, leadership that is based in creativity only seeks permission to create.

Babette's creative act had a destabilizing, and therefore subversive effect on the status quo of the little Danish community to which life had banished her. They were right to be concerned about the effect that her offered feast might have. Aesthetically based morality is motivated by desire, as opposed to the rationality of duty-based morality (Gordon, 1986, p. 101). Based on Babette's remarks about the nature of art, it may be surmised that she was aware that the exercise of her own creative skill would have an impact on her community. Poetry operates by the tension between overt foreground and covert background, in which two seemingly disparate themes unite in an unsuspected manner. In like manner to this, Babette, as a poet, and therefore subversive, was exercising leadership in a subversive manner, stimulating her diners to an awareness of the possibilities of life, which had been stifled in them.

The artist knows that rules are merely observations, and as such, relative to truth. Dinesen even believed divine masquerade to be higher than truth. In "The Deluge at Norderney," Miss Malin Nat-og-Dag upbraids a valet who is posing as a cardinal, "Where in all the world do you get the idea that the Lord wants the truth from us? It is a strange, a most original idea of yours, My Lord. Why, he knows it already, and may even have found it a little bit dull. Truth is for tailors and shoemakers, My Lord. I, on the contrary, have always held that the Lord has a penchant for masquerades." Dinesen seems to be saying that the Lord wants us to cooperate with him in the masquerade in which each of us plays a role, as opposed to a merely accurate description of events.

CONCLUSION

Isak Dinesen viewed life as a kind of narrative in which each individual is an author spinning his or her tale. The tale is ultimately about the life and character of the tale teller. Even those tragic events in her life, such as syphilis, brought about by her own hubris, became a part of the tale, contributing to its artistic fullness (Arendt, 1968. p. 103).



Dinesen seemed to feel that her tale telling was a work of service to her readers, just as Babette felt that her culinary brilliance was service. Interestingly, both felt that it fulfilled a personal need to themselves as well as the community. As the quote that heads this article indicates, the act of tale telling enables one to integrate the sorrows of life, as well as the joys. Babette, for her part, more simply states that she creates for herself, to fulfill an elemental imperative which she cannot deny.

In *Babette's Feast* we also see a complex dynamic in which simple service may grant opportunity for creative service, by building trust and good will in a context of relationship (Greenleaf, 2004, p. 16). Servant-leadership recognizes that influence requires investment in lives. Babette invested fourteen years of hard domestic labor into the lives of the villagers who gave her shelter, gaining their trust and respect, before she was allowed to bring them a new experience which brought about permanent changes in their lives. Babette invested of herself both in domestic service and in her culinary gift, spending her own money to fulfill her creative need by creating an experience for others.

Early in the film, the canon prays, quoting from the Psalm, "Mercy and Truth, dear brethren, have met together, righteousness and bliss have kissed one another." A lovelorn young army officer hears these words and abandons all hope of winning his young love. Many years later, having become a general, he stands at Babette's Feast and offers a toast. I quote it in full, because it seems to me that this is the closest the Dinesen comes to an explicit statement of her philosophy.

Man, in his weakness and shortsightedness believes he must make choices in this life.

He trembles at the risks he takes. We do know fear. But no: our choice is of no importance.

There comes a time when our eyes are opened and we come to realize that mercy is infinite.

We need only await it with confidence and receive it with gratitude; Mercy imposes no conditions.

And lo! Everything we have chosen has been granted to us, and everything we rejected has also been granted. Yes, we even get back what we rejected. For mercy and truth have met together, and righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another.



The General, who might be considered one of the less spiritual of the diners, somehow gets to the point quicker than any of the others present. It struck me that the General's words have deep significance for leaders. While I can't agree with the General's words that our choices are of no importance, I acknowledge as well that there are larger issues than our attempts to shape events. If we are open to life and wait with confidence, mercy is infinite. Babette receives back her gift of giving joy through her food; the general rekindles relationship with his long lost love, old friends become reconciled. Those who are open to life receive from life, because of one individual's act of giving. The question of whether we serve or whether we create pales into insignificance beside the question of whether or not we love.

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Daniel Loftin holds a bachelors and masters degree in music, and is a doctoral candidate in leadership studies at Gonzaga University. He has served in pastoral and music ministry for over twenty years, as well as performing classical music as a pianist, organist, and lyric baritone. His current research interests include leadership, Nietzsche and postmodern philosophy, the American Pragmatic philosophers, neurolinguistics, and ministry development and retention. His favorite sports are chess and horseshoes, and he loves cats.

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