A Material Dean

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Preface to the Reader

This article is about materiality and leadership, presented primarily in the form of a creative narrative. The first two sections are written from the perspective of a new business school dean as she goes about her role, including her own visceral and embodied reaction to those she encounters and her environment. As a narrative, the article departs from the norms of academic articles (exceptions include for example, Jermier, 1985; Steyaert and Hjorth, 2002; Watson, 2000). Given the focus of this Special Issue, I sought a way of writing about leadership that captured its materiality, in both its grand and mundane dimensions. Trialling this more creative approach, I was amazed at how much materiality unfolded, how much about bodies, bodily hungers and responses, was lurking there just under the surface, waiting to be expressed if given the discursive means. It seemed to provide a modest example of Judith Butler’s (1993) argument that bodies are only allowable via language and discursive norms. By experimenting with these norms, I found more materiality appeared!

I invite you to read the narrative differently, registering your own bodily experiences: perhaps a chortle of amusement, a pang of recognition or bristle of irritation, a pleasurable moment. Our customary ways of writing about materiality and bodies in leadership often ensures we keep our responses to things disembodied and abstracted. I wanted to see if some different, perhaps more embodied ways of knowing appeared – for you and me – if the conventions were set aside. Mostly though, I don’t want to be prescriptive about how this article ‘should’ be experienced.

The Dean is not me, though of course in the selection of experiences she has clearly drawn on her author. Her colleagues and institution are fictional and any resemblance to real people and places is accidental. Having said that, I hope there may be resonances for you, especially material ones, in the people, places and experiences presented here.

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Accounting and Business (FAB) to the Nirvana Institute of Leadership (NIL). The tag line: ‘Your path to enlightened business practice’. How could the Board have approved the move from FAB to NIL?

Beneath the monitors were banners of larger-than-life-size students. At least one of the women pictured had a strange look of moral superiority tinged with sexual tension – a Madam Lash look the new Dean doubted was intended. I wonder what happened to her? Perhaps she was never one of our students but a model, selected by the consultants to project the requisite what? Diversity + drive but still demure? She thought nostalgically about the days when FAB’s advertising consisted of a photograph of a class of bored blokes – at least they were real students.

‘Welcome to our new Dean’ blinked out the monitor followed by that photograph again. She doubted she still looked much like that. The photographer’s instruction was ‘look like you’re having fun’. Momentarily it seemed possible, back in an earlier decade. She wondered how long she could get away with using that particular photo.

The lift was stuck. That meant hiking up four flights of stairs. She’d worn heels today because of the dinner tonight. She didn’t want the donors to have the benefit of peering down at her. And she thought she could get away with them because she wasn’t required to walk far today – so much for that.

Staggering to the top floor, home of her new office, mumbling came from the conference room adjacent. She had a sudden urge to flee. It was the Curriculum Committee. The unrelenting jocularity of the Director of Marketing rang out. She mentally tallied numbers, allegiances. There was probably no need for this meeting. It was a done deal.

The new curriculum was designed to ensure students actually attended FAB, now re-branded NIL. For the last few years, fewer and fewer of them turned up to lectures. Even among those who did, several routinely just put their heads down and slept – perhaps they were working all night to fund themselves through NIL’s increasingly pricey programs. At exam time there were people there who you’d never met in a term’s lectures. Even exams were likely now to be ‘take home’, submissible on line. The technology-friendly environment that the IT manager had sweated blood and tears to implement meant many could go for terms at a time without actually sitting in a room with their lecturer or their peers.

She wondered whether paths to perpetually enlightened business practices could be lone paths – delivered without any bodily proximity at all. That felt attractive as images of some students and colleagues came fleetingly to mind.

Bracing herself, she opened the door of the conference room.

The Director of Curriculum was keyed-up, confidently adjusting the computerised room controls. He couldn’t wait to get to his deck of cleverly crafted and undeniably persuasive PowerPoint. He’d done his research. No stellar academic himself, this role offered a life-line to an otherwise undistinguished career and a long sought opportunity to push around reluctant colleagues.

The new curriculum would require students to physically attend and interact with each other. They would work together, play together, have fun together, sleep together. Did she hear that right? Yes, part of the plan was ‘chill-out’ times in purpose-built ‘pods’.

Where would they find budget for that? Would students get allocated individual pods? If so would they need rules about personalising pods (no personal photos or sleazy magazines?) Or would they have to share?... She snapped herself back to the meeting. ‘There is a Japanese company’, the Director of Curriculum was enthusing, ‘who specialises in pod
layering and maintenance, though their designs might need amending to suit the bigger bodies of our students’. The PowerPoint continued implacably. Resistance, even questions, were useless in the face of such enthusiasm…

The Curriculum Committee petered out. She returned to her office and, on opening the door, was again shocked at its gleaming self-importance. Her predecessor had seen this job as his swan song and insisted on a vast mahogany desk, below which he seemed to disappear. She must replace those slippery buttoned-leather sofas in ‘ox-blood’ tones.

Her assistant tapped at her door: ‘Academic Board in 10 minutes’. Grabbing her iPad and hoping that there was an obvious link on her desktop to the 600 pages of (mostly unread) background papers, she walked over to the main university buildings. It was a glorious spring day and the leaves were iridescent with new green. Life was good. This was a beautiful environment and she was lucky to work here, she reminded herself. There were a few large groups of international students, kidding about, giggling and falling into one another. Many of the young women were dressed in shorts, would you believe. How could they be taken seriously as university graduate students when they seemed so keen to look like six year olds? She stopped herself… A sure sign of becoming a bitter old blue stocking.

With traces of her more relaxed and laissez faire mood still intact, she slid into the pew-like benches of the University council chambers. Academic Board had been kicked off with a report by the Chair of LIMPET (Learning and Improving Education Taskforce). He adjusted his trousers as if they were inadequate to the task of containment. ‘Engineering has to be made to shape up. They can’t continue to get a normalised mean of below one on their quality of teaching scores’. The Dean of Engineering was not present and had not been seen, at Academic Board or elsewhere, for years.

It was a long afternoon, stretching interminably towards the annual donor dinner, which always seemed like a good idea at the planning stage.

Drinks started at 6 pm. She accepted a water first, knowing that she needed to pace herself. After the welcome she could relax, perhaps have a glass of something nice. The entrees were placed before them. It wasn’t clear what they were but there was an interesting Cajun-style topping that drowned everything else out with its charred barbeque flavour.

A slight fishy smell filled the air as main courses were placed before them. She was ravenous by now but there was definitely a stronger smell than there should have been. She wolfed down the vegetables and tentatively teased morsels off the edge of the fish hoping that the bad bits would be localised. The headline in tomorrow’s Financial Review morphed before her: ‘The Last Supper: Guests Poisoned at Nirvana Dinner’.

The guest speaker, Saul Yalom, was introduced and launched off in a thinly disguised advertisement for his company and its record of philanthropy. More PowerPoint, humorously assembled, yet all ‘on message’. Her stomach felt queasy and in spite of this fact, she gulped at her glass of wine. She shouldn’t have. At the conclusion, restrained sporadic applause except from Professor Drake who, having arranged this guest speaker, clapped ecstatically. She excused herself to go to the bathroom and felt perilously close to throwing up. She wondered whether these caterers had been vetted by the Events team for their history of food poisoning. Would NIL’s insurance policy cover this?

Back at the top table, the chat now seemed more relaxed and pleasantries exchanged. What was that first course? ‘Belly pork’ triumphantly exclaimed one guest who was known for his culinary sophistication. The guest speaker, also a leader of the local Orthodox community, went pale as the head table digested this piece of news.
It was a long way back to the car. The venue for the dinner was one of those newish, cavern-like but supposedly trendy warehouses along the harbour. In spite of its isolation, there was no parking nearby. The wind whipped around her and she had no overcoat. Would the queasiness develop? Longing for her electric blanket, she fervently hoped that someone at home had done the dishes.

The cat slid around her legs as she opened the front door. He was hopeful of another supper but prepared to just be companionable at this late hour. Blissful quiet. What did the Buddhists call it? ‘Noble silence’. She turned to the notes she had been making for her inaugural lecture.

Vice Chancellor, colleagues, friends of NIL, etc. . . . thank you very much for attending this, my Inaugural Lecture as Dean of NIL. It is very good to see you here – and I really mean that – indeed this lecture is about the importance of being here, physically and bodily as well as in other ways, for each other.

Bodies matter. They matter in education and that area ‘close to my heart’ – notice that example of one of many bodily metaphors we use – of leadership. They matter in complex and contradictory ways and tonight I’d like to draw some of these to our attention and suggest some avenues for experimentation.

The physical production and projection of leadership has always been important though overlooked by most contemporary researchers. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and across cultures, sumptuary laws governed the sumptuousness with which leaders and people of other classes, were required and allowed to dress. Ruffs, hose, types of hat and the length of swords were used to maintain hierarchies and send unequivocal signals about who was in charge.

Yet in contemporary leadership we find a contradiction. The discipline – its scholars, practitioners, observers and commentators – largely act as if bodies and physicality are unimportant to leadership. Alongside this are intricate, well-developed codes of physical performance in leadership: of how leaders should look and how they should physically disport themselves (see for example, Kenny and Bell’s analysis of self-help books for women managers, 2011). These codes are gendered, usually tacit but powerfully enforced in contemporary societies preoccupied with image and ‘erotic capital’ (Hakim, 2010).

The contradiction between the theory of leadership – which says bodies don’t matter – and the materially lived world of leadership, serves several purposes. It helps support the idea that leaders are not subject to their bodies and physical frailty. It promotes the desired illusion of invincibility and further, immortality. We don’t want to allow revered leaders to die, as we’ve seen in the reaction to Steve Jobs’ passing. Similarly, ascendant leaders are often photographed in ways that obscure bodies, with heads the focus. As Nancy Harding and others have observed, this does not mean bodies don’t matter but rather the opposite. The clean-shaven, suited executive demonstrates ‘at once both rigid control and signs of sexuality which always threaten to break through’ (2002: 67). In leaders who are ‘on the nose’ – another notable metaphor - we start to see and read speculation on their physical flaws (Sinclair, 2011). The leadership body is tacitly but centrally recruited to the production of a certain kind of leadership performance.

As research shows, the process of making some bodies visible and others obscured is gendered. Women leaders are more likely to be photographed with more of their bodies showing and are more likely to have public debate focused on their physical features. Australia’s own current prime minister, Julia Gillard, has experienced this with her hair, her childlessness, her outfits, her voice. In a TV comedy series which purported to give us an insight into home life at
The Lodge (the Prime Minister’s residence), it was the state of her hair which told us the state of her mind (her partner is a hairdresser).

The seemingly inevitable processes by which women leaders are judged by their bodies, and men by their minds, is the subject of long and important debate among feminists. But it leaves those of us with an interest in promoting women in leadership with a dilemma. If we argue against the double standard by insisting that assessments of bodies and physicality have no place, then we are perpetuating that paradigm of leadership that discounts anything below the neck. Another way forward is to put the body and physicality back into leadership. But to do so brings its own risks, particularly for women.

From my own experience, our physical selves and our material experience of leadership is crucial. The body and its senses tell us things that we should not ignore. It tells us things about ourselves, about others, about the situations in front of us and around us that require our attention. The body provides ways of knowing that are often censored by a rationalising cognitive mind (Casey, 2000).

Another way the body is crucial is to help us grasp our common humanness. Coming to grips with mortality is one of life’s great tasks but our tendency is to put it off. It is often not until the body cuts in with some un-ignorable evidence of its decline, that we see the possibilities of living differently, that we see the value of appreciating what is here, now.

The capacity to feel empathy and love, to exercise nurturance and care are connected to the body and our own physically-held experiences and memories. In leadership, if we are shut off from our own body, we are more likely to treat people instrumentally, as means to ends and this is exacerbated when we are shut off from other bodies too. At such a point it is likely we are not exercising leadership at all.

Particularly in the academy, we have paid a lot of attention to the ‘life of the mind’. There have been great advances that have come from encouraging and enabling people to think differently and more innovatively. But I would like us all, just for the duration of this lecture, to imagine the institution that we would create if we deeply cared for our own and others physical wellbeing. Even further, I want to suggest that a primary task of leadership is to pay attention to and work towards the flourishing of others, and I don’t mean only cognitively. I mean the flourishing of our physical selves.

What might this look like? It would include paying attention to the feelings and insights that come from our bodies. It would include structuring our days to ensure people did not over-work and were encouraged to harness their energies to what gave them pleasure. In this institution, there would be discussions about what was really happening in people’s lives, of what they were dealing with when elderly and not so elderly family members got sick or died. These discussions would be a prompt to ensure that we don’t waste time on things that don’t matter.

In a book devoted to understanding representations of mothers in organisations (Höpf and Kostera, 2003), its contributors note that mothers and motherhood, often symbolised by women in the workplace, get a bad rap. They are often irretrievably and at some unconscious or more archetypal, collective level, seen as ‘maiden, mother, mistress, monster’ (Telford, 2003). Interspersed throughout the book are photos of the contributors and their relatives: mothers, grandmothers, aunties and children. On the frontispiece – novel for a book about organisations – is a photo of a suckling baby lying alongside its mother’s naked body. The photos are powerful in reminding us that the insights that each of the contributors volunteer in their chapters are there at least partially because of mothers. The book reminds us that we all were, and are still, babies and that the babies within us need to be nurtured by us all – not just mothers.
In this different kind of institution there would be attention to the aesthetic and pleasurable dimensions of teaching. There would be spontaneity and creativity, humour, even hilarity and enjoyment in classrooms; a sense of aesthetic or sensuous pleasure in the process of teaching itself, in voice, in bodies and in impact. There might be shock and thrill, subversion and transgression of institutional or customary norms. Teachers and students might look forward to classes! They might feel a mixture of bodily-mediated emotions – exhilaration, pain, regret – which we might understand as pivotal to various kinds of learning. In her book, Pedagogical Pleasures, Erica McWilliam writes ‘being happy or satisfied as teachers and learners is an important part of pedagogy as a moral and technical endeavour’ (1999: 16). How remarkable to imagine what would happen if we substituted pleasure – our own and our students – as an important value in pedagogy.

In conclusion and turning my focus back to leadership, I would like to argue for and intend to work towards implementing a new focus on enjoyment and pleasure in leadership education. How can we make NIL a place where students, alumni and staff explore and experience the sensuous and aesthetic dimensions of leadership? By tuning into our bodies and our sensory experiences as sources of knowledge, insight and engagement, we can foster leadership that is potentially ‘magically creative, inspirational and life-full’ (Hansen et al., 2007: 545). Among my early thoughts are to include offerings in our curriculum on the arts and opportunities for students to experiment as entrepreneurs in creative fields. It is my plan to devise, with your help of course, a new performance appraisal process which values the creation of enjoyment and fulfilment for students and our other stakeholders. With your support, I would like to throw out the Financial Times list of ranked journals and come up with an alternative set of publication outlets that people actually read and enjoy reading. I hope we can also pursue many of the reforms I have outlined above such as irresistible but healthy puddings in the café.

There is a common misconception about enlightenment, which is that enlightenment will come from transcending our material selves, that it’s a flight to the mind. Another view is that enlightenment comes from being truly alive with all our senses to what is here, now. Perhaps our bodies, our physical selves and our experiences of materiality are allies in that project...

She paused, unable to envisage how to conclude compellingly. Undoubtedly at this stage of the speech, some of the Board members in the audience would be regretting their decision to appoint her. A feeling of vulnerability rose from her belly to her chest. It was a feeling she had become used to, but hardly easier. Alternatively, perhaps it was the fish.

Epilogue

Language and ways of writing pre-configure what is knowable. In the narrative above, I have experimented with two connected but different ways of writing to evoke, and argue for, the materiality of leadership: a fictional account of the new dean’s day and draft notes for her inaugural speech. In the speech, the Dean seeks to tailor her message to the constraints of that medium and that audience, while still seeking to embody and argue for recognition of the embodied and material dimensions of leadership.

Organisational researchers have both argued for, and experimented with the value of fiction and narratives in comprehending organisational phenomena. For example, Phillips (1995) and Rhodes and Brown (2005) suggest that fictional genres prompt us to remember how texts are always ‘written’. They encourage us to ask who the author is and what they are doing with their writing, issues which conventional academic discourses often elide.
Furthermore, other researchers have employed narrative means – short stories, performance scripts, poems, imagined conversations – to enable us, as readers, to experience organisational, aesthetic and political processes that are obscured by, or intolerable in, other forms of academic discourse (Ford and Harding, 2003; Jermier, 1985; Steyaert and Hjorth, 2002; Watson, 2000; Grey and Sinclair 2006). For example, exploring the impacts of mergers and retrenchments on managers, Ford and Harding note ‘we found that using the usual rubrics of academic writing suppressed the sheer emotionality of their responses’ (2003: 1131). Kostera’s (1997: 345) collection of management student poems captures the ‘ambivalence and volatility of the managerial experience’, revealing poignantly the creativity of those same students that is then unallowable in most managerial jobs.

These authors point to the probability that there are aspects of leadership too, which are inaccessible to us via the usual language, and modes of comprehension and communication. Materiality and embodiment in leadership is a case in point. Doing the work of leadership is at least partially an aesthetic, physical activity (Ropo and Parviainen, 1999; Hansen et al., 2007; Ladkin, 2008; Ladkin and Taylor, 2010; Ropo and Sauer, 2008; Wukko, 2011). Leadership includes responding to and looking after others’ embodied selves, noticing and being reflexive about one’s own embodied responses while performing to disembodied, often gendered norms. These norms ensure only some bodies are materialised, made visible and available for evaluation (Acker, 1990; Harding, 2002; Hassard et al., 2000; Trethewey, 1999). While I have also been exploring these ideas in my academic writing for some years (Sinclair, 2005, 2011), I have often felt frustration with the results. Important aspects of our sensory and aesthetic leadership encounters in the material world seem to vanish under the weight of language, codes and habits of sense-making.

As well as unveiling often censored organisational phenomena, drawing on fiction has the potential to elicit palpably different kinds of engagement from the reader (Knights and Willmott, 1999). While I can’t – and don’t want to – determine your reaction to this piece, I am interested in how hybrid modes of writing may invite a more material and perhaps even pleasurable reading experience. I am grateful that both the editors and referees for this article encouraged my experimentation with conveying, in this different way, important but usually obscured aspects of leadership.

Note

References


**Author biography**

**Amanda Sinclair** is an author, researcher, teacher and consultant in the areas of leadership, change, gender and diversity. Currently, a Professorial Fellow at Melbourne Business School, her books include: *Leadership for the Disillusioned* (2007) and *Doing Leadership Differently: Gender, Power and Sexuality in a Changing Business Culture* (1998). As a yoga teacher, Amanda seeks to explore the embodied dimensions of leadership and engage with the whole person in her teaching and writing.