

# We Don't Need Another Hero

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**By Richard Fay, Australia Weaver**

There's a growing obsession with superheroes. Every second movie has one (or many). They have become a bit more nuanced since 9/11—for example, Iron Man's PTSD—but they are still "different." Beyond. Other. And therein lies the problem. Leaders are meant to be above the grime and, in faith circles, where purity codes are social currency, this is expressed as moral supremacy, within a limited set of externally judged criteria.

The concept of leadership disqualifies so many for not being a finished work. This distortion is, I believe, a relic of conservative faith, where the need to be "good enough" is linked to positional authority. This is akin to a belief held by the Pharisees two thousand years ago that, if all Israel could manage not to break any of the 613 "statutes" for 24 hours, the Messiah would come. These days, the language is "not giving the devil a foothold" or "living an overcoming life" or, worse, "the responsibilities of a leader." I hear "not many desire to be leaders" as coming with an implied denial of my humanity.

Aspirational models of community require a figurehead who inspires others to be like him. He sets the standard by which others measure themselves: Pulling us all up by our bootstraps. Because the followers cannot attain to his (it's almost always a male) excellence, they keep coming back for more magic methods of living victoriously. Notice how much of the language is couched in terms of warfare, as if there is an ongoing battle raging within us that we have to win, white-knuckled all the way. Of course, this in turn rewards the leader with approval for his public display of peerless conduct. I get influence, power, control, validation, by appearing to be "the man."

In any social context, the leader is the focal point. He must perform, always. He must have the answers. He must be certain, confident. I recently went to a men's event where the invitation was for men to become "lion killers"—a metaphor from a passage in 2 Samuel where a warrior named Benaiah went down into a pit on a snowy day and killed a lion. David also killed lions and bears. Not surprisingly, lions and bears are now extinct in that region, and most others. Leaders are good at doing amazing things and slaying enemies. I wanted to make peace with the lion, but I'm a bit idealistic, I acknowledge. Domination over all threats is clearly a key quality of a leader. We were told at this event to have no backup plan: "That's cowardice." Where can I buy these granite-man bits?

Having said that, young men do need to have stamina, determination, confidence, challenge, duty, sacrifice. They need to sweat over their failures so they do their darndest to build a strong container. Our culture has not much use for the man who bleeds his insecurity all over the place. But if you are the other side of thirty, this girding up of loins, although still necessary, is hardly helpful to understanding life.

I once watched a well-known Christian leadership “expert” say how good leaders must surround themselves with the elite, to move with those who will challenge them to go further, harder, longer, stronger; to not waste time with the stragglers, the battlers, as these will limit their potential. I’ve got books on my shelf from those days of leadership with titles that have the keywords: power, influence, achievement, successful, great, win, giants....

Then, eight years ago, I picked up a book by a man I’d hardly ever heard about, and on the first page I read:

How do you sell emptiness, vulnerability, and nonsuccess?  
How do you talk descent when everything is about ascent?  
How can you possibly market letting-go in a capitalist culture?  
... This is not going to work  
(admitting this might be my first step).

—Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs*

I was captivated. For the first time in my life, I heard something countercultural about social engagement. I was told it was ok to be me. That who I am, what I struggle with, where I fail, all the energy locked up in my humiliation, could find a use.

At first, this was my inner secret. I started to explore it as a possibility. It was terrifying—it was too permissive. I would be licentious, reckless. I would be hated, reviled. Worse, I would be shamed. But perhaps I would simply be free. But could I still have a role in this freedom?

Soon after, I took this newfound discovery to other men and told them they could do the same. Not surprisingly, I was met with resistance. I could not see the irony. I, still playing the expert, was telling them, the followers, they could be free of the system. It had not occurred to me that the resistance was a symptom of the disconnect in me. I could not allow; I had to prove. I had to win.

Which takes me to a word that is very different from “leadership.” To “facilitate” means to make it easy for everyone. It means to remove

obstructions for others, to allow a flow of energy, life, and experience between various people. In my community of men, we call this “showing up and getting out of the way.” But that’s scary. If I’m not in the way, who is in control?

A model of gathering, which has taken me by surprise and to which I expect I will give the rest of my life, exploring and understanding, is called the Way of Council. It is ancient and it is sophisticated, well beyond anything I have seen or experienced. In Council, the center of the circle holds the energy. How? I really don’t know. But I know it does, much better than I could, and this releases me from being the authority. There is no right or approved man; there is only each of us, as we are.

I was recently invited to facilitate a group of men I had never met, to help them see the process in action. At first, I thought that I was invited as “the expert” to “lead them in models of authentic masculine community.” Well, that’s the script that played in my head—and I know what that requires. It’s lonely, isolating. It requires me to have my act together. It’s hard work. But this is the burden of being a leader. Ah, but I knew this group of men had known this prevalent model and, remarkably, they had tenaciously stayed together despite having the limited power of a leader to direct them, and, once this was no longer in place, they found the courage to plunge headlong into the uncharted waters of Council. So I trusted the circle, the process, and chose to simply facilitate, to show up and get out of the way.

The result was remarkable. Astonishing. My head spins with what happened and the implications of it. A space was opened (I can hardly say I opened it, because that was effortless) where each man engaged with their lives, and that engaged every other man with them. Authority was like a treasure buried in a bunch of fields. We allowed the circle to be a container for honesty, where weakness and struggle sat alongside joy and fulfillment.

Author Les Murray (in *The Quality of Sprawl*), observing what colonialists discovered when they came to Australia, wrote:

The continent to which the rejects of Great Britain were sent turned out to be one in which the native people were egalitarian in their way of life beyond the imagination of privilege and even of earlier liberalism; it must have been of some effect, even if only a barely noticeable one, on the colonists that the new land offered no ancient indigenous models of hierarchy at all.

Over 230 years later, we are starting to wake up to our ignorance and join in the dance of liberation.

It is our struggle and vulnerability that imbues us with great authority— within the context of Council. I keep saying to men who feel reluctant and ill-equipped to facilitate, “You are not being invited to lead. You are being invited to model, making it easy for others to be who they actually are, not who they ‘should’ be.”

I don't wanna be your hero  
I don't wanna be a big man  
Just wanna fight like everyone else  
Your masquerade  
I don't wanna be a part of your parade  
Everyone deserves a chance to  
Walk with everyone else  
—“Hero,” Family of the Year

If we don't have to be a part of anyone else's parade, if we can actually be who we are, not who we “should” be, if we can participate in life as it is, with others who are doing the same, what freedom is possible? What healing of shame and isolation might we find?

I say to men who engage in our work that it is their failure that qualifies them, but they struggle to believe it. Council makes this apparent. It's not a shiny, shrink-wrapped program of excellence; it won't make you wealthy or successful in any traditional way; but it will reward you beyond measure, simply because you will be known for who you actually are, today, and celebrated for the unfinished nature of it all.

As I drove away from the experience of facilitation, I shook my head. Why, in the last decade of my active working life, am I finding this a restful, joyous place of fecund potential, known and knowing, as effortless as falling off a log? It matters not why it has taken me this long. It matters only that I have discovered that I am not that important, that it's not about me, that I'm not in control, and that this is freedom.