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TAKING THE “MY” OUT OF “MY PROMISE”

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Kari L. Granger
Fellow, Center for Character & Leadership Development
United States Air Force Academy
kgranger02@gmail.com

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TAKING THE “MY” OUT OF “MY PROMISE”¹

Kari L. Granger

ABSTRACT

The propensity of principal ownership for a leader’s vision can serve as a limit to the successful realization of that vision. While early on it may be effective to relate to one’s vision as “my vision” or “my promise for the world”, such languaging can constrain how a vision occurs for a leader and those being led to a possessive relationship with the consequent correlated ways of being and acting paralleling such a relationship. Taking the required actions for making good on one’s promise for the world requires disentangling “my” from “my promise”.

This paper explores these concepts through a discussion of the author’s personal experience in being part of a greater project to develop a course that would actually create leaders and providing that course to cadets and faculty at the US Air Force Academy. The author shares her personal challenges in transferring the course for others to teach.

INTRODUCTION

What does it take to actually fulfill new realities? To realize a new existence? What does it take to *really* develop the full potentiality of a new state of things as they actually exist?² To go beyond mere thinking or fantasizing about a new existence for life and living, to actually fulfill and realize the kind of future one is deeply committed to? Having a contribution or a promise for the world is one thing, but what does it take to make good on a promise for the world?

Within the context of my personal experiences in the field of leadership development, this paper will assert part of what it takes “to create opportunities for people to create new worlds and fulfill new realities”³ is to give up the *my* in “my promise”.

Many people have compelling visions; inspiring, noble, splendid promises which, the fulfillment of, would alter existence as we know it. With powerful declarations of what is possible, many have put themselves on the hook with a “promise for the world” that by some specific date, a future will be fulfilled. Some particularly committed individuals have performed actions in the direction of those promises or mobilized others to perform actions in the direction of those promises. Yet others have seen tangible real results from those performed actions, fulfilling glimpses of the future

¹ I acknowledge Jeff Ford, Scott Wolf, Matt Granger, Jill Rickards and Michael Jensen for their comments, critiques, and suggestions in creating this paper.

² The Oxford English Dictionary (2005) defines *reality* as “1. the state of things as they actually exist, as opposed to an idealistic or notional idea of them. 2. a thing that is actually experienced or seen. 3. the quality of being lifelike 4. the state or quality of having existence or substance.” (Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English, Oxford University Press, 2005). Dictionary.com (accessed 9/9/10) defines *fulfill* as “1. to carry out, or bring to realization, as a prophecy or promise. 2. to perform or do, as duty; obey or follow, as commands. 3. to satisfy (requirements, obligations, etc.) 4. to bring to an end; finish or complete, as a period of time. 5. to develop the full potential of (usually used reflexively).

³ 2011 Call For Papers, emphasis added

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they created and experiencing the mesmerizing joy that accompanies such feelings of accomplishment ... “It’s actually happening!” ... “I’m really doing it!”

This “I’m really doing it” and “It’s actually happening” can be the beginning of a major assault on one’s identity, a humbling reappraisal of what is important in life and a powerful opening to see what it would *really* take to fulfill on a new reality.

L’ENTRÉE

The first insight into my contribution to the world came in 2005 as an Air Force lieutenant in Balad, Iraq with the left side of my face pressed to the ground and my entire body flooded with adrenaline⁴. I was the officer in charge of a unit, but for the first time under enemy fire. I quickly realized the knowledge I gained from studying leadership during six years of being educated as a military officer and earning a masters degree in Leadership, did not leave me being the leader I needed to be at that moment under fire. Knowing a leader “should” be courageous in a frightening situation was very different from “being” courageous in that situation. Success as a leader in that moment depended entirely on authentically and naturally generating a different way of being than my default way of being (fearful and scared for my life).

I drew on my previous ontological training⁵ to confront my fear, not as my identity or who I was, but as a *way of being* – something I had choice over. In response to what was required in that specific situation, I chose to create being authentically courageous in spite of the fear. This kind of freedom and power to *be* in the exercise of leadership was not available to me in my four years at a military academy nor was it available while getting my masters degree in Leadership. I realized: knowledge *about* leadership does not provide *access* to being a leader.

A year after returning from Iraq, I was given the opportunity to teach leadership at the US Air Force Academy. As an assistant professor teaching leadership to Air Force Academy Cadets, I saw my job as developing the next generation of global leaders. However, despite my noble vision, I found myself teaching in the classroom what was traditionally available in the leadership literature – which was the same as what I was taught in my own six years of leadership education. I experienced frustration in being unable to provide my students with the *access* required to develop themselves as leaders – that is, the being of a leader which I developed for myself while in Iraq. This led to a corollary realization: teaching *about* leadership is not the same as *creating* leaders.

It was around this time a colleague and fellow Captain serving at the Air Force Academy conducted a presentation about his own recent deployment to Iraq. He had taught leadership at the Iraqi Air Defense Institute and, while the forty people I was sitting with that day applauded my colleague for his heroic acts in the Iraqi classroom, I was besieged with despair. With Sunni, Shiite, and Kurds all in one classroom, the Captain’s success was two-fold: 1) he had successfully kept the students, literally, from killing one another in the classroom and 2) he managed to teach a few lessons about leadership. This is not to take anything away from his accomplishments – doing what he did certainly took something extraordinary; however, what about creating a new future? What

⁴ See “Fighting for the Freedom Required to Be a Leader” <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1659188>

⁵ Ontology is the study of being. I attended ontological training and development programs offered by Landmark Education in which I learned I was not stuck with default ‘ways of being’, but rather could genuinely alter how I was being from one moment to the next, and do so completely authentically.

about altering the context through which these students related with one another, not as distinct sects but as “Iraqis”? What about creating new conversations? New realities? It may be a bit idealistic; however, the Captain never received this kind of training to create such futures, nor could I find any such training being offered. As military personnel, we simply didn’t see the profound opportunities to make that kind of difference. Given the people we as a military interact with around the globe, I feared we had failed to train our officers to be able to make a significant difference in global transformation.

A NEW REALM OF LEADERSHIP

I saw a profound opportunity to make a global difference – there was something worth doing and I was the one to do it. My career was no longer about filling bookshelves, walls, and uniforms with awards, medals, decorations, and various other military symbols of success or about being the best, youngest, first, fastest, etc. Rather, my life became a commitment for the world – *each and every person has the capacity to lead others in realizing futures that make a positive difference in the quality of life on earth.*

A new realm of leadership in the world was going to start at the United States Air Force Academy. We were going to commission officers known for their ability to provide leadership in any and all situations, and through their leadership, *all* people could experience themselves as powerful and capable. Air Force officers who empower and enable their troops to powerfully interact with people of varying backgrounds and nationalities, who facilitate conversations “in the language of other peoples ... everywhere in the world ... to create opportunities for people to create new worlds and fulfill new realities”⁶ – globally leveraged agents for workability in the world. For the first time, I truly saw before me the next generation of global leaders.

CREATING A NEW REALITY

In September 2007 I declared my commitment to delivering a course that would actually create leaders. Being an assistant professor and Captain at the Air Force Academy, I began to speak about a vessel for realizing this commitment – a transformational ontological leadership course that got to the core of the *being* required of such a leader for the world. I researched to find who could help me create this new leadership course and what resources were available. I began to find and make contact with people who were providing the transformational outcomes that result from these ontological approaches. Among these was Michael Jensen, a retired Professor Emeritus from Harvard Business School, who was leading an *Ontological Foundations of Leadership* course at the University of Rochester and had a deep commitment to providing this kind of leadership training across every business school in the world. It was not long before my boss (Colonel Joseph Sanders) and I were invited by Michael to attend a course he was teaching with his co-instructors, Werner Erhard, Steve Zaffron, and Alan Scherr. At the conclusion of this course, Col. Sanders and I declared possible a new realm of leadership for the Air Force.

One month later, I promised to teach the first transformational leadership course based on an ontological model to cadets by the fall 2008 semester. This promise aligned with the work and commitments Werner Erhard, Prof. Michael C. Jensen, Steve Zaffron and Allan Scherr had begun at

⁶ 2011 Call For Papers

the University of Rochester. They heard my promise and generously offered with my participation to develop an ontological course that I would teach at the Air Force Academy. Our work quickly began in earnest, contributing countless hours in the development of this course and to my personal growth as the instructor who would teach this course.⁷

At exactly 8:50 AM on August 8th 2008, the inaugural “*Being A Leader and the Effective Exercise of Leadership: An Ontological Model*” course began at the US Air Force Academy⁸. Eight cadets and two faculty members were in their seats at the start of class. At 0950, the second class started with 11 cadets and three faculty members. As weeks began to pass and lessons went on, cadets would remark about that alternate reality they entered into every time they stepped foot in room number 5K31. By the end of that glorious first semester, I remember reflecting on the momentum I had built – I counted up to 38 mentors and coaches actively involved in having a successful course at the Air Force Academy (some of whom are likely reading this paper).

The course was a resounding success. Course critiques were strikingly higher than usual. Students often brought their peers, teachers, and mentors to class. And most importantly, the actual leadership results were phenomenal. Cadets were leading in diverse areas such as combating domestic violence, leading the Air Force Academy to more sustainable ‘green’ programs, starting an African-American male mentorship program in inner cities, reducing recidivism amongst juvenile delinquents, as well as other leadership initiatives in education, generational poverty, health and well-being, and many more. One of my most profound experiences was observing a 20-yr old male military cadet standing in front of his peers and declaring, “I stand for love.”

SEDUCTION

(*Seduction* – Latin roots – “to lead astray”)

In the beginning it was critical that I own what we were creating – we were giving birth to a new reality. The next two years were filled with similarly extraordinary results, a growing interest in the course specifically and the ontological approach to leadership more generally, and challenging journeys through my own “valley of the shadow of death” (being personally fired, having formal military accolades downgraded, witnessing the end of some important relationships, and other personal crises). Hundreds of pages could be filled on the monumental obstacles, le résistance, surrendering, and purely blissful victories – but those will wait for another time. This section is about the seduction of *success*.

I had indeed achieved success, by anyone’s measure – here existed a course I created, made the space for, and delivered. The course was creating space for extraordinary young officer leaders who will deploy around the world to make the positive difference they were committed to making. “It was actually happening!” “I really did it!” “The impossible future I had once declared was now happening!” “This stuff really works!”

Inside the gates of the Air Force Academy, I was known, the leadership course was known, and senior officers three and four times my rank were participating in my courses. The latter resulted in

⁷ It is also important to note that critical to the success of the eventual course was the willingness of Col. Sanders to take a risk and provide the top cover support for such an innovation.

⁸ Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1585976> (pre-course reading), <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1263835> (course materials), and <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1640962> (assignment structure)

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invitations to participate in opportunities generally not available to a junior officer, such as being asked to participate in speaking engagements. My colleagues joked about wearing the “Kari Granger Fan Club T-Shirt”. People of all academic and military ranks were in my office requesting coaching, advice and counsel. While I publically downplayed the acknowledgements, all I had to do was read the comments on those course critiques and I was reminded of the powerful results I was creating in the world. The success was absolutely invigorating, enticing ... seductive.

THE EMPRESS HAS NO CLOTHES

In the midst of this crowning achievement, I woke up to the world. Midway through the 2009 Faculty and Staff course, I realized while creating global leaders one small class at a time at the Air Force Academy was great, it wouldn't make much of a dent in the world. It was fun, but it was not a new reality. We might have a handful of senior leaders, years in the future, who could lead powerfully, but that's it. The vision had to grow – I was so tied up in the small-scale, albeit individually great, results of the handful of small courses I taught that I had lost sight of what it would really take to fulfill on a truly new *realm* of leadership.

The more I tried to get others involved, to have those who graduated from my course lead the course to others; I slowly began to realize I was the only one I could count on to effectively realize my promise. I had an enormous cheering section and many who identified with being a graduate of the course, but the entire endeavor at the Air Force Academy had occurred to me and others as *Kari's* promise.

A sudden physiological response ensued – some intense combination of embarrassment, vulnerability, and fear rushed in. I was the empress with no clothes – I never considered *I* could be the limitation to my own promise. I was blind to the fact *I* was in the way of *the commitment with which I was engaged* really getting out into the world.

I made the commitment with which I was engaged into something of ‘mine’. It was ‘my’ promise, and I talked about it that way. ‘My’ promise was something I owned, some possession of mine. Even worse, it had become my identity in the world. Somewhere along the way, the commitment with which I was engaged moved from a natural self-expression creating space for others, to my identity owning the only real tangible aspect that had been created – the *course*. I had made it ‘me’ rather than the commitment to what it could be.

I had found the upper limit, and it was me. As long as “my” promise was tied up in this thing I called “I”, there was no giving it away. You try giving away your identity.

ENTANGLEMENTS OF IDENTITY & POSSESSION

One of the ways the commitment to which I was engaged got entangled with my identity was I had made it ‘right’ that my promise had become me – I had achieved some sort of high enlightened space – I *was* my promise. I am not saying this in itself is wrong. By constituting myself as the future certainly contributed significantly to the success we had achieved – the problem grew from being blind to the fact that, along the way, I had confused the possibility of my *promise* with “me” (my *identity*) and in so doing made the promise impossible to give away.

To untangle this confusion, I had to get for myself there was a distinction between the possibility I was fulfilling on (the clearing that was being created in the world in collaboration with many others) and anything I called “me” or “my” or “mine” or “I”. But understanding there is a difference between the person I called “I” and my promise, to actually disentangle one from the other, to take the ‘my’ out of ‘my promise’, was completely threatening by its very nature – I was threatening my own identity. I had to get that while I had a promise and I had constituted myself as the future I had created, “I” was not the same as ‘my promise’ – nor was the promise the same as the course. I was one body, one voice (albeit a loud one) in the network of conversations contributing to creating a new reality.

A new realm of leadership is a space, an opening, a clearing in which various expressions of leadership can show up. It is a *realm*, not a *thing*. I had made it a thing, and worse yet I had made it ‘my’ thing. It was something “I” created and invented. Yes, I caused something to happen – from the actions I took, I manifested an outcome. However, once I stood back and said “that’s me”, it moved into an object of identity and possession. As is the case with most people, I generally prefer people not tinker with my possessions. In the attempt to lead or spread materials from the course, when anyone would take actions that (in my mind) were not the ‘right’ actions, I would get irritated because the course was so wrapped up in my identity – they were diluting it or ruining its purity.

MY PROMISE IS AN OXYMORON

“My promise for the world” is a bit of an oxymoron. As Wittgenstein says, there is no private language⁹. There is no promise (speech act) independent of the network of conversations in which it is created. It is quite obvious that the commitment with which I was engaged was entirely created within the conversational network of which I was a part. Moreover, even if it wasn’t, it wouldn’t have any meaning without that conversational network. “My promise” is both an illusion and a conversational shortcut that disguises the network of conversations constituting such a promise. There is no “my” promise as separate and discrete from the community conversation I am involved in.

So what? What’s the big deal in using this conversational short hand? It is now well known among cognitive scientists, linguists and neuroscientists that language has everything to do with a person’s ways of being and acting. Specifically, my ways of being and action are a correlate of the way in which the world occurs for me, and the way in which the world occurs for me arises in language¹⁰. If you accept this premise, you will see that when we use the conversational shortcut “my promise”, our ways of being and our actions are correlated with “my promise” in much the same way we relate to an object of possession.

Once the phrase “my promise” is established in the conversational network, correlated conversations continue to give rise to this idea of possession. I assert whatever a person’s relationship is with items of possessions, their correlated being and action will parallel how that person is with their “my promise for the world”. Take for example the correlated phrase we use to talk about others taking on our promise, we say we are “giving it away” – you can’t give something

⁹ See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/private-language/>

¹⁰ Erhard, Werner, Jensen, Michael C. and Group, Barbados, A New Paradigm of Individual, Group and Organizational Performance (August 24, 2010). Harvard Business School NOM Unit Working Paper No. 11-006; Barbados Group Working Paper No. 09-02. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1437027>.

away that is not yours to begin with. We only say “give it away” because we think our promise is something we own!

WHAT AM I COMMITTED TO REALLY?

When my promise became centered around my creating and delivering the course, I entangled the *commitment with which I was engaged* with an object of possession, something with which I strongly identified – I was now committed to something for and of myself, and my ways of being and my actions had become a correlate of the way it occurred to me. Recognizing this limitation forced a re-evaluation of what it would take to truly create a new reality in which “Each and every person has the capacity to lead others in realizing futures that make a positive difference in the quality of life on earth”.

I had to take the ‘my’ out of ‘my promise’. To accomplish this, I had to ask myself the straight question – what is my commitment, *really*? Is it to a new reality or is it to my producing some outcome? I had to transform my relationship to that with which I was committed. A *new reality* was senior to ‘me’, ‘my’, and ‘I’. Certainly there was a clearing for me to operate inside of, but “to create opportunities for people to create new worlds and fulfill new realities”¹¹ required I take the ‘I’ out of what I was creating.

When I really looked for *what was required* to have a new realm of leadership exist at the Air Force Academy (rather than, “What do ‘I’ need to do?”), I saw in this particular situation, the exercise of leadership might actually require my absence. Many people did not believe I would ever actually leave – I would always be there providing a great course that made a big difference for this particular population. “Kari had it handled”.

I left. Leaving ended up being more difficult for me than getting the course started. For about six months, I nervously watched from afar and shook my head at the inaction – no one was taking action on anything! However, bit-by-bit, graduates of the course began to get in touch with what they were committed to creating in the world and a powerful community emerged committed to realizing futures that predictably were not going to happen without real action.

In a place where rank and hierarchy is unmatched, military officers, enlisted members, cadets and civilians collaborated in a truly unprecedented way. They each found truly unique ways of creating a new realm of leadership at the Air Force Academy: Already existing programs, seminars and courses were substantially elevated by their program directors, young cadet leaders took on responsibilities that had previously been responsibilities of faculty and staff (commissioned and non-commissioned officers). On August 6th, 2010, the third “*Being a Leader and the Exercise of Leadership, An Ontological Model*” course began at the Air Force Academy with 29 cadets and 6 faculty members spread over two classes – and I was not even in the same country. On September 8th, 2010, I was on a series of conference calls 80 miles away when I learned the second faculty course of 12 faculty and staff had begun. At this point, both courses¹² have concluded and the results were absolutely outstanding and included cadets leading workshops to their peers on an ongoing basis.

¹¹ 2011 Call For Papers, emphasis added

¹² Major Sheilagh Carpenter led the cadet course and Major Rod Smith, Captain Julie Mustian and Lieutenant Colonel Shane Coyne led the faculty course.

Fulfilling on this new reality requires more than the Air Force Academy to create new opportunities for leadership. After receiving a request from a handful of former faculty members who were participants in the 2008 5-day Leadership course at the University of Rochester¹³, an opportunity opened to share how the Air Force Academy had created a semester long accredited course. Emails and calls from former course graduates were nothing new, but this time the request occurred differently inside of a context of a commitment generated from the network of conversations – this was an opportunity for *others* to create new worlds and fulfill on new realities. Their request sparked an opening for us as a team to conduct a “Train the Trainers” workshop.

In July 2010, we conducted the 4-day “Creating Leaders Workshop: Mastering the Principles and Effective Delivery of 'the Ontological Leadership Course'”¹⁴ sponsored by the Kauffman Foundation and the Gruter Institute and hosted at the US Air Force Academy for over 40 faculty and staff – not just from the Air Force Academy, but this time faculty and staff from around the world. The Creating Leaders participants formed a Learning Community for Ontological Leadership (L'ECOLE) out of the course, creating countless individual and collaborative opportunities. In the months following the workshop several seminars, talks, papers, and workshops have been created and executed, and plans are in work for teaching within and researching the new field of “Ontological Leadership” – each person creating a new world, fulfilling on a new reality.

EN BREF

If it is as Heidegger said, “Language is the house of being”¹⁵, then *my* promise introduces real limitations in realizing that promise. The illusion of ownership or possession of what, in reality, emerged from and remains dynamic in the network of conversations, limits a truly committed leader from fulfilling on that new reality. Once authored, promises exist within the language community.

To actually realize a new state of existence, to truly fulfill on a new reality, requires we as leaders ask ourselves the self-*less* questions – those questions that have us create spaces outside ourselves, bigger than ourselves. What am I committed to ... *really*? As one of my mentors once asked me, would I still be committed if no one knew I was? There are no easy steps or simple answers for creating new worlds and fulfilling new realities – there is only removing the barriers that prevent us from creating more and more space for others to create new worlds.

Each and every one of us has the capacity to lead others in realizing futures that make a positive difference in the quality of life on Earth. The fundamental challenge is in removing the “my” from “my promise” allowing for our ways of being and our actions as leaders to be aligned with the

¹³The “Being A Leader and the Effective Exercise of Leadership, An Ontological Model” course was taught by Werner Erhard, Michael Jensen, Steve Zaffron and Allan Scherr at the University of Rochester in 2008, by Werner Erhard, Michael Jensen, Steve Zaffron and Kari Granger in 2009 at Erasmus Academic Rotterdam, in 2010 at Texas A&M University Mays School of Business, and in November 2010 in Panchgani India under the auspices of the IC Centre for Governance and MW Corp. The course is currently taught as part of the academic curriculum to cadets and faculty at the US Air Force Academy (since 2008), a version of it is taught at the Erasmus University Law School (since 2009) and Texas A&M Health Science Center and Mays Business School as an inter-professional directed study course (since 2010) and at the Dartmouth Medical School (currently, Spring 2011). A chapter outlining the course and its approach is forthcoming in the Harvard Business School Handbook for Teaching Leadership and is available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1681682>

¹⁴ Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1638429>

¹⁵ Heidegger, Martin. 1971. Pp. 135.

promise itself, with nothing in the way, opening new doors and new opportunities to fulfill on an “impossible” promise.

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