

AN ANGEL AND A MADMAN

GREGG THOMPSON

I hold a beast, an angel, and a madman in me and my enquiry is as to their working, and my problem is their subjugation and victory, downthrow and upheaval, and my effort is their self-expression.

DYLAN THOMAS

I love this quote from Dylan Thomas. I take it to mean that human existence is defined by the inescapable fact that we have, within us, light, darkness and a streak of wildness, and our prime mission in life is to make sense of it all. So what does this have to do with leadership? Read almost any book on leadership and you will be encouraged to build your personal brand on a foundation of self-awareness. That's good advice. Knowing who you are is important, however, your real leadership power comes from moving to a higher level – to accepting your whole self – the good parts and the not-so-good parts. While having a positive self-image and healthy self-esteem is important, the great leader recognizes that they have a dark side, and it is always in play to some degree as they interact with others. Don't have a dark side? Are you sometimes quietly pleased when misfortune falls on someone who has hurt you? Are you a bit jealous of a classmate's greater career success? Have you ever taken undeserved credit for someone else's good work? Spoken poorly about someone behind their back? Said something you knew was untrue? Said something hurtful in anger? Ok...so you are human as well.

A Work in Progress

Accurate self-awareness is actually unachievable because *You* today is different than the *You* who was on this planet yesterday. You are changing every day, even if in very small ways. Artists will often make numerous rough sketches of their paintings before putting brush to canvas. When we look at these sketches, we know they are simply preludes to the final masterpiece. We don't judge the sketch negatively because it is incomplete. We know that it is a work in progress. The same applies to us as leaders. No one assumes the mantle of leadership fully equipped for this demanding role. Even the greatest leaders are paintings in progress. At its most basic level, self-acceptance means understanding this fundamental point about leadership and about being human. We are all continuously evolving and changing, and need to recognize that this is a source of great strength. A lack of self-acceptance as leaders undermines all aspects of our work – our focus, energy, learning and, ultimately, our enjoyment of the journey. Leaders gain great power when they accept their imperfections as inevitable and as opportunities for personal exploration and change. Anger can fuel action. Jealousy can evolve into admiration. Guilt, selfishness, greed and insensitivity can spur thoughtfulness about meaning in life. Our dark sides present opportunities to fully explore what it means to be human; to learn, grow and change and not stay hidden deep inside us as permanent personal deficits.

You Can Change Some Things

Accepting your dark side does not mean one needs to surrender to forces that impair leadership effectiveness. And it is definitely not an excuse for bad behavior. The cool thing about leadership development is that you can not only incorporate new practices into your interactions with others, you can actually become a different person in the process. Here is the secret sauce – every time you do something intentionally, you create a tiny new trail of neurons in your brain. As you do it repetitively, the trail becomes a well-worn pathway. As it becomes a habit, it becomes a concrete freeway. It then becomes part of you. Your brain actually rewires itself. Scientists have a nifty name for this process: neuroplasticity. Here is a simple experiment you can do to prove this. Want to become more likeable? (Many of my clients are very intense, serious, senior leaders and, while they are very nice people, sometimes receive feedback that they are not particularly likeable. This process has worked wonders for them.) Every time you encounter someone new throughout the course of your day, pause, make eye contact and smile. Regardless of the agenda – do this. Then find something positive or appreciative to say to them. Don't flatter them or make it up. Find something real. Repeat this drill every day including weekends (your family may think you have been replaced with an alien, but do it anyway). In a week or two, this will become a little less forced. After a month or two, a habit. Sometime after that, it will no longer be an intentional practice or habit. It will be you. It will become part of who you are. You will, in fact, be likable.

Some Things Just Can't Be Changed

While your approach to leadership is greatly influenced by deeply-held beliefs, values and aspirations, those you lead experience you primarily through your personality. Think of your personality as a colorful amalgam of all of those traits and characteristics, both good and bad, that others see. These factors play a large role in shaping your interpersonal behavior, in setting your personal priorities and influencing how you organize your life. The manifestation of your personality will also have a significant effect on your personal leadership brand through your career. Gaining a deep understanding of one's personality is one of the most important facets of self-awareness and is well worth the extensive exploration. Leaders who are armed with this profound self-knowledge are able to readily capitalize on their natural strengths while lessening the potential negative impact in areas of vulnerability. Here's the rub: personality traits are generally assumed to be stable over time, that is, they persist throughout our life and constitute our true nature. While this is likely true, an overly narrow interpretation may lead to the risky assumption that the fundamental aspects of our personalities are immutable and unchangeable and that our patterns of behavior are carved in stone. Maybe even more important, this assumption may prevent us from looking beyond our easily recognized attributes, beyond those well-practiced behaviors that are so natural to us, to see the less expressed traits, those hidden and perhaps undiscovered dimensions of ourselves. This is an area that holds rich development opportunities for the leader.

As you examine your unique approach to leadership, take a wide-angle view of all of your possible personality traits. This needs to be very intentional. Many of us structure our everyday, non-work lives so that we rarely encounter the circumstances that will elicit the less visible and more neglected parts of our personalities. We lean toward the comfort of our well-known selves. On the other hand, the intensity and unpredictability of organization life provides the leader limitless opportunities for self-discovery. How frequently and thoroughly do you study yourself? Do you make note of how you respond to conflict? How you make decisions? Consider how some of your traits may be situational. Are they conspicuously absent in other situations? In what situations do you feel particularly potent, decisive and fully engaged? When do you feel weak and powerless? What makes you happy? Really sad? How can you use these insights to increase your effectiveness as a leader? We cannot view personality in black and white terms—it is much more accurately depicted as a spectrum of colors with varying hues and tints. The present day propensity to simplify personality theory into four letters or a handful of colors leads us to think of our traits in bipolar terms, that is, we are assumed to have one trait or its opposite. For example, we might see ourselves as exclusively extroverted or introverted. The reality is, however, that personality traits occur along a continuum. Knowledge of where we naturally reside on that continuum and what causes us to slide from one end to the other is the key to the leader's self-awareness and self-management.

Approaching our leadership self-image with a view to eliminating or suppressing parts of ourselves that we may feel don't fit our current roles would be akin to a film editor cutting out any scene containing strife or pain from a movie. When we do this, we dilute our authentic selves and we lose our personal power. There is also an inner and outer dimension to personality. The innermost part of us is the person we believe we truly are and encompasses all of the traits and characteristics we believe we possess. The outer part, on the other hand, is how our personality translates into patterns of behaviors that are seen and judged by others—in short, our personal brand. The gap between these two dimensions is perhaps one of the most fertile areas for self-discovery and growth.

Who is your Angel? Who is your Madman? How will they work together to create the very best possible version of You?



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