

Toxic Leadership: When Grand Illusions Masquerade as Noble Visions*

by

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Leader to Leader

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The tragedy of the human condition is not simply that we all must die, but rather that we choose to live by illusions. And it is that choice of comforting, sometimes exhilarating, even grand illusions, instead of the more humble, often painful and challenging reality, that renders us exquisitely vulnerable to toxic leaders.

The overall purpose of this essay is to consider the plight of followers caught in the thrall of toxic leaders, who first charm, then manipulate, and ultimately leave their followers worse off than they found them. A secondary purpose is to recommend several strategies for freeing ourselves from the clutches of toxic leaders.

A Brief Definition of Toxic Leaders

My serious interest is in the *followers* of toxic leaders, not the more titillating topic of toxic leaders themselves. Yet, to set the context, let me define in a general way what I mean by “toxic leaders”:

* This article draws heavily upon, but goes considerably beyond, Jean Lipman-Blumen. (2005). *The Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians – and How We Can Survive Them*. (New York: Oxford University Press).

Toxic leaders are *not* garden-variety authoritarian bosses, nor undependable political leaders, nor overly strict parents, nor even difficult spouses about whom we all love to complain. Rather, toxic leaders are those individuals, who by dint of their *destructive behaviors* and *dysfunctional personal qualities* generate a serious and enduring poisonous effect on the individuals, families, organizations, communities, and even entire societies they lead.

Toxic leaders come in various shapes and sizes. Intentionally toxic leaders deliberately harm others or enhance themselves at others' expense, while unintentionally toxic leaders nonetheless cause serious harm by careless or reckless behavior, as well as by their incompetence. To complicate matters, leaders look different, depending upon one's relationship to them. Thus, my toxic leader may be your hero and vice versa.

Let's also remember that even the most toxic leaders are not toxic all the time. An individual leader may be toxic in some situations and not in others. That same leader may exhibit different kinds and degrees of toxicity at different times in quite similar situations. Moreover, different toxic leaders display varying kinds and degrees of toxicity, and the consequences of their actions may generate different types and levels of harm.

Thus, it is quite appropriate to place the archetypical evil leader Adolph Hitler in one sector of a toxicity grid and the obviously less destructive basketball coach Bobby Knight in another. They simply represent toxic leadership across a broad spectrum of degrees, types, frequencies, and consequences.

Given that we often recognize toxic leaders for what they are, why do we not only tolerate, but frequently prefer, and sometimes even create them? And how is our vulnerability to toxic leaders related to the tragic choice that most of us make to live by illusions rather than by confronting both our fears and the hard realities that generate them?

Whistleblowers notwithstanding, the majority of followers stay the course, even with highly toxic leaders. Many followers remain because the barriers to escape appear much too high, be they psychological, existential, financial, political, or social – or, worse yet, some overwhelming combination of these formidable forces.

More often than not, we simply wait (and the wait can be long) for others to bring destructive leaders to justice. Too frequently, toxic leaders have their way with us and depart under their own steam in their own sweet time.

Six Aspects of the Human Condition That Make Us Susceptible to Toxic Leaders

Six aspects of the human condition make us very susceptible to toxic leaders. First, existential anxiety, that is, the angst that arises from the awareness that we shall die, ticks away at the very core of the human condition. It grows in that space between the known and the unknown, between the *certainty* that death is inevitable and the *uncertainty* of its particular circumstances.

Second, our psychological needs, as Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs describes, make us responsive to toxic leaders. Such leaders fulfill many of

our yearnings: for authority figures to replace our parents; for membership in the human community; and for feeling “chosen” or special. Our fear that we are personally powerless to challenge a bad leader adds to our jeopardy.

Third, crises, rapid change, and turbulence in everyday life give rise to situational fears. Certainty and safety are in short supply.

Fourth, we each live in a particular historical moment marked by special terrors and challenges. In one era, the bubonic plague decimates the population. In another, AIDS and suicide bombers take their toll.

A fifth, perhaps more salutary, aspect of the human condition also affects our longing for leaders: our awareness of the infinite possibilities that lie before us. These endless opportunities beckon us to find and create meaning in our lives, including, as Ernest Becker (in *Escape from Evil*) suggests, sublime, heroic destinies.

Sixth, we live in an unfinished and unfinishable world, where today’s knowledge is unraveled and re-spun by new discoveries, demanding still newer knowledge and newer discoveries. This unfinished and unfinishable world confronts us with limitless challenges in each new era, setting and resetting the stage for heroic action.

Constantly confronting our anxieties – existential, psychological, situational, and historical – would leave us both paranoid and paralyzed if we didn’t tend to drown our fears, particularly our existential dread, in the sea of our

unconscious. From that unseen depth, they direct our search for security and certainty in the form of leaders.

Beware Leaders Bearing Grand Illusions

If we are to live our lives and “do our thing,” we must somehow maintain the illusion that life is both meaningful and manageable – if not under our own command, then under someone else’s, preferably someone who is stronger and smarter than we are. So, we seek meaning and a controlled world from leaders, whom we agree to obey in exchange for their dangerously reassuring gifts of security, certainty, and order.

We want to believe that

- we shall be safe from disaster, disorder, and death;
- we shall live forever, either physically here or in another world, or symbolically in the memory of others;
- we are important, even heroic, beings in a meaningful world;
- we belong to the “Chosen,” an elite community, who congregate at the center of action, where all critical decisions and events take place;
- we are engaged daily in a noble enterprise, articulated in a noble vision, designed to make the world a better place.

The creation of grand illusions (as distinct from noble visions) is where toxic leaders enter the picture. They stand ever ready to furnish such false certainties. Toxic leaders throw us a lifeline temptingly baited with grand illusions.

Leaders who create illusions that lull our anxieties help us bear the unbearable, those inevitable heartbreaks of life, by lending them meaning. Sadly but comfortingly, these illusions blunt our painful encounters with reality. So, we readily trade off the pain of authentic experience for the comfort of illusions, insulated from fear, misery, and uncertainty.

Leaders present many reassuring illusions. Probably the most irresistible and unfulfillable one promises us escape from death, either physically or symbolically, but only if we follow those leaders. Thus, leaders who vow to protect us from death – either physical or social death – have a particular allure.

Grand Illusions vs. Noble Visions

By now, the reader is probably impatiently thinking, “But, don’t we want leaders who have a vision, some image of a better reality?” Yes, for many of us, that is the *sine qua non* of a leader, someone with, as the dictionary suggests, “unusual competence in discernment or perception.”

Unfortunately, that is where noble visions and grand illusions part company.

Grand Illusions of Toxic Leaders

Toxic leaders offer us grand illusions that stand in sharp contrast to the noble visions of non-toxic leaders. The *primary* characteristic of the toxic leader’s grand illusion is its *promise of some unattainable Nirvana* – a Thousand Year Reich, immortality, or perhaps an opium free world like the Taliban guaranteed us a scant four months before 9/11. In fact, the grand illusions that toxic leaders concoct are grandiose dreams of an *unrealistic* future that are *unconditionally* positive for the followers -- as long as they obey the

leader. Little, if any, risk is involved, at least according to the leader's definition of risk.

A *second* defining characteristic of a grand illusion is the image of the *leader as an omnipotent savior*, one who, single-handedly, can create that grandiose dream. The followers must simply comply passively. This docile posture leaves followers not only totally dependent upon but also easy prey to the all-powerful leader. If the followers fail to live by the leader's dictates, severe punishment ensues – from ostracism to exile (that is, social death), or possibly physical death.

The entourages of toxic leaders, especially their “spin doctors,” promote the illusion of their leaders' omnipotence and omniscience. The media, for other purposes, frequently feed the followers' hunger for tasty morsels about their saviors.

Besides, we followers are often only too eager to impute godlike powers to human leaders in the desperate hope that doing so will make it so and thereby alleviate our angst. We look to bosses, therapists, and other transference objects, on whom we can project our unresolved emotional conflicts or our yearnings for replacements for our departed or unfulfilling parents.

Many of us want leaders who project an aura of certainty – real or imagined – that we lack within ourselves. If the leaders are not actually knowledgeable and in control, to satisfy our own desperate needs, we convince ourselves that they truly are. In the process, we occasionally push leaders into

believing in their own omniscience. Some, of course, don't need much of a push.

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi serves as a case in point. On trial in 2003 for bribing judges in the mid-1980s, Berlusconi spoke in an interview with the *New York Times*:

He portrayed himself as...the savior of Italian democracy, willing to attract undue legal persecution and unwarranted vilification to protect Italy from the clutches of the left.

"It's a great sacrifice to do what I'm doing," Mr. Berlusconi, who is also Italy's richest man, said.

"I have a sailboat, but in two years, I've only been on it one day.... My life has changed. The quality has become terrible. What a brutal job." He added that he worked constantly and was "always alone, always alone here."

Asked why he endures it, Berlusconi said, "Otherwise there would be no freedom in Italy. If I left political life right now, Italy would fall into the hands of Communists." ... (Later Berlusconi added that) he alone had the ability to prevent that. "There is no one else in Italy today," he said, as two aids, flanking him at the dinner table, chimed in simultaneously: "Who else? Who else?"

In addition, grand illusions call for an *idyllic world, untainted* by the problems that those whom we see as different from ourselves create. Attaining that idealized state dictates an unrealistic purification of our world, driven not by our own rigorous self-improvement, but by ridding the world of some tainted "Other." The grand illusion often entails the eradication of "the infidels," "the evil ones," or any other group different from us. Numerous, clearly less lethal, corporate examples exist, like Enron's depiction of a new business model that would eliminate all competitors.

Finally, a grand illusion *mistakes (or mislabels) evil for a moral act*. Grand illusions turn evil into virtue and see the evil action as a magnanimous sacrifice by the evildoer. For example, Gestapo leader Heinrich Himmler commended the members of the SS for “shouldering the terrible but unavoidable task of exterminating millions of people (and)... remaining decent...It is a glorious page in our history that has never been and never will be written.”¹

Noble Visions of Non-Toxic or Constructive Leaders

By contrast, non-toxic or constructive leaders construct noble visions. Noble visions are not some unattainable illusion of an Eldorado or Holy Grail. Rather, they *envisage an achievable reality*, notwithstanding serious difficulties and hazards along the way. President John F. Kennedy’s aspiration of sending humans to the moon provides a good example. At first glance, Kennedy’s noble vision may have seemed unfeasible; however, the actual distance between the technological reality of that historical moment and Kennedy’s noble vision were not nearly as great as it appeared then.

Noble visions are *cooperative ventures* in which leaders and responsible followers, contributing different talents and strengths, struggle together to achieve their goal. The leader agrees to lead the way, to help keep the followers on the path. Sometimes, as in the noble vision that the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. described in his incandescent “I Have a Dream” speech, the leader can even imagine the followers reaching the Promised Land without the leader.

Although the leader may point the way, the leader's noble vision usually calls for heavy lifting by the followers. In fact, followers may be expected to make immense personal sacrifices and confront grave risks.

Noble visions are worthy endeavors *designed to help humankind*. The primary purpose of a noble vision never entails harming others, nor requires enhancing ourselves by diminishing others. At times, noble visions promote a better world for all of us, not just for the leader's followers. At other times, they may be directed more narrowly at improving the plight of the weakest, the smallest, or the poorest among us.

Noble visions *call out the best in us*: integrity, truthfulness, courage, strength, ethics, compassion, love, generosity, altruism, kindness, reliability, flexibility, resilience, dedication, intelligence, imagination, and creativity. No doubt the reader probably would add other qualities to this admittedly incomplete list. Noble visions ask us to be true to the very best in ourselves, our history, and our traditions, while remaining receptive to current challenges.

Noble visions, however, may necessitate a sea change in our mindset, like that demanded by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission established by former South African President Nelson Mandela. In that counter-intuitive process for reconciliation and amnesty, the embittered and traumatized victims found a liberating perspective: the confessions of even the most heinous perpetrators could, in fact, release the victims from unending anguish and self-destructive hatred and promote positive healing.

Yet, we must remain wary of leaders bearing gifts of unfulfillable pledges, grand illusions – such as safety and immortality – that they propose as “freebies.” In fact, those gifts of security and eternal life that toxic leaders present usually come at an exorbitant cost -- our own or others’ freedom.

Let me provide one quick example from *The Allure of Toxic Leaders*:

Four months before 9/11, the Taliban announced an edict to eliminate the farming of opium poppies, Afghanistan’s largest cash crop and the source of 75% of the world’s opium. The media applauded the promise of safety from the dreaded scourge of opium.

That announcement “just coincidentally” occurred the day following the Taliban’s decree that all minority Hindus must wear yellow identification patches on their shirts. Allegedly, the Hindus had requested these patches to “protect” them from beatings the Taliban inflicted on Muslims whose beards were too short or who didn’t attend prayer services.

Elated by this offering of protection and control, world leaders ignored the toxic repression of Hindus. Perhaps, if we had not been lulled by the Taliban’s illusionary prize of an opium-free world, we might have recognized the warning signs of leaders *misleading* and more lethal outrages to follow.

Nonetheless, both grand illusions and less grandiose noble visions also possess a positive side. They free the creative, achieving, thoughtful, spiritual aspects of our human nature to allow even us small, short-lived creatures to become significant figures in this magnificent universe. Yet, to achieve such glory, we followers must constantly patrol and repair the dike of our illusions -- particularly our illusion that leaders know all the answers,

have our best interests at heart, and can keep this turbulent world spinning safely on its axis.

Dis-illusioning Leaders and the *Valuable Inconvenience of Leadership*

Although many toxic leaders deal in grand illusions, it would be unfair to characterize *all* leaders as dream merchants. Leaders committed to their supporters' well-being, rather than to their own power – and such leaders do exist – are more likely to help followers forgo many of their illusions. They do so through painful, but strengthening, doses of reality.

The process of *dis*-illusioning is distressing to leaders, as well as to followers. Constructive leaders refuse to succumb to grand illusions or suggest them to their constituents. Indeed, they may insist upon shattering even those illusions that constituents create for themselves. For example, Mandela's Truth and Reconciliation Commission destroyed the post-Apartheid fervid expectation that all perpetrators would be punished and that conventional justice would prevail.

When nontoxic leaders insist upon *dis*-illusioning us, our short-term pain and anxiety usually increase. Dis-illusioning leaders do not claim to know all the answers. In fact, they may not claim to have *any* answers. More often, they expect us to help create solutions for ourselves.

Constructive, *dis*-illusioning leaders make us face up to the reality that they cannot actually keep us safe or solve our most pressing problems. Yet, they can do something far more important. They can create, as Ronald Heifetz suggests (in *Leadership Without Easy Answers*) a “holding environment,”

supporting and encouraging us, while we grapple with and solve our own problems. In the process, we grow and learn. We taste the exhilaration of freedom and autonomy.

Over time, however, by insisting that we confront both the certainty of our human mortality, as well as life's *uncertainties*, non-toxic leaders are more likely to teach us courage and moral self-reliance. In fact, by one definition, courage means taking effective action despite the continuous glimpse of death from the corner of our eye.

Dis-illusioning leaders may ask us to set aside the current activities in which we may be happily immersed and, instead, take up some of the burdensome responsibilities of leadership. I call this the "*valuable inconvenience of leadership*," because it teaches us a triad of lessons we otherwise might never learn. For one, we identify our own capacities for leadership. For another, by putting our shoulder to the wheel of communal or organizational leadership, we learn that we -- ordinary human beings, not just some idealized leaders -- have unique contributions to make. In addition, we discover the alarming truth that merely by donning the leader's robes, we, too, begin to appear godlike to needy followers.

Relinquishing our illusions is no trivial undertaking. It can cause us great disquiet, at least temporarily. So, it is not hard to understand why we commonly prefer toxic leaders, who offer us free lunches, while non-toxic leaders expect us to help cook the meal and clean up besides.

Facing Reality Despite Anxiety

Dis-illusioning leaders urge us followers to face reality. They encourage us to let our anxiety pierce our consciousness, where we can put it to positive, creative use. Leaders who dis-illusion us must also learn to deal with their own angst.

When our anxiety is where we can see it, where we can keep an eye on it, it can no longer drive us mercilessly from the depths of our unconscious.

When our anxiety is up front, as wild as it may be, we can rope and tame it to help us live full, perchance truly heroic lives.

Difficult as it may be, confronting life despite our anxiety has several benefits. It sets us on the path to maturity and clear-eyed confidence. It seasons our anxiety with hope. It allows the possibility of deeper understanding and creativity.

Dealing with reality forces us to take responsibility for ourselves, as well as for others. It compels us to cultivate new coping strategies. In fact, soberly recognizing that the leader's assurances are little more than grand illusions is a necessary condition for confident constituents—and the society in which they live – to survive and flourish.

Acting in the Face of Uncertainty: The Positive Role of Anxiety

Only when we accept that life is uncertain, that its meaning may never become totally clear, that anything can happen, but that we must go forward nonetheless, can we feel the true exhilaration of living. That is the

fundamental noble enterprise in which each and every one of us must knowingly engage if we are to come face-to-face with our own capacity for leadership and free ourselves from toxic leaders, who manipulate our fears.

Fear need not be inhibiting. Indeed, fear and anxiety can play an extremely positive role. They can act as a “call to being,” (to borrow Jean Delumeau’s phrase in *Sin and Fear*), an invitation to live more intensely precisely because they alert us to life’s fragility. Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face....”

That other part of human nature – our openness to life– dilutes our anxiety and shapes our responses to reality. Joined to our fear and angst, our receptivity to new experience releases new energy, promoting growth and creativity. As we struggle to fathom the meaning of our lives, our released anxiety can help us find direction and meaning.

Only when we are living on the verge of uncertainty, moving forward, making our best judgments as we step out into the unknown, shall we be able to avoid the paradoxical danger of living too safely. Then, we shall be engaged in “an adventure of decision on the edge of freedom and necessity,” as Eric Voegelin (in *Order and History*) suggests. Freedom from subservience to all leaders, not just toxic leaders, coupled with the necessity to act despite our fears, may -- in the long run -- be far more important than seeking an elusive and illusory security. It may be the first critical step toward autonomy and meaning.

Strengthened in this way, we can seek the “leader within” -- rather than external leaders -- to design and implement our own noble visions. Then, perhaps, we might complete -- at least for the moment -- one small piece of this unfinished world. In the process, we grow, learn, and taste the exhilaration of freedom -- not only freedom from fear and anxiety, but freedom from the grand illusions of toxic leaders.

¹ Mitscherlich, Alexander and Mitscherlich, Margarete. (1975). *The Inability to Mourn*. (New York: Grove), in Elemér Hankiss, op. cit., p. 195.