Language as Leadership

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Human beings have a fundamental connection to “home.” Christian leaders all have the underlying goal of leading the way home. We speak of Heaven as home; we use phrases like, “Home is where the heart is,” and “Home Sweet Home.” When circumstances are difficult, when we are worn and discouraged, we lean on life’s tired dreams and murmur, “I just want to go home.” Home means many things to each of us, but I think that language is one of the vehicles that takes us home. For example, I always jump when I hear a Canadian accent, and I say “Hey, you speak Canadian!” It brings memories of my childhood leaping back, and never fails to make me smile. I was born and raised in Canada, and although I have been in the United States more years than I spent up north, in many ways Canada will always be home.

This concept, imaged by the word “home,” shows that language possesses the characteristics of relativity and determinism, which can influence our thoughts and in turn affect a culture. This is why looking at language as leadership can show how, through the context of verbal phrases or proverbs, words like “home” can change our direction.

What does this basic idea of language mean for Christian leadership? Could it be that understanding the deep pathos in this particular philosophical word-context (like the word “home”) might give leaders a tool by which they can truly achieve transformation? For example, do the words we use take others to a path that leads them home, whatever “home” may be to them? I believe language indeed can be used as leadership in this way.

When pondering language as leadership, I looked for this depth within the most commonly asked philosophical questions. Principia Cybernetica Project lists these questions on its website. In a section entitled “Eternal Philosophical Questions,” the editors state that their aim is to “develop a complete philosophical system or ‘world view.’ [This] philosophic system tries to answer the fundamental questions which every person reflecting about the world, and his or her place in it has been asking throughout the ages” (Heylighen, 2000, para...
Three of the questions on this list stood out to me as being directly linked to language concepts like “home”: (a) “Where do we come from?” (b) “Who are we?” and (c) “Where are we going?”

These three simple questions apply to everyone, but when I ask them of myself, looking for my foundational motivation for leadership, the questions become “Where do I come from?” “Who am I?” and “Where am I going?” I find that these questions encompass the basic qualities that define leadership. The answers lie in our personal worldviews, and in knowing ourselves. The answers give me reason to act, behaviors to model, and goals to reach.

My own answers to these rhetorical questions came from looking back, before my own beginnings, to know where I come from. The landscape of genealogy gave me a vision of how to use the understanding of a culture, which helped me pick and choose what to keep, what to move on from, and who I am when it’s all said and done. In studying idioms or proverbs, I see how language can be used to shape a culture.

**Where Do I Come From?**

I have always had a fascination with my ancestors. I come from the MacKays of Nine Mile River, in Nova Scotia, Canada. This is my mother’s family. My father’s family are Morgans, and in a kind of coincidence, the Morgans are a sept of Clan MacKay. The MacKays are one of Scotland’s oldest Gaelic clans.

This quest to know my people led me to the Gaelic language that is a legacy to them, but it is a legacy that is dying. Gaelic speaking, and thus the culture’s decline, is seen in the percentages of Gaelic speakers in both Canada and Scotland. Flyn (2014) noted that the 1991 census showed the number of Gaelic speakers dropped more than 20% in a single decade. “By 2001 the number had fallen another 11 percent, to just 59,000. Gaelic speakers were aging, then dying, and their language was dying with them” (Flyn, 2014, par. 1). In 2011, there were approximately 1,500 Gaelic-speakers in Canada, with the vast majority on Cape Breton Island in the province of Nova Scotia. About 350 Canadians in 2011 claimed Gaelic as their “mother tongue” (Moore, 2014).

The dying of the language is not the result of an accident. The Scottish Education Act of 1872 was a great blow to the language in Scotland; the government chose to officially ignore the Gaelic language. This led to generations of Gaels being forbidden to speak their native tongue at school. Additionally, punishment was administered to anyone speaking Gaelic within the school perimeters. This authoritative ban on the remnants of a culture was proving effective (Crann Tara, 2006).

The shrinking numbers of Gaelic speakers both in Scotland and in Canada are reflected in my own family. Other than my aging aunt and uncle, there was...
no one left who knew how to speak the language of the MacKays when I started this investigation. This was troubling to me, because the MacKay tradition has been written thus: never forget the men that you come from (MacKay, 1893).

Scottish Gaelic is older than Latin, (Crann Tara, 2006) and its structure is different and more difficult in comparison to modern languages. This language fascinated me from my first encounters with it. I knew my aunt and uncle spoke it, usually at church. This is an important aspect, because everything about the language is cultural. They also wore their kilts and sashes to church, they spoke Gaelic to other Gaels at church, and they, like their entire Scottish heritage community, attended the Presbyterian Church. This was all a part of their identity, summed up by the use of the language of the Gaels. Additionally, as a native of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, my aunt’s first language is Gaelic.

My aunt is now 94, and, since my uncle has passed, she is now the only living MacKay relative with the Gaelic. I took it upon myself to learn this language because I see it as the medium by which the culture of the Gaels, my ancestors, will be saved. In any historical attempt to destroy a culture, banning the language is the first order of deconstruction.

In the mid-1980s a musical renaissance began to pull Gaelic from its downward spiral. Many attribute the recent small gains in the number of speakers to the popularity of Gaelic music. Musicians in Scotland from the Gaelic-speaking regions of the Hebrides, and from Nova Scotia’s Cape Breton—the last strongholds of Gaelic on earth—used the power of the old songs and poems and traditions. Using the traditional methods of the language, they sang and recited in Gaidhlig. This brought a new audience, and a resurrected a much-needed interest in saving the culture (Roberts, 2006).

And so it is through the language, as leadership, that I see a way to honor the admonishment of my clan to “Never forget the men that you come from,” and I am committed to learning it well enough to teach it to others.

Gaelic is a bardic language. It is most beautiful when spinning a story, spoken or in song. The Gaelic culture is collectivist, and therefore uses high context language. So stories have dual meaning, and proverbs often make a point. It is with this in mind that I will use Gaelic proverbs and sayings to show how language is leadership.

In order to understand these proverbs, though, a bit of history of the Gaels is required. It is the characteristics of tough-minded, hard-living people that bring meaning to their literature. The circumstances they have lived through are integral to their spirit of survival.

The Highland Clearances of the mid-19th century occurred at a time in Scotland when the Scottish aristocracy turned on their own people and drove them from their homes to make room for sheep farming. The language and the
customs were damaged, and the soul of the country was seared when endless streams of displaced, sad and broken people relocated, many against their will, to the shores of Canada, Australia, and other remote destinations. There is a place in the Atlantic called the “Death Canal,” because it is the point on the journey where so many refugees perished and had to be buried at sea (Logan, 1873).

A memorial sculpture was unveiled in 2007, dedicated to the memory of the people of the Clearances. It is called The Emigrants, and it stands in Helmsdale, Scotland. Helmsdale is in Duthaich Mac Aoidh, or MacKay Country, in the northern Highlands. Standing near the Helmsdale River, the memorial consists of four figures, a family: the kilted father and son are gazing out to the ocean as if to find a vision of where they are going, but the mother has one foot forward, and one foot turned back. With the baby in her arms, one foot is stretched back toward the Highlands, toward home, as she wavers in her leaving. Clearly, her heart is still there (see http://www.electricscotland.com/history/articles/emigrants_statue.htm).

The Emigrants really represents all those who have wandered from their homeland. This memorial is universal in its poignant message that deep inside, all have a heartfelt sense of belonging somewhere. Our identities are closely tied to where we come from, and sometimes life takes us on journeys that lead far from home. My MacKays came to Nova Scotia during the time of the Clearances, and the fact that the memorial stands in Duthaich Mac Aoidh (MacKay Country) makes the heartache of leaving home very real to me when I see it.

The memorial is inscribed with the following words both in English and Gaelic:

*The Emigrants* commemorates the people of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, who, in the face of great adversity, sought freedom, hope and justice beyond these shores. They and their descendants went forth and explored continents, built great countries and cities and gave their enterprise and culture to the world. This is their legacy. Their voices will echo forever thro the empty straths and glens of their homeland. (Electric Scotland)

This story of a culture displaced makes their proverbs even more powerful. We see in them the strength of a people who refused to give up, who faced utter adversity, and who were, through it all, survivors. As survivors, they became leaders. Additionally, as will be seen in the proverbs, there is some dry mirth in the sayings. This shows that a sense of humor is vital to any survival. It reminds us that finding a way to smile in the face of tragic circumstance is a coping mechanism. It can be the way we get through. The lessons learned from history can be applied to our leadership, and who we are today.
Who Am I? Leadership and the Self and Others

Although they don’t speak it anymore, this language influenced my family’s values. I have found numerous connections to my own worldview and culture (which come from my family) and the worldview the Gaels exhibited and influenced through their language. For example, leadership as it relates to the self (inward reflection) and how we use our leadership with others (outward reflection) can benefit from lessons found within the Gaelic language. In the same way that the word “home” shows the effectiveness of language, there is depth and truth in the proverbs that bring more nuances of meaning to leadership skills.

Philosophy

Most of the sayings reflect the Gael’s close ties to nature; this proverb is no exception. It is an astute observation that can be applied to many situations. For example, we often pay more attention to the noisiest thoughts in life when it is the still small voice that can bring the most wisdom.

The Gaelic language also displays the worldview of the Gaels in the structure of the language. In English, we own everything we talk about: “That’s mine,” “This is my dog,” or “This is my house.” But the Gaels recognized that material things were passing things, and so they would never speak of a dog, a house, a car or any possession as “mine.” Instead, to say these things in Gaelic, the literal translations are “This dog is at me” or “This house is at me.” This even applied to the language: “Gaelic is at me.” However, because relationships are personal, lasting and belonging, they say “This is my daughter,” “This is my son,” or “This is my mother.” In this way, we can see the worldview of a people who valued their relationships much more than any passing circumstance.

They also saw bad things as coming on them, instead of owning them. For example, instead of “I have a cold” or “I am sick, I’m doing poorly,” the Gaels said literally, “It is a cold that is on me,” “It is sickness that is on me,” or “It is poorly at me.” In contrast to that, their belief in manifest destiny shows in the language structure. Where we would say in English “I am a teacher,” “I am a doctor,” or “I am a singer,” the Gaels owned it from within and said, “It is a teacher that is in me,” “It is a doctor that is in me,” and “It is a singer that is in me.” In this way, the changes that life brought were not as difficult to accept. The things that really mattered—the relationships, the talents—remained. This way of thinking showed that your talents are also owned—not just something
you chose and learned, but something that springs from within. The interaction with nature then seems natural, when the language structure allows for differentiation between what is just passing, and what is God-given.

Another example is the Gaelic word *seinn*, pronounced “shine.” It means “sing.” It even feels good to say it. And the Gaels used it not only to talk about singing, but also to refer to playing an instrument of any kind. “Sing on your fiddle,” or “Sing on the harp.” This addresses a passion, and correlates how the passionate aspect of the Gaelic language touches leadership. When we ask people in English to “play the violin for me,” it doesn’t hold the emotional plea of “Will you sing on your fiddle?” Perhaps it is the Gael in me, but I deeply respond to this phrasing of words. It inspires me to hope I could tell others, “S’e toisiche a’ thann, agus bhi mi seinn air an uireas agam”—which is to say, “It is a leader in me, and I will sing on my leadership.” The language’s ability to expose worldview in these ways forms the basis for all the other uses of language as leadership through Gaelic.

*Ethics*

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chan iongnadh boladh nan sgadan a bhith den t-soitheach sam bi iad.</td>
<td>No wonder the cast smells of the herrings that it holds.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Storytelling may have been high context and often tongue-in-cheek, but honesty is a value that comes through many of the sayings. In this proverb, there is recognition of the inevitable. It reminds me of the verse that says, “Be sure your sin will find you out” (Num. 32:23). This is also the cultural way of the clans. Their laws were not written but spoken, and a spoken word was taken very seriously. The people swore fealty to their chieftain and lived by his judgments and laws. The language still reflects reference to this method of governance, using the terms of long ago when discussing justice and duty.

According to Crann Tara (2006), “Gaelic has a rich oral and written tradition, called *beul-aithris*. The language preserves the knowledge and adherence to ‘pre-feudal’ tribal laws and customs (as represented by expressions of ‘tuatha’ and ‘duthchas’)” (para. 14). This way the language preserves the ethics of the ancient Gaels. By using the same words to express ideas about justice, and right and wrong, words that have no equivalent today, the language provides a link to the belief system of long ago. Some knowledge is timeless. Since in leadership we decide how to apply those things, it follows that using language and saving language would be an ethical choice on the part of a leader.


Learning

Gaelic was once a primary language in Scotland. According to Flyn (2014), “until the 18th century it was widely spoken in the Highlands and Islands—for 290,000 Scots it was their first and only tongue—but a government ban on all elements of Highland culture after the Jacobite rebellion started 350 years of decline” (para. 1). And it was spoken outside of Scotland, too. Moore (2014) says that “at its peak in the mid-nineteenth century, Gaelic was the third most spoken language in Canada, after English and French. However, the language sharply declined since that period” (para. 1).

In order for Gaelic to make a comeback, and thrive in places like mainland Scotland, the current government needed leadership and has partnered with Bòrd na Gàidhlig. The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 (the Act), passed by the Scottish Parliament, seeks to secure the status of Gaelic as an official language of Scotland, commanding equal respect to the English language. Among other things, the Act requires Bòrd na Gàidhlig to prepare and submit to the Scottish Ministers a National Gaelic Language Plan.

Because of efforts both in Scotland and in Nova Scotia, the decline in Gaelic speakers is beginning to turn. The implementation of programs to save the Gaelic language has required some creative problem-solving, which is nothing new to the Gaels, who have been doing this in order to survive and keep their culture alive for centuries. I see creative problem-solving as a leadership competency. It shows the ingenuity of a culture.

Creative Problem-Solving

This proverb expresses the joy of learning. I think of puirt a’ beul or “mouth music” when I hear it. Puirt a’ beul appeared when the Highland Gaelic culture was being repressed, after the Jacobite risings in the year 1745. This is when everything that encouraged a love of Gaelic culture was forbidden. Bagpipes were outlawed, fiddling and dancing were not permitted, and the language was discouraged in public. Wearing the tartan was against the law. The creativity of the Highlanders emerges at this time. The people loved their music and dance so much, they could not bear to be without a way to use music and
song. They developed this kind of singing they called puirt a beul that provided the fast-paced beat for the dances, and they continued to dance using this unique kind of singing in spite of the laws. Later, this music served as instruments when the people were too poor to have any in their community.

This is creativity at work, and it is a lesson in leadership. Sometimes improvising brings about the best result. This example displays the value of flexibility. Instead of merely complaining, or giving in, these folk found a lively way to cope with adversity. No doubt the endorphins produced from the music and dance made them healthier and happier, and thus gave them stamina required to survive. Leaders must recognize when a creative solution will breathe life back into their followers, and with it, longevity.

**Communication**

Communication is the heart of Gaelic culture. A movie adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson’s novel *Kidnapped* gave evidence of the Highlanders’ worldview after David Balfour had experienced the culture of the Highlands. Alan Breck notes that he had “acquired some poetry for his soul” (Coppola, 1995). This sums up how the Gaels felt about their pipes, their song and dance, and their culture in general. Just this morning I saw on Facebook that an acquaintance of mine in Scotland (friends only because we share this love of Gaelic and belong to a Gaelic group) posted part of a song I also used in my portfolio:

```
These are my mountains, and this is my glen
The braes of my childhood will know me again
No land’s ever claimed me tho’ far I did roam
For these are my mountains, and I’m going home

And how they will greet me my ain kith and kin
The night round the ingle, old sangs will be sung
At last I’ll be hearing my ain mother tongue.
```

~Traditional Scottish Song

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~Traditional Scottish Song

The language keeps this love of home in the forefront of the poems and the songs. The language is the basis for knowing you have come home. The Emigrants brought it with them, especially to Nova Scotia, where they still hold on, although home is now in the new world.
Mentor/Coaching

The traditions of the culture are carried on through the language. This proverb implies that there is more to do than just look pretty in life; you must also learn survival skills. In the old days, the Highland ladies all knew how to make a plaid, the traditional garb of the Highlanders, which when belted became the kilt. It was a long piece of wool cloth, woven tightly and shrunk to keep out the cold, wet Scottish climate. It had specific colors signifying the clan (the tartan). The colors were made permanent by soaking the wool in urine. Then the women would dry it and shrink it by slapping it on a table in a specific rhythm and singing songs to help the dreary (smelly) task. Known as Waulking Songs, or working songs, these ditties were nonsensical but were used when making the garments. Young girls learned these skills while singing the rhythms, much like railroad workers kept time in swinging their hammers. The sound of the language was more important than the meaning. This is just one example of how the Gaels loved the sound of words. These songs are now kept alive (without urine-soaked wool) in Milling-Frolics, where the beat and song are more important than the kind of cloth they use to keep time.

Norman Vincent Peale (2012) says that “the more you lose yourself in something bigger than yourself, the more energy you will have” (p. 35). This is the best reason to learn how to interact with a culture. It implies that not only will you gain for yourself, but that by learning from others we can gain for others. The Waulking Songs maintain a way of life. Singing them is a skill not yet lost, a beautiful way to maintain tradition. This is another means by which to build identity.

Social Responsibility

Highland hospitality is a well-known and important responsibility in the tradition of this culture. Highlanders were hospitable even to their enemies if needed. On the other hand, the culture is built around ceilidhs. The word ceilidh translates as “visit,” which means that visiting has so often been associated with music and lively interaction of singing and dancing that now “house-parties” is how most people interpret the word. The young and the old attend a
Ceilidh; all participate in the music. This is also an important social responsibility value held in Gaelic culture. Inclusion was community wide.

Where Am I Going? Organizational Leadership

Leadership in language relates to organizational development in many ways. The foundations already discussed show the underpinnings of how leaders interact with organizations because of what they bring to the position (the “where do I come from?” and “who am I?”). Gaelic proverbs bring insight to leadership behaviors interacting with organizational development, policy, behavior, change, and assessment.

**Development**

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<th>Gaidhlig</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bidh mir a’ ghill’ èasgaidh air gach mèis.</td>
<td>The smart fellow’s share is on every dish.</td>
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Leaders must be able to relate to every aspect of the organization. In order for that to occur, members of an organization should feel that they can approach or interact with the leader. This speaks to the maintenance and development of relationships, the kind of relationships that benefit the organization, whether they are with people or with other organizations.

**Legal/Policy**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is sleamhainn leac doras an taigh mhòir.</td>
<td>The chief’s house has a slippery doorstep.</td>
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It is tricky to keep everyone happy. This also ties to ethical behavior, as diplomacy requires more than policy. When it comes to policy, it often seems that new policy creates new problems. Leadership must understand and remain true to the organizational mission, while creating policy that protects and progresses the mission.

**Behavior**

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<tr>
<td>Cha dean ‘Tapadh leis an fhidhlear’ am fhidhlear a phàigheadh.</td>
<td>A “thank you” doesn’t pay the fiddler.</td>
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It isn’t enough to just feel grateful. Gratitude is experienced when used in a complete process. Part of the process is feeling thankful, but the thankfulness
should produce an action, some positive change that can impact circumstance. This is the biblical view of gratitude. When the tenth leper came back to thank Jesus, Jesus’ reply implies action: “Where are the nine?” (Luke 17:17). Leaders must exemplify and inspire the process of gratitude in action.

**Change**

Effective change comes in increments. Leaders must choose when and where change must occur, and in order to “land the tree” in the best position, leaders must adjust the changes in such a way as to help the organization through the fall out. Sometimes the leader is clearing the path for bigger and better things, but understanding this concept of incremental change affects the relationship of the leader and the members of the organization.

**Assessment**

 Maintaining tools and methods of evaluation are the key to the success of any endeavor. Leaders must have a plan to check the progress and performance of their organization in order to be sure they are in line with the mission of the organization.

**What Does It All Mean? Language as Leadership**

This view of leadership from a perspective of a language that tells me where I come from also helps me see what I bring with me to my present leadership. Like The Emigrants, it will always be a leader’s job to decide what to keep and what to leave behind. And like The Emigrants, a leader’s behavior stems from leading forward while maintaining ties with her origins, or without losing the love of home. Home will always hold our most precious values, the ones we take with us, and we look back to home for comfort, for reassurance, and for direction when we are unsure of the new path.

For Christian leaders, the lesson is this: we are headed home. We find within our lexicon the words that touch hearts, because of shared vision and direction. Christian leaders can learn to find the cultural values that resonate with their groups. In this way they can use language itself to build the bonds that
promote success in leadership and provide the means for the emotional journey of going home.

References