"I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world"

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One of the most powerful scenes in the 1989 drama Dead Poets Society is when Todd Anderson recites an *impromptu* poem. It takes place in English teacher John Keating’s poetry classroom. After Todd stammers that he didn’t do the verse writing assignment previously assigned, Mr. Keating prods him into verbally creating a poem in front of the class. When Todd begins to turn to his laughing classmates, Mr. Keating says, “Forget them, forget them! Stay with the blanket. Tell me about that blanket.” He gestures for Todd to close his eyes once more and continue speaking. Todd finishes his recitation, opens his eyes to see Mr. Keating kneeling a few feet away from him. While Todd’s classmates clap and cheer, Mr. Keating whispers to Todd, “don’t you forget this.”

I didn’t forget. This scene has stayed with me for over twenty five years. I first saw Dead Poets Society when I was fifteen, living in Metro Manila, Philippines. It didn’t take long for my teenage self to know that Mr. John Keating was the sort of adult I wanted in my life. Mr. Keating is a transformational leader. He inspires. He also pushes and prods, challenges his students to question their comfort zones and the received wisdom they get from the adults, authority figures, and institutions that are prominent in their lives. For many, comfort means silence and obedience to dictates and rules set by older, more legitimate authorities. For a few, like Charlie Dalton in other scenes in the film, comfort equals playing the expected role of reckless, ne’er-do-well. Whatever may equal comfort to the young students of Welton Academy, Mr. Keating stirs them to seek their own voices, challenges them to create own stakes through art, philosophy, and literature.

I still want that sort of guidance from a Mr. Keating adult figure. It reminds me of the type of leadership I long to experience as a follower. It also serves a guide for the type of leadership I would like to give to others. Transformational leaders are people who inspire and motivate, push and nudge, in gentle and jarring ways, so that others can see and become their better selves. The fruits of such work do not always come immediately, all at once, or with replicable, causal links. The focus of such effort, as I see it, is always on the development and formation of the other person. Clarity of purpose, trained on a servant ethic, is key. I grapple with these various threads involved in transforming others—service, motivation, inspiration, development, trust, relationship, equity, respect—in my capacity as an academic librarian functioning in mentoring, outreach, marketing, instruction, and reference.

Mr. Keating’s words—“don’t you forget this”—reminds me that service begins and ends with people. Inspiring others to rise, do, and be more than what is immediately comfortable is the true heart of leadership.

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