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LISA L. COLEMAN

Being There for Honors Leadership

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Southeastern Oklahoma State University

In his 1986 article, “Honors Program Leadership: The Right Stuff,” Rew Godow, Jr., makes a compelling argument for honors program director as Renaissance man or *homo universalis*, someone who is able to do many things well, undaunted by the fact that his job, like the job of astronauts evoked by Godow’s title, exacts commitment, ability, and sheer guts along with daunting paper work, management and budgeting expertise, the habit of building and maintaining a constituency, and the entrepreneurship required to sell a program.

Looking to my eight-year administrative relationship with the Honors Program of my university, Coordinator for two years and Director for six, I see that I have played all the roles that Godow tells us belong to his ideal “Academic Leader”: “Lover of Wisdom,” “Curriculum Reformer,” “General Administrator,” “Entrepreneur,” “Admissions Officer,” and “Student Activities Coordinator”—some with a greater degree of success than others. But as a kind of postmodern supplement to the characteristics of leadership that Godow proposed back in 1986 and to the Renaissance model that they presuppose, I would like to put forward an alternative—a kind of philosophical anti-model that reflects a simpler, more power-diffuse, collaborative role for the director of honors in the twenty-first century.

Using as my guide the existential movie *Being There* and the character, Chance, played by Peter Sellers, I am figuratively pointing toward what I take to be one of the common ways that honors directors begin and stay in their positions, especially perhaps in smaller institutions, more by chance than by design. In such cases this surrealistically inflected movie artfully provides us with some basic maxims that can facilitate the growth and development of our programs, the investment of the university in those programs, and our own growth as honors directors.

Being There is the tale of Chauncey Gardiner—Chance—a distinguished looking middle-aged man of uncertain intellectual means who is forced by the death of his employer to leave his sheltered life-long role as the man’s impeccably dressed gardener and go out into the world of late 60s Washington, D.C. to fend for himself. Unable to read or write and without a

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car, education, or experience anywhere outside his garden, Chance's knowledge has been gleaned from gardening and from watching a television that he controls using a remote—a tactic for switching off unpleasant stimuli that he unsuccessfully tries to apply to the teeming life around him when he leaves his protected environment for the very first time.

Due to a series of fortuitous misadventures, Chance is first injured by a limousine and then rescued and befriended by its occupant, the wife of a fabulously wealthy Wall Street tycoon and presidential advisor. The wife, played sympathetically by Shirley McClain, hopes to stave off a lawsuit by taking him home to the family's estate and the private doctors caring for her terminally ill husband. Choking out his name and occupation ("Chance, the gardener") while downing the alcoholic drink McClain offers him, McClain thinks she hears "Chauncey Gardiner"—and thus, due to her misperception, he is renamed.

Misperception follows misperception as Chauncey is taken for a distinguished, down-on-his-luck business professional. McClain and her dying husband are both smitten with this unassuming peaceful man who speaks so simply about caring for a garden when quizzed on the economy of the United States. Taking his gardening maxims for metaphors, the two ennoble his advice into simple words of wisdom fit for the ears of the President and the American public, and they provide him with private and public venues whereby he may influence both.

Of course, the movie is satirical, and I do not mean to suggest that the supplemental roles honors directors play should include comedian or genius savant (though either role might be helpful), but underlying the rather unbelievable premise I have put forward for you, there is a message that may be of value to us.

Jerzy Kosinski, whose 1970 novel inspired the screenplay he wrote for the 1979 film, does not allow Chauncey to stay in the realm of the ordinary human. When the car that injures Chauncey drives away, the camera homes in on the license plate, which enigmatically displays the letters ER, not the much later 90's emergency room TV drama, but perhaps a reference to Plato's "Myth of Er," the last chapter of *The Republic*, in which the hero, Er, dies but then revives to relate back to us what awaits in the life beyond this one. In the world of the dead he sees purified souls being allowed to choose their own lot in their next life rather than having it decreed by the Fates. Yet despite this opportunity, in their haste they often choose poorly, snatching up the role of powerful tyrant without seeing that they are destined to eat their own children.

The "Myth of Er" tells us that there is a cycle to life and that we have a larger role to play in life and death than we may know. *Being There*, echoing this cyclical perspective, takes place in the winter, with Chauncey saying

many times that there is much to do to prepare for spring. As long as the roots are there and properly nourished, he says time and time again, the plant will return. It will come forth in spring, prosper in summer, and die back again in fall and winter, but the roots are critical; they must be nurtured above all in every season or the plant will ultimately wither and die.

So what do life cycles and roots have to do with honors programs? I don't think that the cycles and roots of all programs are identical, but I am certain that all programs have them, even the very newest seedling programs. As I see it, it is the job of the director to understand these cycles and to seek out and nurture those roots. The roots could be honors alumni, the incoming group of freshmen, the involved and committed sophomores, juniors, and seniors, or the honors faculty or administrative advocates. The seasons could be reflected by the waxing and waning of honors student time and commitment as they negotiate their way through their college career, the spring could come in the boom years of generous state or private funding, while winter might arrive in the wake of tragedies like 9/11 that diminish those same coffers. By nurturing the roots, honors directors no longer have to snatch up that all powerful lot in the course of these seasons: the roots will gain strength when there is sun and rain enough, and the program will prosper.

Taking these lessons of cultivation and chance from Chauncey, sometimes simple wisdom, a desire for service and the ability to let others do what they do well—including students—may be enough. While in another world the Honors Director may be able to play all the roles critical to honors—be all things to all people—in this one it may not be feasible, possible, or even desirable. Of course the director must carefully prepare, understand the exigencies of time, personnel, and key players, but the director must also existentially *be there*, open to the *kairos*, the *chance* of the moment—the opportunities of human circumstance which can be pushed through when they present themselves, even when they are not necessarily part of “the plan.”

In the closing scenes of *Being There*, the wealthy Wall Street mogul dies, and his widow contemplates her future with Chauncey; meanwhile, the gossip of D.C. speaks of making him President. Chauncey for his part, sporting what appears to be a Magritte-inspired bowler hat, is depicted walking near a pond. He takes a turn toward the water and walks *on* it, measuring the depth of the pond with his umbrella. In this moment of wonder, this allusion to miracle, the movie ends.

Being receptive to the moment, to the possibility of something new, something unexpected may bring us the miracle, the inspiration for our program, our students, and ourselves that we do not even know we seek. Of course there must also be planning and planting, of course we need to be prepared to play many roles to be successful in honors, but leadership can also

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consist of nurturing and being receptive to the talents, abilities, and good will of others who wish to make an investment as well. Unlike Chauncey, unlike the astronauts and pilots depicted in *The Right Stuff*, we may not be superhuman, but we can do what we can. We can be there for honors, nourishing the roots, knowledgeable of natural, economic, and academic cycles, trusting in the moment—and ourselves.

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