From Beauty to Wisdom

By Amy Shortt

A reflection on how encounters with beauty can strengthen the way leaders pay attention, make meaning, and respond to complexity.

Across cultures and throughout history, beauty has shaped the way people see themselves, others, and the world around them. A piece of music can communicate what words cannot. A painting can unsettle what we thought we understood. A poem can give voice to something we've always felt but never been able to name. A breathtaking landscape can awaken a sense of wonder that momentarily quiets the noise of everyday life. Beauty can capture our attention, expand our perception, and invite us into deeper ways of seeing.

An encounter with beauty offers a place to begin. Reflection helps us understand what it awakens; practice carries that awareness into the choices we make. In this way, encounters with beauty can become formative, shaping not only what we know but who we are becoming.

Beauty awakens. Reflection and practice make the encounter formative.

This movement from encounter to formation also matters for leadership.

Leadership is not limited to a title or an executive role. We lead ourselves in how we respond to experience, and we lead others whenever our choices shape their lives or work.

The Center for Creative Leadership writes: "AI isn't replacing leadership. It's revealing what leadership must become." As AI becomes increasingly capable of generating information, analyzing data, and solving technical problems, distinctly human capacities such as discernment, presence, empathy, courage, humility, and judgment become more valuable.

Organizations invest significant resources in executive coaching, leadership competencies, strategic thinking, communication, and performance development. These investments matter, helping leaders build the knowledge and skills needed to navigate an increasingly complex world.

Over the past several decades, many organizations that develop leaders have expanded their focus beyond technical competence alone. They recognize that effective leadership is deeply connected to the inner life of the leader: to self-awareness, resilience, character, purpose, adaptability, and emotional intelligence. This shift toward developing the whole person is an important and encouraging evolution.

Every day, we are being shaped by our successes and failures, our relationships, the habits we repeat, the stories we tell ourselves, the technology we use, the media we consume, the conversations we have, and whatever captures, and keeps, our attention. Whether we notice it or not, these experiences influence how we perceive the world, respond to others, make decisions, and ultimately, how we lead.

> *The question isn't whether we are being formed. The question is whether we are participating intentionally in that formation.*

The Formed Leader helps leaders participate intentionally in that formation. Through facilitated encounters with the arts and humanities, participants use guided attention, reflection, and practice to translate what an experience awakens into how they live and lead. This work engages the whole person—body, mind, spirit, and voice. It begins with beauty.

By beauty, I do not mean prettiness or aesthetic pleasure alone. I mean encounters with truth, goodness, wonder, grief, dignity, or meaning that arrest our attention and ask us to look again at ourselves and the world. Beauty, in this broader sense, awakens perception.

Throughout history, music, art, literature, architecture, nature, and story have done more than entertain or inform. They have expanded imagination, deepened empathy, challenged assumptions, and opened new ways of seeing ourselves and the world around us. Beauty captures our attention, interrupts our routines, and creates space for reflection.

These experiences can become more than moments of inspiration; they can become formation experiences. Reflection is the bridge between encounter and formation. It is the space in which a fleeting experience begins to reshape how we see and who we become. Intentional practice then integrates that shift, carrying it beyond the moment and into how we live and lead.

Imagine a leadership team listening to Mozart's *Fantasia in d minor*, K. 397, not as a musical performance to analyze, but as a human experience to inhabit. As the music unfolds, participants encounter a striking range of emotions. Moments of melancholy and grief give way to lightness and joy, only to shift again into uncertainty, urgency, playfulness, and longing. Rather than simply listening, they are invited to notice what these changing emotional landscapes awaken within themselves. Like leadership itself, life is rarely lived in a single emotional state.

The music also pauses for a full measure at several points. Participants are invited to remain in that silence and notice their own response before discussing what the pause might mean. Afterward, the group considers a saying often attributed to Viktor Frankl, though its source is uncertain:

> *"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."*

Emotional awareness can become a doorway to wiser self-leadership. As participants become aware of what they are experiencing in both body and mind, the pause becomes an opportunity not to suppress emotion, but to attend to it, reflect upon it, and intentionally choose a wise response. In this guided encounter, participants hear the silence, notice what it stirs in them, and reflect on how a pause might help them respond more wisely as leaders.

Other formation experiences offered through The Formed Leader follow the same pattern. Norman Rockwell's painting *The Problem We All Live With* awakens reflection on courage, justice, and moral imagination. John Prine's folk ballad "Hello in There" deepens awareness of loneliness, dignity, and human connection. The story and images of Berlin's Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church—its ruined tower standing beside a new sanctuary—prompt reflection on resilience and reconciliation: what we choose to preserve, what we choose to release, and how we lead through change.

In many ways, this can be understood as a simple progression.

Beauty awakens. It catches our attention, deepens our awareness, and invites us to see ourselves and others more fully.

Formation shapes. Through intentional reflection and practice, these encounters gradually shape the whole person—body, mind, spirit, and voice.

Wisdom guides. As our capacities for discernment, humility, empathy, courage, judgment, and presence mature, we become better equipped to navigate complexity and pursue what is good.

Leadership expresses. What has been formed within us is ultimately revealed through how we influence, serve, decide, and lead.

This progression reflects a simple conviction: leadership competencies are always exercised through the person leading. Technical expertise matters, but so do character, emotional regulation, presence, discernment, courage, humility, and wisdom. These capacities shape not only what leaders do, but how they do it.

Leadership development requires both competencies and formation. The Formed Leader offers facilitated experiences that organizations can bring to their leaders and teams as a way to invest in that formation.

The pursuit of wisdom is not a destination but a lifelong practice of becoming, and the quality of leadership can never be separated from the quality of the person who leads. Technology will continue to evolve.

The future of leadership may depend less on what leaders know and do than on who they are becoming. Whether that future leads toward human flourishing will depend, in large part, on the formation of the human being behind the leader.

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Wisdom guides.	Leadership expresses.

Bring The Formed Leader to your organization.

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