

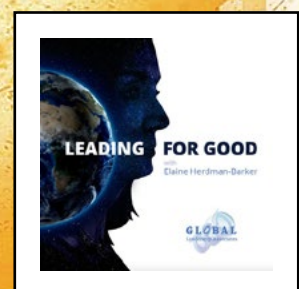
Power and isolation, and whether service is still a function of good leadership

Living Well Together – People and Planet

What is it to be a convener of people? Where do leaders find meaning in it all? Is there still room to talk about the place of character? **Mark Leishman** worked in the private office of the then Prince of Wales, now King Charles. His grandfather was Lord Reith, founder of the British Broadcasting Corporation. Today, Mark is executive director of the Royal Warrant Holders Association. He speaks with Elaine Herdman-Barker, Co-Founder of Global Leadership Associates, to talk about his proximity to power and what he's learnt on the way.

www.gla.global/leadingforgood


© Global Leadership Associates



It's a pleasure to be in conversation today with Mark Leishman – a dear friend who's worked alongside highly influential, prominent people... And on matters that really matter! His background is newspaper and broadcast journalism, with roles at the Sunday Times and the BBC. He's been a member of several charity boards and – for nearly 15 years – worked in the private office of the then Prince of Wales, now King Charles. Today, Mark is the director of the Royal Warrant Holders Association.

Mark's proximity to power gives him a unique view of the problems besetting our world. Today, we'll discuss what he's learnt about leadership – and a little of his personal journey too. Welcome, Mark.

Elaine, thank you so much for having me.



It's a pleasure. Let's get going by elaborating a little on your background. Some of your roles are quite rare, aren't they? They don't often appear on job searches...

That's quite true - although I was approached by a headhunting company when I found my role with the Royal Warrant Holders Association... It's an area just becomes more and more interesting, in terms of what it is about the monarchy that still means so much to so many. By way of example, there was one leading company that decided to take all the warrants off their products and packaging... Perhaps they felt it was out of date, or no longer relevant to their customer needs. But such was the response from suppliers and shoppers, the warrants were all back on again within six months.

Oh! They thought again? And in terms of your understanding of our topic Mark, **how does Leading for Good, relate to the monarchy & more broadly?**

When I saw the name of your series, Elaine, I thought it was simple but effective...But what does it actually mean on a day-to-day basis? Because leadership has become such a familiar term, globally, and in so many walks of life. So it's a great idea to circle back and say, "What do we actually mean? What are we trying to describe here?" And I like 'Leadership for Good' because it's

positive. It throws up a whole series of challenges in the complex world in which we live and work. For me, a lot of leaders – certainly some of those I've observed – seem to have a need to create a legacy. I think that's an important area for us to explore, as human beings...Because you quite quickly get to asking, "Where's the meaning? What's the point of all this?"

And what IS the point of all this?

I'll only speak for myself here, but as one becomes older, and I hope a little wiser, there's a sense in which your life is really very short. And the important thing, is what are you going to hand on? I remember one politician who used to go around saying, "Never mind about money, don't hand on your money – hand on your skills; that's the most important thing.

Pass on your skills?

Pass on your skills – take all you’ve learned in life and make sure other people, or one other person, gets the benefit of that. Because that way, you can feel good about what you’ve done. And with a bit of luck, one or two other people might also feel the same way.

And how do such leaders pursue establishing their legacy?

One of the things I’ve learnt about is the strength that’s to be found in pragmatism. In pragmatism and practicality, in addressing problems with a group... Rather than rushing off, say, and creating a review group, or writing or commissioning a report. In other words, I don’t think we’re giving ourselves enough credit for what we actually know, and for where our instincts lie.

I've heard you speak before about the power of convening, of bringing people together to talk about issues. Is that something you're referring to here? When you talk about coming together as a group?

Yes, it's one of the things that the then HRH The Prince of Wales became well-known for. This is actually a very practical example of the sort of thing I'm talking about in terms of leadership: bringing people together. So it's not necessarily a good idea to rush off and set up a group, or a task force, or a steering group, or a review committee, or whatever...

There is, however, enormous strength to be gained by drawing people out from behind their email and phones to get them around a table. I was working as a private secretary for the best part of 15 years, and – time and time again – one of the ways you could begin to get some movement, in terms of resolving apparently intractable difficulties, was getting people to meet around a table. Because, very often, people are exchanging with each other or even shouting at each other, but they've never actually met.

Could you give us an example of that, Mark?

Funnily enough, I remember one particular example around fisheries. It was quite sensitive, because it was very difficult for a lot of people. And they'd been taking public positions and writing emails – quite understandably... But no one had actually said, "Let's all just get together!" When they finally did, we suddenly had about 20 people meeting around a table with their various interests. They went on to meet about six or eight times – privately; no great fanfare or anything. And they found ways to work together, which they'd never done before... Why did that work particularly well? Well, they quickly found they had much more in common than they ever thought possible. So that's a little act of leadership.

And it seems so incredibly obvious, doesn't it, to bring people together? And yet, in our society, there's a lot of talk about isolationism, of competitiveness, of political division... So it sometimes feels as though we're a world away from that natural human conversation. And I wonder, Mark, if to be a good convener requires something other than just a power base... Because it's drawing on a different attitude of mind, isn't it? **A different attention for relationships and a receptivity, perhaps, to something that you might not want to hear from a group of people?**

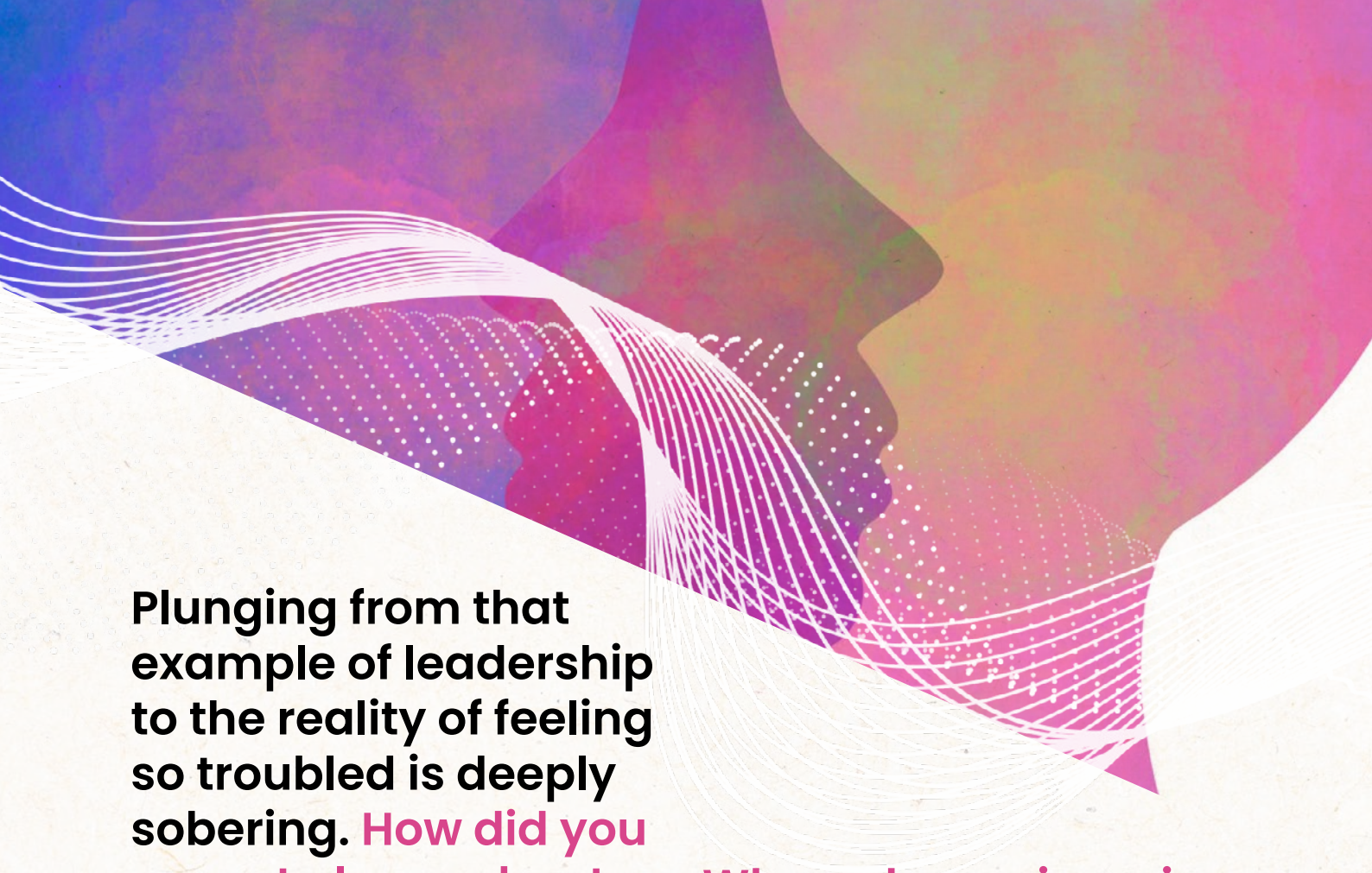
Yes, I think there's a great deal in that, Elaine. I also think there's a degree of modesty involved in all this. I always remember, when I was working at Clarence House, there was a meeting of the G20 group. It was taking place at Buckingham Palace and almost all the leaders went to see His Royal Highness. They had quite big discussions about sustainability, the environment and so on.

What was really interesting, though, was how a number of them kind of fell upon each other, not having seen each other for quite a long time. Suddenly you got the most famous political names in the world congregating! And most of them greeting each other like long-lost friends. It was almost impossible to imagine a more powerful group of political leaders in that same room. And yet, there was that kind of much more personal interaction.

That's a really lovely example of how, whatever our level of influence, we all need other people... How we benefit from warmth and friendship. Because we can all feel isolated, can't we? That isolation can be quite debilitating, particularly in a leadership position. And even quite dangerous!

Yes, very much so. Actually, the best example I can think of was my mother's father, John Reith – Lord Reith of the BBC. I didn't see a lot of it because I was only nine when he died. I've read a lot that was written about him, though, and indeed one or two books he wrote himself. He was a very unhappy individual for a lot of his life. And yet, his leadership abilities are noteworthy. First of all, recognising what public service broadcasting was in the early-1920s. In fact, there's quite a well-known story that – when he

wrote his application – he had no idea what broadcasting meant. It was something the American companies were involved in; the wireless companies as they then were. So to take that organisation and build, develop and shape it, and take it through all sorts of extraordinary times, such as the General Strike... And to leave that legacy was quite incredible. But, as an individual, he was profoundly unhappy, and very disturbed a lot of the time – and very little solace at home.



Plunging from that example of leadership to the reality of feeling so troubled is deeply sobering. How did you come to learn about his life?

Because he and my late mother both wrote about it in their books. And to be a leader of... I mean, he was one of the top three people in the UK at that time and went on to develop enormous fame. But not because he was seeking it! Rather, because of the way he was leading the public service broadcasting, and developing the concept, which others then followed. But then where did he find himself? And who was asking him the questions about his form of leadership; what he was doing? And why? But neither he nor my grandmother had many friends, and I sometimes wonder about that isolation you mentioned – and where he went with it.

Where do you imagine he went with it?

Well, with some evidence to back it up, again through his writing, I can say he found faith in God and spent an awful lot of time thinking about not just religious practice, but about a human being's relationship with the Almighty. Whether you believe in God or you absolutely don't, it was such a dominating force that it was impossible to ignore. But then that, in itself, can be lonely too... Because nobody apparently answers back; nobody responds. And I know that some people would profoundly disagree with that, and that's fine. I'm not being critical about it; I'm just talking about my grandfather's experience.

Did anything else sustain him alongside that belief?

Funnily enough, my mother described him as a pragmatist, with the benchmarks of, "Will it work?" and, "Is it efficient?" That's what took him through his leadership of the BBC, and industry after that. But he was a very tall, physical individual too... He was six foot six, and used to go walking up in Speyside, in Strathspey in the Cairngorms. He'd often walk to the top of Cairngorm, because he felt he'd be closer to God standing on the top of the hill. So it's a very complex and confusing picture... Particularly when you're nine years old, trying to make sense of this giant man who only ever wore black, three-piece suits. Oh, and a white three-piece suit in the summer... That was the only concession. In fact, he wrote that he always enjoyed midsummer's day because it was that bit closer to winter coming.

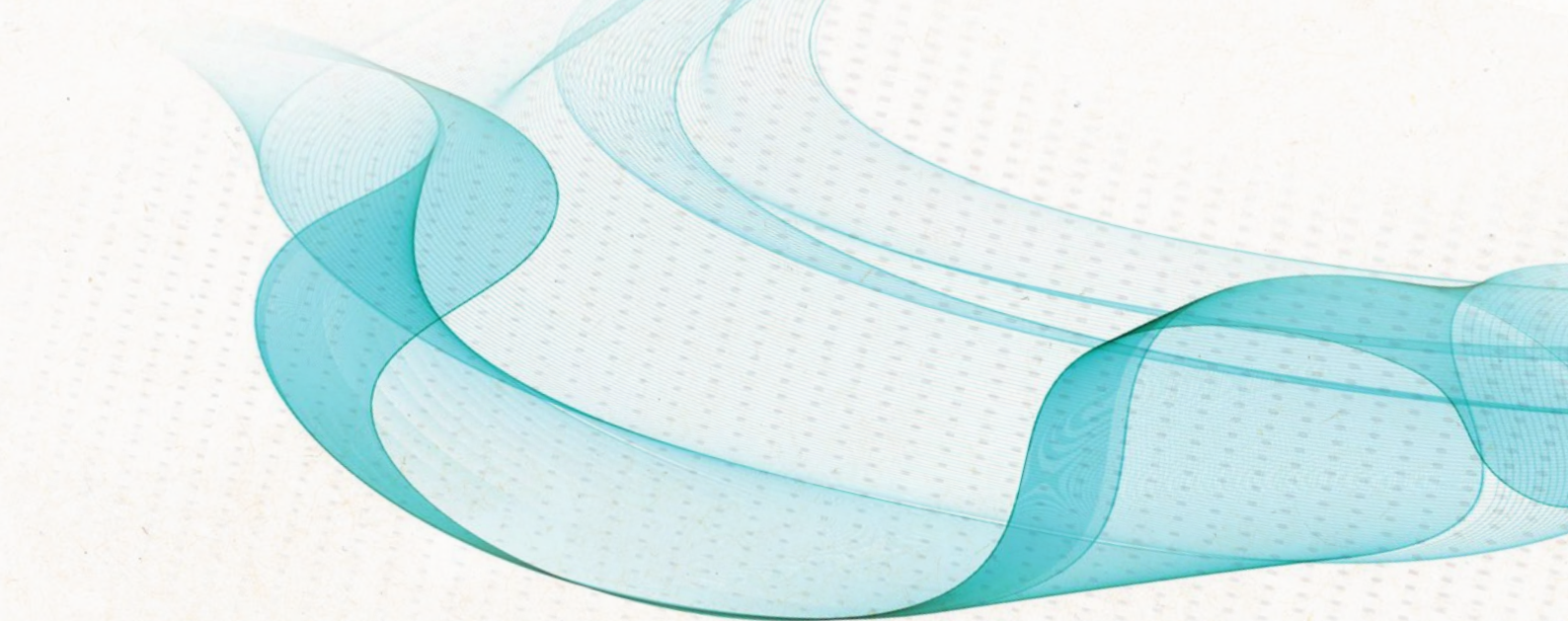
That's rather a touching image: him waiting to come out of his white suit into his winter black... Quite a character your grandfather.

I think by June he might have resorted to a white suit, but probably only in July and August! Anyway, I'm slightly off the leadership point, but I think there's something about character, which I feel is missing in a lot of our leadership thinking discussions.

In what way?

I mean the place of character. And strangely enough, John Reith was an engineer by training. He went to work in the North British Locomotive workshops in an area of Glasgow... For five years, he studied and learned about engineering. And actually, that's why he was able to shut down the BBC transmitter when the BBC moved out of Savoy Hill – because he knew exactly how to do it. So yes, of course he was a brilliant administrator, but he was also the most immense character, one that nobody could

ignore... Whether you loved him or loathed him. And I'm a bit concerned about the way we don't seem to pay sufficient attention, I would suggest now, to all that. With the rise and rise of technology, we're at risk of becoming just a bit too linear. And that seems to be a risk to which we should pay attention... We're not created as linear beings; we're created as individuals. And that means a whole series of things, including what some might describe as mind, body and spirit.



I have two questions on that... First, what is it you're referring to about our linearity? Because some world figures come to mind, who are larger than life, almost unbelievably so... The other question I have is: what effect has all this family background had on you? How has it shaped the leader you are in the places you've been? So, I have a two-pronged question there!

Well, I suppose it would be disingenuous to suggest that the family background has had no effect at all. I think, though, that one has to be very clear that somebody's life is somebody's life – and this is my life. I'm incredibly fortunate to be doing what I'm doing, and to have had the opportunities.

The point about the linear, however, is a very general one – and it's not just about famous and most powerful leaders. It's about all of us. Every time we send an email, every time we look at the phone, every time that we go on a laptop... I don't want to sound negative about it. What we're now able to do with technology, almost without thinking, is simply unbelievable. Incredible, actually, in the true sense of the word. But these are technical systems – not humans. And although they're created by humans, I've been struck by their fallibility in some recent crises. For example, a major airport had to shut down. There's utter chaos when the systems stop working... The technical infrastructure doesn't work; something goes wrong with the programme.

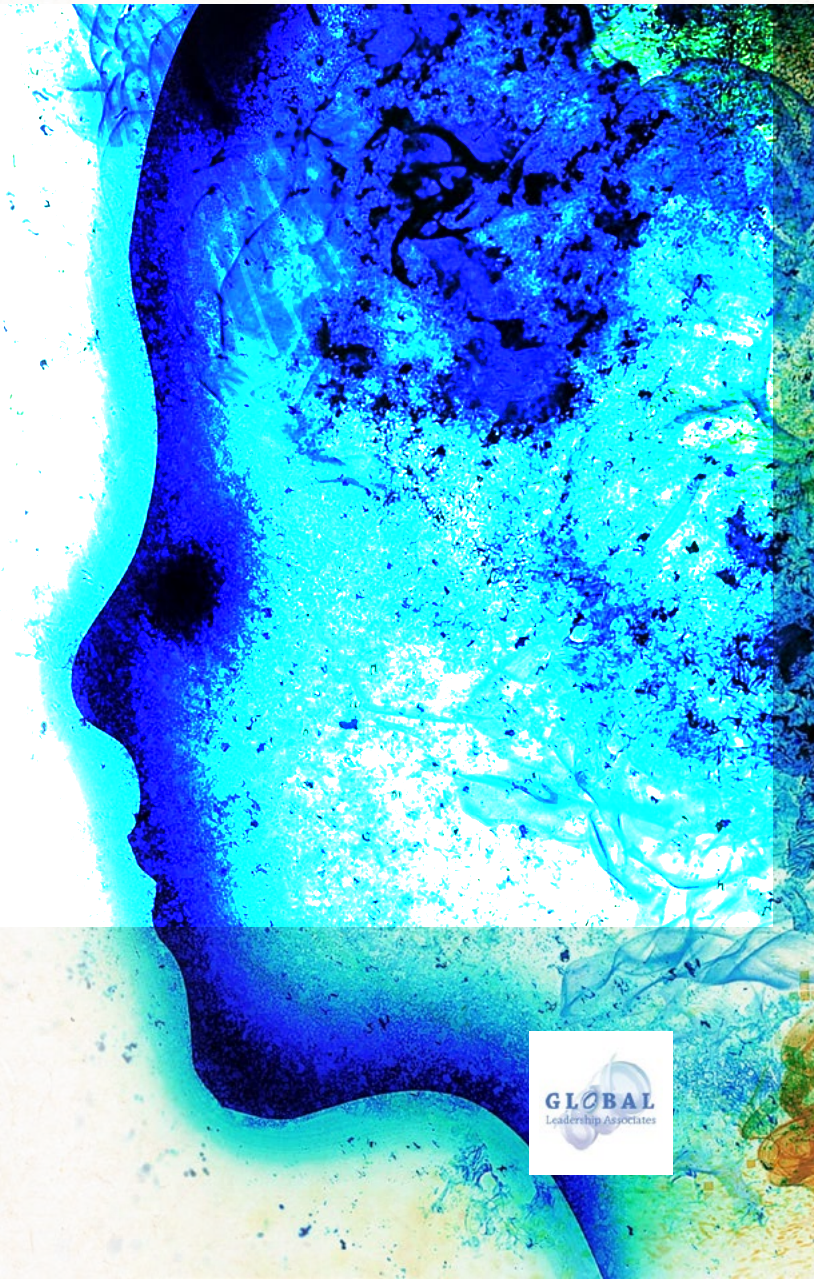
So it goes off kilter...

Exactly. Similarly, there's a deeply distressing set of failures in a major corporation in the United Kingdom, as we speak... But very often parts of the media will describe it as "system failures". But what I'm asking is: what about the people who are running the systems? Or are we actually implying that the systems are taking over? And that there isn't a great deal that we

can do about it? That's something we've got to watch like a hawk in the age of AI. And this is not anti-AI, it's not anti-technology at all. Rather, it's asking about the nature of the problem that we're developing this technology to solve... Because we're the ones making the decisions, not the technology. The power behind the button, literally, is a human being.

So, *who* we are increasingly matters because of the power of the buttons we now push?

And in today's leadership, in terms of leading for good, it seems to me that we could do an awful lot of good, just being very clear – every now and again – that we are the ones in charge... That we're re-establishing dominion over the technology. Are we using the technology in the way we're meant to? In other words, for gain? For avoiding repetitive, monotonous tasks? For creating jobs, for creating wealth, and an explosion of creativity? But are we actually in charge of it?



That makes me think about what we value in life, as individuals and leaders. We're often talking about the power of AI, and the crisis in our natural world, and the need for change... But we need to pay attention to what is it we're prioritising in that change. Are we prioritising stability and safety in our communities alongside, if not above, financial wealth? Are we prioritising the beauties in our natural world? Or do we see it more as a huge shopping basket for us to use?

Interesting...

I was listening to Professor Mona Siddiqui recently*. She talked about Islamic thought on leadership as being about moral responsibility... That the trust between leader and people is almost a sacred bond in which leaders should prioritise their duty to those they serve... And do so humbled by the knowledge that their power is temporary. To me, that puts the real human touch on leadership, which I believe is what you're also saying. There's the use of technology, and there's the use of AI within that technology. But there's also the heart of the human being; the character, that's making those decisions. Do we really pay enough attention to that?

Well, of course, Professor Mona Siddiqui writes and speaks with a terrific eloquence, and I agree completely. There are now so many distractions, if I might use that word. And it's not that these things disappear; it's not that characters suddenly aren't created or don't develop – they do. But they don't get the attention. Instead, I think there's a kind of reductivist approach in a lot of modern Western culture – although not exclusively so. But it strikes me that in many other parts of the world, there is still this sanctity that we are mind, body and spirit. And that means something, and it has done for thousands of years. So, are we seriously suggesting that perhaps within the last 150 years, that's all wrong? And we're not paying any

more attention to all that? Because it's got no place in 'modern society?'

I also think there's a good deal of room for optimism, and not in a facile sense. Someone once said that harsh reality is always better than false hope. We could debate that, but there's something in it. Again, it goes back to what we were discussing about life being so short, in many ways... That we all have a responsibility to make it count for something where we can. That can be incredibly modest or incredibly immodest.

So, I think this relates to what we might describe as guiding principles, perhaps... That's becoming more

continued...

important as we run the risk of finding a form of technology-based existence outside nature. And it's not simply because my former boss, now King Charles, is a committed individual on all these things, He's thought, studied, written and spoken to an extraordinary cast of people on his thinking. And our

place within nature is exactly that: a place... Nature may get to a certain point, then get sufficiently irritated and fed up with us! She'll then simply turn around and squash us. It really is that simple, which might sound laughable, but ultimately, that's the risk we may be starting to run.

You give a wonderful example there, Mark, of your former boss. Because being the bringer of breakthrough, if I could put it that way, is not always an easy task, is it? Because encouraging others to shift from what they value to a value of nature, can leave us vulnerable. Vulnerable, and open to accusations of naïvety, or foolishness, or of being a bit wacky. I just want to go back to Mona Siddiqui's words if I may. She said there's nothing weak about a leader who speaks with compassion, acts with integrity and is simply more human with their successes and failures...

Yes, very much so. I think you say some very important things there. It's the wholeness I think she's describing. And, actually, there's another person who we hear quite a lot of, in the UK at least: the Reverend Lucy Winkett, at St James's Church in Piccadilly. I've heard her speak on similar themes. You hear quite a lot about

fragmentation in the world, and you hear a lot about disputation and disputatious people. And I think at times, it can feel very polarised and, in some respects, broken. But we've got to be careful about how we use that kind of language, because it then starts to diminish hope for finding solutions and better ways through.

And having optimism – hope in a better future – is so important for us all... Yet sadly it's often not available. What can we each do to help engender hope? And specifically, what can leaders do?

Imagine if we went around the corner, into a room with 20 or 30 of the world's most powerful political leaders. It would be very good to be able to say to them: "You've got to start imparting these messages about the wholeness of what it is to be a human being." We're all guilty of all sorts of ghastly things, and that's not the point.

So, wholeness being all of the parts of ourselves, perhaps the ghastly, the grubby and the gorgeous?

Absolutely right. My father was a terrific fan of the author Robert Louis Stevenson, who wrote *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. His brilliance in doing so was recognising that we all have Jekyll and Hyde within us. That's not the point! the point is how are we going to deploy ourselves? How are we going to live our lives? What sort of contribution might we make to ourselves, and to the world around us? If we lose sight of that wholeness – mind, body and spirit – we are, by definition, dealing with fragmented parts. We're not dealing with the whole. That, in turn, suggests whatever we come up with to find our way forward and take people with us is going to be on a reduced model.

Do you think, Mark, that it's straightforward for us to really look at ourselves?

One thing that strikes me, Elaine, is that one of the most difficult things of all is to look in on ourselves. That's a really big test, if only because it's so uncomfortable for most of us... Recognising our strengths and our weaknesses, and really thinking about them. And that often can bring people into a sense of vulnerability about themselves. It strikes me as something that, with a bit more age, becomes more important rather than less. And it's a big risk. We might have to admit to some very difficult things. But then – isn't that part of the deal?

There're actually a few lines written by Ernest Hemingway, of whom I've been a long-time admirer. And it's not perfect, but if you don't mind, I'll read out a quote... I think it captures at least some of what we're saying. He wrote: "The best people possess a feeling for beauty. The courage to take risks. The discipline to tell the truth. The capacity for sacrifice. Ironically, their virtues make them vulnerable; they are often wounded and sometimes destroyed."

And I think that captures that central dilemma, that core dilemma... One we can wrestle with just about every day of our lives: personally and professionally. Are we prepared to be vulnerable, in pursuit of our beliefs and what's important?

Wow... Beautiful question. I'd like to ask a question about you, Mark. If you were to meet the Mark of 20 years ago, what advice or support would you give him?

I would say to myself, "Make every day count. Think more about what you're doing. Make more of the opportunities you have, and hopefully will continue to have in terms of the people you meet... And keep asking questions." One of the great things about both newspaper and broadcast journalism is that it teaches you never to be afraid of asking a very simple question. Because you tend to find – in a packed room, with a very famous person or someone that everybody wants to hear from – that everyone's terrified of asking a simple question.

And what happens when you do? **What happens if you ask a simple question?**

There's an almost palpable sigh of relief that someone's asked that question. Because everyone was wondering what the answer was. They just didn't want to look either ignorant or sound naïve. And I think that speaks to curiosity... Always keep the curiosity going.

And on that...I'm a fan of the power of storytelling, of myth and lore... And I know you're good for a few stories Mark! **What helps fuel curiosity?**

There's a description of something in old Celtic lore, which defines what people used to call – and still do – a thin place. Of course, people say, "What on earth does a thin place mean?"

Right. Because you don't necessarily think of places as thin...

Exactly. They might be pretty or not very attractive, or wet, or dry... Whatever! But a thin place was the idea that this world – and the next, or the other worlds – becomes much closer than in other areas. And there was a great churchman called George MacLeod, Lord MacLeod, who set up a thing called the Iona Community in the Hebrides. It was fantastic. I was a little young, but I remember that, in Glasgow – during the 1950s and '60s – they used to take folk out of really poor areas... And give them a week on the island of Iona. Most of them had never ever been out of a very, very tough urban environment before. And, of course, it completely opened up their eyes and their minds – it gave the most extraordinary experience.

In any case, George MacLeod was a great Churchman. He also won the military cross in the First World War and spent the rest of his life campaigning against the development of nuclear weapons. He always used to describe the Isle of Iona as a thin place. There was tissue paper, he said and wrote, between this physical place and the next world. And you hear something like that and just find it incredibly reassuring. Because it's not all in front of us... There's much more to all this than we necessarily recognise or understand in our very busy day-to-day lives. And I think those ideas are worth holding on to.

It takes us beyond the rational and brings in mystery... And it's very difficult sometimes to experience something beyond our understanding. You mentioned George MacLeod's service in the First World War... And given your own career and time so close to the monarchy, I'd be remiss not to mention the place of service in Leading for Good... Even though service is a bit of an old-fashioned term, do you think it remains a central function of good leadership?

One of the things 'service' is really not meant to sound like is, as people might say, "motherhood and apple pie". There's nothing facile or soft-bellied about it. Service is a great notion, in the right way. I'd equate the word 'service' with 'contribution'. And I think service is a profoundly important thing to hold on to. That's because – apart from anything else – it marks out our contribution and helps us feel that we're devoting something to the improvement of others. And let me add that this country is extraordinary. There are – what – more than 168,000 registered charities in the UK? And I've known a lot of people working in charities over the years. They're motivated and highly skilled; they want to do something to make a difference for the better. So that, I would suggest, is a more modern take on the word 'service'. But essentially it means something very similar. You've touched on an area though, Elaine, in which we could do an awful lot better by thinking about it a bit more. Somehow, it often slides down the scale unfortunately, I think, because people are more taken with the idea of how much money they make.

Yes, and I loved what you said there... That contribution is important – especially in the world we're now in. Because with some elements, it's not solvable. We're not going to be able to return to the beauty of the nature we once had, for example. So what are we to do amid that? Having a contribution is a very positive step, isn't it?

Yes, but I would take issue, actually, with that. I think there's still a chance that we will get back to, and we will be able to recreate some of those areas that we've lost. If only because we've now got the technological means to understand the damage that we've done, ironically. And that it could be any number of things... For example, the way that certain chemicals are taken out of use, because the toxicity levels have become too strong. By understanding what we're doing, I think there's still a chance – if we've got the foresight, the application and the passion – to turn this around. We can still do it. We're mighty short of time, but I think we have to hold on to that belief; not just a hope, but a belief that we can do this – and we shall.

Well, I'm very happy for us to end on a hopeful and positive note. Thank you for a great conversation, Mark. It's been a real pleasure.

If you or others around you are affected by any of the topics included in this podcast, please visit the [Mental Health Foundation](#), [Mind](#) and [Samaritans](#) for resources and support.