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Closing Ceremony Atelier for Young Festival Managers NEXT 2019

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In thinking about what to say tonight, two themes reared their heads: leadership and hope. A few months back, in a moment of despair, a friend posted a simple question on Facebook: ‘What is hope?’

I wrote on his timeline:

Hope is

The burden of belief

The price of guilt

The foundation of denial

The curse of those with no options

A mockery of history

And yet

Why we do what we do

He hasn't unfriended me. Yet.

Rather than ignorant or denialist hope,

I believe that as intellectuals, as creatives, our lot is to dwell within the Gramscian paradox of the pessimism of the intellect, and the optimism of the will. With our minds, our intellects, we are able to analyse, understand and conclude that the world is in a mess, that structural inequality is as unsustainable as it is deepening, and that unbridled capitalism is wrecking our planet, and will ultimately eliminate our species.

And yet, the very act of living, of living consciously, rather than in denial or in wilful ignorance, is an act of optimism. That we seek to change our immediate worlds, our bigger festival worlds and the world through our festivals and other creative interventions, are acts of optimism.

We live in a world characterised by the worst forms of leadership: greedy, petulant, elitist, narrow-minded, ungenerous...characteristics that come to infuse our politics, and bend us towards pessimism.

As festival and programme managers, you are leaders, compasses of optimism.

I want to leave you with some thoughts on counter-intuitive leadership. Not as someone who has landed all of these, but as one with whom these ideas resonate.

Leadership is about serving, rather than being served; leadership is not self-serving, self-seeking, but serving our artists, our stakeholders, our publics.

Traditional concepts of leadership emphasise power and strength. But leadership can also be manifested in vulnerability, in uncertainty, in being led and in learning.

There is the idea that a good leader is one who is single-minded and rigid in the pursuit of a vision or goal. I'd like to propose the idea of the counter-intuitive leader who has a sound vision, but who recognises that there are different ways, different paths to get there. It may take longer, it may take circuitous routes, but flexibility is the hall mark of the counter-intuitive leader.

You are needed and necessary – which is why you have your position, but you are not indispensable. Counter-intuitive leadership is about allowing and enabling others to have profile, to lead.

Self-confidence is encouraged as a good leadership trait, but self-awareness is probably more crucial to counter-intuitive leadership. Be aware of your biases, your privilege, your limitations; just because you're 'the leader', doesn't mean that you need to know everything, or that you're expected to know everything.

There is the belief that a good leader does not rock the boat but keeps everything in equilibrium; that may be true of a good leader, but a really good leader provokes to test ideas, to interrogate and challenge the beliefs of her peers.

Good leaders don't do things to be well-liked; don't expect or rely on the affirmation of others. In a position of leadership, you are bound to offend some, to be misunderstood, not to be liked by everyone. Get used to it. But be sure about who you are; take time out to reflect, away from the crowd, and be certain of your own values, of your own authenticity and that you are doing the right thing.

Counter-intuitive leadership is not about point-scoring, about being right, about winning the argument. It's about generosity, that allows for as many winners as possible.

One final thought on hope, on optimism and leadership: You have no right, nor reason, to hope for a better world, unless you are making it so.