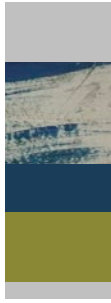


# How dare you?

BY KATE GILMORE



Melad Bassam Al-Ghazali  
*Portrait in green and blue*  
Azraq Camp



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■ When addressing the 2019 UN Climate Conference, Greta Thunberg demanded of world leaders failing to address the climate crisis decisively, simply: *'How dare you!': '... People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction. And all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!'*<sup>i</sup>

*'How dare you!'* stands out. An exclamation of acute frustration, the phrase can also be more interrogative, meaning something akin to: 'How do you dare do what you do?' It's a leading question and a question for all leaders.

Thunberg's pungent assessments give words to what millions feel, yet few dare articulate. Her summation that, in response to the climate crisis, world leadership is just so much *'blah blah blah'*<sup>ii</sup> is perhaps her best known, but *'how dare you!'* is a clarion call, striking an alarm bell whose peal should resound far and wide.

Greta Thunberg herself is a global leader. As yet she holds neither high-level office nor post-graduate credentials. She oversees no institution and has no institutional resources to deploy. Nonetheless, she dares lead. Initially, she did so by the sheer moral force of her example. Then it grew and spread from there into what is now a global platform of action – *'Fridays for the Future'*.<sup>iii</sup> As a result of her daring, Thunberg has inspired and mobilised hundreds of thousands of her peers, and others, the world over.

If her gaze was to turn to leaders' efforts to address other global threats, would her assessment, or that of her peers, be any different? Their assessment of leaders' efforts for poverty eradication, or to end vaccine nationalism? Of efforts to eradicate inequalities, eliminate discrimination, end impunity, reject armed conflict or to establish effective governance of new technologies and of new weaponry?

Those are interconnected global concerns too of course, and increasingly so: interconnected one with the other, and entangled now with the global climate crisis also. And all their warning signs are flashing red-hot. With the Doom's Day Clock<sup>iv</sup> set at just 100 seconds to midnight, Thunberg's challenge should already be heeded more broadly beyond the few seated at the UN's top decision-making tables, important as those leaders are.

### **How dare we?**

How dare we lead? During accelerating global crises exacting awful local costs? When, thanks to man-made exploitation, natural resources are rapidly shrinking<sup>v</sup> yet evidence mounts daily of our interdependence with other species and their habitats?<sup>vi</sup> When commitments to resolve inequalities' historical and structural injustices – between and within countries – evaporate,<sup>vii</sup> yet public and private funding for new arms races, even newer space-races, escalate?<sup>viii</sup> When UN goals for sustainable development are trumped by national goals for economic growth – for inequality-deepening, unsustainable growth?<sup>ix</sup>

How dare UN leaders do what is needed now and for tomorrow? How dare they lead in the interests of generations to follow, not merely for the generation to which they belong? What makes for 'daring' leadership of the kind that our world of accelerating change needs, but is so often left wanting? The research suggests that leadership daring is not about more risk-taking; it's not more dare-devilry. Rather, as a positive state, daring is the combination of *moral courage* and *inner strength*; qualities on which the exercise of *ethical* or *principled* leadership depends; qualities in high demand when uncertainty is high too.<sup>xi</sup>

*Daring* should be a quality for which UN leaders are selected and elevated and that UN organisations should

foster, encourage, and reward. It raises a fundamental question: Is *daring* embedded sufficiently in the UN's human resources, management, and leadership systems? Is *daring* discernibly part and parcel of the operational policies and practices that govern leader selection, performance assessment, professional development, reward and advance? It should be. After all, in essence, that's what the 'UN System Leadership Framework' promises.<sup>xii</sup>

But *daring* is not just some esoteric characteristic. Guideposts for its exercise can be quite practical. Daring leaders will go wherever evidence-based assessment of critical issues and their contributory factors leads.

Apply up-to-date technical knowledge and pay close attention to applicable values and standards, policies, regulations as well as the law. Refer to, but don't mindlessly defer to, relevant precedents. Identify and consult with groups most affected by the decisions to be made. Be frank about the available options and their various likely consequences. In *daring*, leadership and self-examination is key.

Honestly probe inner fears and desires to guard against distortions out of ego and self-interest. Sustain your energy and maintain the focus needed to stay the course. Take responsibility for whatever actions you take and be prepared to be held accountable for that. Monitor implementation and evaluate it transparently, so that any distances between the actual, as compared to the intended, outcomes are revealed and examined.<sup>xiii</sup>

In other words, opportunities for UN leaders to be more *daring* present daily. But the reality is that leading is rarely that systematic. It is frequently an amorphous and fragmented business. Often dispersed across issues, forums, systems and colleagues, and then exercised in sequences, that all combine to undermine systematic approaches. This can work to drive a leader away from loyalty to the best outcomes. On top of that, often leaders' decisions must be taken quickly without the time to process them in more ideal ways. Frequently decisions must be made without sufficient, or even despite conflicting, information and under stressful and pressurised organisational and political circumstances.

That's why the personal and professional idiosyncrasies of the individual leader matter.<sup>xiv</sup> Indeed, fostering *daring* in leaders may be less about decision-making logic or frameworks and more about a leader's moral posture and demeanour or, what the research calls, their *moral courage* and *inner strength*.

The exercise of *daring* requires moral courage. That in turn depends on *inner strength*, which is the fuel of leaders who dare.

### **Moral courage**

*Moral courage* is not a calculus of the danger to be faced, nor is it feeling less fear. It is not reduced to one's own moral code, or personal judgement as to the *morality* of an issue. Rather, it involves a leader's *moral clarity* about the

*Box 1: An account of leadership by the CEO of US energy giant Enron, the subject in 2001 of the world's largest ever bankruptcy case (McLean, B., Elkind, P.; The smartest Guys in the Room: The amazing Rise and Scandalous Fall of Enron; Penguin, 2013, pg. 3).*

'[the CEO] was a hard man not to like. His deliberately ... modest manner... built a deep reservoir of goodwill among those who worked for him. He remembered names, listened earnestly, seemed to care about what you thought. But ... He cared deeply about appearances, he wanted people to like him, and he avoided the sort of tough decisions that were certain to make others mad. His top executives ... knew that as long as they steered clear of a few sacred cows, they could do whatever they wanted. And as we all know, many of them did'.

*Box 2: Concluding passage to the German Bundestag, Yehuda Bauer, 27 January 1988. See: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191826719.001.0001/q-oro-ed4-00000799>*

**'Thou shall not be a perpetrator, thou shall not be a victim, and thou shall never, but never, be a bystander'.**

depths of the wrongs they are to right – such as the wrongs of rights abused or betrayed. The deeper those wrongs, the more *daring* the leadership should be.

The word '*courage*' has its root in '*cor*', the Latin for '*heart*'. Its original meaning was not a rallying cry to heroics, but an invocation to '*speak one's mind by telling one's heart*'.<sup>xv</sup> For UN leaders, *courage* thus is both the taking the UN's moral code to heart, and the speaking up clearly for it. That code is made explicit by the UN Charter, set out in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and has been elaborated upon, over decades, in human rights treaties, declarations, and countless resolutions of the General Assembly.

*Daring* UN leaders are those that can not only clearly see the crossroads between right(s) and wrong(s), as defined by that code. They are those who have the courage to turn always towards right(s), even if doing so is against their own comfort, preference or self-interest eg their popularity or future prospects for elevation.

When, UN leaders are not *daring*, dissonance is created with the organisation's values and, arguably, its aims and purposes. When such contradiction is visible to others, the risks of damage to the UN's credibility, and thus its effectiveness, further mounts. That said, it is the *immoral* leader alone who wreaks havoc. As high-profile cases elsewhere demonstrate, an immoral leader's misconduct or mendaciousness may even unite others in clearer opposition to just that.

However, if as they navigate complexity, leaders opt to remain silent or avoid communicating about values, norms, and standards; are indirect or inconsistent in their application of those principles in their daily work? While they may not be *immoral* as such, they are likely to be seen to be *amoral*.<sup>xvi</sup>

*Amoral* leaders – those not anchored discernibly in values, who act with indifference to core principles or who invent their own to suit themselves – do more than discourage principled, courageous efforts by others.<sup>xvii</sup> In other settings, such leaders have been found to act as vectors for the spread of unprincipled conduct.<sup>xviii</sup>

Particularly, in workplaces where values are core to their organisation's identity, as is the case for the UN, leaders whose posture or approach is devoid of, or ambiguous about, their organisation's values are likely to be detrimental to staff, systems, and results.<sup>xix</sup>

That's a challenge for the UN, and specifically for its civil service. The UN cannot afford to have leaders treat its values as accessories: adorned for special occasions but discarded in operations' daily settings. Values don't work only performatively: displayed if convenient to do so, but then muted, distorted, or betrayed when politics or circumstances so entice. For the sake of the system's inherent integrity, to better limit a broader sweep and reach of unethical conduct, UN leaders – without exception – should dare to demonstrate, quotidian and in both word and deed, an unambiguous, and unwavering adherence to the values and norms on which the UN, by Charter, is founded. That is not some lofty, idealistic expectation; it is a signpost towards greater impact.

How does – how might – the UN better foster, encourage, and reward *moral courage* in its leaders; the courage to dare to adhere to fully to its core values? How is '*speaking one's mind by telling one's heart*' valued among and by UN leaders?

### **Inner strength**

*Moral courage* is not enough on its own.<sup>xx</sup> For *daring* in leadership, *inner strength* is also essential. If both moral courage and inner strength coexist within a leader, the

*Box 3: Thomson, C.J., 'How could Vietnam happen? An autopsy', The Atlantic, April 1968, as cited by Applebaum, A., 'History will judge the complicit', The Atlantic, July/August 2020.*

When the war in Vietnam was going badly, many people did not resign or speak out in public, because preserving their 'effectiveness' – 'a mysterious combination of training, style, and connections', as Thomson defined it – was an all-consuming concern. He called this 'the effectiveness trap'.

research suggests not only is a leader's own behaviour likely to be more ethical, but so too is that of those they lead. Furthermore, a leader's 'in-role' performance is found to improve and, intriguingly, it also helps foster 'psychological flourishing' for all.<sup>xxi</sup>

The inner strength to resist opting for the merely popular or conventional, to speak up where others are silent, to stand up when even superiors fail to, to confront rather than concede to the system's sponsors – to its funders or political partners; to resist those who by power of their influence would purchase compromise of principles: in such times, for UN leaders, *moral courage* is a GPS by which to chart principled pathways, but *inner strength* is fuel for the journey.<sup>xxii</sup>

The courage to perform – consistently and visibly – to standards requires the capacity (and the effort) to stay strong within oneself – to attain, maintain, and sustain for the duration, well-being, including mental well-being. If a leader's well-being depletes, their inner strength or resolve is more likely to weaken. A weakened resolve means a weakened ability to '*resist ... temptation and to stand up and take action against ... the wrong thing*'.<sup>xxiii</sup> That's a timely reminder of the relatively untapped contribution that well-being (and its absence) makes to workplaces, and a pointed message about the importance of leaders taking (and being seen to take) active personal responsibility also for their own well-being, no matter the level at which they serve.

This is a long-neglected dimension of leadership, nonetheless research now concludes that the key to the personal well-being on which inner strength depends, is self-care. Training and coaching can help a leader develop the required self-care skills to prevent depletion and renew

inner strength; to build up '*moral muscle*'.<sup>xxiv</sup> Taking a practical approach to self-care also matters. Such as getting enough rest, maintaining fitness and building a quality of lifestyle. Even sustaining blood glucose levels have been found '*to help preserve reserves of self-control for ethical leaders*'.<sup>xxv</sup> Support systems play an important part too. Working with the help of '*Aides, associates, friends or family members who will save us from ourselves*'.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Daring again can be quite a practical matter. It involves the desire or the will '*to generate responsibility and motivation to take moral action in the face of adversity and persevere through challenges*'.<sup>xxvii</sup> Thus, it is not only a question of the courage to follow wherever UN principles lead, but of perseverance in doing so by sustaining the inner strength for the tough journey's *daring* demands. That said, *daring* is also 'ecological'. It's not just about individual leaders alone. The fuller challenge, to generate UN leadership better suited to our times, involves the organisation itself and the expectations it has of its leadership. As Gifford et al put it, leadership is not merely about the quality of the 'apples', but of the 'barrels' that hold them and the contexts or 'situations' they are expected to confront.<sup>xxviii</sup> To paraphrase: Is an absence of *daring* the result of:

- *Bad apples?* ie, individuals making bad choices, OR
- *A bad barrel?* ie, a systemic or organisation-wide failure or culture of ingrained behaviour? OR
- *Sticky situations?* ie, the difficult, often compromising, nature of decisions that leaders so frequently face?<sup>xxix</sup>

### **In leadership - the barrel matters, not just the apples**

The 'barrel' matters. If the organisation's policies, instructions, and technical guidance are ambiguous about

the application of values or otherwise undermines their exercise, then the UN's leaders' and its staff's loyalty to those principles is set adrift. If the organisation's culture is to encourage and reward only 'yes-people' rather than the daring, or fails to signal clearly that it 'has the back' of its leaders when they stand up for principles, or fails to provide clear and accessible protections if leaders face threats, intimidation and bullying of the kind for which some Member States are infamous, then again it is *daring* that will be among the first casualties.<sup>xxx</sup>

As will be the case where the informal culture frowns on or belittles efforts to promote well-being, or it means a lack of disciplined action by leaders and all staff to sustain their well-being.

Furthermore, UN leaders are, of course, also the led. What they see when they look 'up' is important to what they demand when they look 'down' the hierarchy. To propel all leaders to greater daring, a visibly strong and constant alignment, and cascade of expectation consistent with *daring*, is needed across all levels, from the top executives to front-line staff.<sup>xxxI</sup> And for that, it would be wise to ramp up investment in selecting, training and commissioning both the led and their leaders to speak up about the organisation's values confidently and not selectively.

To find ways to engage consistently with the organisation's values and norms and to apply them coherently, particularly in the 'sticky situations' - the sensitive or complex or controversial situations - that so often fall under the purview of UN leaders.

It would also be smart to strengthen integration of affirmative expectations of and support for mental and physical well-being among all leaders across the system and at all duty stations.

## **Sticky situations are no excuse; they are why we need daring leaders**

However, it is situational complexity - or the 'stickiness' of situations that UN leaders confront - which frequently is offered in excuse for their compromises on values. Human rights concerns, for example, may be deemed too 'sensitive' or 'controversial' to raise with those in power. Upholding UN values in the messages of formal demarche may be deemed too confronting. That a Member State or development partner will be open to advice based on core principles, rather than expediency, may be dismissed as unrealistic. But are those moments more a question of smart tactics or strategy, rather than unassailable grounds on which to justify a betrayal of principles? When is self-censorship just self-comforting?

Simple and routine situations do not need leaders. Once the technical guidance is in place and the priority has been set, most good people can lead themselves perfectly well. However, it is precisely in the 'stickiest situations' that leadership moments emerge - moments requiring daring leadership that is.

Look out for the leadership moments that sticky situations offer. Be alert to and create and expand those spaces to make a difference; spaces to be prised open wherever cracks are found in dense walls of resistance and '*There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in, where the light gets in.*'<sup>xxxII</sup>

## **For whom are we daring to lead?**

For moral courage there must be moral purpose. For moral purpose to propel forward, it must be rooted in a moral consequence or, in other words, in moral accountability. It is here, that the UN has, if you like, a 'superpower': a

*Box 4: Dag Hammarskjöld as cited by Erling B., 'A reader's guide to Dag Hammarskjöld's Waymarks', Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 2011, pg. 58.*

**'It's a deeply personal question ... The longest journey is the journey inwards. Of him who has chosen his destiny, who has started upon his quest, for the source of his being'.**

powerful energy to be handled with care. That superpower is contained in the answer to a tough question: *'To whom are UN leaders ultimately accountable?'*

Most organisations accept the need for financial accountability to donors or investors; programme accountability to partners; the accountability of the subordinate to the bosses. Audited accounts, annual reports, executive boards, 360-degree performance appraisals: all play their part at the UN, but none addresses that deeper question. To whom are the UN leaders morally answerable for their legacy – that which they create, those whom their decisions affect, what they leave behind? How is that answerability manifested, managed, and adjudicated in the UN?

The UN's Charter opens not with *'We the Member States'* or *'We the Donors'*. It does not open with *'We the Development Partners'* or *'We the Leaders'* or *'We the International Civil Servants'*. It opens, of course, with *'We the Peoples'*. How is their distinctive authority – the authority of the peoples of the world – as voiced by the UN Charter – distinctively manifested?

The UN's politicians may consider it redundant, if not outright problematic, to attempt to channel the organisation's accountability directly to the world's peoples rather than only through Member States' representatives eg the diplomats or national ministers of the governments of the day. But *daring* UN leaders should understand their ultimate accountability to be rooted differently. Programmatically, for example, ultimate accountability starts and ends with intensive efforts to ask, listen, and take on board as mission-critical, the opinions, preferences, and choices of the beneficiaries whom UN programmes serve. In both humanitarian and development settings, appreciating that targeted populations are rights-holders is thus an obligation of the first order. The UN is a duty-

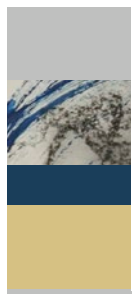
bearer, for whom adherence to norms, standards, evidence, and transparency of action to those whose lives it affects must surely be its bread and butter.

When a doctor loses sight of their patients' needs, and answers first or only to income? When a lawyer cares less for the rights of their client and more about their billable hours? When a journalist worries more about social media hits than about authoring factual copy? When a UN leader lobbies for the award of a more senior post in answer for long service, seeking to bypass competitive and impartial selection? When a UN leader is elevated to higher leadership, not on merit, but because their home country or a regional grouping insisted upon it? Does each scenario not reveal a similar troubling failing: a failure to remain loyal foremost to those whom leaders are duty bound to serve first?

The driving force that can most powerfully congeal a courageous ecology for daring in UN leadership is surely to be found in a clear, unambiguous answer to the question of *'On whose behalf do we dare to lead?'* Its practical tests should be rooted in such as *'Whose assessment of us matters the most?'* A much-needed development within UN practice and methodologies is just that. The placement of more investment of resources, time, and effort in direct and material accountability to those whom it serves as expressed in *'We the Peoples'*. In addition, far greater use should be made of the results of those efforts as tangible evidence of the moral authority that the UN can then choose to wield authentically as a 'superpower' – the UN's unmatched moral accountability which converts to true authority, if fulfilled.

## Conclusion

When among the world's 'top' leaders, and their pretenders waiting in the wings, there are so many willing to treat



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*Box 5: Baldwin, J., 7 January 1971, 'Open letter to my sister, Miss Angela Davies', The New York Review*

**'... If we know, then we must fight for your life as though it were our own— which it is—and render impassable with our bodies the corridor to the gas chamber. For, if they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night'.**

universal norms and legal standards, fact and science, not as guide-stars, but like poker-chips in a populist power game; when global decision-making tables are intentionally enfeebled and, in every region, nativist nationalism is on the rise: How dare we lead?

We should not forget that the UN was forged in tough, not prosperous, times. It was forged amidst global chaos and under the shadow of the very worst that human beings can do to one another. Its authors were not realistic, they were *daring*. Which realist would have ever drafted the UDHR?

In our times - crisis and anxiety ridden, unpredictable times - it is time to repurpose UN leadership more coherently and comprehensively to do exactly as the UN Charter promises - to be *daring*. In fulfilment of that mission, leadership is not rank, it is responsibility.

But take heart. In darkest of hours, at the worst of times, with the future threatened more than inspired and although self-interest pulled hard away towards self-comfort, there are still those who chose to dare. How dared they?

In South Africa, medical student and anti-Apartheid activist Steve Biko dared lead. He was repeatedly imprisoned and ultimately killed in detention for organising resistance to his country's racially segregated healthcare system; a segregation that can be traced back to the 1900's outbreak of the bubonic plague.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Biko dared leading and lost his life nearly two decades before the world saw a post-Apartheid South Africa.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

British physician Judith Mackay dared lead. Among the first to speak up against the dangers of smoking, she was publicly branded '*psychotic human garbage*' and a '*power-lusting piece of meat*' by those multinational tobacco companies

who helped to fund multi-million dollar campaigns to discredit her and her research.<sup>xxxv</sup> She dared lead us to understand that public health for all matters so much more than profits for the few.

In February of 2021, a Russian police captain dared to resign rather than obey orders to restrain and detain those peacefully protesting state corruption and impunity: '*I am ashamed to wear this uniform because I realize it is covered in blood,*' he said, tossing it into a dumpster. He dared lead us to appreciate the rule of law as protection of the rights of the people, not protection of the interests of the powerful.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

They all used what little power they had and, against great odds, in the toughest of situations, dared to lead. So we can't say that we didn't know. For they have shown us. If, for all the reasons that Greta Thunberg and other youth leaders implore us to, we dare to lead courageously, and sustain our strength to do so, we too will lay down *daring* footsteps that others can follow. But it's okay not to be *daring*. Not everyone has what it takes. But if you know you are not made for *daring*, please don't dare lead.<sup>xxxvii</sup> ■



## Endnotes

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<sup>11</sup> Margie Warrell, 'It's Time For Leaders to Be Daring. Not All Will Take The Leap', *Forbes*, 19 June 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/margiewarrell/2021/06/19/this-is-a-time-for-leaders-to-be-more-daring-not-all-will-be-brave-enough-will-you/?sh=14df604c6e23>.

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