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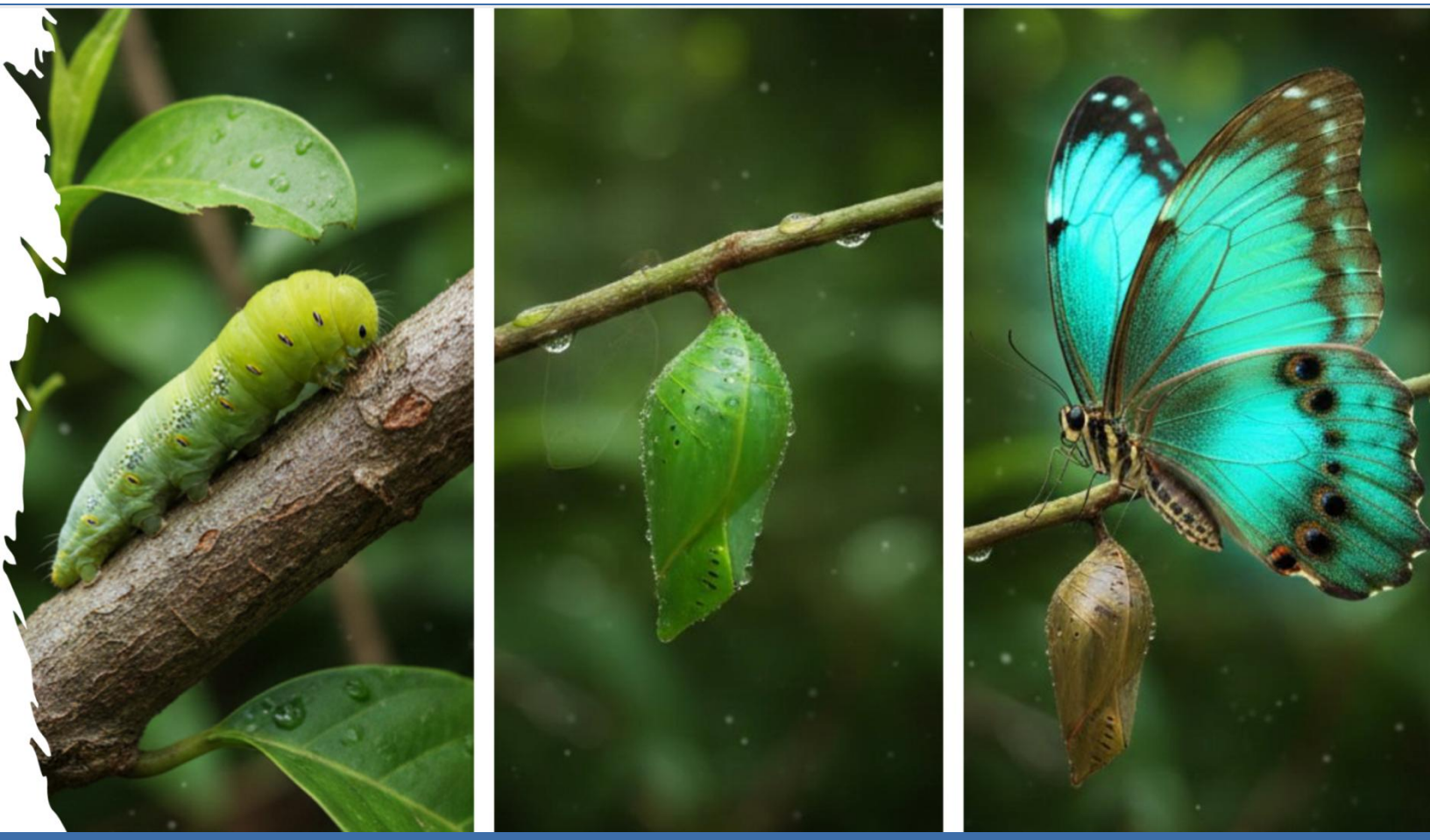

# Imaginal Leadership

*Empathy, inner work, and leadership in a liminal world*

Zachary Green, Johanan Rivera

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## 1. Leadership at the Edge of Coherence

Across the globe, leaders are operating inside conditions that feel increasingly uncontainable. Climate systems are destabilizing faster than institutions can respond. Wars and mass displacement have become normalized backdrops rather than exceptional crises. Polarization and mistrust are no longer confined to fragile states; they now surface inside workplaces, classrooms, communities, and democracies that once assumed coherence as a given. At the same time, leaders are still expected to act decisively, reassure stakeholders, and project certainty, often while privately sensing that the maps they were trained to use no longer apply.

This widening gap between lived reality and inherited leadership models is not only visible at the scale of nations or institutions. It appears inside organizations, teams, and partnerships whenever familiar structures begin to loosen and a new form has not yet taken shape. In such moments, leaders often feel intense pressure to restore order quickly: align the group, clarify the strategy, assign responsibility, move on. Yet attempts to impose coherence too early often produce a familiar pattern. Teams comply on the surface while disengaging underneath. Decisions are made, but trust erodes. Conflict is managed procedurally while remaining metabolically unresolved. What looks like poor execution is often something deeper: a system that has not yet absorbed the losses, fears, and identity disruptions that change has set in motion.

Much of contemporary leadership discourse still begins from a quiet assumption: that interests are fixed, incentives are stable, and power is largely predetermined. Lived experience suggests something else. Interests are formed through relationship. Leadership emerges through collective sense-making. The messy dimensions of being human (ambiguity, grief, ambivalence, contradiction, mood, misalignment) are not noise around the work. They are often the work itself.

Imaginal Leadership[1] begins from that disruption. It asks what kind of leadership becomes possible when systems can no longer be held together by certainty, authority, or expertise alone. It proposes that in liminal periods, when what once worked is unraveling and what comes next has not yet cohered, the task of leadership is not to force resolution, but to help a collective remain connected long enough for new coherence to emerge.

This framework is indebted to the traditions that have shaped the field: adaptive leadership, systems thinking, adult development, dialogic practice, and justice-oriented critiques of power. Each contributes something indispensable. Yet together they also reveal a persistent gap. Much existing leadership thought remains strongest at the level of diagnosis, reframing, and process design. It is less developed when it comes to the lived psychological and relational strain of

[1] The term "imaginal" draws from biology, not psychology. Imaginal discs are clusters of cells in a caterpillar that carry the blueprint for the butterfly's future form. This differs from imagination, the human capacity for creative visualization.

staying present while coherence is breaking down: to what complexity does to human beings, not only how to analyze it.

That gap matters because transformation does not fail only when people misunderstand the system. It also fails when the emotional and identity-level costs of change exceed what individuals and groups can metabolize. People may understand the need for change and still become reactive, polarized, withdrawn, or defended. In such moments, the challenge is not simply to generate better insight. It is to create enough holding for insight to remain usable under pressure.

The challenge, then, is not lack of insight. It is lack of holding capacity.

## 2. The Liminal Condition

There are moments in collective life when the old map is no longer reliable, but no new map has yet become credible. People sense that something is changing but cannot yet say what the new form is or what it will ask of them. The familiar language of strategy and execution begins to feel inadequate, not because it is irrelevant, but because the deeper issue is no longer only operational. Meaning itself has become unstable.

This is the condition of liminality. Much of the leadership literature that acknowledges it stops at recognition: naming the in-between, counseling patience, cautioning against premature resolution. That is necessary but insufficient. What receives less attention is what actually happens within the liminal space. We call this the imaginal process: the active, metabolically demanding reorganization that takes place inside the threshold condition. Liminality names where a system finds itself. The imaginal process names the work being done within that condition. The distinction matters because the two require different forms of leadership attention: one calls for resistance to premature closure, the other calls for actively stewarding what is trying to emerge.

Anyone who has lived through a major transition inside an organization, a country, a community, or a family knows some version of this pattern. Meetings become more polished while the real questions go underground. Teams comply outwardly while withdrawing inwardly. Small disagreements become symbolic battles about who belongs, who is trusted, or whose reality counts. People search for the one person, subgroup, or decision to blame, because blame offers a feeling of coherence that uncertainty does not.

We treat these dynamics not merely as problems to be corrected, but as signals of threshold. Liminality is not the absence of order. It is a developmental interval in which an old coherence is loosening before a new one has gathered sufficient form. That is why it feels so vulnerable. People lose not only clarity, but orientation. They are asked to participate in a reality that is still emerging and therefore cannot yet provide the reassurance of a settled shape.

This helps explain why liminal periods so often intensify projection, polarization, and premature certainty. Human beings do not only want truth; they also want ground. When the ground shifts, we reach for substitutes. We divide the field into allies and threats. We attach ourselves to narratives that reduce complexity to moral clarity. We perform confidence because the room cannot bear more ambiguity. We mistake decisiveness for containment.

The point is not to romanticize liminality. Being between forms is costly: it can involve grief, exhaustion, fear, and the temporary loss of competence. But when liminality is misread as failure, leaders respond by trying to end it prematurely. What we are proposing instead is harder: to understand these conditions as developmental thresholds and to ask what kind of holding would allow a collective to move through them without collapsing into control, cynicism, or disintegration.

That question leads to a biological image, one that gives this framework its central language.

## 3. The Biology of Metamorphosis

The metaphor of metamorphosis matters beyond its poetry. It clarifies something essential about transformation: real change involves breakdown, but breakdown that is held. A caterpillar does not simply dissolve into chaos and then somehow reassemble into a butterfly. The process follows precise developmental sequences, and those sequences reveal principles that run deeper than analogy.

Imaginal discs (clusters of cells that carry the blueprint for the butterfly's wings, legs, antennae, and organs) exist from the caterpillar's earliest development. They remain dormant, protected from the larval immune system by a kind of molecular camouflage, waiting for the hormonal signals that indicate readiness. Only when those signals arrive do the discs begin to activate and grow. The capacity for transformation is not manufactured at the moment of crisis. It is already present, waiting for conditions. In human systems, the people, insights, and relational possibilities needed for what comes next may already exist in the organization: in the colleague quietly developing new approaches, in the team experimenting at the margins, in the informal conversations that carry more intelligence than the official channels. These may be imaginal discs: latent structures carrying the blueprint of a form not yet visible.

When the discs first activate, the caterpillar's immune system attacks them as foreign. They must survive that assault, continuing to develop even under pressure, until they become strong enough to out-compete the immune response. This is among the most instructive elements of the biology. Emerging forms of organization (new coalitions, new ways of working, new configurations of authority) regularly face immune rejection from existing systems. The reaction is not evidence that the new form is wrong. It is part of the developmental sequence. Knowing this does not make resistance easier to bear, but it changes what the resistance means.

The discs do not randomly find one another. They grow toward each other along chemical gradients: morphogen signals that create directional pathways, guiding individual structures toward the larger pattern they will form together. Transformation happens not through chance but through the presence of information flows that allow emerging elements to locate each other and connect. In organizations, this is the work of sense-making infrastructure: the spaces, practices, and relationships that allow what is trying to emerge to find its form rather than remain isolated.

While most of the larval body dissolves, the central nervous system largely persists. It undergoes significant rewiring but provides continuity of identity and regulatory capacity across the transformation. The butterfly is not a different creature with no memory of what came before. It carries forward what is essential while the rest reorganizes around it. Transformation requires both dissolution and continuity. The question of what must change versus what must

hold is rarely obvious in advance. In human systems, that continuity is often relational: the bonds of trust, the commitments that persist across restructuring, the informal networks that carry institutional memory when formal structures have been dismantled.

Something else holds the reorganizing organism together during metamorphosis: adhesive forces (molecular signals and physical structures that allow the emerging tissues to find one another, bond, and stabilize). These are not the same as the scaffolding that provides structure, nor the nervous system that provides continuity. They are what keeps the new form from flying apart while it is still gathering. Without them, the components of transformation remain isolated, unable to cohere into anything new.

Emergence also requires something that looks, from the outside, like unnecessary difficulty. As the butterfly nears the end of its transformation, it must push its way out of the cocoon through a narrowed opening. That effort forces fluid from the body into the wings, building the tensile strength that flight depends on. Remove the resistance, widen the opening, spare the struggle, and the butterfly emerges intact in shape but incapable of flight. The difficulty is not incidental to the process. It is the process. Some of what looks like an obstacle in liminal periods is the means by which capacity gets built. The task of holding is not to remove difficulty but to keep the container intact so the difficulty can do its developmental work.

Transition, in the biology, is genuinely costly and genuinely risky. New form is not guaranteed. It depends on continuity, latent pattern, adhesion, and enough holding for early emergence to survive what would otherwise destroy it. What is coming into being has to gather.

Which brings the argument to its central question: what are the social and psychological equivalents of scaffolding and adhesion? What allows people to remain connected long enough for reorganization to happen? In the biological model, the adhesive forces are what prevent emerging tissues from flying apart while new form organizes. In human systems, empathy functions as one of those forces: not a soft supplement to leadership, but structural infrastructure that makes the imaginal process survivable.

## 4. Reframing Empathy

In much contemporary leadership discourse, empathy functions either as moral ornament or as a suspect softness. It is treated as a signal of care, a substitute for conflict, or a vague interpersonal virtue. In reaction, some dismiss it as indulgent, indecisive, or incompatible with authority. Both responses flatten it.

We begin from a different premise. Empathy is the capacity to hold another person in consciousness: to remain present and connected even when their reactions, beliefs, or emotions do not fit our frameworks, even when they feel irrational, threatening, or morally unsettling. It is active, effortful, and developmental. It is not the same as agreement, warmth, or the absence of conflict.

A parent remains beside a frightened child without demanding coherence. A colleague receives anger without immediately retaliating or retreating. A community resists the pressure to assign blame too quickly and stays together long enough for something deeper to come into view. In each case, the holding is chosen and costly, requiring the tolerance of discomfort

without fleeing into control, cynicism, or premature certainty. Empathy, understood this way, is fully compatible with truth-telling, limit-setting, and decisive action. Honoring what we cannot understand does not mean excusing harm or suspending judgment.

## Empathy as Structural Infrastructure

The biology of metamorphosis helps clarify why empathy matters at the level of structure, not just relationship. Adhesive forces are what keep the reorganizing organism from flying apart while new form gathers, distinct from the scaffolding that provides orientation, and from the nervous system that provides continuity. Empathy functions as one of those social adhesives. It is one of the ways human beings remain bound to one another while older forms of certainty, role, and identity are loosening. It does not create agreement. It creates enough relationship for disagreement, grief, and uncertainty to remain bearable.

This adhesion operates across levels. At the individual level, empathy is the capacity to remain present when one's own coherence is under strain, noticing the impulse to withdraw, simplify, or retaliate, and not automatically acting it out. At the relational level, it becomes a practice of genuine encounter: staying curious about how someone's experience might be coherent in ways not yet legible, rather than classifying their reaction as irrational or obstructive. At the organizational level, it becomes embedded in structure: in how decisions are communicated, how loss is acknowledged, how conflict is held, how repair is practiced.

The cost of this holding, however, is not evenly distributed. A leader who chooses to remain present through difficulty is exercising a capacity. A colleague whose position requires them to absorb pressure from above and below simultaneously — translating upward to authority, translating downward to those whose work and belonging depend on decisions they had no part in shaping — is providing the same function without the same mandate or recognition. These are not equivalent acts, even when they look identical from the outside. The infrastructure of empathy, to actually hold a differentiated system, has to be differentiated itself.

powell's work on targeted universalism is clarifying here. A universally applied gesture lands differently depending on where each part of the system sits. What feels like psychological safety to those near the center may feel like managed inclusion to those at the margin. What reads as trust-building from above may register as surveillance from below. Empathy as infrastructure therefore requires asking how relational labor is distributed, who carries it, and what the system owes in return, not as a supplementary equity concern, but as a structural question about whether the container being built can hold what it claims to hold.

## Empathy Embedded in Organizational Life

Individual empathy, however developed, is insufficient on its own. Organizations that treat empathy as infrastructure build it into how they operate. This shows up in specific, observable ways.

Some build regular spaces for people to name what change is costing them alongside what it is building toward, not as therapeutic detours but as core intelligence. A technology company that includes "impact on people" as a standing item in strategic planning, or a nonprofit that runs structured pulse checks during major initiatives, is treating emotional reality as relevant data rather than noise to be managed.

Others design decision-making processes that ask not only whether a decision is correct but how it will land for those who had no part in shaping it. A foundation that creates listening sessions before implementing a new grantmaking strategy (engaging program officers, community partners, and grantees to understand how the shift will affect their work and relationships, and then designing support accordingly) is practicing what differentiated empathy actually requires: attending to the specific conditions of each part of the system rather than assuming a uniform response.

Still others build repair into the rhythm of their operations. When empathy fails (when people are reduced to obstacles, dignity is compromised, trust frays), organizations with genuine holding capacity have practices for acknowledgment and restoration rather than simply moving on. Some teams build retrospectives that ask not only "What did we learn?" but "Where did we miss each other, and how do we repair?" Repair becomes operational necessity, not optional niceness.

The question that shifts when empathy is understood as infrastructure is not whether a leader is an empathic person. It is whether the holding environment they help create can sustain the weight of what transformation asks, and whether the costs of maintaining that environment are distributed with the same care as its benefits. When a challenge requires people to change values, roles, identities, and relationships, the real work is emotional and relational as much as it is strategic. The question is whether the collective can remain intact long enough to do it.

## 5. Inner Work as Collective Infrastructure

Empathy is the capacity to hold another person in consciousness when understanding fails. But what makes that capacity possible, and what allows it to persist under sustained pressure rather than collapsing when the cost becomes too high?

The answer lies partly in a dimension of leadership that most frameworks underattend: the inner work required to remain available to relationship when one's own coherence is under strain. When a system enters a liminal phase, the pressure is felt internally before it is articulated externally. People experience anxiety, grief, disorientation, and the threat of losing competence, belonging, or meaning. What gets externalized (the sharpened conflict, the sudden factions, the leader who becomes the problem) is often the inner experience that could not be metabolized.

The inner work of liminal leadership is the practice of tolerating one's own dissolution. During threshold periods, people lose not only clarity about external situations but coherence about who they are in relation to them. Roles shift. Competencies that once felt secure become uncertain. The interior experience is often disorientation, not just difficulty. What this requires is the ability to remain in contact with that disorientation without converting it prematurely into certainty: neither collapsing into despair nor rushing to restore a self-concept that has already become inadequate. It means holding the question of who one is becoming, even when no answer is available. This is not passive. It requires deliberate attention to one's own defensive impulses: fear, impatience, righteousness, the need to appear competent, the wish to win or withdraw. Naming these creates a small space between impulse and action. That space is where relational leadership becomes possible.

A person who can remain present in their own turbulence becomes a stabilizing force in the wider field. Their presence reduces the contagion of anxiety and widens the space in which others can think. Inner work, in this sense, is not private. It is collective infrastructure.

Most organizational approaches to inner work, however, still treat it as containment: how to manage emotional disruption so it does not interfere with productivity. Even sophisticated frameworks like Group Relations emphasize how authority figures and organizational boundaries contain anxiety to restore equilibrium. This is homeostatic thinking: the assumption that health means returning to a stable state after disruption. But the conditions described throughout this article (climate destabilization, polarization, institutional insufficiency, technological disruption) are not temporary disturbances to be contained. They are ongoing realities that require continuous adaptive response. Systems that optimize for stability will become increasingly mismatched to an environment that is itself in continuous transformation.

## Organizational Morphogenetic Capacity

What we are proposing instead is what the biology names morphogenetic capacity: the ability of human systems to continuously reorganize their own structures, relationships, and practices while maintaining essential identity and purpose. In the biology of metamorphosis, the nervous system provides continuity across radical transformation, not by preserving old patterns, but by continuously rewiring its connectivity while maintaining core regulatory function. Organizations need equivalent infrastructure: not a department or a program, but a distributed capacity embedded in how the system senses its environment, processes difficulty, and makes meaning collectively. This means building ongoing practices for surfacing what is genuinely uncertain rather than performing false clarity. It means maintaining distributed channels for processing difficulty so that disruption does not funnel exclusively upward or accumulate in particular roles. It means developing enough collective self-awareness around shadow dynamics (the habit of projecting anxiety onto identifiable targets, of scapegoating what cannot be metabolized) that these patterns can be named and worked with rather than acted out silently.

Buurtzorg, the Dutch neighborhood nursing organization founded in 2006, offers one of the clearest available examples of what this looks like in practice. It emerged in direct response to a care system that had become over-bureaucratized and detached from patients, one that had, in the terms of this framework, imposed premature coherence on the relational work of care by subdividing it into billable tasks and administrative hierarchies. Buurtzorg's response was structural: self-managing neighborhood teams of nurses who handle both patient care and team coordination, without passing ordinary complexity upward through layers of supervision. By the mid-2020s the organization had grown to roughly 950 teams and 15,000 nurses, yet the coordinating logic remained consistent: when conditions change locally, teams adjust how care is delivered, how labor is divided, and how learning is incorporated into practice, while remaining inside a shared ethos of relational, neighborhood-based care. Reorganization is distributed, ongoing, and embedded in how work happens at every level.

What makes Buurtzorg instructive is not only its structure but what its structure makes possible relationally. The removal of supervisory layers is not primarily an efficiency measure: it is a holding environment design. It creates the conditions under which nurses can stay close to the full complexity of a patient's situation, metabolize uncertainty without bureaucratic deflection, and maintain the kind of sustained presence that care actually requires. In the terms of the

biology: it preserves something like a nervous system (distributed, continuously rewiring) while allowing the form of care delivery to reorganize around what each local situation needs.

Organizations with this kind of morphogenetic capacity do not look frictionless. They look like systems that have learned to stay honest with themselves when honesty is costly.

## Imaginal Leadership at scale

The imaginal question is how this happens at scale. How do imaginal discs find each other and connect to produce something larger than any of them? In the biological image, discs grow toward each other along chemical gradients, signals the organism generates when it is ready for transformation. In human systems, those signals are the practices of honest relationship: the conversation that names what everyone has been feeling but no one has said, the meeting that surfaces the real tension rather than managing it away, the willingness of two people in an organization to reflect together on what their system is actually doing rather than what it says it is doing.

A practitioner reading this does not need positional authority to begin. At the scale of a team, an individual can begin to shift the culture of a meeting: through the quality of their listening, through the questions they ask, through the willingness to name what is real rather than what is comfortable. These are small acts of holding that, accumulated across time and relationship, begin to build the relational infrastructure of a holding environment. Finding others in the organization who share that orientation (across functions, across levels, across the formal lines of the org chart) allows something larger to form. The discs are finding each other.

Organizational cultures change through the slow accumulation of practices that make different kinds of conversation possible: through individual commitment that becomes team discipline, through team discipline that becomes organizational template, through organizational practice that reaches beyond the organization's boundaries and contributes to the wider cultural conditions that allow new forms of leadership to emerge. The discs find each other. Gradually, and then all at once.

The deeper purpose of inner work, at scale, extends beyond organizational effectiveness. Human societies are navigating transitions that will require sustained adaptive capacity across decades, not solutions to be implemented, but ongoing reorganization of how we live, govern, produce, and care for one another. The holding environments we build inside organizations and communities are practice fields for this. The Netherlands' approach to water management offers a historical example. What began as reactive emergency response evolved into something closer to societal morphogenetic capacity: flood plains designed to function as parks, architecture built for periodic flooding, cultural and governance practices that treat water management as an ongoing collective responsibility. The Dutch phrase leven met water (living with water) names exactly what homeostatic thinking cannot: not the restoration of equilibrium after flooding, but the sustained reorganization of how an entire society relates to its environment. Indigenous governance traditions that practice decision-making across seven generations name a similar logic: the stable organizing principle is long-term stewardship, not the preservation of any particular form.

These are not perfect analogues. But they point toward what it might mean for a human system to treat continuous transformation not as crisis but as the condition of life, and inner work not as personal improvement, but as one of the foundations on which that capacity is built.

## 6. The Differential Weight of the Threshold

A text chain has been running in the background of a family for the better part of two years. Nothing has exploded. That is precisely the problem. What has happened instead is that some family members have gone quiet, in managed withdrawal rather than anger, a decision that the cost of full presence has become too high. Others have grown more certain, their messages arriving with the momentum of people who have read the silence as agreement, or at least as the absence of objection. The chain, which once carried the ordinary texture of family life (photographs, logistics, complaints about weather) now carries a residue. Everyone can feel it. No one has said so.

A cousin begins to notice they are doing something they did not used to have to do. Before, they could simply be at Thanksgiving. Now they arrive having already rehearsed. They have thought about the seating. Considered which conversations to let run and which to redirect. Made a pre-emptive call to one relative, sent a careful message to another. They have prepared, which means they have done the inner work of sitting with their own political grief, their own anger at what the polarization is doing to their sense of what this family was, before walking through the door. Because they know that if they arrive unprocessed, the room will feel it.

At the table, something happens: a comment carrying a charge. A joke, maybe, or an opinion offered with a confidence that assumes the room will receive it as common sense.

One response is available that everyone at that table would recognize. Change the subject, with enough warmth that no one feels dismissed. Or release the tension with something light, timed well enough that the moment passes before it can settle. Or save it for afterward: a quiet word in the kitchen, an arm around a shoulder. This is handling. It is not nothing. It requires skill, timing, and a genuine reading of the room. It leaves everyone feeling that something difficult was navigated. The meal continues. People pass the bread.

But handling is oriented toward the surface. Its work is the restoration of ease: getting the room back to a place where people can continue being together without the weight of what just occurred. The charge dissipates. The comment goes underground. And the family returns next year, to the next holiday, carrying the same residue, slightly thicker, slightly harder to reach through. Handling is repeatable. It does not build anything. It preserves the form while something in the interior quietly accumulates.

### From handling to holding

One person at the table does something harder. A cousin says something: not to win the argument, not to shame the person who spoke, but to keep the room in contact with what actually happened long enough for it to be acknowledged rather than managed. The comment that carried a charge is named in a way that makes the person who spoke feel neither attacked nor simply indulged. The silence that followed is tended rather than filled. The people at the table remain, for a moment, in genuine relationship with each other rather than in the

performance of it. Nothing is resolved. No one changes their mind. But something passes through the room rather than around it, and what passes through does not have to be carried forward in exactly the same form.

This is holding. It is cumulative in a way handling is not. It changes the conditions slightly each time it happens, building, slowly and without announcement, a relational field that can bear more than it could before. It costs the cousin something a thank-you does not name: the deliberate presence, the prior inner work, the risk of making visible what the room would have preferred to leave submerged. And it leaves the family with something handling could not have given them: not resolution, not agreement, not the comfort of a difficult moment avoided, but the faint and durable knowledge that they can remain together inside difficulty. That their belonging to one another is not contingent on the absence of conflict. That the table can hold more than they thought.

What the cousin's moment also reveals (though its costs are easy to miss) is that this kind of holding is not evenly distributed. And the framework being built here cannot pretend otherwise.

Liminality, as described throughout this article, is a developmental threshold: a period in which old coherence loosens before new form gathers. But that description carries a quiet assumption worth naming. It treats liminality as something a system enters and, with sufficient holding capacity, moves through. What it risks obscuring is that the weight of holding is not evenly distributed within any given system, and that for some people, liminality is not primarily a developmental threshold. It is a structural condition, imposed rather than chosen, that has persisted across their entire history in the organization or institution.

Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, and john a. powell have each named this, in different registers. The borderlands Anzaldúa describes are not a temporary threshold between two states of belonging; they are a permanent condition of living between worlds that do not claim you fully. Lorde's insistence on the uses of the erotic and the dangers of the mythical norm points to the psychic and relational labor required simply to remain present when the dominant order renders your experience illegible. powell's work on targeted universalism reminds us that universal frameworks often reproduce inequality not by intending harm but by failing to account for the different starting conditions people bring to any shared situation.

The weight of holding the in-between falls unevenly on those who are structurally less protected within any given system: those whose belonging is more conditional, whose voices are more easily dismissed, whose discomfort is more readily attributed to personal difficulty rather than structural strain.

## The Colleague in the Middle

Consider a colleague that works in a values-driven organization navigating a shift in strategic direction. The new direction has been set from above. It is not wrong, exactly. This colleague can see the reasoning. But they occupy a particular position: there is a significant structure above them and a team, as well as peers whose work they depend on, below and beside them. They are between. The strategic shift has made that in-between position newly demanding in both directions at once.

Upward, they are expected to hold the direction: to translate the new priorities into language their team can work with, to absorb the anxiety of senior leadership about whether the change will hold, to remain visibly aligned even when the reasoning feels incomplete. Downward and sideways, they are expected to hold the people: to stay in contact with what the shift is activating in those whose programs have been sidelined, whose roles now sit in uncertain relationship to the new priorities, whose grief at what is being lost has nowhere official to go.

What they actually do does not appear in any meeting agenda. They take someone to lunch: to hear them rather than manage them. They stay in contact with the fear of irrelevance, the quiet grief of work that was meaningful and has now been deprioritized, without joining the resentment and without dismissing it. They organize something social with their team. It looks optional. It is not optional. It is the deliberate creation of a moment in which people can be in relationship outside the frame of the disruption. In a team meeting, when a peer names obliquely what the strategic shift is costing their work, this colleague acknowledges it, honors the reality underneath, while also holding support for the direction. They are doing something technically difficult: maintaining contact with the ambivalence in the room while refusing to become a container for resistance. This is the refusal of premature coherence.

And it requires them to have already processed their own response to the strategic direction (in private, on their own time) before entering any of these rooms. They cannot offer presence they have not first found in themselves.

None of this is recognized as strategic leadership. It is recognized, when it is recognized at all, as being "good with people." The organization benefits from what is being built, the threads of trust that will allow the new direction to be inhabited rather than merely tolerated, without registering that it is being built, or who is building it, or what it costs.

The invisible surcharge on presence that this colleague carries is evidence of an unacknowledged capacity, one developed under conditions that those at the organizational center have rarely had to navigate with the same degree of deliberateness. The cost is real: the continuous labor of processing before presence, the risk that attentiveness marks someone as available to absorb more, the knowledge that relational skill will be legible as warmth rather than strategy when decisions about the next phase are made. Beneath the cost is a form of knowledge: about systems under strain, about how trust moves through a hierarchy, about what it actually takes to keep a collective intact through disruption, that this work needs to learn from, not only protect.

Lorde argued that the capacity to remain in contact with complexity, to draw on emotional and relational knowledge rather than treating it as noise, is a form of serious thinking rather than a supplement to it. The people who have had to develop that capacity under conditions not of their choosing are ahead of this work's learning curve in many cases.

Something similar, quieter, and in some ways harder to name, is happening inside the family navigating political fracture. The person who has historically managed conflict across difference — who knows how to hold space for the cousin who posts inflammatory content and the sibling who cannot bear to be in the same room — is often doing labor that goes unnamed. They are sustaining the relational container that allows the family to remain a family. And the asymmetry

is usually visible once you look for it: it is more often the person whose belonging is most fragile, whose position least secure, who absorbs the most to preserve the whole.

Imaginal Leadership must not simply describe holding capacity as a virtue to be cultivated. It must also reckon with who is already doing the holding, often without choice, often without recognition, and what that labor costs. Infrastructure requires maintenance, and the cost of that maintenance should not fall silently on those who are already carrying the most.

This is not an argument against holding. It is an argument for seeing it more honestly: for naming the costs, acknowledging the asymmetries, and asking what kind of organizational and collective cultures might distribute the weight of the threshold more equitably. powell's targeted universalism is useful here: any framework that aspires to serve a universal good must account for the differential conditions people bring to that work, and the differential impacts it has on them.

We do not sidestep power. The capacity to hold is not evenly distributed, the costs of holding are not evenly borne, and a theory of leadership adequate to this moment must hold both truths simultaneously: that holding is necessary, and that it is not neutral.

## 7. The Holding Environment

When the ground is shifting, what determines whether a group stays available to the work, or fragments, withdraws, hardens into faction? The answer is rarely strategy. It is usually the quality of the container: whether the environment itself can hold the weight of what is being asked.

Empathy is the adhesive force that makes this possible: the capacity to hold another person in consciousness even when understanding fails. The holding environment is what that force builds when it operates consistently, over time, across a system: the accumulated conditions that determine what a group can bear together.

The distinction between holding and a holding environment is worth making explicit here, because the practice of leadership as imaginal capacity depends on it.

Holding is an act: something a person does in a specific moment, in relationship, under pressure. The colleague who takes someone to lunch and stays in contact with their grief. The cousin who tends the silence at the table rather than filling it. These are acts of holding: immediate, relational, and personal. They can be done by anyone, in any context, drawing on whatever inner steadiness they have been able to develop.

A holding environment is something different. It is the structured relational field (the accumulated norms, practices, agreements, and cultural conditions) within which acts of holding become possible, sustainable, and recognized rather than invisible and exhausting. Its components are specific: shared norms that make candor safe enough to risk; practices of repair that mean rupture is recoverable; clarity of task and role that reduces the ambient anxiety a system generates when people do not know what they are responsible for; and a cultural relationship to uncertainty that treats it as information rather than failure.

Individual acts of holding can temporarily create the felt experience of a holding environment even when the structural conditions are absent. They cannot substitute for it indefinitely. The colleague who holds the team through a strategic shift, year after year, without the organization developing the structural conditions that would distribute that work and replenish those who do it. That colleague eventually exhausts, leaves, or stops. Acts of holding are renewable only when the holding environment that surrounds them is real. Building that environment is an act of organizational design as much as personal development.

A holding environment is structural before it is relational. Its strength shows not in comfortable moments but in difficult ones: whether hard truths can be named without people leaving the room, whether disagreement can be voiced before it calcifies into faction, whether loss can be acknowledged rather than managed around. Organizations that have built this kind of container can act under pressure without destroying what they are trying to lead. Those that have not find that the pressure of liminal conditions does what pressure always does to structures that cannot hold it: it finds the cracks.

The challenges organizations face in liminal periods are not simply technical. They require people to change values, roles, relationships, and self-understandings: to let go of what has oriented them while no stable replacement is yet available. Loss is in the room. Fear is in the room. Identity threat is in the room. When those dimensions are ignored, leaders may still get compliance, but they rarely get durable participation. The group is present without being available. A holding environment is what makes people available, not by removing the difficulty, but by making it possible to remain in contact with difficulty without fragmenting.

This is what makes authority worth following. Exercising authority within relationship means remaining accountable to the relational asymmetries that authority both depends on and creates. A leader may still need to end an initiative, confront harmful behavior, reallocate resources, or make a call that disappoints part of the system. Imaginal Leadership does not ask leaders to avoid those acts. It asks something harder: to carry them out in a way that preserves dignity and keeps the social fabric from tearing beyond repair, while staying honest about whose dignity the system has historically been least attentive to.

## Active Emergence across levels

In practice, this kind of leadership often looks quieter than conventional models reward. It looks like slowing premature closure when the group is rushing toward certainty for defensive reasons. It looks like naming the losses underneath resistance rather than treating resistance as obstruction. It looks like distinguishing discomfort from harm, so that the system can remain open without becoming unsafe. It looks like returning, again and again, to the work of repair when trust has frayed.

The holding environment has to reach across levels simultaneously. At the individual level, it requires inner stamina: the ability to remain in contact with fear, grief, confusion, and contradiction without converting them into control or false certainty. At the relational level, it becomes visible as presence: listening, staying connected during disagreement, resisting the reduction of others to caricatures. At the organizational level, it depends on whether the wider container supports emergence or prematurely shuts it down. Inner steadiness enables relational trust; relational trust makes organizational holding more possible; organizational holding helps people become more capable than they would be on their own.

What actually binds an organization under this kind of strain is worth naming precisely, because the vague answers (culture, values, shared purpose) tend to dissolve under pressure. What holds is a braid of three things: a shared task that matters, a shared aspiration about the future the work is meant to serve, and repeated practices that preserve dignity under strain. Purpose alone is too abstract to hold a group through conflict. Aspiration alone can become projection. What binds a system over time is whether people experience the work as meaningful, the direction as worth serving, and the relational norms as trustworthy enough to survive disagreement.

The work of active emergence is necessarily responsive rather than prescriptive: what the field is showing determines what the moment requires. But there are practices that develop the attentiveness this work demands, and that any practitioner can begin building regardless of their positional authority. Bohm's discipline of dialogue (the suspension of assumptions, listening for the meaning flowing between contributions rather than defending one's own position) trains the kind of collective attention that allows early emergence to become visible before it is named. Theory U's practice of descending to presence (moving through the voices of judgment, fear, and cynicism to arrive at what a group is called to) creates the conditions in which genuine adaptive work can be named rather than managed around. Strategic tensions methodology surfaces an organization's competing values through structured listening and returns them to the group as a mirror rather than a diagnosis, inviting a collective to see its own complexity honestly before moving toward resolution. One-breath dialogue trains the movement from individual perception to shared meaning: each person speaking from their own experience before the group steps back and asks what they heard collectively, which is the basic unit of genuine collective sense-making.

## Practices as the scaffolding

These practices are the scaffolding within which imaginal capacity develops: the way a musical scale is not music but makes music possible. A leader working from this orientation develops a relationship with them over time, using them as disciplines that train the underlying attentiveness active emergence demands rather than as techniques to be applied.

What this looks like in organizational life, when the sequencing is gotten right, is worth making concrete. When Imago supported the integration of a mission-driven health equity organization into a larger clinical infrastructure partner, what made the difference was precisely this sequencing. Before any structural decisions were finalized, individual interviews were conducted across both organizations: listening for what people were carrying, what they were proud of, what they feared losing, what they sensed was possible that had not yet been named. The findings were returned to the combined leadership team as a mirror rather than a diagnosis: here is what we heard across these conversations, what do you notice? Strategic tensions that emerged (between relational depth and operational scale, between mission fidelity and financial sustainability, between the intimacy of a small team and the demands of a larger infrastructure) were held in workshop settings long enough for the group to feel the full weight of what they were actually choosing between, rather than collapsing them into false resolution.

This is active emergence in organizational life. It is slower than conventional integration processes in the places where conventional processes move fastest: the honest naming of loss, the surfacing of real tension, the protection of what is fragile before it is exposed to the full pressure of the new structure. What it builds is more durable, grounded in what the system

actually knows rather than what leadership assumed it knew. The combined organization that emerges from this kind of process carries something that a colonized integration cannot produce: a shared identity that belongs to both of what came before and to neither of them entirely. Something new has organized itself into form, because the conditions for its emergence were tended.

Imaginal Leadership is a theory of how collectives remain human enough to act under conditions that tempt them toward dehumanization.

## 8. Holding the In-Between

What the previous section describes at organizational scale is also, at this historical moment, the condition of entire societies. Inherited forms of leadership are losing their ability to hold the worlds they now inhabit. Stability can no longer be presumed. Shared meaning is fragile. Trust is easier to invoke than to sustain. Expertise remains indispensable but is often insufficient to create the forms of legitimacy, coordination, and care this moment requires.

This wider condition can be understood as a passage between forms. Ecological systems are destabilizing faster than political institutions can respond. Democratic cultures are straining under mistrust and polarization. Wars and displacement have become ambient rather than exceptional. Technological power is reordering privacy, labor, and attention faster than ethical consensus can keep pace. In many places, people experience this not first as a theory, but as a felt loss of orientation.

In such moments, the temptation toward premature coherence intensifies at every scale. Societies reach for simplified enemies, technocratic fixes, fantasies of return, or strong narratives that promise ground. Institutions multiply metrics in the hope that quantification will restore control. Leaders perform certainty because uncertainty appears politically or organizationally intolerable. These moves offer temporary relief by shrinking the field of reality rather than enlarging our capacity to inhabit it.

We are proposing something harder. To understand this historical moment not only as crisis, but as a liminal passage in which old forms are loosening before new forms of life, governance, care, and responsibility have fully assembled. That does not make the moment less dangerous. Liminal periods are vulnerable to regression, scapegoating, authoritarian promise, and violent simplification. But they are also periods in which what is possible is less fixed than it appears, in which the imaginal discs already present in the system, already carrying the latent pattern of something not yet visible, have a chance to activate.

### Dangers to the Imaginal Process

The imaginal process is inherently vulnerable. At every level of human systems, there are forces that can cause the collapse of liminal space before genuine emergence has time to occur. Understanding these threats matters because they follow predictable patterns, and one appears repeatedly: premature closure that either reduces the system to its previous form or causes it to fragment rather than come into new life.

The most common threat is the rush toward any form of certainty when the discomfort of not-knowing becomes unbearable. A person in career transition grasps for the first job offer that

feels familiar, even when something deeper is trying to reorganize about their relationship to work. A family splits into factions during a crisis rather than staying present with the complexity of multiple perspectives, each side defending a piece of the truth rather than remaining available to the whole. An organization under economic pressure abandons a multi-year transformation to return to familiar business models, precisely when investor anxiety could be information about what new form is trying to emerge.

These collapses follow a recognizable pattern. The person returns to familiar competence precisely when growth requires a willingness to be temporarily incompetent. The family's shared capacity to hold not-knowing together fractures, and with it the possibility for genuine collective transformation. The organization's existing culture begins treating new forms as threats to be eliminated rather than possibilities to be explored: performance pressure drives the imaginal process underground, and the appearance of having answers comes to matter more than the quality of the questions being asked.

At larger scales, the same dynamic appears with greater consequences. When collective anxiety becomes so intense that societies choose strong control over uncertain freedom, the result is often authoritarian capture: the promise that someone else can make complexity simple, that difficult choices can be avoided, that change can be stopped rather than navigated. When collective shadow and unprocessed fear gets projected onto particular groups rather than owned and metabolized by the community as a whole, those who become targets are often the ones who have been carrying liminal knowledge: living at the intersection of different worlds, holding complexity that the dominant culture has not yet learned to integrate.

The fundamental threat across all levels is the same: premature coherence driven by anxiety. When the discomfort of not-knowing exceeds a system's capacity to hold it, there is a reflexive reach for any form of certainty, even if that certainty is less accurate, less creative, or less alive than what might have emerged through sustained presence with complexity.

## The scars of premature coherence

The costs of premature coherence run deeper than strategic failure. In slavery, some mothers learned to make their children appear smaller in the eyes of a world that measured Black life as property. It was not a failure of love, but one of love's distortions under terror: a strategy of protection in a system where a child's visible strength or promise could make them a target for separation and sale. The tragedy is that language forged for protection can survive the moment that created it. Passed down without its original context, it may remain in family life as a habit of minimization. What once helped a child stay close can, in another era, teach that child to feel small. The condition that gave the strategy its meaning is gone. The encoding remains.

We draw on this history carefully, and not to equate what enslaved people survived with anything an organization faces. The two are not commensurate, in scale, in stakes, or in kind. What travels across that distance is narrower: a mechanism, not a magnitude. Protective adaptation can outlive the danger that produced it, and the language or behavior it leaves behind can be misread long after the threat that shaped it is gone. That mechanism appears at every scale where coherence has been forced under duress, including scales far smaller and far less costly than this one.

At the organizational level, that same mechanism appears in a far smaller, far less costly form, though the logic is recognizable. A leadership team that rushes a merger toward cultural resolution before the people living through it have been genuinely heard encodes something in the system's body: the memory of a bridge that collapsed before anyone could cross it. The next time a difficult integration is attempted, people will hold back, because the attempt has been registered as dangerous rather than because they lack good faith. The rush to coherence produces scar tissue rather than stability. The difference between colonization and genuine integration lives in the sequencing and quality of the work done before the structural decisions harden.

Human systems contain their own version of latency, and some of the most precise knowledge about holding it has been carried in traditions the dominant culture has rarely thought to consult.

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy (the Six Nations of the Iroquois, whose territory spans what is now upstate New York and parts of Canada)[2] developed a governing principle that encodes a particular relationship to emergence: decisions of consequence are made in accountability to seven generations forward, to people not yet born whose lives will be shaped by choices made today.[2] This is not a metaphor for long-term thinking in the conventional strategic sense. It is an epistemological commitment: a claim about what a decision-maker is responsible for knowing, and whose presence must be held in the room even when they cannot speak. Leadership, in this frame, is the stewardship of conditions for forms of life that do not yet exist. That the Haudenosaunee carried this principle through centuries of colonial violence, land dispossession, and forced assimilation (that it remained not as archive but as living practice) is itself an act of imaginal holding. The knowledge survived because the relationships that carried it survived, tended across generations under conditions designed to make such tending impossible.

In the Andean communities of what is now Ecuador, Bolivia, and Peru, the concept of sumak kawsay[3], translated most directly as "living well" or "good living," offers a different but related form of imaginal knowledge.[3] Where Western developmental frameworks tend to begin from the individual and move outward toward the collective, sumak kawsay begins from right relationship with the whole: with the community, with the land, with the cycles of the natural world, and with the ancestors and descendants who extend the community across time. Wellbeing is not a condition an individual achieves. It is a quality of the relational field, something a community either sustains or loses together. Applied to the question this article has been building toward, sumak kawsay offers a way of reading what a system under pressure actually needs: beginning not from the optimization of its parts but from the health of its

[2] The Haudenosaunee Confederacy (also known as the Iroquois Confederacy, or Haudenosaunee, meaning "People of the Longhouse") is a confederation of six Indigenous nations (the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora) with territories across present-day upstate New York, Pennsylvania, and Ontario, Canada. The seventh-generation principle is embedded in the Great Law of Peace (Gayanashagowa), the confederacy's founding constitution. See Haudenosaunee Confederacy, The Great Law of Peace (haudenosauneeconfederacy.ca), and Vine Deloria Jr. and Daniel Wildcat, Power and Place: Indian Education in America (Fulcrum, 2001).

[3] Sumak kawsay is a Kichwa concept originating in the Andean indigenous traditions of present-day Ecuador, Bolivia, and Peru, where it has been taken up in both community practice and national constitutional frameworks: Ecuador's 2008 constitution and Bolivia's 2009 constitution both incorporate buen vivir (the Spanish rendering of sumak kawsay) as a governing principle. The concept resists direct translation: kawsay means life or living, and sumak carries a sense of fullness, beauty, and rightness in relation. An accessible entry point is Alberto Acosta, Buen Vivir: Sumak Kawsay, A New Model for a New Society (Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, 2013).

connections, asking whether the holding being practiced is genuinely oriented toward the flourishing of the whole.

Both traditions have been marginalized, suppressed, and appropriated by the same dominant systems that are now, in their own liminal passage, reaching for frameworks adequate to the complexity they face. That these knowledge systems survived is not incidental. They survived because they were held at the margin, where the pressure to conform to dominant coherence could not fully reach them, tended in relationship, in practice, in story, across generations of disruption. They are not romantic alternatives to institutional leadership. They are examples of imaginal knowledge that endured precisely because those who carried it understood, from long experience, what it means to hold coherence under conditions of dissolution.

## The task at hand

Imaginal Leadership, at this scale, challenges us to look harder and farther than the traditional sources of knowledge about transformation: to ask what has been present all along, in the parts of the system least visible to the center, that has never yet been given the conditions to organize into form. The colleague who has spent years holding pressure from above and below simultaneously, whose relational knowledge has been legible only as temperament. The cousin who has been sustaining the conditions for family coherence without anyone naming it as work. The communities that have metabolized loss, translated across difference, and maintained collective life under conditions the dominant culture would find unendurable. These are not supplementary contributions to a framework built elsewhere. They may be carrying the discs.

Holding the in-between is not a passive state. Emergence, in the metamorphosis image, is the result of continuous, metabolically demanding, invisible work. The imaginal discs do not drift toward each other randomly; they grow along chemical gradients, guided by signals the organism generates in response to its own readiness for transformation. Active emergence is attending rather than waiting: attending to the small signs, the early shoots, the fragile evidence of something trying to organize itself into form before anyone can name what it is becoming. It requires an eye for potential rather than an eye for product. A butterfly whose cocoon is opened too early, to spare it the struggle of emergence, loses precisely the resistance it needs to develop the strength to fly. The help that removes the difficulty removes the capacity along with it.

This is why we do not offer a formula for the future. We offer a different task: to become more capable of holding the in-between. More able to recognize the early signals of a new coherence. More willing to stay with difference before forcing resolution. More practiced at protecting dignity while making difficult decisions. More honest about the darkness that enters the room whenever an old form begins to die.

The task of leadership today is not to force the future into view, but to hold the present well enough for a different future to gather. That future is not waiting to be invented. Its imaginal discs are already active: in the colleague who has spent years holding pressure from above and below, in the cousin who tends the silence at the table rather than filling it, in the communities that have metabolized loss the dominant culture has not yet learned to name. What remains unfinished is recognition, whether those who have been holding the most, for the longest, with the least acknowledgment, are understood not as evidence of what the

system has failed to fix, but as part of what it has always had the potential to become. The discs are already finding each other. That is the ground for hope this framework offers: not a promise of arrival, but the evidence, already visible to anyone who knows where to look, that the capacity for what comes next is not being built from nothing.

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