


Leadership Research: An Arts-Informed Perspective

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Abstract

The positivist tradition for studying leadership involves correlational analyses and manipulation of an independent variable to determine the effect on a dependent variable while holding all other variables constant. Despite voluminous empirical data, an understanding of leadership has remained elusive. This article proposes the convergence of an arts-informed qualitative research with positivist methodologies, opening up space for a nontraditional approach to understanding leadership that is storied, embodied, and participatory. The epistemological pluralism of arts-informed research, rooted in the literary, visual, and performing arts, generates possibilities for understanding the tacit personal worldview of culturally diverse leaders who, as the result of globalization and changing demographics, are reaching leadership positions. Through a process of reflexivity, knowledge of the particular, and shared meaning-making, this approach has the potential to inform scholarship by enabling researchers to tap into and appreciate emotional as well as cognitive processes that differentiate and explain the behavior of leaders.

Keywords

leadership, qualitative research, cross-cultural, mixed methods, creativity

The very essence of 21st century leadership demands the passionate creativity of artists. Leaders need courage to see reality as it actually is, the courage to envision previously unimagined and unimaginable possibilities, and the courage to inspire others to bring possibility back to reality.

Adler (2006, p. 493)

The shift in the global political and social landscape, inspired in part by the convergence of myriad social cultures and divergent values in Western societies, continues to drive adaptation of intellectual and cultural sensibility to what is viewed as universal rationality (Hancock & Tyler, 2001). In a world where the multiplicity of unpredictable change sweeps across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East to North America, acquiring knowledge in ways that embraces intuition and imagination is becoming a necessity. In this new world order, leaders must find creative ways of taking into account the unique resonance of each individual's voice while honoring a collective humanity. To be effective in organizational settings, leaders must embrace diversity of thought and forge discoveries through openness and inclusiveness of "different others" in the workplace. They must foster new forms of meaning, and provide a social and economic environment within which diverse individuals can construct their own unique identities and prosper as a result (Florida, 2004). In short, successfully meeting the 21st-century collective challenge of imagining new possibilities

requires understanding of, engaging with, and participating and developing connections with others. Such courage, as Adler (2006) urged, begins with a leader's willingness to envision personal capabilities in ways that inspire one's self and others into action far beyond imagination.

To this end, this article proposes the fusion of traditional positivist leadership research methodologies with the creative art forms prompting organizational researchers to bring together the analytic and artistic creativity of the individual as a means of exploring and expressing implicit leadership theories that influence and differentiate behavior. It does so by providing an understanding of arts-informed research at the point of intersection with traditional leadership research. Conceptual elements of arts-informed research are made evident through visual imagery and textual interpretation of its application to cross-cultural leadership research, education, and practice. The concluding discussion sheds light on the assumptions, challenges, and opportunities of venturing into an alternative research landscape (Ewing & Smith, 2004).

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The Traditional Positivist Approach to Leadership

Leadership research is an interdisciplinary field that extends across business, psychology, sociology, political science, and education. The extant leadership research in organizational psychology, dominated by North American researchers, is based primarily on empirical, rational, quantitative analyses of complex lived experiences of individuals in leadership positions. This is likely because North Americans, as a cultural group, are typically considered low-context (Hall & Hall, 1990; Hoppe, 1998), in that contextual information about a person's background or situation is not considered critical for understanding behavior. However, the universal acceptance of situational contingency theories (e.g., Fiedler, 1967) has prompted North American researchers to identify environmental dynamics and sociocultural variables that play an important role in understanding effective leader behavior (Hunter, Bedell-Avers, & Mumford, 2007). The result has been the emergence of "new leadership" theories, and a qualitatively distinct way of thinking about leadership (Pearce, 2007).

The acknowledgment of the importance of context, the nature of interactions across cultural differences, and their influence on the effectiveness of a leader provide social constructivist significance to the phenomenon of leadership (Bryman, 1992). Researchers engaged with "new leadership" concepts such as transformational leadership, charismatic leadership, and authentic leadership, which have emerged as extant paradigms for the study of leaders, are now working on "meaning-making" activities. Gardner and Avolio (1998) defined "meaning" as both the product of human interaction, and the quality of the "social act" (p. 33).

Furthermore, the positivist realization that the leader-member relationship, as well as the context or situation, moderates the relationship between personality traits and job performance has served as a building block for cross-cultural researchers. Hofstede (1980) found, in a global study, that cultural values (i.e., power distance, individualism and collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity and femininity) identify patterns of thinking and differences in attitudes and beliefs of leaders. His research led to a proliferation of behavioral constructs and competing leadership taxonomies that revealed how different behaviors are effective in different cultural contexts and situations (Fiedler & Garcia, 2005). Among the most ambitious of these correlational studies is the ongoing GLOBE project (House, Hanges, Agar, & Ruiz-Quintanilla, 1994; House, Javidan, Hanges, & Dorfman, 2002; Javidan, Dorfman, Sully de Luque, & House, 2006). This project has conceptualized and developed measures of nine cultural dimensions that differentiate societies in the ways that leadership is practiced (i.e., power distance, uncertainty avoidance, human orientation, institutional collectivism, in-group collectivism, assertiveness,

gender egalitarianism, future orientation, and performance orientation).

A limitation of correlational studies, a traditional positivist methodology for studying leadership, is that an understanding of the mathematical relationship between two or more variables rarely sheds light on meaning-making activities. A correlational analysis is at best an initial step for doing so. The random assignment of participants to conditions, the manipulation of an independent variable while holding other variables constant, and the assessment of change in one or more dependent variables allow conclusions regarding causality (Campbell & Stanley, 1972). Yet, this positivist methodology rarely yields clues on tacit personal beliefs and values that drive meaning-making. Nearly a half century ago, Stogdill (1974), a positivist, observed that decades of research on leadership have produced voluminous findings and yet "the endless accumulation of empirical data has not produced an integrated understanding of leadership" (p. vii). The same can be said today (Yukl, 2012).

The construct of leadership continues to evolve in response to ongoing social, political, and organizational debate as to what constitutes a leader and how leaders should behave. Yet, leadership as a concept in the social sciences remains an enigma; one that is further complicated by the contributions of the growing cross-cultural research on leadership. Hence, this article proposes engagement with qualitative arts-informed research to explore embodied experiences of culturally diverse leaders and their worldview, and their impact on leadership practice. Grounded in a qualitative social science research orientation, the arts-informed integrated approach provides a significant move forward toward subjective meaning-making and artful ways of interpreting life experiences within the emerging social and cultural contexts.

Arts-Informed Leadership Research

Leadership is a vibrant bright orange, and we are amazed at its resilience in the face of leadership studies hammering it into a shapeless, hapless, colorless, life-less condition. (Hanson, Ropo, & Sauer, 2007, p. 545)

Traditional case studies of leaders, as typified by articles in the *Harvard Business Review*, are developed on the basis of in-depth interviews conducted to gain firsthand information about leaders and their critical life incidents. The typical case describes situational complexities of the leadership role primarily from the perspective of a leader. Arts-informed research expands leadership understanding beyond participant observation, biographical accounts, and case studies to include individual subjectivities through the arts. For example, an arts-informed life history study provides a complementary and alternative approach for researchers to make sense of the complex and illusive concept of leadership. It is

at once similar to and different from a traditional case study. It is similar in terms of understanding significant life changing experiences, what Bennis and Thomas (2002) called “crucibles” that individuals pass through and make meaning from in order to learn, grow, and subsequently lead. It is different in the manner in which such understanding is brought about, given meaning to, and communicated.

Within an arts-informed life history study, the researcher is at once committed to a principled process of research as well as aesthetic appeal by using language and visuals such as photographs and artifacts that are coherent with the content of the story. The process begins by the engagement of a researcher and a participant with intuition and feeling, through the creation of an art form. It ends with thought, ideas, and action by both in their respective areas of interest. The process makes transparent researcher subjectivity through reflexivity and is inclusive of the influence of others (the participant) on one’s (the researcher’s) behavior. Within an arts-informed framework, experience is structured by discourse; it is understood and explained through subjective interpretation of its art form (Strega, 2005). As such, this approach presents a contextual way of examining and learning about the complexities of a leader’s life experiences. Variations of life history study are currently used in anthropology, sociology, and education (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Wicks & Whiteford, 2006), but the discursive nature of an arts-informed life history research provides cross-cultural leadership researchers and their participants with the opportunity for reflective thinking and an awareness of self within the dynamic and complex social system in which they live.

The objective of my own arts-informed life history research (Latham, 2010) was to (a) develop a contextual understanding of culturally diverse leaders’ life experiences and (b) understand how a leader is influenced by and interacts within a social system to influence others.

Beginning the process with the traditional case study in mind, I gradually became immersed in the arts-informed perspective. During an authentic process of reconstructing experience, the contextual narratives of the participants’ lives gave meaning to their current worldview as leaders. Their stories of experience, as immigrants to Canada, revealed through a series of “guided conversations” (Cole & Knowles, 2001), provided the data on the transformative cross-cultural life events that enabled them to be successful as leaders in their new country. These stories were further enriched by the images they provided from their personal archives. As such, the visual “data” provided additional contextual information that was not articulated by the participants, yet enabled me as the researcher to learn about, understand, and appreciate each life story from a personal interpretive lens.

Erickson (1959) described one’s identity as the sum of values, experiences, and self-perceptions that develop as a

function of environmental challenges. The socially grounded self reflects and responds to changing needs, and adjusts to rapidly developing challenges of the modern world (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Through an explicit “on-going process of reflecting ideas and experiences back to oneself” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 42), arts-informed research takes into account both the researcher and the participants’ subjectivity as an expression of their respective identities. The very constitution of identity is thus configured in stories of lived experiences and reflexive interpretations. Artistically defined self-construction of cultural values yield variable but “particular” images that open up space for diverse interpretive resources. As such, an arts-informed research process allows a leader to depict insights into self as a primary instrument with which to analyze and measure experience and ultimately adapt to new circumstances.

An arts-informed life history process can facilitate a paradigm shift and the unfolding of the concept of leadership as “meaning making in a community of practice” (Drath & Palus, 1994). As “meaning making” becomes a central role of leaders, and meaning becomes recognized as “multiple” within the context of culturally diverse societies, arts-informed leadership research has the potential to generate “knowledge that is vital, relational, multivocal, and multi-sensory” (Brearley & Darso, 2008, p. 639). The transformational potential of embodied knowledge allows powerful and multiple ways of exploring, identifying, and learning about leadership. It provides a way to make meaning within an epistemological and ontological framework that is different from the traditional positivist methods for studying leadership. The conceptual elements of an arts-informed approach, discussed below, (a) enhance a researcher’s intuition and skills in creativity, (b) invite reflexivity and “knowledge of the particular,” and (c) allow for the practice of mutuality and shared meaning-making.

Aesthetic Form and Creativity

Among the art forms, visual inquiry in particular, fosters “meaning-making.” Integration, if not the unity of art and science, is among the legacies of Leonardo Da Vinci who emphasized the connection between experience and perception (Gelb, 2004). With his unique synthesis of logic and imagination, Da Vinci inspired many through the ages. Visual forms of data can demonstrate and elaborate on the analytic process allowing for multiple points of convergence and divergence with quantitative analyses of correlational data and traditional experimental designs. This makes it possible for researchers, particularly North American researchers whose worldview is generally that of linear, objective, and quantifiable models of behavior (Hoppe, 1998), to grasp the illusive aspects in terms of cultural, social, and historical contexts in which images are displayed and interpreted. As Weber (2008) stated,

An image can be a multilayered theoretical statement, simultaneously positing even contradictory propositions for us to consider, pointing to the fuzziness of logic and the complex or even paradoxical nature of particular human experience. (p. 43)

Describing her water color exhibition at Banff, "Reality in Translation: Art Transforming Apathy Into Action," Adler (2008) described the scholar/researcher's creative experience:

Allowing a painting to be born is to stand in awe of one of life's most beautiful mysteries. Invited by the blank paper, the best of my intentions and experience enter into a dance with controllable coincidence. Neither the process nor the resulting art are ever completely defined.

In Adler's (2010) art exhibit in concert with inspirational reader's theater, she engaged and inspired the viewer to share the researcher/artist's world through reflection. Her objective was to move the collective beyond the "dehydrated language of management." Engagement with various kinds of art induces ongoing creativity. Rogers (1961) described the creative process as "the emergence in action of a novel relational product, growing out of the uniqueness of the individual on the one hand, and the materials, events, people, or circumstances" of one's life on the other (p. 150). Openness to new experience, an internal locus of evaluation, and the ability to toy with elements and concepts are conditions for constructive creative action in a leader. Creative functioning requires the ability to take risks and to overcome obstacles in ways that may not be conventional. It requires clear goals, an understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses, and the ability to embrace novel ways of thinking about and doing things. Arts-informed researchers, much like artists and leaders, experience the creative process of consciously preparing for a task, and then allowing the subconscious to weigh in to address an issue. They aim to go beyond what is imaginable (Figures 1 & 2).

Arts-informed research gives new symbolic twists to old perceptions and draws attention to what could otherwise be ignored as an everyday occurrence. It allows one to pause, reflect, imagine new possibilities to emerge, and "work backward from aspirations and imagination rather than forward from the past" (Adler, 2006, P. 487). Inspired by my experience of an arts-informed life history research, I now encourage 4th-year students in human resource management to engage in a creative inquiry as part of a leadership development course. My objective is to move them beyond the conventional rational, analytic problem solving to imagining possibilities. Using Adler's (2010) *Leadership Insight* as a source of inspiration, the students are asked to reflect on their leadership skills within the network of relationships in which they contextualize their experiences. *Leadership Insight*, as a tool, inspires the students with its aesthetic appeal of art, motivational text, and white space to record reflections. The

students are also encouraged to capture their thoughts and feelings in an art form (e.g., a collage or painting) of their own choice. In this way, the students identify and develop insights into their leadership strengths as well as the challenges they face as emerging leaders. This process often provokes the students to explore questions that they might not have otherwise asked.

Creating art is a process analogous to what Eisner (1997) called "productive ambiguity," inviting attention to detail and generating insight through its evocative complexity. It is a problem-solving process that requires a combination of thinking and sensing intuitively with the end product determined by a process that allows for the new and the unexpected to emerge (Watrin, 1999). Engagement with the arts is admittedly a complex iterative process of communication and expression of a meaningful vision, taking risks, and making decisions. Thus, it is a process that "can seem to be rather mysterious and uncontrollable" (James, 2000, p. 155) to individuals, especially students, who are looking for immediate solutions to problems. Finley and Knowles (1995) described creating art, such as a collage, as a search for visual images to re-present life, and the art of research as a search for written images that equally re-present life. Through the process of creating art, the students have the opportunity of making meaning of their own experiences (Wilcox, Watson, & Paterson, 2004), to know why they act in a particular way, while offering issues and themes that may resonate with others.

By virtue of the assignment, my students are deemed "artists" and interpreters of their experiences as data (Cole & Knowles, 2008). Artists, much like leaders, use rigorous discipline "developing a critical eye, technical skills, and observational techniques that blend with the creative passion" (Watrin, 1999, p. 93) to examine life and the human condition. Unaccustomed to acknowledging themselves as either an artist or a leader, they often express mixed emotions about the challenge. Despite initial trepidation, ultimately, the culmination of personal life experiences, cultural orientation, levels of confidence and artistic knowledge, as well as risk taking, problem solving, and creative skills direct each student's choice of the art form of inquiry. As emerging leaders, the students exhibit the courage to see their own reality, imagine possibilities, and find the inspiration to mobilize their resources within the space that the art form provides them for new experiences. They learn to express themselves and communicate through a medium other than text, and in doing so, come to see the influence of relationships and situations on their identity as leaders. Their "capacity to wonder" is stimulated by a form of inquiry that is novel for them (Eisner, 1997).

Reflexivity and Knowledge of the Particular

In what Denzin and Lincoln (1994) termed the *seventh moment*, qualitative researchers are now using processes to

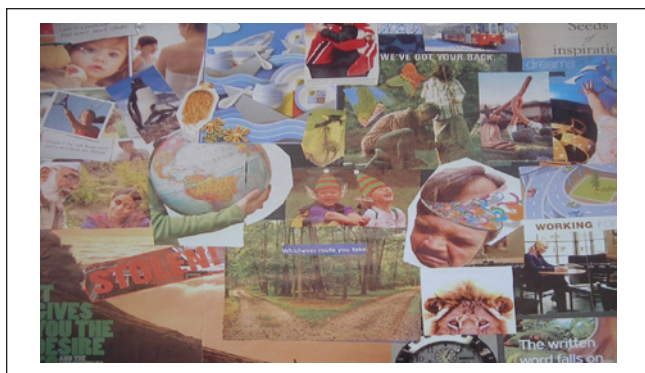


Figure 1. Student Collage.

Note. I have realized that in order to win, sometimes I may have to lose. I reluctantly decided to include an unpleasant picture on my collage. It shows a man with his face distorted and question marks popping out of his brain. I described this as being normal (Student 1, 2007).



Figure 2. Student Collage.

Note. My growth is represented by a flower drawn in its three different stages: Phase I symbolizes my closed state of mind, shy and quiet . . . The large mosaic image of a woman and the puzzle piece face depicts me taking myself apart piece by piece, symbolizing my active involvement . . . The last phase, I was relieved and have finally become completely comfortable in class (Student 2, 2007).

generate reflexivity to make sense of a phenomenon in terms of the meaning that people bring to it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). McKenna and Richardson's (2003) research on managers in the New Zealand health industry, using complexity-mapping methodology, captured each manager's narrative thought through unstructured interviews. The process facilitated accessing and understanding of how they made sense of, and gave meaning to, the complexity of their role within the context of their industry. Through story telling by the managers, "the facts of organizational life as told by the storyteller are given meaning" (McKenna & Richardson, 2003, p. 80). The storied process enhances empathetic appreciation of the complexities of others' roles and experiences simultaneously.

This allows others (e.g., audience or readers) to "see" for themselves, to evaluate how the situation may or may not apply to them, and to reflect on how they would act in a similar situation (Watrin, 1999).

Reflexivity, metaphor, and generative experience in the arts are tools for exploring subjective and intersubjective human behavior as well as facilitating an understanding of mental processes (Higgs, 2008). Cole and Knowles (2001) stated that reflexivity, tied to the issue of subjectivity, is an essential component of arts-informed research. Being reflexive implies engaging in an ongoing process of reflection with a particular outcome expected, based on a contingent experience rather than making assumptions regarding universal rationality. It is about finding voice, an acknowledgment of personal truth from the subjective point of view, based on a unique personal experience. Through the process of reflexivity, researchers and participants have the opportunity to explore the situations that shape their understanding of themselves and their worldview, the identity they have created, and the challenges they have yet to overcome. In short, the arts-informed approach to research can make us "recall who we are and who we want to be" (Darso, 2004, p. 28).

The study of lives of leaders through story telling or visual artistry induces a reflexive process of engagement that builds on the subjectivity of the researcher and the participant while allowing space for readers to construe their own meaning. Stories teach, mobilize, and motivate in ways that a quantitative analysis cannot (Kouzes & Posner, 2003). While conducting my own arts-informed life history study, listening to the stories of the participants, I was reminded of Muchmore (1999), who recounted his encounter with an art exhibit:

I realized that I was actually creating a version of his life—one that was inextricably linked to my own, for it was through the lens of my own life experiences that I was making sense of these objects. (p. 179)

Provoked by the artistic orientation to inquiry, I also engaged in the creative process of developing a collage as an expression of my teaching pedagogy (Figure 3). The experience provided me with an opportunity for reflexivity; specifically, it allowed me to understand the interplay between intent and practice within the context of my role as an educator. Through an emergent process of integrating cognition and intuition, I reconnected with my self as the primary source of information based on which I was able to initiate action. The art form can direct attention to deeply entrenched values as antecedents for change and personal development. More importantly, the potential to access unique individual emotional perspectives and intellectual challenges through the creative art form can enrich interpretation of quantitative data derived from traditional personality and psychological assessments used for leadership development.



Figure 4. Reciprocal leader/follower representation.

Source. Reproduced with permission of Rosile (2001).

Note. 20th century: man'age—verb: control physically, as a horse (Webster's). 21st century: man'age—verb: influence reciprocally, as a horse and rider (Rosile's).

of leaders. Doing so enables researchers to link emotional and cognitive capabilities, and tap into embodied values, beliefs, and behaviors that differentiate and explain the actions of leaders within the context of the changing landscape of the 21st century.

In a world where effective leadership is about “meaning-making,” traditional positivistic research alone cannot adequately respond to the challenge that currently confronts organizational researchers in terms of understanding implications of cultural diversity on leadership. Their approach is problematic given the emerging plurality of epistemologies among leaders triggered by increasing social mobility and the convergence of cultures. Societal culture incites ongoing and “particular” interpretation of experience, based on personal knowledge accumulated over the years as part of belonging to a group or institution (Holstein & Gubrium,

2000). Arts-informed research gives significance to the “particular” and as such provides a platform for further positivists research focused on “generalizations.”

An arts-informed methodological approach takes into account a leader's sense of social and cultural identity, a key source of meaning from which a leader operates (Day & Harrison, 2007). As such, it is particularly well suited to exploring multiple ways of “knowing” that which cannot always be grasped and articulated through text-based language or a quantitative analysis. Examples of researchers using an arts-informed perspective across disciplines are Butler-Kisber's (2010) work in teacher education, Brearley and Darso's (2008) study of managerial experience in turbulent organizations, Dinh's (2007) study of work process complexities, and Cole and McIntyre's (2004) study of Alzheimer caregivers. These researchers are emphasizing the importance of the emotional domain and the motivational aspects of individual qualities, as well as symbolic behaviors (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). They are abandoning grand universal theories in favor of local or mid-range theories to address “the particular” within contingent situations (Pinder, 2008).

The focus of this article has been on ways the arts can enhance extant leadership research through analytic thinking and creative synthesis of often diverse and opposing perspectives.

It is guided by the (a) belief that individuals have the potential for developing leadership capacities and creative sensibilities, (b) fact that leadership ability and artistic talent are nurtured by freedom in creative expression, and (c) knowledge that researchers and artists share similar creative aspirations in that both have the desire to generate knowledge that may not otherwise be acquired. This article proposes the fusion of traditional positivistic leadership research methodologies with the art forms as a means of opening up space for a creative process of knowledge generation that is grounded in qualitative practice, and not bounded by constraints of expression. It provides a research perspective that simultaneously encourages collective meaning-making within the context of a changing social landscape while giving voice to the individual. It is additive to traditional approaches by accentuating and bringing color to the research process (Adler, 2006) ensuring that indeed “what we cannot comprehend by analysis, we become aware of in awe” (Heschel, 2001, p. 3).

Arts-informed research embraces “scholartistry” (Nielsen, 2002), that is, the art and craft of creating art-related research that is “transformational in process and representation, and regenerative in possibilities and influence” (Knowles, Promislow, & Cole, 2008, p. 2). The use of the aesthetic form and intuitive creativity, together with the knowledge of the particular as sources of data will enable researchers to explore and bring to the forefront a range of organizationally relevant issues such as cross-cultural leadership behaviors. However,

“scholartistry,” the fusion of traditional leadership research with the arts, is not without challenges. Doing so is provocative by its nature and disruptive of tradition. Working with the arts requires “courage, confidence and a willingness to work at the edge” because in working with the arts, “the strength of the data is in its ambiguity and potential for multiple interpretations and levels of engagement” (Brearley & Darso, 2008, p. 641). The process “entails perpetual curiosity as well as wearied surrender in which one’s understandings transform” (Lapum, Ruttonsha, Church, Yau, & Matthews David, 2011, p. 100). Integrating a quantitative analysis with interpretive researcher subjectivity may appear on the surface to be in conflict. The drive for quantitatively derived results may be perceived by traditionalists to be at odds with an emphasis on process. Moreover, emotional and cognitive integrative thinking may require a new vocabulary, a communication medium that is based on “hands on experience” with the art forms. As such, researchers themselves are at the center of this process of exploration in terms of their perseverance and commitment to new forms of research. Researchers are challenged to use their own creative abilities to exploit individual aptitudes in novel ways. This process requires them to begin “asking questions, energizing one self and others, working with intuition . . . expression and reflection” (Darso, 2004, p. 30). It requires them to open up space for serendipitous happenings (Austin, Devin, & Sullivan, 2012).

To conclude, I leave researchers, who are embarking toward embodied leadership research by working with the arts, with Pablo Neruda’s (2008) words, when writing his first book:

I did not know what to say, my mouth
had no way
with names,
my eyes were blind,
and something started in my soul,
fever or forgotten wings,
and I made my own way,
deciphering
that fire,
and I wrote the first faint line,
faint, without substance, pure
nonsense,
pure wisdom
of someone who knows nothing.

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