



## LESSONS FROM FREDERICK – THAT DAMN MOUSE!

Coach, teacher and writer **Martha Freymann Miser** reminds us of the power of images created by artists and poets to sustain and inspire us in dark times.

I keep thinking about Frederick.

As a coach, I've tried other images to help me make sense of these challenging times. But that damn mouse keeps creeping into my head — insisting he has something to say about leadership and beauty and poetry.

*Frederick* is a classic children's book about a 'chatty family of field mice' preparing for winter. When my kids were young, it was one of many books we would share at bedtime before they finally settled down and went to sleep. In the years since, my husband and I have given away most of our children's library, so I was surprised to find the slightly dog-eared little book sitting on my bookshelf. I guess you could say Frederick was waiting for me.

First, I was curious: where did *Frederick* come from? The book was written in 1967 by Leo Lionni.<sup>1</sup> Born in Amsterdam, Lionni learned to draw by making sketches at the iconic Rijksmuseum, the Dutch national museum in Amsterdam and home to great masters like Rembrandt, van Gogh and Vermeer. In his lifetime he became a world-famous illustrator and the author of more than 30 children's books.<sup>2</sup>

As it happens, I'm well acquainted with the Rijksmuseum; my family spent four magical years in Amsterdam, living a few blocks from it. Today my son lives a short walk from that famous landmark. Writing this brings back a flood of treasured memories. For instance, I remember my first trip to Amsterdam — Easter 2000 — two years before our move. It was a quiet, sunny morning and, feeling disoriented, jetlagged and far from home, I took a walk. Rounding a corner, I suddenly found myself facing the castle-like Rijksmuseum, sitting back on a lush green lawn, sparkling in the sunlight. It was a breath-taking, unforgettable image.

Which is a good segue because, you see, *Frederick* is very much about the power of images.

Here's a quick synopsis: Frederick is a member of a family of field mice. Anticipating winter, the family does what mice do: they all 'gather corn and nuts and wheat and straw'. All, that is, except Frederick. When the other mice ask Frederick why he isn't working, he says: 'I gather sun rays for the cold dark winter days', or 'I gather colours . . . for winter is grey', or 'I am gathering words, for the winter days are long and many, and we'll run out of things to say'.

Eventually the mice go into their winter hideaway in the rocks. At first, they have lots to eat and lots of funny stories to tell. But as the temperature drops and the food begins to run out, they fall silent. That's when Frederick climbs up on a large rock. 'Close your eyes', he says. 'Now I send you the rays of the sun'. Imagining the sun, they feel warmer. Then he tells them about the blue periwinkles, the red poppies, the yellow wheat, the green leaves and the berry bush, and they see 'the colours as clearly as if they had been painted in their minds'. There's even a drawing showing the mice imagining blotches of blue, red, yellow, green and purple. At the end, when Frederick recites a poem, they applaud. 'But Frederick', they exclaim, 'you are a poet!'

### A WINTER LIKE NO OTHER

So why has Frederick been whispering in my ear these past few months? Because, I suppose, like Frederick and his family, we've all entered a winter of sorts, forced into our hideaways amid our own metaphorical rocks.

Clearly this is a winter like no other — a time so uncertain, chaotic and paradoxical we lack a vocabulary to describe it. On the one hand, we share a profound sense of dread. We fear illness, economic collapse, oppression, ecological destruction and social unrest. Conversely, new possibilities emerge like green shoots through cracked pavement: ending racism; tackling climate change; rebuilding relationships; innovations in science, business, education and the arts.

By now millions of people have faced the terrible darkness of the Covid-19 pandemic. Like many others, my family has managed to stay well, but loss has found us nonetheless in the form of lost jobs, lost freedom, discarded dreams and even the death of my sweet mother, who slipped away peacefully on an early August morning. Still, we carry on. In Boston, USA, where I live with my husband, we're enjoying the sunny days and cool evenings of an early New England fall. Each day, much like the last, is not unpleasant. And yet, I notice, the sheer banality of existence — the sameness of my day-to-day routines, the illusion that work continues unchanged (albeit online) — numbs me to these losses and to the reality of my exile from the world beyond our home. Without conscious thought, I've begun to shrink myself, my expectations and my aspirations, all to fit inside this smaller life.

Similarly, for many of my coaching clients, leadership has become a joyless task. Seeing no end in sight, they are worn down by the relentless succession of disembodied video calls, by the hypervigilance, by the burdens of care at work and at home. Listening, I see myself and know I must shake off this mood. For unless I can challenge them to rise above their immediate concerns, find new sources of vitality and envision new possibilities, we may all succumb to complacency and resignation.

### NOURISHING THE SPIRIT IN EXILE

Poets like Frederick understand these dangers. Leadership expert Meg Wheatley reminds us that exile historically has been used to punish and to break the human spirit.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, says poet David Whyte, those deprived of community or meaning or a life 'based on the soul's desires have empty larders, and no fire in the hearth; they will starve if they are not fed something more nourishing'.<sup>4</sup>

Poets are also masters of imagery. They know that our capacity to hold an internal image is not a simple exercise in memory. It's a

practice as vital to human flourishing as food and water. To illustrate, Whyte tells the story of a Jewish concert pianist who, locked by the Nazis in a confined space with dozens of others, 'survived by playing mentally through her entire repertoire of Chopin while everyone died in a standing position around her'.<sup>5</sup> Though less dramatic, Frederick's images of the 'sun rays and colours and words' are equally profound.

And what of my images, my blotches of blue, red, yellow, green and purple? It takes little effort to summon them. Like Frederick, I've been gathering them all my life. There are arresting images of a rushing waterfall in Glacier National Park and the majestic snow-topped Grand Tetons. There are beautiful images of the yellow-green-red Tuscan landscape and the sun glinting on a Caribbean beach. There are spiritual images of the haunting plains of South Dakota, and serene and silent Squam Lake in New Hampshire. There are also intimate and tactile images: wrapping my arms around my children and grandchildren, stroking the ears of a beloved dog, feeling the soft papery skin of my mother's hand. Each image has its own story, meaning and magic. And each awakens and breathes new life into me.

### FOLLOW THE POETS

But what about words? Frederick gathers words as diligently as he gathers sun rays and colours. He knows that 'the winter days are long and we'll run out of things to say'. He knows that words, in the hands of a poet, convey images as powerful as a painting or a photograph. He knows that his choice of words can create apathy or excitement, despair or hope. And he knows that the most potent words remind us who we are in the middle of the most terrible of times.

I'm glad to have my own stockpile of words, for the days of quarantine are long, and I've exhausted things to say about designer masks, virtual meetings and disinfection routines. So, following Frederick's gentle guidance, I pause and consider how my life has gone from logging airline miles to this unexpected homecoming. And in that moment, the opening lines of *Love After Love*,<sup>6</sup> a favourite poem of mine by Derek Walcott, come to me:

*The time will come  
when, with elation,  
you will greet yourself arriving  
at your own door, in your own mirror,  
and each will smile at the other's welcome,  
and say, sit here. Eat.*

Frederick © 1967 by Leo Lionni  
© renewed 1995 by Leo Lionni



The poem continues: 'You will love again the stranger who was your self' — the one 'who knows you by heart', the one 'you ignored'. Slow down, remember, forgive, rejoice. The poem concludes: 'Sit. Feast on your life'.

What could be more perfect in this time of solitude than to joyfully greet myself at my door and then spend time reflecting on my life? Which is why I say 'follow the poets'. They will always lead you back to yourself.

As we move ahead into an unknowable future, there will inevitably be more dark days that threaten to crush our spirit. Days when we will be called on as leaders and coaches to summon images of hope and humanity, and the words to help us remember who we are and what we stand for.

On those days, think of Frederick, climbing up on the rock, sending rays of sun and sharing the warmth of his imagination.

1. Lionni, L. 1967. *Frederick*. New York. Pantheon.
2. Heller, S. 'Leo Lionni, 89, Dies, Versatile Creator of Children's Books'. *New York Times*. 17 October 1999. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/10/17/nyregion/leo-lionni-89-dies-versatile-creator-of-children-s-books.html>
3. Wheatley, M. E-mail to author. 17 April 2020.
4. Whyte, D. 1994. *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America*. New York. Currency Doubleday.
5. Ibid.
6. Walcott, D. (1976). 'Love After Love' in *Sea Grapes*. New York. Farrar Straus Giroux. Available at [http://www.phys.unm.edu/~tw/fas/yits/archive/walcott\\_loveafterlove.html](http://www.phys.unm.edu/~tw/fas/yits/archive/walcott_loveafterlove.html)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Martha Freymann Miser is founder and president of Aduro Consulting, a Boston-based coaching and consulting company specialising in leadership and change for purpose-driven companies. Prior to this, Martha held leadership positions in both private and public sector organisations, including Global Head of Leadership and Change for ING in the Netherlands. Martha holds a master's degree in public administration and a doctorate in leadership and change. She teaches at George Washington University and is on the editorial board of *Coaching Perspectives*.

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