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Magellan of Arizona CEO Clarke looks to connect and lead through poetry

One of the most interesting and unexpected sessions at the 2012 National Council Conference featured Richard Clarke, PhD, the chief executive officer of Magellan of Arizona, the managed care organization that is contracted to serve the behavioral health carve-out for Phoenix and Maricopa County, Ariz.

Clarke's lesson in leadership involved, well . . . poetry.

Through past experience in the public education system, Clarke said that he learned that educators and leaders must not only teach, but embrace learning themselves, in part by "freeing themselves from the limits of their own thought and knowledge networks." Clarke found this freedom by reading and reflecting on poetry, a viewpoint reinforced when he read the book *Leading from Within: Poetry that Sustains the Courage to Lead*.

"Experts show that reading the *Iliad* out loud causes a synchronization of heartbeat and breathing. Studies find that there's greater activity in the brain when people listen to poetry," he explained. Later, he cited a statement by T. S. Eliot: "Genuine poetry communicates before it is understood." Clarke said that poetry opens the mind because "it can evoke emotions without a great deal of processing."

Because of this unusual capability, Clarke looks for and uses poems in his leadership whenever he can. He insists that "sometimes, using the imagery, symbolism, or paradox of poetry can take you to a different way of looking at a problem," he asserted, adding that "because we in the field are involved in adaptive change—moving decisions downward and outward to others—it is important that we find ways other ways—beyond a few words—to communicate at a greater depth with those we lead."

"Symbols and images are the leader's props," he suggested. "They become a means of keeping the vision and values present to all even when the leader is absent."

Citing the poem "Fire" by Judy Brown, Clarke made the point that "what builds the fire—a pile of logs—can also extinguish it." To him, the poem emphasized the need to recognize that creative fire demands more than just fuel—the logs—but also attention to the spaces between the logs: "Fire happens because you leave openings through which the fire can grow."

In another poem, he cited the power of gentle, but persistent effort, comparing it to the action of water on a rock as seen by poet Holly Near. "First, the drops of water splash away when they hit the rock, but over time, they wear the rock away, resulting in a dramatic change. Can we be like drops of water on a rock?" he asked, paraphrasing the poem.

A final poem by the poet Hafiz examined an extraordinary act of listening, asking the reader, "Do I listen as if everyone were my master, speaking to me his last cherished words?" Clarke suggested that, if this dynamic were created in an otherwise routine meeting, the results could be—and have been—profound.

"I recently opened a meeting by asking all to read and reflect upon a piece of poetry," he said. "We all sat quietly for a time, and then we got started." Despite a very diverse collection of participants, Clarke described the subsequent meeting as "one of the most effective I've experienced in a long time."

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