

The Reflective Executive and the Road to Human Flourishing

Intelligence. Creativity. Moral Imagination.

Dr. Gayle D. Beebe

Dr. Gayle Beebe opens his talk by reflecting on his core belief that effective leadership begins with an internal conversation—one that leads to self-correction. Drawing from his own philosophy, shaped by reading and influential mentors, he invites listeners to adopt the daily discipline of reflection: reviewing what has happened, preparing for what lies ahead, and cultivating awareness of the people and responsibilities they will encounter. Framing this in a broader historical context, he references Simone Weil and T. S. Eliot, who, amidst the chaos of World War II, questioned what kind of moral and philosophical vision would be required to rebuild a fractured world. Their insights—especially Eliot’s warning that “they had the experience, but missed the meaning”—serve as a caution and a call: that leaders must not only act but also interpret their experience in ways that promote growth, wisdom, and human flourishing.

1. What Is Human Flourishing?

Dr. Beebe introduces the Global Flourishing Study as a landmark, five-year research initiative led by Harvard and Baylor Universities, seeking to define and measure the essential components of human flourishing across the world. Building on Martin Seligman’s foundational work in positive psychology, the study surveys 200,000 participants across 22 countries, identifying six dimensions of well-being that together form a comprehensive vision of what it means to thrive—both personally and socially.

The first domain, happiness and life satisfaction, is rooted in the experience of autonomy and competence. People flourish when their work aligns with their values and when they feel trusted to contribute meaningfully. Beebe highlights the importance of creating environments that combine freedom and accountability, referencing Red Poling of Ford Motor Company, who empowered his employees by setting clear goals and then giving them the freedom to achieve them creatively.

Second, flourishing depends on physical and mental health, not as freedom from hardship but as resilience in the face of it. Beebe notes that creativity often coexists with difficulty and that life’s burdens are not obstacles to growth but essential to it. Resilience involves cognitive flexibility, emotional regulation, and a belief in one’s ability to respond well to adversity.

The third element is meaning and purpose—having a sense that one’s life matters and is connected to enduring goals. Beebe draws on Viktor Frankl’s insight that even suffering becomes bearable when it serves a meaningful purpose. People with a strong sense of purpose report greater happiness and cope better with life’s challenges, especially when their purpose contributes to something larger than themselves.

Fourth is character and virtue. Flourishing requires moral development and the pursuit of the good life—questions that reach back to Socrates and Aristotle. Beebe stresses the importance of helping people wrestle with questions of goodness, not just through personal reflection but also through education, community, and mentorship.

Fifth, close and positive social relationships are essential to well-being. Human beings are wired for connection, and deep, supportive relationships are among the strongest predictors of happiness and longevity. Beebe underscores the importance of religious communities in fostering this kind of belonging, citing strong evidence linking regular participation with lower depression, greater meaning, and stronger civic life.

Finally, financial and material stability provides the practical foundation for flourishing. While prosperity alone cannot guarantee fulfillment, the absence of economic security generates stress and disorientation. Flourishing requires a balance: enough stability to reduce anxiety, paired with purpose and perspective that rise above material concerns.

2. How do we become self-aware so that we can self-regulate?

Dr. Beebe begins this section with the essential leadership question: *How do we become self-aware so that we can self-regulate?* He illustrates the stakes of that question with a story of a gifted adult student who, after sustained disrespect, imploded in a career-ending moment. This led Beebe into the early literature on emotional intelligence and the lifelong work of helping people develop the internal clarity and resilience needed to lead well.

To distill this inner work, Beebe introduces a simple Venn diagram: intelligence born of education and guided experience, creativity born of innovation and strategic risk-taking, and moral intelligence born of empathy and emotional insight. These intersecting qualities form the foundation of reflective leadership.

He then reflects on his own formation through educators who shaped his thinking and character—from Robert Gundry’s biblical insight to Peter Drucker’s practical genius. These mentors helped him grow not by replicating them, but by encouraging him to become more fully himself through rigorous learning and reflection.

This inner journey deepened when Beebe encountered the moral philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch. Her concept of *attention*, borrowed from Simone Weil, describes a just and loving gaze that slowly reorients our perceptions. Murdoch believed that moral change begins with seeing others rightly, especially when ego and self-deception distort our view. For Murdoch, beauty plays a central role in awakening this moral attention. Just as Plato saw beauty as a natural pathway to the good, Murdoch viewed art as a catalyst for reflection—something Beebe experienced firsthand during solitary visits to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where great paintings prompted deeper questions about his own motivations and desires.

This vision aligns with the post-war reflections of Simone Weil, T. S. Eliot, and other thinkers who sought to rebuild society by recovering a sense of moral and spiritual purpose. Drawing from St. Augustine’s idea of the “right ordering of loves,” Beebe emphasizes that a well-ordered inner life is what enables leaders to respond wisely to external challenges.

Finally, Beebe contrasts this with Machiavellian leadership, which dismisses virtue as impractical. Instead, he affirms James Hankins’s call for “soulcraft”—the cultivation of moral character—as the only durable foundation for statecraft. Leaders must be inwardly transformed if they hope to lead communities toward genuine flourishing.

3. How do we undergo the sort of change for the positive that Bruni advocates, Murdoch extols, Weil elevates, and T.S. Eliot reflects?

Dr. Beebe proposes the parables of Jesus as a powerful tool for personal transformation. He draws on Donald Capps's insight that parables engage in indirect communication—disrupting our assumptions and forcing us to shift perspective, much like Gestalt psychology's figure-ground reversals. These stories invite us to see from multiple vantage points, cultivating the self-examination necessary for moral growth. He illustrates this need with Daniel Kahneman's warning: "*What you see is all there is.*" Beebe recounts a moment when others misjudged his actions based on appearances, not knowing the deeper context. This example underscores the danger of quick conclusions and the essential humility required to ask, "What am I missing?"

Beebe turns to Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son* to highlight how beauty and storytelling can awaken grace, humility, and moral clarity. The father's embrace, the son's repentance, and the elder brother's resentment represent different stages of the human heart. Each figure challenges us to forgive, to be forgiven, and to release self-righteousness.

Ultimately, the parables—and the moral imagination they inspire—call us into inner conversations that lead to self-correction. In the spirit of Murdoch, Weil, and Eliot, Beebe argues that human flourishing requires this kind of spiritual realism: seeing others as independent centers of reality and cultivating institutions that serve the common good.

He concludes by introducing Westmont's future initiatives, especially the Keith Center downtown, which will house programs in nursing, theology, economics, and media. Among these is a podcast called *The Reflective Executive*, designed to explore the kind of internal dialogue that undergirds wise leadership. Beebe also announces Westmont's formal engagement with the Global Flourishing Project, committing to track and reflect on flourishing through its six dimensions in the years ahead.