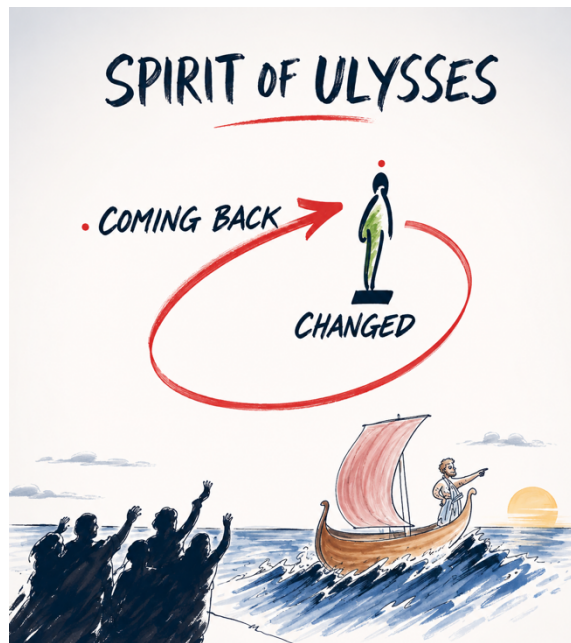


Twenty-Five Years of Ulysses: An Open Letter to Every Leader

Twenty-five years ago, a leadership programme called Ulysses set sail from the shores of Turkey, near ancient Troy. This is a letter to those who were aboard, and to every leader who wasn't.



Dear Ulyssians, dear fellow travellers, and every leader reading this,

Twenty-five years ago, we stood together on the Mediterranean shores of Turkey, within sight of ancient Troy, and set out on a journey. We called it Ulysses, a leadership programme, yes, but truthfully something more: an experiment, an exploration, a wager that leadership for the new millennium would have to be learned the way Ulysses learned it. By leaving the familiar shore, weathering what the sea sends, and coming home changed.

I still remember the evening we launched. The light on the water, the sense that something was beginning that none of us could fully name. And the poem we read aloud as our compass, Cavafy's *Ithaka*:

As you set out for Ithaka, hope your road is a long one, full of adventure, full of discovery...

That road has indeed been long, and rich with places. We drew on two odysseys at once: Homer's timeless epic of the voyager who returns transformed, and Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, whose very title named the year we set sail, pointing not backwards into myth but forwards into the unknown. That was always the heart of our work: leading from the future. Not managing what is, but listening for what wants to emerge, and having the courage to sail towards it before the maps exist.

And the programme itself was a voyage into the unknown: not a classroom, but a test of leadership in the world as it really is. Across its tenure, participants completed some fifty projects, working side by side with NGOs, intergovernmental agencies, and grassroots social entrepreneurs: tackling hunger, poverty, environmental degradation, and HIV/AIDS; engaging in post-war reconstruction; widening access to medical care; and standing with indigenous communities as they addressed their own challenges. We went not as experts but as learners: to help where we could, and to discover, in the doing, what responsible leadership in the corporate sector should truly look like.

At the time, this was unorthodox. It won us accolades, followers, admirers, and, let us be honest, a few raised eyebrows. Yet look around today: so much of what we explored together as experiment has quietly arrived as accepted leadership practice and reality. What we tested on those shores, others now teach. What we lived, the world now names. That is perhaps the deepest satisfaction a designer of journeys can know.

In 2016, many of you travelled to Switzerland to mark fifteen years: to reconnect, and to reignite the spirit of Ulysses. I have carried the warmth of that gathering with me ever since. And now 2026 marks a quarter of a century since that first crew set out from Turkey in 2001.

Who would have thought that this year, of all years, a film would carry Odysseus back to the top of the world's screens, headlines, and conversations? Whatever one makes of any particular telling, it confirms what we knew from the start: this story of Homer's endures across millennia because it keeps teaching us about longing and endurance, about cunning and humility, about the long way home. Watching the world rediscover it, I was carried straight back to the moment we set out, poem in hand, hearts open.

To those of you now retired from formal leadership: you have not retired from the journey. Ulysses, too, came home, and his homecoming was not an ending but a harvest. The wisdom you gathered is needed now more than ever, by younger travellers who are only just pushing their boats out.

And let me name what I myself carried ashore. As my own boat drew closer to the home shore, I discovered that of everything we learned on that long voyage, one message asked to be carried forward above all: courage. It has become my work in the years since, the distilled essence, for me, of twenty-five years of exploring what leadership truly is: the courage to leave the harbour, the courage to stay the course, and the courage to come home changed.

And to those reading this who never sailed with us: know that Ulysses was never really about a programme. It was about a way of being in the world: curious, courageous, willing to be changed by what you meet. That journey requires no enrolment. It begins whenever you decide to leave the harbour.

So let this anniversary be more than a memory. If you were part of Ulysses, say so in the comments, and let's find each other again. Write to me. Write to each other. Share where your road has taken you these twenty-five years: the storms, the sirens, the unexpected islands, the homecomings. And if you never sailed with us but something here speaks to you, share it with a leader who is still deciding whether to leave the harbour. Let us reconnect the crew, across generations, and pass the spirit of Ulysses on to those who will lead from the future we will not see.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind. Arriving there is what you are destined for, but do not hurry the journey at all.

With gratitude, admiration, and an embrace across the years,

Ralf Schneider Initiator & Steward, Ulysses (2001)