

**A Mandela Moment in the United States:
A View of Leadership on the Day after the 2008 Presidential Election**

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November 5, 2008**

This is a good time to think about, and talk about, leadership. I want thus to suggest at the outset three reasons why conversations like this should be taking place not only in this room, but throughout the universities and living rooms across the world.

1. For almost two years, we have been immersed, inundated and even obsessed with a process that culminated yesterday in the selection of the president of the United States.
2. Within the next few years, we will see a generational transfer of leadership as many in the present generation (baby boomers) will retire and be replaced by members of the next generation (so-called generation Xers). We have seen the impact of the new leadership not just in the election of Barak Obama, but we have seen it also in the young people who played a major leadership role in making this happen.
3. Hardly a day goes by when we are not reminded that someone respected and revered has been found guilty of violating the public trust. A new paradigm of leadership is emerging in which we give as much attention to moral intelligence as we now do to emotional intelligence.

In South Africa, they called yesterday a Mandela moment. It was not just the long lines and the long wait at the voting places that reminded us of South Africa in 1994. It was not just the magnitude of the moment that spoke so loudly about the birth of a new America. It was really the birth of a new paradigm of leadership; a reaffirmation of many of the qualities that made Mandela so widely revered and respected around the world. So the question that all of us who think deeply and care deeply about leadership should be asking on the day after the euphoria of November 4, 2008 is "what are the qualities we should be looking for in electing or elevating people to positions of leadership?"

For a long time we in the United States were united in seeking to identify leaders who called us to a higher purpose, inspired us, informed us and elevated us. But we have been through a period in which many people seemed to be looking for the ordinary; someone in whose image they saw themselves, someone who looked like them, thought like them and acted like them. This romanticizing of ordinariness has lost some of its hold on the American mind, but it has not been fully extinguished.

According to a South African expert on leadership, the problem we face in talking about leadership is exacerbated by the fact that many of the leadership gurus who write books, do research and tell us what they think we should know about leadership have never been a leader, and even worse, many have never even known a leader. Yet, they write books describing the essential elements of leadership. There are also consultants and motivational speakers who make a living telling us how to do what they have never done.

A second problem with trying to talk about leadership is that much of the discussion is about positional leadership, people who occupy positions of leadership. In far too many places, the

prevailing notion of leadership has been that of the military/manufacturing model of command, control and even coercion; those who have sought to bluff, bully or buy their way into influence. Leadership must also be seen as a social influence process where leaders are not simply people with a high profile, but often quite leaders who make things happen from wherever they are in an organization, a movement or a bureaucracy. The CEO may have the position to give orders, but she may not have as much influence as a secretary or a worker in the plant.

It has been my great pleasure to have worked at a senior level for four United States presidents, for a renaissance business leader who advised presidents as well as civil society and corporate leaders. But the man who best exemplified the qualities I want to speak about was Nelson Mandela, one of the most respected and revered leaders of the 20th century. He went from prison to president in a small country on the tip of the African continent. Yet, heads of state and royalty from around the world beat a path to his door to seek his advice and counsel and, sometimes, for a photo op to prove that they had once been in the presence of this global icon. President Clinton said of him that when he enters a room, we all feel a little bigger and a little better because on our best days we all want to be like him.

Yet, Nelson Mandela was in prison while the internet was being developed. He was in prison while we were learning the many uses of the cell phone. He was in prison while we were becoming dependent on new technologies and the world economy was becoming more and more interdependent. But he came out of prison, took over the leadership of his party and his country without missing a beat because for him leadership was a way of being rather than simply a set of skills or a set of experiences. His influence came from:

- the power of his personality,
- the elegance of his humanity,
- the loftiness of his ideals,
- the wisdom of his judgment,
- the calmness of his temperament and
- The power of his commitment to the well being of others.

When I analyzed what made Mandela so influential and so widely respected, admired and followed, I concluded that in its most essential sense leadership is a way of being. I do not mean to ignore the importance of the other two elements described in the US Army's leadership training manual as knowing and doing, but simply to say that it is time that we give more attention to leadership as a way of being. When Henry Ford set out to manufacture an automobile, he was asked during a press conference in his office why he thought he could be successful in making cars. After all, someone said, "You are not an engineer." His reply was, "No I am not an engineer, but if I pressed this button under my desk, some of the best engineers in the world will walk through that door." Leaders must know how to use technicians. They need not be technicians themselves.

That paradigm of leadership, as represented by Nelson Mandela and Henry Ford, is re-emerging with an emphasis on altogether different qualities than the old paradigms. After working with and observing the style and strategies of Nelson Mandela I have now concluded that leadership as a way of being has four elements.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

The first we know as emotional intelligence. To suggest that leadership is a way of being is not simply to draw upon the life, leadership and legacy of Nelson Mandela. It is to apply the clinical studies and insights of Daniel Goleman and others to my own experience as well. Goleman

highlighted the importance of emotional intelligence after studying a large group of successful leaders and concluding that leadership is more art than science. The central thesis of his study is that while the qualities traditionally associated with leadership are important, they are not sufficient. The qualities he described as elements of emotional intelligence are self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social awareness. I have found that Goleman's conclusions apply not simply to the more collegial styles of social influence leaders in civil society, but also to the authoritarian styles of positional leaders in the military, business and bureaucracies.

MORAL INTELLIGENCE

The second dimension of leadership as a way of being is moral intelligence. One of the greatest challenges we face today is how to think about, how to talk about and how to apply values to our work in public and private institutions without getting caught up in the politics of virtue or the parochialism of dogma. I can not over emphasize what a grave mistake it would be to allow questions regarding the appropriate role of ethics in our aggregate existence to remain primarily the domain of moralists interested almost exclusively in the private behavior of individuals.

Reinhold Niebuhr, the great moral theologian who in 1932 wrote the book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, could have been speaking directly to our own times when he warned of the difficulty of applying the moral sentiments of individuals to the moral imperatives of groups. He went on to argue that while we know a lot about what is right and what is to be revered in individual behavior, we have made relatively little progress in applying morality to the problems of our aggregate existence, whether national, economic, racial or organizational.

I like, therefore to make a distinction between the micro-ethics of individual behavior, the private virtues that build character, and the macro-ethics of our aggregate existence, the public values that build community and promote social cohesion. Religions do a good job of affirming moral absolutes, but what we want most of leaders in today's complex environment is the ability to cope with ambiguities.

SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE

The third element of leadership as a way of being is social intelligence. Here I refer, first of all, to recognizing and protecting the dignity of difference. Some of our leaders look at diversity and want to homogenize it to fit their comfort zone. They fail to understand that the more diverse we are, the richer our culture becomes, and the more expansive our horizon of possibilities. Jonathon Sacks, the British Rabbi who wrote the book, *The Home We Build Together*, argues that if we were all the same we would have nothing unique to contribute, nor any thing to learn from each other. Yet, if we were completely different we could not communicate and if we were exactly alike, we would have nothing to say. So the Rabbi concludes that we need to see our differences as gifts to the common good, for without a compelling sense of the common good, difference spells discord and creates, not music, but noise.

Leaders with social intelligence are the ones who are most convincing in persuading others that diversity need not divide; that pluralism rightly understood and rightly practiced is a benefit not a burden; that the fear of difference is a fear of the future. Howard Thurman, the black poet, theologian and mystic described the social intelligence we need in dealing with diversity when he said "I want to be me without making it difficult for you to be you."

That is it, "I want to be me without making it difficult for you to be you." Can you imagine how different our world would be if more Americans were able to say "I want to be an American without making it difficult for an Arab to be an Arab, an African to be an African or an Asian to

be an Asian?” Can you imagine how different our communities would be if more Christians were able to say “I want to be a Christian without making it difficult for a Jew to be a Jew, a Muslim to be a Muslim or a Buddhist to be a Buddhist?”

Social intelligence is also about understanding the role of culture and context in influencing and shaping leadership styles and strategies. I used the authoritarian model effectively when I was an officer in the United States Army, but I had to adapt my approach to the context in many other situations; often going beyond the power of position to consider the power of persuasion, principles and personality.

SPIRITUAL INTELLIGENCE

The fourth and final element of leadership as a way of being is what I would like to call spiritual intelligence. Here I refer to the ability to cope with the unexplored, the unexamined and the unknown; the capacity to transcend the reality we see and to imagine alternative possibilities; and the ability to step back, renew oneself and to find meaning and purpose in our existence. A friend of mind refers to spirituality as privileged access into one’s own soul. Spiritual intelligence is especially important at a time in our history when people are so divided and many alienated not just from other groups, but they are living in psychological exile from their own past.

It is spiritual intelligence that reminds leaders, and would be leaders, that they will need to be agents of reconciliation. The South Africans under Nelson Mandela introduced us to four different forms or dimensions of reconciliation. The first is **individual**, a kind of existential rebalancing of the self. Kदा Asmal, an architect of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, describes this bringing back into balance as undoing historical illusions, deceptions and misteachings. To make this point, he likes to quote William Wordsworth who said, “To be mistaught is worse than to be untaught – no errors are so difficult to root out as those which the understanding has pledged to uphold.”¹ When past prejudices, stereotypes and conflicts are carried from one generation to another, the act of reconciliation has much to do with softening or eliminating old memories. This does not mean condoning or forgetting past actions, but remembering them in such a way as to reduce the desire for revenge.

Forgiveness research in the field of clinical psychology provides clinical evidence to support the South African emphasis on forgiveness as a necessary part of individual and communal health. Forgiveness reduces the stress that comes from anger, hostility, bitterness, hatred and resentment, all of which lead to high blood pressure and impaired neurological function.

The second dimension of reconciliation is **communal**. It is based on the natural urge toward bonding and community. The South Africans have a special word for this form of community. They call it “ubuntu,” an understanding of the human connection that is best expressed by the Xhosa proverb “People are people through other people.” It follows that to deny the dignity or damage the humanity of another person is to damage or destroy one’s own. Ubuntu provides an alternative to revenge, an opportunity for forgiveness. It does not mean that the victim forgets, but it does mean recognizing that without forgiveness sustainable reconciliation is very unlikely.

This will to include everyone in the circle is the deeper motive for reconciliation. It creates a context for learning to live together, to deal with disputes, opposing ideas and even violent conflicts. The notion of embracing others has deep roots in the South African experience. Some of the early warring tribes had “war-healers,” individuals on each side who sought after combat to engage the other side in the construction of a relationship that recognized the dignity and humanity of the former adversary.

Communal reconciliation is also about creating a caring space for communication, providing opportunities for careful listening and deep conversations that enable people with profound differences to hear each other, respect each other and begin the difficult work of building new relationships. The agreement to talk to the adversary is often the first step in finding solutions to what once seemed to be an intractable alienation. Charles de Vincencio, Director of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, who served previously on the staff of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, calls this “negotiating with one’s memory and deciding which is to have the last word.”

The third form or dimension of reconciliation is cosmic or **spiritual**, the claim common to all religions that we are not here alone, that each of us is a part of something bigger and more mysterious than the self. It is to say that the search for a higher level of being, the urge toward a universal connectedness, is a reflection of the human condition. It is thus in our common search rather than our different answers that we find common ground. The religions of the world may define and address holiness from different perspectives, but they are one in their recognition that because of our spiritual kinship with the larger universe, prejudice and discrimination should have no place among people of faith.

For all of our oneness in spirit, the touchstone of human interaction begins with the human community. And that is why the fourth dimension of reconciliation is **political**. Different kinds of conflict require different forms and ways of reconciliation. Political reconciliation is not dependent on the kind of intimacy that other forms of reconciliation may demand. Rather statecraft and politics require peaceful co-existence. Forgiveness may come later, after the creation of confidence and the building of trust. Vincencio likes to tell the story of a Danka elder who in reflecting on the Sudanese conflict said “Reconciliation begins by agreeing to sit under the same tree with your enemy, to find a way of addressing the conflict.” At one level, this may mean simply to stop killing one another. On another level, it involves a willingness to work together with one’s enemies and adversaries in pursuit of a solution that is not yet at hand. Although this sense of reconciliation is incomplete, it does interrupt cycles of conflict and lay the groundwork for something deeper and different. It is in Nelson Mandela’s words an attempt to resolve conflicts by the use of our brains rather than our blood.

Finally, the leader of the future must be also a purveyor of hope. We are living through a historical epic that psychologists call a period of free-floating anxiety. The period immediately after 9/11 was such a moment. The period after the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy was such a moment. But the anxiety we feel now is not the result of one event, but a confluence of events. It is anxiety about what the wars are doing to our soul as a people; anxiety about coping with the near collapse of our economy; anxiety about the increasing disparity between work and reward; anxiety about the frequency of hurricanes which remind us that disaster is no longer an aberration or an abnormal event, but the new normal.

So in the end, we need and want leaders who are purveyors of hope; leaders who can look beyond what they see and imagine alternative possibilities. Hope is, for them, not so much an act of memory as an act of imagination and courage. It is the realization that what we can imagine we can probably create. Optimism is the ability to look at the evidence and infer that things are going to get better. Hope is the ability to look beyond the evidence and to see something deeper and different.

Vaclav Havel put it best when he said, “I am not an optimist because I do not believe that every thing ends well. I am not a pessimist because I do not believe that everything ends badly. But I could not accomplish any thing if I did not have hope within me, for the gift of hope is as big a

gift as the gift of life itself.” When you find a leader who is a purveyor of hope, one who understands that the gift of hope is as big a gift as the gift of life itself, you will find someone who comes around rarely in a generation, but one who, like Nelson Mandela, lifts us into our better selves.
