

## **Leadership and Older People: Ageing as an Asset**

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I am delighted to be able to help launch the conversation over the next three days about age-friendly cities. I will focus in this opening plenary on leadership and older adults, and I will argue that in meeting the requirements of leadership in a world that is integrating and fragmenting at the same time, ageing is an asset. I want to begin by examining why the conversation taking place in many of our communities about the intergenerational transfer of leadership has often led policymakers and opinion leaders to ask the wrong questions. Far too many are asking what can we do about an ageing population, what can we do for older adults, when they should be asking what can we do together, how can we draw from the strengths of each generation. They should be asking not simply what social service should we provide, but how can we encourage and empower older adults to continue serving, and to do so in the center of the arena rather than silenced on the sidelines.

For a long time, we looked for leaders who inspired us, informed us and elevated us. But far too many people seem now to prefer the familiar and the ordinary, leaders who look like them, think like them and act like them. This romanticizing of ordinariness poses a dangerous threat to our future. And that is why I hope that the message which comes out of this conference will be that a less noisy revolution is taking place, a new breed of older people is emerging who are willing to participate in intergenerational alliances to help solve serious social problems and to call our nations to a higher purpose. It is time that we see the ageing of society as an unprecedented triumph and not the economic burden some of our politicians make it seem. Blinded by the conversation about the economics of ageing, they fail to see the rich potential of older people in helping cope with political, economic and social institutions that are themselves ageing.

In many countries the rising generation is likely to become as demographically defining in the next few decades as the baby boomers were before them. The implication for public policy is that the two groups could very well end up in a political war for dwindling public resources with the elderly fighting for economic benefits in order to ward off poverty, and younger people pushing for education and training benefits in order to avoid falling into poverty. This is a war that need not be fought, and can only be avoided if older adults participate in the making of public policy and the shaping of public opinion. As my good friend Sharon King has reminded me, “Much of the past struggle has been about social service for the elderly. The struggle in the future must be about social justice for the elderly.”

While medical science in the last century succeeded in extending the human life by twenty years, our policies, practices and perceptions have not changed. It is not

simply that we have failed to ascribe a legitimate social function to the added twenty years; we have not taken advantage of the emotional wisdom and social intelligence available to a world desperately in need of leaders with the moral and spiritual intelligence they bring.

Over the years, it has been my good fortune to work closely with, or closely observe, older adults whose leadership was an essential part of the history of our world. I want to describe several of them and then comment on why I have the audacity to suggest that in many areas desperately in need of leadership, ageing is an asset.

Let me begin with Nelson Mandela who led the effort to launch a new democracy in South Africa in the mid-nineties. As the U.S. Ambassador, I had a front row seat as leaders and royalty from around the world beat a path to his door to seek his advice and counsel on many of the great issues of the day. The irony is that he became the most revered leader of his era despite the fact that he was in prison while the world economy was becoming interdependent. He was in prison while we were developing the internet. He was in prison while we were becoming addicted to the cell phone. He was in prison while we were being seduced by the notion that experience trumps wisdom and judgment. But he came out of prison at an advanced age, took over the leadership of his party and his country and never missed a beat because for him leadership was a way of being. His influence came from the elegance of his humanity, the seduction of his personality, the strength of his values, the wisdom of his judgment and the power of his life story.

Another great leader, with whom I had the privilege to work, although only briefly, was Martin Luther King who was several generations younger than Nelson Mandela when he emerged, but who could not have accomplished anything had he not maintained the intergenerational connection with older leaders and mentors. While we celebrate the contributions of high profile young leaders, we fail to ask who their leaders were. Who were the elders they turned to in moments of crisis and danger? For Martin Luther King, there were many, but I simply want to mention two who played that role far into old age. One was Howard Thurman, the black mystic, poet and theologian who was his professor and mentor at Boston University. Another was Benjamin Mays who was president of Morehouse College when Martin Luther King was a student, and who continued to be a leader of choice for many of the younger leaders who were changing the practices of social institutions and transforming society during the change and challenge of the 1960s.

It was not only Martin Luther King. Many of us who were on the front lines of the civil rights movement in local communities now realize that we could never have gained access to power centers in the African American communities if it had not been for the willingness of older adults to use their social capital to give us credibility. All of us remember how when we were hungry they fed us, how when we needed a place to stay they housed us, but even more importantly they mentored us and advised us about both the probability of violence and the potential for change.

I was a founding chair of the local movement in Tuscaloosa, Alabama while still in my mid-twenties. I was in the local headlines, but it is not an over statement to say that while the young students were the foot shouldered, it was the quiet leadership of older adults who made our movement a success.

What did these leaders share in common? Why was age an asset? These are the questions I have been trying to answer in my own research and intellectual inquiry.

### **Emotional Intelligence**

The first answer, I have concluded, is that each of them had what is now called emotional intelligence. Daniel Goleman and his researchers who wrote a book by that title could have been describing an ageing Mandela, Mays or Thurman, even some of the older adults who not only kept me alive, but taught me how to lead when they emphasized the importance of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social awareness. I am sure that many of you are already familiar with the work of Goleman, so let me just remind you that after studying a large group of successful leaders he concluded that leadership is more art than science. The central thesis of his work is that while the qualities traditionally associated with leadership are important they are not sufficient. And that is why I like to describe leadership as a way of being with emotional intelligence only one of four elements.

### **Social Intelligence**

The second element that these older adult leaders shared in common was social intelligence. They were “entrepreneurs of identity” whose success hinged on an ability to turn me into us. Nelson Mandela is remembered not simply for his ability to bring solidarity to those who had been victims of apartheid, but for his efforts to expand the communal identity of his most immediate followers to include their former adversaries. He could have settled for being the leader of the African National Congress, meeting the needs of the blacks oppressed by apartheid and even seeking retribution for his twenty seven years of incarceration. But he felt an obligation to all South Africans, the former oppressors as well as the victims. While some of the younger leaders would have preferred retribution, he chose reconciliation. He used his leadership position to expand the solidarity of his followers, to call them to a higher purpose that included not simply their own interest, but the interest of the nation.

It may be that the most important form of social intelligence is the ability to affirm and take pride in one’s heritage while being able to appreciate and respect the heritage of others. The best insight on how to do this comes from one of Martin Luther King’s own kitchen cabinet of older leaders. Howard Thurman put it simply and succinctly when he said “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 me without making it difficult for a European to be a European, 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 recognizing the dignity of difference. Some of our present leaders look at difference 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. Jonathan Sacks, the British Rabbi who wrote the book *How 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.

Social intelligence also requires that leaders understand the relationship between culture and leadership. In the book *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela attributed his approach to leadership to the principles and practices of the elders in his tribe. “I watched and learned from the tribal meetings that were regularly held at the

Great Place by the regent and his court,” he wrote. “All Thembus were free to come – and a great many did, on horseback or by foot.” He went on to add:

Everyone who wanted to speak did so. It was democracy in its purest form. There may have been a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, but everyone was heard: chief and subject, warrior and medicine man, shopkeeper and farmer, landowner and laborer. People spoke for many hours... Only at the end of the meeting, as the sun was setting, would the regent speak. His purpose was to sum up what had been said and to form some sort of consensus among the diverse opinions. If no agreement could be reached, another meeting would be held... I always remember the regent’s axiom: a leader, he said, is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go on ahead, where upon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind.

Mandela also came from a tradition of which it was often said of the older leaders that they had a short memory of hate. Among even the early warring tribes from which many descended, this short memory of hate was facilitated and cultivated by the use of “war healers” whose job was to mediate and restore spiritual and social harmony after a violent clash.

Traditionally, following a war between two tribes, war healers from each side would talk and together arrange for a cleansing ceremony that would involve those who fought on both sides. It was believed that since people died, ancestors on both sides would be aggrieved, and the hands, hearts and spirits of killers on both sides would need to be cleansed

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could engage, rather than sideline, the potential Mandelas in our midst and to not only learn from them, but call on them to help us lead from moral values that promote reconciliation rather than retribution, values that produce war healers with a short memory of hate.

### **Moral Intelligence**

Among the older leaders from whom I learned so much, emotional and social intelligence was accompanied by moral intelligence. One of the greatest challenges we face in applying ethics to our aggregate existence 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 cannot 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 only 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.

Far too much of our discourse about ethics in public life is about the micro-ethics of our individual existence, the private virtues that build character. My interest is in the macro-ethics of our aggregate existence, the public values that build community. It is not that I am uninterested in the cultivation of private virtue. It is simply that religion does a great job of proclaiming moral absolutes for individual behavior while not as much attention is given to the moral ambiguities of our public life.

There are many who question whether it is possible to identify moral prescriptions or standards for our public life that would be acceptable to all humanity. In other words, is it possible to identify a set of common values, a set of precepts so fundamental that they dissolve borders, transcend races and outlast cultural traditions? My friend Russ Kidder, who wrote the book *Shared Values for a Troubled World*, traveled around the world in search of an answer to that question and concluded that it was indeed possible, that there are some values so universal to the human mind, so fundamental to the human spirit, that they transcend the boundaries that the writers of sacred texts and the proponents of secular philosophies have created to protect cultural identities.

This is certainly true of the so-called Golden Rule that Christians claim as their own, but which cuts across all sorts of boundaries and can be found in many variations in faith communities around the world. Consider these examples:

**Christianity** “Whatever you want done to you, do also to others.”

**Islam:** “No one of you is a believer until he loves for his neighbor what he loves for himself.”

**Judaism:** “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man. This is the entire law; all the rest is commentary.”

**Buddhism:** “Hurt not others with that which pains yourself.”

**Hinduism:** “This is the sum of duty; do not onto others what you would not have them do unto you.”

**Confucianism:** What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.”

**Bahia:** “And if thine eyes be turned towards justice, choose thou for thy neighbor that which thou choose for thyself.”

**Yoruba Proverb (Nigeria):** “One going to take a pointed stick to pinch a baby should first try it on himself to see how it hurts.”

It is clear from these excerpts that the Golden Rule constitutes a set of precepts that transcend national, cultural and religious borders. Regardless of the reason for the renewed emphasis on values, it is increasingly obvious that the need for a moral thermostat is not confined to any one group or locale. Moral intelligence encompasses both what people should demand of their leaders and what their leaders should demand of them.

### **Spiritual Intelligence**

The final element of leadership in the older adults with whom I have worked or observed is spiritual intelligence. And here I mean something very different from organized religion. Religion is for many a set of coherent answers to the existential problems of humankind while spirituality is a quality of the human spirit that helps cultivate openness to the unknown, the unexpected and the unexplored. Religion is more closely tied to doctrines and sacred traditions, but both may help develop a sense that we are a part of something bigger and more mysterious than the self. An older friend of mine describes spirituality as a sort of privileged access into one’s own soul. That makes a lot of sense to me because I have learned much over the years about the importance of being in touch with the inner self and at ease with my own strengths and weaknesses. I have found that I am happiest and most at harmony with myself and others when I practice compassion, forgiveness, tolerance and patience. I have found inspiration also from others with whom I have felt a deepened sense of presence. I have not always had to retreat from the noisy sounds of either the streets or the workplace because stillness does not always mean silence. For some, it requires detachment from secondary attractions. Yet, it has been my experience that it can also

come from a short “break away” moment, from the magical sound of the ocean, the mystical seduction of a song, the singing of a bird or simply the rustling of the wind.

Desmond Tutu, who was Nelson Mandela’s ally in promoting reconciliation, often pointed to moments of renewal when he stepped back and disengaged in order to serve others more effectively. The inability of many younger leaders to understand the importance of renewal is best illustrated by the story of a man walking in the woods who came upon a logger cutting down trees and as he greeted him asked, “How are you doing.” The logger replied, “Not so well. I was doing so much better this morning, but this afternoon, I simply cannot cut as many trees.” The passerby said “why don’t you stop and sharpen the saw.” To which the logger replied, “Oh I can’t do that. I have too many trees to cut.” In my work with younger leaders, I find many of them guilty of feeling that it would be selfish to stop and spend time on personal renewal, when instead it is often the most other-serving thing they can do because it enables them to serve others better. Over the years, from my days of organizing in the civil rights movement to my experience of the intensity of the engagement of many leaders in the aftermath of hurricanes, floods and other disasters, I have found that some very good people reach burnout and lose their effectiveness because they have been on the frontlines too long. They tend to think of personal renewal as selfish when they really need to step back and renew themselves in order to serve others better.

I emphasize spiritual intelligence and argue for the cultivation of our spiritual nature for a second reason. The effective leader must be an agent of reconciliation. In badly divided communities in a badly divided world we need leaders who are healers and unifiers. But reconciliation involves more than resolving conflicts between individuals and groups. It often means reconciling conflicting images of the past and competing visions of the future. It is complicated by the need to undo historical illusions, but as someone once said “to be mistaught is worse than being untaught.” Reconciliation then must take place not only on the individual level but on the communal level because anger, hatred and hostility corrode both the personality of the individual and the potential for community. It must also take place at a spiritual level where we are reminded that we are part of something bigger and more mysterious than the self. And it may be that despite our different ways of expressing our connection with creation it is in our common search for holiness, rather than in our different answers, that we find common ground.

The third thing I learned about the spiritual intelligence of older adults is that the effective leader must also be a purveyor of hope, and here I have in mind something very different from optimism. Hope theology and hope psychology both argue that optimism adopts the role of the spectator who surveys the evidence in order to infer that things are going to get better. Hope, on the other hand, enacts the stance of the participant who actively struggles against the evidence in order to make things better.

For a long time, hope has been considered an emotion, and, therefore, ignored, discounted or simply dismissed, as an essential element of leadership. But psychology is now being joined by other disciplines in seeking to develop a cognitive based theory of hope and leadership. The basic premise of those scholars and researchers is that hope is comprised not only of emotion, but thinking as well. They are now trying to understand the role of hope in sustaining innovation; the relationship of hope levels to stress, commitment and performance; even the impact of hope in business organizations on profits, job satisfaction and retention rates.

The kind of hope I have found in the older adults with whom I have worked was best expressed by Vaclav Havel who wrote “I am not an optimist because I do not believe that everything will end well. I am not a pessimist because I do not believe that everything will end badly. But I could not accomplish anything if I did not have hope within me, for the gift of hope is a greater gift than the gift of life itself. So age-friendly communities are those that understand why so many older adults agree with Havel, the gift of hope is as big a gift as the gift of life itself.

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