The Presidency: Servant-Leadership in Higher Education

The following section highlights the presidency of two institutions of higher learning in the Western United States, Gonzaga University and Whitworth College. Robert Spitzer, S.J. of Gonzaga and Bill Robinson of Whitworth have developed a lasting friendship with one another, unique in that one is president of a Catholic university, the other president of a Protestant college. Considered by many to be servant-leaders with effective and very different approaches, the two presidents have become crucial developers of their respective communities. Under their leadership Gonzaga and Whitworth continue to receive national acclaim.

Gonzaga University, a Jesuit liberal-arts university in Spokane, Washington, has been ranked by the *Princeton Review* as among the top 10 percent of undergraduate universities in the nation. *U.S. News & World Report* ranks Gonzaga as one of the top 5 "best universities" in the West, and top 5 in "best value." A school with a perennial top 20 basketball team and a vibrant, vital student culture, Gonzaga is one of the premier institutions for higher education in the United States.

Also located in Spokane, Washington, Whitworth College is a private, Presbyterian liberal-arts college. Whitworth consistently garners top 10 status both as one of the "best universities" and "best values" in the West in *U.S. News & World Report.* Students at Whitworth enjoy nationally known programs and a student culture that deepens heart, mind, and spirit. A family atmosphere pervades college life. Noted for its cutting-edge, progressive leadership and integration of intellect and faith, Whitworth is established as a nationally recognized site for higher learning.

In the following section, each president responds to three servant-leadership questions. Following their answers, an excerpt of each president's writing on leadership appears.

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AND VULNERABILITY: A BRIEF INTERVIEW WITH BILL ROBINSON

—BILL ROBINSON
WHITWORTH COLLEGE

1. Greenleaf refers to love as essential to both the servant and the leader in generating legitimate power in the self, the organization, the community, and the world. Emerson furthers this point when he proposed the following: mediocre people want to be loved; true people are lovely. How does love influence your own leadership and your way of following others?

I think I'm probably influenced by some kind of twisted, quid pro quo love, but I don't find the agape version showing up too often. When my oldest daughter was a senior in high school, she hung out with a friend named Libby. Certainly I liked Libby, but for whatever reasons I wasn't turning out to be the cool dad that I thought I would be, the kind who laughingly engages all of his kids' friends, the kind who is so amazing that his kid isn't even embarrassed by him. So Libby just came and went and I was quite nice. But one day when Libby showed up I noticed I felt an authentic care and love for her. It was the day after she had just decided to attend the college I served as president. I remember being surprised and a little ashamed by the contrast. So, I wish I had a kind of generalized love for all people, even those who are as messed up as I am. I wish that especially because I'm a Christian, and if Christians are good at anything it ought to be that. But I absolutely do love our students in a way that mystifies even me. I love our faculty and staff who give themselves joyfully to our students. I love our alumni and friends who support our students. And it is real. And it makes me a better leader than I was ever meant to be.

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When it comes to following those I lead, or anyone else for that matter, I'm a way better follower if I love the mission or the people or both. Who isn't? Actually, this is one of the reasons I don't buy into what a lot of my presidential colleagues say about not caring if they are liked, as long as they are respected. I want to be liked AND respected. Sometimes you can't get both, in which case respect wins. But I'm a normal person who needs love and I don't think it's a stretch to think folks have more of a quality mood to an idea if they like the messenger.

2. Servant-leadership implies the ability to develop deep discernment (the contemplation and action of a whole person, servant and leader) with regard to the seemingly unresolvable problems in the self as well as the systems around us. How do you develop the discernment needed to be effective, bring healing, and create lasting change when needed?

I don't think you can develop much in the way of discernment without taming the ego. Reason always buckles under the weight of pride. Our best bet for discernment, healing and change is to put our money on humility. We'll be better listeners, learners, healers and collaborators. Also, if we can develop an empathy reflex, it's a start. Empathy does two things, although we generally give it credit only for getting us to stand in the other person's shoes. The other gift of empathy is that it gets us out of our own shoes, which helps us temper our own egotistical perspectives no matter whose shoes we end up wearing.

3. Greenleaf refers to listening as perhaps the most central essence of the servant-leader. Tell us a story of a servant-leader you know who is a great listener, and how that person's listening has informed your present way of being.

Chuck Boppell, a very successful turnaround specialist in the food industry, chairs our board of trustees. He has this amazing quality of listen-

ing to you until you're done speaking. You don't see the wheels turning as he thinks about what he's going to say next. He doesn't give you that eager "shut up" nod. He doesn't finish your sentences. He remembers stuff you say. He asks questions. Sometimes he listens to you so intently his eyebrows flutter. You don't have any doubt the man is tuned in and cares deeply about what he's hearing. He's a collector's item. I hate to say it because sometimes it condemns me, but I think listening is more of an attitude than a skill. I discovered this principle when I was in prison —- visiting. I was giving a seminar in 1980 at the Anamosa State Penitentiary in rural Iowa. It was a level-IV prison primarily for violent offenders. As I was about to walk into a room, I glanced down at the sign-in sheet. What I saw stopped me in my tracks. More than 75 six-digit numbers, no sign of a name, not even a letter. As I walked to the front of the room and looked at rows of desperate faces, I decided if I didn't do anything else that weekend, I would learn these guys' names. As they went around the room introducing themselves, I couldn't wait to hear each man announce the name that had been taken away from him. Not before and not since have I remembered names the way I did that night. In reflecting on this experience, I realized that when I really care, I really listen.

SHAPING ATTITUDES

I think the most fundamental question about our attitudes is whether we choose them or they choose us. Do attitudes just descend on us, or do we have some choice in the matter? For a mood-swinger like me, the answer is easy. Other people choose their attitudes, but mine just overcome me. In other words, I can't help how I feel, but you can —- so shape up. Most of us carry a double standard when it comes to attitudes, expressing scorn when we encounter the bad attitudes of others while hiding behind "I can't help how I feel" when looking at ourselves.

I realize that there are good people who do not enjoy a full range of choice. For some psychological or physical reason, their emotions have been damaged and they require psychiatric attention. But too often, those

of us who are not emotionally impaired feel victimized by our attitudes. We grant them a sovereignty that renders us helpless. In one of the most supremely stupid lines ever uttered in pop music, Debby Boone wails, "It can't be wrong when it feels so right," and blah blah blah, "You light up my life." Not only do attitudes seem to overcome this singer emotionally, but they determine the morality of her relationship with whoever "you" is. Ms. Boone can't seem to help herself; she is surrendering to her attitude.

A few days ago I was going somewhere with my nephew, Tom, a very smart 30-something guy who also happens to be one of my best friends. Involved in his first really serious dating relationship, he's trying to figure out how two people can be both honest with themselves and sensitive to each other. He observed, "I don't want her to act cheery just because she thinks I need that, not if she doesn't really feel that way."

Actually, I think maybe he does want that. It's not a bad choice for her to make if she can put her mind in charge of her disposition without feeling phony. Tom's observation makes two common assumptions about attitudes. First, attitudes just show up without being invited. We exercise little choice over how we feel. It's hard to know which side of the bed we'll wake up on. Second, it is natural and honest for us to act in accord with our feelings. To do otherwise is phony.

Good leaders do not accept either of these assumptions. Frankly, nobody should. They're false. People with non-impaired neurological, cerebral, and psychological equipment exercise more choice over their attitudes than most of us realize.

I have a friend named Tanya (Shann, this is Steve Alford's wife) who is very happily married to a wonderful guy who has to travel a lot. He and I talk pretty regularly, so I know when he's out of town. A year ago I decided to call Tanya while her husband was gone, just to see how life was treating her, and to cheer her up. When she answered the phone, it sounded like a rock concert was going on in her lap. The screams, shouts and bursts of laughter competing with my "Tanya, is that you?" were the normal sounds of her three little rug rats going crazy. When I yelled the question,

"How you dealing with everything, Tanya?" no decibel level could have drowned out the power of her response. "I'm doing great, Bill. I don't have any choice."

As a matter of fact, Tanya was doing great because she did have a choice, and she made a healthy one. She chose to accept the steady chaos that comes with the high calling of being a parent and the principal support person for the four other people in her family. Having accepted that choice, she then chose happy and upbeat over whiny and frustrated, knowing that a nasty attitude would not improve the physical circumstances of her life one iota. So Tanya chose to be happy. She rejected the role of victim. She chose the role of victor.

The research in attitude formation is pretty complicated. Behavioral scientists are sometimes guilty of attempting to explain and predict human behavior using formulas and tools borrowed from natural scientists. On the other hand, former behavioral scientists like myself tend to oversimplify our explanations for why people act and feel as they do. True to my own characterization, I would like to make the argument that, in general, attitudes are formed and changed by associating what we believe (including information we have) with a particular object or behavior. When I was seven years old I went to my first major league baseball game in Chicago's Comiskey Park. It was there, worshipping my summer gods in their white wool uniforms, that I smelled my first cigar. To this day, I love that smell. It is the romantic smell of baseball on 35th and Shields.

Attitudes are so much the products of our associations that sometimes even what would naturally feel bad feels good to us. For example, most of the time we have a negative attitude toward pain, but by association our attitude toward pain under certain circumstances can make it feel wonderful.

Much of what experience has taught me about attitudes has come in the athletic arena. To preserve relationships, I have been forced to choose attitudes that don't come naturally. For years, my friend Pat Cunningham and I engaged in epic tennis and racquetball battles. They would end with

the two of us sprawled on the court, totally spent, while pain shot through our shoulders like a thousand needles.

At that moment of exhaustion and finality, the loser despised both of us as he recited, again, the litany of how pathetically he'd played and that surely this was the last time he would ever play this stinking sport. But for the winner, pain was the welcome messenger that reminded him of the glories of sport and the goodness of this friend heaped alongside of him —- this friend who on this day hated his guts.

Today my attitudes involving direct physical competition are profoundly affected by the wars with Pat and all the other good friends with whom I've competed. The associations are so strong that when my nephew drills me in a set of tennis, the loss feels not so much like one set as like the accumulation of every set I've lost in my entire life. If I'm not careful, I will associate one event with thousands and let the feeling crush me. But I have come to realize that I don't have to bear emotionally all the losses of my life with every new loss. If I prepare myself to respond with new associations, I loosen myself from the emotional tyranny of negative associations.

Some time ago, I was at the gym with my son, shooting baskets. After he threw down two dunks and several three-pointers while I was doing stretching exercises that would put me in a position to tie my shoes without assistance, he offered to play me in one-on-one. For his first twenty years, which were my years 30-50, I owned this boy in one-on-one. Even a year or two after he had the skill to beat me, he either lacked the mental toughness or he else he realized it was better for our relationship for the less mature one of us (me) to win. But I am not a stupid man, and it was clear to me that this was his day. No matter how wily, crafty and whiny I might be, the time had come when he would find consummate joy in destroying me. And destroy me he did.

But before he did, even before we started, I was frantically disassociating all the losses in my life from the one I knew I was about to have administered. I needed to associate this imminent loss with all the wins of being

Ben's dad. It worked. As I crumbled to the floor, gasping after my barrage of fouls failed to prevent the inevitable, I crowned him the new king of one-on-one, winner-whenever-he-wanted-to-win, and it felt good.

I have discovered that I can go through the same kinds of preparations that lead to the creation of positive associations with leadership patterns that are important, but that I don't particularly like. For years I dreaded doing my monthly newsletter. I would have abandoned the practice, but folks seem to really like it. A couple of years ago I realized that I needed to change my attitude toward this discipline or I'd start writing it poorly while it drove me nuts. To that end, I met with the folks who sent me information, my assistant and proofreader/editor. I told everyone what I liked least about writing this thing. What surfaced was that "writing" was the one thing I did like. The components of my dread turned out to be the organizing, searching for incomplete information, waiting for late information, patching writing time into my schedule, etc. So now, my moles and my assistant get everything ready, including a chunk of uninterrupted time. When I wake up to a "write the Mind and Heart" morning, I make a pot of coffee and sit down in a good mood, ready to go.

As I said above, attitude formation is very complex, and there are many points that could be made about its nature. For the purposes of this discussion on implementing new leadership behaviors and patterns, the two most important starting points are 1) rejecting the notion that we are victims of our feelings, and 2) engineering our circumstances and preparing our thinking to make positive associations with our desired behaviors.

The following essay is reprinted from chapters 1, 2 and 6 of Bill Robinson's book *Leading From the Middle: The Universal Mission of Heart and Mind.* The chapters are titled: "21st Century Trends," "Paradoxical Leadership," and "Virtuous Leadership."

Leading From the Middle: The Universal Mission of Heart and Mind

—Bill Robinson

21st Century Trends

Prophesying general directions for new-century organizations poses less of a challenge than figuring out specific destinations. Only omniscient 26-year-old Wall Street analysts think they can intuit the exact specifications of the typical 2020 organization. But the early 21st century does reveal some pretty clear trends. Most organization trends evolve in the private sector, get copied by the not-for-profits, are forced upon public enterprises, and eventually show up in non-formal affiliation groups. Generally, these trends undergo contextualizing of some kind in order to make them fit the situations, but they still push their way into an outfit's operations or culture. For example, the service rage of the 1980s, given display by companies such as Nordstrom and Scandinavian Airline Systems, invaded hospitals, schools, government, and every other customer-dependent line of work (except toll booths). So the trends we see in the business organization will, ultimately, affect all organizations in some form.

The Characteristics of 21st Century Organizations

I see many fads and directions in today's organizations, but three solid trends seem like pretty sure-bets to last well into the 21st century. These characteristics are neither new nor exclusive properties of this era. They are simply organizational traits that we will see with greater frequency and magnitude. I believe businesses will become more federated, adaptive, and connected.

1. Federated

Last month, I enjoyed a dinner in Seattle with a friend of mine who worked for three different companies—Ma Bell, Ameritech and Southern Bell—all without leaving his employer. Having lived through the government breakup of Ma Bell, and the SBC takeover of Ameritech, this 40-something man now had the responsibility of setting up a business for SBC in Seattle. After peppering him with questions, I concluded that the principal resources this new business would receive from the parent company were start-up capital and organizational culture. Certainly, the company brand would serve well in this venture, but for the most part, my buddy was building a business that would learn from the parent company, and then stand on its own.

It is possible that becoming federated, more than the other two trends, correlates with the size of an organization. But even small organizations will locate responsibility and authority farther from the center and closer to their dispersed customer bases than they once did. During my graduate studies I conducted a few research projects in network analysis (back then, "network" enjoyed the stable life of a noun. Now it races around trading business cards and kissing fannies in its frenetic life as a verb). Because my primary interest focused on the conditions under which centralized and decentralized networks prove most effective, I have always looked at organizations on this continuum. But "federated" provides a more apt description of this trend than "decentralized." Charles Handy penned a wonderful chapter on federated organizations in his book, *Beyond Certainty* (HBS Press, 1996), that helps explain the difference.

Handy points out that in most decentralized organizations, the center usually delegates jobs, responsibility and even authority to the outer units. In a federated organization, the center provides only what the units can't effectively provide for themselves. It is like the states granting powers to the federal government, rather than the other way around. A balance of power exists as both the cause and the effect of many centers throughout the

federation. Handy notes that the corporate center exists to coordinate, not to control (43). For this reason, he argues that federalist centers should always be small, if not minimalist. Federations are held together by trust, interdependence and common goals. Group members hold dual citizenship in both the subsidiary and the federation.

In the 21st century, globalization will make federations desirable, while technology will make them possible. Staying involved with a geographically dispersed customer base will not stand in the way of close communication and feedback within the federation. Technology will allow workers to be in touch with each other while being "out there" with customers. Furthermore, employees' proximity and engagement with the constituencies they serve will turn orders from headquarters into the famous last words of companies who don't listen to the folks on the front lines. I should also mention that organizational federalism will surface not only in the sprawling multinational corporations, but even in small groups. Wherever we find independent group members or units, held together by a mutual need rather than structural cords, we find a federated environment. This authentic distribution of rights and responsibilities alters irreversibly the relationship between the leader and the led. Central powers become more limited and the roles of the leader become ones of coordinator, strategist, resource broker, vision builder, motivator and encourager.

Perhaps federalism will prove to be the basic organizational model of the 21st century, maybe even Rost's post-industrial paradigm. For that to happen, more than structures will have to change. Warren Bennis comments, "The most practical solution, particularly for large corporations, is federalism. Federations work better than monolithic organizations because, along with strength, they offer flexibility. They are more nimble and adaptive. They have all the inherent advantages of being big but all the benefits of being small."

Federalist thinking must replace the policy-driven, hierarchical patterns of thinking. "Follower" questions, such as "What would the center want me to do?" get shoved aside by "What is the best thing to do?" I think

that day is upon us. In political history, federalism usually comes about by revolution. Textbooks aren't exactly littered with examples of voluntary federalism, as Handy points out. But globalization, technology, corporate mergers, fluid and disperse markets, and the demand on organizations to be both grand and personal could be the revolutionaries at the gate. Former IBM chief, Lou Gerstner, observes, "The real revolution isn't about the technology itself. The real revolution here has to do with institutional change—the fundamental transformation of time-honored ways of doing things" (Leadership Magazine, Vol. 3 No. 2).

2. Adaptive

Last summer my son and I built a computer. Needless to say, it was a "virtual computer." Imagine a couple of technological boneheads slapping together a state-of-the-art laptop in about 45 minutes. In all probability, no other computer in the world bears exactly the same features and specifications as the one we built. When we finished, we conferred genius status on each other, and still had enough energy to go outside for a game of World Wrestling Federation one-on-one basketball. Four days later, our creation arrived at the door. The chefs at Dell had cooked up exactly what we had ordered.

Organizations that proudly decree, "What worked in the past will work in the future" can look forward to going under with their heads held high. Markets change and markets rule. Let's look at the computer example. I bought my first computer in 1981 after going to Sears and looking at their line. All I really needed was word processing and an electronic spreadsheet, but my choices were restricted; so my shiny, new Osborne had far more bells and whistles than I wanted. When my son Ben reached the point of buying a computer to take to college, he called the school's academic technologist and got the "must-have" list. After determining he wanted a laptop from Dell, he entered their website and made 32 decisions about features, with a running tab that calculated the cost of each choice (he owes me a lot of money). The company without the capacity to deliver exactly

what Ben needed had better find lots of people my age who trust the manufacturer to guess right about what we need.

The last decade of the 20th century will be remembered as the point in history when the emergence of technology and the proliferation of market economies joined forces to change the world. Adaptation is the only way organizations can harness, even survive, the combustion of these two forces. Every day more people are demanding and getting what they want right now. All organizations, not just businesses, feel the effects of immediacy bearing down on them. When I was a boy, all the Presbyterians in Itasca, Illinois, went to the Itasca Presbyterian Church. Why wouldn't they? Maybe because consumerism had not yet become a sacrament. Now they go wherever they can best get what they want. Is this bad? Not necessarily, but it does change the rules.

It will be interesting to see if our sacred cows see the need to adapt. Not long ago I had to go to a meeting in Washington D.C. I discovered that I could buy a round trip ticket to a D.C. airport for $1710, or to Baltimore for $318. But I also found out that the Baltimore flight would get me back to Spokane too late for a speech I had to give. I called the United number that we high mileage, prized customers use. I was delighted to find out that a flight from Reagan National in D.C. was half full and fit my schedule perfectly. So, I explained that I worked at a college and could not justify $1710 dollars to go to a meeting, but I'd be willing to pay $750 to sit in one of those empty seats out of Reagan, otherwise I'd have to cancel the trip. "I'm sorry, I can't do that," she replied. "So you're going to throw away $750 minus the cost of my snack?" I asked. "I'm sorry, there is nothing I can do," she helplessly replied. I didn't make the trip.

Even in running a business that trades on the tradition-rich value of the liberal arts, I deal daily with the need to make market- and technology-driven decisions. In 1986 I entered the college presidency believing that no student came to a small college out of affection for bureaucracy. I harped incessantly on the importance of being personalized in our treatment of students. In the first decade of the 21st century, providing personal attention

isn't enough. We need to move from personalized service to individualized service, and there's a difference between the two. When Ben went out to test-drive computers, all the service stores gave him personal attention—treated him like a king, actually. But when it was time to slam down the money, he demanded a product customized for his individual needs more than he demanded love and attention. In this new century, organizations like Whitworth will inventory every service and every operation asking two questions: "Is this a point at which our mission will benefit from individualization?" and, "Does technology provide a means to individualize?" The personal/individual adjustment serves as one example of the many adaptation demands that markets and technology will place on organizations.

The organization functions as a battleground for clashes between two primal human forces: resistance to change and pressure to adapt. Environmental systems work relentlessly to mold and shape us, like rushing water carves out canyons and attacks dams. Our internal defense systems fight valiantly to protect habits, predispositions and comfort zones from all the offensives launched by our environments. As an ordered collection of individuals, the organization becomes a macrocosm of this basic conflict between internal and external forces. With few exceptions, organizations find themselves in a Darwinian world that requires adaptation as a ticket for survival. Fortunately, this requirement often pays generous dividends. The sagacious Peter Drucker observes that "All great change in business has come from outside the firm, not from inside" (*Forbes*, 3/10/97). In this century, organizations will adapt. The question is not whether, but how?

3. Connected

Few people need to be convinced that the organizations of tomorrow will reach extraordinary levels of connection. The web of connections promises to move in all directions. Business organizations will expand connections with employees, customers, parent companies, research firms, and consultants. Non-business organizations will also erect internal and external networks to provide members with helpful ties.

Technology has eliminated all of our excuses for not communicating. We received a phone bill with what we believed were inaccurate charges. When I spoke with the phone company representative, he explained that the service we purchased didn't include certain types of operator-assisted phone calls. I maintained composure until he grunted, "You should have known. . ."

"Scott," I responded, "I'm your customer. Your representative left out information in selling me a service. There's no excuse for that. You could have e-mailed me, faxed me, called me, or read me the terms. You had many options, but saying 'You should have known' is not one of those options. You will lose my business and I will be an eloquent critic of your company if these charges are not removed."

Contrast this experience with a drugstore order I made over the Internet. After I filled my basket and clicked "Purchase," I heard that guy inside my e-mail system say, "You've got mail." The e-mail listed my items and provided a link I could click on if there were any errors in the order. And, as a matter of fact, I changed the order after changing my mind.

Because organizations will reach such high levels of connection, much of their success will depend on how well they maintain their networks. Overuse, underuse, and misuse pose equal threats. The old Marshall McLuhan aphorism that "the medium is the message" may be hyperbole, but it makes a pretty good point. Our abounding connections could use a few good masseuses to keep them supple and in good working order. The "when," "how," and "which" connection questions become vital in environments of virtually unrestricted information flow. In my work group, the president's cabinet, we chose to proscribe criticisms of each other by e-mail. It's too easy to fall into the trap of "If you can't say something nice, send it by e-mail."

Connection is in and distance is out. The organization of the 21st century had better know how to deal with that reality.

Two Other Trends

Most organizational theorists could round up a half-dozen or more 21st century trends that fall into the "obvious" category. My "Big Three"—Federated, Adaptive, and Connected—seem drop-dead certain to me, but I've included them because of the direct impact they have on leadership. The two characteristics listed below will likely be smaller waves to hit the organization beach. I suspect they will exercise a less-direct influence on the formula for successful leadership, but they will create a different atmosphere in our organizations.

Pedagogical: Korn-Ferry reports a sharp rise in the number of "chief learning officers" they're being asked to find. These folks scan their organizations for knowledge gaps, and then plug them with the abundant knowledge and information that they track externally. The current term we keep hearing from hotshot business consultants is "the learning organization." It may take some time to determine what this term actually means, but clearly organizations failing to tap into the knowledge explosion are tomorrow's dropouts.

Consummatory: Social seismologists find our most venerated institutions on shaky ground. The stability of marriage, family, church and even the Moose Lodge is being attacked by alternative choices. Although people have seemed willing to declare bankruptcy on their souls, they're less enthusiastic about losing their property (Machiavelli is getting smarter with each century). This trend, I believe, has created a cavernous spiritual vacuum. What else can explain the torrents of interest that have nudged spirituality beyond serious business to big business? As our inner longings deepen, people's desire for the workplace to be more than a source of income will grow. They will seek meaning and fulfillment from the organization that employs them and from the voluntary groups they join. Membership will occur not simply for instrumental reasons, but also for consummatory aims.

The Big Question Mark

At the heart of the leadership challenge there lies a fundamental question about the 21st century organization that goes beyond leadership: *Will organizations return to being servants of their people, or will people continue to serve their organizations?* Every organization ever formed began as a tool for people to accomplish something. Some person, or collection of persons, felt forming an organization would enable them to do more than what could be done by individuals. The organization served those who formed it as an instrument for achieving a common purpose. But somehow, for some reason, over some period of time, most organizations take on a life of their own, and the people become the servants of the organizations. I'm not sure whether this inversion is a good or bad thing. While some have welcomed the stability of "serving the organization," others have battled the intransigence of companies that have institutionalized "the way our company does business." To date, nobody has figured out how to reinvent mature organizations on a monthly, quarterly or yearly basis, so it is not surprising that most big businesses have held their people in servitude.

In the 21st century we will have the tools to return organizations to their early roles as servants. Will we run our organizations, or will our organizations run us? I suspect leaders of all organizations will face the challenge of whether and how to take on this question. It is the cosmic question of change. It is the question of who owns whom.

Paradoxical Leadership

I know a guy who almost became just the right leader. He's an uncompromising fellow, and for that I commend him. He bellied up to a nasty situation and took a lot of shots as he exposed wrongdoings. I admired him for his courage. I've been a dartboard on occasions myself, and it's no fun. Unfortunately, this person's leadership drive crashed after failing to negotiate a turn. He had gotten into a complex situation that required paradoxical leadership. Any lasting solution would be the product

of *both* a steely eye and a conciliatory spirit. There were enough missteps for everybody to join in the guilt. The torchbearer would have to lead back and forth between firm standards and generous forgiveness. This would-be leader did fine on the steely eye and firm standards part, but he couldn't bring himself to stop scolding the folks he considered the transgressors. He couldn't deal with the paradoxical need both to raze and raise.

Today's leaders must navigate the paradoxes inherent in the new organizational structures. The tall and tight hierarchies of years gone by tolerated less nimble leadership than the federated enterprises of the 21st century. In a federation, the situation above could very easily occur when separate units angle their way into cross-purposes. No hope for mediation rests with the leader who shows up and delivers Rodney King's "Can't we just get along?" line; neither will the Wyatt Earp approach reconstruct productive relationships. The savvy leader will need to unearth the tension points, and then traverse the paradoxical demands needed to renew productivity.

Wherever people or units have been empowered, even in small organizations, complexity results in the relationships between the whole and the parts, between the leader and the led. A sense of dual authority replaces the more orderly chain of command. This complexity creates the need for adaptive leadership that often touches opposite poles, depending on the nuances of the situation.

The Presidential Paradox

Where do we look for enlightenment on paradoxical leadership for today's federated organizations? At the risk of brash nationalism, I would suggest that a good place to start is perhaps the greatest federation in world history, The United States of America. The framers of the Constitution set up a leadership system characterized by limited powers, especially in the president's office. Article I stands guard against the strong-willed dictator, while Article II provides opportunities to wield forceful informal power, along with the formal powers placed under check. Clearly, the Constitution

established the Presidency as a job for the persuasive navigator. Congress would squash the monarch and the people would throw out the weakling. With unparalleled genius, Paine, Franklin, Madison, Hamilton and Jefferson led in the creation of a government with fluid, decentralized power. This may have been the first moment in history when one's leadership became more powerful than one's position as the leader.

I have a friend, Tom Cronin, who is a wonderful college president and one of the world's foremost authorities on the American presidency. He and Michael Genovese literally wrote the book on *The Paradoxes of the American Presidency* (Cronin & Genovese, 1998). This engaging book, more than any other, has helped me understand the challenges of 21st century leadership. I find it absolutely fascinating that the U.S. presidency offers a better laboratory now for understanding contemporary leadership than at any time in the past two centuries.

Tom and his co-author suggest nine paradoxes of the presidency. Four of the paradoxes that these authors find in the American presidency ring prophetic of the conflicting demands that most organizations will place on 21st century leadership. I have also presented an additional paradox that I'm certain leaders will face. Not to belabor the point, but when leaders authentically empower people or sub-units, they spread authority and limit their direct influence. By definition, this distribution creates paradoxical relationships. If leadership theorists agree on anything, it is the rising demand on leaders to empower those whom they lead. Real empowerment is not simply delegation; in fact, it is almost the opposite of what we sometimes think of delegation. When one is given a task by the leader to be done for the leader we're talking about a favor, not empowerment. Real empowerment results in high levels of independence and responsibility, and leading a group of empowered people can get complicated.

In the early decades of this century, leaders will create structures and relationships that federate power. These leaders cannot rely on the old ways of leading, unless, of course, they reach way back to the 200-year-old ways of leading nestled in the Articles of the United States Constitution. Of

the five paradoxes below, the first four are of the United States presidency (Cronin and Genovese, 1998) that will find parallels in the leadership needed for today's organizations:

Five Paradoxes

Paradox 1: Americans demand powerful, popular presidential leadership that solves the nation's problems; yet are suspicious of strong centralized leadership.

For seven years, I found myself in the vortex of this paradox. Manchester College is affiliated with the Church of the Brethren, one of America's four historic peace churches. Serving seven years as its president, I found a clear, and sometimes painful, perspective on the Church of the Brethren's historical suspicion of authority. At once, it admired and feared strong leaders. This became clear to me when I noticed an ominous pattern. Current leaders were held in suspicion, former leaders were appreciated, and dead former leaders were venerated. Before making this observation, I felt the Brethren simply didn't happen to like any of the people in leadership. After my realization, I softened a bit, thinking maybe this peace church just enjoyed a non-ballistic form of target practice. Finally, I concluded that they really wanted centralized leadership, but feared centralized power. My effectiveness in this environment required both muscle and deference, and timing was everything. In an utterly implicit and unintentional way, the Church of the Brethren taught me the difference between the use of leadership and authority.

I feel the best way for leaders to manage this paradox is by using formal power as sparingly as possible, but "not never." In any group or organization, once the power decentralization occurs, any sign of retraction threatens the empowered. Leaders can learn from our system of federal government and grant informally or structure formally a system of checks and balances. I find it helpful to think of my "formal power" as exhaustible credit, and to consider my informal influence as a means of replenishing tolerance for the times I need to use a formal, presidential chit. Using the

very efficient and readily available power of my authority when I could engage people informally to support a similar or improved outcome, sneers at the benefits of federalism. I use a credit unnecessarily if not detrimentally. When I take the route of building consensus on an issue, I am nourishing the general confidence people have in my perspective, thus strengthening the base of my influence.

The paradox surfaces when we recognize that occasions do arise in which leaders must not be fearful of exercising authority over the decisions for which they will be held accountable. If we avoid those situations when formal power offers the only option to do what we believe is best for the organization, our informal influence erodes. A perception of weakness settles over our leadership. Judiciously "pulling rank" when the situation calls for it can strengthen leadership.

Using muscle always involves risk. Group members often chant, "Stronger, stronger . . . too strong!" It takes a pretty good shot to hit that narrow space between people's desire for "stronger" and their complaint of "too strong!" Sometimes people protest out of benign ignorance. After the Whitworth board of trustees delivered one of the few decisions that lies appropriately within a board's domain of decision-making, a faculty member crossly asked me, "How can they get away with that?"

I didn't even understand the question. They're the trustees—that's what they do.

Authoritarian mandates that require cooperation raise the risk even higher, and the mandates had better work. "Lincoln is often criticized for acting outside the limits of the Constitution, but at the same time he is forgiven due to the obvious necessity for him to violate certain constitutional principles in order to preserve the Union" (Cronin & Genovese, 1998, p. 6). I'm not sure the forgiveness would have been quite so generous had his efforts failed.

Leaders in this new century must be authoritative without being authoritarian. They must be forceful without forcing. The 20th century deal was that leaders would give power in exchange for productivity and

fulfillment from those being led. Leaders can't take that power back. They must lead strongly, but with the sparing use of power. St. Paul captures the paradox in explaining that we need to be "unknown, yet well-known. . .sorrowful, yet rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, yet possessing all things. . .for when I am weak, then I am strong" (I Cor. 6:9, 10; 12:10).

Paradox 2: Americans yearn for the common person and also for the heroic, visionary performance.

I remember vividly when Tom Jarman, a close friend whom I lured from Northwestern University to become the Manchester College athletics director and wrestling coach, introduced me to his best friend, Denny. These two guys had wrestled on the same team in college, with Denny going into high school coaching and Tom into the college ranks. Denny came across immediately as a regular guy, a fun-loving, portly old jock whom I felt I'd known for years. Now, Congressman Denny Hastert is two heartbeats away from the United States presidency, serving his country as Speaker of the House of Representatives. I'm thrilled that "one of us" occupies this lofty office. Only in America. . . On the other hand, I'm terrified that "one of us" is running Congress. What happens if an important vote comes before the House during a crucial World Series game? I have this admittedly fanciful and outdated image of Denny sitting up there in front of the U.S. House of Representatives with a transistor radio at his ear. As he peers over a large salad bowl overflowing with popcorn and pushes aside a couple of dead soldiers, Denny inadvertently changes the course of history when he pounds his gavel in delight over a "walk-off walk" in the 10th inning.

The Economist tells the story of a watering hole in Baltimore where a group of regulars were toasting the basic (and sometimes "base") views of Vice President Spiro Agnew. After their sudsy conferral of sainthood on Spiro, a journalist stunned the group by interrupting the coronation with the question of whether they'd like their man Spiro to be president. One bloke's reply illustrates the "commoner-king" paradox. "I don't want the

President of the United States to sound like I do after a couple of beers," he said (September, 1996). How does today's leader satisfy Americans' desire for leaders who are, in the words of Cronin and Genovese, "greater than anyone else, yet not better than themselves?"

My answer to this question is painfully trite, but painfully true. Today's leaders must come to terms with their own vulnerability. Often we talk about being vulnerable as an act of stooping, and a quite noble one for those leaders whose sweat doesn't smell bad. I can't stand it when leaders or speakers make a big deal about how they're going to be vulnerable and disclose some frailty. "Hey, leader, we never thought you were perfect; are you the last to know, or what?" The "King" side of the commoner-king paradox generally gets conferred upon leaders by virtue of their positions and skill sets. On the other hand, being a member of the "Commoner Club" requires an honest and open recognition that in so many areas we are vulnerable—just one stumble away from abject failure.

My best example of serving as commoner-king comes from a leadership position that gets smoked daily by this paradox: the cleric. My former pastor, Jim Singleton, is one of the most godly and human people I have ever met. By virtue of geography, our church represents a blend of professional and non-professional workers. When Jim left our church, we were all heartbroken because, to a person, we felt we were losing "one of us." Jim was our *commoner* because he knew, and we knew that he knew, that he just happened to be the "wretch like me" up front, using his rare gift for helping us grasp the impenetrable mysteries of a holy God. He was our *king* because his longing to know God gave honesty, eloquence, and even royalty to the ordinary. As he met the ups and downs of life, he was just like us, but somehow better, and we loved having him as our leader.

Paradox 3: Americans want a just and compassionate president, yet we admire a cunning and, at times, ruthless leader.

The 21st century leader will need to move deftly between tenderheartedness and cold-bloodedness. In thinking about this paradox, it's hard not to conjure up images of the twisted morality that has "the godfather"

roughhousing with his children in the morning and roughing up a "slow learner" in the afternoon. Actually, this paradox will unfold in quite the opposite manner in today's organizational leadership. Leaders will need the ice in their veins on matters of principle and morality, but understanding hearts in their human relations. They must ruthlessly guard personal and organizational integrity, but that resolve must be carried out with justice and compassion.

Operating at only one pole on this paradoxical continuum won't work in the future, and wasn't effective in the past. In the early 1990s, Middlebury College in Vermont had a mess on its hands. Evidently, their operating budget turned red, so they hired a consulting firm to help trim their payroll. They made the cold-blooded decisions that needed to be made if they were to preserve the strength and integrity of the college. Unfortunately, the consultants were equally cold-blooded in executing (no pun intended) their conclusions. Pink slips and "Clear out your desk by noon tomorrow" notes violated the culture and the individual loyalty that characterized Middlebury. The consultants knew they'd made a mistake when faculty and staff arrived at commencement exercises in funeral regalia.

I've never made a really hard decision in which the victims cheered for me. But in those difficult moments of making the hard call, for some reason I felt a strong sense of compassion. I've felt this as both a leader, and a father. I recall one night when I delivered a totally arbitrary "no" to our 17-year-old son's request to join his friends in an inherently harmless activity, but one that I could not bring myself to approve. With tears streaming down his face, he blamed my decision on everything from me not trusting him to my need to protect my own image. Fortunately, I didn't have it in me to accept his invitation to do battle. I was too sad about what it meant to fulfill my obligation as his father. I learned a good leadership lesson that night. Because of my commitment to our son's best interests, I could not compromise this decision, nor could it matter how cruel my authoritarianism felt to him. Precisely because it was my son I was facing, I ached horribly for the pain being endured by the boy who means more to me than

any other male on this earth. And precisely because I was his dad, he recognized how much I hated the role of parent at that moment. By the end of the night, we were laughing at the naked shamelessness with which he had tried to leverage my guilt into some kind of payoff that I have now forgotten.

That night I went to bed thankful that I'd said no with a hanging head, rather than a stiff neck. Neither the hard-heartedness of my decision nor the soft-heartedness of my response could have survived that encounter without the primal instincts of the parent-child relationship. The clear lesson of the episode was my need to consider this paradoxical integration of opposites whenever I appear in front of the most difficult of decisions. Cold-blooded doesn't necessarily mean "arbitrary," but it does mean "difficult." I can't back down from that. Tenderhearted doesn't necessarily mean soft or even generous, but it always means compassionate and respectful. I violate everything I stand for if I protect myself with a cold veneer. Today's leaders must develop square jaws and soft hearts, and most importantly, must know when to lead with which.

I am aware that the paradox of compassionate and cold-blooded is not the same as compassionate and cunning. Cronin and Genovese found that American people believe that their president should, under some circumstances, resort to craft and guile in pursuit of a greater good. I suppose certain businesses benefit, at least in the short term, from a shady move by the leader. I believe leaders carry the responsibility of providing moral leadership. We can argue definitions of morality, but I do not believe that leaders should ever release themselves or others from their ethical responsibilities. I'm not sure how cunning and guile apply to those of us who lead in non-life-or-death situations, but I know of the intrinsic value of standing for what is right.

Paradox 4: Americans want powerful, self-confident presidential leadership; yet are inherently suspicious of leaders who are arrogant and above criticism.

No matter what you thought about Ronald Reagan's politics, you have

to agree that his navigation of this paradox was masterful. No president in my lifetime exuded more confidence in his political philosophy, nor has any president in my memory seemed more comfortable in laughing at his own pratfalls. This fusion of self-assurance and vulnerability may be why many people found Reagan's leadership impact greater than his success level.

Below, I discuss the importance of personal security as an indispensable element of 21st century leadership. I believe security serves as one of the important ties that bind confidence and humility. Although Cronin and Genovese present the American appetite for leaders with confidence but not arrogance as paradoxical, these two characteristics are commonly found in the truly secure leader. It is exactly the strong self-system that allows a leader to feel confident enough to get the job done, and secure enough to welcome criticisms that improve her or his performance.

Success in developing and displaying confidence without arrogance relies heavily, but not exclusively, on a healthy self-concept. Propelling leaders' movement between confidence and humility also requires a strong and honest self-*awareness*. There are some tasks in the life of our college that I do really well. They're jobs I've done many times and they play to my strengths. I'm the only one I want doing those jobs, and I think my co-workers share that opinion. In most jobs around the college, however, I would find myself two standard deviations below the mean in quality of performance, and I *know* my co-workers share that opinion. It is this self-awareness that enables my colleagues to believe that neither my confidence nor my humility is false or strategic. When former Boston Celtic star Larry Bird walked into the locker room before the first All-Star Game's 3-point shooting contest, he called out, "Which one of you boys is gonna get second place this afternoon?" He then buried the competition. Larry Bird did not, however, pose that question or even enter the competition in the slam-dunk contest. The man had a love affair with gravity. Confidence and humility co-exist well together in leaders who know what they can and cannot do well

The federated authority of 21st century organizations places leader

arrogance in direct conflict with the organizational structure and climate. Leaders neither can nor should "do it all." They must, however, have the ability and confidence to hold together the loosely bound units through which their missions are accomplished. Strength without arrogance enables them to meet the demands of the humble/confident leader paradox.

Paradox 5: Americans expect leaders to be visionary, but not unrealistic.

Most leaders get knocked for lacking vision or for being too idealistic. This paradox always seems to put a fat kid on the other side of our teeter-totter. Solomon had a point in observing, "Without a vision, the people perish"(Proverbs 29:18). And we also accept Professor Noel Tichy's claim that "facing reality is the first crucial step that leaders must take" (*The Leadership Engine,* 1997, p. 31). Actually, these two poles aren't that far apart, which is why leaders don't have to drift very far from the middle before suffering the criticism of camping at one extreme or the other.

In my experience, the success of any attempt to unite vision and realism will rest on a fundamental premise—one that many failed leaders never understood. Leaders do not bring vision *to* an organization; rather, they extract a vision *from* it. Successful leaders dig into their organizations, mine the gold, and then figure out how and where to sell it. Having completed this painstaking exercise in reality, they trade in their picks and shovels for a chisel and begin to sculpt an image of what their enriched organizations can become. Bennis and Nanus are great on this point:

> In the end, the leader may be the one who articulates the vision and gives it legitimacy, who expresses the vision in captivating rhetoric that fires the imagination and emotions of followers. . .. But if the organization is to be successful, the image must grow out of the needs of the entire organization and must be "claimed" or "owned" by all the important actors. (Bennis & Nanus, p. 109)

Leaders must till their organizations for the makings of an achievable

ideal. The people will recognize both the reality and the reach, and will feel ownership for both.

We need idealism from those we lead. I just returned from Amsterdam, where our family visited Corrie ten Boom's hiding place where she protected Jews from their voracious Nazi predators. We were gloriously inspired by acts of heroism and strength. As I listened to the stories, I found myself thinking that the superhuman acts of the stowaways were not really stories of the survival instinct; they were stories of hope. It was vision that kept the Jews from perishing in World War II. The manna of hope that they would one day embrace loved ones sustained them more than a primeval fear of loss of life and limb.

As leaders, we must provide visions that inspire hope. While visions may bound wildly about, true hope always settles within the latitudes of reality. Rare is the organization or group that exceeds the measurements of its leader's vision. But even rarer are the people who find hope in fanciful, unrealistic visions.

Three Ways to Traverse the Paradoxes

I feel very strongly that paradoxical leadership will serve 21st century organizations better than the unbending styles that provided comfort and predictability for yesterday's less-complicated enterprises. In offering the above paradoxes, I would like to suggest three rules for traversing them:

1. Go wide. Some who read this section on paradoxical leading will claim that I'm simply putting a new spin on the need for balance, which is hardly a new thought. They're wrong. Balance is achievable through timid baby steps, back and forth between two poles. I'm campaigning for a fat standard deviation—getting way out there in both directions. When it's time to be king, don't be a wimp about it. Leave no doubt about who's running things. When it's time to be commoner, lose the symbols of your office. The minute a leader gives the impression that being commoner for a few moments is an act of magnanimity, that leader is cooked. Leaders need

to cut a wide berth in all the paradoxes of their roles, being "bipolar" in a healthy sense of the word.

2. Angle into the current. I've written most of this book lifting my eyes intermittently to watch the magnificent Pend Oreille River push north toward the fabled waters of the Columbia River. When I kayak on the Pend Oreille, I am never unaware that "going with the flow" will turn my kayak into a magneto. Any direction but north requires intention and effort. Paradoxical leaders must know the currents of their own preferences and personalities. Rarely will they find situational eddies that move them naturally upstream. For example, with respect to the "powerful but not too centralized" paradox, distributing authority comes more naturally to me than wielding it. Hence, I far more frequently ask myself the question, "Where do I need to engage?" than I ask, "Where am I micro-managing?" Centralizing power and exercising authority represent upstream actions for me. So occasionally I point my kayak in that direction, assuming that the currents of my style have carried me in the direction of decentralization. Leaders need to know where their comfort points lie on the paradoxical continuums of their positions, and they must be sure that they make moves toward the farthest pole. As a rule, angle upstream.

3. Don't become predictable. In general, impact and predictability are inversely related. One of the great benefits of paradoxical leadership lies in the ability it provides the leader to avoid tight patterns. Leaders need to take advantage of the impact available to those who deploy bipolar acts. For the most part, distance from the opposite pole creates impact. Once at a dinner party, I finished eating before the other folks at our table, so I gathered everyone's dirty dishes and bussed the table. A couple of visitors considered my service salutary because of the distance it represented from my normal duties as president. Although my wife would break a dish over my head if I suggested dishes weren't in my job description, I guess for these folks, the surprise created impact. In another instance I saw some surprise-based impact at the opposite pole of this paradox when some students invited me (their buddy) to participate in an activity they'd dreamed up.

Not only did I decline, I explained that they too would be declining. The message that I (now less their buddy) wanted them to hear managed to get around. Leaders skilled in the paradoxes will recognize that the unexpected act packs more of a punch than the next stop in a standard pattern.

I suspect the ultimate paradox of leadership grows out of the longing people have for their leaders both to follow and lead them. Knowing when to reflect (follow) and when to shape (lead) the hopes and expectations of those we lead will determine the success with which we navigate the paradoxes. Some leaders will find it difficult to climb out of the trenches created by years of leading in a particular way. Others might reject paradoxical leadership as chaotic, if not duplicitous.

When I have succeeded in arcing polar opposites I have experienced a sense of wholeness. I am much more than someone's idea of a college president. In fact, only on the most formal of occasions am I comfortable in being addressed as anything other than "Bill." I do not wish to be narrowly known by my role or my degree. I love serious debate, and I love spontaneous laughter. I love to serve, and I love to be served. I love to teach, and I love to learn. In a sense, paradoxical leadership respects the glorious complexity of being made in the image of God. It is whole leadership for whole people.

Leading from the Middle

Paradoxical leadership does not work well from a distance. I often enter my office wearing cargo pants, an old sweatshirt and a baseball cap. None of my co-workers look twice. Once, when I was thus attired, I encountered an alum whom I had met only one time, and I had been wearing my starched-white-shirt-striped-tie-uniform. He was startled, apologizing that he had caught me on my day off. One of the women in the office quipped, "What are you talking about, he looks this way half the time." My clothes aren't very significant, but this incident makes the point. Leaders need to be close enough to their people so that when they appear at opposite poles of a paradox it isn't startling. It is in the middle of those they lead

that leaders are granted the freedom that comes when their authenticity can be seen at close range. People know they go to the poles to be effective, not for effect.

Virtuous Leadership

In December of 1991, through a series of bizarre circumstances, I tracked down NBA basketball player Steve Alford and hired him as coach for Manchester College's 0-6 men's basketball team. At the time, he'd just been cut from a West Coast team and was in conversation with the Boston Celtics. I'd read that he wanted to be a college coach and did not like the NBA very much. So within 36 hours of my first contact we shook hands, and three days later the most beloved basketball figure in the most basketball-crazed state had moved with his great (and pregnant) wife, Tanya, to North Manchester, Indiana.

After watching Steve for one week of practice, I concluded that he would become a very good college coach. After watching him for a month, I thought he might also become a very good leader. Then on Monday, May 18, 1992, I thought, "This guy might become a *great* leader."

It was the morning after the Alfords got home from the hospital with their newborn child, and I dashed over to their house to meet baby Kory. Everything was typical new parents/new baby stuff until the new dad and I walked out to my car. In a light rain, Steve said, "I want to thank you."

Although his words were a bit halting, I thought he was thanking me for stopping by. "Are you kidding?" I replied, "I wanted to see Kory." Then he said, "I'm not talking about that. I want to thank you that I'm here. If I had signed with the Celtics, I might have been in Cleveland (where the Celtics were playing the Cavaliers in the NBA playoffs) and missed seeing my son being born. Can you imagine how horrible that would have been?"

What I could scarcely imagine was that this 27-year-old, who dreamed every day of his Hoosier childhood of playing in the NBA, felt that seeing the birth of his son was much more important than being a professional

basketball player. It was then that I knew he really meant what he said about his values.

When a leader's virtue rebuffs culture's most seductive invitations, the power of authenticity is created, and it is a power that can catapult or destroy leadership. Maybe I shouldn't have been so taken, but if one of Grimm's Fairy Tale fairies had asked me at age 27 to choose between playing in an NBA playoff or seeing my child arrive in the world, I don't even want to know what I would have said. Virtue in leadership gives people the confidence that nothing expedient or self-gratifying can ever divert their leader from doing what is good and right.

If my list of 21st century leadership qualities falls victim to wishful thinking at any point, it is here. In a couple of years, I will hit the number-two spot in longevity of the Whitworth College presidents. This endurance should get me at least a couple of pages in the next written history of the college. (This recognition inspires me to work hard at kissing up to the college historian.) No doubt my two pages will refer to buildings, money, enrollment, and how weird it was to have a president whose maturity level was indistinguishable from that of the students. But what I want most in those two pages is for someone to remember me as a really good person. My target is to be the kind of leader my children imagine me to be. I want to be a leader known for my virtues as well as for my accomplishments.

I hold a somewhat confused perspective on virtue and ethics, but I hold it tenaciously. I'm even more dogmatic about virtue now than I was before I got confused. Almost 20 years ago I got a call from a friend saying he needed to talk to me. Although I loved this guy, I did not necessarily consider him a paragon of Christian virtue. As it turns out, his wife had taken a shine to another guy and wanted out of the marriage. Kids, property and quite a few years together merely complicated her exit; she was gone. My job was to support my friend, so we quickly put together a time for golf, eating and venting. As we sloshed our way through dinner, passing up few chances to villainize our new enemy, my buddy confessed his certainty that this was not his wife's first affair. That observation didn't exactly startle

me, but his next statement did, and it hurled a wrench into my system of ethics and virtue. Sheepishly, he peeked over his glasses and said, "But I never cheated on her." Incredulously, I asked why. "Well, I was tempted several times," he said, "but I knew it wasn't right." Here I was, the big Christian ministering to my secular friend, but I knew that if I were in his shoes, only my reverence and fear of God would have delivered me from the suspicion and vengeance that would have provided the perfect excuse to satisfy my lust. I realized that I had never constructed a personal morality independent of faith.

Several years after this incident I got hit with the second major assault on my belief that virtue came only from God. After I'd spent almost a year consulting with Phil Clement, the president of DeVry, Inc., we arranged for a long dinner at which I would give him a summary of my observations. I had found Phil to be consummately Christian in everything he did. While sitting on his management team for a year, I never saw Phil budge on his demand for the highest ethical standards in every decision we made. He had become my role model of integrity. No cracks. Toward the end of our meal together, I had to ask him to reveal the source of all this morality and commitment to his employees. "My grandfather, I guess," Phil said. "When I was a young boy, he worked for a labor union. He just always told the truth, and he always did what was right. There were no other options. I watched the way he lived." "But what about honoring and obeying God?" I asked. "Nah, I'd say it was my grandfather. I've never really given God too much thought," Phil replied.

When I say my commitment to virtue has become stronger now that it's confused, I mean that I no longer hold my original belief in the existentialism of "Eat, drink and be merry" as the only logical ethic apart from God. I find too many examples of non-faith-based morality for me to accept that there is no good apart from God. I do believe God to be the first source of everything that is good, but a fundamental awareness of what is right and wrong endows all people with certain moral responsibilities. For me personally, ethical resolve still rises from my longing for God's

approval, but reinforcing that resolve is a profound awareness of my responsibility as a citizen of the human community. I believe that for others, not being a person of faith provides no excuse for moral compromise.

Leaders claiming that all this stuff should be left to philosophers and graduate students are dangerous. They duck their moral responsibilities, hiding behind the question of "Whose morality gets to be in charge?" That's not a bad question, but it's a bad shield. We should have no tolerance for people in positions of leadership with cavalier attitudes toward virtue, no matter what excuses they hide behind. Years ago I was discussing with a dear friend who was serving as a Division I athletics director whom he should choose as his men's basketball coach. We came to the conclusion that all things being close to equal, he should take the person with the strongest integrity. He did, and the success that followed was not restricted to the basketball court. The coach has become highly respected in his community and in college athletics. In fact, after he moved on to the next level, he and his wife helped provide tuition for a student who no longer benefited from an athletic scholarship at the school to which my friend hired him.

Virtue in our leaders is more important now than ever. When organizations were such that leaders and members worked in more circumscribed roles, moral detours were a little easier to spot. Now that our line of sight isn't so straight, trust must replace surveillance. Leaders must rise to repair the moral disintegration making our society outrageous and absurd. Unless we discover some kind of moral fluoridation that prevents ethical cavities, our leaders must serve as our moral physicians. I believe the 21st century citizen will demand leaders whose competence *and virtue* can be trusted.

Contributing to the challenge of providing virtuous leadership is the enormous pressure leaders feel to produce results. Leaders of publicly held companies live and die on quarterly earnings. Even not-for-profit organizations can ill afford to make a good long-term decision if it throws the annual operating budget into the red. Red ink means red flags for donors

who want to invest in a winner. I know that the intense pressure I place on myself diverts my attention from moral considerations. I commit sins of omission more than of commission, but that's not much to be proud of. Leaders need to recognize that virtue is good business. It delivers good long-term results because it inspires trust and loyalty in those we lead.

The tall influence of James McGregor Burns both helps and hurts the case for leaders' virtue. When he says, "Leadership occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality" (1978, p. 4), he helps make the virtue point. But when he excludes from his definition of leaders people who use their power nefariously, he lulls us into danger. By Burns's definition, Bill Clinton was not a leader, because he failed to raise people to higher levels of morality. I think Bill Clinton was a very strong leader—despicable in his personal morality—but certainly a leader, and not always a good one. By defining "leaders" as necessarily morally uplifting, we weaken our position to *demand* their virtue. I agree with Barbara Kellerman (ironically, of the James McGregor Burns Academy of Leadership at the University of Maryland) who objects to Burns's odd, albeit influential, definition of leadership.

> One problem with what is arguably a redefinition of the word "leadership" is that it separates those who are in the field from those who are outside it. Although most scholars and practitioners who are in any way associated with Leadership Studies. . .assume that to lead is to do right, those outside this still narrow band make no such assumption. Most folks use the word leader as it has always been used: to refer to those able to draw on sources of power, authority and influence to get others to fall into line. In ordinary conversations, for example, Slobodan Milosevic is referred to as the leader of the Serbs, no matter what he does. . .. While outside the rarified halls of academe I have yet to hear anyone call Milosevic a (Burns's term) "power wielder," I know full well that for most of us in leadership studies, the term leader simply does not apply. (*Cutting Edge Leadership*, 2000, p. 69)

I think Kellerman's deliverance from the jargon of Burns and other

academics better positions the average person to demand virtue from those who wish to lead.

What can the 21st century leader do to become more virtuous? I have three suggestions:

1. Identify the virtues that you want to define your leadership. Trying to move in the general direction of being virtuous won't work. If you achieve anything, it will probably be little more than a feeling of self-righteousness, which is definitely not a virtue. Ask the folks you lead which virtues they most want in their leader. Read other people's lists to stimulate your thinking. I just received in the mail a book on virtues written by Gordon B. Hinckley, president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. His top 10 virtues are love, honesty, morality, civility, learning, forgiveness and mercy, thrift and industry, gratitude, optimism, and faith. We need to increase the frequency of our discourse on ethics and morality.

I remember a great discussion our family had on virtues. We were on a road trip from Washington to Chicago when my wife whipped out a tape of Bill Bennett's *Book of Virtues* and made the kids and me listen. Because I was still mad at Bennett for trying to kill the whole Department of Education when he served as head, I supported the kids' demands that we break from virtue for a few tunes now and then. On one of those breaks, we happened to beam up the O.J. Simpson chase on our car radio. Somehow, the irony of virtue and O.J. coming out of the stereo in sequence stirred deep and important questions in our children. (By the way, I decided Bennett couldn't be all bad when I found out he once went on a date with Janis Joplin.) Think specifically about the virtues you want your people to be able to count on from you.

2. Commit yourself to openness. Life is filled with temptations that intensify when nobody's looking. Sometimes I have been tempted to live a bit more luxuriously on my business expense account than I would on my own money, a practice I find lacking in virtue. So I've told faculty members that they are welcome to review my expense reports if they have concerns. Sometimes, especially when I travel, I'm tempted to look at garbage

on the Internet, a practice I find lacking in virtue. So I've given permission to our information technology people to look at my site-visit logs.

Sometimes we're all tempted to conceal information that we feel others can't handle or will misunderstand. Such paternalism lacks virtue, and openness is its most effective antidote. I don't consider openness to be some kind of desperate measure to save us from ourselves; it just keeps the light on. Virtue always stands up under scrutiny. There is a certain honesty belonging to those who live their lives in the light, and honesty is definitely a virtue.

3. Be honest with yourself. In Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Doubleday, 1961), he argues that we all have three selves: the public self, the private self, and the ideal self. I think that many times we're not honest with these three selves. We pretend to be someone we're not (the public self), we long to be someone we're not (the ideal self), and we convince ourselves we're someone we're not (the private self). Leaders easily fall prey to personal dishonesty. Too many people blow compliments in their ears.

The most important point in my own efforts to become more virtuous occurred over a yearlong period in which I came to grips with my hidden but abundant selfishness. Faced with two situations in which my public image would get battered no matter what I decided, I asked, "What would the real Bill Robinson do?" My shameful but honest answer was that he would do what would be best for his public self. I discovered I'd been so impressed with my public self that I didn't notice the rot in my private self. I had boxes of clippings that proved I was a good guy. I had seldom looked within, and when I did, I chose carefully what I wanted to see. I was long on God-talk but short on spirituality. Only when my selfishness caved in on me was I driven inward in any kind of honest way. I had dipped to the point where virtue, ironically, came within reach. It was worth the crash.

Back to Leading from the Middle

I've tossed around terms such as "virtue," "morality," "integrity" and

"ethics" without strictly defining them, as though they were interchangeable. There are certain differences among these terms, but leaders know what they mean, and they know how badly leadership needs to stand on virtue and moral courage. Our society cries out for moral leadership. Our leaders must come through as good human beings.

There is something about being among those we lead that calls forth our virtue. At close range, we are exposed. All that we are and all that we are not is laid bare. Being in the middle serves as both the cause and effect of our leadership strength. In their midst, people can see most clearly whether we possess the goodness to deserve their confidence. It is where they can discover if we are the same person up close as we are up front.

The end of Psalm 78 offers a beautiful statement of an ordinary person of integrity providing extraordinary leadership: "God chose David and took him from the sheep pens; from tending the sheep, he brought him to being the shepherd of his people. . . And David shepherded them with integrity, and with skillful hands he led them."

Bill Robinson assumed his duties as the 17th president of Whitworth College in July 1993. During his tenure Whitworth has been named the best workplace in its category of colleges, universities and seminaries. A communications scholar who has distinguished himself as a teacher, speaker and community leader, Robinson received his master's degree from Wheaton College and his Ph.D. from the University of Pittsburgh. He also studied at Princeton Theological Seminary. Most of his scholarly work has focused on organizational, cross-cultural and interpersonal communication, as well as religion and philosophy. Robinson recently published a book titled *Leading People from the Middle: The Universal Mission of Mind and Heart.*