

Leadership in the Second Half of Life: A Mandela Moment in the United States

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When I turned fifty, a friend who had traveled that road a few years earlier said that it was like coming out for the second half of a football game. With every one now seemingly convinced that sixty is the new fifty, this is an appropriate occasion, and an especially good time, to talk about leadership in the second half of life. While many researchers are now focusing on the coming intergenerational transfer of leadership, it is important that we not overlook those who are shifting gears to launch encore careers that have the potential to rebuild communities, shape a new vision of aging and provide hope for many who might otherwise feel exiled to a life of boredom.

The historian Tacitus once defined patriotism as praiseworthy competition with one's ancestors. I recall that definition of civic virtue today because it reminds us that each generation, whether under thirty or over sixty, has an opportunity, indeed a responsibility, to contribute something as significant, as meaningful and occasionally as extraordinary as those who preceded them.

It was my good fortune to work for three years with Nelson Mandela, the prototype of effective leadership over sixty; so I was not surprised when some of my friends in South Africa called last November 4th "a Mandela moment in the United States." It was not just that we were electing a president who, like Mandela, would be called on to lead us through a period of transition where euphoria was tempered by adversity. It was not simply that a generation that had been largely outside the leadership axis learned something powerful about both the potential of civic engagement and the perils of deferred leadership.

What caused my friends in South Africa to speak of a Mandela moment was not just the long lines and the long wait at so many voting places that reminded them of South Africa at the launch of the new democracy in 1994. It was not just the magnitude of the moment that spoke so loudly about the progress Americans have made in their efforts to form a more union. It was really the recognition that Americans were betting on many of the qualities of leadership that made Nelson Mandela so widely revered and respected around the world. He went from prison to president in a small country on the tip of the African continent. Yet, heads of state and royalty from around the world beat a path to his door to seek his advice and counsel and, sometimes, for a photo op to prove that they had once been in the presence of this global icon. President Clinton said of him that when he enters a room, we all feel a little bigger and a little better because on our best days we all want to be like him.

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

- the power of his personality,
- the elegance of his humanity,
- the loftiness of his ideals,
- the wisdom of his judgment,
- the calmness of his temperament and

- The power of his commitment to the well being of others.

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

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

A second problem with trying to talk about leadership is that much of the discussion is about positional leadership, people who occupy positions of power. In far too many places, the prevailing notion of leadership has been that of the military/manufacturing model of command, control and even coercion; those who have sought to bluff, bully or buy their way into influence. Leadership must also be seen as a social influence process where leaders are not simply people with a high profile, but often quite leaders who make things happen from wherever they are in an organization, a movement or a bureaucracy. The CEO may have the position to give orders, but she may not have as much influence as a worker on the plant floor or a secretary in her own office.

Those who come into new leadership roles in the second half of life are very likely to bring with them the four elements of what I have come to call leadership as a way of being.

Emotional Intelligence

The first we know as emotional intelligence. To suggest that leadership is a way of being is not simply to draw upon the life, leadership and legacy of Nelson Mandela. It is to apply the clinical studies and insights of Daniel Goleman and others to my own experience as well. Goleman highlighted the importance of emotional intelligence after studying a large group of successful leaders and concluding that leadership is more art than science. The central thesis of his study is that while the qualities traditionally associated with leadership are important, they are not sufficient. The qualities he described as elements of emotional intelligence are self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social awareness. I have found that Goleman's conclusions apply not simply to the more collegial styles of social influence leaders in civil society, but also to the authoritarian styles of positional leaders in the military, business and bureaucracies.

Moral Intelligence

The second dimension of leadership as a way of being is moral intelligence. For almost a decade I have been arguing that one of the greatest challenges we face in the 21st century is how to think about, how to talk about and how to apply values to our work in public and private institutions without getting caught up in the politics of virtue or the parochialism of dogma. I can not over emphasize what a grave mistake it would be to allow questions regarding the appropriate role of ethics in our aggregate existence to remain primarily the domain of moralists interested almost exclusively in the private behavior of individuals.

Reinhold Niebuhr, the great moral theologian who in 1932 wrote the book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, could have been speaking directly to our own times when he warned of the

difficulty of applying the moral sentiments of individuals to the moral imperatives of groups. He went on to argue that while we know a lot about what is right and what is to be revered in individual behavior, we have made relatively little progress in applying morality to the problems of our aggregate existence, whether national, economic, racial or organizational.

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

Social Intelligence

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

Leaders with social intelligence are the ones who are most convincing in persuading others that diversity need not divide; that pluralism rightly understood and rightly practiced is a benefit not a burden; that the remarkable achievement of November 4th is a great leap forward, but it does not yet signal the arrival of the more perfect union we seek.

Social intelligence also helps us understand what the great mystic, poet and theologian Howard Thurman had in mind when he said I want to be me without making it difficult for you to be you. Howard Thurman was in the second half of his life so it was his experience over the years that led him to say “I want to be me without making it difficult for you to be you.” Can you imagine how different our world would be if more Americans were able to say “I want to be an American without making it difficult for an Arab to be an Arab, an African to be an African or an Asian to be an Asian? Can you imagine what our communities would be like if more Christians were able to say “I want to 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?”

Spiritual Intelligence

The fourth and final element of leadership as a way of being is what I would like to call spiritual intelligence. Here I refer to the ability to cope with the unexamined and the unknown; the capacity to transcend the reality we see and to imagine alternative possibilities; and the ability to step back, renew oneself and to find meaning and purpose in the work we do. A friend of mine refers to spirituality as 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 my inner self, especially the need to cope with the demons that some psychiatrists call the tyranny of the urgent. Spiritual intelligence is especially important at a time in our history when people are so divided and many alienated not just from other groups, but they are living in psychological exile from there own past.

It is spiritual intelligence that reminds leaders, and would be leaders, that they will need to be agents of reconciliation. The South Africans under Nelson Mandela introduced us to three different forms or dimensions of reconciliation. And those of us over sixty know them well. The first is **individual**, a kind of existential rebalancing of the self. Kada Asmal, an architect of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, describes this bringing back into balance as undoing historical illusions, deceptions and misteachings. To make this point, he likes to quote

William Wordsworth who said, “To be mistaught is worse than to be untaught – no errors are so difficult to root out as those which the understanding has pledged to uphold.”

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

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

One of the things I learned years ago about building community is that when neighbors help neighbors, and even when strangers help strangers, both those who help and those who help are transformed. When that which was their problem becomes our problem, a new connection is made and new forms of community are possible. In other words, getting people to do something for someone else – what John Winthrop called making the condition of others our own – is the most powerful force I know I building community. When you experience the problems of the poor or troubled, when you help someone to find cultural meaning in a museum or creative expression in a painting, when you help to dispel prejudices or fight bigotry directed at your neighbor, you are far more likely to find common ground, and you are likely to find that in serving others you discover the genesis of community.

The third form of reconciliation is **political**. Different kinds of conflict require different forms and ways of reconciliation. This is an especially good time to remember that political reconciliation is not dependent on the kind of intimacy that other forms of reconciliation may demand. Rather statecraft and politics require peaceful co-existence. Forgiveness may come later, after the creation of confidence and the building of trust. Some South African leaders like to tell the story of a Danka elder who in reflecting on the Sudanese conflict said “Reconciliation begins by agreeing to sit under the same tree with your enemy, to find a way of addressing the conflict.” At one level, this may mean simply to stop killing one another. On another level, it involves a willingness to work together with one’s enemies or former adversaries in pursuit of a solution that is not yet at hand. Although this sense of reconciliation is incomplete, it does interrupt cycles of conflict and lay the groundwork for something deeper and different. It is in Nelson Mandela’s words an attempt to resolve conflicts by the use of our brains rather than our blood.

Long before Joseph Nye wrote his first article about soft power, Nelson Mandela was demonstrating that seduction is more enduring than coercion; that while hard power can be used to inflict or prevent pain, it is soft power that is most likely to create influence that is sustainable over long periods.

Finally, the leader over sixty is likely to understand the importance of being not just an agent of reconciliation, but also a purveyor of hope. We are living through a historical epic that psychologists call a period of free-floating anxiety. The period immediately after 9/11 was such a moment. The period after the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy was such a moment. But the anxiety we feel now is not the result of one event, but a confluence of events. It is anxiety about what the war is doing to our soul as a people; anxiety about coping with the near collapse of our economy; anxiety about the increasing disparity between work and reward; and for those of us who have been working in Louisiana since Katrina, it is anxiety about the frequency of hurricanes which reminds not just us, but the whole world, that disaster is no longer an aberration or an abnormal event. It is in fact the new normal.

So in the end, the challenge for civic ventures is to identify and support leaders who are purveyors of hope; leaders who can look beyond what they see and imagine alternative possibilities. Hope, as Cornel West has reminded us, is not so much an act of memory as an act of imagination and courage, the realization that what we can imagine we can probably create. Optimism is the ability to look at the evidence and infer that things are going to get better. Hope is the ability to look beyond the evidence and to see something different and deeper.

When you find a leader who is a purveyor of hope, you will find someone who, like Nelson Mandela, calls us to a higher purpose and lifts us into our better selves; someone who understands what Vaclav Havel had in mind when he said “I am not an optimist because I do not believe that every thing ends well. I am not a pessimist because I do not believe that every thing ends badly. But I could not accomplish any thing if I did not have hope within me, for the gift of hope is as big a gift as the gift of life.” That’s it. That is what leaders in the second half of life bring to the table. We may set out to provide help, but we learn very quickly that the gift of hope is as big a gift as the gift of life itself.