

Born Leaders
A Sermon Offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
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On October 4, 2009



The most dangerous leadership myth is that leaders are born -- that there is a genetic factor to leadership. This myth asserts that people simply either have certain charismatic qualities or not. That's nonsense; in fact, the opposite is true. Leaders are made rather than born.

~Warren G. Bennis

Reading

From Leadership Lessons for The Real World by Margaret J. Wheatley

It is a world of interconnected networks...

In this world, the 'basic building blocks' of life are relationships, not individuals. ... We are all 'bundles of potential' (as one scientist described quantum particles.)

Relationships evoke these potentials.

In this historic moment, we live caught between the mechanical worldview that no longer works and a new paradigm that we fear to embrace. But this new paradigm comes with the promise that it can provide solutions to our most unsolvable challenges. In contrast to the terrible failures of government, it was communities, individuals, and small groups who responded immediately to Katrina. They organized their "home-made rescue and relief efforts" around the slogan "If not us, then who?" Those with boats went to New Orleans to join "The Cajun Navy." They rescued people from rooftops, picked up the dead, transported the injured to trauma centers. They saw people from other communities doing the same thing. FEMA wasn't around, "That was it. Just us

volunteers." Ville Platte helped thousands ... Their success cannot be explained by the old mechanical paradigm..... We live in a world of relationships, where each event or person evokes new capacities.

We have discovered that even in the most economically poor communities in the world there is an abundance of leaders. These leaders work to strengthen their community's ability to be self-reliant by working with the wisdom and wealth already present in its people, traditions and environment. A 2002 Ford Foundation report on leadership notes the same thing. "There is a sense among some in our country today that we are lacking inspirational leaders...Yet a closer look reveals that all over the nation groups of concerned citizens are working together, often at the local level, to solve tough social problems. These are the new leaders in America today."

We need to carefully consider what we are learning about leadership in these disaster-laden times. I hope we learn that we *can* rely on human caring, creativity, and compassion. We *can* rely on us 'bundles of potential' figuring out solutions, learning quickly, and surprising ourselves with new capacities. Together, people act creatively, take risks, invent, console, inspire and produce. This is how life works.

Sermon

Last weekend Mike Durall came to Countryside Church as a consultant. He brought us some questions and challenges. In fact, I had been reflecting on Mike's ideas since April when I'd read the new edition of his book *The Almost Church Revitalized*. What I came to realize – and it's very much what I have thought and known for some years, now – is that the cornerstone of congregational thriving is leadership. Now – don't glaze over – I know leadership is a rather dry sounding word. I've tried to find a better word – but I'm just not sure that there is one.

To me anyone who steps forward in congregational life is a leader – it is not a title bestowed simply from a position, though titles can help in identifying where to find a leader but, still – the chair of a committee could fail to be a leader – but the person who quietly inspires others to do good work, the person who uses their gift of organization to create a library database, the person who starts a film series, who organizes circle suppers, who can orchestrate a huge reception, who keeps a program going week after week – these are all leaders – people who recognize their talents – even when they feel very modest about those talents – and then use them to create a better world. In fact, to me leaders are people who can envision something positive and can help make it happen – can help other people to help make it happen.

To be honest, leadership isn't a dry word or a dry idea to me. To me it is challenge, a summons, an aspiration, a life preserver, a center point.

The reading by Margaret Wheatley – co-founder of the Berkana Institute – points to one of the reasons that leadership is such a center point – she writes: "In this world, the 'basic building blocks' of life are relationships, not individuals. ... We are all 'bundles of potential' (as one scientist described quantum particles.) Relationships evoke these potentials." In this room we are each these bundles. At whatever point we are in our lives we are replete with possibility – capable of more in the present than we were in the past. And all we require is the situation that can call that more out of us. We see it all the time when people pull together and invent ways of helping one another, after the devastation of September 11 when so many people came to New York to help or in natural disasters – after Katrina as people innovated rescue strategies when the federal government failed.

Wheatley quoted a Ford Foundation study that said "There is a sense among some in our country today that we are lacking inspirational leaders....Yet a closer look reveals that all over the nation groups of concerned citizens are working together, often at the local level, to solve tough social problems. These are the new leaders in America today."

To me leadership is not about the ability to direct other people or stand in front – although sometimes leadership calls for those things – leadership is, first, about the capacity to govern oneself, to provide an example of value to others, to live according to the highest and best purpose that one knows, to look toward a common future, to know oneself and to hold one self accountable, to care for the larger good and to put one's self interest after that common good, and to seek to serve – leadership implies a recognition that we are on a journey – a living journey together and that something – somehow must be trusted to be a guide – not necessarily the leader – but, instead – that sense of purpose that Ronald Heifetz pointed to.

That sense of purpose is often what prods people out of the comfort zone and into leadership. Again, I remember Daoud Nassar, from Tent of Nations outside of Bethlehem on the West Bank, who came to speak here last year. When I met him three years ago – I recall standing in a cave that his grandfather had settled and lived in during the 1920's, when they first bought the land. The lantern light shone on the tiled surfaces that his family had created almost a century ago, Daoud's fight to hold on to his family's land, in spite of Israeli attempts to seize the land have inspired him to create an arts and leadership summer camp on his land where Palestinian youth can learn the histories of non-violent movements in the past, study the teachings of Jesus and Gandhi and King, put on plays, play sports, create art, and generally have a break from the stress of living in a time of extreme conflict. Nassar also create an international project where activists and lovers of peace from around the world, as I did with the American Friend's Service Committee, to work on his farm and inspire one another to work for peace. He stood with us in this cave and said: it would be so good if we had great inspiring leaders and visionaries today." I knew, as his eyes sparkled with kindness, dedication, compassion, peace, and determination, that I was in the presence of just such a leader – even if he thought that a great leader would appear in a flashier package. He is a quiet man – but his life pressed him – pushed him to become a leader – a beacon – a risk taker.

The cover quotation on your order of service addresses this idea – this idea that our lives and circumstances cultivate in us our leadership skills rather than being born to leadership. Of course, there was a time not so long ago in history when it was absolutely thought to be a genetic inheritance – that's how kings and queens earn their crowns - through bloodline. It was positively revolutionary – in some cases quite literally revolutionary to wrest leadership from the privileged few and give it to the people. To be honest, it looks to me as though we are still wresting that leadership away from those who think they are entitled to it – by class, money, education, marriage, parentage. Democracy is a young reality – it's still in development. Warnne Bennis says: "The most dangerous leadership myth is that leaders are born -- that there is a genetic factor to leadership. This myth asserts that people simply either have certain charismatic qualities or not. That's nonsense; in fact, the opposite is true. Leaders are made rather than born." I agree and disagree at the same time.

I agree -- there is no one who should simply be given the mantle of leadership - it must be earned and warranted in some way. Not everyone has the same tools in their

kit bag and certainly not everyone has the gift of being able to lead or organize or inspire people. Not everyone can These are skills sometimes learned intentionally and sometimes these skills rise from the crucible of life experience.

At the same time, I think of leadership as a diversity of strengths. But it is, I believe, a nascent capacity in every person – the capacity to find ones wit and wisdom and talent and then to use it to bless the world. Such capacity shines out differently from each person depending upon their gifts. One of my favorite leaders is Pete Seeger – the singer/songwriter. His mother was, by the way, a Unitarian. He took a love of folk music, the desire to save and share that music – and he translated it into something that could save people’s hearts, souls, and material lives. He learned and knew so much about folk music and he carried that with him wherever he went and it mushroomed into a movement. His music accompanied people as they marched for peace and justice, his music rolled out through concert halls, the Mall in Washington DC, and pressed people to act for the good. He wasn’t leading the march or giving the main speech – he was leading by lyrics – leading by songs. When he played at General Assembly five years ago I was only one of scores of people who went to Pete and told him how his music had changed our lives. Now – I know that Pete Seeger’s musical talent may, in fact, be one that is inherited – but using it to change the world -- that is his own kind of leadership -- he points the way and people are moved. As a young child we had one of his records – at least – and I listened to it over and over. And there was this song – I used to listen to over and over --

What did you learn in school today,
Dear little boy of mine?
What did you learn in school today,
Dear little boy of mine?
I learned our government must be strong.
It's always right and never wrong.
Our leaders are the finest men.
And we elect them again and again.
That's what I learned in school today.
That's what I learned in school.

Even as a small child I could feel the sarcasm in that song – and I knew it was trying to teach critical thinking skills to children. It worked for me. I felt as though, if our leaders were not, in fact, the finest men, that each of us somehow needed to become the finest leaders – since we were reelecting what were clearly inferior leaders.

How is this learned – well there are a number of ways – most of which involve hard knocks – but it is my firm belief that at its best the key purpose of congregational life as well as the keystone which helps it to stand – is to cultivate that kind of leadership in people – to draw forth the bundle of potentials.

True leadership rises from nothing less than true soul-shaping – from the call to a greater purpose and the challenge given to discern, cultivate, draw forth, engage the leader within every person. Houses of worship – more than other places -- promise the possibility of developing full persons. This is because in congregational life – at least in Unitarian Universalist congregations we recognize that people are physical, emotional, logical, spiritual, artistic, playful, and studious – full persons and we will address that fullness. I am reminded of Ken Wilber who has a model of spirituality in which he looks at the spiritual paths of the past and present and calls the spiritual path that is most mature Integral spirituality. This model – which isn’t his alone – appeals to the idea that

we are bundles of various intelligences – emotional, social, spiritual, physical, hearing, seeing, smelling touching, political, academic and that as we mature spiritually we integrate more and more of these intelligences and experience the world using them. Fully dimensional. Fully alive. Fully tuned in. It doesn't come out of a can and there aren't 5 easy habits to cultivate.

We have within us an intelligence that tells us that we are integrated beings – beings that belong to a world that is –as Emerson called it – a knot of relations. We need places – that will help bring us fully to life – not for ourselves alone but for the world which, as Mike Durall put it last week – so badly need us.

I cannot imagine a more fitting place than a congregation for the cultivation of full – integrated beings – spiritually mature people – as Mike calls it. Spiritual maturity does not mean that we can gaze at our navels longer or that our mind is perfectly clear when we meditate or that we glow with a beatific radiance. It means that we see our lives in the context of the whole of being and know ourselves to belong and to have to answer to that whole.

It means that we are engaged in ongoing learning from the center of our beings outward. It means that we seek to know and grow, and to use our gifts and offer them to our congregation and from there to our world. Being spiritually mature means that you are directed toward a higher purpose. Every teacher of leadership asserts that the key factor in true leadership is having that higher purpose and living by it – attuning ourselves to that purpose. Over and over the thing that came out of last weekend's conversation was a general yearning to be guided by a higher purpose – and to have the congregation serve such a purpose.

Ronald Heifetz distinguishes between a distinct plan and a sense of purpose. He says that it's more important to have that sense of purpose than the distinct plan – because that should be called forth in response to the opportunities that present themselves. He means that we need to listen closely to the world and to be free to respond to it. I think that we are listening and are somewhat overwhelmed by all that we hear.

With various folks on nominations, program council, and the board, we are working on a program that will help people at all points during their life in this congregation – discern their own path of leadership, strengthen themselves, and stay focused on shared purpose.

A congregation should have formal leadership that is always seeking to enable the congregation to live up to its best self in service and spirit in the world – that holds the covenant high and keeps up to date on new paths, new tools, skills, wisdom, and opportunities that will keep us moving forward. This sort of movement forward almost always evokes anxiety – “what does change mean to me – will I know this place? Will I find my place here? I liked what we had.” Leadership means, above all the willingness to be uncomfortable and move forward anyway. To walk toward the next creative challenge or to allow others to lead toward the next creative challenge. Last week Mike told me that he believes in good leadership and also good followership – that each person knows when it is their time to set direction for the whole or when they are simply losing sight of the whole while focusing on details or debating strategies the energies of the full congregation are free to respond to new opportunities, to develop inwardly and serve outwardly. There should be people and structures that take care of many of the details of how this happens. Beyond the formal leadership there should be broad freedom to innovate, discover, bring in new opportunities for service and outreach –

what's called a permission giving atmosphere. A congregation that has strong leadership has strong formal leadership and strong membership – so that new ideas are always bubbling in from the ground up and causing new things to happen. Everyone is creative, able to pursue things that are both fulfilling to self – while taking them into the world of service beyond their own self-interest. That -- of the people for the people and by the people helps the people to be at their best. Leadership is not a job description but a path – where there are times to follow in cooperation and times to be visionary and set new directions.

After Mike Durall's service last week Kay Gredell came up to me and Mike and said that she was so excited that she felt as though she were – and then she searched for the right word – in some frustration she said – I feel pregnant – she meant pregnant with possibility – and I felt it too. I think part of what she was responding to was the sense of purpose and service that Mike was inviting us to – and I think that part of it was the notion that we – as a congregation – could strive for that spiritual maturity that can give us permission and skills – to become the individuals and a leading congregation we are meant to be. Maturity that makes us whole. So often congregations say – we want to grow – or we don't want to grow. I don't think of growth in terms of numbers as much as I first think of it in terms of maturity – growing up. And I believe that if we grow in spirit, in service, in maturity – the numbers all take care of themselves.

I know this is why I am here – because we need one another to keep growing – to be focused and nimble in response to our world and our faith. – because I believe in the prophethood of all the faithful – I believe that every person here has gifts to share and that our task is help draw them forth, refine those gifts, and mature together. I believe that what we do here on Sunday morning should be to focus as a community, to renew our sense of covenant, to deepen our spiritual lives, and to be encouraged to be our best and most mature selves.

Remember that worship means shaping that which is of worth. Leadership in our context means to make of everything that we do – an act of worship. We begin with our selves – we have here what I believe to be – in a truly American spirit – the best laboratory for human growth -- the workshop for deep belonging – for mortal healing – for loving service – for leadership in the greatest sense of that word.