

Attributes of leadership

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1 PREAMBLE

In 1988 Nelson Mandela was still in South Africa's apartheid prison system, where he had been incarcerated for a quarter of a century. He would turn 70 that July, and his friend, the doughty president of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, Archbishop Trevor Huddleston, C R, had suggested that the world should celebrate this birthday. Many young people started pilgrimages from various parts of the United Kingdom, and they converged on Hyde Park Corner in London on Nelson's birthday. The crowd that gathered to celebrate this prisoner's birthday was about a quarter million strong, mostly youngsters who had not even been born when Mandela went to prison. And yet here they were gathered to honour this prisoner as if he were a pop star. Why?

A few years later, Cape Town saw much the same kind of phenomenon when the Dalai Lama visited. He was due to speak in the city hall, from whose balcony Nelson Mandela had greeted South Africa and the world after he became the first democratically elected president of the new South Africa in 1994. The queues of those who wanted to hear this holy man from Tibet stretched for many blocks, and most of those who were crammed into the auditorium were young people. Why did they come?

Before this, Mother Teresa had visited South Africa, and again the crowds that went to hear her at various venues were amazingly large. Why such a frenzy, as if she too were a pop star? This essay will attempt to answer this and other questions about human magnetism and thereby try to set out the characteristics of authentic leadership as I have discovered them to be.

2 SOME ATTRIBUTES OF LEADERSHIP

Our modern day world has often been described as hard-nosed and cynical, quite inhospitable to idealism and other noble ideas. This is the environment that made it possible for Thatcherite and Reaganite objectives to flourish - an environment in which it appeared poor people were blamed for their poverty, and compassion and caring seemed to be swear words. You had to be tough, because market laws reigned supreme; you had to be competitive or perish. The weak were pushed to the wall as a

matter of course, because it was a case of eat or be eaten. There was a contempt for weakness, and it didn't seem there was much room for goodness, gentleness, or caring.

But such an assessment of the world and its human denizens is clearly untrue. The reaction of hundreds of people to the three persons I referred to above is totally at variance with conventional wisdom. I believe there is in us an instinct for *goodness*. We hanker after it, we recognize it when we encounter it, and we admire it. The popularity of a Mother Teresa is one in the eye of those who consider strength, power, and hard unsentimental toughness to be admirable traits. Mother Teresa was not strong in a macho sense (she was strong in other senses). Physically she was minute and fragile, and she never actually succeeded in a spectacular fashion. She was not engaged in a glamorous enterprise. In Calcutta she, and the Sisters who survive her, have been caring for derelicts whom they have picked up from the streets to give them a decent place to die with some shreds of dignity. For this labour of love, a fragile, vulnerable, dear old lady was given the Nobel Peace Prize and countless other awards. The world adored and admired her, and thought that she was an outstanding leader. I contend that despite all appearances to the contrary, the world admires someone who is good, and the world recognizes goodness when it sees it.

In 1997, *Newsweek* had an issue that featured Che Guevara in its cover story. Someone in one of the articles on this Cuban freedom fighter refers to the craze about Che and suggests that he has been “idolized” in part because he embodied certain values, certain qualities that young people in particular find attractive. Value, quality, virtue, goodness: I don't know whether goodness is the all-embracing quality, or whether it is one of several attributes of leadership.

Be that as it may, I want to say that the good leader, the authentic leader has to have *credibility*. Nelson Mandela is not the most riveting orator, and yet thousands hang on every word as he addresses huge crowds who flock to hear him. Why? It is because they perceive that he is a great man who has credibility. Because he is believable, people believe in him. There is a consistency between who he is and what he says. He has integrity - the medium is the message. Someone has said of that quality, “Your deeds are too loud, and I can't hear what you are saying”.

People want their leaders to be good, and they feel horribly let down when some scandal or other shows that the one they held in such high regard really had feet of clay. And it seems that you establish your credibility by demonstrating that your involvement is not for personal aggrandizement. You are a leader for the sake of others. St Paul, in the Epistle to the Philippians, chapter 2, quotes the saying about Jesus and

his self-emptiness - how He did not cling to equality with God, but emptied Himself by taking on the form of a slave and becoming obedient even unto death - the death of the cross. People know the true leader is not in it for what he or she can get out of it. The true leader is not self-serving but shows a high level of altruism.

It does appear too that the acid test of this self-emptying, other-regarding style of leadership is whether one is *ready to suffer*. Suffering establishes in an unequivocal manner that one has been selfless in one's involvement. There can be no question that Nelson has suffered. After all, he spent 27 years in jail and had declared at his trial that he was even ready to lay down his life for the cause to which he had committed himself. Equally, the Dalai Lama has been in exile most of his life as he has struggled against the might of China to gain respect for the independence and autonomy of Tibet. Mother Teresa could have found a less demanding way of living out her vocation as a nun.

I believe too that the authentic leader has a *solidarity* with those he or she is leading. This is particularly so when they are involved in a struggle for self-determination, for independence, and for freedom from an oppressive overlord. But the need to share the lot of those one hopes to lead applies even in free independent societies. If you want to stand a chance of gaining the votes of your electorate you must know what makes them tick, you must not be an alien in their world of hopes and aspirations and fears. How else can you touch responsive chords? Often there is a longing on the part of followers to see embodied in their leader the qualities they might only hope for, the realization of their dreams and ideals; to see someone who somehow represents them as they would most like to be.

The good leader is one who is *affirming* of others, nurturing their best selves, coaxing them to become the best they are capable of becoming. This style of leadership is not coercive, but plays to the strengths of others, giving them space to fulfil themselves. The good leader is not threatened by the accomplishments and gifts of others, for this leader is really not a one-person band, but a team player. Such leaders are often described as charismatic - you know you are in a presence when you encounter them. They are inspirational, because in the end they enable others to blossom and not to wilt. Such a leader will almost always be *courageous*, willing to stick his or her neck out, and take unpopular decisions, take risks - as F W de Klerk did on February 2, 1990.

A leader must know how to balance opposite traits, not to be so far ahead as to lose followers, and not to be so much a part of the crowd as to forget that the business of a leader is to lead. I believe too that a good leader has *intuition*, a knack, the capacity to read the signs of the times,

and to have this uncanny sixth sense of knowing when to go for it; this can often be in the face of evidence that might dictate the opposite course of action, that might dictate caution when taking risks is what is ultimately called for.

The real leader knows too when to make concessions, when to *compromise*, when to employ the art of losing the battle in order to win the war. Some leaders make a virtue of being hardliners. You might win, and then one day comes the shattering almost ignominious loss.

It is possible to have leaders who are there, not because of popular support, but because they control the instruments of coercion. They may also mesmerize people with their demagoguery, pandering to the worst attributes of their followers, as Adolf Hitler was able to do in pre-Nazi Germany. Because this is a moral universe, such leaders will almost always come a cropper, and they will certainly not be mourned by the majority when they do get their comeuppance.

3 CONCLUSION

All the qualities described explain why a Nelson Mandela could attract all those starry-eyed young people and why people can be so awestruck in his presence. He is a good person whose magnanimity is breathtaking, speaking of a nobility of spirit in his willingness to forgive those who treated him so shabbily. People recognize that goodness. As for the other kind of leaders, when they inevitably bite the dust, few lament their passing. They become just a part of the flotsam and jetsam of history.