Engaged, But Not Heroic, Academic Leadership

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Abstract

Over the years, I have explored leadership challenges faced by department chairpersons and school deans. In this essay I reflect on some findings, noting that they also apply to other educational leaders such as faculty senate members and student affairs officers. Most mid-level leaders struggle with the tradition of defining leadership in terms of individualistic values and mythologies of seeing the leader in terms of the individualistic, heroic cowboy of the Western film and novel.

Then I examine the position of institutional president. Here too some leaders aim to be heroic figures, like the fabled cowboy. Almost inevitably, their behaviors foster campus suspicion, fragmentation, and isolation. Other presidents are closer to the relational individualism for which I argue. They model the importance of conversation by practicing hospitality and honoring covenant.

One obvious difference between midlevel leaders and presidents is the larger platform the latter possess to set the philosophical, moral, and spiritual tone of the institution. If the tone is hospitable, midlevel leaders find their tasks easier and more fulfilling. If executive leadership is not hospitable, however, chairpersons and deans report their positions to be both more difficult and more important.

Mid-Level Leaders

Henry Rosovsky and Inge-Lise Ameer remark on the oddity of college and university teachers studying the norms of every profession except their own. This neglect is puzzling, they note. We can ruin a life just as easily as any doctor or lawyer. Do we assume that an understanding of professional conduct is a genetic trait among Ph.D. students? (Rosovsky & Ameer 1998, 120). The question is rhetorical, for the situation is serious. Rosovsky and Ameer lament that older professors no longer initiate younger faculty into appropriate standards of conduct. Increases in the size and diversity of institutions, together with more specialized research and consulting, have led to the neglect of the professor’s pastoral duties and his or her institutional citizenship in the intramural community of students and teachers. Competition has made things worse and academic leaders have been unwilling to set clear tasks and clear limits.

Pastoral Duties

Although they deplore this situation, Rosovsky’s and Ameer’s suggestions for addressing it are scarcely robust. Their remedy is providing mini-courses on professional conduct for graduate students contemplating faculty careers. Altogether absent is any reference to help for current members of the
academy who may be ruining the lives of others right now. Nor do the authors express concern that it will be years before their proposals could have any significant purchase. And even in proposing mini-courses, Rosovsky and Ameer assign no value to behaviors that express the underlying and cardinal virtue of professional conduct in academe: hospitality. Both pastoral concern and institutional citizenship flow from practicing hospitality, not the other way around.

Although both their analysis and their remedy are flawed, Rosovskys and Ameers concerns are surely on target. Attention to pastoral duties and institutional citizenship has declined. But it is at the level of department chairpersons, senate members, and deans, not in graduate seminars, that more immediate reform is likely to occur. It is in academic departments and divisions that answers must be forged to current (not just prospective) questions of appropriate professional conduct. Chairpersons are ideally situated to know the many ways that academe can ruin lives. Together with faculty senate members, they enjoy a position and standing that provide special opportunities to advance conversation about the meaning of intellectual hospitality, of authentic ethics, and of appropriate and fulfilling spiritualities.

School deans are in the best institutional position to support faculty leaders and chairpersons in these efforts. Indeed, many of their responsibilities parallel those of chairpersons. Only the breadth of responsibilities is different. Successful chairs and deans tap into unifying visions and exercise interpersonal skills necessary to effect those visions. Both chairs and deans work to elicit an appropriate unity out of an aggregate of individualists possessing competing interests. The dean works through chairpersons in pursuit of a broader vision just as chairs work through their faculty in furthering their version of that vision (Bennett 1990).

Being a hospitable leader means recognizing that colleagues and students have different contributions to make to each other and to the classes and groups of which they are members. Practicing this kind of leadership means modeling and enabling contributions that are thoughtful and sensitive to the humanity of the other that are respectful of individual dignity, even though that respect may not be initially returned. Perseverance as well as integrity is required. Hospitality cannot be reduced to quid pro quo arrangements. Such reductions empty hospitality of reciprocal openness to the new relationships for which it is calling. Truly practicing hospitality means working toward a mutuality of connections and conversations that advance the good of each individual involved as well as the common good of all.

Senate members, student affairs staff, chairs and deans must also establish limits to inhospitable ways of behaving. As professionals, all educators have a moral responsibility to advance the good of their students. As William May observes, "teachers who wield knowledge simply to dazzle, to show off, or to jangle the verger's keys of learning without opening the door to their students, malpractice, as surely as dentists who exploit their patients' ignorance to sell them expensive procedures? (May 2001, 9).

Other educators behave inhospitably through their inaccessibility, rather than self-preoccupied performance. The academy may have attracted them precisely because its conditions of autonomy make isolation possible.

Educational leaders must set clear limits to malpractice and inaccessibility. But they also need to do more. They need to use a variety of ways to talk up, celebrate, and reward professors' pastoral duties
and to emphasize institutional citizenship. The hospitable leader works with colleagues to select mechanisms that welcome new faculty and staff, while also helping the old to feel useful and valued. He or she prods them to attend to the hospitality characteristic of good teaching and scholarship?to the importance of openly sharing and receiving learning?and to nurturing the curriculum as retaining the best of the past and also addressing the new. In every case strategies and techniques that recognize the self as relational rather than autonomous?as constituted by relationships with others rather than independent of them?work better in promoting effective self-regulation and in providing individual fulfillment.

Power

Yet, department chairs often complain about their lack of power. ?Our responsibilities are incommensurate with the authority we are given? is a common lament. ?How,? they ask, ?can we exercise leadership?? In terms of organizational charts, chairs are almost always at the bottom. Any institutional power a chair may possess is hostage to controls effected by others. However, isn?t this simply the nature of work in the academy? Deans and provosts also complain about their lack of power. They too must work in contexts that defy the clarity of organizational charts. Faculty senate officers and student affairs personnel recognize this situation. Even presidents fuss about their inability to introduce change. If an individual or a group really doesn?t want to do something, most campuses offer ways to delay, resist, or actually thwart the unwelcome initiative. Yet, academic work does go on. Every campus has leaders who are known for making a difference. They must have some power, even if not the kind whose absence is frequently lamented.

Leadership means making a positive difference. Academic leadership requires that chairs, deans and others figure out what kinds of differences they want to promote and what works to promote them. Most of us are familiar with what I call unilateral power?power associated with agency and control. Those seeking this kind of power want to pursue their agendas and resist the agendas of others. The academy places a high value on controlling power. Although sometimes in a backhanded way, most of us do admire those who appear to have it. It is this power to control that is usually what we have in mind when we lament not having enough.

However, it is probably a good thing that others cause us to complain. We may be frustrated at times by their obstinacy, but successful leadership obviously requires others. And when it occurs, leadership is considerably better for having been done with and through others. The metaphor of education as conversation comes into play. Through reflection and consultation we are helped to see things more clearly?perhaps even to change our minds and incorporate things we had not considered. In the process, we come closer to covenantal community and to relational power.

Relational power involves allowing ourselves to be affected by others as well as seeking to affect them. There is strength in receptivity as well as agency. Successful leadership involves letting others make differences. We know controlling power alone is deficient when we reflect on the nature of healthy interactions characterized by reciprocity and mutuality, they display a minimum of control. No one is regarded as self-sufficient in insight or ability; genuine openness to the perspectives and ideas of others is deemed essential for significant and enduring progress.

If leadership means promoting desirable differences, it requires openness to others. It means encouraging and allowing them to play roles as well. It involves the receptivity that is part of relational
power. Successful campus leaders know how this works.

Conversations and Teaching

Under the leadership of an energetic and hospitable chairperson, dean, or other leader, conversation provokes a broad examination of pedagogy, curricula, or policy objectives. When this happens, diversity of talent and perspective is celebrated within frameworks that are often expanded precisely because of the conversation. As a result, the unit, department or school becomes more than the sum of its members. But this usually happens only when the director, department chair or dean takes the lead or encourages and allows others to do so.

This analysis of power and conversation should remind us of good teaching as well as leadership. The reason, of course, is that teaching is a form of leadership and vice versa. The current preference for talk about learning rather than teaching reflects the importance of relational power because teaching lends itself to controlling power. The instructor is the authority, standing above and outside others. However, when learning rather than teaching governs, students are active players. Their individual talents and past experiences become part of the process and are utilized rather than ignored. Instructors themselves become examples of learning with others, not above them. Indeed, they use their learning to become exemplary students. The parallel with successful, hospitable leadership is striking.

Whether in teaching or leading, practicing hospitality means understanding selves as dependent upon contributions from others as well as contributing to the self-constitution of others. Those who acknowledge this reality are more likely to contribute to the enrichment of others and to enjoy fulfilled lives. They are more likely to exercise genuine authority and to be successful as leaders, teachers and scholars. Their leadership and their teaching reflect their interest in learning from others and in having their students and colleagues learn from each other. Students are seen as individuals, possessing different personal gifts and educational needs and talents. Colleagues are treated as those with whom one is linked in common endeavors?endeavors advanced only through mutual interest, reciprocity, and respect.

Modeling Respectfulness

Sharing information plays an important part in how academic leaders generate respect. The three parts of Stanley Fish?s golden rule of administration apply to all educational leaders?to committee heads, department chairpersons, and deans, and no less, as we will see, to presidents. ?Part one is, always tell the truth. Part two is, always tell more of the truth than you have to. And part three is, always tell the truth before anyone asks you to.? Fish characterizes his rule as both moral counsel and strategy. Like knowledge, information is power, but ?it is a power best exercised when it is expended, not hoarded? (Fish 2001). To promote a sense of belonging to the institution, leaders must share information.

As leaders of the department or school, chairpersons, deans, and other leaders need personally to model the openness to the other, the new, and the different that hospitality involves. Attending to the other requires stepping back for the moment from policies and procedures that may be stagnant or obsolete in order to hear the new and different. Leaders show the way in periodic review of the old, the
familiar, and the traditional in order to assess their continuing adequacy. Leaders can delegate a number of responsibilities, because they have limited time and energy. But hospitableness is not something that can be delegated, only modeled.

Hospitableness should inform all leadership efforts. Curriculum review comes immediately to mind as does faculty professional formation and evaluation. Curricula need periodic assessment, marked by members who openly, honestly, and collaboratively question whether they really serve the good of the student or just the convenience of the instructor. Likewise, attending productively to issues of faculty formation requires sensitivity to the individual as well as concern for the school. Conducting inclusive searches and welcoming the new member into the institution are perhaps the most obvious examples of hospitableness. The offer of mentoring by more senior members is important as are the chances for mutual enrichment that come from collaborative activities. But the continued growth of all members is important for the department and school as a whole.

Personnel evaluations also provide opportunities to support individuals in the context of their contributions to the welfare of the department, students, the school and the institution. The effective leader is able to present evaluation activities as opportunities for individuals to identify accomplishments and strengths that might otherwise go unnoticed. For the individual who no longer contributes, hospitableness requires honest and firm presentation of a plan of action (and perhaps separation) that the leader has previously discussed with the supervisor.

To think about hospitableness and conversation in this context is to give a new slant to the job. For far from being superficial or superfluous, hospitality and conversation are essential to the work of academic leaders. They provide for the health of the individual, the increase of learning, and collective responsibility for the welfare of the community and its programs. Hospitableness and conversation are prerequisites, not substitutes, for competence. They are the means whereby the covenanted collegium of scholars and learners is created and sustained, and they seem vital to the deep satisfactions we all seek as educators. Far from a counsel of perfection, hospitableness, conversation, and covenant are essential to learning and the academic life.

Presidents

Are matters different when we come to the position of institutional president? Some think so. Former university president James Fisher has written in support of a heroic model of the institutional president—a leadership form of insistent individualism. He argues for a ?socially distant? president who is authorized in the strongest sense by the board (Fisher 1994). In this view, an institution of vigor, capable of substantial change, cannot tolerate blurred roles for students, faculty, administrators, and trustees.

Social Distance and Heroic Leadership

Let us examine this heroic leader in more detail. The effective leader must stand apart. Fisher regards ?social distance? as ?the single most important characteristic? of effective leadership. It ?means being present on important occasions and appearing often, but briefly and informally, in the workplace. Actually being approachable detracts from the power of the president, compromising his
or her stature and aura of wisdom. Day-to-day intimacy destroys illusions and makes the leader more debatable and less likely to be inspiring. Collegial contact can obscure strengths, highlight weaknesses, and eliminate perceived referent qualities? (Fisher 1994, 64).

Only through the adroit use of social distance can the institutional president hope to be truly transformational and not merely transactional. Using James MacGregor Burns? now famous distinction between two schools of leadership (Burns 1978), Fisher observes that the transactional leader is a collegial sort, perhaps first among equals, who manages the institution toward the realization of its goals. By contrast, transformers are leaders who through character and charisma give visionary direction and expression to institutional goals. What institutions of higher education need most are presidents capable of both vision and decisiveness, not openness to others or collaboration with them.

Is Fisher on track? Are hospitality and relational power really deficits and liabilities in effective presidential leadership? One wonders about the staying power of the charisma Fisher celebrates when it is used to bolster personal, unilateral power. And his use of social distance cuts two ways. On the one hand it may prolong presidential controlling power, but on the other hand the leader?s absence and failure to collaborate can undercut trust and confidence. As socially distant, one is hardly modeling the fruit of education as liberated engagement. Instead, one risks being known as arrogant.

Team Leadership

Writing in response to Fisher?s position, Madeleine Green argues that the day of heroic leadership is over. Fisher is describing an ideal of the past. There are no ?great? leaders now who control things by dint of intelligence, charisma, and other personal powers. Ours is an era of delegation and collaboration. Leadership today must be an interactive process. ?The traits of the leader become less important than the complex interrelationships among leaders, followers, context, and the tasks at hand? (Green 1994, 56). Green?s relational understanding of leadership emphasizes both its complexity and the unavailability of easy formulas for unilateral power and successful leadership.

She cites with favor scholars who argue that presidents do not create an institutional vision, but tap into the ideas, hopes, and dreams within the institution that are waiting to be acknowledged and renewed. Robert Greenleaf puts the issue well: ?Institutions function better when the idea, the dream, is to the fore, and the person, the leader is seen as the servant of the idea? (Greenleaf 1998, 87). It is the dream, the vision that energizes?not the leader, however socially distant. Good leaders not only permit but evoke participation in the development, formation, and extension of the dream. That is, good leaders are servants to the process of conversation.

Green notes the importance of teams that enable a variety of perspectives, approaches, and strategies to emerge. Of course not every team is real?some are ?illusory,? sharing only information but not responsibility. But real, effective teams display the characteristics of collegia. They ?benefit from the diversity of their members and enable their members to engage in meaningful dialogue, learn from one another, and benefit from their differences, rather than minimize or discount them. In this context, leadership roles are multiple. One person may keep the group on task, one may serve as its conscience, another as its emotional glue? (Green 1994, 56).

Hospitality seems a critical virtue in the exercise of this kind of post-heroic leadership. Openness to others, learning from them, and addressing the others in
their terms are essential. From this point of view, the markers of effective presidential leadership are no different from those of chairs, deans, or other educational leaders. Team leadership requires the ability to listen to others. It requires letting go, giving up control as the predominant mode, and being prepared for unexpected outcomes. It requires establishing trust, first by trusting others and then by modeling the behaviors of valuing diverse opinions and sharing leadership? (Green 1994, 56).

This is a long way from the concept of heroic leadership where the model is that of the Western?a model of command and control. Heroic leadership tends to exclude others, deny them access to appropriate information, and mislead or in other ways treat them as means to an outcome rather than as valuable agents in helping to determine and achieve that outcome. The heroic type also neglects the fundamental teaching role of the leader. As teacher, the hospitable leader extends the educational conversation by distributing, not sequestering, information. He or she includes others in institutional decision-making, taking advantage of their special knowledge, insight, and perspective. Leadership that teaches does not simply bend people against their will, or dazzle them out of their faculties, or manipulate them behind their backs, or indoctrinate them without illuminating? (May 2001, 157).

Hospitable leadership does not mean one is unable to be decisive and make quiet decisions when necessary. But it does require ongoing attention to others?understanding their perspectives from their points of view. Informed by these viewpoints, hospitable leadership relies upon persuasion rather than command. It requires the energy and flexibility to recognize and even encourage changing coalitions. Issues change, often quite rapidly, and authority and power change as well. Leaders must sometimes be followers themselves. Sometimes they must deliberately share their power with others by delegating it or by truly giving it away. At other times, when power is not theirs to give away, they must draw power from others by creating partnerships and alliances? (Green 1994, 59).

Presidential Influence

Chief executives can occupy positions of extraordinary prominence and visibility. Critics are quick to observe discrepancies between public pronouncements and personal behavior. Executive behaviors and decisions on issues of hospitality, conversation, and covenant are noted and have a widespread effect. For instance, scrupulous attention to matters of hospitality and honesty sets an example for others. On the other hand, subtle messages that institutional budget or enrollment numbers reported to the public can be manipulated give others in the institution permission to be dishonest.

That institutional misrepresentations? are in fact untruths about a particular college or university is the real issue. The very institution that identifies itself as conducting an unfettered search for truth fetters itself by these behaviors. Some institutions might claim that a doctored photograph, for instance, is actually quite representative of the campus, but the fact remains that the college or university is still lying about the photograph itself. Other institutions may defend their practice of misrepresenting data because greater competitive positioning allows them to achieve goals such as greater diversity, but desirable ends do not automatically justify means.

Providing an ethical compass is part of leadership. Job descriptions for presidents and chief academic officers should include ethical and personal character as central elements.

Periodically, we hear about high-ranking executives who plagiarized or otherwise falsified their
credentials. Some leaders have been charged with diverting institutional funds into reimbursements for arguably personal expenses. And collegiate athletic scandals and abuses seem always to be with us. Fortunately, these kinds of abuses do receive attention, if not solution. Apparently of lesser community concern are the lower-profile, but more corrosive, matters of deliberate misrepresentation of institutional achievement and performance?and the subtle, debilitating consequences of increasing reliance upon part-time faculty as a major mechanism for providing instruction.

When presidents are heard to say that higher education institutions can ?get away? with these activities, others hear and conclude that they too need not pursue the highest levels of ethical behavior, especially when alternatives appear easier or more desirable. When presidents do not speak to the academic purposes and identity of the institution or declare what knowledge is most worth having, others in the institution conclude that it is business as usual (not academics or education) that is most important?business such as increasing enrollments, securing positive media coverage, producing winning athletic teams, or satisfying alumni and trustees. These behaviors imply that public misrepresentations are acceptable, that even outright fabrications can be justified by some higher end they serve, and that the slow evisceration of academic substance through decreasing use of full-time faculty is permissible.

Society provides institutions of higher education a privileged status. Yet, colleges and universities are inherently public and communal, and have corresponding ethical responsibilities. Presidents and other leaders need to tell more, not less, about their institutions?and be forthcoming in what they do tell, instead of modeling the art of social distance. Leaders must be caring as well as knowledgeable. They must bring ethics and spirituality to their intellectual and practical concerns. And they must recognize the primary standing of relationality and their connectedness with others. As Green and others suggest, successful leadership involves dispersing, not concentrating, leadership functions.

Practicing Hospitality as Leadership

It seems increasingly clear that as applied to the academy, Burns? famous distinction between transactional and transformational may divide what should be joined. Most of us now recognize that good management is a necessary condition for effective leadership, and vice versa. Further, we may sense that even the distinction between them suggests a concept of heroic leadership that is no longer possible or appropriate in the academy. As James Downey correctly observes, both transactional and transformational concepts ?focus too much attention on the ?leader? and encourage the erroneous belief that organizations rely on a gifted individual or two for their prosperity or even survival. This in turn bespeaks a culture of dependence and conformity which is at odds not only with how universities actually operate but with an ideal of highly distributed leadership which is the heart of the collegium? (Downey 2001, 237).

The academy contains a variety of leaders?school deans, office directors, student life officers, committee heads, department chairpersons, faculty and students themselves, and central administrators. The most successful may complain that they have little power. And, indeed, any institutional power is almost always hostage to multiple controls in the hands of others. But successful leaders recognize that leadership is dependent less upon unilateral power and charisma than on hospitality?on practicing radical openness to others in both sharing and receiving.
Downey reminds us that visions in universities are not manufactured; they are harvested. The [leader's] role is to take the lead in cultivating an institutional climate where openness, mutual respect, and the release of creative energies are valued as acts of leadership in themselves? (Downey 2001, 237). That is, leadership involves practicing hospitality. But equally important, it seems to me, is that practicing hospitality is itself a form of leadership. The point seems parallel to the nature of servant leadership. In writing about servant leadership, Robert Greenleaf stressed that those who are committed to service, lead others (Greenleaf 1997). In higher education, we can say, these servants promote, support, and extend the hospitality and conversation that constitute education?and invite others to do likewise. In short, just as effective leaders are hospitable, those who practice hospitality are themselves also effective leaders.

Those who make a habit of practicing openness to others seek ways to overcome the fragmentation and isolation too typical of both individuals and academic institutions. They develop philosophies and ethics that promote both individual and common goods. Thereby they also create conditions for healthy spiritualities?understandings of self as linked with others in commitments that attend to others, advance insight into self, and promote ethical fulfillment. These hospitable leaders draw on their different strengths to pursue the common task of revitalizing traditions of openness?traditions that are becoming weakened and depleted as higher education becomes more a business than a social institution.

Hospitable leaders introduce a constructive restlessness instead of a comfortable self-satisfaction. They resist the reduction of colleges and universities to the reproduction of some accepted hierarchy of power, wealth, and authority. As a consequence, they are custodians of standards: they help others to contest dullness and the obsolete; to distinguish bold experimentation from carelessness; and to attend to others and to opposing positions. They remind us of the resources we already have our ability in conversation to distinguish the good from the bad. They also remind us that the ideal of the better is always available for self-criticism and for the search for deeper insights and more rewarding ways of being together.

Those who practice hospitality in formal positions of leadership elicit appropriate unities out of aggregations of individualists. They strengthen community wherever they can, and they nurture institutional structures that integrate rather than separate. They promote organizational arrangements that convey actual interest in individuals and their distinctive gifts, rather than indifference to their presence. They use an array of rituals, celebrations and other symbols to create and reinforce patterns of individual and community openness?to remind us of the many voices and idioms, the conversational richness of human achievements and self-understandings that constitute our inheritance. Hospitable leaders invite participation in conversation that reflects, reaffirms, and extends the underlying connectivity, not the atomistic fragmentation, that is our basic reality. They see differences as opportunities to seek both reconciliation and transformation through deeper and more inclusive concepts rather than oppositional ones.

These leaders invite us to share the responsibilities and opportunities of the collegium they invite us to transcend self-promotion and self-protection. They authorize us to discover and develop our own talents and goods through discovering and creating the common good we share with others. They use to advantage the history of their institution to cultivate campus intellectual life. They draw upon the traditions of what higher education has done best, rather than imitate proprietary institutions with their unbundled faculty, their standardized curricula, and their emphasis upon production rather than
conversation. They work to counteract the increasing evisceration of higher education through the growing reliance upon adjunct faculty. They devise ways to reverse the rapid dismantling of the central core and stewardship of instruction that unbundling and accelerated adjunct dependence represent.

These leaders help replace the metaphor of education as production with that of a commonwealth whose essential defining characteristic is conversation. They know that hospitable conversation has a self-referential character that other metaphors for education do not. They also know that conversation as a defining metaphor for higher education is in retreat in the face of increasing technological and socio-economic change. And they sense that without the centrality of conversation as its distinctive feature, higher education reduces itself to a commercial transaction. Nostalgia is always a risk, and the 
?good old days? never really existed. But traditional education

has centrally engaged hospitality and conversation as ideals, however flawed the efforts might have been. When we abandon these ideals in favor of market efficiency and productivity we lose the distinctiveness of higher education.

It is important to resist the seductive suggestions that comfortable routines suffice, or that business models that involve developing aggressive public relations, unbundling faculty, establishing for-profit subsidiaries, and loading up with adjunct faculty are the way to go. Vital education requires engagementa professional life full of conversation and honest reflection on ourselves, our programs, our research and teaching, and our institutions. The challenge before us is twofold to educate others

and ourselves; to facilitate the growth of others

and ourselves. Through our learning we can release healing forces in the world and

in ourselves.

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