

Moral Leadership

Integrity ✧ Courage ✧ Imagination

With a New Preface

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Preface

*I wish I knew how
It would feel to be free
I wish I could break
All the chains holding me
I wish I could say
All the things that I should say
Say 'em loud say 'em clear
For the whole 'round world to hear*

*I wish I could share
All the love that's in my heart
Remove all the bars
That keep us apart
I wish you could know
What it means to be me
Then you'd see and agree
That every man should be free*

*I wish I could give
All I'm longin' to give
I wish I could live
Like I'm longin' to live
I wish I could do
All the things that I can do
And though I'm way over due
I'd be startin' anew*

—NINA SIMONE

(LYRICS BY BILLY TAYLOR)

I came of age on the South Side of Chicago during the 1960s. Part of the soundtrack of those years was provided by Nina Simone singing “I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free.” It was an exhilarating, volatile period. You may be aware of the stories about the great refugee migration of rural southern African Americans that often unfolded in two stages: first, from the rural south to the urban south, and in many cases, a second move from the urban south to the urban north. My family was part of what has been described as the largest migration in such a short concentration of years in American history. We migrated from Mississippi to West Memphis, Arkansas, then north to Chicago to escape the domestic terrorism of lynching and to pursue greater economic and personal development opportunities. But, there was a shadowy side to our life in the city. The street gangs of Chicago were already world famous.

One day, two groups of young men gathered on the street directly in front of my grandmother’s house. We lived with my grandmother for many years until my parents could save a down payment to purchase a larger home where she moved in with us. The boys were arguing about something and preparing to fight. All of a sudden, out of nowhere, my grandmother ran from her kitchen through the house, onto the front porch, down the stairs, with apron flying in the wind, and right into the street to place her body between these muscle-bound young men. I was eight or nine years old and horrified that she was putting my reputation on the line this way. But I listened. She spoke to both groups of boys and said, “No one is fighting here today. I know what it’s like for a mother to get a phone call that her son has been shot. My son was shot in Europe in World War II. I have fed many of your families from that little garden next door. I know your mothers. Your mothers don’t want to get that call.” It was an incredible scene.

I watched these tough homeboys look at her, look at each other, look at her, look at their friends, and begin to back away. No words spoken. She placed her body and authority between them, backing

them off and disrupting the usual flow of street brawls. They disbanded, certain to fight another day. No other mothers or fathers intervened like that, although a few watched timidly from their porches. But because of this one woman and her moral courage and imagination, there would be no fight that day in that place. I am writing because I must bear witness to the life of Mother Martha Battle McCann from Battle, Mississippi.

Most books on moral leadership are written by scholars on the topic and do not see light beyond the edge of a university campus or a congregational parking lot. Unfortunately, many people are unaware that important conversations about moral leadership are happening inside the community's anchor institutions. More important, beyond the conversations, these enduring community institutions are doing the hard work of nurturing and producing moral leaders—sometimes as simple as grandmothers mentoring and modeling leadership for the kids around them; sometimes more formal and text centered.

Given the state of our polarized nation and world, the topic of moral leadership is open and awaiting participants. Years after my grandmother passed away, I reflected on her unusual gifts of hospitality, care, and discipline. Through them, I realized that she was extending an invitation, hoping that I, that we, would respond by loving the things that she loved, caring for the people for whom she cared. This preface is dedicated to her and to your grandmother and all of the other change agents and moral leaders who have given us a pretty good world. Now, it's up to us to improve it.



My grandmother was not there when I graduated from Morehouse in 1975, nor was she there in 2007 when I became the tenth president of the college. But I thought about her the morning that I was to be introduced to a commencement audience during the final commencement of my predecessor and distinguished physicist Dr. Walter E. Massey. My story affirms the deep affection of

the national community for Morehouse as an enduring institution that merits the confidence of some of the nation's most influential citizens. Indeed, many of them encourage their sons to attend with hopes that they will in the course of education become moral agents and leaders.

Just before the procession, platform guests gathered to don their robes and take photos, all except two people, the actor Denzel Washington and me. Apparently we were acting out of habit rather than following the memo. We went to the president's office instead of the student center. One of the college staff was on hand to lead us across campus just in time to robe and join the lines. As we walked and talked, he expressed pride in his son's recent graduation from Morehouse, a young man who went on to become a Golden Globes-nominated actor and artist. I felt the pride in the tradition and legacy of this village asset that occupies a unique place in the hearts of people.

We hurriedly walked outside on a gorgeous Sunday morning to the sight of thousands of people on the stunningly beautiful and stately college yard, the same yard where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s funeral and memorial service occurred on April 9, 1968, as tens of thousands gathered and millions watched from afar. Sitting in our living room in Chicago, I was part of that TV audience, and I became entranced with this place, and with President Benjamin Mays, who delivered the amazing eulogy that day. As we began to walk through the parted Red Sea of an excited audience, I realized that processing in front of me were filmmaker Spike Lee and actor Wesley Snipes. Behind me were Denzel and a famous boxing promoter, Butch Lewis. As we processed, people were going crazy, with deafening noise and shouts, snapping photos, calling out to these national celebrities, and enjoying the moment. I felt like the potted plant in this company. But, I knew that in a few days, after the masses had dispersed with their graduates, I would be responsible for steering this great ship and setting the tone for our future. It felt like an object lesson on stewardship and leadership. I had

an important role to play, I had authority and power, but I was at once the least interesting and most ignored person in the picture. I smiled. What a metaphor for how authentic leadership works.

That's when I heard my grandmother whisper: "Work hard, be sincere, change lives on a daily basis, and you may or may not be noticed. But, never forget that your work is undeniably important. The things that people take for granted and in which they have great pride are on your shoulders. Be faithful. March forward."

Introduction

Every saint has a past, every sinner has a future.

—OSCAR WILDE

A few years ago, while attending the 100th anniversary of Emory University's School of Law, my wife and I stood in a crowded gymnasium at a reception awaiting the moment when the doors would open for the banquet. While standing there, nursing a glass of club soda and lime, a law professor greeted me. We chatted, and I learned about his academic interests. Then he asked what I do. I noted that I am a professor in moral leadership who explores the zone where ethics and leadership studies overlap. His first reaction was amusing, "Moral leadership, is that a thing?" I could have returned with a cheap-shot joke, such as, "Among lawyers, perhaps not so much." But I refrained.

He listened intently as I explained that this topic or area of study is concerned with the intersection between leadership studies and ethics. That is where longstanding theoretical and practical questions about effective leadership encounter the theory and practice of the good life and the just society. He was suddenly intrigued. "Well, that should be taught immediately on Capitol Hill," he said.

Later, I reflected that what this colleague had quickly surmised was not only that moral leadership is a thing, but that it might actually be a welcome response to an urgent public and private need.

I maintain that throughout history, when human communities have faced seemingly insurmountable challenges, women and men with integrity, courage, and imagination have emerged to help lead them forward.

Sociologist Robert N. Bellah speaks of this phenomenon:

In times of national difficulty, when the existing order of things appears unequal to its challenges, Americans have often sought new visions of social life. But when new visions have appeared, they typically have done so not through political parties, as in many European societies, but in the form of social movements . . . from Abolition to Prohibition, from organized labor to Civil Rights.¹

This book has a very practical goal: to stimulate conversations about the nature of moral leadership and why we need more of it now. There are several reasons why this is the case.

First, democracy requires virtue. Nearly all of the founders of this country believed this. They maintained, furthermore, that citizens have a right to insist upon the moral behavior of their leaders. America, as a new republic, was born and nurtured in the incubator of virtue. This is our debt to John Adams, Abigail Adams, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, Eleanor Roosevelt, and many others. Democracy requires virtue. And most of the time we have found it. As Secretary of State William Seward said during the Civil War: “There is always just enough virtue in this republic to save it; sometimes none to spare, but still enough to meet the emergency.”

Second, as most people would agree, we are now in a state of steady moral decline—almost a nosedive. David Crary of the Associated Press puts it this way: “Public cynicism about America’s moral standards is high, as evidenced in the annual Values and Morals poll

¹ Robert Neelly Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1985), 212.

conducted by Gallup since 2002. In the latest poll, released last June, a record high 49 percent of respondents rated moral values in the U.S. as poor, and only 14 percent rated them excellent or good.² We need the virtue conversation because we are slipping; we are losing ethical ground.

Third, moral decline can be contagious. These trend lines of lying, cheating, theft, hatred, violence, racism, Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and so on will not suddenly stop and reverse themselves. According to Andrew Cullison, a philosophy professor who leads DePauw University's Prindle Institute for Ethics, "The perception that unethical behavior is increasingly commonplace could have a snowball effect. People think that if moral standards have eroded, why should they play by the rules. If they've lost trust in some entity or institution, then that organization has lost the right to their compliance with the rules."³ The recent admissions-for-sale scandal in certain colleges and universities is an example that calls for a serious response. The corrosive effects of an attitude that prizes deception and winning at all costs can leave those who play by the rules thinking they need to come up with their own way of gaming the system.

Fourth, the contagion can be deadly. This moral decline threatens to destroy our families, schools, congregations, communities, and our very nation, but it will also bore into individual human souls, emptying or hollowing out that part of us that can appreciate and recognize what is good, true, and beautiful. We will become rotten people. We will not fund the education of children who do not look like our own. We will resist acknowledging our unconscious biases. We will become numb to offenses, private and public. When the president of the United States behaves badly, we will sigh in resignation. We will learn to make peace with evil. What else can we do?

² David Crary, Associated Press, "Admissions Scandal Unfolds amid Cynicism about Moral Values," March 15, 2019.

³ Andrew Cullison, in Crary, "Admissions Scandal Unfolds."

Professor Cullison observes, “It’s the objective truth that norms of conduct are being violated. . . . Where people differ is how outraged they are. If you’re getting what you want (in terms of policy), you’ll be more willing to look the other way.”⁴

Jordan Libowitz, a spokesman for the watchdog group Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, notes that a number of President Trump’s cabinet appointees have been the subject of ethics investigations. He says: “We’re seeing a pattern of not caring about ethics that we’ve not seen before. . . . It sets a dangerous precedent for future administrations, that once ethical norms are pushed aside and nothing is done about it, this might become the new normal.”⁵

To those who are skeptical about the topic or study of leadership, let me begin by saying I share your skepticism, even disdain, for hypocritical leaders, for demagogues, con men, and other despicable manipulators of public trust. But does that mean that all leaders are the same? Do the traits, values, and behaviors of the leader matter? Are leaders fungible? Do they make a difference?

Obviously, I believe that leadership matters. Pick an issue, any social problem, and think about the many interventions one could make: passing a law, investing money, donating money, increasing or decreasing regulations, threatening punishment, creating incentives, changing the brands and messages. . . . All of these have a role in effecting social and personal change. I would argue that, regardless of the issue, the addition of one or two moral leaders to the equation dramatically transforms the situation, and may or should do so in ways that bring long-term and sustainable social goods. The goods that leaders create and cultivate include a sense of community, social trust, nondiscrimination, shared prosperity, equal justice, hope, friendship, and the willingness to make sacrifices for strangers. Those are lofty ideals, and it is a bold claim that moral leaders can help to unleash these possibilities, but I believe that to be the case. Throughout this book I profile people who have done just that.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jordan Libowitz, in Crary, “Admission Scandal Unfolds.”

In short, my argument is that good leadership matters, and moral leadership matters more.

In the mid-nineteenth century Alexis de Tocqueville wrote: “The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults.”⁶ In this country, perhaps in every country, nations and peoples have exhibited respect for leaders who have helped to heal and repair national faults.

I think that it matters where one begins the conversation about revitalizing the health of a democracy and its possibilities of creating a just and good society. When we expand our focus beyond ideas for repairing our society to the purveyor of those ideas, then we are dealing with the topic of leadership, and at that point different foci come into view. For instance, we might wish to know something about the personal qualities, traits, vices, and virtues of leaders. Do they appear to be generous or selfish, wise or foolish, patient or rash? We might be curious to know how they think, how they reason through an issue, problem, or crisis. We might want to know what they have done in the past, and what they would do in the future. Thoughts and deeds matter. I think we might also want to know what impact leaders have made and promise to make in the future. What impacts are possible for leaders to make?

I have chosen to divide my reflections into three distinct but interrelated questions: First, who are these moral leaders and how do they come to be such? Second, what and how do they think and act? And, third, what impacts do moral leaders have or enable?

America has strong roots in Anglo-European-African-Indigenous-Latinx symbols and culture. But from the beginning, as historians have agreed, this young nation drew from two principal sources to inform and shape its identity, purpose, and destiny in the larger world. These were, of course, the Bible and the Enlightenment tradition. The Bible taught Americans to speak of the

⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

individual value and worth (sanctity or sacredness of the human soul) of every person. It invited people to trust that the order in the universe reflected divine intention. At the same time, the rational, skeptical, and philosophical elements of the Enlightenment tradition taught Americans to question authority and to demand that political and social systems be justified on rational grounds. Some interpretations and applications of biblical revelation were employed to justify the divine right of kings, slavery, and the subjugation of women. The Enlightenment tradition challenged these assertions and usually demanded the highest respect for personal freedom and dignity.

On that basis it seems appropriate to speak of moral leadership that is inclusive of all religious beliefs and motivations but is also independent of revelation and faith. Morality can be justified on the basis of right reason. Faith, whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, or other, provides important guidance and inspiration to uphold the moral good.

I am and aspire to be a Christian leader, and I believe in the authenticity and power of public Christian witness. Augustine, Aquinas, Martin Luther, William Wilberforce, Richard Allen, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King Jr., and Dorothy Day demonstrate that distinctively Christian public moral leadership has been and can be a history-changing vocation—and one to which more Christian leaders should aspire. As G. K. Chesterton writes, “The Christian faith hasn’t been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.”⁷ Nevertheless, we know that this nation and the world are better today thanks to the sacrifice, struggle, and leadership of many non-Christians. We have gladly received the leadership gifts of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Mahatma Gandhi, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and Muhammad Ali.

In our radically diverse society we need ways to communicate with fellow citizens who do not share our theological convictions. Even approaches to truth, justice, and goodness may be found in

⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956).

approaches that are not religious at all. Some are even skeptical and critical of religion. That, too, is a gift. Enlightenment traditions can help us to get to where we all want to go because religions have proven themselves to be capable of so much injustice, violence, ignorance, and abuse of power that they need to be held accountable by the authority of reason, logic, and common sense. This was indelibly imprinted a few months after the 9/11 tragedy. I visited Ground Zero in New York City, and while walking near the smoldering and pungent site, I saw on a wooden panel in the fence that someone had written, “God, save us from your followers!”

Religions need reason. But reason also needs to be kept accountable for its more insidious capacity to oppress. Reason as philosophical, secular, rational discourse about truth, goodness, justice, and beauty is clearly admirable. But reason can also be used to justify and legitimate injustice. Critiquing or reexamining traditions does not dismiss or disrespect them. Reason in history is good. The question is, how can we make it better?

In the first chapter I consider the process of identity formation of moral leaders. I set forth a definition of moral leadership that is inclusive of, but distinct from, moral agency. *Not all moral agents are leaders, but all moral leaders are first of all moral agents.* Moral agents are people who act in accord with their most deeply held values, principles, and beliefs about what is right, true, good, and beautiful. Such moral agency is a necessary foundation for moral leadership. But *moral leadership* involves something more. I define *moral leaders to be people who live and lead with integrity, courage, and imagination as they serve the common good, while inviting others to join them.* They are moral agents who respond to the vocation of leadership, which leads to the increase of righteousness, truth, goodness, and beauty—in other words, the enhancement of the common good. And they seek to expand this project or movement by enlisting others.

Many factors and experiences go into the development and making of moral leaders. It is interesting to think about how and why they become moral leaders, and what they actually think and

do in the world. How did my grandmother become “that” person? We know what she did, what she could do, but what did she think about? From what she said that day, and from what I observed over the course of our life together, I know that she had a keen sense of the way God wanted the world—her world—to be ordered. And so that church lady went into the streets to make it happen.

The question of what moral leaders think and do is the focus of the second chapter. I suggest five behaviors or habits that are common among moral leaders. These behaviors or habits can and should be cultivated in those who aspire to lead.

Being identified as a moral agent or leader ultimately hinges on the judgment of others. It involves the retrospective assessment of *words spoken, lives lived, and deeds done*. The larger community of human observers makes the judgment about whether another person was or is a moral leader. That seems natural and appropriate, since leadership is a social act, one that implies a social contract among people. Among the normative actions of leaders is the commitment to building enduring institutions and movements that sustain their visions by fostering the development of other moral agents. That is the focus of the third chapter.

In reflecting on the impact that moral leaders can have and the difference they make through institutions, I reflect on my experience as a senior leader in two iconic American institutions: Morehouse College and Chautauqua Institution.

I conclude by highlighting efforts to heal our divided nation and repair frayed social bonds. Creating a just society and enabling good lives for all is an exciting, noble moral project. I believe that it requires moral leaders. My hope, for those who read these pages, is that something here will guide, unleash, and inspire your own capacity for moral leadership.