

BARTOLOME DE LAS CASAS ESSAY SERIES

Tenth Essay: Leadership and Human Rights

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I don't believe there is such thing as leadership.

No, I'm not writing an essay on nothingness. What I mean is: there is no such thing as leadership, full stop. What there is, is leadership in a domain. A student leader. A leader in one's community. Taking the lead at home. A leader on the ballfield. Leading by doing (say, the dishes). General Ulysses S. Grant, famously, was a miserable failure at everything he did, until someone gave him some authority in the battle of Vicksburg. He promptly proved himself a leader of men in the narrow domain of war--which gets counted as a paradigm of leadership. Now, if there was such a thing as leadership, surely Grant would have had it, and he would have been a leader everywhere, which he wasn't.

I also doubt too that there is such a thing, really, as a 'student leader'. What people mean, when they use that phrase, is someone who takes part in relatively transient student politics; or starts a club; or produces the school play. A student leader, that is, is a student who is a leader, and these come in many varieties, which are always particular varieties.

Nonetheless, students are young, or at least they generally are. Moreover, students are almost always citizens—even international students are citizens of their own countries. So, there is a broad sense of ‘leadership’, applicable to students, where the word picks out someone who leads precisely in being young, and who leads in ways relevant to being a citizen. And that is my interest here.

To lead, when one is young. What could this mean? Doesn’t youth imply inexperience, but leadership requires experience? Well, surely it would mean at least this: not to follow when one is young, that is, in the way young people in particular, tend to be followers. But how do they follow? Obviously, they are concerned about fads. Yet, unless one happens to be a designer in Milan or Paris, one does not lead by wearing the latest fashionable clothing. Downloading a song onto an iPod is not an act of leadership. Pierce your nose? Ten million others have been there, done that.

(It’s no objection, that many adults also are likewise concerned about fads, because they are so—it is widely conceded—because society now as a whole now cultivates attitudes which once were, and should be, especially distinctive young people.)

So, to lead when one is young implies, at very least, a certain kind of detachment from, or indifference to, fads, fashions, and peer pressure. This sort of indifference is not the same as leadership, but it is a condition of it.

Likewise, anyone who could rightly be charged with merely following an “-ism” would not, to that extent, be acting as a leader. Are you affected by consumerism? To that extent, you are not a leader. (It requires a good amount of imagination to contrive circumstances where someone leads by spending money.) Are you, practically speaking, a hedonist? Then pleasure is leading you about, and therefore it is not you who are leading others.

(No one is claiming, of course, that it is always right to lead, or always better to lead than to follow. By all means accept those -isms that are true, if there are any, and be a follower there.)

Again, no one can lead who is a mere follower in thought. Leadership involves an independent mind. But be wary of those traps that appear to offer independence, yet lack it, giving only extreme dependence instead. “Question Authority?” Oh, like the thousands of other people who see the bumper sticker and agree, unquestioningly? (Hardly independent thinking, that.) Avoid also the reflex reaction of a relativist, when encountering a bold assertion: ‘That’s your opinion!’ Of course it’s your opinion: if it weren’t, you wouldn’t say it. What the relativist means, of course, is that it’s only your

opinion, and no more. But, if so, then relativism, too, by the same reasoning, is only the relativist's opinion, and nothing more. One can safely ignore it, then. (Short work of that.)

A moment's thought will reveal that there can be no independent thinking without—to use an old-fashioned word—knowledge. It is knowledge, and knowledge alone—together with everything which knowledge brings in its trail, such as clarity of insight, logical acuity, and depth—which can insure independence of thought. Why should this be? Because, when all is said and done, there never is any absolute independence of one thing from another. (A lunatic: someone who thinks he is independent of anyone.). What one means by 'independence of thought', rather, is lack of dependence on the ill-considered opinions of others, because one is dependent, instead, on what really is the case, because one has knowledge.

Suppose now that you have achieved indifference as regards fads; a lack of attachment to any demeaning -isms; and a good grounding in general knowledge. (No small achievement. This would require a discipline and a path 'training' which was every way as demanding as that adopted by the most successful athletes. It would necessarily involve real changes in your habits and lifestyle, and many small but significant sacrifices.) You are now in a position to lead, then, as a young person. But what do you do?

This is where human rights enter in. A young person leads, by offering what he or she in particular can offer. And what youth in particular can offer, is looking at things afresh: despising conventions; not thinking that 'because we've always done it that way' is a good answer; wondering whether, after all, it really 'has to be that way.' The Abolitionists were essentially youthful. An oldish person in 1850—old in outlook—would have looked at a slave and seen only a tragic necessity. "Nothing new under the sun. Vanity of vanities." Slavery would appear to him as a vast system of contract and agreement, an indispensable cog in the grinding machinery of economics. You might just as well destroy the Appalachian Mountain range, he would think, as abolish slavery.

A young person would look at the very same system, that "Peculiar Institution", as it was called, and observe, correctly, that it depended on nothing more than human agreement and decision. In 1850, it undoubtedly was true that slavery could have been entirely abolished, if people only wanted to abolish it.

"You see things; and you say, 'Why?' But I dream things that never were, and I say, "Why not?". (No, not Robert F. Kennedy, but George Bernard Shaw, in his play, "Back to Methuselah".)

A right, it has been said, has to do with the dignity that a human being has prior to the state and prior to any human convention, which sets limits on state power, and which (as regards a 'social right') provides an ideal for assistance and aid to others. One cannot

glimpse a right, without looking past conventions, to something more basic. *The Bill of Rights* is a pointer, merely. The Supreme Court gives its own views on something glimpsed, merely. Neither of these institutions invents rights; both attempt to report on them.

The glimpsing belongs to everyone, and in a free society, in which people move corporately toward social justice, it must be that way. But a special concern for rights belongs to the young, who often have a lively sense that they have only one life to live, and that time is short. It belongs to youth, also, to regard itself as a new generation, and potentially a new society, which can reconstitute everything, simply by wanting it to be that way.

The framework of rights is an ideal for a free and just society. To be a leader as a citizen with a youthful outlook (chronological age ultimately being irrelevant), then, is to look constantly toward what promotes the dignity of all human beings, and for one's own part to begin, without apologies or excuses, to live in that ideal society, here and now, not spurning any sacrifice that that implies.

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