

The Tempest

Before I go into the subject for the day, I would like to make some comments on administration. The more I hear from you about your operation the more similar it seems to my own experience. The problems of running a university are not all that different from those of running a school. The major difference is in the freedom the college president has from the influx of regulations and accountability reports that surely must plague your office. You have an upper administration to satisfy, and that administration has a Board to satisfy. I reported to a Board, but only rarely; it ruled on matters of policy and had overall fiscal responsibility but not of operations. And it hired and fired the president. Otherwise it kept its hands off, as a Board should.

The principal, then, whatever his style, must, like the college president, have something of the Zeusian mind, a vision of things. And it is in his vision that the justice (the virtue) of his leadership lies. The principal must be the kind of leader of which Plato speaks in the *Republic*; he must have a political greatness (an administrative ability, we would say, in this instance) combined with wisdom. But the particular kind of wisdom Socrates spoke of is not the *possession* of wisdom; rather, it is an awareness of one's own *lack* -- and a desire to pursue -- that ultimate wisdom which, as Socrates put it, "the god" alone possesses. Hence, as Leonard Grob has written ("Leadership: the Socratic Model"), Socrates espoused a "critical [or inquiring] spirit" as the *moral ground* of all human endeavor. If leadership is not nourished "by a wellspring of critical process at its center," as he says, it "'dries up' and becomes, finally, the mere wielding of power on behalf of *static ideals*."

But if the Socratic ideal is to prevail, not only the principal must be engaged in the search. The faculty too must be engaged in this lifelong quest and should not be locked into a position of follower-ship, as Grob calls it. "The very essence of dialogue consists in that mutual offering of perspectives which allows for -- indeed promotes -- the movement of followers into leadership roles, both in relation to others less aware than they of the need to acknowledge their Socratic ignorance and also in relation to those leaders whose horizon of meaning may now be more limited than those of their followers. In this sense leadership is a dialogical movement in which both participants engage in that process of critique -- the love of wisdom -- in which their very identities as the leader and the led are continually in question.

". . . Leadership, *more than any other kind of human activity*, must demand of its practitioners a willingness to open themselves to critique. . . . If to lead is to assume the initiative in a relationship with others (that we might call followers) toward the pursuit of some goal . . . then leadership at its highest must root itself in that exercise of humility which is the mark of the philosopher. [The leader must be the

philosopher in the sense that he has humility -- that he knows he is perpetually, a seeker after wisdom.] Yet this dialogical leadership should not be construed as hindering action, or diminishing authority.

As Mortimer Adler has pointed out, Socrates began with the image of gadfly for his activity; he ends with the image of the midwife -- the one who enables others to examine their own lives, to give birth to an understanding. Such an activity is the birth of all learning. This is the high stage of instruction that Adler refers to as *miauetic*, from the Greek goddess Mia, who presides over births. Kierkegaard, more than two thousand years later, made the following comment: "Socrates entered into the role of midwife and sustained it throughout not because his thought had no positive content, but because he perceived that this relation is the highest that one human being can sustain to another." This spiritual help, enabling another to learn, is the highest calling in the educational process.

For Plato, what distinguishes the ideal leader from his followers is the possession of an intellectual vision informing his action and a constant search for wisdom.

I am more used to designating this constant search, the inquiring spirit, as the *act of learning*, something that everyone thinks happens almost automatically in schools but which, on the contrary, is fairly rare. And yet the learning event, I maintain, is the central action of education. Why is it rare? Because it is the result of intense concentration, in all three of its stages -- grasping, mapping, and making -- that requires undisturbed attention. If just the right conditions could be maintained and if a gifted teacher were present, then the event would be more frequent. But even then a limitation exists because when a learning event occurs, a great deal of information that had been lying around disjointedly in the mind, rearranges itself in a new structure of understanding. And that takes time. Time, too, for the mind to dance around this new structure in a miniature carnival of celebration, exhausting itself in the joy of learning. I am of course indulging here a little fantasy as an analog of that blown-off-the-top-of-the-head sensation when an insight flares up. I should like to think some mild versions of such events happened to you in this past two weeks, so that you could have a reference for my fantastic analogy.

Be that as it may, the two conditions I specified as needed -- the proper facility and the gifted teacher -- bear some discussion. Suppose both are present. What happens to concentration when the squawk box breaks in with an announcement from the principal's office? or gives a little click that says "you are being listened in on?" or an observer steps into the room, pad and pencil in hand? The mere potential for such interruptions banishes any possibility for a learning event to occur. Guardians should be at the door to say "STOP! Do not go on. This place is holy." And if we do get in, a band of furies should carry us away.

A closed door and a broken speaker system are the only equipment needed for the classroom of a gifted teacher. But where

do we get the gifted teachers? Why, right in the classrooms. In all likelihood, they *know* enough right now to qualify for the gifted category. It doesn't take much. It is their joy in learning that needs to be awakened and passed on to their students. With that desire they become gifted teachers.

I admit there are teachers who are geniuses at rote teaching, perhaps by the fill-in-the-missing-word technique. I have witnessed them in classes I have visited. They are masters at tossing the questions around the room, keeping the class involved. I admire their mastery. Yet on reflection, I am appalled at how quickly their classes divide into bright, mediocre, and slow, strictly on the basis of memory and recall. If you have such teachers, be happy. There is something about them you can praise -- and begin to change. I have said elsewhere that instruction given in the context of praise is most palatable -- a little Odyssean maybe, but effective. Another helpful hint I buried in that book we gave you was to address suggestions to a faculty, not to an individual, in order to avoid the binary confrontation. Of course one mustn't alienate a whole faculty at once, either. But the faculty can be that third entity in a ternary situation. We build our faculties out of individual teachers, and we do so by involving them in a learning event in which all can join.

Let me put this situation in a somewhat different light. Teachers are our greatest asset. They must *seem* to be sterling characters, and it is in our best interest to see them in that guise. In their teaching capacity, they are inspired by Athena; but in their private lives they tend to be, except for the exceptional ones -- like Antigone -- ordinary human beings like everyone else. When faced with an opposition of power, most of them will crumble. We cannot afford to let that happen. Their self-esteem is essential to the well being of our enterprise -- not just how they look to others but how they regard themselves. Their political courage, their commitment to academic freedom, may be a fiction but it is a necessary fiction that we must promote. Whenever the governing board decides to show who's boss and lets faculty members know that they are nothing but hired-hands, the very heart of the enterprise is shattered and that institution never fully recovers.

Further, somehow, the faculty must be persuaded to drop its traditionally critical and skeptical stance -- it must be persuaded to enter into an affirmative relation with the principal. If it plays its traditional role of countering, or of substituting another plan for the one proposed, then dialogical relationship is prevented from the very beginning. How can faculty members be made to see that their role is not of inferior -- but that it *is* different from the principal? Neither subservience nor the buddy-buddy alliance is the right one for the faculty-principal relationship. The teacher is in many ways in the superior position, if we must think in those terms: the teacher is the Athena of the classroom, the channel through whom comes the wisdom of eternal things. The principal is the Zeus of

the school (he may be an Athena to his faculty). We do not want teachers burdened with the multiplicity of problems the principal faces, some of them seemingly trivial and yet all of them bearing upon the well being of the school. Perhaps the manner of the principal must convince the faculty members that they are respected as the heart of the school; and that all the necessary regulations and restrictions -- the design that the school attempts to implement -- exist to further that learning that goes on in their classrooms. The classroom is that third thing in the encounter between teacher and principal, that thing that is the mutual concern of both parties. But it belongs more to the teacher than it does to the principal, who must enter that sacred ground by permission. In truth, the principal is the chief guardian of the doorway, the one who can say "Stop, do not go on" to parents, observers, supervisors. The feeling of security a principal can give to a teacher's intimacy with a class is the firmest pillar of authority a principal can establish.

What about accountability? That is the principal's responsibility. What kind of nonsense was it that established 72 points of evaluation, or whatever that number was? We cannot avoid judgement by multiplying trivia. The principal's judgement is the nexus of trust on which an effective system depends. The principal must be trusted by the district and the teachers. To establish paths around this single channel is to subvert the system.

We have not talked explicitly about judgement in this institute, but I suppose it has been implicit in everything we have done. It is the flowering of the reflective process. Judgement is a bold act with a very brutal element in it, but if it is to be a good act it must be guided by a delicate sensibility that I have labeled "taste," something that has a personal flavor and yet is not arbitrary. "Taste," I said, "is the guide that presents an object to philosophic speculation, wherein the two modes of knowing -- rational and aesthetic -- conjoin in judgement." (That's in the last essay of *Unbinding Prometheus*.) And I shall let my last essay that you were supposed to read for today suffice for any comment I might make on that great leader-teacher Prospero, who by pursuing wisdom, is finally able at the end of the play to return to his principality ready to be the highest kind of leader, the one who knows that he does not know everything, but whose pursuit of wisdom is lifelong.

--Donald Cowan