



## **Musings on Leadership** **by Sterling E. Freeman, Executive Director**

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**Duke Environmental Leadership Program**

The Wildacres Leadership Initiative is a leadership development and education organization steeped in the cause of improving human relations. According to our perspective human relations is a way of being in which individuals invest themselves in sharing their experiences and beliefs, challenging their assumptions and perspectives and exploring and learning from the realities of others. The reason we think improving human relations is so important is because human relations is fundamentally about acknowledging the other. The process of how we interact with one another is as important as what comes out of our interaction with one another. We examine the interpersonal implications of human relations and use that information to form a prism through which to look at cultural and institutional issues that challenge us. Our mission reads:

Wildacres Leadership Initiative cultivates a network of courageous leaders who connect across differences in identity and ideas to develop new solutions to the complex challenges facing the people and communities of North Carolina.

We pursue our mission through a leadership model based upon our 3 I's integrity, intention and inclusion. And we define those 3 I's: integrity: acting in alignment with one's well-discerned and publicly stated values; intention: acting with purpose in accordance with one's passions and abilities; inclusion: engaging authentically across deep differences in identity, experience and perspective.

So we want to improve human relations by building a community, the members of which are bound by a common experience that engenders collegiality and collaboration in their efforts to lead in this state. We believe the leadership practices of integrity, intention and inclusion are tools for building this community and for use by its members in their various leadership roles.

We take a three-pronged approach in order to deliver this model.

The William C. Friday Fellowship for Human Relations (education component) is a two-year Fellowship for emerging leaders in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors who are able to directly affect issues facing our communities. Friday Fellows learn core competencies related to the principles and practices of integrity, intention, and inclusion. Each class of 15-20 Fellows is deliberately diverse in terms of region, race, political ideology, sexual orientation, profession and more to deepen Fellows' appreciation for complexity and skill at negotiating boundaries. What further connects Fellows is their commitment to practicing self-critique and discernment of core values, acknowledging and understanding their differences, and finding the intersections between their varied perspectives to affect change.

The Fellows Action Network (support component) connects leaders who have the common experience of the Friday Fellowship with each other and to other statewide and community leaders. Members of the Fellows Action Network leverage resources from each other, generate innovative ideas to improve North Carolina, and act collaboratively when appropriate. The change they seek is driven by the Fellows themselves, individually and collaboratively; the Initiative's role is to help leaders collaborate and deepen the practices of leadership used in civic change initiatives.

The Center for Excellence in Leadership (outreach component) promotes the value of the principles and practices of leading with integrity, intention, and inclusion through products and services such as a speakers' bureau and leadership curriculum, publications, and articles distributed to the media. Beginning in 2008, WLI plans to host an Annual Leadership Caucus so leaders across the state can dialogue about

the practical application of leading with integrity, intention, and inclusion. The proceedings of this annual caucus as well as other leadership lessons from the field will be distributed through some form of media by WLI.

Integrity is acting in alignment with one's well-discerned and publicly stated values. Yale law professor, Stephen Carter, is helpful here. Carter frames integrity around three steps which include (1) discerning what is right from what is wrong (2) acting on what you have discerned, even at personal cost; and (3) saying openly that you are acting on your understanding of right from wrong. The first step is about reflection, the second commitment and the third transparency. I believe Carter is right in distinguishing integrity from honesty. Indeed one can be honest without practicing integrity. That is integrity requires a level of contemplation and discovery, then action commensurate with what we learn -a process not necessarily prerequisite to honesty.

The importance of discernment in Carter's equation is measured in the mental and emotional investment it demands. The easy thing is to not be discerning; to assemble a compendium of moral values bestowed upon us by mother, dad, grandmother, favorite uncle, pastor or spiritual leader, best friend or favorite professor, all of whom love us and mean us well. But neither of whom is perfect, even in what they discern is right and wrong. The element of discernment challenges us to think independently, realizing the pressures of the crowd to group think are real. We spend a lot of time at WLI sharing with one another to provide information for discernment and developing reflective practice to process that information.

The second step is about putting some skin into the game. After discernment, integrity requires us to act, even in the face of personal loss. Carter would say that there a lot of people talking about integrity, but aren't doing anything about it. Leadership scholar David Rendall says our touch must be congruent with out talk. The business of acting even at personal cost is a hard proposition.. It means that we might lose friends, break family ties, split with business partners, defy political affiliations or incur any number of losses .

The third step calls for us to claim our beliefs and behavior. If we discern, then act, but we are nowhere to be found after we act, that's not integrity. That's more like stirring up the pot, then dropping the spoon and running. We realize this step can be just as difficult as the first two. However one of the things we do in our work that conceptually seems quite easy, is we contract with one another to speak from the "I" position. Why, because generally speaking, we have the habit on a cultural level of explaining and justifying our individual behavior by invoking the proverbial "you". There is something safe about the substituting the collective you for the singular I. So when I begin to explain myself, my thoughts, my beliefs, my behavior, inevitably my offering is not, "I do this because I believe this, but rather, "you know how when you do this because you believe this?" Invoking this amorphous you divorces the I from owning I's own stuff, shields the I from the risk of being who I is all the time and often falsely co-opts others into bearing I's responsibility. Ladies and Gentlemen that is not leadership - that would be called avoidance.

As I think about discernment, action and taking ownership there are a couple of historical caveats that come to mine. The fist of which is the dilemma with which we in America have been trying in various and sundry ways to work through since our birth.

Consider our language:

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and Nature's God entitle them . . .

The declaration goes on to say that they should declare the things which impel them to this separation.

We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.

Bill Grace, the founder of the Center for Ethical Leadership, based in Seattle, WA encourages us that as we examine the seminal documents of any nation or (state, city, organization, association for that matter), in all of their eloquence and idyllic appeal, take notice of how that nation lives out its creed. In other words he's saying don't spend too much time listening to them talk, but spend more time watching how they walk.

Speking of walking, I can see that old lady who must have been a domestic walking to work. I understand she was referred to as Mother Pollard. The boycott was well on its way and I suppose she had been walking ever since it began on December 5, 1955. And as she's walking, a car pulls up beside her and there is a young man inside who rolls down his window. The young man offers her a ride. Now she had every reason to go. She wasn't a spring chicken so chances are she did not get around as swiftly as she used to. She had been walking since the boycott started. It would seem reasonable to have at least one day's respite from the labor. The young man in the car, was a young colored (as was the term at that time) man, so she would not have feared that he would accost her in any way. Sure, she had committed to the boycott, but there was no one around to chastise her for "riding on the job" that day. No one, but herself. She knew what was right, she decided to act and she declared she would "walk" on her principles until she could ride anywhere, anytime and in anything with dignity. So the old lady looked at the young man and I can imagine she said something like "Bless your heart, what a sweet boy." I can imagine she told him thanks but no thanks. I am going to keep on walking 'til things change. Then she said and I quote, "My feet is tired but my soul is rested."

Leadership and integrity is about paying attention to how I walk.

Intention is acting with purpose in accordance with one's passions and abilities. There once was a young man who by all accounts would grow up to be successful. He had the good fortune to be born into a stable home - it was middle class and had two parents. Mentors were in immediate proximity as this young man had older siblings who by and large were doing positive things and therefore displayed a pattern that made high achievement, good conduct and productiveness the norm. He was the type of young man who always heard how smart he was; his parents lavished him with praise. He was always asked what he wanted to be when he grew up. And it was often suggested by others what he would be when he grew up. "I can see you now wearing that long white coat, the pendulum of the stethoscope swinging to and fro while you traverse the halls of healing in a hospital." Or, "One of these days you will be in that tailored suit, with the three-buttons, slightly baggy trousers with a slight break in the leg and bankers cuffs, attaché' to boot." So for a long time, this young man thought he was going to be either Cliff Huxtable or Gordon Gekko. Long white coats and stethoscopes; tailored suits and briefcases - it seemed the young man's wardrobe for life was chosen by everyone but himself. The point is that overtime he came to own expectations of himself that others, with no mal intent by the way, had imposed on him, rather than arriving at those expectation vis-à-vis his on personal desires and groanings. So for 11 years after college this young man wore a suit of clothes that did not fit . The process of changing his clothes did not begin until he encountered the William C. Friday Fellowship for Human Relations and took the time to contemplate and dwell upon his passions for himself.

In the Friday Fellowship we create a lot of space for our Fellows to think about their leadership in terms of intention. The question is where are you investing yourself and why? There can be a plethora of motivations for us doing what we do, none of which say, "because this is a true passion." The capacity to find your passion(s) and act on it is a true gift because there are so many barriers real or perceived to doing what you really want to do. Parker Palmer admonishes us in his work, *Let Your Life Speak*, about the journey towards finding our passion when he notes that after we are born the world has a way in the early years of our lives of divorcing us from who we really are. What we are ultimately confronted with, I believe, when we talk about finding and pursuing our passions is aptly captured in the words of author Toni

Morrison when she said prior to becoming the prolific writer she is today, that if she did not write, she might as well cease to live. Hyperbolic though they may be, her comments remain instructive as I feel it is important to have Sister Morrison's level of abandon as we consider our own professional and/or volunteer work. Palmer goes on to encourage each of us to listen to that inner voice. Voice derived from the word *vocare*, meaning "to call". Essentially when we listen to that inner voice we are responding to that which is our calling or vocation. It is because that young man to whom I referred earlier, listened to that voice that he now is able to wear a suit of clothes that fit him. By the way . . . how do I look?

Being intentional is about paying attention to those things that we are cut out for in this life. If we do this, I have learned that the requisite zeal, creativity and commitment are there in order for us to be leaders. Further as leaders, it is my hope that we would want for ourselves and for the people around us to know the great gift of the magnificent rush that comes from being able to affirm,, "I am pursuing my calling."

The intention dynamic of our model makes me think of a maxim that I have now seen show up in several pieces of literature on leadership, "leadership is not a position, it's an action." Now it's time for a bit of audience participation. Please raise your hand when you hear a name with which you are familiar - Bob Moses, Diane Nash, Charles Sherrod, Claudette Colvin, James Bevel, Fred Shuttlesworth, Septima Clark, Wyatt Walker, Ella Baker, John Doar. How about Fannie Lou Hammer? How about John Lewis? How about Rosa Parks? How about Martin Luther King? They were all leaders in the civil rights movement. Of course, when we invoke the name Martin Luther King (and Rosa Parks to some extent) it resonates not only here in this country but across land masses and seas in far away places. And, I would suggest that this is a legitimate phenomenon. However, I would also suggest to you that the difference between Martin and Ella or Martin and James has nothing to do with the amount of blood spilled or tears shed during the Civil Rights Movement, but rather the positions of authority they had within the movement. And the fact that King had lodged in his throat one of the sweetest instruments grace every granted. Nevertheless, we could look at the stories of sacrifice, commitment, risk and leadership of many of these others and I would submit to you that the impact of their drama would be second to none. King's articulation of the plight of the Negro in America was like an artist brushing his way to a masterpiece on canvass. And, Wyatt Walker's ability to raise money, Septima Clark's ability to train in non-violence, John Doar's ability to take risk to file lawsuits, all provided the necessary ingredients for that masterpiece.

Ronald Heifetz at Harvard warns us about relegating our sense of leadership to traditional roles. There are leaders of formal and informal authority, and one can be just as important and effective as the other.

Being an intentional leader is about answering that voice that resonates within and being an encourager to those around you to do the same. It is about being committed to making meaning with my talents, gifts and skills.

Inclusion is engaging authentically across deep differences in identity, experience and perspective. I commented earlier that the fundamental basis for WLI's existence is the improvement of human relations. And when we speak of human relations we consider all the actors in the human family and the complex web of identity, experience and perspective that characterize that family. Let's be clear that inclusion, although it could be, is not necessarily about us getting along. It could be about us not getting along. Whatever the case, inclusion is about each of us acquiring a healthy respect for who others are and for their right to continue to be. As it relates to those who are on our team, inclusion is about finding ways to integrate the mixed bag of who we are in order reach our goals. As it relates to those who are not on our team, inclusion is about finding ways to bridge gaps across difference and at the very least, seeking to learn enough to know what the possibilities are of working together towards a constructive end.

Inclusion encourages in one a desire to be a life-long learner and being humble enough to engage in regular self-interrogation about who I am, what I believe and how I behave. This in my experience seems to be one of the scarier things about our model, because when I begin to ask the questions about who I am, what I believe, how I behave and why I behave that way, I run the risk of not being satisfied with my

answers. If I am not satisfied with my answers that might mean that I have to change some things and if I have to change some things - values, belief systems, friends and associates -- then it gets really messy because I begin to confront my identity. This is important because identity cannot simply be reduced to a set of characteristics - African-American, male, heterosexual, college-educated, able-bodied, professional, Christian --, but is more about what it means to be these things amongst the multiple permutations and combinations of characteristics that exist in the world.

As it applies to our leadership there are two things about inclusion I want to highlight. First, as leaders who have teams to manage or a staff for which we are responsible there is the concept of "player-coach". How many of you have ever heard of a gentleman named Bill Russell. Bill Russell is considered to be one of the best to ever play the game of basketball. He played for the NBA's Boston Celtics in their heyday and before he finished, as a player, he won an unprecedented 11 NBA Championships. There was a period during his career in which he was a player coach. That is the Celtics did not have a full time coach, but instead had Russell play and coach the team simultaneously. I must acknowledge in sports there are instances in which the "player-coach" model has been unsuccessful. Nevertheless, I feel it's instructive and also takes a reflective, conscious leader to pull it off. Its an interesting way for me to think about things, because as an athlete I can remember my coaches barking out instructions, sometime followed by, "Listen fellows, I can't play the game for you." How's that for motivation. The player coach model is compelling because it seems to offer a way for the leader to affirm to her team that she is in the game with them. As the leader of a team, I have found it important to know my strengths and weaknesses and acknowledge both, communicate constantly and receive perspective on what's going on (in the "game"), trust my teammates to play to their strengths and ensure that whatever I am asking my team to do I am finding a way to model it within my own responsibilities. By the way as it relates to this last point. Bill Russell use to keep a list of things on which he graded himself after every game. According to his standards he never made above a "C" average.

The second leadership lesson under the rubric of inclusion has to do with the importance of acquiring empathy - a characteristic apropos for working across difference. This is why story telling figures so prominently into the work of WLI. Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker cites the philosopher Peter Singer as stating that we have a moral circle that is expanded through revelations from various mediums that give us story. Pinker goes on to say that story allows us to project ourselves into the lives of others who are different from us. Stories have a way of humanizing the other. As a provocative contemporary illustration we might consider Corey Booker who is the new mayor of Newark New Jersey. Mayor Booker is an African-American in his 30s who is Stanford educated, has a Yale Law degree and is a Rhodes Scholar. His parents were both IBM employees. I outline these things for you such that we can contrast his story with that of a great deal of his constituency in Newark, a city which bears its share of poverty and crime. In an effort to acquire the story of his constituency, however, Mr. Booker has moved into an urban area housing community, some refer to it as the projects, in Newark. Now as radical as it may sound, it is the ultimate act of projecting oneself into the reality of another. What's more powerful to me about this is that Mr. Booker is an African-American leader in a city with a healthy population of people of color, yet he appears to have no presumptions about their stories. He is aware of the fact that just because he and many of his constituency are covered in the same hue, does not mean they came from the same hood.

Leadership and inclusion is about being humble enough to pursue learning about myself and about others.

WLI has essentially, in some form, been harping on the concept of the three I's - integrity, intention, inclusion - since its inception; however, we only recently committed specific language in 2005. We now have 148 Fellows across the state of North Carolina leading in a multitude of capacities. Our Fellows are of different ethnicities, of different ideologies (conservative to liberal and everything in between), of different spiritual practices, of different sexual orientations, of different professions, of different educational background and of somewhat different social classes. We are attorneys and grass roots activists, we are doctors and religious leaders, we are journalists and bankers, we are in government and

in education, we are venture capitalists, entrepreneurs and advocates for the farm workers. We are sitting on the bench as judges and we are representing districts in the General Assembly.

As I speak to these folks about how the Fellowship experience figures into their leadership today, invariably a common theme emerges. More often than not they talk about the courage they gained through acting in the safe and challenging space created by the Fellowship. They talk about the experience of trying on new ideas and acknowledging what they don't know, asking hard questions they had been afraid to ask, hearing hard answers and gaining new knowledge, becoming more self aware and challenging their own beliefs, taking risks and the liberating effects. Somehow, all this figures into increased courage. Courage, we hope, to challenge the status quo, advocate for the marginalized and be civil in their approach.

My musings on leadership. Thanks so much for listening to me.