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Claremont McKenna College Opening Convocation 2001

## **The Very Idea of Moral Leadership**

*Stephen T. Davis*

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## **THE VERY IDEA OF MORAL LEADERSHIP**

Address to the Fall Convocation

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by

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From 1946 until today, Claremont McKenna College has been characterized by an emphasis on leadership. We have done amazingly well at this point. The Admissions Office consistently attracts students with leadership skills. We stress leadership in our curriculum. And anyone who spends time with CMC alumni, as I often do, must be profoundly impressed with the mark they are making as leaders in public affairs, business, and the professions.

Today I invite you to follow along as I think aloud about the topic of leadership, and especially what I will call moral leadership.

Early last summer, a respected and famous professor of history at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts met disgrace. Joseph J. Ellis was best known for his writings about the American founding. But he also taught a popular course at Mount Holyoke called “The Vietnam War and American Culture.” Ellis felt qualified to teach the Vietnam course because of his wide reading and strong opinions about that war, and because of his combat service in Vietnam as a platoon leader in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne division. He frequently told war stories to his classes.

The only trouble was that Ellis never served in Vietnam, and was not a platoon leader in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne. The Boston Globe broke the story in June after two months of investigation. Further research revealed other lies that Ellis had consistently told about himself, e.g., that he had served on General Westmoreland's staff in Saigon, that he had been a civil rights worker in the South in the 1960s, and that he had scored a crucial touchdown in a high school football game.

Ellis was an icon at Mount Holyoke, and a Pulitzer Prize winning author. When I first heard the story I did not know whether to be puzzled or outraged. I was puzzled—like many Americans—because I could not understand how anybody that intelligent could do something so stupid as to lie like that. I was outraged because Ellis' actions betrayed the most fundamental premise of the profession of teaching, viz., that we teach students the truth, as we best know it. Knowingly telling lies in class is about as low as a professor can get.

I believe professors lead primarily by example. Indeed, this special role is both the blessing and burden of any leader. What then is leadership? I understand leadership to be a relationship, a relationship among persons. It is a relationship of influence or persuasion. Let's call the influencing person the leader and the influenced person or group the follower or followers. The

leader tries to influence the followers to believe and behave in certain ways. I need to emphasize that there is nothing pejorative about the word “follower.” Nobody is a leader in every area, and I have always felt that one mark of good leaders is that they are good followers in other settings. So when I use the word “followers” I do not mean to denigrate the people I am talking about.

There are lots of species of leadership. We might analyze types of leadership in terms of the goals different leaders try to achieve. A leader may try to influence followers toward his or her own private goals; we can call such a person a tyrant or dictator. Another leader may try to help followers achieve goals already held by the followers; we can call such a person an enabler or facilitator. Finally, and this is at heart what I mean by leadership, some leaders try to influence followers toward shared or common goals, goals that the followers were persuaded to accept.

If leaders in the best sense of the word, then, influence followers toward goals shared by both leaders and followers, where does morality enter the equation?

Well, there are of course moral and immoral means followed by leaders, but I will limit myself today to talk about the ends or goals of leaders. First, some leaders try to influence followers toward goals that are

non-moral or amoral (in the sense of having little or no moral implications). I take it that most coaches fit here. To win or lose a basketball game is rarely a matter of moral right or wrong. It is sad if your team loses, but not usually immoral. Second, some leaders try to influence followers toward goals that are immoral. I take it that Hitler fits here; he influenced most of his countrymen toward the immoral goals of conquering Europe and killing Jews and other minorities. Third, some leaders try to influence followers toward goals that are moral. I take it that the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. fits here. He influenced his fellow African-Americans, as well as many white Americans, to move toward the goal of racial equality.

Now anybody who wants to argue on behalf of moral leadership today--as I do--faces a big problem: ours is an age of moral relativism. That is, many people, from high school students to national opinion-makers, buy into the assumption that right and wrong are not objective facts, but merely subjective opinions or feelings. According to moral relativists, what you think is morally right is morally right--for you. What I think is morally right is right--for me. If you think murder is wrong and I think it's okay, we're both right. Every moral opinion is correct--for the person holding it.

Some people extend the point beyond morality to all beliefs. We all create our own realities--so it is said--and what I consider true is "true for

me” and what you consider true is “true for you,” even if our two truths conflict. We can call this view “total relativism.”

I wonder whether the people who embrace this theory recognize that it constitutes the perfect defense of Professor Ellis. That he served in Vietnam as a platoon leader in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne was “true for him”—so it could be said—even if was not true for the rest of us. I take this little piece of reasoning to be the reductio ad absurdum of total relativism. It is silly, indeed ridiculous, to claim that we all create our own realities that are “true for us.” If total relativism is true, then Professor Ellis did nothing wrong. And of course he did do something wrong, as we all know.

To be sure, there are some areas where relativism makes perfect sense. The ancients used to say, “On matters of taste there is no judgment,” and that is correct. There simply is no objective truth on whether pizza tastes better than steak. You could prefer steak and I could prefer pizza, and we could both be correct. We would only be reporting our own separate preferences.

But outside of matters of taste, total relativism is bankrupt. Who in his or her right mind could possibly hold that the statement, “San Francisco is north of Los Angeles” depends for its truth or falsity on what you or your group happens to believe? There is an objective truth here—viz., that San

Francisco is north of Los Angeles—quite apart from what anybody believes. And I suspect that even the most determined relativists would abandon their own doctrine if faced with a brain surgeon or an airline pilot who announced that he was going to create his own reality with his own beliefs and perform the surgery or fly the airplane in any way that he wanted.

But if total relativism is not only false but obviously false, what about moral relativism? Maybe there is an objective truth about whether San Francisco is north of Los Angeles—so it could be suggested—but not about moral issues like whether lying is morally wrong. The truth on that sort of point—again, so it might be said—varies from person to person.

Now there are some moral questions that are exceedingly hard to decide and where even well informed and well-intentioned people disagree. Consider capital punishment, for example, or abortion. But my point is that there are many other moral issues where there is general agreement. I take it we would all agree that it is immoral for a sadist to torture babies just because he gets pleasure from it. I take it we would all agree that it was morally wrong for Hitler to kill six million Jews. And colleges and universities are based on the assumption that it is morally wrong for students to cheat on tests or plagiarize papers.

I mention this point because last year, the Academic Standards Committee of CMC adjudicated more cases of academic dishonesty than ever before in its history. How disappointing! The very idea that tomorrow's leaders—as CMC graduates will surely be—might include people who thought that cheating in college is okay is deeply disturbing. I hope that this year there are fewer cases than ever before.

What I know about leadership, and it is probably not much, I learned years ago mainly from a few professors, religious leaders, and especially coaches. Some were more effective leaders than others, but the ones I respected most were those who used their leadership skills to achieve moral ends.

For example, I knew one coach who seemed to be in the profession mainly for reasons of his own ego. He was successful in winning matches, but he did not care about his players as persons, and he was known occasionally to lie and make promises that he did not keep. The players all knew this, and our respect for him, despite his great record, was negligible. Indeed, I think that in any setting most followers can sniff out in a minute a leader whose methods or goals are questionable.

What, then, is a good leader? I would argue that there are three basic attributes of good leadership: Good leadership entails: (1) communicating a

vision; (2) persuading people to work toward that vision; and (3) beneficially transforming the situation. Communication, persuasion, and transformation.

- Communication is the ability to project to one's followers an infectious and attractive vision of a better future;
- Persuasion is the ability to influence the views of one's followers, and mobilize them to work to bring about that better future; and
- Transformation is the ability to bring about mutually beneficial change in the direction of the original vision.

And I think these points are consistent with the fact that the leaders who are most admired in human history are people who had a vision that was essentially moral. In the previous century, I think of people like Winston Churchill, Harry Truman, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandella, and Mother Teresa. These folks were all flawed human beings, to be sure. You do not have to be morally perfect to be a great and respected leader. What you do have to be, as I suppose, is a person who works effectively toward shared and beneficial goals.

I have never met Professor Joseph Ellis. But I would hazard a guess that he is a person who learned to lie early in life, found that he could usually lie with impunity, and believed that other people would think more highly of him if he embellished the truth about himself. In my opinion, his actions constitute a tragic failure of leadership.

Let me close by telling you about the most effective leader I have ever known. Her name was Henrietta Mears, and her paid job was Director of Christian Education at a large Presbyterian church, which basically meant that she ran the Sunday school. This was a rather modest platform for her from which to go about her business. Her career was mainly in the nineteen thirties, forties, and fifties. By the time I knew her she was in her seventies, but still active and vigorous.

A religious leader, I truly believe she could have succeeded in any field of work, including the law or politics. She was not perfect. Like many determined and single-minded people, she had rough edges in her personality. But she exuded genuine concern for everyone she met. She was a charismatic public speaker. She handled conflict brilliantly, usually turning it into a positive rather than a negative. Most of all, she had the ability to explain what she wanted in such a way that instantly made you a member of her team. In her lifetime she founded a successful publishing company that still exists today. She also founded a large and still thriving conference center. And she inspired scores of young men to do what in her time she could not do, i.e., become ministers. She was, above all, a moral leader.

It is often said to college students, especially at commencements, that they are the leaders of tomorrow. It's a cliché, but when said about CMC

students, it is true. Many of you who are listening to me today have great potential for leadership in society, and one day you will be out there exercising your skills. Far too many of our political and cultural leaders today are either radically self-centered people or are at best mediocre leaders. Your college years constitute a unique opportunity for you to forge not just your intellect but also your leadership skills and your character. You can become a leader who is loved and respected if you use those skills in moral ways and toward moral ends.