



## Ellisville Missouri

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### Sermon

Good Morning. Nearing as I am next month another birthday, I happened to mention to a faculty colleague how it feels to be sliding into Senior Citizenship. He looked at me, wide-eyed. "Sliding?" he asked. "Hell, Allen, some of us are plunging headlong."

This is what birthdays can do to you. For example, I'm far enough along now into advancing decrepitude that I can remember the really old days – like the early 90s – when Presidential campaigns didn't do anything to attract people's attention until Labor Day, some eight or nine weeks before the election.

I surely can't be the only one to whom it seems this Presidential election started on the way home from the January 2009 swearing in ceremony and Inaugural lunch, so that I've been tired of hearing from the current candidates for months, with more than a year left to go.

Please don't get me started on \$2 a gallon gasoline, racist names painted on camp rocks, Ponzi schemes and class warfare, that the Founding Fathers fought tirelessly to end slavery, or that Mormons believe Jesus and Satan were brothers. How are we going to survive more than a year of these seemingly endless rounds of snide innuendoes, of really ridiculous policy proposals, of shameful displays of historical and scientific ignorance, of repellent character assassinations, and the eagerness to distort or deny verified facts?

Well. I'm here this morning to report we will. How do I know that? I'm basing that assumption on the study of cultural history, of the history of ideas, in part by devotion to the existential belief that "the more things change, the more they stay the same." Or in the immortal words of Coach Mike Ditka, "what goes around, comes around."

For example, let's start by recognizing the commonplace assumption that no time or society has a corner on missing sight of the forest for the trees. Accounts as far removed from us as those of ancient Greece and China speak of bitter intergenerational conflict, of the fear and rage on the part of elders that their children are lazy, unmotivated, unpatriotic, incompetent, and more interested in sex than in the preservation of their national and political heritages.

No less familiar is the cry that one lives in an age of leadership pygmies, of men and women with small goals and minds, of narrow vision and even more confined accomplishment. Consider, for a moment, this statement by one of America's most eminent 19th Century historians:

Our ship is among breakers, and we look about us for a pilot. An endangered nation seeks a leader worthy of itself . . . . In a struggle less momentous it found such leaders . . . . Out of three millions, America found a Washington, an Adams, a Franklin, a Jefferson, a Hamilton; out of twenty millions she now finds none whose stature can compare with these. She is strong in multitudes, swarming with brave men [and women], instinct with eager patriotism. But she fails in that which multitudes cannot supply, those master minds, the lack of which the vastest aggregate of mediocrity can never fill . . . .

Where are they? Why is mediocrity in our high places, and the race of our statesmen so dwindled? . . . The people have demanded equality, not superiority, and they have had it: men [and women] of the people, that is to say . . . in no way raised above the ordinary level of humanity. In degrading its high offices, the nation has weakened and degraded itself.

The words are those of Francis Parkman, son of a Unitarian minister, famed author of *The Oregon Trail*, and written only weeks after the outbreak of the Civil War. Ironically of course, as historian Richard Brown points out, they were written just as the nation was about to discover the greatness of Abraham Lincoln. Yet the fact of Lincoln's eventual stature in no way lessens the accuracy of Parkman's analysis. Brown reminds us that Lincoln was elected as the Common Man incarnate. To borrow a frequently used political slogan, "He's One of Us" might have served his advertising purposes well.

The fact that Lincoln later displayed superior qualities of wisdom, rectitude, and courage was accidental to his election. His immediate predecessors (James Buchanan, Franklin Pierce, and Zachary Taylor), like his immediate successors (Andrew Johnson, Ulysses Grant, Rutherford Hayes, and James Garfield) eloquently testify that Lincoln's extraordinary abilities were hardly required for nomination or national election.

Brown suggests that in most circumstances we're more comfortable with people we consider not much different from ourselves. Nebraska Senator Roman L. Hruska elevated this less than startling conclusion to the status of an art form in defending President Nixon's 1970 nomination of G. Harrold Carswell to the Supreme Court. In response to charges that Carswell was an undistinguished jurist, Senator Hruska nonetheless still promised to vote for him "even if were mediocre," since "there are a lot of mediocre judges and people and lawyers, and they are entitled to a little representation, aren't they?" The Senator's only error, Brown believes, lay in supposing that mediocrity isn't already fully represented in the nation's high councils.

Brown concludes that Hruska's statement embarrasses us because we don't like to admit our suspicion of superiority. Faced with the eventual need to choose, however, we regularly elect plausible, supple politicians who have the patience for endless campaigning and who may be more appealing than admirable.

Political analyst Richard Harris describes how the activities Presidential candidates must endure inevitably foster such qualities: the months required in single-minded pursuit of influence and power, their repetitiously required stump speeches, their estrangement from a normal lifestyle, the humiliations they must suffer "begging, begging, begging for money."

It seems unlikely that we will ever again have a good President. Instead, we will have our pick, willy-nilly, from among a crowd of egocentric children who are so obsessed by their dream of being "leader of the free world" that they will do anything and be anybody to get the job. Unhappily for them, and unfortunately for the world, all the dignity and glory and power of the Presidency cannot make a leader out of someone who has won it by behaving like a fool.

We don't have to be Presidential candidates, however, to see how the pressures on those of us in local elected or appointed leadership roles, on senior managers, administrators, and organization officers, have grown severe. Beyond financial stress and pressures to measure accomplishment in budget line item totals,

they daily face the harsh paradox of calls for strong leadership while in the background may be recognized those dissonant local forces gathering to cut our leaders down at the knees.

No President, for example, was so vilified as Lincoln, whose opponents termed him a political coward, “a baboon, an imbecile . . . an ignoramus,” and those were just for starters . . . Lincoln’s reply to such abuse was legendary . . .

If I were to read, much less answer, all attacks made on me, this shop might as well be closed for any other business. I do the very best I can, and I mean to keep doing so until the end. If the end brings me out all right, what is said against me won’t amount to anything. If the end brings me out wrong, ten angels swearing I was right would make no difference.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, dismissed by journalist Walter Lippmann in 1932 as “an amiable Boy Scout . . . a pleasant man, who, without any important qualifications for the office, would very much like to be President,” went on to so embitter many of his opponents that they couldn’t even bring themselves to refer to him by name, but rather only as “that man in the White House.”

Aware of such feelings, Roosevelt liked to tell the story of a World War II marine preparing to be sent home after a Pacific tour of duty, who complained to his commanding officer, “I haven’t killed a single enemy. Let me stay a little longer.” The understanding officer dispatched him to a hill then under attack, and told him, “Just shout, ‘To Hell with Hirohito,’ and a Japanese soldier will stick his head up so you can get a shot.” The marine followed orders, but when he shouted, “To Hell with Hirohito,” an enemy stood up and screamed, “To Hell with Roosevelt.” And the marine, later explaining to his commander why he’d failed his mission, sighed, “What could I do? I couldn’t shoot another Republican.”

As more of us share that kind of dilemma, it grows ever clearer how we need the complementary perspectives of our different experiences, training, and orientations if we’re to succeed in informing our leaders of where we seek to go with their guidance and coordination.

My interest also lies in a related issue, born and nurtured in my first real political involvement, as a graduate student in Boston as Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy’s 1968 campaign for the Democratic Presidential nomination arrived in neighboring New Hampshire.

As that terrible spring and summer wore on, as we endured the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, as I grew to fear watching live, rather than filmed, political events on television, and as I watched the spectacle of what a national report later termed a “police riot” by Mayor Daley’s security forces at the Chicago Democratic national convention – claiming to protect my family’s Lake Michigan drinking water from Abbie Hoffman’s boast to lace it with LSD – it grew plain that McCarthy would lose his bid to Vice President Hubert Humphrey.

As that conclusion arrived, more and more of the people I had come to know and respect said that Senator McCarthy would lose because he was too good for us, too far in advance of what America was ready to accept in a national political leader: a poet, a scholar, a man who quoted Thomas Aquinas at factory gates, shaking hands with workers for the thirty second sound bites on the evening news.

Well. It's consideration of such issues which has led me to the following conclusion: that societies no less than companies, corporations, PTAs, social organizations, political parties, baseball teams, congregations, colleges and universities all invariably succeed in getting just the leadership they deserve.

As an Illinois native, I've always admired the lesson of an incident from Adlai Stevenson's 1956 Presidential campaign. The former Illinois statesman was just leaving the stage after a campus speech, basking in the afterglow of a thunderous ovation, when a woman shouted from the balcony, "God bless you, Governor Stevenson! You'll get the vote of every thinking person!" "Not good enough," Stevenson shouted back without breaking stride. "I need a majority."

Consider the following vignettes, compiled by leadership analyst Arthur Levine:

The director of a national association tells an audience that colleges and universities are choosing second-rate presidents today, and decries the trend of selecting corporate managers to try to serve as academic leaders

[There's a revealing story about Dwight Eisenhower running aground of this issue. Many people mistakenly think Eisenhower went from being Supreme Allied Commander in World War II to running for President. In fact, he served as President of New York's Columbia College and University, from 1948-52.

Shortly after his arrival, he was invited to speak at the year's first faculty meeting. Eisenhower walked to the podium, greeted everyone, and said how nice it was to be here starting the academic year together. Unfortunately, instead of then waving and sitting down, he kept going. "I've always believed," he said, "it's a good idea for the chief executive officer to meet with customers and the employees."

Shock waves slowly spread through this room of distinguished Ivy League scholars. Finally a very senior faculty member slowly rose. "I would remind the General," he began, before beginning to sputter, the veins in his neck now bulging as his face grew a mild shade of scarlet, "I would remind the General that at Columbia, the faculty is the College . . ."]

Back to Arthur Levine. In informal gatherings, a group of corporate officers describe their current leadership as "bankrupt," lacking the vision once provided by the founders of their industries

Recent surveys of former organization presidents reveal a number would not return to their jobs. Many report it's no longer personally worth the stress to survive what educator and former University of California-Berkeley Chancellor Clark Kerr termed "the institutional use of senior officers like Kleenex, requiring the endless reply to hostile criticism and nerves like sewer pipes"

[Kerr was also the source of a wonderful explanation of job change. Some years after having been dismissed from Berkeley by then Governor Ronald Reagan, Kerr was asked to reflect on the experience. "Of course; it's very simple," he said. "I left campus just the way I'd arrived: fired with enthusiasm."]

Levine argues that the present time could be a golden age of American leadership, suggesting that hard times have produced some of our most celebrated executives. His central point is that opportunity is implicit in adversity. Good times often mean Business As Usual – continued growth accomplished largely by adding to what already exists. By contrast, hardship requires cutbacks and reappraisals, forcing us to develop new goals and visions even as we reevaluate old ones. It's a process which has produced a number of outstanding leaders, "pragmatic dreamers" in Levine's term, "who have become leaders of historic proportions."

Levine speaks for many of us when he says that such does not seem to be the case today. The great visions are lacking; the larger than life leaders absent. Instead, he concludes, all too many of us are mired in "survivalism," a short sighted commitment to holding tight and riding out economic and demographic problems, a stance which makes effective leadership – though badly needed – all the more unlikely, and for at least three reasons.

First, the emphasis is less on quality than on minimizing risk. In such a climate, boards of trustees too often search for "managers" rather than people with the creatively unorthodox ideas to keep their organizations vibrant over the long run.

Second, survivalism represents a struggle of each against all, a Zero Sum Game in which for every winner, someone must lose. Departments, divisions, committees learn to protect their own turf, separating each constituency from every other. Such an approach may even have its own political attraction. In the words of one President for whom I worked, "if these people stay busy arguing with each other, they have that much less time arguing with me." In the business of survival, everyone is out for him or herself. There are, as a result, few followers, and so even fewer leaders.

Third, difficult decisions are often not made. The reluctance to take risks and the absence of followers are conditions which require politically expedient decisions. When budgets have to be cut, senior officers may be more drawn to do so across the board rather than selectively in weaker areas, or reallocate to support excellent ones.

To lament the small stature of our leaders, is, in truth, to admit how sadly small our expectations have grown of them. Strong leadership from men and women who inspire as well as manage, who prod and urge us to higher levels of achievement than we might have first thought ourselves capable, requires something beyond their native abilities; it needs from us supportive context, a community consensus on identity and purpose.

In turn, we need from our leaders evidence that they grasp and understand our concerns, our fears, our group dreams and ambitions. And of critical importance, we need assurance that our leaders understand how unlikely it is they will succeed at any but the most shallow level and for the briefest time by failing to view their context whole, failing to recognize or to deal with the sometimes conflicting demands of all their constituents.

As my Russian immigrant master plumber grandfather once suggested to me while serving as a congregation president, you can't be a successful president of just part of an organization any more than you can successfully install the plumbing to just part of a building – at least not without very serious and regrettably soggy results.

An effective leader may cherish collegiality without forgetting there are times when he or she must accept challenge – even rebuke – and thereby refine what one believes to be just and true in the crucible of local opinion. There's no necessarily disabling contradiction in those feelings. On the contrary, if a leadership role initially carries some limited personal influence and authority, to maintain credibility one must stand for something worthy of community trust, and regularly re-earn it.

In this sense, our organizations and institutions are no more immune from critical scrutiny than are our individual leaders. If, for example, we're to cope successfully with the bewildering problems spawned by advanced technology, if we wish to make informed judgments about nuclear power, climate change, and alternate energy sources, thoughtful regard for the values behind their creation is postponed at our peril. To the extent our leaders and organizations decline a role in quality individual and group problem diagnosis, for familiarity with and respect for ethical paradox, ambiguity, and ambivalence, they first jeopardize then forfeit our trust.

So if the best way to inform and instruct our leaders and to teach values is by example, then how an organization spends its money, how its governance, problem diagnosis and solving systems work – who has access to them and under what circumstances – are all moral questions requiring connection to those values the organization says it holds. A group whose governance system contradicts the principles in which it says it believes, is a group in disrepair.

Perhaps above all, effective leadership works to build paths and bridges among local learning and work areas, to erode old false barriers, to demonstrate that better solutions wait to be found through the integration of knowledge, what former university president Theodore Gross terms “the great leadership issue of our Century.” Harlan Cleveland, the founding Dean of the University of Minnesota's Hubert Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, has called for a similar shift of focus in the way we and our leaders regard our problems.

The real enemy to progress now is excessive specialization. It has increased productivity but has gone so far that specialization is dysfunctional. In politics we have one issue fanatics. Elsewhere we have territorial fighters. We have more experts in small areas but more fragmentation and anarchic bickering. The trick is to move educated people toward more integrative thinking, to see more connections and consequences, to realize the ties between present decisions and future quality, between their little area of work and the whole organization of which they are a part.

Integrated, strategic thinking will also help us move ahead despite fewer resources. The hallmark of specialized experts is their sense of doubt and gloom. The mark of integrative thinkers is their sense of new possibilities and action.

This is the lesson which teaches us how difficult it is to think of our concerns in sharply drawn, stubbornly held polarities, without the promotion of crippling stereotypes about each. This is the lesson that quality leadership brings people, ideas, and learning areas together, rather than pit them against each other to aid their separation.

And this is the difficult process which syndicated columnist Sydney J. Harris advances as one answer to the rhetorical puzzle of the ages: why so often the wrong people seem in charge of the right things; how does the world get handed over to the people who seem to run it so badly, so selfishly, even self destructively? Who voted for these jokers? Wait a minute, wait a minute . . . .

To the degree the charge is true, Harris believes the explanation rests in the sharp division of thinking which marks us all as being human. There are people who see only one side to many questions, which they pursue with vigor, often ignoring the claims of the other. They may turn out to be the people who seek and win office and power, because of their infectious confidence that they are absolutely and irrevocably right.

There are others, though, who are painfully aware of the world's contradictions and complications. Their judgments tend to be tentative and provisional, leaving room for adjustment. These people are often much less persuasive.

We regularly look for leadership to those who are positive, even aggressive in their proposals and statements, who paint themselves and their adversaries in boldly contrasting colors to arouse emotion and partisanship. The men and women who can see and evaluate several sides of a question, less frequently command enthusiastic followings. Few of us eagerly surge to enlist under banners stating, "All things considered, I hope this is the right way."

What's required, says Harris, is leaders who combine these opposite traits in proper balance – being capable of making fine distinctions, but not immobilized by the need to split hairs when a final decision cannot be postponed. One of the reasons Lincoln is so revered as a President is our belief that he, almost alone among world leaders, possessed this duality, with the kind of mind poised between thought and action. What happens to us, Harris concludes, is all too often decided by those not well suited to raise our moral and cultural standards, no matter what social or political creed they advance.

Predictions are an obviously risky business. The Danish physicist, Nobel Laureate Niels Bohr, may have put it best when he said, "Prediction is very difficult, especially about the future." Risk or not, let me suggest we'll need a new kind of leadership for the world our children and grandchildren will inherit, and too often we've not been looking in the right places for the right kind of person. In my grandfather's words, "Nothing is more dangerous than an idea, when it's the only one you got."

In this fashion, one grows to admire those men and women who make a difference in the life of an organization, who help friends and colleagues understand how their complementary roles affect the local quality of life, who grasp that motivation and growth rest in building a sense of ownership and common cause, wherein individuals feel they have an investment in decisions. One honors such effort by being the kind of leader who makes things possible, who helps people believe in themselves and in their abilities to reach and achieve.

"Empowerment" is one of the flash points dividing leadership from management. In his prize winning examination of the subject, *Why Leaders Can't Lead: The Unconscious Conspiracy Continues*, former university president Warren Bennis argues leaders are people who do the right thing; managers are people

who do things right. Many of us in our working lives, he says, encounter the wasteful tragedy of being under-led and over-managed.

To avoid this trap requires leaving behind the survivalist ethic, the management stance equating the avoidance of risk or controversy with successful leadership. Don't Make No Waves – Don't Back No Losers is political scientist Milton Rakove's memorable 1975 study of Chicago politics. [Is that a great book title or what? At the Sermon Talk Back later this morning I'll explain the title of Rakove's 1979 follow up book, We Don't Want Nobody Nobody Sent.]

The central point is that we must produce creative violation of such advice, because as badly needed today as ever is the reminder that we were not put here to grow complacent. Survivalism proves inadequate because the price of its purchase is self-effacement. Survival with lost identity is hardly worth discussion. Quality and distinction are. If we fail to believe that, it will matter far less at what we succeed.

A key ingredient to model individual and group success has been proposed by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly in his 1990 best seller, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, about those moments in our lives when we're so engrossed in an activity, so wonderfully in control of our abilities, with all jets burning, that only the moment matters. His base finding:

Challenges greater than talents evoke anxiety. Skills exceeding demands create boredom. When talents equal the task at hand, circumstances flow.

Most important, he argues, we can learn to orchestrate such peak moments to enhance our lives. "Optimal experience," he writes, "is something we can make happen."

Well, in this time of shadowed altruism and lowered expectations, whether or not we agree with such optimism, we might pause over the words of one of the 20th Century's instructional giants, the distinguished educator Benjamin Mays, longtime President of Georgia's Morehouse College and spiritual mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr.

The tragedy of life is not in failing to reach one's goal; the tragedy lies in having had no goals to reach . . . . It's no calamity to die with dreams unfulfilled, but it is not to have dreamed. Not failure, but low aim, is the sin.

In every cultural transition – as we are surely in now – the work of a single person or of a small group can mean the difference between opening a superb achievement for others to follow, and copied mediocrity. In this time of diminished heroism and expectations, as we struggle with role model alternatives, teaching by example is the moral compass I wish to recall.

"Our inability to work together, to collaborate and cooperate," writes Bennis, "is undermining America. If people in authority believe that competence and conscience must be restored, then they must demonstrate both."

Gandhi may have put it best when he wrote, with matchless simplicity and eloquence, "We must be the change we wish to see in the world."

Many of our greatest leaders have arrived at the same conclusion, so that now the choices are ours.

Or, put another way, in the words of cartoonist Walt Kelly's sage character, Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and they is us."

Amen.