Where have all the leaders gone?

Almost Half a century ago Time Magazine published perhaps its most famous cover ever asking “Is God Dead?” After spending any amount of time in any media outlet today I must ask “Is leadership dead?” Recently I opened up the newspaper to see that my state’s former governor had a child with his house keeper ten years ago resulting in the dissolution of his current marriage. Whereas just a decade ago it was a big deal when a leader failed morally, it is getting to the point where almost every headline on the front page has to do with some kind of corruption of leadership. From elected officials of small cities like Bell, to school district mismanagement, to a previously mentioned governor to a future president of a major world power, it seems like the wheels have fallen off of the notion of integrity in leadership. A major motion picture has been released recently called “Waiting for Superman.” It is about our very ill education system. I watched in silence with a group of colleagues. Basically the movie claimed that the failure of the system boiled down to failure of leadership.

Where have all the leaders gone? What happened to leadership? It is in these times of crisis that we are forced to ask the most fundamental questions. So I am now asking, what is a leader?

Before I start, please forgive me for using a multitude of personal experiences as I share my journey, my search for what is true leadership. Much, but not all, that I have to go on was discovered as I reflect on my own personal quest for a leader.

To understand leadership at all, we must ask the fundamental question: What are we leading them to? Leaders by definition are to be followed, but to where? For example, many coaches of sports are leading players to winning a game or playing the game well. For a military general leadership may mean winning a battle or war. In both cases these could be worthy goals of leadership, although great coaches and generals have something even bigger in mind than winning. But we must ask, “What are we leading these people to?” “Where are we going?” My neighbor used to lead expeditions to the Himalayas. Everyone he led knew where they were going.

As a chemistry professor at a community college, I deal in teaching students how to balance those dreaded chemical equations. The law of conservation of mass says that every atom of each element on the right has to equal every atom on the left. The one side of the equation must equal the other side. Otherwise, the equation is unbalanced.

Do we currently have an unbalanced equation of leadership? I will claim that we do. I think that we have redefined leadership in our society without realizing it. And we are out of balance. I claim we have come to equate leadership with three different definitions that leave our understanding of leadership incomplete.

First, we have equated competence in project management or task completion with good leadership. I need to share an experience that I had with my son who is a junior in high school. He wants to go to the Naval Academy. The academy looks for three qualities in a candidate: academics, athletics and leadership. My son discussed with me that he thought he is weakest in the area of leadership. About this time I was involved in organizing a food drive for the hungry that I do annually in conjunction with my church. The food drive is a cool concept. We have church members stand out at the entrance to grocery stores and ask patrons to purchase some items of food from a shopping list that is handed to them as they enter the store. The food is collected as the patron leaves and is taken to local food banks around Orange County such as the O. C. Rescue Mission. At the mission they weigh the
food and calculate how many meals that particular load would serve. One year at the end of the food drive we estimated we collected enough food to provide 20,000 meals!

I thought maybe it would be a good idea for me to let my son take over and lead it. A lot is involved in organizing this event. We have to get permission from grocery stores to let our workers stand at the entrance. We have to get professional looking posters and handouts. The workers have to be recruited and communicated with and trained. The food has to be collected in pick-up trucks. We have to find those trucks and willing drivers. The distribution centers have to be contacted and arranged for drop offs. And then the food has to be unloaded by more volunteers. This sounded like a perfect project for my son to lead. It certainly would look great on a college application! But halfway into the project I seriously began to wonder if there is more to leading than organizing people to complete a task, even a very worthy task.

It certainly would look great on a college application! But halfway into the project I seriously began to wonder if there is more to leading than organizing people to complete a task, even a very worthy task.

This sounded like a perfect project for my son to lead. It certainly would look great on a college application! But halfway into the project I seriously began to wonder if there is more to leading than organizing people to complete a task, even a very worthy task.

I can train my son to talk to people in a way that makes them want to participate. I can teach him how to word emails and talk to store managers. I can help him practice speaking to the volunteers about how to approach patrons and ask for food donations. This is all well and good, but is this all there is to leadership? I wonder will my son still be doing this kind of work when he is my age? Is the only motivation to perform a task that looks good on a college application? There must be more.

There is: compassion. I want my son to develop compassion for people, for the volunteers he recruits, for the store managers, and especially for those hungry people. I don’t just want my son to develop skills, yes that is very important, but I want him to develop internal character. And I want him to lead in such a way that those who follow him also develop that same compassion. It made me ask: Is that compassion what drives me?

It dawned on me that leadership is more than project management or organizing people or delegating or even collecting food for the hungry. Those things are important, but they are secondary. I have come to believe that the primary element of leadership is the character of the leader.

As I thought about this I realized that I learned this in my first experience as a scientist. To help pay my way through college I worked summers as a research technician at U.S.C. Medical School. I worked for a neurologist physician named Dr. John Fleming. John could have made good money in a private practice, but instead he chose to do research. He believes that the cause of Multiple Sclerosis is viral. I spent three summers genetically altering the mouse corona virus and studying its affects on the host to see if it acted like the disease. Every Tuesday John would walk across the street to County Hospital to treat M. S. patients at his free clinic. I was amazed at his generosity. One Friday afternoon he told me he was leaving the lab early and to make sure I lock up properly. When I asked him where he was going he answered: “I am working in a homeless shelter tonight. I need to care for those who are in need.” Care for those in need? Wow, I thought that is what he did everyday.

Sure, John taught me how to do research. I followed him in making monoclonal antibodies and tissue cultures and reading viral plaques. I mimicked his every motion. We were successful in injecting my double variant viruses back into the mouse and seeing demyelination similar to M. S. symptoms. But he taught me so much more than that. He taught me character. He taught me that I need to care for people, real people, that are less fortunate than I am. That is why we were investigating M. S. in the first place. He taught me that the followers take on the character of the leader.

"Men think that it is essential that the Nation have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour ... but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain."
Henry David Thoreau
The follower takes on the character of the leader. The kingdom takes on the character of the king. This has played itself out in the negative many times. I think horrifically of Adolph Hitler and Nazi Germany, for example.

John Fleming also taught me the importance of honesty in science. And he taught me this by being, for me, an imitatable example.

And this is how our whole system of science works. The entire apparatus of science in our society is built upon the notion of following a leader like an apprentice follows a master. We all know that most professors at universities do little lecturing. They mostly do research. And they have one or two graduate students that follow their every move. Now, every summer I send out a dozen or so of my best students to universities like U. S. C. or Cal State Long Beach to do a research internship. If you watch them, the students soon even take on the mannerisms of the research advisor! Our system of education is built on making followers into leaders. And this process is done by having the follower take on the characteristics of the leader.

I want to claim that leaders must first be people of good character. They must possess the character traits like compassion and honesty and humility because it is one’s character that is the rails on which our whole society runs. Have we forgotten that this is the case?

Do we as leaders live lives that we would like others to imitate? Imitation is, I believe, inevitable. The followers will begin to take on the characteristics of the leader. I don’t think there is anything we can do about it.

But have we reduced leadership down to something besides character? All too often in the last decade or so we have seen leaders “run off the rails.” I really think it is because of a misconceived definition of leadership.

If leadership that is equal to project management does not balance the leadership equation, the second element in the unbalanced equation of leadership is that leadership equals standing for the right cause or having the right beliefs about a certain issue. Of course these things are important, but supporting the right position on a worthy cause is not the primary meaning of being a leader. Nevertheless I fear that is what leadership has become.

We see, almost every week it seems, someone in congress get into serious trouble. It does not matter what side of the aisle one is on in Washington. Both Republicans and Democrats have had too many fallen representatives. But often in the past the bad behavior has been excused. How many times have we heard in the political world, “It doesn’t matter what he does in his personal life because he champions our cause.” Is leadership just holding the right beliefs about a certain issue? “He is ok with me because he works so hard to save the environment…”

"The partisan strife in which the people of the country are permitted to periodically engage does not tend to the development of ugly traits of character, but merely discloses those that preexist."
Abrose Bierce, American Author Referring to election campaigns, 1884.

Just this last month this falling of a leader went to a new low. A member of congress was caught texting questionable pictures of himself to various women. He then tried to cover it up with lies. Many in his district stood up for him because he stood for the right causes in their minds. Again,
what difference does it make what he does in his private life? But a New York Times writer Ross Douthat suggested that it might mean a lot.

Douthat writes, “In the sad case of Rep. Anthony Weiner’s virtual adultery, the Internet era’s defining vice has been thrown into sharp relief. It isn’t lust or smut or infidelity, though online life encourages all three. It’s a desperate, adolescent narcissism.” Weiner, according to Douthat, was on a “pathetic quest for quasi-public validation.” He goes on “Whether the congressman was tweeting photos of his upper body or bragging” about some other body part, Douthat observes, Weiner’s focus was “squarely on himself.”

Does the character of the leader even matter anymore?

“…fake it, fake it…Never worry about facts. Project an image to the public.”
Diana Vreeland, Editor of Vogue Magazine

Does it matter that a leader might be a complete narcissist? Or does it only matter that he voted “yea” on a particular bill? Is it possible that the narcissistic character trait could influence his or her positions or decisions? Would he or she produce followers that are also narcissistic?

But, what about lying? If one lies to their spouse to cover up an infidelity surely that is private, right? Perhaps, but we should also ask, if one lies in “small” things will he not tell a lie in “bigger” things? Does it even matter how one treats those closest to him or her? Can one be ok as a leader if he treats his spouse and children and aides like absolute garbage, but he votes yes on an education bill so he is fine? Would he or she also lie to his or her constituents or colleagues or the press or oversight committees? Or are those things ok too as long as he or she is pro-…?

Surely there are people that are “really nice guys” but are terrible leaders. I acknowledge that. Leadership is about skill and beliefs and authority. But those elements alone do not even come close to balancing the equation. Good character must be there also. Is character the missing element in our leadership equation?

The third misconception of leadership is equating leadership with mere authority and power.

A very “successful” coach just resigned from his position at one of the most prestigious football universities. Why make him quit? After all, he had won a national championship. His teams had beaten their bitter rival nine out of ten times. Why was he forced to resign? Integrity. Sadly, it has just become too easy to find anecdotes for this article. But a brief discussion of college athletics is actually appropriate here because it demonstrates the complete shift from the character building purpose of the university to a project or task driven purpose.

If you walk around the halls of Harvard (1636), it won’t take long to see that it’s original intent was to build lives of character. Just read the permanent etchings on the walls. But within 260 years character had found its way out of the curriculum of places like Harvard. Morality and ethics were no longer considered real knowledge. Nevertheless, university administrators still saw a need to get students to develop some form of character. (After all we don’t want students to cheat on tests.) Needing to put ethics somewhere they developed athletic programs and other extra curricular programs to teach character. Now we see the result of that decision very clearly. Ethics and character are no longer considered knowledge in the university. What happens when you remove character from the curriculum is that it leaves the equation entirely. Only the content in the actual curriculum is considered valuable knowledge. Everything else that falls outside the recognized curriculum is window dressing. Character or ethics is no longer considered knowledge so it is relegated to optional, or for “when we get around to it.”
Now those university students don’t just cheat on tests, they cheat on Wall Street after they graduate.

We want our leaders in authority to make the right decisions. We want them to allocate funds correctly. But almost everyday the front page of the Times has a story about misuse of funds, misuse of authority. We call this corruption. And it happens at many levels. Is this not one big reason why local, state and national governments are in huge deficits? It happens when a city manager diverts municipal funds to pay for his house. But it also happens when one spends public money unnecessarily in order not to lose those funds the next year. “Use it or lose it”, the saying goes. It is about a misconception of authority. It goes like this. Let’s say I think my chemistry department is more important than the English department so I hoard the money given my direction this year even though I don’t need it. I believe my cause is more important than someone else’s so I spend the money unnecessarily. If this is not a form of corruption then at least it is a misuse of my authority, even though I believe my cause is just. Multiply this action over a million times and we get an awful lot of waste.

"Few men have virtue to withstand the highest bidder."
George Washington

We have now spent 100’s of billions of dollars fighting wars in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan. One of the stated goals was to set up a new system of government. Surely we must have learned that we cannot just “export democracy” to a country at random. That country must first have the rails of character before the train of democracy can carry its cargo of freedom to the people of that country. Back home it generally seems that the democrats want government to have greater control and the republicans want business to take the lead. But if the individuals who run business or government have a weak moral character, what difference does it make who is in charge? Have we finally come to disagree with the likes of T. S. Eliot who said: “It is impossible to design a system so perfect that no one needs to be good”?

Leadership involves organizational skill and correct stance on issues and use of authority in decision-making. But leadership is obviously more, way more.

I often hear that we want leaders of integrity. But what does integrity actually mean? Integrity is related to the term integration. It means wholeness, completeness, not corrupted, according to Webster. It means a balanced equation! Skill and authority and correct stance on the issues are essential but they are not enough.

"In a president, character is everything. A president doesn't have to be brilliant... He doesn't have to be clever; you can hire clever... You can hire pragmatic, and you can buy and bring in policy wonks. But you can't buy courage and decency, you can't rent a strong moral sense. A president must bring those things with him... He needs to have, in that much maligned word, but a good one nonetheless, a "vision" of the future he wishes to create... But a vision is worth little if a president doesn't have the character-- the courage and heart-- to see it through."
Peggy Noonan, Presidential speechwriter

Character can no longer be just an “option” like a better stereo in a new car. I think that I would rather work with someone that I disagree with politically but whom is honest than one who I agree with on most issues but is dishonest. I wonder can we have knowledge about character just like we have knowledge about chemistry or history? Can character knowledge be on the same level as knowledge of physics?
As a science educator, what does it mean to be a leader? What does it mean to have integrity as a teacher? Certainly I need to be knowledgeable of my subject of chemistry. I need to have the skill to instruct my students in multiple ways and explain that knowledge in an understandable manner. Those are both part of integrity. But there is more.

Now that I have found that my equation of leadership is unbalanced, I think I am ready to try to balance the equation. I would like to suggest three elements of the character of a leader that I think are necessary but have for some reason been forgotten in our society of late.

First, leaders live an imitable life. We cannot help it. If we are a leader we will be followed. This is part of the natural process whether it is parenting or teaching or coaching or “presidenting”. The leader will be imitated. A friend of mine who is an author has written: “Wherever a king exercises this kind of power, the result is that his character is made manifest in that territory. That is to say, his realm displays the contours of his nature.” In other words: the kingdom takes on the character of the king! The implication of that statement makes me pause. If that is true, then those I lead take on my character. Gulp! My family takes on my character. My college chemistry class takes on my character. This makes me shudder! Therefore my character matters (Charles Barkley of, “I ain’t no role model,” was wrong!) We cannot help but be a role model. Indeed modeling is one of the best techniques I was taught in teacher school. I always hear politicians are told to “stay on message.” Friends, our message is our life. Our curriculum is communicated through our character. Have we come to think that if we know certain scientific facts or support certain causes then our character, and that of those around us, will take care of itself? Do we think that good character just happens?

In the case of my work for the needy I have learned that it takes effort to cultivate that compassion in myself, in my kids, and in those volunteers I lead. Sometimes it is not easy to show compassion for people that can be difficult. If it is inevitable that I am going to be followed, then I must cultivate a life worthy of being modeled. I think that means honesty must come before my cause. It means that I won’t fudge the data even if manipulated facts would better support the worthy issue I believe in so strongly.

I don’t think the idea is that any leader is going to be perfect. Indeed one of the best characteristics of leaders I have followed is that they know their own weaknesses. This kind of humility might actually be the most important quality of a good leader. I don’t think I have come anywhere near an exhaustive list of character qualities of a leader, but humility, compassion and honesty are a good start.

If it is natural that I will be followed and copied then I think it follows that the second aspect of a leader of character is that I value those people I am leading above all else. I must put my students and my colleagues above my causes.

I have actually observed leaders that did not even seem to care about the people they were leading. I see this frequently in my own profession. I have seen colleagues treat other colleagues with complete contempt because of a minor disagreement. I have seen some administrators treat those under them like they are non-entities. I have seen teachers treat their students poorly. That may be one reason why chemistry teachers have earned such a bad reputation. Some of my own chemistry teachers put the content way above their care and compassion for me or the other students as people.
When I went to teacher training school I had a professor that told the class, “Please remember, you don’t teach subjects, you teach students.” “Yah, right!” I said, “I teach chemistry, and they better learn it!”

And then I met “Billy.”

Billy was a missionary kid who wound up in my first semester Organic Chemistry class, twice. He could not speak very understandable English, he could not write well and he could not make a peanut butter sandwich let alone synthesize cis-dibenzoyl ethylene. His mom is dead. His dad is somewhere in Africa. He wants to be a cardiologist—ON WHAT PLANET? Actually he wants to be a missionary doctor. He cleans a church to pay rent to a pastor he lives with. His closest friends keep telling him he is a failure. When he gets a C in class he had to submit to discipline, as he told me is common in his subculture. After he is by far the last student done with his experiment, for the fifth time in a row, he hints to me he wants to figure out a way to end his life. I think, “Darn, I should have been on the 91 freeway to home a half hour ago!” Not knowing what to do or say, I hear my mouth say the words “Well,…let’s pray.” Billy needed an ear to hear him, a shoulder to cry on and a friend to care for him as a valuable person.

How many “Billy’s” do I have this semester?

Billy and other students like him have taught me that education is relational. The ancient Hebrews had a word for teach: yadah. I feel like that is all my students hear sometimes yada, yada. But, in fact the Hebrew concept of teach is not like our lecture. Yadah really means “to cause to learn.” It is a totally relational term. To the Hebrews, teaching is almost completely relational. When I look at my best teachers or the mentor I had, John Fleming, this makes perfect sense.

But have we allowed skill and correct support of a cause slip into first place? I have been able to observe many in leadership. It startles me that recently I have witnessed several of my friends “sacrificed for the cause.” Sadly some of these friends were even involved with a church.

I believe that in the mind of a great leader people do not get sacrificed for the cause. I think this also means that the leader does not try to manipulate the followers. I think there is a fine line between persuasion and manipulation. A leader that puts people before causes does everything in their power not to cross that line. People are not just a means for me to achieve my goals! I have sadly seen one leader misrepresent another leader’s words or actions for the sake of the cause. Causes and tasks are important. Winning wars, winning games, research findings and test scores are important, but it is the people that must come before the task. Either way, it is people that will carry out that task.

First, leaders work to live imitable lives. Second, how a leader treats others matters more than the leader could possibly imagine.

Third, the excellent leader is a person of vision.

Recently a good and well-respected leader on a college campus asked the rest of the faculty this question: “What is the product of our institution?” His answer was that “Our product is our programs”. Even though this is a wonderful leader on this particular campus, I carefully say that I would have to disagree with him. The product of an educational institution is the students. And I think that is the difference between mission and vision. Excellent leaders are visionary. And the vision of a leader is to produce a certain kind of person. None of these ideas are new. I just think that over time we have forgotten them. The Greek thinkers, such as Plato and Aristotle believed that the
job of a leader was to create a just society. And the best way to do this is to create a just person. The founding Fathers and Mothers of our nation also believed that to have a good society we must have good ethical and moral people. That is why they created colleges like Harvard or Yale or Princeton. These places were not created to primarily perform scientific research. Research actually came centuries later. Character came first. And good character is the destination to which we are leading those that follow us. We are leading people to an excellent character and to a good and just society.

“America is great because she is good. If America ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.” And “The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults.”
Alexis de Tocqueville, French historian and political scientist

About half way through writing this article on leadership I was interrupted by my 16 year old. “Dad, I need help building my physics project.” Deep inside I thought, “Now? But I am right in the middle of thinking so profoundly…about…leadership.”

At least I am not so dull as to realize, with much guilt, the irony of that! “Ok son, let’s go work on that project.”

He had to build a device that would propel him across the school pool within, three minutes, while he was standing up. It was called “Walk on Water.” As we sat down to start drawing up plans, a thought came to me. What are we doing? Is this all about building a boat? Or is there more to this than I realized? I taught physics in high school for many years. So I could give my son a whole bunch of theoretical knowledge about buoyancy. I do lots of woodworking so I could teach him the skills of safely using a saw and a drill. But is there more to this project than the mission of building a boat?

What would he really learn? Would he see me lose my temper when things did not go right? Or would I be patient with him? Would I take over and connect it together for him or coach him through putting it all together himself. Would I encourage him to bend the rules just a little? What are we really building here? I began to see that we were building something much more than a flotation device? We are building lives together. Is my life worth modeling?

I think this is the difference between mission and vision. Teaching is not just about chemistry or English or history. It’s those things, but also much more. Teaching is about molding young lives into spectacular people. Teaching is about shaping people into closer and closer images of their potential as a unique human being. I think great leaders see that potential and help their followers achieve their own potential. And I think that potential should include character traits like honesty, humility, care for others (maybe even above self), and patience, among many other good qualities. I think great leaders are builders of certain kinds of people, and the leaders strive much to be people of good character themselves.

Leaders live immitatable lives. How I treat others matters more than I can imagine. Leaders build certain kinds of people.

"Fame is a vapor, popularity an accident, riches take wing, and only character endures."
Horace Greely, New York Newspaper Editor

You know what, I want to follow a leader who lives a life worthy of imitation. I want to follow a leader that cares about me. I want to follow a leader that can help me reach my potential.

I want to learn to lead the way I want to be led.
leadership ≠ the right cause or beliefs or ideology,
leadership ≠ authority and decision making
leadership ≠ project management, delegation and task completion

Balanced equation:
Integrity in leadership = good ethical character (worthy of imitation, honesty, humility, care for the led, vision) + the right cause or beliefs or ideology + authority and decision making + competent project management, delegation and task completion