

Friday Focus

From Emory

The Character-Based Leader

For as long as I can remember, I have been interested in leadership. It is an intriguing and sometimes elusive quality that is a requirement for those of us involved in education. Recently, I came across this article written by Gordon MacDonald and published in *Christian School Education*. Mr. MacDonald has written a wonderful article with a unique perspective of leadership that runs counter to what culture often depicts as ‘good leadership,’ and it is worthy of reproduction. For the next two weeks, excerpts of this article will be our Focus.

About 140 years ago, Matthew Arnold wrote a stirring poem--“Rugby Chapel”--in honor of his deceased father, Thomas. I think the poem ought to be required reading for every school teacher and administrator.

At the time of his death in 1842, Thomas Arnold, the principal of Rugby School, was considered the architect of the modern English educational system. Beyond that, he was widely celebrated as a supreme example of Victorian nobility. In short, he was your quintessential *good man*. Son Matthew had much to be proud of when he heralded his father.

If you collect descriptions of noble leadership, include “Rugby Chapel” because it speaks to spiritual qualities such as compassion, courage, and selfless dedication as premier hallmarks of a leader’s life. While twenty-first-century treatments of leadership tend to focus on matters of performance such as skill, power, and rewards, Matthew Arnold went deeper in describing a leader: in terms of personal character. Here are some of my favorite lines. Midway through “Rugby Chapel,” Matthew Arnold writes this description of his father:

If, in the paths of the world,
Stones might have wounded thy feet,
Toil or dejection have tried
Thy spirit, of that we saw
Nothing! To us thou wert still
Cheerful, and helpful, and firm.

Cheerful! Helpful! Firm! Such an interesting string of words. Years ago I typed them into the screen saver of my computer. I see them almost daily, and they remind me of the kind of men and women I most admire. And each time they revive my aspirations to be a person marked by those qualities.

Musing on those three words one day, I wrote in my journal that I desired to be
not a pessimistic man, but a cheerful one;
not a discouraging man, but a helpful one;
not an unbending man, but a firm one.

I think Jesus would smile at the thought of His disciples--then and now--who are cheerful, helpful and firm. And I suspect that a lot of things might change for the good if there were a larger band of people today who fit that three-word description.

So where do you start finding people who look and act like that? First, you become like that yourself, and then you grow others to be like that. Isn’t that the way our Lord did it?

The Gospels are a primer of leadership development at the character level. Take, for example, the story of Jesus and His disciples in a boat on a stormy lake. As the tempest rose to unexpected ferocity, the disciples began to panic. Somehow all their experience and bravado was not up to the challenge of the elements. Anxieties boiled until the men simply lost all self-control and rushed to the back of the boat where Jesus was sleeping.

Refresh your memory of the picture. The disciples: crazed with fear. Jesus: sleeping, unperturbed!

I think that in this case the sleep of Jesus was a statement about character. It was evidence of His confidence that all things--even storms--were in His Father's hands and that there was no need for hysterics.

Obviously, the disciples saw things differently. Thus their furious screaming at Jesus, their accusations of gross insensitivity (after all, someone had to be blamed). Want to bet that their language wasn't a tad salty?

As a child, I always thought the message of this story was in the miracle when Jesus put the storm out of action. But in more recent years I have come to see that the message in the story comes in the question the Lord asked after the miracle when things had settled down.

"Where is your faith?" He asked the shaken disciples (Luke 8:25, NIV). It was no small question, and Jesus probably asked it very strategically. The question was designed to provoke an exercise in soul-searching. It was time--out in the boat--to assess character: theirs.

Was Jesus' tone of voice one of anger? Irritability? Pity? Ask Jesus' question out loud. Mimic all three tones of voice and listen to how the question sounds.

...The storm was one of the ways that Jesus prepared His disciples to live in a world of uncertainty and surprise...

...My bet is that the disciples never forgot that moment and its follow-up question. When times got tough in their apostolic years, they must have returned in their minds to that scene again and again and the vivid lesson they learned when Jesus conducted Himself with such dignity in contrast to their collapse of spirit in that boat. Matthew Arnold saw a similar dignity in his father, and he was caused to write about it:

Therefore to thee (his father) it was given
Many to save with thyself;
And, at the end of thy day,
O faithful shepherd! To come
Bringing thy sheep in thy hand.

A discussion about character traits in leadership can go in a thousand different directions. Taking my cues from the description that Matthew Arnold gives of his father, I am interested in only three that I mentioned earlier.

Matthew Arnold says of his father, "Thou wert... cheerful." What could he mean? That Thomas was a jolly, optimistic, and fun-loving man? Or is he saying something far more profound? My bet is that he is remembering his father as a hope-giving man. Cheer, hope--what powerful traits for a leader to possess. Especially in a world where they seem in such short supply. Matthew Arnold writes the following:

Weakness is not in your word,
Weariness not in your brow.
Ye alight in our van (at the front); at your voice
Panic, despair, flee away.
Ye move through the ranks, recall
The stragglers, refresh the outworn,
Praise, re-inspire the brave.

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Next time, Part II of this article