



Heart-Centered Leadership

Rev. Dr. Bentley deBardelaben-Phillips

“Fear is such a powerful emotion for humans that when we allow it to take us over, it drives compassion right out of our hearts.” - Thomas Aquinas, 13th century Italian theologian, philosopher

Lately, I have been saddened by the daily representations of newly elected leadership whose brand or reputation is fear-based. I struggle to comprehend the need to bully, intimidate, and belittle when other tactics, even heart-centered ones, might yield equivalent results through civil behaviors.

Surely, I can create my own story about those who actively choose to lead like warlords, but that would not be helpful. Obviously, in war-like scenarios, I might understand the need for such a strategy. However, the US is not currently in an active war, at least not as I have been informed.

Besides, there is much to be said about leading with compassion. Thirteenth-century theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas once stated, *“I would rather feel compassion than know the meaning of it.”* I wholeheartedly agree.

As a boy in middle school, I remember studying famous African American leader George Washington Carver, a prominent twentieth-century agricultural scientist and inventor. He famously stated, *“How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving and tolerant of the weak and strong. Because someday in your life you will have been all of these.”* Having lived a long life, I know his profound words to be truthful.

My siblings and I were raised in the 1960s by a family of successful entrepreneurs who modeled humility, forgiveness, and grace to us and the community we lived in. I recall many occasions when people outside of our family would meet with my grandparents or parents and share a need of theirs; while I didn't know what they requested, they would often leave with something, even if the something was a hot meal, a hot bath, clean clothing, or a place to lay their head.

Growing up in a household where heart-centered leadership was regularly exemplified influenced my own style. If others had a need and my family could help, then, as good people of faith, we felt a mandate to assist and not judge them. We clearly understood that doing nothing would be more than shameful—it would be sinful. The de Bardelaben household would not heap despair upon anyone already in pain.

“While injustice is the worst of sins, despair is the most dangerous: because when you are in despair you care neither about yourself nor about others,” stated Thomas Aquinas.

At this stage of my varied career, I have found that my leading with an iron fist has been rare. While it may have gotten me the result I desired, that outcome was short lived as it was rooted in fear and intimidation. If my desired outcome is one rooted in just peace, mutuality, and alliance, then leading as my family successfully exemplified for me is the right and sustainable path for me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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