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Remarks, delivered for the Retirement of P. Douglas Kindschi in March 2004

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To gather as friends and colleagues of Doug Kindschi to discuss matters of science, philosophy and ethics is both appropriate and emotional. Where these subjects relate to and influence one another is at the core of Doug's interest and reveal the source of his understanding. To salute a person where his main interest lies is appropriate and to probe the subjects of that interest whose mysteries and revelations have formed his character, his means of relating to others, and his professional style is an emotional experience for him and for his friends who at this seminar are doing the probing. The event where a person's successful career is celebrated should be infused with emotions. For me it is particularly intense because Doug's career and mine were intertwined, and I am so well aware of his exceptional contribution to the success of the university where we both serve. He will continue, engaging in sciences, philosophy, and ethics unfettered by administrative responsibility. But we must take note, as we are, by holding this seminar, of his

distinguished twenty-eight years as a Dean at Grand Valley State University before he moves on to more contemplative academic pastures.

Before I launch into my discourse I must issue a disclaimer, I am neither a scientist nor a philosopher. You cannot hope from me what you can legitimately expect from a professor of ethics. My knowledge and understanding are based solely in experience abetted by reading, mostly history and some political theory and philosophy. My remarks, therefore, resemble more a personal memoir, a career apologia, than a careful, reasoned analysis of leadership ethics.

Upon my retirement from the Presidency I was asked often what I thought was my highest achievement during my thirty-two years. I always replied, survival. Once when Governor of Michigan, G. Mennen Williams was told by a supporter that taking a certain controversial action on his part would make him a great governor. Williams responded. "First, you have to be elected

governor before you can be a great governor.” Survival counts. What comes to us as moral or ethical is the method the species has discovered to survive and thrive. To say this does not diminish religion as a source of the higher life, but it hints at a long period of discovering the behaviors that contribute to the elevation of the human spirit and those that lead to its destruction. Religions, though often misunderstood by those who invoke them, is the codification or expression of spiritual insight that lead to the moral way of life. All point to degrees of destruction if there is no morality and degrees of survival if there is. This broader discussion is not our subject today, but it places in context the principles of ethical leadership that I gleaned from practice and heritage.

“What did I learn and when did I learn it?” As in all life’s stories I began at my beginning. I was fortunate to be born into a family of nurture whose father soon thereafter assumed a college presidency and a mother who considered herself his partner in the task. They moved

only once during my growing up years from one college presidency to the presidency of their alma mater. Aside from watching and absorbing their style and techniques of administration two things happened to me. As a child and adolescent I became totally interested in the life of the campus, the concerts, the athletic contests, the personalities of faculty members and students, the books in the library, and the beauty of the surroundings. The college was at life's center. I have no doubt that my parents wanted and actively sought professional success, and they achieved it to their satisfactions. Yet, I observed when I came to years of understanding that part of what motivated them and inspired their lives was their attachment to the institutions. The cause was most important to them and the success they had contributed to the cause.

From an inherited way of life as a child immersed in the activities of a college, and raised by parents committed to the colleges they served it is not unusual

that in the four college and university positions I have held, loyalty to the institution and desire for its success is woven into my own ambitions. From this experience comes my first ethical principle for leadership, one that may not be universal though I hope for it a degree of universality. A leader leads best if he or she matches desire for personal success with commitment to the institution for whom he or she works.

The ethical imperative derives from the human composition of the institution. It may have a culture, good or bad. It may have traditions that have created and maintain its ethos. It may have structure and architecture that help define it, but it is always comprised of individuals who need a living, a purpose and a direction. The leader's commitment to the institution then is his or her responsibility towards people rooted in an old discovery "love your neighbor as you love yourself." A discovery believed and embraced by the leader that is likely to bring better results for those he is attempting to

inspire and direct. For himself and for the organization, of course, the leader must contend with the culture, the traditions, the structure and the architecture at one time or another, hoping to use them or change them for the institutions benefit. They all can be elements that elicit loyalty and common cause if explained and appealed to effectively. But to help people make a living, live a worthwhile professional life, and have the environment in which that living is made contribute to the renewal of the individual spirit is the Holy Grail for which a leader seeks. That search is based in love. That search is worthy though never fully successful. Institutional loyalty without this recognition is at best sentimentality. At worst it becomes the reason for sacrificing the good of individuals on an institutional altar, often with the result that the leader or leaders “cash in as many chips” as they can before they desert.

The young aspiring to leadership and the emoluments that accompany the successful are often consumed by the

process toward fulfilling their ambitions. This does not necessarily result in the denigration of others, lack of courtesy or genuine interest in others welfare. Many of them are sincere advocates of causes they deem righteous. They enter into camaraderie easily. Yet, in all their doing and relating the fire of ambition holds their attention. They remain focused. Fulfillment to most of them is pretty much a one way street. Often they achieve early. Their drive and intelligence pay off before they have enough time for reflection and contemplation. You cannot force feed understanding to a human being as you can grain to a goose or milk to a calf. I remember the condition. There was nothing sinister nor overwhelming. Leadership came early, spiritual maturation had to catch up. Which leads me to my second ethical imperative “The leader understands that most in the organization want to succeed as much as he or she does earning the approbation of colleagues and finding personal security in self respect. The primary responsibility of the leader is to

enable this outcome. In a large organization the leader cannot address the specific conditions of each individual, though there will be many occasions when he can for some. The leader does this by making his spirit apparent in public and private ways. He moves against those who intimidate threaten and cheat. His words and his actions are trustworthy, and the trust he engenders gives courage to those who believe as he does. Trust takes hold in the institution and filters through it and even affects outcomes in the far reaches where effect of his earlier words and action have become diluted. In such a venue people can live comfortably with themselves and their colleagues, expecting and expected to do their best. Is utopia the result? No, but the leader sees his hopes for a better place realized through his awareness that ambitions different from his or even lesser are equally worthy. He comes to see that their attainment is essential to his own. This I learned from on the job training.

It is a short mental step to the next ethical imperative. If each person's desire for fulfillment in work is legitimate each job in a well designed and structured institution is equally worthwhile because it is necessary. Some jobs are closer to the core mission or require more refined knowledge or skill than others. Yet all have the dignity of necessity. None are denigrated. I have seen the satisfaction of job holders in all areas of the university when they are well chosen well led and well respected. I have also learned that it is better to have more work without enough jobs to accomplish it than the other way around. Protecting a job of little value is spiritually debilitating for most Americans. The respect for all begins with the leader who must demonstrate it through policy, words, and sociability without surrendering to unreasonable demands. There are tense times, yet even in defeat I would not forsake this understanding.

Recently I listened to a sermon preached on a text from the Old Testament Book of Micah. It reads He

(God) has told you what He wants and this is all it is: to be fair and just and merciful and walk humbly with your God". These are beautiful words. They could be words spoken by an old experienced leader to a young aspiring one. Simple as the instruction seems, complications develop as one applies them. What appears fair to one does not to another. Justice for the community tempered by mercy for the individual is seen often as a miscarriage of justice. Justice meted out according to rules and policy can seem unduly harsh to the individual. The leader who is invested with institutional authority becomes an arbiter of justice and mercy, and his intuitive as well as reasonable sense of fairness comes into play as he makes decisions where justice and mercy hang in the balance not always apparently compatible. To the degree the leader is inherently fair and in his ability to temper justice and mercy will rest his chances for success or failure. When to tilt toward fairness and justice for the community and when to opt for mercy for the individual is a quality

learned through experience. Fortunate is the inexperienced leader who does not live amongst wolves. He has time to learn. Fortunate is the young leader who has a good mentor for he may prevail.

A leader, certainly one in a university, will face these difficult decisions upon assuming leadership before knowing how difficult they are and how crucial to his ultimate success they will be. Consulting with the wise around him will help. The quality of his intuition and the extent of his innate political skill will contribute to how successfully he makes them. If the leader survives the early rounds of decision making he will think about what went right and what went wrong. He will ponder his own view, the existing political situation, the positions of proponents and opponents and begin to figure out what led him to the decisions. He realizes the decisions have implications, first for the institution, the whole community, second for individuals or groups within the

community and third for his position within the community.

Last winter browsing in Schulers Book Store I found the recently translated biography of Nicclo Machiavelli, bought it and read it. There is much to be learned from this able public servant devoted to the concept of a republic and in his victories and tribulations in service of his native Florence. The reader is reminded how important the character, vision, and strength of the leader are to the quality and disposition of the organization he leads. A confident leader who believes in his vision and his capacity will consider the effect of his decisions on his ability to survive and lead. The primary responsibility of the leader, however, is to the whole community.

Before action is taken the question of “What is best for the community”? must come into play. This takes precedence. We have observed leaders acting in the best interests of institutions knowing that in so doing they forfeit their own tenure. This happens usually when

serious mistakes need correction. The perceived best interests of an individual or a group are subordinated to the good of the whole, yet there are opportunities to favor the individual or group without detriment to the community. Often favor for the individual will eventually benefit the whole. The leader is usually better able to understand this outcome than those engaged in their particularities within the institution. When did I know the ramifications and complexities of decision making? Certainly not when I began making them. Why did I survive? I began in a small organization, the information I provided was valid and reliable, my heritage provided a values centered view of life, my intuition served me well. I never worked in an environment where academic wolves were in ascendance or unrestrained egotists served on the Board. The opposite was the case, I was given the benefit of any doubt. What I consider the light of understanding came gradually through experience. The Vietnam War troubles on campus and the financial crisis of the late

seventies and early eighties undoubtedly contributed to my illumination. I came to understand, at least in part, the conflicting forces, the different perceptions and the intensity of feeling that attached themselves to the process of making a decision. After this long introduction and explanation we have come to the fourth ethical imperative. The primary responsibility for the leader is to make decisions in the interest of the whole community, considering interests of individuals and groups in the process, and on occasion favoring them. The leader should evaluate decision options on how they will effect his or her ability to lead. By the 1990's I had a fairly clear idea of why I made a decision, what the elements of that decision were and what the likely outcome would be over a period of time. The second sentence of the principle stated may appear to be self serving and it certainly is in the leader's self interest. There is however more to be considered. Continuity in leadership is the only way to highest achievement for an institution. The

ideal length of time for a leader to serve an institution can be debated, but most will agree that two or three years is insufficient for significant accomplishment. It becomes a leader's responsibility to survive long enough to establish a positive legacy by the time he leaves. He survives by his decisions so he must consider their impact on that survival.

Keeping a leadership job depends on support from several constituencies, yet the one that is absolutely necessary is the one to whom the leader officially reports. In my profession I have seen Presidents forget or ignore that to their peril. During my tenure I watched one of my colleagues, effective in many ways, lose his position because he did not tend to relationships with his trustees. There is more to it than pleasing the Board for whom you work; it is the realization by a person empowered through position, influence and statute that he in his exercise of leadership and authority is not without restraint. As we have heard power corrupts. No one should be without a

superior authority to his own. This leads us to the final ethical imperative. The leader in the exercise of his or her leadership should recognize and find ways to relate positively to those who have final authority.

I have set forth five ethical principles or imperatives that articulate what was in my head as I dealt with people, policies and politics. By now you have concluded that my style was oriented to people's thoughts, ambitions and needs. The principles indicate that I attempted to accomplish objectives through motivating people, guiding their individual purposefulness to the achievement of institutional goals. I make no claim that this is the only ethical foundation for achievement. It is individualistic, and it worked for me. Successful leaders choose what to hold foremost in their minds. The ethical imperatives I have shared with you came to be foremost in mine.

I never had the fear of being absolutely wrong or the need to be absolutely right. My patron saint Rhinold Niebuhr saved me from that in graduate school. The

whirl of opinion, the myriad options, the hard choices all confirmed for me his view that we may well come close to the truth in the clash of opposing ideas, in the paradox. The Leader who can live with ambiguity and still knows right from wrong is likely to live longer.

Soon after I retired I wrote a sermon setting forth what I believe to be the essence of religious understanding. I said at the end that humor might be a religious quality though I needed more time to think about that. As I came to the conclusion of this paper reflecting on guiding principles for my professional work, I remember the importance of humor in leavening the days activities. The pressure attached to the hardest decisions could be relieved by humor and its use always assisted in achieving self understanding when it was required. I hesitate to burden humor by making it an ethical imperative yet it may deserve it. I have depended on it from the beginning, but have come recently to place it in

my pantheon of ethical values, so I suggest a sixth imperative, humor must be involved to place issues in proper perspective and to manage lifes difficulties and pressures.

As I end my remarks I leave to aspiring leaders a final thought. Articulating worthy objectives and vision comes easiest. Trust, fairness, justice and mercy take the most work and like Micah said, “walk humbly.”

Arend D. Lubbers