

Moral Leadership

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Introduction

At the Global Forum in Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June, the Baha'i International Community sponsored a number of activities including a Symposium on Values, Institutions, and Leadership for a Sustainable Future. The key-note address was given by Sir Geoffrey Palmer, the former Prime Minister of New Zealand. The members of the panel which followed Sir Palmer's address were: Dr. Rosina Wiltshire of Barbados, Research Coordinator for Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN); Mr. Koy Thomson of the United Kingdom, a Programme Director with the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED); Dr. Elizabeth Bowen of the United States, the President of Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSI); Mr. Eloy Anello of Bolivia, international consultant on moral education and founder of Universidad Núr, in Bolivia. The moderator of the panel was Professor Maria de Lourdes Montenegro Holzman of the Federal University of Parana, Brazil. Following the panel discussion, participants took part in two workshops, one for English speakers and another for Portuguese speakers. This was followed by a plenary at which both groups presented the final outcome of their discussions.

Both workshop groups concluded that the Earth Summit process had effectively highlighted the vital need for moral leadership in all spheres of human endeavor. The consultation which followed focused primarily on the subject of leadership. At the end of the plenary session the participants decided to share the following information on leadership with the NGO community and beyond that with people in other sectors who may be interested in the subject. The group felt that a reexamination of the concept of leadership is a vital and indispensable step on the road to the construction of an ever-advancing, sustainable world civilization.

NGO Phenomenon

The dramatic emergence, during the last decade, of thousands of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) throughout the world, particularly in the South, represents a highly significant social phenomenon. With appropriate structure and leadership, NGOs have a potential to provide the type of moral leadership and vision that is required if we are to effectively promote, through actions, those essential values that must reorient the development process so that it is sensitive to and meets the needs of all who share the planet.

Already, some donor agencies find NGOs to be much more effective than government bureaucracies in creatively responding to the needs of communities. NGOs are often willing to explore alternative paths to development which are more holistic and sustainable. For these reasons, perhaps, it is within the NGO community that we can begin to address the need for a new kind of leadership.

Too often, NGOs have been critical of the leadership models promoted by governments, while at the same time perpetuating modified versions of the very same models within their own organizations.

The Need for Moral Leadership

At the heart of the global crisis currently afflicting humanity, there exists a pervasive lack of moral leadership in all sectors of human society. The lack of moral leadership is demonstrated in the continuous uncovering of unethical behavior at all levels of society in all parts of the world. No sphere of human endeavor, from the family to the highest corridors of power, remains unaffected. Often, moral leadership is hard to identify because society presents too many conflicting messages about what is meant by leadership. The participants of the symposium felt that it would be helpful to identify a few fundamental capabilities that characterize effective moral leadership and to set in motion a systematic learning process that will foster the development of these capabilities within the institutions that serve human society.

Service-Oriented Leadership

The first challenge is to clearly define what is meant by the term leadership. Too often, the word "leader" conjures up notions which are contradictory to the way it is used in this discussion. When asked to define "a leader," people frequently say - "one who is in charge, in command or in control," "one who gives orders." Unfortunately, the pages of history are replete with those who defined leadership in the terms stated above.

Autocratic, paternalistic, manipulative and 'know-it-all' modes of leadership, which are found in all parts of the world, tend to disempower those whom they are supposed to serve. They exercise control by over-centralizing the decision making-making process, thereby coercing others into agreement. If humanity is to move out of its collective adolescence and enter its age of collective maturity, if it is to reap long term benefits from the Earth Summit process, we have to ask ourselves some pertinent questions. First, are the currently-prevalent models of leadership capable of producing leaders who are able to address, with integrity and justice, the essential global issues facing humanity? Second, are the institutions which are brought into being by the currently-prevalent models of leadership, capable of creating a sustainable world civilization? Third, are we ourselves, ready to abandon our outmoded practices and old loyalties and explore a new model of moral leadership? Fourth, what would such a new form of leadership look like? It is in response to some of these questions that the following proposal is being made for a new model of moral and ethical leadership.

The leadership model which is being proposed, is unequivocally centered on service to others. Therefore, one of the prerequisites for moral leadership is the spirit of service - service to one's family, community, and nation. This spirit of service does not in any way negate individual drive or initiative, nor does it stifle individual creativity. Rather, it calls for a model of leadership which will release the potential of the individual while

safeguarding the well-being of the whole. Those who emerge as leaders would likely combine a spirit of service with a drive for excellence. The institutions which would emerge from a service-centered leadership would promote the well-being of the whole community while safeguarding the rights, freedoms and initiatives of each individual. These institutions would preserve human honor which would lead to a civilization which deeply cares for the beauty of nature and all beings on the planet.

The Concept of Capabilities

Traditional approaches to moral education have often tended to promote a passive concept of the moral person: being good means keeping out of trouble. The question is, how does this moral person become a social actor who is consciously and actively engaged in performing actions that promote individual and social transformation? First and foremost, for an individual to become a moral person he/she must possess certain capabilities that empower him/her to perform moral and ethical actions. To know what is moral and ethical is not enough. To become a moral person, the individual must put this knowledge into action. Thus, the capabilities that empower the individual to know and to act morally are of primary importance in developing moral leadership.

Each capability has unique functions and characteristics and is composed of a combination of specific concepts or principles, virtues, attitudes (habits of mind) and skills. These functions and characteristics help us gain a fuller understanding of each of the fifteen capabilities listed below. For example, let us look at the capability to participate effectively in consultation. What are the virtues which a leader must have in order to participate effectively in consultation? What are the concepts or principles which she or he must understand? What are the attitudes the leader must have in order to effectively participate in consultation? What are the skills the leader must have in order to effectively take part in consultation? The unique mix of these elements within the individual creates a capability to perform specific types of actions.

In developing a systematic learning process or training program for moral leadership, the first and most critical task is that of identifying the necessary set of capabilities that the program intends to develop. The subsequent tasks entail an analysis of the elements of each capability (i.e., virtues, concepts, attitudes and skills), which provides the focus for the design of the curricular elements and the selection of appropriate teaching methods that will facilitate the learning process.

The Essential Capabilities of Leadership

The following list of capabilities consist of those that are considered to be essential for effective moral leadership. Perhaps as individuals who work in NGOs develop these capabilities, they will empower their institutions to play an important moral leadership role in the process of transformation towards a sustainable world civilization.

These capabilities are not listed in order of importance. Nor is this to be considered an exhaustive list of capabilities. The list simply represents those capabilities which were considered by the working group, to be essential for moral leadership. We recommend to all who come across this list to use it and adapt it to their particular institutions and to continue refining the points presented in this paper.

Each of the capabilities listed below is composed of certain concepts, virtues, attitudes and skills. To gain a clearer understanding of each capability, one must ask the following questions: What are the essential virtues for developing a certain capability? What are the concepts that must be grasped to cultivate a capability? What are the attitudes that one must possess to develop a capability? What are the skills necessary for a particular capability?

The capability to: encourage others and to bring joy to their hearts; infuse one's thoughts and actions with love; be visionary and to encourage others to be visionary; manage one's affairs and responsibilities with a rectitude of conduct; assess one's strengths and weaknesses without involving the ego; oppose one's self-centered tendencies by turning towards one's higher purpose for existence; exercise initiative in a creative and disciplined way; sustain effort and persevere in overcoming obstacles; understand relationships of dominance and be able to facilitate their transformation into relationships of inter-dependence, reciprocity and service; serve as a catalyst for the establishment of justice; engage in empowering educational activities, both as a student and as a teacher; learn from systematic reflection on action and to do so within an evolving and consistent framework; think systemically in the search for solutions; participate effectively in consultation; build unity while cultivating diversity; and serve on the institutions of society in such a manner that these institutions are actively encouraged to empower the individuals whom they serve, to express their talents in service to humanity.