

Professional Leadership: What Kind of Calling?

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To appreciate the importance of interpreting a profession as a calling, we will need to locate professionals in the social scheme of things. The modern professional sits on a somewhat tippy throne. On the one hand, professionals wield an enormous power. We might number them among the members of the ruling class. Traditional societies transmitted power largely on the basis of family and blood; their rulers inherited their power. But today we transmit power chiefly on the basis of knowledge, a knowledge largely acquired at a university. That is why ambitious parents, whether rich or poor, successful or stalled in their careers, worry about their children getting the grades that will put them into the best colleges and universities. Through education, they hope, their children will ease into the slipstream of modern power.

And power it is. Whereas the ancient Greeks celebrated the human power *for* knowledge; since the seventeenth century we have celebrated the powers acquired *through* knowledge. In the first wave, Francis Bacon heralded modern scientists whose knowledge of nature would produce the technologies that would transform the world for the benefit of humankind. In the second wave, universities in the 20th century would endow professional with a knowledge-based power that has left few things in our world untouched. Modern doctors – as distinct from their predecessors – can actually cure. Scientists and engineers, in the company of industrialists, have reshaped the earth to serve the most extravagant of human wants. Geneticists will soon be able to alter the fate of generations to come. Lawyers have increasingly fulfilled. De Tocqueville's 19th century prophecy that lawyers would eventually emerge as the aristocrats of the North America. (Any society that eliminated the traditional privileges of class in favor of a government based on “laws not men” would inevitably rely on a peculiarly privileged class of experts whose special knowledge of the law would enable them to serve as the gatekeepers to power.) Business leaders, whether wearing the blaze of the traditional

professions or stamped with the MBA, rule large corporations that exert a power unmatched by all but a few heads of state.

Yet, while professionals exercise great power and often enjoy the vast privileges and income of a ruling class, they do not perceive themselves as power-wielders. They feel marginal, insufficiently appreciated, suspect, harassed.

The visitor to various professional groups today quickly senses the contrast between the public agendas of their meetings which resound with the self-confident tone of leadership and the private exchanges of professional friends who often lament their plight. Doctors complain of lawyers who harass them with malpractice suits; and they chafe at the burden of paperwork that a third party payment system imposes upon them, even though that system has handsomely compensated them for their professional services. Lawyers complain that the society lumps them with the criminals they defend, the creditors whose harsh letters they write, the affronted clients whose cause they advance for a fee. Engineers have found it relatively easy to obtain first and second level jobs in an expanding economy but recognize that their careers speedily reach an upper limit beyond which the engineer only rarely rises. Business leaders can hardly claim they lack power, but they often define that power as wholly private and perceive themselves as unjustly beleaguered by the government and insufficiently appreciated by the media and the society at large.

Since professionals perceive themselves as marginal and beleaguered, they tend to obscure for themselves their public duties as rulers. Their obligations to the common good seem, at best, remote, peripheral, and occasional. They often wield public power for private purposes, a state of affairs, which Aristotle once characterized as the basic corruption of tyranny. This weakened commitment to the public weal defects from the classical understanding of a vocation and a profession, diminishes morally the practitioners of the several professions, and impoverishes fatefully their service to the common good. We have moved a long way from Roscoe Pound's statement in 1953 that a profession refers to a group "pursuing a learned art as a common calling in the spirit of

public service – no less a public service because it may incidentally be a means of livelihood. Pursuit of the learned art in the spirit of public service is the primary purpose.”¹

To recover a sense of the professional’s public obligation and calling, we need to distinguish a profession and vocation from the more privatistic notion of a career.

The term “profession” and the equally ancient though less often invoked term “vocation” or “calling” have a moral and public ring to them, which the word “career” does not. To “profess” means to “testify on behalf of,” “to stand for,” or “to avow” a high good that defines one’s fundamental commitment – a covenant, if you will, that shapes and constrains the practitioner, the professor. Pound associates this fundamental commitment of the professional with the word “calling” and links a calling with the pursuit of the common good.

Traditionally, the term, “profession,” highlights a distinctive characteristic that not all other vocations, such as plumbing or carpentry, share. Medicine is a “learned art.” Plumbing is a skill, not a learned art. But medicine, law, and other professions cannot escape service to the common good by virtue of their being learned. All lines of work, but especially those callings that serve goods basic to our common life, such as law, medicine, and religion, ought to serve the common good. The religious tradition of the West reverberates in Pound’s sentences. In the Scriptures of Israel, the calls to the prophets, Elijah, Hosea, Amos, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, Deutero-Isaiah, and Ezekiel, all emphasize the public character of their service to the people of God. Similarly the calls to discipleship in the gospels and the gifts of the Spirit, enumerated in the Pauline letters, serve not the private musings of the religiously adept but the flourishing of the community.

¹ Roscoe Pound, “The Lawyer from antiquity to Modern Times 5(1953) cited by Stephen Gillers, Regulation of Lawyers: Problems of Law and Ethics (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, Third Edition, 1992), p.7.

The late 16th century theologian, William Perkins, who powerfully influenced the American Puritans, explicitly defined a calling as, “a certain kind of life, ordained and imposed on man by God for the common good.”¹ In the language of the philosophers, God is the efficient cause of one’s vocation – God does the calling; and the common good defines the final cause toward which the vocation points. Perkins did not tack on a reference to the common good casually; “he abuseth his calling, whosoever he be that against the end thereof imployes it for himselfe seeking wholly his own, and not the common good.”² Rightly understood and deployed, a vocation allows for the temporal extension of love beyond occasional works of mercy; it supplies the regular means for service to the common good, whether as a carpenter, a plumber, a doctor or a lawyer.

In the later stages of Puritanism, of course, the concept of a vocation tended to drift away from service to the common good; instead, vocation, therewith, deteriorated into an extended monologue, in and through which one attempted to prove to God, neighbor and oneself that one was saved. Such a definition of vocation transmogrified into the modern notion of a career and to the psychological dependency that Nietzsche once termed, “the work neurosis.”

Career. We should not load the word, “career,” with everything that is morally unsavory in the work life of a professional. A career partly solves the problem of securing a livelihood, which usually serves more than oneself. Earning a living helps sustain helps sustain personal commitments to others – family and other dependents – which varyingly carry one beyond a merely private existence into the public arena. However, careerism today symbolizes a general shift away from service to the common good toward the pursuit of private welfare and happiness.

The words “car” and “career” stem from the same root. Both refer increasingly today to private means of transportation. The modern car appeals to us because it lets us travel alone. We prize it as an auto-mobile, a self-driven vehicle. It frees us from traveling with others; it saves us from the body contact of public transportation. Even

though a car takes us out into the streets; it wraps us in a glass-enclosed privacy as we race down public thoroughfares.

Similarly, a career supplies the modern ambitious person with a self-driven vehicle through life. A careerist tends to calculate privately, even in public places. At the beginning of his race, he asks, what shall I be? What choice of career will best serve my interests – provide me with the means, in both money and power, to satisfy my wants? In the course of the journey he asks, what moves shall I make to get where I want to go, and most speedily? Whom shall I cultivate? Whom, avoid? And at the end of the race, he looks back on the track, the honors won, the fortune acquired, the opportunities missed, the mistakes made, and wonders whether it was all worthwhile. In such a race, questions of public obligation and responsibility fade to the marginal and episodic at best, to the distracting and suicidal at worst.

Why do professionals owe something to the common good? The religious heritage of the West supplied part of the answer with its powerful emphasis to the common good through one's calling. Further, modern professionals wield a public power that vastly exceeds that of their predecessors. What they do fatefully affects all societies. They have even less reason than their predecessors to construe their power in private, entrepreneurial terms. Finally, professionals largely derive their identity and power from knowledge acquired in our schools and universities, a derivation which inescapably generates an indebtedness to the society. No one can go through a modern university and plausibly pretend to be a self-made man or a self-made woman. A huge company of people contribute to the shaping of professionals as they zigzag their way through college and professional schools: the janitors who clean the johns, the help in the kitchen, the secretaries who make the operation hum, the administrators who wrestle with the institution's problems, the faculty who share with their students what they know, the vast research traditions of each of the disciplines which set the table for that sharing, and the patients and clients who lay their bodies and souls on the line, letting young professionals practice on them in the course of perfecting their art. Students depend additionally upon

the public moneys and the gifts that support the enterprise, so much so that tuition money usually pays for only a fraction of their education. When professionals treat education as providing them with a private stockpile of knowledge to be sold on the market to the highest bidder, they systematically distort and obscure the religious origins of calling, the social origins of knowledge and therefore the power which that knowledge places within their grasp and the common good which that power ought to serve.

Professional Leadership in a Democracy

We began by locating professionals socially as members of a ruling class and explored the grounds for their calling to serve the common good. We need now to reflect on the types of leadership professionals might exercise in making good on that responsibility, especially in the setting of the great institutions in which they usually work today, political and corporate. In sorting out the various ways in which professionals lead, I will need to resort to four cities that conveniently symbolize four different types of leadership in the West: Jerusalem, Sparta, Athens, and Florence.

The founder of *Jerusalem*, King David, symbolized leading by *charisma*. David was a man of transcendent gifts and charm: a poet, a musician, a great strategist, a sometime adulterer and betrayer of his men, but also the founder of a nation and the prototype for a personal, kingly rule. American democracy rejected this notion of personal charismatic leadership. George Washington did not want to be king; and the founders agreed. They insisted on a government of *laws*, not of *men*. The oil of charisma but rarely anoints a great leader: a Garibaldi, a Churchill, a de Gaulle or singles out a president such as Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, or FDR. We should not confuse charisma with its somewhat sad counterfeit in the modern celebrity. Instead of the hero's deeds today, we get a *People's Magazine* glitz, and a disposition to limit political candidates to those who pass the camera test for office.

By and large, charismatic leadership has defined neither corporate executives nor exemplary practitioners in other professions. *Charisma* occasionally graced the founders of great corporations, but usually these institutions have quickly routinized leadership – except for the dubious recent emergence of “star quality” CEO's, replete with stock

options. Other of the professions – law, medicine, accounting, engineering – have largely relied on standardized rather than maverick performance, on the solidities of a knowledge base rather than the irregularities of genius.

Ancient *Sparta*, a military society, symbolized a second type of leadership: by *command*. Military leaders do not need to use many words. Sparta was a society given to taciturnity. It depended upon the bark of command and the grunt of obedience. Leaders of the Spartan type abhor the messy give and take of political compromise; they prefer the clarity of military confrontation to the shifting waters of political coalitions. They prize hierarchy. Today, we still partly depend on such leadership. The American president is commander in chief, and corporations depend rather heavily on command. Until recently, the helping professions have also relied on the authority of command – the doctor's orders, the teacher's instructions, the priest's governance. However, executive command is not the whole of leadership, not in a democracy.

Athens symbolized a third type of leadership – by *persuasion*. Athens relied on *logos* or *rhetor* (that is, the *word* or the art of *persuasion*). Democracies are inherently *wordy*. A *parliament* is literally a house of *words*. The American presidency may no longer be a bully pulpit, but it has to be a bully blackboard to the nation. The President must lead by persuasion. You cannot lead for long, you may not even command the armed forces for long, unless you bring the people along.

The helping professions across the last thirty years have relied increasingly on the importance of persuasion in making good their interventions. They must teach their patients and clients, not merely dispense their technical services, in order to secure cooperation. Probably corporate executives are the exception among professionals. The transmission of knowledge up and down the ladder is increasingly important in corporate decision-making, but, when push comes to shove, corporate hierarchies still depend upon command and obedience. Corporate executives have relied somewhat more on Sparta than on Athens in exercising professional leadership.

But corporate and political leadership alike depend upon a fourth resource not yet acknowledged. Our three ancient cities do not highlight an important fourth ingredient of leadership that Machiavelli knew so well: the rough and tumble of bargaining, maneuvering, and manipulating upon which survival and accomplishment often depend. To the three ancient cities therefore we need to add a fourth – Florence – and its successor cities the world over, run by princes, ward bosses, and CEOs, well acquainted with the power of self-interest in human affairs. In addition to charming, commanding, and persuading, leaders must also bargain, manipulate, and maneuver.

Leadership in a Democracy: What It Takes Morally

The task of *leading* in a democracy differs from *managing*. The manager, whether working for the government or a corporation, operates with *preset* goals. The political leader faces the more difficult task of choosing goals, not just operating within preset objectives. Leadership usually entails breaking new ground, whether in the cause of transforming or consolidating a community. Leadership poses the vexing questions of destination. It requires the wise choice of goals (which the culture has not entirely preset) and the means to them (about which further serious differences of judgment may exist).

So the first *virtue* required in the leader is practical wisdom or, what we might call today, *discernment*. In order to know what to do, leaders must take in what is out there; That's why modern leaders rely heavily on consultants, to help them set priorities; and professionals must attend to cues from patients, clients, citizens, and workers as they set their course.

But, no matter how much wisdom and information leaders take in, they cannot dispel all doubts or eliminate all risks. At best, they choose wisely what risks to take. So, in addition to the virtue of wisdom, the leader needs *courage*. A rough patch of trouble usually follows hard choices; and most decisions that cross an executive's desk

are hard choices. They provoke a coefficient of adversity. Thomas Aquinas defined courage as firmness of soul in the face of adversity. Such courage has two aspects: active and passive. Courage requires the active capacity to attack problems, rather than dodging or ducking them. But, in defeat, it also calls for an equally important, somewhat more passive, capacity for endurance or resilience – an ability to pick oneself up off the floor and carry on.

Leadership also requires the virtue of *temperance*. Plato once noted that to govern others, one must first be able to govern oneself. Runaway desire can set institutions lurching out of control. Plato also recognized that the greater long term danger to a Republic's integrity comes from the intrusion and corruption of cash, not sex, in its civil life. On the take is even worse than on the make. The problem is not simply individual – the politician on the take – but social – the power of ravenous interest groups and their lobbyists in setting National policies. Similarly, corporate executives and their boards of directors have have run their institutions into the ground while they arranged their sweet deals, stock options, buyouts, and retirement packages that let them prepare for their own soft landings..

Finally, leadership in a democracy also requires, for want of a better term, what the founders of the country called 'public virtue,' a readiness to sacrifice self-interest to the *common good*. Leaders need to display "public –spiritedness," the art of acting in concert with others for the common good.

We need the virtue of justice not only in our political leaders, but also in the leaders of corporations and other huge organizations. Forty or fifty business leaders wield as much wealth, power, and influence as all but a few heads of state. We woefully underestimate their power, if we think of business leaders as engaged in *private* enterprise, for their decisions have huge public impacts not only on their stockholders, but on the jobs we need, the neighborhoods in which we live, the water we drink, the air we breathe, and the schools in which we learn. We cannot be satisfied with Milton Friedman's runaway imperative for business executives – maximizing profits – an

imperial aim, which crowds out all other claims of workers, neighbors, suppliers, consumers, sky, sea, and air, except insofar as they serve the fortunes of stockholders. In effect, business leaders, professional leaders, are *unelected public officials* in a society like ours.

So what does leadership in a democracy require? The Greek art of persuasion certainly. But morally it also requires the virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance, and public spiritedness or justice. And we won't get enough of these virtues if we demand them of our political leaders alone. The leaders of other powerful institutions in the society must evince these virtues as well.

The Current Crisis in Leadership

What city shall we look to as symbol for the current crisis in leadership – a withdrawal from public responsibilities? Perhaps the city of Zurich, the repository of secret bank accounts, or perhaps some other locale, the Cayenne Islands or the Bahamas, where corporations can secure charters without accepting the financial responsibilities of citizenship, or perhaps yet other enclaves the world over where the rich and famous can lead insulated lives.

Classically, privileged aristocrats prized order and abhorred instability and chaos. Their status entailed a moral corollary: members of the guardian class must accept some measure of responsibility for sustaining the stability and well-being of the society at large. However, today, many of the most successful members of our society, instead of sustaining order, have been rather busily engaged in what Robert Reich has called, “the secession of the successful.” They tend to withdraw into gated communities, with private security guards and “enclaves of good schools, excellent health care, and first-rate infrastructures – all the while scoffing at almost all functions of government – except the police and the military – thus cutting off the supply of taxes for most public undertakings – leaving much of the rest of the population behind...”⁴ Too many of the most favored and powerful have abandoned the Puritan ideal of the “City Built on a Hill” (language to

which Reagan once appealed) and aspire to living in a mansion behind walls, where they can live out the anarchic fantasy of doing what pleases them.

Meanwhile, apparently successful economic institutions and their leaders vanish into thin air. In the United States, we have witnessed the sudden evanescence of stock values in institutions that seemed so tangibly ascendant – Enron, Worldcom, Global Crossing, McLeod USA, Cendant, Sunbeam, Waste Management, Dynegy, Qwest, and Adelphia Communications. Chief executives in these and many other firms enjoyed salaries, bonuses, and other perks as much as 400 times the average salaries in their companies. Half of the top two hundred American chief executives received in 2001 an average of fifty million dollars in stock options. Some executives took advantage of insider knowledge to sell off their company stocks before the bubble burst; and most chief executives enjoyed golden parachutes to escape future financial contingencies of the sort that ordinary earthlings face.

During this shedding of embodied life and responsibility, where were the purported professional guardians of the common good – accountants, lawyers, and politicians? Accountants belong to the only profession that explicitly carries the word, “public,” in its self-description – certified public accountants. But accountants compromised the clarity and integrity of their public role, when they defined themselves solely as make-up artists, accenting quarterly reports for the sake of stock market prices or annual returns for tax purposes. Lawyers purportedly must serve their clients under the constraints of their duties as officers of the courts. However, as Susan P. Koniak testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee in the recent Enron scandal, “where were the lawyers?”

And, where were the third set of guardians of the common good – the politicians? Across the past twenty years, occupants of the White House and both Houses of Congress have depended massively on campaign funds from interest groups to keep them in office. Not surprisingly, many politicians have run for office opposed to the government as though it were a foreign power, King George the III, not an instrument of national purpose. To that end, they have starved regulatory agencies so that they cannot perform

their proper jobs. During a ten year period, the Internal Revenue Service suffered a 26 percent decrease in permanent employees, despite a 14 percent increase in tax returns to monitor. Prosecutions of tax cheats dropped by half from what they were ten years earlier; and the government selectively audited those making less than \$200,000 a year much more often than the wealthy, partly because¹⁰ the tax avoidance strategies of the wealthy are especially difficult to monitor and enforce. More than 3 million corporations operate worldwide with no identifiable owners; and wealthy individuals “may control as much as 17 trillion of assets in jurisdictions with opaque bank secrecy laws.”¹¹

Understandably, critics worry about the impact of such tax policies on interest rates, on our long term war debt, and on our ability to sustain the safety net for the young, the elderly, and the sick, but the mere act of voicing such worries produces the charge against critics of engaging in class warfare.

Beneath such discrete policy debates lies the question of the readiness of the powerful to pay for civilization itself. As Oliver Wendall Holmes, Jr. put it, “I like to pay taxes. With them, I buy civilization.”¹²

But who will lead us back to civilization – to the ideals, if not the flawed reality, of ancient Athens and Republican Rome? As things stand, it will take more than a latter day Aristotle talking about the four cardinal virtues to make the deaf hear and the morally obtuse pay heed. Who will issue the call? Where is the prophet Amos, the Shepard out of the hills of Tekoa when we need him?

Endnotes

¹William Perkins, “A Treatise of the Vocations or Calling of men with sorts and kind of them, and the right use thereof” in Edmund S. Morgan, Ed. *Puritan Political Ideas*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc. 1965), p 36.

²*Ibid.*, p. 39

³*Ibid.*, p. 56

⁴Robert Reich, *The Work of Nations* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1992), p. 291.

⁵See John Cassidy, “The Greed Cycle,” *The New Yorker Magazine*, September 23, 2002, p. 77. Chief executives also secured advance access o initial public offerings from investment firms eager to lure business in their direction.

⁶Kevin Phillips, *Wealth and Democracy*, p. 412.

⁷*Lincoln Savings and Loan Association v Wall*, 743 F. Supp. 901, 920 (D.D.C. 1990).

⁸“Where Were the Lawyers? Behind the Curtain Wearing their Magic Caps,” testimony offered by Susan P. Koniak, Professor of Law, Boston University School of Law, at the hearings on Accountability Issues; Lessons learned from Enron’s Fall, before the Judiciary Committee, February 6, 2002.

⁹New York Times, November 25, 2002, Editorial, A24.

¹⁰ For this observation and the following, see Charles Lewis and Bill Allison, *The Cheating of America* (New York: Harper Collins [Perennial Edition], 2002, p. 260), p. 260ff.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p 271 citing a *Time Magazine* estimate of accountable holdings.

¹²*Ibid.*, p.269.