

Essay

Leading Schools with Reverence

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Abstract

Reverence—generally defined along narrow, sectarian religious lines—is often missing from current conversation about educational leadership. This article seeks to recover and scrutinize reverence to see what value it has for educational leadership. Several examples from P–12 leadership situations are discussed to show how reverence is present or absent in the work of the educational leader and discuss reverence in rituals and ceremonies that unite schools.

Key words: reverence, educational leadership

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The idea of reverence is almost entirely absent from the current conversation about education and educational leadership. Woodruff (2001) claimed it is also a “forgotten” virtue, by which he meant people no longer remember its fuller meaning. In contemporary America, “reverence” is regularly associated with narrow, sectarian religious beliefs. Perhaps it is concern about the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (1791) that causes educational leaders to avoid explicitly employing the word even when it has other or more than religious connotations to them. Nonetheless, Woodruff (2001, 4–5) wrote: “Reverence has more to do with politics than religion.” Specifically, reverence has to do with the affairs of the *polis*, meaning literally the affairs of the city, the state, and, most explicitly, communion within the community. Individuals may exercise reverence in religion, but they also may exercise it in the classroom, school, and community.

What value does reverence have for educational leadership? The most precious component of any practice is not its tools or techniques—though they are no doubt vital—but rather the skill and virtue of the practitioners themselves. A sense of reverence can inform and enrich the lives of those who lead schools by invoking appropriate attitudes of awe, wonder, humility, and mutual respect. These attitudes can help to join together the school community into a cohesive whole, in service to something greater such as justice, love, ideas, ideals, nature’s majesty, death, beauty, God, or goodness. This article looks at reverence for learning and truth, in particular, as well as at what Schweitzer (1965) called “reverence for life.” Schools are not just places to acquire formal subject matter knowledge, but places to learn how to live a reverent way of life. The expression of reverence in the rituals and ceremonies that unite schools by creating mutual respect deserve exploration. The authors of this article believe that educational leaders may rely on reverence without confining it to religion, while simultaneously reconciling

religious reverence with other forms of reverence for the good of the classroom, school, and community.

When leaders appeal to reverence, they appeal to a higher authority than their own. Such attitudes enable everyday technical practice and incite reflection on the larger beliefs and values, which guide that practice by placing the educational leader's actions in a larger context. When a school community and educational leaders have a shared sense of reverence, they often can overcome the disagreements that diversity and difference bring. As Woodruff (2001, 13) stated, "reverence fosters leadership and education."

Reverence Defined for Educational Leaders

What is reverence? We do not use the word much in daily living, except in a religious context. While this use of the word is no doubt appropriate, it nonetheless constrains the possible meanings of reverence and ties it unduly to the sphere of religion and spirituality. Reverence is an encompassing human capacity and, the authors assert, a cardinal virtue that, like justice or courage, binds together other virtues. Further, reverence is something that goes beyond a particular culture. Woodruff (2001), for example, compared ancient Greece to China and both to modern cultures to show that reverence is transcultural.

Woodruff (2001, 63) offered a capsule definition: Reverence is "the capacity for a range of feelings and emotions that are linked. It is a sense that there is something larger than a human being, accompanied by capacities for awe, respect, and shame; it is often expressed in, and reinforced by, ceremony." A caveat here is appropriate: Reverence does not mean mute and prim solemnity. One can express reverence with joy and spontaneity. Ceremonies of reverence invoke feelings of shared veneration and wonder—such as truth, learning, and justice—about the kind of

higher meanings and values that connect individuals in a community, along with the schools that transmit them across generations. Virtues are learned by participating in shared social practices. Such rituals and ceremonies help cultivate the cardinal virtue of reverence.

The awe-inspiring object of reverence meets at least one of the following conditions: It cannot be fully controlled or changed by human beings; it cannot ever be fully comprehended; it is something not created by human beings even though people may rely on it to prosper; or it is transcendent in a supernatural sense (Woodruff 2001). Something that satisfies any one of these conditions may involve a reverent sense of individual human limitation that brings a feeling of humility. Examples already mentioned include learning, truth, life, or God.

In a coda to an essay on the debate between religion and secular humanism in the context of democracy as education, Glickman (1998, 98) expressed reverence for how something beyond humankind's own power to create, completely comprehend, or control can nonetheless bind people together despite profound differences:

At these times, looking and listening to the geese, knowing that the moral, natural, spiritual, and social world is beyond my ability to control and that I am insignificant in the total scheme of history, events, and the rhythm of the universe, I am better able to think about what I am and what I want to be. . . . I am troubled that we haven't acknowledged that there is a common core of virtue for American education, rooted in religious, spiritual, and private conscience.

There are further examples of how reverence even overcomes profound difference in belief and value, including religious values.

People are reverent when they acknowledge their human limitations, including the limits of knowledge. The opposite of such reverent humility is what the classical Greeks called *hubris*, which expresses itself as an overweening pride and trust in rationality accompanied by a sense of invulnerability such that people need not attend to the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others,

especially subordinates. Too often, such *hubris* accompanies tyranny and tyrannical leadership in society and in schools.

Approaching human limitation with appropriate piety allows members of a community to experience a sense of grace that something greater than their individual egos sustains them. A reverent attitude puts people in their proper place, keeping humankind from acting like little gods or sinking to the level of beasts. It allows leaders to relax and enjoy that they do not always have to be in charge to lead well. Often they can depend on others in the community, such as parents, teachers, and even the students themselves. Some values, such as learning to live a better life through reciprocal care and compassion, are so overwhelmingly powerful that people only have to invoke them to bring out expressions of leadership in everyone. Reverence also helps leaders avoid despotism, cruelty, foolishness, and debauchery. It cultivates respect not only for the object of reverence, but also for those who share reverent ideals, even when they do not otherwise agree.

Respect is a feeling or attitude of appreciation, special consideration, or thoughtfulness for others. Individuals may express thoughtful consideration for those with whom they may have profound professional and even religious disagreement if they recognize that everyone is equally humbled before a shared mystery or that people pursue many of the same values, such as justice, truth, or learning.

Another way to approach defining and describing reverence is to say what it is not. Religion, of course, is a part of almost all communities, and reverence is important to religion; but the term must not be confined there. That would harm both religion and the community. Bumbaugh (2004, 19) remarked, “we are living in a post secular world” where religion is suddenly “a hot topic at the center of our public life.” As a minister, Bumbaugh (2004, 20)

wished to speak to a generation that flees what he called “a sterile secularism”; yet, he worried that religion “has become part of the entertainment industry” while “sacred texts are drafted to support political agendas of questionable merit.” In many religious traditions east and west, the majesty of God defies human comprehension. In these traditions, claiming to know the will of God in all matters is the sin of pride. Woodruff’s (2001, 4–5) reminder that “reverence has more to do with politics than religion” brings reverence out of the cloister and into the classroom, cafeteria, and schoolyard, where people live, laugh, argue, and love others.

Educational leaders should have a sense of awe, wonder, and respect for the relations that sustain and enhance life—a view that Schweitzer (1965) saw as the foundation and source of all ethics. These leaders should be devoted to the relations that sustain and enhance the life of students, teachers, parents, and others in the community. Once people recognize that human beings live by the grace of forces they cannot fully comprehend or control, reverence for life and recognition of human limitation can complement each other. Strong educational leadership requires many things, including appropriate use of science and technology. Reverence for life brings the insight that people must intelligently employ their rational tools and techniques with empathy and compassion because the goal of educational leadership is to improve the lives of our students, community, and democracy.

Sanders (2005) portrayed a principal who brought about an end to a toxic, irreverent culture in a working class high school. The principal, whom Sanders called Anthony Amistad, paid attention to the norms, traditions, and lore of the school. He developed a shared sense of commitment to remake the school into a thriving culture. He gave respect to his colleagues, making them feel that their thoughts, actions, and feelings mattered. Amistad understood implicitly what Woodruff called (2001, 177) the “paradox of respect”:

Why should a leader listen to people who know less than he or she does about the matter at hand? The short answer is that reverent leaders do listen to their followers. The hardest case for the paradox is teaching: Good teachers know more than their pupils; even so . . . good teachers listen to their pupils, and in this they are reverent.

Similarly, good educational leaders should listen to their teachers, parents, and the community at large. Amistad inherited a toxic school culture, close to civil war, whose previous principal was not reverent. The previous principal did not listen to others, refused respect, and consequently could not recognize personal limitations. Amistad's predecessor was isolated from teachers and from students, and suspicious of any change. The teachers in this toxic environment became dispirited and resistant to the work at hand. Sanders (2005) noted that, for these teachers, a good day was when the students did not show up.

Amistad's seemingly insignificant gestures indicated respect for discipline and structure by listening to others. He made it a point to learn names. As a reverent leader, Amistad understood that serving others organized his own life and pointed it toward the values and ideals that grounded the school as a learning, listening, and reverential community (Sanders 2005). Yet, as effective as such dynamic leaders are, people cannot hope that they will single-handedly revive reverence. However, the actions of one person who steadfastly goes about practicing reverence can help to enact a powerful transformation in the larger community.

Reverence as a virtue is "the capacity to have certain feelings and emotions when this capacity has been cultivated through training and experience in such a way that it inclines those who have it to do the right thing" (Woodruff 2001, 61–62). That is, all individuals have this capacity for reverence and for justice, courage, and the like, but they must nurture it. Considering reverence in a political and community context enables people to see reverence as a civic virtue. Unless they enact and practice them, virtues cease to exist. Sometimes the reverent spirit feels

something it cannot even name, and sometimes this spirit even expresses itself as humor. For instance, in an essay titled “*Sustaining a ‘Sacred’ Education*,” Glickman (2003) reported about one highly successful high school where the phrase “Don’t Do a Peabody” often was repeated. The phrase referred to a time when the school realized the rigidity of a well-known educational foundation that had provided the school considerable grant money but challenged its core values. The phrase was a reverent expression of the school’s refusal to compromise its highest values. It also signaled “hard choices ahead to keep the school on course” (Glickman 2003, 33). A sense of reverence can bind together a school and its community around common values and help it resist pressures from state and federal government and other agencies that may mean well, but would harm the ability of teachers to teach and leaders to lead.

Reverence is not something one simply acquires and always has; like all virtues, it requires a lifetime of continuous practice. It is active and depends on shared experience and on the way people go about working with or among other individuals in a community. Ceremonies and rituals help bind together reverent communities. While there are many forms of shared experience, rituals can provide exceptionally close connections. Therefore, the importance of ceremony and ritual (key components of a reverent school culture) are considered here at length.

Borrowed from the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, Sergiovanni’s (2000) distinction between the “systemsworld” and the “lifeworld” that he used to discuss educational leadership is helpful to consider. The systemsworld is the realm of rational management, data, test scores, financial statements, and the like. Sergiovanni contrasts that technocratic world with the idea of lifeworld, that realm of virtue, character, and human connection that gives the tools and techniques of an educational leader deeper and more enduring meaning and value. People must free themselves from the illusions of disembodied, decontextualized, and dispassionate

technique in educating educational leaders and look again at the content and quality of a leader's character.

To do this, human beings turn to virtues and virtue ethics to go beyond the ethics of rules and laws and far beyond the cold, dispassionate, and sometimes even amoral realm of systemsworld regulations and standards. Virtues are embodied predispositions to act that express feeling and emotion. They are about who people are, not just what they believe, about what they do, not just what they say. A good person just naturally feels like doing the right thing.

Reverence is an attitude that influences our thoughts, feelings, and actions. Like other virtues, people acquire reverence by participating in social practices, especially those rituals and ceremonies that connect them to one another and the larger world. Still, reverence is not something people can inculcate or teach directly; like any virtue, individuals may acquire it only through practice. If individuals accept that they all have the capacity for reverence, this capacity needs to be practiced and cultivated through a leader's action and, just as significantly, by the ceremonial and ritualistic aspects of education that reinforce the capacity to feel reverence. This is what Woodruff (2001, 77) meant by his apt expression that reverence uses ceremony "as a kind of language of behavior."

To the detriment of reinforcing the capacity for reverence, ceremony and ritual rarely receive attention in the education of school leaders. Even today, most of leadership education concerns systemsworld management issues—buses, beans, and budgets, as the saying goes. Too often, the day-to-day work of educational leaders never extends beyond such concerns, vital though they are to the running of a school or district. Exclusive preoccupation with systemsworld demands can cut off educational leaders from the lifeworld, the realm of culture that gives their actions meaning and significance. When technocratic rules and regulations take control, the

systemsworld comes to “colonize” the educational leader’s consciousness, thereby constraining his or her capacity for sympathetic and compassionate lifeworld response.

Educational leaders today not only are occupied with the systemsworld activities of making sure the buses run, but they also must respond to strident external testing and accountability mandates. Schools need more than bureaucratic management; they need leaders who respond to and foster the key elements of a school culture, particularly ritual and ceremony.

As a cardinal virtue, reverence ties other virtues together. In this examination, the authors posit that reverence for the relations of life and the relations that sustain life are especially relevant for educational leaders who wish to create caring and compassionate school climates. The character of a good educational leader involves many virtues. A very short list would include: courage, patience, persistence, being a good listener, and commitment—all encompassed by a self-transcending desire to serve others. A common mistake is to assume that virtues are absolute and exist separately, as if these virtues are something one can simply list and define.

Consider, for example, the virtue of courage. Like all virtues, it involves emotions as well as action. Unchecked by compassion, courage may become merely the ferocity of a beast, which destroys one’s humanity and quickly turns on those it should serve. Likewise, without intelligence, this virtue becomes foolhardy. True courage knows when the occasion calls for disciplined retreat. Without reflection, courage often allows itself to defend evil against the good. An isolated virtue frequently becomes a vice. Further, vices often pass themselves off as imposter virtues, such as controlling behavior and micromanagement of subordinates in a school or school system.

A focus on reverence as more than a virtue of an individual educational leader's character is appropriate, but Sergiovanni (2000, 17) makes a strong case for a close connection among many distinct virtues (such as integrity, sense of purpose, style, substance, and moral diligence) that define the character of "authentic leadership." Sergiovanni's idea and his work on the lifeworld of the school and the traits of the virtuous leader are worthy of endorsement.

This discussion of the virtue of reverence supplements and enhances Sergiovanni in key ways. First, reverence is a cardinal virtue that helps integrate other virtues of authentic leaders. Second, reverence, like other virtues, belongs to the community, the *polis* in Greek terms, as much as it does an individual.

Sergiovanni succeeded (2000) in relating the virtues of an individual leader's character with the character of the school or community, or what people may call the *ethos*. Sergiovanni's (2000, 17) insistence that educational leaders must be "sensitive to the unique values, beliefs, and needs of the followers, when they rely on ideas, values, and well thought-out theories to influence others" has merit. Such talk about the values, beliefs, and needs of followers places Sergiovanni's ideas on educational leadership squarely in the camp of moral and cultural approaches.

Many think someone is a good leader if their followers obey willingly, even eagerly; but Sergiovanni suggested that is not true. Irreverent leaders fail to have a sense of limits and humility; forgetting their place in the order of things, they act as if they are God (or God's designated agent) and lord over their followers. The irony is that the followers of a tyrant are often docilely willing to obey such seemingly "higher" authority while the followers of a leader are not always willing or obedient. In tyranny, the personality of the dictator is the highest value; while in leadership, everyone—the leader and the follower—has reverence for the higher ideas

(beliefs), ideals (values), and norms (laws, rules, etc.) of the culture and community, which they all serve. The difference between leadership and tyranny is a moral difference.

Wise leaders distribute the leadership function among all who participate in the practice. Sergiovanni (2000, 168) spoke highly of “followership” as part of “idea-based leadership” and insisted that “when ‘followership’ is linked to ideas it takes on intellectual and spiritual qualities.” Reverent leaders are willing to let others lead when it is best for the overall functioning of the organization. Reverent leaders who have a proper sense of their limitations know they exist by grace in codependent relations with their followers who help sustain them and whom they help sustain for the greater good. Leaders who cultivate critical and creative “followership” have little reason to fear their followers, while tyrants have good warrant to worry about theirs.

Sergiovanni (2000, 168) added: “Moral leadership and leadership based on shared ideas are more powerful and enduring than leadership based on personality and interpersonal skills.” The same holds for ideals and other objects of reverence, such as truth, life, God, justice, beauty, and goodness. Though reverence is one of the supreme unifying virtues of moral leadership, this does not denigrate the other virtues it conjoins. This seems like the loftiest goal for any community, yet it risks suppressing differences and diversity, which can lead to fanaticism. Without a profound sense of limitation, many rituals are, in fact, irreverent. They foster *hubris* rather than humility.

The idea of the virtue of reverence within the context of educational leadership should be developed further. Specifically, the authors next explore reverence and educational leadership that consider ceremony and ritual, and then delve into the topic of shared deliberation. Surprisingly, the two are closely related.

Reverent Educational Leadership: Ceremony and Ritual

Many leaders do not comprehend or deal adequately with ceremony and ritual in school culture. Even when they acknowledge ceremony and ritual, few recognize the depth of these cultural practices. Ritual may connect people in thought, feeling, and action regarding common ideas and ideals even when they have deep differences in social class, age, ethnicity, race, gender, and sometimes even culture. Ritual and ceremony do not just refer only to religious worship, sacraments, or liturgy, but also to ordinary, everyday customs, procedures, and protocols. Performed with reverence, mundane tasks may invoke a sense of respect for shared traditions, ideas, and ideals. Done properly, common tasks offer occasions for invoking connections among individuals. Ritual and ceremony are powerful means of social unification. Deal and Peterson (1999, 37) praised “integrative ceremonies” that “provide ways to meld the various social, ethnic, and religious groups in a school.” Examination of ritual at greater length offers a better understanding of the role of reverence in concrete educational practice.

Many hold education as a high value even when they disagree on many other fundamental issues of religion and politics. Reverence brings a profound humility for the mystery of life, along with recognition of individual limitations and ignorance. Deal and Peterson (1999, 23) made much of this “mythic side of a school” that “looms as a school’s existential anchor—its spiritual source, the wellspring of cultural traditions and ways.” An attitude of reverence recovers the traditions of the past into a present that allows the school and its community to imagine and create a richer future. Reverent leaders who can comprehend the school and community’s inheritance of generations of learning realize that collective wisdom

usually exceeds even the most astute leader. Ceremony and ritual can harvest the greater wisdom of the school and community.

Deal and Peterson (1999, 31) asserted: “Without ritual and ceremony, any culture will wither and die.” They observed that decades of bureaucratic (systemsworld) reform “have managed to sterilize schools of the symbolic acts that help culture survive and thrive.” Here is their apt definition of ritual (Deal and Peterson 1999, 32):

Rituals are procedures or routines that are infused with deeper meaning. They help make common experiences uncommon events. Every school has hundreds of routines. . . . But when these routine events can be connected to a school’s mission and values, they summon spirit and reinforce cultural ties.

Rituals do transform the commonplace by infusing it with the higher meanings, hopes, and values of the community. People may understand the word “spirit” as signifying the shared feeling of working together to actualize possibilities, ideas, and dreams within a tradition where the efforts of those who came before sustain them and the success of their efforts will depend on those yet to arrive. So understood, “spirit” has some of the aspects of immortality that involve telling the story of human lives in a vastly larger and more meaningful context.

Ceremony and ritual formalize embodied actions that invoke feelings and attitudes about beliefs, values, and norms of conduct in those who perform them with commitment. Shared ritual unites participants around notions of the good, true, and right. Ritual may allow its participants to embody intangible, even spiritual ideas, ideals, and feelings in concrete practice. Such observance aids individuals in forming embodied habits of action that conform to social customs and norms of proper performance. Unquestioned conformity to the social norms of unreflective morality is not, however, a good thing (as reflected in totalitarian nations). Thus, consideration of

the role of reflection in discerning properly reverent ritual is needed in the discussion of shared deliberation.

Ceremony can instill habits of right action directed toward the mission and values of such cultural institutions as schools. Deal and Peterson (1999, 36) described one school's annual rite of renewal where

the mission statement is reviewed each fall. It is refined or reworded to match current values. Then the statement is redone in a new calligraphy by a local artist and signed by everyone. This makes the mission statement alive, vital, connected to everyday experience.

By participating in common rituals and ceremonies, individuals become part of the larger community wherein they may find their appropriate place and make their contribution. These practices place appropriate limits on leaders, thereby restraining the misuse of power. Ritual and ceremony prevent leaders from becoming tyrants while also protecting the leader from the tyranny of cliques, cohorts, and even the majority of followers. Both democratic and despotic leaders make use of power—either the power of persuasion or violence. Reverent leaders use power with and for their followers to secure the ideals the society should serve with the least use of brute force possible, while tyrants require oppressive power over their followers and often resort to brute force. Irreverent leaders use ritual wrongly; distinguishing the difference requires a moral deliberation, considered further later in this article.

Rituals and ceremonies may yet unite a diverse culture—for instance, a pluralistic democracy—in mutual respect and reciprocal admiration regarding the culture's highest ideals (e.g., “life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness” or “all children can learn”). Glickman (2003, 30) described this type of school:

[E]very morning the entire membership of the school sits in a large open space in the center of the building for morning call—they hear the day's announcement, usually

observe a student or faculty or community member's short recital, and participate in singing a student-written song, the anthem of what it means to be a Jerold student.

Shared emotions about clearly articulated, namable, and named ideal values evinced by joint participation in ritual and ceremony can hold a community together around a common good even when members do not otherwise believe the same things or even agree on the best means of obtaining or sustaining the shared ideal.

Perhaps the most profound and difficult human limitation to articulate is death. If human beings were immortal, society would not have to reproduce itself biologically or culturally. Education performs the primordial function of initiating the young into culture. If mortals failed to reproduce, this would not be necessary. Among mortals, if a group cannot reproduce its culturally defining beliefs and ideals in the next generation, these beliefs and ideals will vanish. It is this fact that makes debates about education and schooling so understandably intense. It is also why all cultures hold education in high esteem and especially why cultures that have formal educational systems value these practices, even if some members of the culture condemn their personnel and procedures. The continuity that those who are alive today share with the generations that have gone before and are yet to come is itself worthy of reverence as part of the mystery of existence. This continuity is part of reverence for life. Deal and Peterson (1999, 52) affirmed: "All schools face waves of birth, death, and renewal among people, values, and program." Reverent rituals can acknowledge loss while gathering the passion, compassion, wisdom, and memory necessary for rebirth.

For instance, Schweitzer's (1998, 128) maxim of "reverence for life" included reaching out to what he termed the "Fellowship of those who bear the Mark of Pain," which for him involved realizing that part of what makes people human is their vulnerability and sensitivity to

human suffering. Deal and Peterson (1999, 34) provided a simple example depicting “closing rituals” that “furnish the needed support and compassion when things end.” Glickman (2003, 37) described one such ritual (“The Viking Funeral”):

This is a ritual where the entire staff ends their last day of school by sharing with each other the memories of the year that they wish to note, speak of, and then release. They walk together to the river and, while standing on the bank, quietly put their notes into a small cardboard “Viking boat,” which then is pushed into the current and moves down stream.

Similarly, on the last day of any class, A. G. Rud, one of the authors of this work, says “goodbye” to the room now empty, sometimes uttering students’ names and looking around and remembering who was there and what was discussed. He realizes that this class will never meet again and closes his eyes for a moment before turning off the lights and leaving.

Amazingly, many teachers express a profound sense of loss and grief at the end of the school year—especially graduation. Such “memorial ceremonies” are “times to remember the contributions and trials of others” (Deal and Peterson 1999, 39). The latter connects to the history and traditions of schools and allows people to recognize and perhaps feel for those who have sacrificed in the past for the greater good.

According to Woodruff (2001, 50), “Ceremony is like a language: You cannot simply invent it and you cannot do it all by yourself; it must be part of the texture of a shared culture.” Nonetheless, leaders can recover and reinvent ceremony to reshape a school’s culture. In most communities, schools rival churches as institutions of social hope and foci of the community’s beliefs and values. Because such things always are present in schools, they always are available for wise leaders to gather into a deeply meaningful ritual. Deal and Peterson (1999, 88–89) remarked that school leaders must serve as “anthropological sleuths” who “listen and look for clues and signs to the school’s present rituals and values” and seek out “secret ceremonies of

daily activity in teachers' lounges, workrooms, and hallway greetings that reflect deeper features of the culture." School leaders must "listen closely for the cherished dreams that staff and community hold" because they "probe for the latent sentiments, values, and expectations for the future." Deal and Peterson (1999, 95) wrote:

When an authentic ceremony is convened in a hallowed place, given a special touch, and accorded a special rhythm and flow, it builds momentum and expresses sincere emotions. Planning and staging these events is often done with extreme care. Encouraging and orchestrating such special ceremonies provide still another opportunity for leaders to shape—and to be shaped by—the culture of the school.

The crucial idea is that leaders are shaped as much as they shape. Leaders cannot lead unless, at some level, they can identify and follow the contours of the school community, the subcultures within the community. If, however, they can comprehend these things and suitably shape themselves, they can create rituals and ceremonies that convene and sometimes even transform existing ideas and ideals.

Consider the story of Joan Vydra at Hawthorne Elementary School. As principal of a 40-year-old school, confronted for the first time with a "clash of cultures," her response was to "move fast to establish common rituals and traditions that would bring different groups together in a cohesive culture and celebrate success for all students" (Deal and Peterson 1999, 78). Woodruff (2001) is correct in his assumption that ritual cannot be invented, but can be recovered and reinvented via profound cultural ideals and shared feelings. Brilliantly, Vydra employed American education philosopher Nel Noddings's (1992) ideal of a caring school culture. By doing so, she sought to reinforce what may be taken for granted: that parents care for their children; teaching is a caring calling; good educational leaders care about their teachers, students, and staff; communities care about their schools; and, in a reverent school in a reverent community, all care for and respect one another. Vydra established "Care Week" as a fall

tradition. On Mondays, students learned how to care for themselves; Tuesday students wrote their families thank-you notes; Wednesday emphasized the care of student comrades; Thursday they cleaned up and cared for the school; and Friday involved support of different community charities (food pantry, homeless shelters, etc.). Vydra also cultivated students, parents, and teachers as leaders within the school, thereby distributing respect as she distributed power.

Reverence is what animates a ritual. Without reverence, a ritual is empty, or worse. Such are dinners for many families that are incessantly on the go, with cell phones ringing, soccer practice and homework beckoning, and parents exhausted from the day's work. Woodruff (2001, 19) described the phenomenon this way:

Something is missing from these people, something that makes a difference between feeding time and meal time, between a home and a kennel. If you ask them why, they will answer, "Who has time for family dinner? It's only an empty ritual after all." True. Without reverence, rituals are empty.

Like the family dinner, rituals in schools also may become mere routines. Rituals that are disconnected from a school's mission and values fail to summon spirit or to reinforce cultural ties. Indeed, they kill the spirit and break ties. An absence of traditional rituals and ceremonies contributes to "toxic cultures" in schools (Deal and Peterson 1999, 123–24). In such cultures, leaders and followers lose respect for one another. They no longer know their proper limits and place. Reverence for life, and the community relations that sustain it, dissolve. People admire only themselves. Things become even worse when the rituals become completely empty routines, and people even forget the moral rule the routine seeks to capture.

Toxic cultures readily can decay further into tyranny when the empty forms are filled with what Woodruff (2001, 70–72) called "imposter virtues," such as false reverence, false justice, narrow adherence to religious tradition, narrow loyalty, and similar expressions.

Woodruff's example is the false patriotism of the Third Reich in Germany. He conceded that imposter virtues and the imposter reverence that united them in a disgraceful culture such as the Third Reich are difficult to detect. One should not trust any authority, including that of tradition, when it means "suspending our own moral judgment" (Woodruff 2001, 72). Bumbaugh (2004, 20) worried about presidents in the United States "functioning as *pontifex maximus*, the high priest of the nation." People should honor reverence for truth and learning in any educational setting because it helps defend against imposter virtues, including false reverence. Reverence supports freedom of inquiry, which is the first thing tyrannical leaders suppress.

Reverent Educational Leadership: Shared Deliberation and Inquiry

In the current environment, as the close of the first decade of the 21st century approached, the Congress of the United States of America convened during a time of war and deep division. Watching the opening ceremonies of one of the world's most powerful deliberative bodies provides a strong reminder that ritual attended to with reverence may invoke feelings of unity in diversity (*E pluribus Unum*) that are crucial for judicious inquiry. While presumably life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness unite this group to form what dictionaries define as a "congress," there are also ideals such as truth and justice that unite them. Americans hope that, as citizens, congressional leaders have feelings of care and compassion for one another. One of the members of this most recent U.S. Congress was sworn in using a copy of the *Koran* owned by Thomas Jefferson. Sometimes, civic rituals are strong enough to overcome even religious differences.

Reverence has a critical role in shared rational inquiry. Truth can most inspire a reverential attitude when people realize that it transcends the human condition. Finite creatures

are not, and never will be, omniscient. Recognition of human limitation humbles all before the mystery of the unknown and, perhaps, unknowable. Truth never can be the possession of only one person or one leader, however wise. The quest for truth and understanding belongs to every member of the community who answers the call, including those who have come before and those who are yet to come. Reverent leaders are open to learning because they know they are vulnerable to the shifting contingencies of existence and recognize that even the most assured position is subject to refutation. Reverence for truth alerts leaders to the permanent possibility of error.

Reverence for truth and learning requires people to listen carefully to one another. Even the least knowledgeable individual will know something others do not. Those who spend a lifetime, or even only a year or two, educating themselves are going to learn something; and because every human is a unique individual, it would be most odd if they did not occasionally spot something others have overlooked. The young and those new to an organization are not only its future, but also those most likely to notice what others have become so accustomed to that they can no longer see. In a pluralistic school, listening becomes especially crucial to learning and growth. People all grow when they are open to new relations with those who are different from them. Educational leaders are no exception.

Acknowledging that leaders must sometimes use persuasion, threats, and rewards, Woodruff (2001, 176) wrote that the reverent leader is “open to persuasion in return. Leadership involves reasonably open inquiry. Openness and honesty are defenses a good leader employs against the danger of bad judgment. Leaders are especially vulnerable to bad judgment when they allow themselves to become isolated.” Inquiry cannot always be completely open. Sometimes there is privileged information that should not, for instance, be revealed to those who

would do the school harm. Only the reverent leader can bear the burden of privileged knowledge well, for that leader knows that what he or she possesses is not of his or her own making. Even when leaders are the only ones entrusted with knowledge, it still belongs to the entire community.

Within the bounds of prudence, open inquiry—including the sharing of information and opinions—is always to be preferred. Reverence for appropriate persuasion, like reverence for learning, requires that both leaders and followers listen well. While leaders often do know more than their followers, they should nonetheless listen.

Education is the practice of everyone in the community; though, like other esoteric practices, there should be a core of dedicated professionals. Of course, leaders too must know their place. Reverent inquiry allows others—teachers, staff, parents, students, and concerned community members—to put the leader in his or her proper place. Deal and Peterson (1999, 86) described many instances of such dispersed deliberation and remark that “the leader must listen for the deeper dreams and hopes the school community holds for the future.” Sergiovanni’s (2000) idea of followership linked to shared ideas and ideals has a similar function in distributing deliberation, cultivating leadership, and avoiding tyranny.

A school without reverence for what it knows of its past, or refuses to learn about it, harms its present and future; while a school without reverence for the unknown future betrays its past *and* its present. Pluralistic democratic learning communities are the best vehicles for deep and enduring change, in large part, because of their sense of reverent humility, limitation, and respect for the mystery of life and learning, which deprives them of arrogant self-certainty.

Wise inquiry in schools should have its rituals of respect not just for truth and learning, but for one another as well. Wise educational leaders will learn them, preserve them, and, if

necessary, reinvent them. Reverent deliberation defends leaders from allowing meaningful rituals to degenerate into merely empty actions or mechanical systemsworld routines that kill a school's spirit and corrupt its values. Even more importantly, this deliberation helps protect people from imposter virtues, which is especially important in the case of a cardinal virtue like reverence.

Distinguishing reverence from an imposter is difficult, but achievable. Woodruff (2001, 71) provided valuable guidance when he commented: "Imposter virtues generally cloud the mind." Reverence for cultural tradition or God's authority may prove appropriate, but it should never lead to narrow patriotism or blind obedience. Those who believe that human customs are the will of God can too easily follow a false prophet, just as free peoples who do not question their country's leaders fail in their democratic duty and may fall into tyranny even as they think they are defending democracy. Woodruff (2001, 72) suggested one way people may avoid imposter virtues is by not suspending "our own moral judgment or closing the lid on our own moral compasses." Reverence requires that individuals respect such things as a school's tradition or its leadership; but people also must examine and criticize their leaders and values and, when necessary, imaginatively reconstruct those values. Reverence for the truth and inquiry is always higher than reverence for some or other dogmatic assertion of truth, whether in religion or science.

Conclusion

This discussion began by asserting how many have forgotten the virtue of reverence or defined it in narrow, religiously dogmatic ways, and arguing that there is worth in its appropriate recovery for educational leadership. School leaders are essential to the fostering of a school culture that is life-giving rather than life-stultifying. To use the terms of Sergiovanni and

Habermas, such a school culture is a morally and aesthetically rich lifeworld supported rather than dominated or colonized by its bureaucratic systemsworld of procedures and mandates (Sergiovanni 2001). The reverence fostered by a school leader through the languages of ritual, ceremony, and shared deliberation sustains this lifeworld of the school. The cardinal virtue of reverence, so crucial to any leader of a sustained lifeworld, can bring these acts and behaviors into a properly proportioned whole.

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