

Leadership, God, and the Devil

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This first conference of the Leaders/Scholars Association is the site of an important pronouncement. Warren Bennis, in his keynote address, argued that leadership is dead. Of course; it is a particular style of leadership to which Professor Bennis refers: the style often described as heroic, solitary, driving. Our current idea is that leadership moves among many persons in a leadership group. Of course, many practicing leaders are also heads of something -- directors, managers, CEO's, deans, etc. They still have output-based responsibilities and they still lie awake at 4:00a.m. wondering how to meet the budget deadline, get a product out, win a customer back. That hasn't changed.

For such people ends and means are constantly being weighed. Not only our ingenuity in problem solving is required, but also our integrity and our concern for foundational principles. This striving for ends and struggle with means is the stuff of drama, from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* to Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* and David Mamet's *Glengary Glenross*.

Leadership is fortunate in being a transdisciplinary study, influenced by the work of many disciplines. I have learned a great deal from the work of people at this conference. Your work has been grounded in political science, history, organizational behavior, management, speech communication, etc. (Many of you know that I have been a professor both of management and of theatre.) My work in this speech is grounded in the study of that other track in my life, the drama.

For many years, as a student of leadership and as a practitioner, I have been interested in those aspects of the leader's character which provide the endurance, the courage, and the

centeredness needed in order for one to keep shouldering the burdens of leadership. It seemed to me, as I watched my peers and colleagues, befriended my Congressman, observed the business leaders on my board, struggled with the opportunities and cares of my own college presidency, that some of the effects of each passing year in the yoke of office were to accumulate exhaustion and to bear corrosive marks on the soul from disappointment in myself and in others. Even as success crowned the organization and its aims, even as valued colleagues experienced success in shared objectives, a special kind of weariness grew as well. Constant striving and struggle with compromise is the norm for most of us. The totality of the leadership experience is often morally ambiguous: is this really all there is? Is this really the right goal for us all? Have our ends justified all these varied and sometimes vulgar means?

Over the years I have often taught the survey course in Western theatre and drama. The legend of Faust kept coming to mind as I struggled with these challenging aspects of leadership. You all know at least a bit about the Faust legend. Hector Berlioz composed *The Damnation of Faust* and Charles Gounod the opera, *Faust*. Franz Liszt wrote a symphony on the legend and the painter Ferdinand Delacroix depicted it. Two fine plays, separated by more than 200 years, have been written about Faust. Both, moreover, concern a superior person struggling to achieve in this world at the risk of his soul. Both reveal much to think about in relation to the theme of leadership, God and the Devil.

The earlier of the two plays is Christopher Marlowe's *Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*, 1588. It is the story of a brilliant scholar whose interests are entirely self-absorbed. The playwright, Marlowe, was acclaimed as better than Shakespeare in their time in Elizabethan London. Marlowe was an educated man, a prominent member of Cambridge's University Wits. He was a true giant of the Renaissance: poet, soldier, playwright, adventurer, said to be a

member of Elizabeth I's secret service. Killed at age 29 in suspicious circumstances in a barroom brawl, Marlowe created a Faust who sought out a devil, Mephistopheles, with whom to seal a bargain. Marlowe's Faust, called "Dr. Faustus," was a brilliant Renaissance scholar, a bit of an alchemist, nearly a wizard. He wanted to experience all of knowledge, of pleasure, of power. He contracted Mephistopheles' service for twenty-four years, in return for which Mephistopheles would take Faustus in death to Hell. Using Mephistopheles' demonic power, Faustus sought all experience, calling Helen of Troy to himself as his paramour, abusing his powers, living riotously only for himself and only for the moment, achieving nothing. Interestingly, Faustus' bargain with the Devil had an escape clause: at any time he could ask God's forgiveness and save his soul. But, in a scene which would echo again a few years later in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Faustus is in despair and can't bring himself to pray honestly. As he pleads with Mephistopheles for just another day, another hour of life, the demons of Hell carry him off.

So, Faustus is the Renaissance version of a failed leader. We could as easily have chosen Macbeth in the play of the same name. The point is the same.

Now, fast forward two hundred years to the Enlightenment, to the time of the American and French Revolutions, to Napoleon. A truly gifted writer provides us with a clearer, profound view of a complex leader: Goethe creates *Faust*. Wolfgang Goethe himself was a man of enormous talent. Like Mozart, Goethe was discovered to have genius as a boy. His gift for writing makes him in many critics' eyes the German analog of Shakespeare. Poet, playwright, critic, he was also a gifted executive in the Court of Weimar, a theatre director, and a lawyer. His novels and plays were the leading models of the 19th century Romantic movement and it is his and Schillers' translations of Shakespeare which play on German stages today. The Faust

character he wrote is a leader worthy of study by today's standards, that is, standards of the drama and standards of leadership.

If Marlowe's Faustus is a man driven by the need to know all and experience all, to have magic power over others, Goethe's Faust is a man driven to understand all and, in obtaining power, to achieve all. This important point is made clear at the very beginning, for Goethe's play starts in Heaven, in discussion between God and his archangels, into which the Devil, Mephisto comes. In an argument not unlike the one God and the Devil have over Job, a wager is made between God and the Devil. But, I get a bit ahead of myself...

Previously I mentioned Goethe's remarkably full and multifaceted career: literary genius, lawyer, executive in the Court of Weimar, critic, play director. It is fascinating to me that Goethe's mature view of leadership is reflected in a play written in two distinct parts with an interval of 30 years. *Faust, Part One* is written by Goethe as an established literary lion and German leader. *Faust, Part Two* is completed in 1832 in the last year of Goethe's life at age 83. *Faust* is certainly not autobiographical, but the title character is matured by those two imposters, failure and success, just as the playwright was. Goethe was one of the great leaders of thought in the 19th century.

The central struggle in both *Parts One* and *Two* is that of a person of character and achievements to understand all he can and somehow apply that understanding constructively in the world. This is surely as true today as it was in the 19th century. Goethe's God is a figure, not of veneration, so much as a creative, divine force. His Devil, Mephisto, is a sophisticated figure, not a caricature of evil, but of world-weary, skeptical nihilistic, destructive force. In Goethe's "Prologue in Heaven," we see a wager created between God and Mephisto.

Goaded by Mephisto's taunts that the scale of human misery has almost taken away Mephisto's desire to plague us, that it has become easy for Mephisto to turn us away from "confused service" to God, God replies by telling him "Men make mistakes as long as they strive." God cites Faust, an outstanding person, who is presently experiencing some confusion about his life in middle age. God bets with the Devil that he, Mephisto, will not triumph over Faust's soul in the end; that Mephisto underestimates Faust; that the Devil will have to admit in the end that "a good man with groping intuitions" will still always "strive for the light" over darkness. Thus begins Goethe's *Faust, Part One* in a study of leadership, God and the Devil.

Part One's plot moves when Mephisto tempts Faust into a wager. Faust is already a man of 50 – not at all young in the Age of Napoleon – and he has already become known for having mastered several professions: law, medicine, theology. Mephisto tries unsuccessfully to tempt Faust to wager his soul for limitless wealth and pleasure. But to know all, to achieve all, that is a temptation which Faust embraces. He accepts the proposal from Mephisto that Mephisto will use his powers to aid Faust's search. However if a moment, or an achievement, comes to Faust that is completely fulfilling to him, then Faust's soul will belong to Mephisto. Faust, in middle age, begins his search.

The first of Mephisto's snares for Faust goes awry. In the famous scene in Auerbach's Cellar, the temptations of camaraderie, wine and song are dismissed by Faust, who sees through them. But the next temptation is more telling. Faust is offered a potion that takes 30 years off his age. He accepts the magical/demonic restoration of his youth, and he begins to be spun into Mephisto's web. Shortly thereafter he meets an extremely virtuous and beautiful woman, the famous Gretchen of German literature, and is completely smitten. He uses Mephisto's help to seduce the loving, trusting girl. On Walpurgisnacht, Faust's unselfish love for Gretchen is

overcome by his passion for her, and he impregnates her. You can imagine how things spiral out of control. Gretchen's brother challenges Faust over his sister's honor; Faust, with Mephisto's aid, kills him in a duel. Gretchen drowns her baby, is imprisoned, abandoned by Faust, goes mad.

A moment of decision has come. Faust, full of remorse, makes Mephisto again use his powers in a mad dash to the prison to save the betrayed girl. But she, also repenting, refuses Faust and Mephisto and reasserts her faith in God and Divine Mercy. This is the crucial step in her redemption.

For Faust, too, this is a crucial moment. His desire to do good and achieve greatly has unraveled totally, but his remorse has set him back on track. Although as yet unredeemed, he has not met Mephisto's condition of the wager and has so far avoided losing his soul. In the struggle Faust has returned to a position from which he can reinvent himself for the better and once again pursue his worthiest visions.

So ends Goethe's *Faust, Part One*, a very middle-aged tale of struggle, fall, and remorse, and courageously starting over. Thirty years later Goethe, now facing his own death, picked up the strands of leadership, God the Devil in *Faust, Part Two*.

Be aware that I am skipping much more German Romanticism in this second, much longer portion of the work. Faust works on grand achievements as he serves the Emperor. He takes up a classical journey to defend Helen of Troy. He wins battles, saves Helen, champions a young man very much like the poet, Lord Byron. But each and every achievement is made with the tainted help of Mephisto. All achievements, Faust finds, combine both good and evil, even when good harnesses evil in pursuit of praiseworthy aims. Faust grows wise enough, as he now nears one hundred, to see this. This moral ambiguity keeps him always with a sense of some

guilt, so it acts as a constant brake on both his id and his ego. He embarks upon the last, great service of his life.

Europe's poor, dispossessed by the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution, are a discarded mass of misery. Faust responds to what we now know were the utopian workers' movements of the age, clearing land and reclaiming it from the sea for egalitarian workers' communities. He and Mephisto create land, villages, a new port, but their partnership to change things for the better in this world is still tainted by the cooperation of good and evil. One unintended consequence is the death of a virtuous old couple who were dispossessed of their cottage in the great land reclamation. Faust still feels deep remorse for his part in their deaths. Finally, afflicted with blindness, he nonetheless sees in his mind's eye the completion of his great project, a flourishing and just workers community. Touched by this culmination of his life's struggle, he embraces the vision of the community. He is completely fulfilled. He falls dead with this vision before him.

Triumphant that Faust, dead at age 100, has finally succumbed to his wager, Mephisto sends his minions to take Faust to Hell.

And then God steps in. He sends his Angels, reminding the Devil of their superceding wager, to carry Faust up to heaven. Faust's soul, released from Hell, is carried upwards by the Angels who sing "Who so with fervent will STRIVES ON, we Angels can deliver."

Faust, especially in Goethe's version, is a character who represents simultaneously the best in us and the worst, a giant of the Romantic Age with strikingly contemporary human contradictions. Leadership, God and the Devil is still the central conundrum of our discipline. It is much more than business ethics. Especially for those who work with others to achieve greatly,

especially for those who work for the common weal, the questions that come late in the night are still the same:

“Where lies the path of honor and virtue?”

“Where lies the path of redemption?”

The non-religious Goethe gives us a clear answer in the outcome of the wager between God and the Devil: virtue is found in the clear-headed acknowledgement of your own mistakes, the courage to pick yourself up and strive forever for the light. As Shakespeare says of Hamlet, another failed, heroic leader, “Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angels guide thee to thy rest!”

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