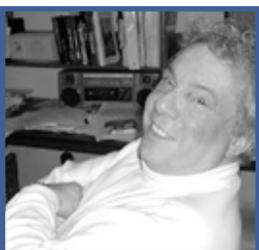


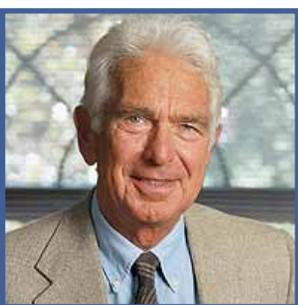
## *Still Surprised: A Memoir of a Life in Leadership*

by Warren Bennis (Jossey-Bass, 2010)



This month, ILA member Richard Couto continues in his role as a special guest interviewer. He is currently Distinguished Senior Scholar at Union In-

stitute & University in their Cohort PhD Program-Ethical and Creative Leadership. His most recent publication is the two-volume *Political and Civic Leadership: A Reference Handbook* (Sage, 2010), which he edited.



Warren Bennis is the founding chairman of USC's Leadership Institute, distinguished professor of business administration at the USC

Marshall School of Business. One of the world's foremost experts on leadership, Dr. Bennis has written more than 30 books and numerous articles on leadership, change and creative collaboration. His book *Leaders* was designated by the *Financial Times* as one of the top 50 business books of all time, and he received a Pulitzer Prize nomination for *An Invented Life*. He has consulted for many Fortune 500 companies and has served as an adviser to five U.S. presidents. In May 2000, the *Financial Times* referred to Bennis as "the professor who established leadership as a respectable academic field." *Forbes Magazine* referred to him as the "dean of leadership gurus." In 2007, *Business*

*Week* named Bennis as one of the top 10 most influential thought leaders.

**Richard:** Great to have you today, Warren. We are talking about your memoir *Still Surprised*. Could you talk about some of the other titles you considered for your memoir?

**Warren:** I'm usually very eager for feedback about most things I do, I require it, I need it. At first I considered only one other title and finally decided against it, based on feedback from a person for whom I hold enormous respect: Howard Gardner. I was going to call it *My Self through Others*. I know my life has been enriched and my development has been through conversations, relationships, and connections I've had with others. I don't quarantine myself and suddenly, "Eureka!", a brilliant thought or idea comes to me. All of my learning comes through others—meaning that I thrive and grow and learn through others, through conversation, through good questions. One of the ways I learn since I became conscious of a Self, at Antioch College in the late 40's, is dialogically: to repeat, with and through, others.

Howard said, "No," in thunder to "My Self through Others, and suggested "My Self-Discovery through Others," which forced me to rethink the title. Suddenly, out of the blue, *Still Surprised* came to mind. I didn't want to tell anybody because I didn't want feedback from anyone: not a

"No," or a, "Hey! That's wonderful." I knew *Still Surprised* was right because whenever I try to be open and discuss my anxieties and insecurities and all the mistakes I've made, I'm rarely believed. They cannot suspend disbelief and just think I'm angling discretely for compliments. The truth is that I remain surprised, yes, still surprised at whatever success I've gained and, more importantly, whatever beloved connections I have.

Most of the surprises you talk about in the book are those you just mentioned. But you talk as well about aging in terms of surprise. Could you talk a little bit about that?

The chapter title is, "The Crucible of Age," and to me, it is the most interesting crucible because no one prepares you for it. If you're a woman growing up in our society at least early on you're prepared for, as well as angry and/or disgusted with, the sexism of everyday life. If you're an African American or a woman or a Latino you go through experiences early on in your life that may be hateful and ugly, if not dangerous. Frightful and scary as that is, you can develop some pre-emptive defenses which at the very least, prepare you. But with aging, it's more like having your first child. Who's going to prepare you for aging? Your body probably keeps reminding you, but what I'm getting at is that the two primary images we have of aging in our society are extreme and wildly exaggerated.

gerated. At one extreme there is the famous Bette Davis remark, "Old age ain't no place for sissies," which implies aging is horrible. And the other extreme is like those cruise ship TV commercials where you see a seventy-ish-year-old couple: the guy with a nice, really a glorious, thick head of white hair and a tan, with Viagra coursing through his veins, and she, just gorgeous and voluptuous. Both with alarmingly white teeth and smiling vigorously. The two of them hip-hopping around the dance floor, looking adoringly at each other. Well that's all rubbish too. Aging is adventurous and rough in a sense that I spend more calendar-coded time in "health maintenance"—visits to doctors, spinal surgery, walking twice a day, at least. Trying to keep in shape. It's to keep an active sustained life. It's work. Takes discipline. Even after a full 6am-to-12 midnight day, reminding yourself to brush your teeth.

I just saw a portrait of myself recently taken by Yousuf Karsh about 35 years ago. He was a very famous portraitist, known for his photographic portraits of the rich and famous. He himself became a celebrity because of his portraits of celebrities. Because I knew his wife in college, he agreed to my portrait pro bono which was to be placed in the Presidents' dining room when I was president of the University of Cincinnati in the '70s. By the way, I've just learned that it's no longer in sight anywhere because the curator of the gallery at USC has been trying to get it "on loan" for a Karsh exhibit in her gallery. Then, Professor Selma Holo, USC's curator, discovered that the portrait was not only "in storage" somewhere, but not in great condition: some gashes disfigured the left side of my face. I recently reviewed an email copy of it, but apparently they've been unable to restore it. All the other portraits of the past presidents were oil paintings and they all looked alike:

dour-looking old men. I wanted to do something different than those generic, characterless oil paintings. Well, that's what happens. That's why it is somewhere in storage at the University of Cincinnati, which says something about legacy doesn't it?

You would think that those people who weren't happy with your tenure at the university would be eager to hang you somewhere!

Hang me somewhere? Is that a laugh line? Well, yes, probably. Can I read you an email from Dr. Holo that just arrived today? She is also a friend and I think she is impishly carrying on this cartoonish correspondence. Well, here is the latest:

"Hi Lucy, this is Selma..." (Lucy is apparently the archivist at the University of Cincinnati.) "I imagine you will be wanting to repair the portrait of your former president before lending it out? You probably cannot display it like that right? And of course you will be intending to display it, as he was one of your former presidents. Please advise what your plans are before we do loan forms." Apparently Lucy asked her to do something of a loan form because she wrote Selma and said "Oh! There seems to be, it shows, oh, we do have President Bennis's portrait and it is being stored at the art museum. Attached is a photo of it. In our records it shows there to be a crack in the left center of the portrait. The crack can be seen in the photo. I am copying somebody else who would prepare the loan agreement." This goes on in the correspondence. It is comedic, no?

It speaks to that satisfaction at the later part of life, looking back at these things and probably with a greater sense of humor than you might have had earlier.

I don't know whether it's in the chapter, "The Crucible of Age," or the penultimate chapter where I write about finally being given an honorary degree at the University of Cincinnati in '07. The President, at that time a woman—a remarkable woman, Dr. Nancy Zympher—delivered a great speech honoring me that emphasized how much work I put in—two to three years of political energy at least—to make the University of Cincinnati a state university and, finally, financially viable. Made me out to be a virtual savior. At the disrobing room, after the ceremony, the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences came over to me and said, "I had no idea that you had anything to do with..." She was totally vague about the whole "going state" campaign. She then continued to say, "Your book, *Why Leaders Can't Lead*, page 21—I'll never..." And then began quoting from an old book of mine, which to the Dean was a "life-changing" experience. Talk about legacy: my voice, not my position. Nothing about being the president, she didn't even know I had been president until that day. And then there is the Karsh portrait. What's weird and funny is that the disfigured portrait is in storage somewhere, but my writing is all the good dean knows about me. That does make me happy, actually because touching people with my writing and teaching is really what I care most care about.

Talk a little bit about teaching the leadership course at USC and why you find that so rewarding. You would think of all your achievements there would be a lot of things that would give you great satisfaction, but this idea of gearing up semester after semester and dealing with a set of new students is the thing that stands out for you.

I'm really glad you ask me about that. I co-taught a course for thirteen years with USC's former President, Steven Sample. The course is called "The Art and Adventure of Leadership," not, "The Art and the Science," by the way. The first few years we didn't know quite what direction to take and how we can organize a semester-long course about a portmanteau topic like leadership. Eventually, over the years, the course began stirring up campus buzz and the last semester we taught it, close to three hundred students applied for forty-two openings. The course had become totemic on campus. In the last several years some students applied to USC hoping to get admitted to the course when they were juniors or seniors.

So over thirteen years five hundred or so students have taken the course. The students organized two reunions over the years and over those weekends, hearing their stories about how what they learned has been incarnated in their life stories. They come from all over the world, a few from as far as Iraq and Uganda, for the weekend, on both occasions, combined with a football Saturday.

One of the reasons teaching is so rewarding is that with first-rate, challenging minds, you just can't help learning. I know that sounds cliché, but it's really true. The second reason I find the experience so rewarding is that in conversations with my students, I feel I've become a Master; not just good, not just an expert, not just adept, not just very confident. That feeling of mastery is ineffable. I don't feel that way about my writing or just about anything else. I don't know exactly what I do that makes it that way but for me it's an elixir, a goad to keep learning and

teaching and, yes, a continuing lust for living the life of the mind. Now, by the way, I love it when people read my book, and feel "Hmm...I learned something important which is going to stay with me forever." I don't know how to put it in a non-cliché way but to be able to affect the kinds of choices people are going to make in their lives and to bring out their "better angels:" what could be more fulfilling than this? Here I am at eighty-five and still fully employed; where else could that happen? I love the title of Nobel Laureate, Richard Feynman's book, *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out*. That's what it's all about, isn't it?

I was very taken with your discussion about roles, especially your role as a lieutenant in the infantry. You even describe your relationship with Doug McGregor as the role of protégé. I understand the idea that you take on a role and you learn to meet that role and this is part of acquiring leadership skills. Yet, there is also this part of me that wonders where do you get to the point where it's authentic, where you and the role are one? Sometime around your teaching at Harvard and MIT and certainly by the time you go to Buffalo you're not talking about roles anymore. That is, you weren't taking on the role of a provost—you were a provost.

This is perhaps the most important question I can be asked about the book and about who Warren Bennis is. It's a powerful yet very subtle, very complex question, and I am certain that my answer can't possibly approach the depth of your question. The truth is that I don't fully understand it myself but I'll give you my best shot. I'm not an actor when I'm a provost; I'm a provost. It's still, however, a performing art.

The philosopher Habermas talks about possible selves, which always bring to mind an interview I did with an extraordinary man, John Gardner, another valued mentor. Most people fifty years or younger don't know the name, John Gardner. I'm not talking about the novelist; I'm talking about Lyndon Johnson's Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) back when it was the one of the most important cabinet posts. John Gardner was from humble origin's, a Roman Catholic, a conservative—not politically speaking, but his essential character was : reserved, low-keyed, and with a capacity for long, thoughtful and comfortable silences. He was the only Republican in Lyndon Johnson's cabinet. He had a brilliant career that included founding the White House Fellowship program as well as Common Cause and Independent Sector. I interviewed him for *Geeks and Geezers* when my co-author, Bob Thomas, and I interviewed successful leaders: the geeks, thirty-two years and younger, and the geezers, seventy-two years and older. John was eighty-six when I sat down with him on the lush, green campus of Stanford in 2001. I loved our conversation, about two and a half hours which went like five minutes. He's been a mentor to me for many years; mentoring across far distances with phone calls, letters, and occasional meetings in Washington. We weren't close, like I was with Doug McGregor, but he was the guy I would call and say, "John what do you think?" I remember asking him, "John, how did you get here from there?" At that time, he was a famous, best selling and influential author, a mentor to hundreds of people. He looked puzzled for a minute and then he said, after one of his longer-than-usual silences, "There are, I guess, some qualities there that life was waiting to pull out of me." Boy, can I identify with that: what life is waiting to pull out of us.

Just how, I wonder to this day, how do we get to know all our possible selves?

So I wanted to be like my mentor Doug McGregor, who was a college president. I wanted that almost desperately, perhaps too much. I figured if I wanted to be a college president I had better taken on some administrative office. Which is why I left a full professorship at MIT, with an office overlooking the Charles River. I threw my hat into every damn available ring, so to speak, and sought a provostship as a stepping stone for a presidency. That would be a start, I thought, which led to four years as provost at SUNY/Buffalo. My colleagues at MIT were baffled and I recall one colleague consoling me with a miserable attempt at empathy, calling my decision a “mid-career” crisis.

I admired my MIT dean at faculty meetings. He would make a speech, say at a banquet for donors or at a faculty meeting, no more than seven

or eight minutes long, and they were always witty, resonant, and relevant. He would sit down and I’d think,

“Oh my God, I could never do that.” When I was suddenly Provost, guess what: I was asked to give speeches and discovered, “Hey I can do that.” That was one of those selves that seemed congruent with Warren Bennis. In a way I chose something that had some part of me. That role brought or pulled out of me the ability to give a quick, witty speech. How would I know if the role didn’t pull that out of me?

Now here is the tricky part of “What is authentic?” and I’m going to talk about somebody I wrote about in the book, Al Gore. I have a deep admiration and real affection for the former Vice President. To go out on the limb, a shaky one

at that, I believe that he’s an exemplar of someone who was a hostage of his parents’ dream: that one day he will and should be president. From early on in his youth, he was virtually brought up to be president, from where he was sent to school

and even how he dressed. I have wondered to this day whether he really, really wanted to be president. Notice how he comes across these days, especially since his book, *An Inconvenient Truth* was published, followed quickly by winning the Nobel Peace prize. His concern about de-forestation and the environment is where his heart is, where he seems totally relaxed and comfortable in his own skin, not in his parents’ bespoke suits. Compare his performances in those painful-to-watch TV debates with George W. Bush in the 2000 presidential campaign. I often show clips of that debate to my class and squirm every time. To repeat myself, I don’t think the Al Gore I know, the guy you would love to have a beer with, simply didn’t want that job enough. That led to an inauthentic Al Gore. When you’re with Al Gore today, with a group of people, friends, colleagues, he is comfortable, witty, and, on top of that, so brilliant. This is the authentic and remarkable person I know, not the political Al Gore who ran for president over a decade ago.

One more thing, if I may. As I said earlier, my wife is a retired psychopharmacologist and I’ve picked up a few useful psychoanalytic terms from her. She would say, if the role you choose (or find yourself in) is congruent with at least one of those possible selves, it is ego-syntonic. On the other hand, if the role you are playing is not congruent with who you are, the “real me,” as William James described it, that’s ego-dystonic. It became clear to me that I was fortunate enough to end up in roles that pulled from me the person I really wanted to be

I’m thinking about this idea of role congruence and how it relates to mentoring. In talking about both Captain Bessinger—your commanding

I feel two things about learning—one is E.M. Forster’s two simple words from the frontispiece of his book, *Howards End*, that goes “...Only connect.” That’s a piece of my philosophy. The other thing, what sounds like the opposite, is learn how to make the right distinctions. Relocation camps are not the same as death camps. Genital mutilation and slavery? That’s evil! Anything that interferes with free speech? That’s wrong. I mentioned that one of the liberal fallacies is all-too-frequent inability to call something wrong or evil. It has to do with the limits of tolerance. The other fallacy... is the quest for perfection. Those are the two liberal—and I consider myself liberal—fallacies that contradict the foundations of our Democracy. And while I’m at it, it annoys the hell out of me!

officer in the Army—and Doug McGregor, you talk about how they saw things in you before you saw them in yourself, and, in a sense, invited you to discover them and bring them out in yourself. I wonder if that's part of the transition to authenticity as well—that as we develop and mature what a mentor would have done for us we learn to do for ourselves a bit more.

It's interesting because they were the two key figures in the book, especially Doug. Yet, the time with Bessinger was so different than the time with Doug. It's hard to compare. Captain Bessinger was probably a kid from a hard scrabble background who was the caretaker of the Vanderbilt mansion in Asheville, North Carolina. I doubt he had any college education and I am sure he never did any psychotherapy or took courses on empathy or listening, but he was a natural, marvelous listener, and I learned through my interactions with him. He had this patient quality, while he was chewing his Red Man tobacco, of really taking in what I was saying. There is a vivid anecdote in the book where I was getting to the point of gaining a little confidence as a combat infantry platoon leader and began bitching and griping the sort of low level grumbling that was pretty typical of troops in combat. In fact, we were actually moving ahead pretty successfully on the German front in late '44, early '45. I think he was a little hard of hearing so I was almost shouting. He listened to me very patiently as I bitched and moaned about this or that, whether it was the erratic air support or tank support or the stupidity of regimental brass or the crummy food or just about anything, including the cold weather. I said outright to him that given what appeared to me the crappy support

we were getting, the Germans were to sure to win. On and on I went, covering just anything I could think of. He just listened to me rant and finally after I was almost hoarse, he spat out a bullet of Red Man tobacco he was chewing and, he looked at me and said, "Shit, kid, they've got an army too." Boy, I thought to myself when I thought about what he said, how downright brilliant that was, the perspective he gave me. To this day I think about his response. Do you think it was as brilliant as I think it was, even now over a half-century later?

I agree it was brilliant. I found the writing about the war just tremendous: "Combat was a bloody blur. You killed the enemy when you had to because you knew he wouldn't hesitate to kill you. It shocks me how vivid, but shallow, my memories of combat are." You then talk about making judgments and later realizing the consequences of those judgments. "In that sense teenagers make ideal soldiers. Their fit young bodies can perform the demanding physical acts of war while their immature brains don't probe too deeply into motives or consequences." I thought that was tremendously insightful. You reach back to your own state of mind at nineteen years of age when you saw some pretty heavy duty combat including the Battle of the Bulge. There is no romance about the war in your memoir. It's about wet fox holes. It's about trench foot. You offer neither the romance nor the heroics of war, but still a very dramatic view; as you put it, a crucible.

As you read it I thought, "Oh my God. I said that? I wrote that?" I just got a thought, as you read it now and did not even think of it when I wrote those sentences. I guess I was

way over my head when I wrote that because it now seems like a developmental question, which the neurosciences may answer some day. Who am I to be an authority on that? Even so, I still believe it's true and think it will be confirmed in the years ahead through the neurosciences and fMRI brain imaging. For whatever it's worth, I think brain mapping and the neurosciences will soon become a seminal contributor to leadership research.

You are reflecting on, insightfully, I think, your own experience and you make a point that those memories don't go away. Let me talk a little bit about another incident that happened in your late teens before you went to war. This is the case of the Japanese-American merchant who had a store next to your dad's shop. A truck troop carrier pulled up to the store and soldiers went in. Jeff comes out and talks to them, but then goes back in and empties his cash register, closes the door, puts the "Closed" sign down and rolls down the gate protecting the front entrance of the store. Off he goes to the internment camp.

They put him on top of a two and a half ton truck standing with other Japanese, still wearing his apron where he stuffed the money from his cash register in the pocket of the apron. I was seventeen. That's what I remember, still vividly.

You talk in this episode about how the war came home and about Gold Star families, etc. I was wondering how you as a seventeen year old processed Jeff's removal. What did it mean to you? Did you ponder, reflect upon why the selection of this person? What's going on here? The justice or injustice of it? The

marginalization? The stigmatization? Did any of that go through your mind?

These so-called “relocation camps” had no name then, and I didn’t know what the hell was going on. I just saw Jeff, the next-door fruit and vegetable guy, dragged away with other Japanese.

I didn’t write about this, but this influenced my going into the social sciences. I came upon a book my last year at Antioch College called *The Proper Study of Mankind* by Stuart Chase. It was a series of essays on a variety of exciting experiments that had been going on in the social sciences during and after World War II. There was one chapter that immediately caught my attention. It was a study about the Japanese relocation camps by Dr. Alexander Leighton, a community psychiatrist from Canada who spent several years living in several Japanese internment camps. I quickly found the book, *The Governing of Men*. It opened my eyes to what was going on with the various generations of Japanese interned during World War II. Now mind you I was living in Los Angeles at the time and we were building fortresses on the beaches near here with flood lights, whatever they are called, going up into the skies every night. There were headlines and in one of the tabloid papers it read “Jap plane shot down on Vermont Ave.” It was a scary time.

What I am getting at is that I’m sure I would not have had the same interest in that chapter if I hadn’t seen Jeff hauled away, like an escaped convict, from his own little shop. I don’t know; it’s hard to figure things out like that though I would guess it was a precursor of why I became so interested in that chapter and then went out and made sure I read that book. Which quickened my interest

in the social sciences.

You make a mention of the scholarships that Antioch was offering to Japanese-American students whose families had been interned. Apparently that episode with Jeff stayed with you, even to this day. When you look back at Antioch, that scholarship and that kind of action stands out.

I was surprised when I reread the book recently that that episode must have been etched somewhere in my brain. I had almost forgotten about it until writing the memoir. The reason it stays in my mind to this day, I guess, is the sense of justice and the sense of my lover’s quarrel with the Antioch ethos of cultural relativism, which is, simply put, that different cultures do different things, so genital mutilation is ok within cultures that think it’s ok. In my class, I teach to this day, some students compare the Japanese relocation camps to the German death camps. “They are very similar, aren’t they?” they ask. Well, yes, in certain ways they are similar. They have certain things, awful things, in common; that is, interning a group of people, imprisoning them, because of their color or religion or because they are gay or they’re Jehovah’s Witness’ or whatever it is. Still, it’s not the same. There is a difference, an important difference between the relocation camps and the death camps. The Japanese, thank God, weren’t killed. They weren’t exterminated. They weren’t beaten, as far as I could tell, from the 1943 War Relocation Authority report.

What I am getting at here is that I do think one of the two liberal fallacies is the incapacity to say “That’s equal” or “That’s bad” or “That’s good.” At Antioch those weren’t words we would use. We were very, quote, “tolerant” to the point that we could even try to understand and then even

excuse brutal things such as slavery. I’m not saying my students or people in general approved of genital mutilation, but when I hear people comparing relocation camps with death camps it sets my nerves jingling. It’s just stupid. I feel two things about learning—one is E.M. Forster’s two simple words from the frontispiece of his book, *Howards End*, that goes “...Only connect.” That’s a piece of my philosophy. The other thing, what sounds like the opposite, is learn how to make the right distinctions. Relocation camps are not the same as death camps. Genital mutilation and slavery? That’s evil! Anything that interferes with free speech? That’s wrong. I mentioned that one of the liberal fallacies is all-too-frequent inability to call something wrong or evil. It has to do with the limits of tolerance. The other fallacy, which has nothing to do with our interview I guess, is the quest for perfection. Those are the two liberal—and I consider myself liberal—fallacies that contradict the foundations of our Democracy. And while I’m at it, it annoys the hell out of me!

Finally Warren, have you planned your next book yet?

Well, actually I have. It’s more about the Still word, as in the title of my book, *Still Surprised*: “Warren, are you still...?” When I hear that word in a question to me, I would like to shush whoever asks it and before the questioner finishes the inevitable questions, “Yes, Dammit, I am! Still!” And I plan to call my next book, “Still and... Will!”

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