

Being Made

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As I examine the lives of great leaders throughout recorded history, I've noticed that each one faced a severe testing period before they ever led effectively. Although there will always be the ongoing nature versus nurture debate - that being, whether leaders are born or if they're a by-product of their environment - I've concluded that it's a little bit of both. It is clear that our world needs effective leaders, role models with backbones that will bend but not break under the direst of circumstances. Where can we find refuge when our lives are threatened each day, both on our soil and abroad? Who can we go to, someone equipped to lead us through perilous times? And what are we doing to train our young people to be effective leaders at any level of leadership?

Whatever you believe, it cannot be denied that many of the world's leaders, both past and present, experienced a difficult season before they were released to lead people. Sometimes these challenges defined them as leaders. Just look at the former Mayor Rudy Giuliani. Prior to the 9/11 event, Mr. Giuliani wasn't really liked by many NY'ers. Many felt he was harsh, impersonal, and led with an iron fist. But after September 11th, the world embraced him as a great leader. Under intense pressure, when everything was in chaos, he was calm, focused, and effective in reassuring NY'ers, and the US, that we would not be defeated. At a time when our world seemed completely uprooted, we leaned on his leadership. Contrary to what others believe, I would suggest that his leadership wasn't developed at the time the 911 events unfolded; it was simply revealed. Trials can develop an individual and growth can happen with every experience we go through. But I would also suggest, especially during very intense situations, that the colors of a leader are made evident. There's no time for schooling or time to read-up on quick fixes. The individual will either step up to the plate and respond,

or he will retreat. It's that simple. In other words, it's how we face those valleys that our character and leadership ability is unveiled. Under such pressures, like the 9/11 attacks, some individuals just crumble. But Rudy Giuliani's leadership came to light which was, in my opinion, years in the making.

Look at other great leaders in history and you'll find a similar pattern. Prior to ever leading South African, Nelson Mandela was wrongfully imprisoned. He was very critical of the apartheid government which led to his arrest and subsequent detention in jail. What's significant was that his imprisonment was well over 20 years. When asked if he felt like a victim, he clearly denied it. From his perspective, his time in jail offered the opportunity for change, not with the government but with himself. That's an amazing perspective. Now, he will always be recognized for his courage to stand up for the freedoms his people deserved. What's even more significant is that he's now considered a leader of leaders. And a lot of this was birthed out of his prison experience.

There are several other great leaders who went through the fire of circumstances and stood up at the moment of need. Martin Luther King stood up against racial prejudices in America. Winston Churchill is recognized as a great leader because of his ability to lead England through one of her darkest moments. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a man who contracted polio in 1921, yet led America through the great depression and World War II. If we look in scripture, we find many men and women who went through a preparation period. Moses spent forty years in the wilderness before ever leading the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery. King David spent his boyhood years as a shepherd, tending mere sheep. Yet, his defining moment came when he defeated the Philistine giant, Goliath. And despite his apparent human failures, he was recognized as a great king and leader of the Israeli people. Even God identified him as a man after his own heart.

There are many examples which demonstrate the developmental process great leaders go through before ever becoming the individuals we look up to and admire today. But as I study these leaders, I can say that I personally knew a model leader – my father. I could share many examples of his ability to address some of the most strenuous of situations. Sometimes he led a few individuals; other times he led a few thousand people through some very trying times. Each trial he faced, I believe, brought him to a cross-road of decisions. He could have chosen to do what was right or what was most convenient for him. With every situation I knew of, I can say he always chose what was right. Often, his decision was made with the awareness that the road ahead would be difficult.

Let me share one such example. My father attended a large gathering of leaders. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss a very important decision that had already been decided. I might add that the decision was a very expensive one. Many stood up and shared their reasoning as to why this was the right choice. My father sat patiently throughout that meeting and listened to everyone support their position. Not one individual stood up to oppose the conclusion. From my father's viewpoint, he knew the decision was clearly wrong. Having spent much time in research regarding this matter, and having spent most of his life negotiating large contracts, he knew he had to stand up and go against everyone in that room. He knew exactly what he was in for; yet, his decision to respond was based on principle not feelings or a desire to be liked.

Finally, my father stood up and staunchly opposed the comments that were made. He was clearly angry, but he respectfully articulated his case as to where errors were made and where they (as a group) failed to do their homework. As a result, well over a million dollars was wasted. When my father was done speaking, not a word was said for the rest of that meeting. The room was silent.

Later on, I spoke with my father regarding the situation because I wanted to better understand (from the perspective of leader) what happened and then, what insights could be obtained from that event. My father never wanted to hurt anyone with his words. But he also knew that sometimes the truth hurts. Of course there are many things to consider when confronting an issue such as timing, tone, choice of words, and a right attitude. But even when all of those are in check, words can still hurt.

I got the sense that my father felt bad about his strong words. But in that same conversation, he didn't question his motion to stand up and speak against the entire leadership. From his standpoint, as member of that team of leaders, he felt responsible to those who entrusted that group with the monies given and how they were distributed. Corporately, he knew they (and this included my father) had failed. Therefore, he had to stand up and speak out against this failure to do what was right.

Sometimes such challenges can appear devastating. Causalities happen whereby relationships are severed, secure positions are terminated, companies fold, and everything seems to go wrong. You might say that what made my father so unique was his ability to stand in the gap for others, even if he was the only one standing. I've seen him do what was right time after time, even when he knew the ramifications would be costly. You might even say that what made him a great leader was his ability to lead others successfully, which he did. Although this did mark his legacy, there is something else that signifies his uniqueness - it was his ability to lead his own life well.

It's one thing to lead others well; it's another thing to lead your own life. As we all know, this isn't an easy task. One of the greatest things I observed as a son was seeing my father assess each situation he experienced. Methodically, he carefully wrote notes in a journal each day. He would reflect and look for lessons learned and areas where growth could improve. I've heard it said that experience is the greatest teacher. I would disagree because many experience the ebbs and flows of life; yet, fail to learn from their

circumstances. In my opinion, “evaluated experienced” is the greatest teacher. It is when we stop, evaluate, and then extract valuable principles that we grow, not just go from one experience to another. In addition to intentional reflection, he sought the counsel from some of his most trusted friends. And finally, he spent much time in prayer, seeking God’s perspective with every situation brought before him.

As I shared earlier, it’s in the crises moments of life that a leader’s level of effectiveness is revealed, not made. When I look at my father’s ability to tackle very difficult situations head-on, he always looked at them as opportunities, not problems. Of course, each situation had to be evaluated to assess the severity of each crisis. But I was always amazed at how calm he was. He never let his feelings drive his decisions. Even when he was moved with compassion, especially for those who were wrongly mistreated, he was determined to do what was just and, make right if something was clearly wrong.

Shortly after my father passed away, I was asked repeatedly the same question: “How are you doing?” To be quite honest, I didn’t know how to answer the question since this was the first time I lost a parent. Early on, my response was: “I’m making it through each day, I guess.” And then I said on behalf of my family, “we would make it through this somehow.”

Over time, my response began to change from making it through to learning how to manage our situations better. My focus began to shift from getting to the end of this loss to working through it. In other words, instead of seeing this as getting to a particular destination, the focus was now directed on the process – of what was going on now and how we would grow individually and as a family.

I personally believe life is more about what we’re doing in the here and now and how we’re growing as compared to getting to the end of something, as in the case of a runner reaching the finish line of a race. Sometimes we focus so much on our goals that

we miss the wonderful opportunities to expand our capacity for much growth. Goals are important. They help give us direction and something to strive for. But failing to stop and look at the scenery along the journey is a grave mistake.

For the one who is concerned about how you're going to get through your loss, I encourage you to stop for a moment and see what today could offer you. You certainly need to walk through your pain for a season. But at some point, you will need to make some essential changes for yourself. Your pain may seem like your greatest challenge now. It takes from you – emotionally, physically, and spiritually. But at the same time, our pains can also teach us a lot – about ourselves, about others, and our world. I pray that as you walk daily through this new journey that you find new opportunities for healing and growth, areas that you never saw deep within you, and “places” you never thought you could tread upon.

Principle: Although I like the idea of *making it* through the pain, the grief, and the loss felt each day, I'm not sure that's what God has in mind. Perhaps my focus should be on how this process is *making me*.