

That essential element: Leadership



Mary Garrison

In elementary school days, my classmates and I eagerly anticipated the recess bell. Out the door we charged for informal playground games such as Follow the Leader.

Remember the rules? A chosen leader is at the head of the line, and everyone in line must do exactly as he or she does. Those failing to comply are automatically out. In adulthood, is such blind allegiance always wise?

This next week during Early Voting, and on election-day Nov. 3, we choose our leaders. There are many issues to consider. Ultimately, this election comes down to leadership. Let's explore what constitutes a good leader.

Those fortunate to have responsible parents receive leadership lessons from them. Others hopefully observe and absorb from those whose paths they cross: care-givers, educators, faith leaders, and so forth. A sad fact is that many grow up without good guidance.

If still living, my parents would be 97 and 98 this year. Like most parents, they deeply cared for us and made some mistakes along the way. Parenting is a tough job. Children learn from observing their parents in both tranquil and stressful times and in situations that challenge them. Both my parents received some hard knocks in life.

At age 13, my dad lost his father to a sudden strep infection a year before penicillin was widely available. I never met my granddad, but he had just filed for state office. He faced no primary, or opposition party challenger in his race.

My dad and his two brothers deeply grieved this loss. As their mother suddenly assumed the family business, they took part-time jobs after school. Each served in World War II. The depression years hit my mother's family hard. Her parents had health challenges requiring the children to pitch in with help, jobs and moving college to the back burner. Yet, these trials were character-building.

During his profession as a minister, my father faced challenging times when factions in the membership strongly differed. I once saw him preside over a room of angry people. He somehow managed to prevent harm to a bullied individual yet remained polite and in control. He also faced criticism as our community grappled with desegregation. Both parents were cancer patients, and I watched them maintain hope under duress.

For what they taught us, I remain profoundly grateful for: a belief in truth, honesty, integrity,

trustworthiness, personal responsibility, community service, respect for others and listening to one's conscience. These are the rules we imperfect human beings should strive for to live a good life.

History books are full of remarkable leaders: The tenacity of Gen. George Washington and his troops at Valley Forge; President Lincoln's faith in the Union; Winston Churchill who refused to succumb in the dark days of World War II. Harriet Tubman's bravery; Susan B. Anthony's dedication; and Ruth Bader Ginsburg's role on the Supreme Court.

In our community, this year's Athena Award winner was Mayor Barbara Volk. Other outstanding women leaders nominated were Ruth Birge, Marcia Caserio. Kim Hinkelman, Laura Leatherwood, Lori Kay "LK" Paden, and Joy Ponder. They exemplify the leadership principles of ATHENA: to live authentically, learn constantly, advocate fiercely, act courageously, foster collaboration, build relationships, give back and celebrate.

We see the characteristics of good leaders each and every day on the local, state and national level. They are intelligent, decisive, and possess good "people sense" on the social IQ scale. They are not threatened by different opinions, and listen to constructive criticism without defensiveness. They deal in facts. They express appreciation, show compassion, and make decisions for the common good rather than self. A strong leader remains dedicated, practices pre-emptive moves and perseveres in time of crisis. We all know when we witness it that invisible but essential component that is hard to define: a good leader inspiring us to grow and to follow.

During these most trying times, wise, informed leaders from the CDC and the NIH advise us to keep wearing masks as our best defense until a Covid-19 vaccine is widely available. The Mayo Clinic says it would take 70% of Americans to contract and recover from the virus, meaning 29 million people. At the current Covid-19 death rate, this would bring devastating loss of life and hospitals stressed beyond capacity.

Choosing our leaders is part of citizenship. Vote early One-Stop Voting Oct. 26-31, or on Election Day Nov. 3. Check the hours and dates on the Board of Elections website as well as any required documents needed. Use the non-partisan Vote411.org for candidate-submitted information for each race.

Let us hold a spirit of optimism and faith that the American people will not blindly choose, but elect ethical, trustworthy leaders.

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