

THE Soapbox

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Dear Friend:

This is *Soapbox* #2. I received quite a number of helpful comments on our first version of *Soapbox*. Thank you for your responses. And then again I know many of you tossed the first issue on that read-it-later pile or perhaps in the round file under your kitchen sink. I understand. My read-it-later piles are too numerous and teetering and my garbage man strains his back each Monday morning carting off all the unread information.

But while I hope *Soapbox* does not create more clutter for any one of you, I am writing these pieces because I long for genuine conversation on the issues of the day. I believe there is a deep hunger in our lives for thoughtfulness and wisdom, a hunger for the deeper kinds of conversation. I love to see a genuinely poised person, and I suspect such people are poised because they think hard and often on the deeper things.

I have been doing a lot of thinking and speaking about leadership lately. A series of articles in the *Seattle Times* recently asked "Where have all the leaders gone?" and "What does it take to be a leader today?" These articles appeared just before the tear gas and the pepper spray clouded the streets of Seattle during the WTO conference.

After reading another fine series of articles on the "me millennium" in the *New York Times*, I thought about what kind of a culture leaders face these days. The novelist Richard Russo, for example, says that our culture has spent a full millennium "driving God out into the farthest reaches of the universe," rendering him irrelevant or dead, and we have now succeeded in placing the individual at the center of all that we value. "For better or for worse," Russo says, "it is the self in all its glory that we've chosen to celebrate, and we seem prepared to continue the celebration even when the individual turns out to be Dennis Rodman."

How are we supposed to lead in such a world? Who can lead with poise and thoughtfulness in a world full of Dennis Rodmans? Who wants to? Who can make a difference? How do we determine where we are going when everyone has a different opinion? Who can lead a city in the throes of the WTO conference?

I don't know too much about football, but I like all the talk about splitting the seams of the zone or locating the cracks in the line. The defense looks threatening and ominous. The defense just may have the ability to stop us cold. But a good offensive team, a good coach and good quarterback, can spot the vulnerable seams and send a receiver or running back ripping through those holes for great gains.

That's what a good leader must do in these times. We need to find the seams in this self-focused culture. The zone of this culture wants to stop us cold, challenge all authority, tie our hands, but good leaders study the seams. Good leaders engage the culture, and then

they run right at the seams. You can't just gather on the sidelines with your own team and talk about how tough that defense is and what a terrific run you might someday make. The game always calls for intense engagement.

But then we have to have a vision of what the end-zone looks like. Here is where I come to my main conclusion about leadership in a culture such as ours. We desperately need what I have come to call moral leadership. Moral leadership for the new millennium will hone the skills of competence, no question about that. But moral leadership is about more than competence. It is about character. It is about having a clear moral vision, complex as that task sometimes is. Moral leadership believes in community and recognizes that people both need and want to find a common good. Moral leadership brings a new sense of civility to our work, treating others with dignity and kindness. We need grace-filled organizations and communities.

Moral leadership requires a radical worldview. I suspect leaders in our time do not think enough about what frames our view of the world, where our deepest convictions lie, what anchors the values by which we live and act. The unexamined life, Socrates tells us, is not worth living. I think our leaders for this time and the future need to work on worldview.

And then here is my main point: Christians, as leaders, have a radical worldview to offer their organizations, their communities, and the world. God created the world. What a place to begin. What a place to stand. God created each of us in his image. What a radical view of human nature. God wants his world to flourish. He wants people to prosper, to live with a sense of meaning and purpose, to be able to laugh, to have enough to eat, to have shelter, and family, a home. This is a worldview, and these assumptions make all the difference in the way we lead.

And then moral leadership requires vision. Shaped by worldview, a leader must have a clear view about the way things should be and can be. A leader needs to see the seams, not just the obstacles, and a good leader will always give hope that the seams are penetrable. Vision is critical. People must have hope. Moral leadership opens the world to God's flourishing. Once again, Christians, as leaders, believe in transformation.

Finally, leaders must do something. No sitting on the sidelines. Moral leadership means that we run right at the challenges, that we move forward boldly. Guided and motivated by a radical vision that things can be better, we find the seams, make things new, change the world.

I just finished David Aikman's book *Great Souls, Six Who Changed the Century*. Aikman profiles six people who rose "above their times and their circumstances to change, if only just a little, the direction of the human tide." These people demonstrated moral leadership. These people were guided by a radical worldview that God created his world to flourish, and they literally changed the world.

I have dedicated my life to learning better how to split the seams, how to make a difference, how to open the world to God's flourishing, "if only just a little." And I would love to hear what you think about moral leadership in our times.



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