

Public Service and Social Responsibility

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The broad-based and enthusiastic support that brought President Barack Obama to power last November in the United States is strong evidence that people lack something in their lives and specifically lack something in their shared experience of citizenship. Many people want more than they have been experiencing, and they look for leaders who can help them find a richer experience of life. This is a good thing and it demonstrates a deeply human desire for significance and for connectedness.

In longing for this significance and connectedness we are like the young knight Gareth in Tennyson's cycle of poems about the stories of King Arthur, called *Idylls of the King*. When Gareth's mother attempts to keep him at home rather than letting him seek his way in the world, he says this to her:

Man am I grown, a man's work must I do.
Follow the deer? follow [the Christ,] the King,
Live pure, speak true, right wrong, follow the King --
Else, wherefore born?

Gareth in these lines reveals that he is not content to live a sheltered life, providing only for the needs of his family by hunting. Instead, he wants to seek out the charismatic leader, King Arthur, who has come on the scene and is generating so much excitement. But it is not just excitement that Gareth seeks. He wants a life based on truth and righteousness, which he expects to be exemplified in King Arthur. Implicitly in this brief extract, and more explicitly in the context from which they are extracted, Gareth is also eager to join a company of others with similar aspirations.

Like King Arthur or the biblical King David or John F. Kennedy or Martin Luther King, Barack Obama has generated a response of hopeful enthusiasm in those around him, a longing for personal significance and an attachment to something that transcends oneself.

Though, like you, I know that Barack Obama is a limited person such as we all are, I hope that President Obama will be a great President. I hope that his accomplishments will overshadow his limitations. I hope that we will see moral and value-based leadership that will be effective and inspiring. I hope that his leadership will be a unifying influence.

I hope these things will happen because he has an important role and these are difficult times requiring wisdom and humanity. But I also hope these things will happen because individual aspirations for significance have been focused on him, and I do not want to see people disillusioned and thus made cynical.

Instead, I long to see each person in the United States – and in Canada and in the rest of the world – fulfilled and happy and optimistic about the future that we can create together. I want for all of us what Parker J. Palmer describes in his book *Let Your Life Speak* when he describes the universal human need for significance, and his perception of how we are to find it:

Our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic selfhood, whether or not it conforms to some image of who we *ought* to be. As we do so, we will not only find the joy that every human being seeks – we will also find our path of authentic service in the world. True vocation joins self and service, as Frederick Buechner asserts when he defines vocation as “the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need.” [p.16]

Palmer describes the “deepest calling” of humans as finding our authentic selfhood – our uniqueness – whatever it is. Once we know who we are as individuals we will also realize the importance of living in community with others, and we will find our “path of authentic service in the world.” And his quotation from Buechner is beautiful, is it not? Buechner says that an individual’s vocation, the place where the person is called to be, is in “the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need.”

What a vision for significant living there is in that construction of words: vocation is not a burden but a “deep gladness” found where we use our own particular talents and opportunities to address “deep need.”

I would like to focus attention for a few moments on one particular set of possibilities for finding this matching of “deep gladness” with “deep need.” I want to suggest that both of these things are possible in a kind of service, a kind of career formation that is not widely deemed as attractive in Canada now as I believe it has been in the past. I have in mind the deep need that we have as a country for outstanding young minds to enter public service.

This is an amazing country. We Canadians are not demonstrative about our patriotism. We do not rehearse in public or in our private conversations as much as might be appropriate our pride in our country, the freedoms and opportunities it affords and the accomplishments that are possible here – and that occur here.

But this is a wonderful place to live – this country, this province, this city are all wonderful places, as are the other provinces and communities in Canada. We choose our own governments and thus the policies that govern our behavior, through democratic processes. We are by world standards a prosperous and successful economic presence. We have a rich history that we study less than we should and a complicated social fabric that we thus understand less well than we should. We are committed to collectively providing social programs that address real needs in our communities. We have a vibrant and rich cultural experience available to us.

Of course, I do not want to ignore the reality of problems that exist: our world and to varying degrees our country face food shortages, environmental crises, economic uncertainty, inequity of opportunity, disparities in health outcomes and the quality of life, poverty, religiously motivated strife and too great a readiness to address differences through conflict and distancing others rather than peacemaking and bringing others close. These are real issues and I do not want to pretend that they do not exist. Instead I want to view them this morning as the “deep need” that must be addressed, the sphere in which many may find their individual “deep gladness.”

What we have in Canada is the legacy created by many people of outstanding intellect and outstanding commitment who have built this country, making contributions of many different kinds.

Much of that legacy was created and is still being created by those who have committed themselves to public service, to politics and to foreign service on behalf of this country. But I have a concern that these careers are less valued by us as a populace than they have been in the past. It is appropriate in a democracy to debate and to challenge. But I believe that the degree to which we are critical of those who take on these roles has led to an unfortunate diminution of the respect we should give to those who give of themselves, and the respect that is due to the important roles taken on by dedicated public servants.

In addition to denigration of these roles, there are two other disincentives that I will mention in passing, viz., the degree of public scrutiny to which we subject the lives of public servants, and the inadequate compensation relative to the magnitude of the responsibility. But I will leave those for another time.

To return to my main point: in a recent conversation Manitoba Senator Janis Johnson on this matter, told me that in her view, as a career choice:

Government is not competitive with business, for example, which has become the “career of choice” today for many outstanding graduates. Public service used to be that. And more than this, serving in the public sector, politics and the foreign service was considered an honourable career and was much admired.

While I have the privilege of speaking to many outstanding young people in my role in the University of Manitoba, and while I meet some who are committed to making a difference in the world through public life, I meet many who have turned away from that possibility. They consider public life to be too bureaucratized, too inflexible, too limiting of individual contributions. In other words, they believe too much of what we too often say about our fellow citizens who take on those roles, and about the system in which they work.

In fact, the history of this country demonstrates that individuals *can* make a difference to the development of policy and to the development of the country.

I suppose I am talking to you about this because I have been thinking about it a good deal, partly as a concerned citizen and partly from the perspective of my professional role. I wonder what universities can do to encourage outstanding young people to enter the public service.

Of course, the University of Manitoba has formal programs to prepare people for all sorts of careers, and to prepare people more generally for good citizenship. We offer political studies, social work, cultural specializations and on and on. And we have specific activities to engage with the community in areas of need, such as the Alternative Spring Break program which will take students to South America to establish a water system in a village there, or the Service Learning programs through our Student Life group that have taken students to Bangladesh to help communities there. And closer to home we have the Soup Up Your Smile program in Dentistry that offers free dental help to impoverished inner city residents.

These are all good things, but I would like to see a renaissance in awareness of the “deep gladness” that can be found by meeting the “deep need” of continuing to build this country through public service, through political engagement and through foreign service.

Let me return to the poetry with which I began. In another part of the *Idylls* (The Coming of Arthur) Tennyson's narrative voice says this:

And after these King Arthur for a space,
And through the puissance of his Table Round,
Drew all their petty princedoms under him,
Their king and head, and made a realm, and reigned.

Strong leadership can stand against chaos and, in the image of this poem cycle, make a realm – a place of order, a nation. We need strong leaders from each new generation to aspire to provide that kind of leadership.

This is, I believe, the essence of what Obama supporters long to find.

Perhaps a step that all of us can take is suggested by this observation of G.K. Chesterton (in his book *Orthodoxy*):

People first paid honour to a spot and afterwards gained glory for it. Men did not love Rome because she was great. She was great because they had loved her.

Perhaps each of us could love our nation, our province, our city a little more visibly and expressively. And thus we could make them great, because we could let the next generation of leaders know how valuable the legacy is, and induce more of them to take up the challenge of continuing to build that legacy. Perhaps in that way they could find “deep gladness” in meeting “deep need.”