

The [E1][E2] Nelson Touch: A Model for Leadership?

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I would like to thank the OΔK officers for the invitation to speak to you on the subject of leadership. The Omicron Delta Kappa Honor Society, founded in 1914, seeks to “recognize exemplary achievement in scholarship and leadership” on American campuses. In order to be selected one has to meet a minimum grade point average requirement and show leadership in one or more of the following areas: (1) scholarship; (2) athletics; (3) campus or community service, social and religious activities, and campus government; (4) journalism, speech, and the mass media; and (5) creative and performing arts.¹ That covers a wide range of activities and all of you deserve to be congratulated for your efforts. But is a leader simply someone with a long resume? When your application to OΔK was considered by the current membership do you think they determined the weight of your achievements with a scale? Did they merely count how many activities you were involved in? Was it a matter of popularity? Physical attractiveness? Personal charisma?

What *does* a leader look like? Let’s imagine we are British sailors serving aboard the ship HMS *Victory*. It is mid-October 1805 and we are part of the British fleet cruising off the coast of Spain in search of the combined French and Spanish fleets. Our leader is a man who is 5’ 5” tall. He was born forty-five years ago, the same year our ship was commissioned. A contemporary described him as “one of the most insignificant figures I ever saw. His weight cannot be more than seventy pounds. A more miserable collection of bones and wizened frame cannot be imagined.”² Throughout his naval career he is known to have been chronically seasick. He has no sight in his right eye and is missing half of his right eyebrow. His right arm is missing just below the shoulder. He is a married man and his very public affair with a married woman has scandalized all of England. He is vain, likes to dress up with all of his many honors proudly displayed on his dress uniform, and he has a tendency to ignore the orders of his superiors when it suits him. Is this the image of a man we would be inclined to follow into battle? Would our confidence in this man’s ability to lead us be strong if it were based solely on physical appearance or even personal moral behavior? Yet it is upon this seemingly frail, diminutive man that the hope of England

rests. Failure to maintain mastery of the seas would mean that the economic lifeblood of the British nation would be endangered and that Napoleon would be able to ferry his army across the English Channel and finally succeed in invading England.

By now many of you have guessed that Horatio Nelson was the naval hero in question. He would lose his own life but defeat the combined French and Spanish fleets at Trafalgar on October 21, 1805, without the loss of a single ship. Nelson did this through innovative strategy and decisive leadership and thereby secured his place in history as one of the greatest naval commanders of all time. Now the days of wooden warships powered by the vagaries of the wind are long past. It is not very likely that many of us will ever be involved in a naval battle and I do not seek to glorify warfare. Then, as now, war is a horrific, brutal business and the last resort when all other options are exhausted. However, is there something we can learn about leadership from Nelson? Since I believe that leadership is a combination of innate ability combined with dedicated effort and the conscious and subconscious study of the principles of leadership, it makes sense to learn from the example of great leaders.

Nelson referred to his approach as the "Nelson touch." It was composed of several elements: "(1) a genius for bold strategy based on giving his trusted subordinates both a simple plan and great autonomy to carry it out; (2) an inspiring and calculated bravery; and (3) a charming capacity for kindness, concern and affection that inspired genuine love [in those who served under him]. He was self confident, patriotic and believed in prayer."³

On the morning of Trafalgar, he wrote:

May the Great God, whom I worship, grant to my Country, and for the benefit of Europe in general, a great and glorious Victory; and may no misconduct in any one tarnish it; and may humanity after Victory be the predominant feature in the British Fleet. For myself, individually, I commit my life to Him who made me, and may his blessing light upon my endeavours for serving my Country faithfully. To Him I resign myself and the just cause which is entrusted to me to defend. Amen. Amen.⁴

Despite his weaknesses he had the ability to inspire loyalty, respect, and devotion in those who served with him. One of Nelson's sailors said, "Men adored him and in fighting under him, every man thought himself sure of success."⁵ They had confidence in him because he had confidence in them. Nelson knew that his ships were strong because of the oak with which they were built. He also knew that his men had "hearts of oak" and would do what was expected of them. As his fleet sailed into battle at Trafalgar he famously signaled "England expects every man will do his duty."

While Nelsons may only come along every so often, those of us who aspire to leadership positions or have leadership thrust upon us can seek to emulate the "Nelson touch" both here as campus

leaders and, for our soon-to-be-graduating seniors, in the world at large. Our “bold plans” and “bravery” will not include attacking an enemy fleet but it may require all of our cunning and moral courage to successfully lead a campaign to change an unjust law or navigate an organization through difficult times. We can lay out a straightforward plan and give those we lead the latitude they need to use their own talents to make it work. We need to demonstrate real benevolence and consideration toward the very people who are the designated beneficiaries of our inspired leadership. No one’s contribution is unimportant, no matter what their title or salary. We must believe, as Nelson did, in the rightness of our cause and allow that passion to guide us.

As the ecclesiastical leader of two congregations of [E3]people for more than eight years, I, like Nelson, acknowledge the hand of the “Great God” in all of my affairs. Unlike Nelson, who as the captain of a ship had god-like authority and could rule as a tyrant if he chose and mete out punishment and even death, you and I are largely constrained to lead by example. “It is the nature and disposition of almost all men [speaking of the race and not merely the gender], as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion.”⁶ Therefore, many may be called leaders, but only some rise to the level of a true leader. In most settings it is only by persuasion, by “long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, kindness and love unfeigned” that we are able to lead effectively. I would hope that you consider your induction into OΔK an acknowledgment of a job well done and an encouragement to proceed on to continued success as a leader in all of your professional and personal endeavors. OΔK and Juniata College expects everyone to do their duty. Thank you.

NOTES

¹ See the Omicron Delta Kappa website for additional background on this organization:
<http://www.odk.org/>.

² The Lutheran pastor Thomas Kosegarten thus described Nelson and added, “His bold nose, steady eye and the solid worth revealed in the whole face betray in some measure the great conqueror. He speaks little, and then only in English, and he hardly ever smiles.”
<http://www.nmm.ac.uk/collections/nelson/viewObject.cfm/category/90332?ID=PAJ3940>, Accessed 23 February 2007.

³ Remarks of the Secretary of the Navy, The Honorable Gordon R. England, Trafalgar Night, The Residence of the Ambassador from the United Kingdom, Washington, D.C., October 17, 2002.
<http://www.navy.mil/navydata/people/secnav/england/speeches/eng021017.txt>, Accessed 23 February 2007.

⁴ <http://www.nelson-society.org.uk/html/introduction.html>, Accessed 23 February 2007.

⁵ Remarks of the Secretary of the Navy, The Honorable Gordon R. England, Trafalgar Night, The Residence of the Ambassador from the United Kingdom, Washington, D.C., October 17, 2002.
<http://www.navy.mil/navydata/people/secnav/england/speeches/eng021017.txt>, Accessed 23 February 2007.

⁶ Section 121, *The Doctrine and Covenants*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.