Leadership Matters: Now More than Ever

Leadership matters. That is why we come together today to honor you as student leaders, because your leadership has mattered to our law school. Each of you has served your fellow students, the law school and, in many instances, others in the community in ways that have made a real difference. I am thankful to you for your leadership. You have made this community a better place for all of us. Some of you will shortly receive particular recognition for your individual leadership or for the achievements of your particular student organization, but each and every one of you has earned our respect the admiration and gratitude.

But there is more to be said today than just thanking you for your leadership. By saying leadership matters my intent is not just to reward you, but much more importantly to challenge you. The challenge of leadership has never been greater, and never has the consequences of the failure to meet that challenge been more evident than now. Leadership matters and, after this pandemic, it will matter even more.

Who can feel good about the terrible failures of leadership that we have been witnessing in the past few years and in particular this time of the Covid-19 epidemic? Instead of intelligence, compassion and courage, we see ignorance, narcissism and pandering, not just in our own country but around the world, in movements called “populism.” Think about it, if you are doing what is popular, isn’t it almost certainly the case that you not leading but following others? And isn’t it evident that, if you are following others, you are unlikely to know where you are going or where you may end up?
As a former history professor, I find myself spending more time these days looking back and thinking about the dangers of popular movements, like those that shook Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, fascism in its various forms, some more virulent than other. In the 1940s, it took great leaders, above all Winston Churchill comes to my mind, to lead Europe out of that crisis. Where are (and who are) the persons of strong character like Winston Churchill who will lead us out of this global crisis 70 years later?

You did not zoom in to listen to a history lecture and I will stop my historical ruminations now. So back to my theme: leadership matters, especially in times like these. But what is leadership and what are the qualities that make or characterize a leader?

A few days ago, working here in my study at home remotely participating in a ZOOM meeting, and surrounded by many books that I have not had time to read, I picked out a collection of essays about leadership I had bought several years ago when I was in Oxford. The essays were written by former Warden of the Rhodes House, an eminent Australian political scientist and professor of international relations, Donald Markwell. One essay in particular caught my eye as it seemed to be directly relevant to the current situation that we are all facing: “Developing Leaders for a World of Global Forces and Rapid Change.”

Pretty pertinent, right? A global force (that is certainly what the pandemic is) and rapid change (how rapidly has everything changed in just a matter of weeks). Did you ever imagine this would happen? Markwell provides a long list of qualities (21 of them) – many of them not surprising: vision, idealism, clarity of purpose, judgment, commitment to service. But three

1 Donald Markwell, Instincts to Lead: on leadership, peace and education (2013).
qualities stood out to me as especially worthy of being discussed with you today, as student leaders who are being, and will continue to be, tested by these extraordinary times. I have put these three qualities into a set of slides, which we will now put up using the Share Screen feature and which I will send to you if you would like. Each of these qualities is packed with meaning and worthy of extended reflection. All I can do this morning in the time allotted to me is tell you why they resonate for me as such essential qualities of leadership, especially now. Here is the first:

**Emotional intelligence, both understanding and mastering oneself, and understanding others and being able to work effectively with them, in all their (and our) diverse human frailty and complexity.**

There are two dimensions to this quality. First, emotional intelligence involves understanding yourself, your own strengths and weaknesses. You need to recognize and continuously reflect on your strengths and weaknesses—how they impact your effectiveness as a leader. The second aspect of emotional intelligence, understanding others, requires, above all, that you recognize the importance and value of human diversity. We humans are not all alike, and our beauty and our strength stem from our differences. The adjective I probably most often use to describe our law school, and this community of which you serve as student leaders, is vibrant. That vibrancy, I strongly believe, is rooted in our diversity, in our inclusiveness, and the respect we have for one another’s differences and different views. Diversity matters in every community, in every team, in every organization. I urge you to embrace it, encourage it, insist on diversity wherever you are. Why? Because, as I believe you have learned from your experience here as leaders, diversity no less essential for understanding yourselves, for making
good decisions for yourselves, and for how to live your own lives, than it is for understanding and working effectively with others and making good decisions leading others.

The next quality is centeredness:

**Centeredness** – character that is marked by integrity, by courage and by humility and not by narcissism, by humanity and compassion, and by commitment to well-considered principles or values, with determination to do the right thing as best as one can judge it, and not pursue popularity for its own sake.

This is what I was speaking about earlier in my criticisms of current leaders, negative attributes like narcissism and populism. There are some real challenges here in this description of centeredness (sometimes moral compass). For example, humility is not a quality that is immediately evident in leaders of strong character and courage, like a Winston Churchill. Think about it: if you asked a friend about your best qualities as a leader, how often would you hear them use “humble” to describe you? I certainly don’t hear it about myself!

A leader must have a core set of values and principles that guides them (that is their lodestar) in determining what is the right thing to do (whether popular or not). The centeredness of keeping true to such a core set of “well considered” values and principles is what gives a leader the confidence and courage to lead. Humility does follow. Humility comes from knowing that, even when you are determined to do your best, you may get it wrong. All you can do then is to try again as best as you can, without ever departing from that core set of values and principles that remain your lodestar.

This leads to the third and final quality, resilience:
The determination to ‘see it through,’ and the personal resilience to do this in the face of pressures, criticisms, and opposition – the resilience to pick yourself up in the face of defeat or failure and get back on with the job.

This one especially rings home to me personally right now. And I am going to ask you to indulge me for a moment and allow me speak about why this quality resonates so much for me personally in these extraordinary times, which have put all of us, including me, to the test.

As some of you know, it was not my choice to announce my resignation as dean. And with all the changes and uncertainties that face our law school as a consequence of this unexpected and extraordinary global force, the Covid-19 pandemic, it is now even less my desire to step down. That so much about the law school’s future, especially what will happen next year, remains unclear and unresolved, weighs heavily on me as I face this transition in my own life.

How can one lead in a situation like this? Or isn’t the more important question really how can one not? The answer is embodied in this quality, the determination to “see it through.” What this devastating virus has done for me is to require that I put aside whatever personal defeat and failure I have been feeling, “get over it” (which, as many of you know, is one of my favorite expressions) and get back on with the job. Whatever the pressures, criticism or opposition, the situation has simply demanded determined leadership to guide the faculty in making difficult decisions, as well as the administrative team in implementing them, and then, perhaps hardest of all, in seeking to persuade everyone, especially you and other students, that the decisions that have been are the right ones, as best as I can judge them under the circumstances.

Adding to the pressures are the challenges of advocating for law student interests in a largely undergraduate-focused university where the law school is often an afterthought, while at the
same time, and of particular importance to those of you who are graduating, continuing to battle with the State Bar and Supreme Court about the bar exam. Remember, in early March, when the issue was finding out there would be no San Diego testing site for the July exam. Now, as I wrote in my communication last evening, it’s whether there will be a July exam at all, when the next exam might be, and how, and how long it will be before, you will be licensed to practice law. There is so much yet to be “seen through,” and I feel that more every passing day. All I can do now is to give you my assurance that my unwavering efforts advocating on your behalf will continue until June 30th. This pledge of my resilience to and for you is inspired and sustained by the resilience I have seen by and from you as student leaders over the past few weeks. It is your resilience that I now want to turn to in concluding my remarks.

I have repeatedly praised the resilience that our law students have demonstrated in my communications over the past four weeks – to you, to our faculty, to our alumni who serve on the Law Alumni Board and Board of Visitors, and, most recently, to the Academic Affairs committee of the University’s Board of Trustees. I have been so proud of that resilience, as I am of all the other qualities of leadership, you have shown. But I have chosen to conclude by talking about resilience because I think it is likely to be the quality you will need most in the immediate and uncertain future that you now face.

As we look into that future, I don’t think that any of us doubts that you will face unexpected challenges, uncertainties, obstacles and pressures. What is going to happen to those interviews, offers, internships, summer associate positions, jobs and clerkships? Who knows when and how the bar exam will next be held or whether or not California will ever grant provisioned licenses to practice? All this on top of whatever illness, financial or other hardships
you or your families or loved ones may yet face, for who knows how long. Professional goals that you thought would be soon within you reach are being delayed and may get derailed. Who knows for how long? As I said, times like these test us all. They have tested me and they will certainly test you. However, whatever happens, I am confident that you can and you will pass this test with flying colors if you continue to show demonstrate the personal resilience that I have seen in the past few weeks, if you hold steadfast to the core set of principles and values that have made you the leaders that you are, and if you have that determination to “see it through” and do what you set out to do, even if doing so proves harder than you ever expected it to be just a short time ago when this semester began.

As proven leaders, you can do it. You must do it, now more than ever. We are counting on your leadership to get us out of this mess.