

Lecture for BLI Symposium: Dr. Michael Dantley

I am honored to have this opportunity to be with you and to share for a few minutes my thinking on why Black leadership matters. This is a most appropriate topic especially for this season as the issue of Black leadership is within the center of the political discourse particularly in the United States and certainly not to sound at all xenophobic, I am clear is in the focus of especially Black people internationally. When I was thinking about preparing these remarks, I had to come to grips with the fact that my area of scholarship and research is on leadership in the educational setting and while I know that area fairly well, I also knew that I would have to broaden my perspective on leadership particularly because I was going to be addressing a prominent group of international Black leaders and so I wanted to be true to my own discipline but also broad enough in my coverage to become general in painting the picture of the efficacy and necessity of black leadership internationally. I would like to divide this talk into the following areas. I'd first like to discuss the role of black leadership in a context of fighting a racist status quo, I then would like to discuss the three different types of black leadership as espoused by two leading scholars and I'd then like to conclude this talk by focusing on what I would like to call the spirituality of black leadership and the hope that accompanies that moral dimension of leadership.

I would like to begin this talk by recognizing how easy it would be to fantasize the effects and even the motivation for black leadership simply because of the almost eternal context in which most black leaders find themselves. When we consider black leadership we think almost immediately of personages such as Nelson and Winnie Mandella or Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Desmond Tutu or others for whom the role of leader has been glamorized, their personal struggles, by many, have been sanitized, and their notoriety has outweighed the pain and the agony each underwent simply to walk under the mantle of leadership. Black leadership, no matter where it is executed, is not glamorous. It would also be easy to submit to a sense of overwhelming burden and fatigue when considering black leadership because in most instances black leadership must always contend with resistant forces that question the very efficacy of black leadership period. We almost always lead in conditions where a racist status quo rules the day. But what I would like to offer instead today is a leadership of and by black people that is almost always not focused on personal aggrandizement though the enticements of power and prestige that so often accompany positions of leadership are nonetheless issues with which Black leaders must contend.

Generally, black leadership is one that focuses attention on communal uplift and enhancement. The focus of leadership is the greater community good rather than personal or individual profit. For many of us leadership is a calling, it is an endeavor that we simply cannot help but to be involved in because in doing so our lives have meaning and attend to a kind of divine purpose that establishes for us our mission, charge, or avocation for our lives. Black leadership often emanates from the core of who we are and is hardly ever entered into so that we might gain reputation or individual advancement. Almost always, black leadership sets its sights on lifting the community of other black people and creating a space for all black folk to pursue their dreams and fulfill their potential. There is an understanding that with individual achievement comes community advantage. It is as if we know that in so many ways we are inextricably linked together and that what we do impacts so many more people than just ourselves.

I must admit that black leadership is not simply located in the black community or just with black people. However, I am convinced that black leadership, no matter where it is expended, cannot afford the luxury to believe that it exists in an a-contextual, raceless, classless, and frictionless space. I am intrigued by how Dr. Cornel West, in his book *Race Matters* defines quality leadership. He says, "Quality leadership is neither the product of one great individual nor the result of odd historical accidents. Rather, it comes from deeply bred traditions and communities that shape and mold talented and gifted persons. Without a vibrant tradition of resistance passed on to new generations, there can be no nurturing of a collective and critical consciousness-only professional conscientiousness survives. Where there is no vital community to hold up precious ethical and religious ideals, there can be no coming to a moral commitment-only personal accomplishment is applauded. Without a credible sense of political struggle, there can be no shouldering of a courageous engagement-only cautious adjustment is undertaken" (p. 56-57). Black leaders have the constant struggle between critical consciousness and professional conscientiousness. It is a struggle between do I do what is right or what is advantageous. Do I make a moral and ethical decision or do I follow the company policy? Do I speak the truth to power or do I remain reticent in order to maintain the semblance of power I have achieved through my position of leadership? And only from a deep abiding sense of the precious ethical and moral positions come the desire to lead courageously through the political struggle that is simply a part of black leadership universally.

I would also like to submit to you that black leadership almost always has a futuristic perspective. It is one that is clearly based in the realities of the present but places those realities in the hope for a better tomorrow. This futuristic perspective gives meaning to the struggle and gives intention to the fight against the present set of circumstances. I cannot overly emphasize that inherent in black leadership is always this struggle, a combat, if you will, against forces that are determined to impede the progress of black people and thwart the effectiveness of black leadership to spearhead such progress. I am not being paranoid about this but know that this is the case throughout years of leadership experience. I am not couching this perspective in a conspiracy theoretical frame as well but know without a doubt that there are ideologies and ways of thinking that are pervasive globally that perpetuate the notions that black people are inferior, that black people lack the intellectual acumen to accomplish grand achievements and that it is the place of black people to serve those who are in power and authority and to submit themselves to the wishes and plans of a dominant people. Black leadership's role, however, is never to succumb to such thinking but to present a counter strategy and counter narratives that argue vehemently against such denigrating notions. It is a difficult position for black leaders because in almost every facet of our work we are presenting a counter story. Everyday as people watch us lead we are presenting a counter narrative to the ones that many have already created for us. Everyday as we challenge our people and others to rise above detrimental ideas and connotations about people of color we are presenting a counter discourse to the one that is pervasively believed. And so the work of the black leader is not only one of motivating others to implement the goals and visions of institutions, but is also one that is embedded in a space of constant struggle, tension, and dichotomy.

So black leadership most generally focuses on the communal and not simply personal aggrandizement, is almost always in contention with a dominant racist status quo, and must maintain a futuristic orientation at all times. I would like to next discuss four types of leadership I believe can contextualize black leadership.

Cornel West argues that there are three types of black leadership. These three are what he calls race-effacing managerial leaders, race identifying protest leaders, and race-transcending prophetic leaders. The first type of leader, the race-effacing managerial leaders, are the type of leader, West says, who reach a large white constituency and keep a loyal black following as well. He argues that these leaders survive on political savvy and personal diplomacy. Yet, according to West, these leaders tend to stunt progressive development and silence the prophetic voices in the black community by arguing that the maintenance of the mainstream and the status quo is the way we should operate. The second type of leader, the race –identifying protest leaders confine themselves to the black turf and serve as power brokers with powerful non-black elites to enhance the black turf. West maintains that race-identifying protest leaders function as figures who white Americans must appease but in doing so the plight of the black poor are overlooked. Often these are elected officials or other spokespersons for the black community who have some voice in the public sphere that the dominant culture, if not heeds, at least listens to. Finally, the race-transcending prophetic leaders are those who West argues possess personal integrity, political savvy, moral vision and prudential judgment, they embrace courageous defiance and yet have organizational patience. Few people, in West's mind have reached the point of serving as race-transcending prophetic leaders. I would like to risk troubling West's notions of leadership by offering actually four different types of black leadership. These types of leadership, more aptly, in my mind, represent the categories of available black leadership. First, I would argue that there are black leaders who follow the notions of accommodating. These are rather hands off leaders who believe that the strength in dealing with oppressive situations is to have an otherworldly focus. Their idea is that we are not here on this earth for long, simply endure the hardship of racism and we demonstrate our valor and strength of courage by going through the struggle and living through the oppression. While there are some religious undertones to this accommodating perspective, it is much too passive a position for me and one that I believe does nothing to enhance the life of the members of the black community. The second category of leadership, I call the neo-liberal egalitarian black leadership. This leadership style argues that systems must be created to give everyone a fair chance at attaining the commodities of the capitalist economy. It argues that by increasing the numbers of black people in an institution signifies progress and that progress is a slow process with incremental achievements that signify movement toward the goal of equal opportunity to contribute to the economy and to receive from it. The neo-liberal egalitarian black leadership model is all about the economy. It is all about making sure that we have black players in the marketplace and even if the marketplace is not significantly changed in a positive way through the presence and actions of black people, simply because they are there means that progress is being made. While I understand the premise of this second type of leadership style, I am left nonetheless, troubled because what it seems to purport is that as long as more men and women of color enter into the ranks of the middle class and hold professional titles and positions then the prevailing racist ideology is losing or waning in its effectiveness. It is that kind of discourse that argues that since the United States has our first Black President that we are now living in a post-racial society and nothing, my friends, could be further from the truth. The third type of leadership I call the resistant and separatist black leadership. This leadership has a definite Afrocentric perspective and eschews anything white. White bread, white rice, white sugar, are an anathema to the resistant separatist black leader. These leaders see the black community from a rather myopic perspective and would be pleased if black men, women, and children could secede from the mainstream global societies and care only for themselves. Clearly, while the concentration on the issues of black people is a powerful ingredient of this resistant

leadership style, it is virtually impossible, in this global economy, for this to actually be a prudent strategy for the black community. The final leadership style I call the transformative black leader. This type of leadership critically analyzes the systems and institutions, policies and practices that are grounding our society and determine how they marginalize and silence those different from the mainstream. What the transformative leader knows, however is that critique is not enough. It is very easy to offer critique and to assess where oppression lies and to uncover the practices of injustice and racism where they exist. But that is not enough. It makes for good rhetoric but not for resolution of these issues. Transformative leaders present alternatives to what exists being fully aware of and embracing the struggle and the conflict and the counter resistance the status quo will offer their alternatives. The one given that the transformative leader has to grapple with is the fact that self protection and self-propagation is the goal of any system and resistance will be lodged vehemently when there is introduced an alternative way to distribute power or an alternative way to think about authority and so the transformative leader then not only has a strategy for implementing change but must also include strategies for dealing with the resistance to the change he or she is introducing to the system. Now, it is also important to understand that the transformative leader is not working to simply make sure that the ranks of the middle class swell with black people but more important than that, that the agenda to see human justice afforded to all people becomes the motivation and the work for those who have reached such a position of achievement. So these people actually are civil rights workers of sorts. They achieve and then work to see to it that no one's rights are abridged no matter their social station.

Finally, I would submit to you that black leadership has a spiritual or moral character to it. Black leadership is almost always grounded in notions of what is morally right and just and those notions are almost always founded in some religious construction. As mentioned earlier, in this talk, black leadership is almost always a response to a kind of calling where the black leader is in the position of authority simply because he or she can't help it. Their very lives depend upon their walking under the leadership mantle. It is their avocation. It is one of the things that gives meaning to their lives and they sense that it is not only ambition or a desire to lead that is driving them but rather a sense that this is their mission and purpose to fulfill in the earth. Black leadership emanates from a selfless core that compels the leader to do what he or she does. Black leadership recognizes the necessity to find strength outside of oneself or even from the group being led. Many black leaders inherently know that their strength comes from outside themselves, that their wisdom is not earthbound and their vision for a better tomorrow is not based upon things that are seen but are based on things that are not seen. They understand that they literally can believe transformations into existence and because of their belief all kinds of things can and will happen. They are not limited to the present and they certainly are not limited to restricted or inadequate resources but they are cognizant of the boundless assets that are at their disposal simply through their exercise of faith and belief. Black leaders accept that the power to persevere through the struggle is divine and that their leadership is not from a human source but emanates from a leader unseen but knowable, untouchable but present, boundless but will never leave nor forsake the believing leader.

These are my thoughts. Certainly, they are open for discussion and debate. I am honored to have had this tremendous opportunity to address you and thank you for giving my ideas your attention.