



The wisdom of our children

Leadership?

I admire the men and women who grace the pages of this magazine this month—each of them undeniably accomplished in his or her own ways—but I know only four people who, in my life, qualify as weathered, patient, fearless, visionary, mature advocates of a more beautiful life for themselves and all around them. And none is older than one score and 12—or 32, as the kids say.

Let's just say 30 ain't what it used to be. It used to be this: beach volleyball parties, dripping with vodka and beer and late-night runs to the liquor store for more vodka and beer. It used to be about keeping the teenaged babysitter up way past her bedtime on the off and unlikely chance she really was interested in the spike you launched into the belly of a (now former) friend.

At least, that's what certain older members of my family remember and recount, often ruefully and sometimes delightedly, about the "festival" of their turning 30 on Toronto Island in the mid-1960s, when developing media luminaries would show up to enjoin their chums in lively, booze-and tobacco-influenced discussions about whose lead, on their respective stories in the latest edition of God-knows-whichever publication paid them way too much money to write, was best.

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My heroes, these days, don't boast, don't drink, don't smoke. They don't play pot-bellied volleyball. In fact, they don't do much of anything that I might have once called "fun". What they do is take the detritus that their grandparents and (yes) their parents have made of the world, and turn it into a fair, if compromised, chance to begin again.

To be clear, my heroes are my kids.

One is a veterinarian-in-training. She runs mini-marathons whether or not she's pregnant. As it happens, she is. . . again. . . pregnant. This month, she brings into the world another soul to keep her first son company, just in time for her fourth-year rotations. Throughout, she tells her parents to eat right, exercise daily and keep their spirits high. And, we do. She is a leader.

The other is a policy analyst in early childhood education. She shed virtual blood to get

that job, after graduating from McGill and then George Brown at the top of her class. Now, she's sanguine about the fact that her parents will never become what they always thought and hoped they might. Never mind, she tells us. Enjoy her son, our grandson, she says. And, we do. She is a leader.

Leadership?

The late, great American management guru Peter Drucker once defined it as the ability to lift "a person's vision to high sights," to raise "a person's performance to a higher standard," to build "a personality beyond its normal limitations."

That's fine, as far as it goes. But I'm partial to variations of a different definition of leadership, a definition best articulated by the sixth century Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu: "A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves."

Nineteenth century English Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli echoed the sentiment when he said, "I must follow the people. Am I not their leader?" So did 20th century French writer Andre Malraux when he wrote, "To command is to serve, nothing more and nothing less."

Even former American First Lady Rosalynn Carter recognized that while "a leader takes people where they want to go, a great leader takes people where they don't necessarily want to go, but ought to be."

And where people ought to be, especially in these days of political gridlock and partisan self-absorption, is that place where generosity, circumspection and self-reflection triumph over the pettiness and bitterness of pedestrian life.

We are wrong when we assume that leadership is the exclusive province of the seasoned and demonstrably successful. There is a big difference between the truly wise and the merely wizened.

Leadership?

Often you'll find it among those who, in virtue of their youth, must follow, but who, in virtue of their character, actually point the old and weary in our midst to the horizon. | ABM

I must follow the people. Am I not their leader?



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