

The Qualities of True Leadership

A Commentary by Teyowisonte (Thomas Deer)

Please e-mail me your comments at teyowisonte@hotmail.com

On July 1, 2000, elections for positions on the Mohawk Council of Kahnawake (MCK) were held at Karonhianónhnha Tsi Ionterihwaienstáhkhwá. It seemed paying attention during those few weeks of political campaigning was unavoidable. As this author watched the competition, the qualities of true leadership were pondered. Is this the way true leaders are found? Are these candidates material for true leadership? And what of leadership itself?

During the recent MCK campaign I bought a book by Henry P. Sims and Charles C. Manz called Company of Heroes, which is a study of leadership concepts and how one attains leadership. I figured that this book, which I found in the bargain bin, could shed light on my quest for the true meaning of leadership. The authors explain that there are three basic types of leaders. One is a “strongman” leader, who commands rather than leads, similarly to that of a military general. The follower of such a leader provides service out of fear of reprisal or penalty. The next type is called the “transactor” leader. This type of leader provides attractive rewards in exchange for service. The third type is called a “visionary hero”. Followers of such a leader provide service and commitment out of love and admiration for the leader’s inspirational charisma, ideology, or treatment. The final type is called the “super-leader”. The super-leader is able to develop self-leadership abilities among his or her followers by thoroughly involving them in his or her decision making process.

Equipped with this new ideology I was able to identify more clearly what the various factions in Kahnawake had to offer in terms of leadership. When I looked towards the MCK, I had seen a combination of the first two types of leadership. Initially, the MCK lures its constituents by way of reward or other types of benefits. These rewards and benefits come in many forms such of employment, housing loans, etc. In time, they are kept loyal and impotent through the sense of security, comfort, and stability (financial or otherwise) solidified by the providing of such rewards. If by some instance, the constituent or subordinate expresses a displeasure with the moral or practical efficiency of his or her leader; that individual is then forced into compliance out of a fear that this so-called leader will take away that foundation of security, comfort, and stability.

Moreover, the Indian Act or MCK process of installing leaders troubles me with its undesirable competitive atmosphere. Leadership is not something that should be competed for. Competition, particularly in politics, encourages personal agendas that are concerned more with maintaining leadership rather than leading. Thus, diminishing the democratic right of the constituent and adding to the corruption and impotency in representative type governments (republic).

Earlier this year I had the pleasure of witnessing the great Condolence Ceremony of the Haudenosaunee. There, at the Mohawk Nation Long House in Akwesasne, I had seen, unconsciously, examples of both visionary leaders and super-leaders. Leaders whose qualities were based upon reason, loyalty, tolerance, compromise, and respect. Of course there have been some exceptions in Long House leadership, but this should not reflect upon the institution itself, but rather the individual who has corrupted it.

The most profound statement ever made, in regards to leadership in the social development of the Haudenosaunee, was made by fellow Mohawk writer William Newell who stated in 1964 that, “It would seem that their (Haudenosaunee) society developed leaders; it was not the leaders who develops society.” I never read anything so comprehensive or precise with regards to our ideology of traditional leadership and the notion of pure representative government (republic).

Until the good tidings of peace and power return to all the people of Kahnawake, we and especially the mothers of our nation, must watch the children coming up and examine them for their special gifts and qualities that they each have to offer. At the same time, the community as a whole must take the initiative to guide them on their path and help them develop their special gifts and qualities. Then, as time goes by, we will be in a far better position to select leaders by way of our “custom” and leave behind the outside’s competitive nonsense. In most cases, those who aspire to be leaders are not suitable or qualified for the mere fact that they desire that position of political status. Perhaps, those who are of leadership quality avoid becoming leaders, as they very well know that being a leader requires the deepest commitment and endless responsibility. Who in their right mind would want something like that?

Ever onward towards the good tiding of peace & power!