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2nd Place Essay: The Best Leaders Are Those Who Serve

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Rachel Groters

Reed Leadership Award Essay Contest

16 October 2011

“The best leaders are those who serve.” These words have echoed in my mind since I first heard them during a mission’s trip in Oklahoma the summer before my senior year of high school. My youth pastor prefaced the foot-washing ceremony we did one night with this thought-provoking statement. It was the first and only time in my life someone’s gotten down on their hands and knees and washed my feet for me—an incredibly powerful, jarring experience. What a leader Jesus was, to do this not only physical, but also symbolic act for his disciples and commission them to do the same. As displayed in this act and the rest of his life, Jesus was the embodiment of what it means to lead with courage, caring, and a deep desire for community. I believe these same three elements are what it takes to lead and inspire hope today in a culture of cynicism.

Recently I went to see Sherwood Pictures’ latest film, *Courageous*. I never would have guessed that a movie about fatherhood could speak so much to my own life, but it did. The main message I got out of it is that those who make the resolution to lead with integrity and strength and honor and truth are doubly accountable for their actions. Being doubly accountable means you answer to God *and* others—it also means you have to deal with the junk in your life that nobody sees so you can be above reproach. That hidden junk is the stuff that eventually, inevitably comes out and makes the cynics scoff in smug contempt. It takes a tremendous amount of courage to reveal it, but it’s worth it in the end. Leaders who inspire hope in a culture of cynicism have the courage to make themselves vulnerable so others aren’t afraid to do the same, to admit when they’re wrong, and to point out others’ wrongs in love even though it hurts. Along with this, they’re not afraid to let go of their own cynicism and see the best in others. They give people the benefit of the doubt and exercise grace with wisdom.

I've been thinking a lot about the concepts of courage and being doubly accountable since I saw *Courageous*. It fits so well with some other things God's been revealing to me in the past few months—like the importance of living in community. This past summer I spent eight weeks in Ecuador; of necessity, my focus began to shift from myself to those around me. While I was there I read Don Miller's *Blue Like Jazz*, where he talks about how "other people keep our souls alive, just like food and water does with our body." When I got back to school for this semester, Cory MacPherson mentioned during Revival that our college years might be one of the only times in our lives that we'll be able to live as we do in community. All of this got me thinking about community—and I finally understood what it's all about. I think what needs to happen in order to lead and inspire hope in a culture of cynicism is that leaders be *with* their followers, that they care more about the people they lead than themselves or what needs to get done. What better way to drive out cynicism than by being constant in caring for the cynic? If cynicism is a poison that chills and disheartens, caring in the spirit of community is the antidote.

I'd like to end with a real-life example of someone who is leading and inspiring hope in a culture of cynicism. My father is a public high school teacher—based on the stories he brings home, it's safe to say that his school is full of young cynics. Most of his students don't know how to lead because they've never before been truly led. But my father's teaching them by example. After talking with him, students often have this to say: "Nobody's ever talked to me like that before." What they mean is they've never had someone in their lives who has courageously led them and genuinely cared for their souls, someone above reproach and worthy of respect who's gotten down on their level and lived in community with them. My father's leadership, born out of his own desire to emulate Christ, is helping young people be free of their jaded cynicism. I want to be able to say the same for my own.