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C.S. Lewis as Transformational Leader

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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume VIII

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Joint Meeting of

The Eighth

FRANCES WHITE EW BANK COLLOQUIUM ON C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

and

THE C.S. LEWIS AND THE INKLINGS SOCIETY CONFERENCE

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In a 2007 commencement speech at The Colburn Conservatory of Music, Dr. Robert Cutietta, a dean at USC Thornton School of Music, urged graduates to perceive themselves as leaders in society. Cutietta posited that artists have a crucial role in maintaining a positive outlook by sustaining hope while highlighting the changes needed in society:

If artists abandon this role, the leadership paradigm loses its balance of power. For our future to remain bright, we need artists to be leaders to help envision the positive future that can be, by helping point out the present that shouldn't be. (McKinney para. 7).

Cutietta exposes an interesting myth. Leaders tend to be caricatured in society by corner offices, distinguished titles, and generous retirement packages. However power extends much further than the boardroom. Anyone who can harangue a crowd, who can instill a vision, who can be a catalyst for change is a leader.

Bearing this in mind, do all artists have the capacity to become leaders? Can a musical crescendo elevate a society to action? Can the strokes of a paintbrush produce a following? Do words on a page crafted with the passion of its author create armies of admirers? The answer is a firm *yes*. Artists, by gaining the respect of the masses, possess a unique power. Through their talents, they can affect change on both national and international levels through the medium of art. Because their tones, images, and texts

resonate, they exercise immense influence over society. C.S. Lewis is one of these individuals.

Although his name is rarely associated with scholarship on leadership, Lewis had a great deal of experience with leadership throughout his life, which validates his writings on the subject. For example, he grew up under oppressive schoolmasters, fought on the front lines of a world war, and was a prominent voice of optimism during a second world war. Later, as a don at Oxford University he served as president of one of the most popular organizations on campus, the Oxford Socratic Club, in addition to heading his department while at Cambridge. He led thousands of students to an appreciation for literature, many of whom became leaders themselves. Many leaders cite Lewis in their works or claim Lewis as an influence. Academic categories and spiritual presuppositions could not suppress his expertise and wisdom. Lewis was a valid candidate to provide a realistic portrait of life and leadership not only during his time but also offers a comprehensive examination of leadership for the present and future. Whether addressing a room of Oxford undergraduates or writing for the children of Britain, Lewis provided his audience with a convincing and colorful account of life which is accurate, entertaining, and instructional.

Lewis identified the needs and challenges of his culture and discussed these topics in his various radio addresses and speeches. Although his goal was simply to

identify with and hopefully encourage the British public, inspirational leaders may not wish to gain power and prestige; rather, they feel pressed to communicate truth to a disillusioned society:

A serious problem in meaning for the followers creates the possibility that an inspirational leader will emerge. Followers perceive such an inspiring leader to be knowledgeable, enlightened, and sensitive to the problems at hand, and from these perceptions, their confidence in the leader grows. Their trust in the inspiring leader arises from the meaning the leader gives to their needs and actions. Followers share with the leader common beliefs about what is wrong, beliefs the leader articulates publicly to them . . . Inspirational leaders help followers feel more powerful by setting forth desirable goals and providing the means to achieve them.(Stodgill and Bass 206)

Pages of testimony attest to Lewis's influence. Lewis scholar David Downing discussed Lewis's influence as a conscientious individual:

When I was about fifteen, I complained to my dad about people in our local church who were uptight, legalistic, and basically just uncool. My dad replied, 'Well, David. I see you've mastered the easy part. You've noticed that too often, other Christians make disappointing ambassadors for the kingdom. Now I want you to work on the hard part – to yourself become an effective ambassador for the kingdom.' I've spent most of my adult life trying to live out my father's advice, and I have found C.S. Lewis to be an admirable role model and mentor in this journey. (Phemister & Lazo 96)

Como, in *C.S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table*, cited Lewis as a leader with great spiritual and philosophical influence, that "like a great *magister* he enacted what the Greeks called

psychagogia, 'leading me forth' and enlarging my soul" (860).

Bass posits that transformational leaders strengthen both the morality and the motivation of followers. Ultimately, they empower new leaders. Bass argued that transformational leaders illustrate four qualities: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Lewis possessed all of these qualities, as this research revealed.

Bass's first quality of transformational leadership is "Idealized influence (Charisma)." Lewis would perhaps deny that he possessed charisma, but his influence proves quite the opposite. He was unpolluted by the desire for power; in fact, the central message of his talks was unity and the promotion of benevolence among the population. He did not need to create a personality cult to promote his ideas; he much preferred to remain humble and avoid crowds as much as possible. When asked why he did not attend the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth, Lewis wrote in *Letters to an American Lady*, "I'm not a man for crowds and Best Clothes" (17). Lewis's words are his legacy. He wished to turn the public admiration from himself to *something other*. Why would we praise the fork for the delight of an entrée and not the chef? Lewis was not the central theme of his works, God and spirituality were. Many people claim there was something about Lewis that attracted people to him. He was clever with words and could disarm people in an instant with a joke or quip. Students intimidated by this great Oxford don were at ease within a few minutes of their first meeting. He was an effective leader, Lewis scholar Devin Brown stated:

He is certainly the most influential Christian writer of the 20th Century and is on track to be the most influential Christian writer of the current century as well. He speaks to Christians not only through his fiction and his apologetic writing, but also through the

example of his own life . . . He did not only talk the talk. He lived it.

Author and scholar Bruce Edwards, editor of the four-volume set, *C.S. Lewis: His life, Works, and Legacy*, among other books on Lewis cited Lewis as a “different” type of leader than one traditionally defined, one who led by doing rather than by an organizational expectation or hierarchical decree:

I happen to think Lewis is a unique ‘specimen’ and that there are few people who can reach a level of ‘leadership’ of the kind he possessed and exercised...I tend to think when people study ‘leadership’ they are primarily looking at outcomes or results; if this is the criteria, then Lewis’s leadership is easily established by the number of readers whose hearts and minds Lewis has won over, manifested primarily in their emulation of his example as a fearless champion of essential truths and the concepts of objective values, as well as his advocacy of unity in diversity within the church . . . In other words, his leadership stems from his declaration and their embrace of the particular worldview fostered by Christianity that sees everything from the perspective of eternity. From that worldview flows a recognition of the leadership traits resonant-in-action in such characteristics as loyalty, sobriety, honesty, fidelity, humanitarianism, persons over systems, and so on.

Secondly, transformational leaders have inspirational motivation. Many casual readers are introduced to Lewis through his broadcast talks later published as *Mere Christianity*. In this work, people of faith finally have a treatise to explain the longings of a converted heart. Faith is, in essence, to believe without seeing. However, Lewis shines a light of understanding and analysis on hearts and minds and aims fully to explain the *yearnings for our homeland*, which penetrate deep, far beyond the frivolities of this life, our purposes, and even our

existence. Although there is no suitable explanation, it evokes a feeling of joy. This sense of *joy* is what Lewis encourages his audience to discover, as great works of literature and nature once moved him as witnessed in the title of his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*. Thousands have claimed Lewis as the driving force in their conversion to Christianity. Postconversion, Lewis’s works provide sustenance to the developing Christian, illustrating that a desire to strengthen faith can nourish the mind as well as the heart. This is perhaps his strongest quality of the four proposed by Bass.

C.S. Lewis Vice-President Gayle Anacker wrote of Lewis’s personal impact:

Lewis has strongly contributed to my vision for my work as a Christian within the world of ideas, he has inspired me to a higher standard of intellectual attainment, he has led me to broaden my circle of genuine Christian fellowship and action, and he has strengthened my faith in God.

Brown echoed the sentiment:

Lewis has influenced me in three general ways. First, he introduced me to the idea of loving God with all your mind; he showed me how faith and reason could be integrated. Secondly, he also showed me the role of the Christian imagination; he demonstrated how faith and imagination go together. Finally he reminds me again and again of the Christian view of humanity, of the great worth and potential in every person.

Scholar and author Will Vaus noted that C.S. Lewis was a powerful, inspiring force:

I have been influenced by his Anglican spirituality to use the Book of Common Prayer in my daily devotional life and to seek out a confessor/spiritual director just as Lewis did. Theologically and spiritually, Lewis has made, through his writings, heaven

attractive to me. His writings have nurtured my longing for God.

Belfast scholar Alexander Smith reflected:

Lewis has sustained me on a journey. That journey is the quest for meaning in existence and not just in understanding existence itself. If we inhabit on small part of a universe that is somehow intelligible to use then the quest is in the direction of what lies beyond. If our world has been entered by an 'invader' . . . in human form, who claimed to be its King then to seek His Kingdom, his Rule and His Authority must be the goal, in essence to be a follower. Ultimately the only meaningful test of leadership is the simple question, Is anyone following? A claim to be a leader with no-one following is bogus. Lewis has been an instrument in sustaining me in the path of discipleship. The disciple has been in lifelong pursuit of the answers to life's difficult questions.

Thirdly, transformational leaders encourage intellectual stimulation. Lewis was a respected Oxford don who wrote one of the most comprehensive volumes of Oxford's *History of English Literature*; it was no surprise that he left an intellectual legacy. Lewis's primary occupation, before he was the author of so many apologetic and other spiritually-imbued works, was a literary scholar. Although some Oxford professors found Lewis's blending of intellect and faith repellant, these minds still respected his literary prowess, considering his analysis and criticism among the best of his time. According to Poe and Poe, Brewer reflected in *C.S. Lewis Remembered*:

Lewis's *Allegory of Love* was in fact widely influential over scholars in related disciplines, whether one agreed in detail or not . . . The brilliant American critic E. T Donaldson . . . yet once said to me personally he would have 'given an arm and a leg' to have written *The Allegory of Love* . . . In

respect of the influence of his writing on secular literature there would be no lack of controversy . . . Yet in the end the secular and the religious writings, however various and controversial, are part of the same eager sympathetic imagination. (70-71)

His sharp intellect captured the tenets of the Christian faith mingled with the pragmatics of a rational mind. Works such as *Mere Christianity* firmly secured him among the Christian intellectuals of his day and ushered him into an inventory of great apologetic authors such as G. K. Chesterton. The origin of the term apologetic is from the Greek *apologetikos* or to speak in defense. In apologetics, Christians give intellectual support for their faith, such as the passage exemplified below from Lewis's *Mere Christianity*:

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned ask; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that country and to help others to do the same. (76)

Lewis expanded the minds of both religious and secular scholars. In addition, he made his works tangible to the public so that laymen of every parish could understand core concepts of the faith. Patterson reflected in *C.S. Lewis Remembered*:

In everything he wrote, Lewis was deeply aware of how ordinary people lived, what they thought, and what they were looking for in life. This is what makes his Christian writings so accessible and so influential. Lewis was not an aristocrat, nor was he an intellectual snob. He never liked the role of a celebrity. He could talk to you and me in our everyday language and understand us. (97)

Smith noted in his responses to the interview questions that Lewis not only caused his readers to think, but analysis of his works perpetuated current and future scholarship:

He was a leader, the first among equals. His early influence not only gathered those of his time and ability but has continued to influence subsequent generations of students and thinkers. The questions he raised and the solutions he offered are still occupying the minds of those at the cutting edge of their respective fields. Books still referencing aspects of Lewis's work and thought pour from the pens of the academics and thinkers of today . . . Setting aside his leadership and influence among the academic and adult world his greatest success is possibly in the appeal to generation upon generation of children. They have followed him through wardrobes, through pools water, through schoolyard walls, through stable doors, through the cavernous underworld and across perilous seas . . . They are still following.

Finally, Bass claims that transformational leaders illustrate individualized consideration. Lewis's personal correspondence exceeds 5,000 pages. The ages of the correspondents ranges from elementary school children to elderly widows. As in his literature, his letters reveal a man who cared deeply about all who read his works. Lewis had a duty to respond to every letter he received.

From the tone of his letters, he never once denigrated a correspondent even if he or she was obviously ignorant of the topic. With all politeness Lewis offered his opinion on the letter's topic, if asked, and usually ended with a note of encouragement or a joke. Scholar Reverend Dr. Robert MacSwain admired Lewis's relentless task of answering every single letter:

Effective leaders also often care deeply for their followers, and thus inspire not just admiration but loyalty . . . Lewis did indeed display many of these characteristics [confidence, vision, charisma, an attractive personality, the ability to persuade and convince others that one's vision is worth following], although he also sometimes deliberately played down some of them (for example, he intentionally dressed in drab baggy clothes). But one must be impressed with the way he responded to every correspondent: that shows a level of care for 'followers' which certainly inspires both admiration and loyalty.

Glaspie reflected on the lasting wisdom contained in Lewis's letters. Even casual correspondence bears Lewis's unmistakable intellect and logic in responding to literary, spiritual, or domestic issues:

Lewis's letters still make valuable, interesting, and instructive reading today. All of his best qualities as a writer come to the fore in the published collections of his letters. Here, too, we see the heart of Lewis revealed, his kindness as an attentive listener to people's questions and struggles, his gentleness in critiquing the amateurish poems sent by an admirer and would-be poetess, his vivid humor and description of domestic life. Although Lewis saw answering these letters as a very personal ministry, they have survived to continue a public sharing of his gifts. (65)

Humility was one of Lewis's best qualities. While some Oxford professors relished every opportunity to promote the height of their intelligence and condescend to those of a lower station, Lewis recognized this as the most tempting of sins: Pride. Pride caused the Fall of Man, and it was still the easiest spiritual stumbling block, as Morris discussed in James Como's work *C.S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table*:

I don't think he ever looked down on anybody, and he was always willing to learn from anybody. It always seemed to me a great pity he did not preach more often, until I learned the reason for his reluctance to do this; he told me one day that after he had delivered a sermon and had received the kind words and the congratulations of all and sundry—as always happened when he spoke in public—he began to think what a jolly fine and clever fellow Jack Lewis was and, said he, 'I had to get to my knees pretty quickly to kill the deadly sin of pride!' (200)

Students of Lewis knew that Lewis, like his tutor "The Great Knock," cared deeply about their intellectual development. Although some professors enjoyed denigrating students for sport, Lewis's first chore was to engage the students' minds. In *C.S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table*, Brewer recalled an engaged, conscientious tutor:

Lewis listened with extreme intentness, not I am all too sure, because of the fascination of my words, but because it was his duty. Once, in the middle of my essay, his phone rang. I stopped, and he answered it in the other room. When he returned after a five minute interruption, he repeated verbatim my last sentence as far as it had got. He had an astonishing verbatim memory and could repeat whole passages of prose to illustrate a point arising in a discussion. (47)

He exemplified generosity throughout his life: voluntary enlistment in WWI, keeping his promise to WWI friend Paddy Moore to take care of his family if he should die in battle, donating a majority of his income to help those less fortunate, and marrying Joy Gresham to extend his British citizenship to her when her adulterous husband agreed to a divorce. Most considered Lewis one of most selfless men at Oxford, often donating money to students who were in need and saying that it was from *his friend*. Because he struggled to manage money, his friend and attorney Owen Barfield maintained a trust for him. Approximately two-thirds of his income went to assist various charities and individuals in need. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*, "I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare . . . If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small" (52).

All through his life Lewis gave his time, attention, and resources to help others despite the personal sacrifice it cost him. He truly lived what he believed, as he wrote in a letter to a correspondent contained in Volume 3 of his *Collected Letters*: "What we practice, not (save at rare intervals) what we preach is usually our greatest contribution to the conversion of others" (576). Even today, his fans feel a deep kinship with him. Edwards stated in his interview:

His core values represent a solid basis for building an ethical life, and presumably, a pattern of leadership that is neither coercive nor manipulative. He leads by example, based on heartfelt conviction. There is never a hint of his being 'controlling,' nor of a desire to become the conscience of others; rather, he sees himself as helping others learn to be independent thinkers and to take action based upon the truths they learn . . . Other than my father, he is the most influential person in my life. His leadership manifests itself in the voice in my head when I read his works and recognize their continuing wisdom and

application in my life, and the lives of others. He taught me the power of metaphor for instilling those values and qualities that exemplify leadership, and the necessity of learning how to create and deliver those new metaphors to one's audience with imagination and grace. It is not to be underestimated what control of language is necessary for successful leadership of the kind that Lewis exhibited.

Although Lewis never desired to be a leader, he proved a most magnanimous one. He met all the criteria and established his eligibility, not just as a mentor or guide but also as one who fundamentally changed people through his influence. Lewis envisioned himself as a conduit, an avenue to something bigger, more powerful, and more satisfying. Lewis deepened the faith and the intellect of many and for this he has *truly* become a transformational leader.

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