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Student Reflections on Leadership

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Using a rigorous internal application process, selected members of the Inamori-based student group, Global Ethical Leaders Society (GELS) attended the U.S. Naval Academy Leadership Conference in January 2018, “Breaking Barriers: Obstacles Are Opportunities.” The selected three exemplary students have dedicated interests in military ethics and leadership, ethical development, and character building, and they brought valued insight to the discussions with the other participants. Their reflections on ethical leadership in their role as student leaders is especially pertinent to their decision making both on and off campus.

Reflections on NALC 2018 Crystal An

“Glad to be here.”

The theme for this year’s conference was breaking barriers, and it was clear after listening to such a diverse range of speakers that there are many different ways to overcome obstacles. The one thing that resounded through each keynote, interview, and panel, however, was the manner with which leaders approach their obstacles. Successful leadership in the face of challenges starts with a perspective of gratitude. A sense of gladness to be standing in front of this barrier with an understanding that excellent leadership can only exist in this moment when one is standing face-to-face against an obstacle. Barriers exist solely to define the difference between where we are and where we want to be. Former Blue Angel John Foley gave this state another name in his opening address: the high performance zone.

“It’s not dangerous. It’s inherently unforgiving.”

Another quote from the opening keynote. Foley was referring to flying fighter jets at sonic speeds within eighteen inches of each other, but this mindset is clearly applicable to other challenges that the rest of us are more likely to face in daily life. There is a nuanced but significant difference

between feeling fear and being scared. Fear implies a feeling of “stuckness,” while being scared stems from one’s intuition and keeps us from falling into complacency. Stress and fear will naturally manifest if one views a challenge as dangerous. Thus, leaders must instead view high-stakes situations as merely an environment with less room for error and a greater need for precision.

“You don’t have to be perfect to step in the ring.”

Society has a tendency to hold girls to a standard of perfection that is unattainable and harmful. A lot of attention has been dedicated to fixing this issue as it pertains to body image, but the expectation of perfection has even more pervasive effects that extend beyond that. Michele Flournoy described a study that showed, when given a list of qualifications required for a job, men are more likely to apply even if they only meet six out of ten requirements as compared to women, who tend to not even apply if they don’t meet all ten requirements. Flournoy stressed the importance of teaching women to be brave instead of perfect. The system cannot be fixed until more women build up the courage to enter the ring, and this cannot happen until we make conscientious moves to shatter the societal misconception that perfection is a necessary quality for women. Merit should be treated as the baseline for assessment, and excellent performance should be analyzed with gender-blind judgement only.

“Touching the dragon.”

Chief James Hatch was a former Navy Seal who worked closely with K9 units and experienced the loss of many friends, both human and canine. After sustaining a severe injury that left him bedridden in a hospital for weeks, Hatch was left with a large amount of free time to contemplate an unbearable amount of guilt. For him, the challenge was in recovery and the obstacles existed primarily in his own mind. Mental health is an enormous issue that has only recently been receiving more attention, but Hatch’s story brought up some jarring questions. How do you approach a barrier with a sense of gladness, when, you are in fact, not glad to be here—not even to be living and breathing? How do you face an obstacle eye-to-eye, when even looking into your own eyes in a reflection feels intolerable? Sometimes, leadership is a lot less glamorous than what we expect it to be. Sometimes, as Captain Hatch revealed, you just have to survive the obstacles. There is a stigma against getting help for mental health issues, but all stigma stems from cowardice, and recovery requires the bravery to touch the dragon. For Hatch, it meant revisiting and reliving his traumatic

memories; for the rest of us, it is facing our fears and becoming comfortable with the feeling of being scared. The reasons why we touch the dragon are universal. We do it for the people that have saved us, the people that we love, and for the people that we can possibly save in the future. Obstacles were never meant to be easy, but touching the dragon certainly creates a powerful sense of purpose.

"Glad to be here."

From the start to the end of the three days we spent in Annapolis, these opening words ran through my thoughts almost constantly. Glad to have been given the opportunity to be at the US Naval Academy. Glad to be here sitting amongst midshipmen who will one day be integral leaders in our country's military. Glad to be here listening to Under Secretary Michele Flournoy advocating for more young women to step into the ring. Glad to be here shaking the hand of the Red Cross Senior Vice President of Humanitarian Services. Glad that she didn't care how sweaty my palms were. Glad to be here with a Navy Seal sharing his story and baring his soul to educate tomorrow's leaders. Glad to be here, but even more glad to be able to bring some incredible lessons about leadership and obstacles back to Cleveland.

NALC 2018 Recap: Promoting Ethical Leadership with Realistic Optimism

J. Lucas Hii

Defining leadership qualities entails a unique problem where every expression can resonate as cliché and unauthentic. We hear that true leaders inspire action within others and appeal to an embryonic sense of passion that people thrive on. However, during my experience at the NALC 2018, I discovered a less portrayed branch of leadership more accessible to the common person than the heroic figures we idolize and fail to truly understand. Rather than regurgitate the details that shape the ideal leader, I will reflect upon my time at the NALC 2018 to indicate how every individual can embody the spirit of a humble leader focused on daily action. I heard from leaders, despite diverse and controversial pasts, who transformed their character to embody the qualities of an optimistic realist. They all expressed the importance of maintaining optimism during adversity; while prioritizing decision making and risk assessment that is grounded by a realistic perspective. One of the most impactful experiences was hearing Former U.S Secretary of State and U.S Ambassador to the UN, the Honorable Madeleine Albright, speak of

her experience during the Rwandan and Darfur genocides. Specifically, the difficulty in proper decision making with limited and sometimes dubious information. Alongside Madeleine Albright, both the Honorable Richard Cheney and General James Conway expressed how a leader must establish credibility through their values and create a culture of authenticity. This authenticity enhances decision making through disagreements and promotes accountability when failures occur. This panel focused on the holistic development of a leader that endures stressful circumstances while remaining composed enough to lead with credibility.

Following the Forrestal Panel, Special Operations Chief Daniel Luna spoke the next morning reinforcing the importance of grit, resilience, and a support system. He stressed more than anything the support system he leaned on to endure terrible circumstances including the loss of many friends and his personal battle with depression. Chief Luna exposed his heart and wore his emotions with authenticity during the address which emphasized his message even more powerfully. Leaders can attempt to remain upbeat and positive on the surface, but a truly powerful leader understands that reality sometimes crushes your soul and all you can do is try to make it through another day. This true demonstration of character encourages reciprocal support when reality is too difficult to handle. Chief Luna highlighted the importance of Faith, Focus, Friends, and Family in order to simply make it through another day. This leadership style is founded in the belief that to lead you first must follow, and that the strongest leader adopts a mentor-mentor relationship never rising above those they lead. They always respect the individuals they take responsibility for, and most of all expose their authentic self in order to make it through the hard days.

I would like to thank GELS and the Inamori Center for Ethics and Excellence for the opportunity to participate in the NALC 2018 which was a privilege that will not be forgotten.

A Leader's Journey to Immortality

Yash Kumar

“The Rainbow Unicorns?”

“Be serious.”

“Airbenders?”

“No.”

“Callahan Killers?”

“Not bad.”

“What about Hornets?”

“Everyone agree?”

After across-the-board nodding, I register our school’s nickname as our team name in Tulsa Ultimate Federation’s (TUF) high school league. The last three years of my high school experience were a long journey. As I reflect on my experience of creating my school’s ultimate team, I truly understand the value of the lessons I learned at USNA 2018.

We have a critical choice. It governs our life philosophy, and how we go about our decision-making process. We must choose between an infinite and finite life.

An infinite life may seem absurd. Isn’t all life finite? This was precisely my thought as Simon Sinek gave his talk on the difference between infinite and finite battles. However, I slowly realized that infinite and finite aspects to life do exist. Infinite life exists when people talk about you in the future because your contributions to organizations outlive you. However, finite elements of life only regard power and money, so when you die, you become forgotten.

If I learned anything at USNA, it is that existence is a privilege! What are you doing with this privilege?

Indeed, one must find something fulfilling in order to pursue his/her infinite life. This is an arduous process, one that I continue to struggle with. However, if we abandon this journey, we risk our potential to induce change. While choosing to maximize the finite elements of life is not a wrong choice, I hope you do not live solely by the philosophy of one of my favorite satirical Bollywood movies “Life is a race. If you don’t run fast. You will be like a broken anda (egg).”

If you have chosen an infinite journey, then your priority is to find a just cause, a why, something that gives you the willingness to sacrifice and the motivation to do the right thing. With a purpose in hand, a leader must continue to establish a proper culture. The need to do the little things right must be the bedrock. In fact, in crisis, you cannot surge trust. Instead, you must build it gradually. The only way to build trust is to have real relationships, where you know what matters to your team and what is happening in their lives. Through this manner, you are prepared for a crisis. In reality, we do not rise to the occasion, but instead we sink to our training, and for this reason, culture is essential.

Additionally, gratitude must be a staple part of the culture. For success, we need optimism. However, gratitude is often the hardest part for people,

including me. This is because the innate human psyche complains, and with a collection of people, complaining exacerbates. However, we must eliminate the “this sucks” lexicon. If my teammates did not care enough to do drills in practice, then why were they there? They had to understand that their dedication to the team and their love for the game drove them to show up for 8 a.m. Saturday practice; they needed to learn to be excited about improving. Thus, with purpose and meaning, people will learn to be grateful in a reinforcing and supportive culture.

Finally, leaders have an additional burden. They must accept situations and take responsibility. You have to be courageous and be responsible for your own morale. Leaders cannot afford to show weakness to the team. Instead, you must show your team that regardless, you will not let them down in any situation. As Churchill once said, “If you’re going through hell, keep going.”

Overall, I learned that leadership has no relation to a title or authority, as an individual cannot bring team success. Instead, it is about identifying a need and empowering people to maximize their efforts in achieving that shared vision. Through remaining accountable and building a supportive and grateful culture, you can progress towards “immortality” and act in a way that drives the team to pursue the fulfilling purpose.