

## **ON BECOMING A LEADER**

Ed Murphy

*I would not be a Moses to lead you into the Promised Land, because if I could lead you into it, someone else could lead you out of it.* —Eugene V. Debs

I am a reflective practitioner. I learn from reading, experience, effort, success, and failure. Adaptation strengthens my capacity to lead. Writing this essay is part of an external meditation.

I am a leader, focused on economic and social justice, ethics, and organizational effectiveness. How do I know? Because I stepped forward, articulated a vision, gathered support, listened, practiced, studied, experimented, made mistakes, learned from them, found coaches, applied for executive jobs, was hired, succeeded, and gained confidence. One day, I knew I was in the guild.

Authentic leadership is not just a title. You earn it every day and can lose the privilege. Someday my slot will be taken or handed over. It may hurt, but I won't complain. I've had a good run. I hope these reflections encourage younger labor leaders. That's one reason I'm writing here. Another is to help me understand what I have done and to focus on the next phase of my life.

I came to the New York State American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (NYS AFL-CIO) in 1999, with diverse experiences and a reputation as an innovator and implement-

## WORKING STORIES

er. I was given opportunities, as well as financial and institutional support. A year later, I founded and became Executive Director of the Workforce Development Institute (WDI).

Leaders improvise. Sometimes they even make history. Gandhi did not have a blueprint. He titled his memoir *Gandhi, An Autobiography; The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Life has no clear path. Leaders interpret trends, lean forward, point the way, seize the moment, take a risk, and encourage others to join them on a journey. There are no leaders without a constituency lending them authority. You have to respect those who invest, who give you power. Your role must be renewed, with humility, often at awkward moments. Think of a rubber band. You can only stretch a relationship so far. One end moves forward while the other holds you back. Push too far, too fast, and the band will break, and that is the end of your leadership. The best leaders stretch, introduce tension, educate, and inspire their constituency. Then the group follows and takes ownership of new ideas and relationships.

WDI was birthed by many, but my story is the one I know best. With a mixture of pride and humility, I share how I was prepared for my role. I ask you, the readers, to reflect on your own experiences and leadership; to accept credit for what each of you has contributed to your family, community, and country. I am proud of my leadership, and hope that you are of yours.

We built WDI with a clear focus: to serve working families and; to strengthen organized labor's voice and role in workforce, economic, and community development. I brought vision, skills, self-confidence, and faith that we would succeed. Others invested time, sweat equity, ideas, money, advocacy, and encouragement.

I wasn't born to lead. I am the baby of my family, number six. Even the cats and dogs didn't follow me. This may have been a stimulus to find some way to become visible. Ask any musician or athlete, and they will tell you that one has to find a niche, practice, seize the moment, practice, draw attention, practice, find models, show discipline, practice, learn from good coaches and find better ones who will push you beyond your limited dreams, adapt, practice,

and develop a personal vision of victory. Success cannot be prescribed. We improvise, make our own luck, take advantage of trends, and exploit leadership vacuums.

I grew up Irish, with the clarity of the Roman Catholic Church and the confusion of my mother's death in 1952, before I was seven. My family was filled with grief. We focused on what was lost and how to survive. Pop took care of the basics. We kids became a team, with more autonomy than our peers. Our family offered love and support, and still does. This is one reason I have confidence, and value organization, teams, cooperation, and reliability. Religion gave me hope that someday I might see my mom again and that there is more to life than living. Public school gave me intellectual discipline.

I learned from three strong leaders. My father was the prime authority, provider, and unifying force. Our pastor, Father McCormick, ruled on Sundays and was an ever-present spiritual guide. Mrs. Cerreta, principal of Public School 11, was my secular authority. The family gave me a sense of organization and coherence. The church offered hope and inspiration. Grammar school trained my mind, demanded discipline, and provided skills. My leaders were confident and inspiring, fallible, and practical. I've met few better. Leadership is local and personal. One needs to understand and care about those who follow. As Che Guevara said, "The true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love." There must be shared values and trust.

My yearning for, and focus on, transformative social change started when I was a wounded child. I wanted my life to be better. I found I wasn't the only one who needed help. Faith and education moved me beyond my family's impacted grief. Public school teachers showed me a world beyond religion. President Kennedy became my significant leader. I developed a relationship with him. He was Irish, Catholic, a Democrat, a war hero, and articulate. He challenged me: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." The priesthood was my response. Paulist Father Kelly, another articulate and inspiring Irishman, spoke to my parish and pointed me toward his American religious community. In 1963, I left Staten Island for their seminary in Baltimore. I learned

## WORKING STORIES

how to learn. My eyes and mind opened wider. Working among the inner-city poor showed me that many had it worse than I. We visited prisons. I walked along death row and through mental health wards. I spoke with drug addicts, and each night returned to a safe, white, quiet school; warm food and clean sheets; to priest-professors who committed their lives to service. We were privileged. I learned of worker-priests who shared the life of those they served. After three years, I realized that faith was a personal asset. My primary interest was in social and economic justice. I saw how religion could be a barrier. A comfortable clerical life protected me from having to take responsibility for my own survival. I remain grateful to the Paulist community for spiritual and academic education, training, support, and inspiration. In 1966, I decided it was time to move on and take responsibility for myself, to grow so I would be able to serve others. I had expanded my perspective. I trusted that God had work for me to do. But first I had to take off my training wheels.

Much happened in the following years that contributed to my understanding. Leaving the Paulists, I gave up my draft exemption. The military waited outside the novitiate. I engaged my fate, enlisted, became an intelligence agent, learned to speak Vietnamese, and went to war; a dramatic change.

I came home with a combat veteran's caste privilege. I was a Vietnam expert, and became an anti-war activist. I stood up for peace, organized with Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), and drew media attention. The press ordained me a leader. I accepted the role and title; helping other vets, talking to community groups, being on the radio and TV, getting my message out. Action was practical, comforting, and therapeutic.

I risked my life in Vietnam and survived; I have never taken that for granted. My new life began on May 9, 1969, when I came home from the war. I did not want anyone else to die. I risked my identity, security, and future when speaking out against the war, motivating some and antagonizing others. I got hate mail: "Your mother must be a Jew." Some said I was a traitor to my Irish race. "What did you expect?" my supportive father asked. He encouraged

me to let this roll off my back. Instead, it showed me the connection between war, racism, poverty, and social and economic injustice. Many saw my standing up as an act of courage, yet it was more about integrity and responsibility.

I was a former combat intelligence agent, fluent in Vietnamese. I had frontline experience and solid information relevant to the public debate about our war. I didn't have a right to remain silent. Leadership requires personal integrity, vision, action, and humility. One needs to risk rejection and accept credit with humility. Vietnam drew me out. I had to either speak up, or be ashamed and live with my conscience. My expertise, caste privilege, and voice made me a leader. Standing up in my home community was a risk. I invited support and criticism from those who knew and loved me. I lost some friends and gained some more. A few family members were embarrassed. I sought help dealing with the emotional consequences of this. I came to understand how important it is for leaders to know themselves, to explore their personal feelings and motivations, and to respect the psychological dynamics inherent in conflict. Mental health is an asset, and asking for help is a start. I began to study all aspects of transformative social change. I sought further opportunities to serve, to learn, and to become more effective.

In 1970, I returned home to Staten Island. I'd been inspired by Gandhi, JFK, RFK, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Saul Alinsky, the great community organizer and author of *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals*. Alinsky spoke at a Paulist seminarians' conference, and encouraged young people to organize within their home communities, where we had shared history, experiences, and credibility.

When I left the army in Washington, D.C., I could have gone anywhere. I wanted to go home. I'd spent three years in seminary and three more in the military. Coming home from war, I was lost and needed to get grounded. I was angry and had a score to settle. Staten Island sent me to war. I'd enlisted and filled a draft slot in my community's quota. I wanted to have a community conversation about what that meant, and what I learned, reporting back to those I

## WORKING STORIES

represented in Vietnam.

I also needed to complete my education. Most of my intelligence peers had undergraduate degrees; some, even law degrees. I had only two years of college and a weak academic record. I was hungry to learn, and wanted another chance. Richmond College (CUNY) gave this to me. I chose to live, study, and organize on Staten Island. I stood out, and was elected president of the student government. I helped focus the student body, and represented us to faculty, administrators, and our local community during turbulent times. I engaged in civil disobedience to protest the war. I was arrested at the White House with Linda Geary and other friends. Nine months later, Linda and I were married. Lin's feminism opened my eyes further: male leaders must listen to and respect women, disarm our sexist perspectives, learn from women, and advocate for their concerns as much as our own.

Two years later, I defeated our congressman to become a delegate to the 1972 Democratic Convention. In that process, I tested myself against a neighbor, a distinguished West Point graduate, Korean War hero, and experienced elected leader. I learned two important lessons. Every leader is vulnerable, and a well-organized insurgent with a good cause and field operation can win against traditional complacent leaders who behave as if elected office is their right.

At the Miami convention, I had a rude awakening with the media. My prior experiences with journalists had been positive. Reporters asked good questions, took notes, and fairly represented what I said. I was an interesting interviewee: a former combat intelligence agent who spoke Vietnamese, who had served in an infantry division, and who had exposed the CIA's Phoenix Program as a reckless assassination initiative. At the Miami convention, it was different. The national media had already framed their story: another Chicago. They had less interest in who I was and what I knew. CBS national correspondent John Hart saw me as another anti-war veteran inside the convention, while a contingent from VVAW demonstrated outside. He asked about my commitment to George McGovern and what we would do if the Democrats didn't nominate him. I didn't plan on

losing that fight, so I did not give an answer. He pushed, and I said, “We will do what we have to if we face that situation.” Hart became intense, and asked, “Are you threatening violence?” His story was about crazy Vietnam veterans rather than me, a combat veteran who rejected violence and was working inside the system to make change. I looked at him like he was crazy, but he was serious. My values were clear, but they conflicted with his storyline.

The day Bobby Kennedy was killed, I was at war, and had shared my perspective in a letter to my brother: “Vietnam is one of our mistakes. . . . In our country there are many ways to make ourselves heard. I hope the legitimate means afforded us through the democratic process will be used. If the swifter and more dramatic means of violence are used, then history will have that much more reason to condemn us.”

If Hart had been interested, I would have explained that I had committed myself to nonviolent direct action. I was insulted by his assumption that veterans were dangerous. He taught me to be careful with my answers; to understand who I was talking to, and to be clear about my messages and what reporters wanted out of each conversation. Hart had his story and he just needed a comment from me to justify his assumptions. He had seen the 1968 Chicago convention, expected a replay, and was ready for a scoop. I learned again that if I wanted to communicate messages, I needed to be clear, concise, and prepared for smart, stupid, and insulting questions. I also had to get better at presenting my perspective.

At home, my interests expanded. Freedom for Northern Ireland, environmental advocacy, and interracial justice became concerns. I made connections between an immoral, wasteful war and the destruction of the environment; between a foreign policy that supported dictators in Vietnam, Chile and British colonialism; between racism at home and abroad and our preference for killing instead of providing jobs and healthcare.

In 1973, I ran as the progressive candidate for Borough President of Staten Island in a Democratic primary. I advocated for veterans, peace, healthcare, the environment, civil rights, fair housing, and

## WORKING STORIES

to close Willowbrook State School, but I did not understand public finance. Had I won, I would have faced New York City's fiscal crisis and yielded to more conservative technocrats to make the trains run on time.

I chose to develop executive skills, and did my apprenticeship in San Diego. Lin was accepted to graduate school in Psychology, so we moved west. I became director of an agency serving the poor and the homeless. Our staff was made up of young counterculture activists. Six weeks after I was hired, 129 businesses petitioned to have the agency defunded. They saw us as a magnet for the homeless, and objected to our clients walking their streets, sleeping on the beaches, and disrupting the tourist trade. My mission impossible was to reorganize the agency, rebuild community support, and convince county government to continue funding us. I used skills I didn't know I had and found an organizational mentor. Anne Doshier taught organizational development at Lin's graduate school, and was a neighbor and founder of my agency. She said, "It's a good thing that you are sane and not looking to make a career out of this job." Anne saw that I was an East Coast guy, and believed I would return east after Lin graduated. She explained that an organization reflects the psychological profile of its leader. Previous directors had wanted to run a club: to be friends with their staff and clients rather than lead an effective organization that helps people. I prioritized services, success, and survival of the agency. I was willing to direct, compromise, and develop partnerships with the business community, rather than lead a cultural conflict. We all won. And Anne was right. Lin graduated and we moved to Saratoga Springs, New York.

Richard Nelson Bolle's *What Color is Your Parachute* helped me prioritize where and how I wanted to live as much as it helped me with finding work. Lin and I had grown up on Staten Island. I'd left for seminary before the bridge to Brooklyn brought urban life and "paved paradise and put up a parking lot." I liked being near the City but separate too. We chose to live in Upstate New York so I could work in state government. We arrived without jobs. My first one there was in a state park inside Saratoga Springs, a small city north



of Albany, with an easy commute to the state capital. In 1976, having found work, I started graduate school in Public Administration. I studied government while practicing it.

My career path has been varied and full. I've learned from all I've done. Every four years, more or less, my jobs changed. By 1981, I had a Master's degree and a new baby, and had lost my job, so Lin and I founded Pathfinders Institute, a non-profit. We led initiatives related to PTSD: veterans, rape crisis, and domestic violence. We built an agency from scratch.

In 1983, I went back into government, joining Governor Mario M. Cuomo's administration to develop programs for Vietnam veterans, while Lin ran Pathfinders. I learned to integrate policy, programs, budgets, and personnel. In 1987, I moved from the Division of Veterans Affairs to the Civil Service Department, and was invited to lead development of the state's first workforce plan. In 1991, I returned to Vietnam for a United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) investors' forum to explore economic development opportunities. I had hurt Vietnam; I wanted to help heal her and rebuild America's relationship with her. This was deeply personal, and an opportunity for me to use my intelligence and language, my political and organizational skills. It was a unique and time-limited opportunity, so I returned home and got myself out of government. Lin supported my decision.

I left steady State employment to start another business, Murphy Associates, a small consulting group. With a mortgage and two children, we took another risk, not wanting to miss the historic opportunity to work on reconciliation between America and Vietnam. I did business consulting, environmental, and humanitarian work. I wrote about Vietnam, spoke at colleges, produced three photography exhibits, and produced a book with our daughter, Zoëann: *Vietnam: Our Father Daughter Journey*.

These experiences prepared me for a 1999 invitation I received from our friend Denis Hughes when he was elected President of the NYS AFL-CIO. Denis invited me to become part of his team. I stood at a crossroads. Lin and I had considered moving to Vietnam, where I

## WORKING STORIES

would have more opportunities as a business consultant. We decided it was not in the best interests of the family, especially for our children. Vietnam had been isolated by an embargo for decades after our war, and their schools were not very good. Four years earlier, I had run for mayor of Saratoga Springs, and almost won. I was planning a second campaign. I was confident I could win, but victory came with a \$14,000-a-year salary. Denis's offer was not fully defined, but there were many pluses: working for a man I respected, staying in our community, our children attending good schools, an opportunity to serve working families, strengthening organized labor, a real salary and benefits. I had organized veterans, developed services, and contributed toward reconciliation with Vietnam. I'd done my share and needed economic stability. I chose organized labor. A colleague ran for mayor in my place and he won. We both won.

Authentic leadership emerges from personal experience. It balances personal and constituency needs, and engages in a dynamic relationship with those we lead and learn from. I did not emerge through traditional union ranks, so I had to earn my right to lead. I listened, learning what was important to union members and labor leaders, and I found a niche. WDI became where I could add value. Denis hired me to participate in his renewal of organized labor. I partnered with his secretary-treasurer, Paul Cole; legislative director, Ed Donnelly; and Joe McDermott, the director of the Consortium for Worker Education (CWE).

Together we incubated WDI as a vehicle to assist the statewide labor movement. I am a non-profit entrepreneur. We recruited a strong board of directors and founded WDI, and I became its director. My first priority was to listen and learn. I visited regional labor leaders and heard their priorities. We decided to expand the mission: to serve working families; provide incumbent worker education and training services; and strengthen relationships with businesses, minorities, women, immigrants, and community groups.

Through graduate education in public administration, work inside government, and running non-profits and a small consulting group, I learned the New York State procurement process. My first

accomplishment at WDI was to show how New York State Education Department funding for union training could be realigned to give organized labor more influence over state training resources. Unions were approaching schools with a tin cup, begging for funds for training. I designed an initiative that enabled statewide education funds to be contracted through CWE to WDI and distributed to unions. This let local unions design their own courses and gave WDI operating resources. I demonstrated my value and earned the confidence of labor leaders. The legislature increased our funding, and we grew beyond union training to provide child care, business and economic development, and cultural and community services. We strengthened our regional operations. Local advocates communicated their satisfaction to legislators. They saw how effective we were and they renewed and enlarged our appropriations. We built strategic partnerships with organized labor, legislators, the business community, educators, and community organizations.

Self-responsibility and credibility are twin aspects of good leadership. Fiscal impropriety breaks faith and trumps the best intentions. I see myself and WDI as trustees of public funds. We built WDI with strong and transparent fiscal controls. In the murky and practical world of government, our reputation for fiscal integrity became an asset. Denis brought me into organized labor. My behavior had to reflect his ethics and good judgment. I needed to not shame him. Many more have since invested in my leadership, provided financing and organizational support, and accepted my guidance.

I must be proactive, responsive, and fiscally responsible in order to remain credible. WDI documents programs and processes, requires double signatures on all checks, has annual external audits, and promotes transparency. I managed inside government, ran non-profits and a small business. I'd put my family's security on the line. I understand cash-flow management and how vulnerable a labor group could be to allegations of fiscal impropriety. As Anne Doshier pointed out to me, an agency reflects the personality and integrity of its leader.

So, what now? I believe in succession planning. I am getting old-

## WORKING STORIES

er. Someone needs to take my job, and I am not qualified to decide who that will be. Like most leaders, my perspective is constrained by my own experience. My goal is to help the next generation of leaders, not choose one. There are no blueprints—only examples, hope, principles, and experiments. I am a reflective practitioner, so I recommend that emerging leaders step forward and start with an environmental scan: study yourself, your organization, your society, and then design your own strategy. I was born in 1945 and defined a leader in 1970. I grew up during the Cold War, studied in a seminary, became an intelligence agent, went to war, and came home on a mission to build a nonviolent, peaceful, and just society. My generation's social environment included an economic resurgence, war, racism, sexism, homophobia, a concentration camp for the “mentally retarded” (Willowbrook), activists, inspiring leaders, and what President Eisenhower called the military-industrial complex, which partnered with Congress and universities.

We have made progress: ended the Vietnam War, built an environmental movement, and improved the lives and rights of women and gays. We closed Willowbrook and integrated developmentally disabled citizens into society. We finally have national healthcare. We still have war, racism, and the military-industrial-congressional complex. Workers, unions, and immigrants are under siege.

The next generation of leaders has plenty to do. They will push their own priorities, using newer and more appropriate technologies. I did not grow up with computers, cell phones, the Internet, Facebook, or even seat belts. Younger leaders have intuitive knowledge I am missing. But I am a futurist and an optimist. I have great confidence in the next generation, and write, offering to help. I share the path I took as a contribution, a reference, but not a map. I believe the most important skill an emerging leader needs is an internal guidance system, a combination of values and ethics, and a personal GPS and gyroscope.

In 2014, I signed a five-year non-renewable contract with WDI. My primary purpose is to lead the agency and strengthen its capacity to operate without me. There is a body of literature about what hap-

pens to an organization when the founder leaves. The best founders prepare their organization, surrender willingly, encourage change, and don't try to manage from the grave. We each have our role and our personhood. It is best to understand the distinction. I am no longer building an organization. We won. I am writing more and mentoring. The best thing I have done for WDI lately is to hire strong leaders, capable of managing independently. I don't agree with all of their decisions, but they can't lead if they only obey. I won't let go in years to come if I don't practice now. I am also engaging my board more in wide-ranging discussions related to mission, services, and direction. Boards get comfortable with, and support, a strong and skilled executive. I need to continually examine that balance and partnership. We have an informed and strong board, skilled leadership, and regional and administrative teams. We have built a leader-full organization. My role is to clearly state a vision, encourage everyone's strengths, guide the agency, and develop younger leaders who will refocus WDI to address emerging trends.

I feel responsibility to the field of leadership. I invite comments and discussion. I write because I must—in order to stay clear and discuss what I believe. I respond to those who ask questions, listen, challenge, corroborate, and help me learn.

Thanks for listening. Please share your perspective with me at [emurphy@wdiny.org](mailto:emurphy@wdiny.org).