

STAYING AWAKE AT THE INTERSECTION WHERE WORLDS COLLIDE

HEMANT BHATNAGAR

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Ethical Leadership

By RICHA VARMA

The journey toward equality is not a cavalier walk.

Walter Earl Fluker believes there is a special place in hell for bores. So when the professor of leadership studies at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, spoke on ethical leadership with Indian students, he wove an engaging web of conversation interspersed with folk tales and even a small dose of meditation to keep his audience engaged.

But what is ethical leadership? Is it a distant philosophical realm that most young people would not want to enter? Fluker thinks so, and to simplify his point, began with a Trinidadian folk tale, with some 20th century modifications:

One day Andy, the ant, finds a crumb with a blob of jelly on it. Delighted, he toils to take it

to the anthill so that the community can enjoy it, too. But even his best efforts are not good enough and he ends up feeling exasperated and humiliated. Out of nowhere, Bubba, the

beetle, appears and offers to help. But Bubba's intentions are dishonest and he takes a big chunk out of the crumb "just to make it lighter." This leaves Andy back where he was, though more weary and dejected.

Nancy, the spider, who has been observing everything from a distance, acknowledges the problem and in an attempt to prod Andy, tells him she would like to feed the crumb to her hungry brood. As she prepares to stick her web to the crumb and lift it, Andy is inspired to do something he never thought possible, and in a final, Herculean effort, pushes the crumb over to the anthill.



“You are going to meet these people,” says Fluker. “They represent a certain kind of philosophy that we see, not just in our individual societies but also in our global culture. I call Nancy the ethical leader. She has an incredible potential to do incredible things once she is awake,” he says.

Like the ideal ethical leader, Nancy provoked Andy’s consciousness, believing in the philosophy “what is mine is yours, and we’ll share it.” Bubba, an epithet for the thug in society, thrives on the doctrine which says “what is yours is mine, and I’ll take it.”

“More than the main content of his speech, I thoroughly enjoyed his asides,” says Puneeta Roy, who attended the talk at the American Center, New Delhi, in

such inspiring leaders among stalwarts who have dedicated their lives to empowering the community in which they live. Names like Prakash Amte and his wife, Mandakini, Medha Patkar...and smaller unsung heroes...are to be found all across the country. They form a part of an important group that is active in the social sector,” Roy says.

Fluker insists that though there is a challenge to ethical leadership, there is also sufficient room for it, as demonstrated in the continuing struggles to sustain democracies across the world.

“Fluker’s talk was an eye-opener. Especially his remark where he says that the greatest challenge before the world is not terrorism or global warming but staying awake,” says Saira Mujtaba, an undergraduate student of English at Jamia Millia Islamia University in New Delhi.

And there is no shortage of staying awake at Morehouse. The college is the alma mater of Martin Luther King, Jr., whose passion for peace and justice was

For more information:

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<http://www.morehouse.edu/centers/leadershipcenter/webbio.html>

his philosophies and theories.

According to the college Web site (<http://morehouse.edu/>), as King finished his final year, “it was evident that he had transformed into the leader he was destined to become when he wrote in the student publication, *The Maroon Tiger*: ‘We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education.’”

In 2006, through the efforts of a group of prominent Atlantans, a 10,000-piece collection of handwritten notes, telegrams and unpublished sermons of King narrowly avoided an auction and now has a permanent home at the college.


Fluker is the interim director of the Morehouse College Martin Luther King, Jr. Collection and has been the editor of the Howard Thurman Papers Project since 1992.

He describes King and Gandhi as two of the greatest ethical leaders in the 20th century and as the embodiment of moral traditions that have shaped the character of their nations.

“MLK and Gandhi were heirs of great traditions which funded ethical insight and wisdom, and which bred a deep sense of justice wedded to compassion,” he says. “Gandhi garnered insights from his Hindu tradition...and MLK was a product of the African American church tradition which held the ideals of community, compassion, protest and accommodation at the heart of its mission.”

Fluker adds that like the journeys of King and Gandhi, as with most other movements in history, ethical leadership is not going to be a cavalier walk for the next generation.

“The greatest challenge is to stay awake. It’s not something to be taken for granted because the world is depending on you to inspire and guide others and awaken consciousness,” he says.

“So while it is important to step up to solutions when there are serious issues at stake in society, ethical leaders know how to negotiate. They may not always have the right answer, but they know how to be pragmatic. And this has everything to do with the future of democracy,” he says. 

Left: Walter Fluker speaks at the American Center in New Delhi.

Below: Fluker interacts with student leaders from Stella Maris College, M.O.P.

Vaishnav College for Women and Loyola College in Chennai.



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Roy, who facilitates leadership workshops for young people in New Delhi and has just returned from conducting similar seminars in South Africa, says there is a dearth of ethical leadership in India. “There is a vacuum.... Yet, you do find

first ignited there, arriving as a 15-year-old in 1944.

Through his education at Morehouse, King was exposed to the teachings of Mohandas K. Gandhi and Henry David Thoreau. The people who taught and mentored him at the college were also to shape