The ancient art of modern leadership

To discover the essence of leadership in the modern world, we must go back to the ancient philosophers. Without virtuous leadership in every sphere of human life, there can be no order and no progress, no security and no prosperity. Lou Marinoff offers an ABC guide to virtue ethics in familial, social, professional and political contexts, through the practice of virtue.

Thus the three most influential philosophers of the ancient world – Aristotle, Buddha and Confucius – taught the ABCs of virtue ethics. Together, they laid the foundation not only for identifying “best practices” of leadership and governance, but also for applying these practices to the daily lives of individuals and organizations. Their application is increasingly vital to the functionality of our global village.

For Aristotle, the exercise of any virtue consists in finding a “middle way” between its two related extremes of vice. For example, courage is a virtue lying between the polar vices of cowardice and rashness.

Before 9/11, Americans flew rashly, heedless of security. Immediately after 9/11, Americans were afraid to fly, despite heightened security. I boarded a Virgin flight to London in November 2001, and was greeted by Richard Branson in the cabin of his own aircraft.

He shook everyone’s hand, thanked us for flying Virgin and flew along with us. He couldn’t guarantee absolute security for his passengers, but was willing to share our risks.

Courageous leadership is vital in wartime. It galvanizes the combatants, in this case civilian travellers who are also front-line troops in the war on terror. They take heart, and find their courage too. As Socrates knew, the instrument of virtues is like a lute; plucking one string makes others resonate as well.

And what would Buddha say about leadership in wartime? Ask the Tibetans, whose peaceful Buddhist nation was subject to unprovoked invasion and brutal occupation in 1951. The Dalai Lama was exiled, monasteries were desecrated, monks and nuns were murdered, Tibetan culture was suppressed.
humanism that Soka universities epitomize.

And what of Confucius? His influence in Asia is greater than Aristotle’s in the west, and with good reason. Underpinned by the very Tao (the Way) itself, Confucian systemic ethics teach that individual security is a reciprocating function of group harmony.

In any group, as long as one’s relations with others are appropriately balanced – as determined by station and duty – then the entire group is a beneficiary of a structural harmony that both accords with nature, and is amenable to nurture. Consequently, it long endures. This applies with equal force to families, corporations and communities of nations.

But in far too many neighbourhoods of the global village, such relations are not appropriately balanced. In the most dysfunctional and least productive cultures, elemental relational imbalances can become so discordant with nature and resistant to nurture that their captive constituencies become bereft of constructive possibility – and so are led to affirm the values of hatred over love, vengeance over reconciliation, and death over life.

The decline of the west can likewise be viewed as a manifestation of flagrantly anti-Confucian vices. In America, the wholesale deconstruction of the cultural order from within, during the past 30 years, has left the polity as structurally prone to implosion as the Twin Towers.

The values of western civilization have themselves been hijacked by a congeries of collectivist counter-cultures, each advocating a special interest for its constituents – which at the same time undermines the possibility of pluralistic alliance and shared vision in the polity.

Harmonious conceptions of station and duty, rooted in nature and stemming from the Enlightenment, have been variously post-mod-

Aristotle’s message:
the means and ends of reason
Means: logic, science and virtue ethics
Ends: individual fulfilment and group stability

Buddha’s message:
the means and ends of passion
Means: theory and practice of empathic ethics
Ends: individual peace and group prosperity

Confucius’s message:
the means and ends of spirit
Means: theory and practice of systemic ethics
Ends: individual security and group harmony
Let each nation and region strive to practice their respective virtues, but let each also assume responsibility for identifying andremedying their respective vices, instead of blaming them on others.