

**KNOWING TWO WORLDS,
THINKING TWO THINGS**

Benjamin DeMott

**FOUNDATION FOR
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ABOUT THE LECTURER

This tenth Foundation Lecture was presented by Dr. Benjamin DeMott, Professor of English, Amherst College, at the Annual Conference of the Public Relations Society of America, in Atlanta, Georgia, on November 16, 1970.

Dr. DeMott completed his undergraduate education at Johns Hopkins and George Washington Universities and received his Ph.D. from Harvard in 1953. In addition to his present position, he has held professorships at Harvard, Yale, MIT, Utah and Birmingham (England) Universities and has lectured most recently at the Universities of Alabama, California, Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nebraska, New York and North Dakota as well as at Vassar and Smith Colleges.

Among Dr. DeMott's publications are the novels *The Body's Cage* (1959) and *A Married Man* (1968) and a series of essays on cultural themes, *Hells & Benefits* (1963) *You Don't Say* (1966) *Supergrow* (1969) and *Surviving the Seventies* (1971). He has also written articles, stories, and reviews on a variety of subjects for *Partisan Review*, *Hudson Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *New York Review*, *New York Times Book Review*, *PMLA*, *Atlantic*, *Esquire*, and other journals here and abroad.

Dr. DeMott is a member of the PEN Club, the Authors League, Modern Language Association, and Phi Beta Kappa. He received the Harbison Award for Distinguished Teaching in 1969 and has twice been the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship.

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An address delivered at the Annual Conference
of the Public Relations Society of America by

BENJAMIN DeMOTT

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The profound unanswered question before us seems to me to be this: what can true leadership do to repair the rents in the social fabric of this country? How can true leadership function to move us on from fierce confrontations to decent commitments?

Please do not misunderstand me: I don't think the great question is, "Where are our leaders?" I am not issuing one more call for leadership in an hour of crisis. They come from the young or the old, the right or the left, from those in office or from those — like the President's Commission on Campus Unrest — sore at the office-holders. I believe all of us in contemporary American society are aware that leadership is A Good Thing and that more is involved in leadership than simply declaring in public that rioting is A Bad Thing. But I also believe that many of us are unsure at this moment exactly how true leadership would proceed. What exactly would a genuine leader do? How would he address himself to our manifold problems? Is there a particular kind of approach that makes sense under present circumstances?

I believe there is and I'm going to try to describe it — but let me first offer a word of description of the circumstances shaping the situations in which leadership now operates — the root problems before us. One problem is the breakdown of belief in the possibility of argument, negotiations, making yourself understood. Millions of Americans are passionately conscious of corruption and meretriciousness in the national life, determined to cry damnation down on it, enraged by other people's obliviousness to evil. The millions in question, young and old, have listened hard to moral challenges thrown down to greed and hypocrisy by their leaders. How, they ask themselves as they listen, how can our countrymen endure life without hurling body and mind against the machine of things-as-they-are?

Yet precisely the same sense of incomprehensibility rules the minds of those on the other side. They are provoked to equal rage by the "inexplicable" rage directed against them. Neither party, in other words, neither the protesters nor the famous silent majority, has in its possession the crudest means of escaping a locked-in world, of breaking the iron habit of referring all differences between self and others to fixed, impersonal, absolutist categories of virtue and vice. We're offered commonplaces of mockery and hate. We're offered, as I said, calls for Leadership. But no one deals in particulars. No talk, no gestures open a road out from the blankness of both sides about each other. So the fury rises, ebbs a moment, rises again — an essentially uncontrollable, and fearful, tide.

Then there is a second pivotal circumstance affecting leadership: it is the problem arising from mistaken assumptions about social change, assumptions that cause crazy veerings in the national psychology — from bogus "cool" at one instant to extravagant despair and apocalyptic destructiveness at the next. Some people in the middle act as though only a Square would ever resist cultural change. They are eager, in the name of the Almighty God of With-It-ness, to welcome chaos as a fresh, exciting new way of life. Some people at political extremes, on the other hand, assume that genuine human and social progress cannot be achieved through institutions, by working "inside the system." The general American tolerance of rapid rates of cultural transformation heightens their sense of moral possibility, enables them to conceive, for instance, the idea of altering in a generation patterns of race relations that were centuries in the making. But the tolerance of rapid change in itself doesn't supply knowledge of those step-by-step definitive actions that, in the day-to-day legislative and political process, edge a moral vision toward practical reality. The result is that people are flayed by contradictory feelings. They feel at the same time that everything is possible and that they themselves are powerless. And the contradictions drive them over the borders of rage.

Now if these *are* the circumstances, the primary psycho-political conditions of this day, what approach should leadership take up? How should leadership now behave?

Part of the answer seems obvious, perhaps even commonplace. True leadership must begin now to clarify, openly and patiently, the bases of contemporary division. Leadership should seek to move Americans on from the jail of the single perspective. It should develop means of combating the trivialization of difference in American society (no more rant about hippies, crackers, radic-libs, greasers, skinheads). The key to this effort is a constant pressing for openings through which to show forth the genesis of conflicting views — the origins and patterns of development of the furies now tearing men apart. *Leadership must teach us once again how to see with other men's eyes.*

Can such teaching be done? It can, instead. A month ago I spent some time with a Cornell agricultural economist recently returned from a year in India, part of it devoted to population problems, part of it to crop yields. He and his wife had both worked in a conflict situation in India — that is, at a birth control station. I remarked, conventionally enough, that while I tried to understand, I didn't fully grasp why it was so extraordinarily difficult to persuade parents that the loop and other control devices worked for, not against, their own interests. Why was this lesson so hard to learn?

My friend said that an Indian mother had helped him to understand why. He and his colleagues kept explaining to groups the relevant mathematical facts about increasing birthrates, declining death rates, starvation prospects ahead. And one day a back country village woman, after listening and waiting, said very simply that when burial processions passed her door and she looked and watched, many and many a small coffin passed. "Children are buried, as many children as grandparents are buried." The detail of the small coffins put it all before him, said my friend. It showed him where persuasion had to start. It reminded him that death is far more visible in India than in America, that the death rate for children remains relatively high in most Indian villages, that no prating about statistics can ever touch the mind of a mother concerned for her children who sees small coffins pass her door, parents like herself weeping. Favorable reaction to birth control talk depends upon, among other things, a powerful conviction of the life-prospects of every living child: you cannot even begin to persuade Indians to "limit their families" until you know the origins of this resistance, until you start looking out the door with Indian eyes, until the images and particulars, the firm hard perceptible details by which another vision of life is shaped and confirmed — until these are present in your mind. And the need for this imagination of particulars of sight and feeling — this readiness to work for a lucid sense of *why* men believe what they believe, even against "their own best interests" — this is no less vital in America than elsewhere.

Leadership ought to bear these elementary truths in mind. If it did, it would never assume that mere "objective" definitions of world or domestic problems work in close enough to inner feeling truly to reveal those problems. The cornerstone of a sound leadership approach in the next decade is alertness to the beat in individual hearts, alertness to the actual, the immediate, the vivid realities of life as known by individual men for whom the so-called "problems" are the conditions of perception, the plain homely facts of daily existence.

But seeing into the "other mind" is, of course, only a beginning. Leaders, schools, media, chapters of opinion must also commit themselves to explicit treatment of major issues in social and political change. This means direct representation of realities of revolution. It

means talking straight about acts of provocation and repression, about historical stages in the emergence both of free and of counter-revolutionary institutions, and about argumentative strengths and weaknesses in the work of revolutionary theorists as well as their critics. We cannot shilly-shally; we have to say what Revolution would be like, how it has gone in the past. This means the creation of honest, nonbrain-washing teaching materials that demonstrate the where and how of social change in America: rates of progress in specific fields, comparative international performances, legislative timetables illustrating obstacles, devices for overcoming resistance, relationships between public agitation and governmental action. The truth must be told, not the myths.

And telling the truth means considering frankly the alternative and competing models to the present consumer-goods-profit-oriented-nationalistic economy. It means discussing publicly, candidly, gains and losses from Radical Change. Such questions have a place in suburban junior high schools — and in political discourse — and in institutional advertising — and in trade association papers, corporation house organs and the like. Ideally leadership would work to show forth whole truths about gain and losses, prevent men from assuming that any single problem or so-called "solution" can be dealt with in isolation from others — and also to prevent men from feigning helplessness, from acting as though the effort to follow the beat, to keep two parts in mind at once, is beyond the capacity of ordinary intelligence. Leadership would talk and act in such a way as to demonstrate that the workings of each part on every part can never safely be neglected, and can be understood by almost everyone.

The other day a world-famous establishmentarian economist told *The New York Times* he believed that primitive-level manufacturing enterprise — shoe manufacturing, for example — should not be carried on in America. Our economy and our work force is geared to higher things: best to reorganize world production facilities so that primitive industrial economies in Africa and elsewhere can take over primitive production tasks and thereby enter world markets. It was interesting talk, heady talk — and Paul Samuelson is no hot-eyed SDS radical — yet it was also too simplistic, unconcerned not merely about the inevitable questions about changeover employment, and about where to start in organizing a cooperative world production system, but oblivious to the relevant social questions. What exactly would be the consequences of a fully homogeneous working population, a work force composed entirely of high skill technicians, engineers, professionals? Might a nation of workers this uniform be disposed to deal with other nations as "inferiors" pure and plain? How do we connect the vision of a super-technological state with the evident appetite of our own young for the "whole earth," the simple, the basic, the rural, the primitive?

True leadership would try to hold the full context of problems in change in mind. True leadership would try to inculcate the habit of thinking forward into the full moment to come. It would understand that you don't set the beat for the first movement without thinking about the second movement, and the third, and the fourth. It would combat both hysterical fear of change *and* hysterical overenthusiasm for it. It would do this by constantly showing forth inter-relationships of social problems, and the unwisdom of searching for or believing in "simple once-for-all solutions." *It would start a dialogue on Change itself.*

True enough this is sober work, not stuff for campaign hogwash, not a laugh riot, nothing to raise Texas hollers. People could abuse it as "professorial." But it is *necessary* work. Alertness to the key variables in cultural change, a feeling for the intricacy — yet penetrability — of problems requiring complex intellectual skills and emotional control and flexibility in their working through: these can't be developed too early, or nourished too richly in public speech and public action by public men.

And there is yet more to be done to characterize a sound approach to tasks and functions of leadership now. Nothing is plainer than that a prime reason for the breakdown of belief in the possibility of making yourself understood is the rampant enclaveism — separation by class, age, occupation, schooling, economic interest — that has until now been endemic in advanced industrial societies. And nothing is plainer than that the rigidity of these arbitrary separations — manager from worker, parent from child, teacher from pupil, man from woman — is undergoing an increasingly potent challenge. Leadership would not only recognize this truth; it would refuse to be terrified by it and would even go so far as to grasp that intelligence and sensitivity could transform the challenge into a major growing point of a genuinely human future. Leadership would press to create more programs and instruments by means of which hitherto rigidly separated groups of citizens could come together not to berate each other, not to stave off last minute crises, but to pool talents and energies in a common cause, whether educational or ecological. (Here I can only mention the concept of the TRIPLE T program, in which teams of educators, community workers, parents and students are now engaged in curricular revision in public schools in a hundred or more school districts spotted throughout the country.)

There are limitless ways in which men and groups hitherto held off in mild American versions of South African apartness can be brought into communication, and into a more immediate sense of each other's needs, character, aspiration. Leadership would struggle to define those ways, and to persuade men to follow them.

Finally, leadership would accept the obligation to seek to restore to men their power to care for each other, by reminding them of their capacity to feel with and suffer for one another, to catch each *other's* beat. It isn't too much to say that, in the end the hope of reconciliation in America depends chiefly upon the power of leadership not only to reason but to make men care. I know it's risky to lay down formulas — but it is at least worth noting that men can be moved to concern and commitment in their own lives not alone by perceptions of huge injustice, but by small inklings as well — by moments of humane impact, intensely felt, momentary penetration of damage done to a fellow human creature by social injustice or meanness, moments that blot out the time and circumstances around them and make us understand, from within, some commonplace pain, some habitual deprivation that hitherto we knew only as words.

Such a moment — not immensely dramatic, not overwhelming, yet substantive and as yet still unforgotten — occurred for me not long ago here in the South. I speak of it now only as an example of the relative slimness of the circumstances that suffice to reawaken in the human being his sense of concern, his capacity to care. We were in Mississippi working in a tutorial program for black youngsters due to enter integrated schools for the first time in the fall. And at the end of the first workday a friend and I drove into town after some beer. We turned off the paved road onto a dirt one, frame buildings, stores, tin roofs over the walks, and we parked. There was a black man and black woman, the woman with a baby in her arms, standing outside the beer parlor. They were looking in the window, watching the bar TV. Maybe the baby had awakened for a feeding or something. Anyway they were involved in the show. I watched for just a second and then climbed out and shut the door. The sound surprised them. The black man looked at me. Instantly he stepped off the walk into the gutter, pulling her elbow. She went right with him, the same motion. This way of talking about it doesn't communicate the fact. It splits the act up as though there were stages or a moment of human response or recognition — the black man turns, sees us, moves himself and his wife and baby from our path. They didn't look up. I felt locked into moving past them. I wanted to say something. I meant to say, Well, look, you know, I'm from out of town, it's your section. You shouldn't — you shouldn't move like that. They were just there, waiting for me to go by. It came out from the man, a strong projecting abasing current, that they had an inward sense of themselves as trespassers, as guilty, dangerously guilty because a white man parked his car close to them, a strange white advancing past them toward — really past them? — toward their beer parlor door. Or did I want their place at the window watching a Carol Burnett summer repeat? No turf on this earth was theirs, they were automatically cowed. They had no right to stand or to look. They couldn't even

inquire — in the honored way people inquire mockingly about strangers. "Who's that? I wonder who that is?" Not for them to know. This elementary primitive freedom — it wasn't there. The child in the mother's arms — would he or she feel the quick movement, the guilty instinctive fearful motion of retreat?

I'm sorry to make heavy weather of this moment. I was to see much that was worse, as we say. And I know, as all of you know, that it is a long way from this experience to that of dealing with a furious Amsterdam Avenue Black Panther. But the point is that this kind of Mississippi experience needs to be held in mind while the Panthers are held in mind. The beat of the situation between races in America requires pity as well as fear — above all a *feeling* for the whole. Leadership cannot merely talk Order, it must *feel* injustice, need, debasement. Moments like the one I cite give back to me a powerful image of injustice unrecompensed, of unacknowledged obligations. You need not be a Black Muslim to ask: who speaks for the suffering of the dead? I believe it is the function of leadership at the present time to try to take men into such moments where unperceived obligations are freshly perceived, to open its own feelings to direct view, not in an orgy of sentimentality, but for the purpose of acknowledging the actuality of deprivation, for the purpose of showing forth the truth that it is not unmanly to be touched by suffering or by hysterical injustice freshly seen in immediate experience.

Here then are four vectors of a leadership-approach for themes or standards by which to judge public actions, public education, public persuasion, four principles that leadership should check its deeds against. Let me spell them out briefly again:

First: Leadership must ask itself whether it is finding the particulars, the key details of feeling, the key genetical facts, that shape the views of the parties in conflict in this society. It must ask whether it is showing those details of feeling to the whole society so that all can know why their opponents feel and believe as they do. *Leadership must ask itself whether it is teaching us how to see with other men's eyes.*

Second: Leadership must ask itself whether its words and actions are creating a new style of political discourse, creating a new habit of thought — that of relishing the complicated model and scorning the simplistic model, in all areas of life wherein the subject is Change. It must ask whether it is showing men how the parts of each social problem are related; whether it is preparing us all to think more flexibly and inclusively about personal goals than men have thought in the past. *Leadership must introduce to a mass public the Idea of Complexity — an idea with which most men on earth are, at this moment, for perfectly comprehensible reasons, nervous or uncomfortable.*

Third: Leadership must work to create institutions — new social instruments at the community level — within which groups hitherto

separated from each other can talk and argue together, and work together, to define and pursue interests beneficial to the whole.

Fourth: Leadership must recover its capacity to move men to care for the suffering in their midst, and to remember the provocations of their "enemies" even at the moment when their own sense of self-righteousness and virtue is most deeply roused.

Suppose leadership followed these prescriptions. Suppose it sought to move men's hearts and to create situations where once-isolated groups can encounter and argue with each other. Suppose in addition that it undertook to clarify the genesis of human difference, contemporary human conflict. Suppose, furthermore, that it attempted to instruct men in knotty matters such as change itself — the inherent risks, the existing means, victories and defeats won in the past.

Suppose all this is done: would there be no limits to the success of such an approach? All ideas have limits. There are men, as Jean-Paul Sartre says, "who are attracted by the durability of stone. They want to be massive and impenetrable . . . They want to exist all at once and right away . . . They close up, they point out with one superb word that the time to argue has passed."

But the existence of such men, and the possibility that they may prevail, don't seem to me adequate reasons for leadership to evade its responsibilities. Ladies and gentlemen, the job I'm speaking of is, admittedly, not mini-sized. We are talking about the creation of means of opening up — in thoughtful, considered ways — closed systems of business, government, universities, philanthropies that aren't eager to be opened. We are talking about new raids on the superb energies of democratization that have been and continue to be this nation's greatest national natural resource. We are imagining a nation in which "the whole consort" dances together, hears each other's sounds and meanings, learns how to argue while giving houseroom to the next man's aspiration, and while remembering the next man's frustrations as well as its own. We are *imagining*, I say—but imagining isn't enough: there is work to be done, and by the leaders in this room. We can't trust nebulous cultural forces of the kind invoked by a Charles Reich to do this job for us. "The longer I live," said Péguy, "the less I believe in the efficiency of an extraordinary sudden social revolution, improvised, marvelous, with or without guns and impersonal dictatorship, and the more I believe in the efficiency of modest, slow, molecular, definitive, social work." The basis of such work is full clarity and sympathy with the needs and aspirations of men not ourselves, and sharp understanding of the inter-connectedness of social parts. We have it in us to carry this work forward — not to completion, but alive to the takeover generations. Let us get to it, all of us, now.

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