

An intergenerational dialogue for the common good to inspire a creative leadership – a Sikh perspective

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In our current times of immense change and challenge, we have a great need for creative leadership which encompasses a selfless concern for the common good. Dialogue across the generations brings light to the timeless characteristics of good leadership by sharing stories and perspectives from a life that is lived rather than simply theorised. The natural occurrence of such dialogue has diminished to a great extent and to revive it requires strategies. Its starting points are the qualities of mutual respect and genuine regard for the dignity of both young and old. Through my own evolution, as a faith practitioner and leader of a community-based organisation, I have found the teachings of faith to be a touchstone for the most valuable learning from intergenerational dialogue, for it digs deep into our shared human frailty and our remarkable human potential, and points to the broader, overarching contexts of our existence. As I will explore in this paper, faith illuminates in many ways what matters most in our human conversations from one stage of a life to another, shaping the spirit in which we move forward, as experiences, scenarios and people of the past give way to the new.

This continuity is echoed for me in a fond childhood memory. Although born in Africa, I spent a short spell as a child in India. One day, as we sat together up on a rooftop, my grandmother asked me to think hard and choose an answer to her question. Between the blazing sun and the little oil lamp or *deeva*, who did I think would get top marks for achievement? After a lively and reflective conversation, she helped me to conclude that it was in fact the humble oil lamp. Unlike the giant sun, beaming away in its own glory, only the lamp, with its little flame, was able to light another lamp. In a warm and humorous way, she taught me that what counts is not the status we gain but the difference we make. The learning from this small event has never left me.

The calling to make a difference, to imagine and build a better world, is embedded in the Punjabi word 'dharam' which may loosely translated into 'religion' or 'faith'. Dharam encapsulates a sense of sacred responsibility of going beyond oneself to serve creation, born out of love for the Creator. Hence, in Sikh tradition, great emphasis is given to nurturing value-centred leadership to govern both the self and society. The importance given to this is expressed through practices such as the wearing of the *dastar* or turban, and use of the names 'Singh' and 'Kaur', which evoke the dignity, sovereignty and capacity for wise leadership in every human, irrespective of gender, age or social status. The purpose of leadership, as my grandmother reminded me, lies not in its status or power for its own sake, but its ability to positively enlighten and empower the self and others.

The nurture of such leadership begins in the mind, which has the dual capacity of being one's best friend and worst enemy. Its negative impulses, such as greed, vengeance, arrogance and self-gratification, are part and parcel of human nature, driven by the selfish ego, or what we call 'haumai'. They are to be recognised and brought under our control, rather than being left to control us at their own whim. Faith urges and guides

us to magnify our latent virtues, which are glimmers of the divine presence within us. By doing so we come to live 'in God's image' and make the inner and outer worlds we inhabit a better place.

When I look back on my own experience, there are a number of qualities essential to faith-inspired leadership that I would single out. Firstly, the need to be wise, but humble with it. This is what we pray for each day – 'man neeva, mat uchee' – excel in your thinking, but have zero arrogance. In a society which emphasises zero tolerance, this would be a good motto to embrace as well. Maintaining respect is paramount, both for one's own dignity and the dignity of others. Learning to listen, obey and serve, before starting to direct others, is vital. One must try to lead by example and, through delegation, one must believe in the human capacity to do good, whilst understanding the workings of human nature. One must make good, fast and informed decisions as a leader, but to err is also human. The power of apology should come naturally.

To share such insights is of itself an act of intergenerational dialogue. I am passing on the inspiration I have drawn from sources which, for me in my lifetime, have been repositories of knowledge and understanding across the generations. This includes the teachings of our sacred text which, as Sikhs, we revere as 'living Guru'. Gurbani, the name we give to its teachings, consists of a kind of dialogue between enlightened souls across the generations, across faiths, cultures and social divides, spanning the eleventh and seventeenth centuries in northern India. Its verses analyse and uplift our human condition by creating a dialogue within the mind, with diverse others and with God. Indeed, we are told 'Kichh sunniyay, kichh kehiaay...'; let us engage in listening and in speaking during our stay in this world, to make our time here fruitful. We are also reminded that our efforts at human- to-human dialogue must involve a triologue – of acknowledging and 'listening' to the presence of the divine. It is also significant, I feel, that the verses of Gurbani are musical, to recited and sung rather than silently read. This reminds me that any dialogue has to be personable, to move the heart as well as the intellect to bring about inward and outward change.

Also emphasised in Sikh tradition is the importance of 'sangat', our association with others. It gives value to social learning, particularly through the company of those who have overcome the selfish ego and embody spiritual attributes such as love, integrity, compassion, courage and forgiveness. More than dialogue, this association enables us to see values modelled in action and embodied in practice. 'Sangat' can be seen as a community of learners, mentors and role models. The word 'Sikh' itself means learner, where we are all expected to take part in the teaching and learning process. There is great potential in the tradition of keeping sangat to enable and sustain intergenerational dialogue. In this regard, one scene from my travels in Jerusalem remains vivid in my mind, of witnessing the Shabbat tradition of children learning with elders. It threw into relief the importance of relationship in education over and above the bricks and mortar of any institution.

From my own life, I can identify role models of value-centred leadership who have been of profound inspiration to me. Some may be historical figures, such as the ten consecutive Gurus who founded the Sikh faith between 1469 and 1708, and the founding personalities of other faiths who had the benevolent and transformative power

to bring the best rather than the worst out of people. Others are my mentors and predecessors in the organisation which I now serve. From further afield are leaders who have left an indelible mark on humanity in recent times, such as Nelson Mandela, whose name is inseparable from forgiveness and reconciliation. Across the ages, they stand as beacons of timeless qualities that noble leadership requires. Alongside them are many unsung and lesser known leaders, the women and men who have earned respect in our families, community and neighbourhood networks. Hence the importance of creating practical opportunities for dialogue and cooperation across the generations.

Gazing forward now, a new generation of leaders will be the inheritors of unprecedented social change. Through technology, media, trade and consumer markets, we are interconnected as never before. Local issues have global repercussions, and global problems impact directly and indirectly on us all. Religion itself, or more precisely, its misinterpretation and misuse, seems to have exacerbated mutual hostility and conflict rather than build understanding, respect and trust. The operation of greed, hypocrisy and deceit by those in positions of power has been made apparent and there is fresh hope to invigorate social and institutional life with values, to go beyond rhetoric and strategise to put values into practice.

We have a golden opportunity before us to nurture a new consciousness, by recognising and strengthening the best of human character which children so often project. Indeed, the founder Gurus of the Sikh dharam included a child Guru and young adults as well as elders, reminding us that wisdom, as I often say, is not a slave of age. We must ask how best to strengthen this in children and help them navigate through the frailties of human nature. The pathway to good leadership lies in good education in its broadest sense. It begins in the environments of the womb, the family home, a child's immediate and early social networks, as well schools, communities and neighbourhoods and the powerful worlds of media and marketing.

We must give greater thought to the value cultures pervading local and global life, asking how we might move from a culture of greed to that of contentment and benevolence, from hostility to respect and trust, despondency to optimism and passivity to positive participation. Beyond talk of celebrating or tolerating different cultures, there is a need to build intercultural and inter-religious literacy, to better recognise commonalities and also respect the dignity of difference. The impulse to do so is shaped by our mindset, which in turn is influenced by the unspoken values of the social environments we move in and out of. To a great degree, human beings are products of their life-long exposure. Create the right exposure and you will have leaders in the making. And leadership in service of the common good depends more so on the 'value transfer' than just the 'knowledge transfer' that intergenerational dialogue can bring about. And woven also, intangibly into this transfer, are the blessings of the old to the young, and the infusion of fresh hope from young to the old.

We may appreciate the idea of intergenerational dialogue, but to fully embrace and practice it, there must be an underlying spirit of solidarity, cooperation and unity. In the broadest sense it comes from feeling that we are part of a shared human story, from being conscious of our own mortality and the hope to leave a legacy of service to

others. These impulses are the driving force of dharam, practiced out of a sense of gratitude, responsibility and love for the Creator. By broadening our horizons into a vast and infinite context, the life of faith and faith communities deserves our closer attention as we look to nurture future leaders capable of serving the common good.