
Leadership Concepts in Poetry (And Some Prose)

W. Michael Reid, PhD, MBA

ABSTRACT

The director of a public health leadership institute often spoke during the workshops and other meetings of the institute participants. He illustrated many leadership concepts in his remarks with verses from poems and selections of prose. Many of the participants in the institute found the passages illuminating or helpful in remembering the leadership content. After his retirement, the former director created a draft based on his presentations. This is an expanded version of that paper. It supplements the original pieces and contains discussions of the importance of the ideas in the selections. A number of the concepts are qualified with considerations for moderating the exercise of the concept. Among the topics included are: principles, courage and fear, decisions, perseverance, joy and spirit, humility and humor, meaning, the legacy, trust, and gratitude.

Florida Public Health Review, 2014; 11, 16-24.

BACKGROUND

I prepared the first version of this paper on the occasion of the last meeting of a public health leadership institute that I had directed since its creation. The institute had been created in part through a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). CDC had initiated funding for state level institutes in response to a seminal call for greater leadership training for public health workers (Institute of Medicine, 1988). Although the institute no longer exists, leadership training is still viewed as an important national priority for public health (Rowitz, 2009). This paper may be helpful to the development of public health leaders.

The leadership institute had graduated about 400 public health officials in its 15 years of operation. Occasionally, during the 100 or so meetings of the institute scholars, I used a number of snatches of poetry or prose in my remarks. I also had been struck by how closely my thoughts and the discussions reflected other passages in poetry (and prose) with which I was familiar. The scholars in the institute often said that the poetry or prose was illuminating and provided a mnemonic for the points I made. I decided to gather my notes and use them as the basis of a brief paper containing my views on leadership. I did write the paper and distributed it to the graduates of the program in 2010. The majority of the graduates were employees of a major state agency and so their work lives were conducted within a bureaucratic structure that often thwarted their efforts to practice stronger

leadership. Many of those quotes that I used were chosen for their aptness to those bureaucracies, but, I believe they are generally fitting for other organizations (including universities and their faculty).

Since that time, I have run across a remarkable book, David Whyte's *The Heart Aroused* (1996) that used poetry as one means for encouraging and comforting the souls of those who work in corporations. I found several of the fragments that he chose to fit nicely into my general approach and so have borrowed them as I revised the original paper. I should add the obvious: In no way does my brief paper approach Mr. Whyte's book for thoughtfulness, grace, or wisdom. I do hope my selections of verse (and a little prose) illuminate some aspects of leadership that will be of interest to the student of leadership and to practitioners who may find the passages memorable or suggestive for their work. The choices in some cases have been removed from the context of the larger poems from which they are taken. However, I believe the view in them is applicable to the point I am making. I also included a few prose selections from my earlier paper that I believe support my ideas.

One of Mr. Whyte's choices seemed to be a fitting way of beginning my discussion. William Carlos Williams wrote (as quoted in Whyte, 1996, p. 18):

My heart rouses thinking to bring
you news of something that
concerns you and concerns many
men.

Look at what passes for the new.
You will not find it there but in
despised poems.
It is difficult to get the news from
poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack of what is found there.

Poetry can nourish the soul and spirit of all of us. Leaders can find it valuable for understanding the characteristics and responsibilities of leadership. Those who look for “news” in most books on leadership theory and practice will find much advice, “best” practices, research findings, and analyses of successful leadership. However, they are written in a prose style that is professional and direct, but lacking in qualities that would rouse the spirit. One noteworthy exception to this is Bolman and Deal’s *Leading with Soul* (2001). We used to assign it in our leadership program and the scholars always found it a moving account of one man’s struggles to renew his soul in his work and life.

The Concepts

I have begun this paper with the claim that a leader’s principles must be the foundation of good and effective leadership. Subsequently, the larger part of the paper is often organized around a contrapuntal pairing of important leadership characteristics and their attendant dangers. Of course, the essay presupposes a level of competence on the part of the leaders in whatever fields they are leaders.

Principles

Events and circumstances often require the leader to choose between principle and expediency. The challenge for many of us is to ensure that, as attractive as the prospect of an immediate result may be, we do not forget the central importance of our principles in our lives. Expediency may lead to some successes, but at great cost if we allow what we believe to be prudence to dim our commitment to maintain our integrity. Principles can give meaning and strength to our work and our lives that expediency cannot. This line by Richard Lovelace (1952, p. 137) has long struck me as capturing this relationship: “I could not love thee, Dear, so much, / Loved I not honor more.”

Although part of a love poem explaining to a mistress why he must go to war instead of staying in her arms, the thought is broadly applicable to leadership. The higher sense of honor or principle can strengthen lesser principles or values which may be worthy in their own right but are incapable of providing general guidance. Principle should give order and strength to those subordinate principles or

passions. If the lesser principle or passion rules, will it be able to sustain itself and will it provide order to other activities? Plato (1968, pp. 254-258) provides an extended and illuminating discussion of the anarchical condition of the soul created by warring passions. An effective leader must bring order to those passions and place them in service to high principle. But, as noted below, the firmness of adherence to principle should be balanced with prudence.

Courage and Fear

Courage. An essential part of leadership is courage. Leaders believe in their principles and their application to the opportunities or responsibilities of leadership. However, belief is insufficient for leadership. The leader must act on the principles, understanding that defeat is always a possibility, but also that there can be no great successes without the courage to act in difficult circumstances. President Theodore Roosevelt (1910) captured this forcefully:

It is not the critic who counts: not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error or shortcoming, but who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself for a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat.

The danger for most of us who work in large organizations is that the prevailing culture will overcome our principles, courage, and competitiveness and turn us into those uninvolved souls that President Roosevelt describes. How many of us have seen (or been tempted to become) such people in our organizations? They are like the stones in the river of the bureaucracy, smaller, smooth with no rough edges, never resisting the flow, never moving far unless a major external force moves them. One imagines that at

one time many were oddly shaped with rough edges and a distinctive character. But, sadly, no more – they have become those timid souls.

Fear. Of course, adhering to principle at times may be difficult. How often have we been faced with circumstances where we are tempted to remain silent or temper our words and actions so that we are not placing ourselves in danger of some sort? Fear, or at least great uneasiness, will often have to be faced. Many of us have faltered as the hero in Whyte’s poem does (1996, p. 51):

One day the hero sits down,
afraid to take another step.

But, fear does not have to lead to paralysis. Indeed, leaders must acknowledge and overcome their fears. Leaders determine how to act despite the temptation to delay or avoid the opportunity for leadership. A passage by Peter Block (whom I consider the one of the wisest writers on leadership) captures a sense that we often have in organizations: “. . . if you stand up and tell people what’s really going on, you’ll be shot” (1991, p. 89). However, for a leader with a strong sense of integrity, he also writes that: “If I am going to get shot, the bullet probably left the gun some time ago and is already well on its way” (1991, p. 90). It is better to have a clear conscience than to have to dwell on regrets for actions based on fear.

This is not to diminish the importance of prudence – action balancing principle and circumstance. Effective leaders must determine if their causes at the moment are hopeless, that the better moment will come to argue from principle. If harmful consequences to a project or staff will come, then it may be better to “fight again another day.” As in all exercises of leadership, judgment must be used.

Decisions Must Be Made, Regrets Avoided

Decisiveness. An essential responsibility of a leader is to decide on many aspects of the organization (such things as priorities for work, hiring, budget allocations, culture to characterize the organization or unit, and staff assignments). Courage may be needed to undertake great things or to make great changes. The leader may ask, as Eliot did (1971b, pp. 4-5):

Do I dare disturb the universe?

And, leaders must often answer, as Prufrock seemed not to do: “Yes you must!”

Leaders can wait too long for the right time, for the right circumstances, for the right information, for the right resources before disturbing their universes. One

can say, along with Larkin (2005, p. 151):

Always too eager for the future,
we pick up bad habits of
expectancy
Something is always approaching
every day.
'Til then, we say.

So, the leader can decide not to decide until a more propitious time, saying “til then.” However, procrastination cannot be endless. An effective leader will make decisions and not allow events to fully dictate the choices that are made or not made.

Do not regret. Once the decision has been made, there is a risk of eventually thinking of Whittier’s (1952, p. 349) lines:

For of all sad words of tongue or
pen,
the saddest are these: "It might
have been!"

Better to embrace the decision that is made and implement it with one’s strongest efforts. Second guessing should be done by others, not by the leader. The leader, instead, should be glad of the choice, even if less attractive in some ways, and not regret the alternatives that could have been. Frost (1969a, p. 105) understood this:

Two roads diverged in a yellow
wood,
and sorry I could not travel both.
And be one traveler, long I stood,
and looked down one as far as I
could.
To where it bent in the
undergrowth;
.....
I took the one less traveled by; and
that has made all the difference.

The more popular path may have led to less productive results. One can never know. However, leaders will be mindful of the consequences of their choices and consider whether improvements should be made in the methods that they used to choose.

Perseverance, But Not Too Much

Perseverance. Leaders must believe that their choices or actions are the best possible in a situation and courageously pursue the chosen path, even if for some reason less traveled. The actions may play out

over months or years for large undertakings. The path can be opposed by members of the leader's organization or important constituencies. The path will likely be through unwelcome contingencies or unforeseen circumstances. It may even prove to be a poorly chosen path. The leader at such times will understand that however constraining in external respects, however despairing of achieving success, one's soul does not have to be crushed. William Ernest Henley (1952, pp. 475-476) proclaimed:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.
.....
It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the
scroll.
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

Henley suffered a terrible, almost life-long illness, but the idea extends beyond such suffering. Whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, we must remember that we have some responsibility and control with respect to our words and actions and certainly with respect to our souls – thus, the strength to have courage to face those circumstances.

It is well to recall that even failed efforts can have their rewards. I always believed when I played athletics that I would rather struggle against a superior opponent than defeat a weaker one. Similarly, in my work, I often sought out advanced positions and undertook challenges with distinctly long odds. I did this in areas in which I was interested; I regret that I lacked sufficient patience for those areas of my work that were not challenging or interesting. Some of my riskier ventures were unsuccessful, but they always provided understanding and experiences I would not have gotten otherwise. Rainer Maria Rilke (as quoted in Whyte, 1996, p. 71) claimed that:

Winning does not tempt that man.
This is how he grows:
by being defeated, decisively, by
constant greater beings.

Of course, failing does not necessarily raise the spirit, even if superior forces are in play. However, it may well be that in the light of time that what was then a failure produced ideas or opportunities that we only appreciate later. Have we not had illuminations similar to those (as quoted in Whyte, 1996, p. 207) described

by Antonio Machado?

Last night, as I was sleeping
I dreamt – marvelous error! – that I
had a beehive here inside my heart.
And the golden bees were making
white combs and sweet honey
from my old failures.

Although there is a risk of retrospective rationalization, it seems as we look back on our efforts that sometimes what we unsuccessfully tried eventually came to pass in other hands or in other times. Our failures perhaps prepared the way for successes.

But not too much perseverance. One of the temptations of a leader is to hold on to the position and power of leadership when it is past time for the leader to be effective in the organization. It is difficult for many of us to recognize that we have done what we could do and it is time to pass the responsibility to another person. Even if we do not recognize it, others will and eventually that will be made known to us in one way or another. Housman (1966, p. 63) knew of the transitory nature of fame and even recognition:

Now you will not swell the rout
Of lads that wore their honours out,
Runners whom renown outran
And the name died before the man.

One does not have to be a dead athlete to retire or change to another path before reaching a point of stasis or decline. The wise leader will be aware of how far they have come, whether they have further to go, or whether it is time to relinquish leadership to someone else and embark on a new path. Better to leave a respected leader than one who has overstayed one's time. It may seem like a death to many leaders to realize that their better days are passed or that their value to their organization has diminished, but to continue despite that realization is, in my view, worse. The wise leader will accept their organizational death as Justice (2005, p. 146) did with his mother: "But the years are gone, the years are finally over."

Joy and Spirit, But the Path May Be Rough

Joy and spirit. The bureaucratic life promotes passivity and threatens to lead us to concentrate on hierarchical safety and "measurable outcomes" to the exclusion of larger goods of the spirit and greater capacity to help the organization. The leader in a bureaucracy will ask important questions regarding those who are being led and those who are being

served by the bureaucracy. Auden (1991b, p. 253) believes that these questions aren't likely to be asked:

Was he free? Was he happy?
The question is absurd:
Had anything been wrong,
we should certainly have heard.

Leaders should be concerned that those they lead have chances to exercise freedom, to be able to make extraordinary contributions to their common enterprise. The leader will also be attuned to how the employee is feeling about the work – is it satisfying, is the employee glad to be part of the effort? The impulse to joy and nourishment of the spirit is strong, as Whyte (1996, p. 91) claims in his poem “Out on the Ocean”:

Always this energy smolders inside
when it remains unlit
the body fills with dense smoke.

The wise leader will recognize this and encourage the spirit when possible, so that the “smoke” of the employee (and leader) can turn into blazing energy. The leader must be ready to defy the dead weight of bureaucratic expectations. Even in dark times the leader will appeal to principle for release of energy and rally employees by encouraging joy. Auden's (1991a, p. 248) exhortation applies to leaders as well as poets:

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice.

The rough path. Although spirit and joy must have an important place in leadership, they must be tempered by awareness that many efforts will require strenuous work for their successful completion. Wise leaders will not mislead their workers by neglecting to forewarn them of the challenges. Rather, whether questioned or not, they will be clear about this. Cristina Rossetti's (1979, pp. 65-66) questions and her responses suggest this:

DOES the road wind up-hill all the
way?
Yes, to the very end.
Will the day's journey take the
whole long day?
From morn to night, my friend.

The honesty beforehand will mean the difficulties will be anticipated and the possibility of sustaining the

joy and spirit increased during difficult times.

It may be that the leader is aware of threats to the organization or project that can or will come to pass. It may also be that these threats are subtle and will require careful responses if success is to be attained. In such situations, it may be desirable for the leader to communicate the threats in a way that doesn't alarm or dispirit the employees. The leader may then, as Emily Dickinson (1961, pp. 248-249) wrote:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant,
Success in Circuit lies,
Too bright for our infirm Delight.

Humility and Humor, But Yet Serious

Humility and humor. In light of the strength of our principles and our courage and our confidence that we are right, it is important to remember that it is an imperfect world and we are imperfect creatures in that world. The leader, however, must remember that even the best intentions, the best plans, the best efforts will inevitably be affected by those imperfections. Events or people or our flawed understanding may prevent our plans and intentions from being realized. Eliot (1971a, p. 58) warned, among his many cautions, that

Between the idea and the reality,
Between the motion and the act,
Falls the Shadow.

We do our best, understanding that the shadow to some degree will always fall between our wishes and our accomplishments. Thus, the wise leader will not become overbearing and arrogant, but maintain a measure of humility. Leaders can believe passionately in their causes, but remaining somewhat modest and using humor has been shown to be valued among leaders and led alike. It requires a confident person to say, as Air Vice-Marshal Arthur David Button did: “I therefore come before you armed with the delusions of adequacy with which so many of us equip ourselves.”

Several studies have confirmed that more effective leaders have a sense of humor and bring that humor to their work (in comparison to those who are less effective). A little humor, including self-deprecating humor, is often good for easing tense times at work or for establishing a collegial atmosphere. Of course, the humor should be “good” in the sense of real humor. The leader must not use the cutting, sarcastic, and possibly hurting humor that we've sometimes witnessed (or experienced or, I fear, delivered).

But serious yet. However, the humor should not blind us to the responsibilities we have to ourselves and to those we lead. Leaders can fall into a practice of

relaxation of discipline and focus to the point of losing sight of the path or goals of the organization. Trying to create an overly friendly atmosphere or lowering themselves through excessive self-deprecation will lead to ineffective measures on their part and those of their employees. Pleasant times and perhaps soon frivolity to the detriment of the leaders' plans and project goals. Good friends may do as Lear suggested (1991, p. 12), but leaders must be cautious about friendship with their employees.

And hand in hand, on the edge of
the sand.
They danced by the light of the
moon, the moon, the moon,
They danced by the light of the
moon.

It will be important to consider the employees' taste in humor, too. My preference is for the humor not to be "corny" or so obvious that the listeners find it banal, lest they lose some respect for you, which seems to have happened in this moment from Lewis Carroll (1982, p. 740):

The Bellman perceived that their
spirits were low,
And repeated in musical tone
Some jokes he had kept for a
season of woe--
But the crew would do nothing but
groan.

Part of the leader's judgment will be to find a suitable balance between humor and seriousness.

Meaning

As noted earlier, one of the features, indeed goals, of bureaucratic organizations is the near overpowering force toward uniformity, consistency, and predictability. Those of us who have worked in such organizations know that they are often very good at providing security and a certain level of comfort – meeting these desires of the employees. However, leaders should never take these as sufficient ends for their work. One of the ways to bring joy to work, to engage the spirit, is to provide goals that the leader loves and work that those being led can come to love. Love without focus and need without love will not provide effective leadership. Frost (1969b, p. 277) saw this necessary union:

My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one sight,

Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal
stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sake.

An important aspect of seeking and finding meaning is freeing our minds and spirits to broaden our perspectives or to consider competing views. There is a tendency within many of us, and certainly encouraged by bureaucratic demands, to become too comfortable with our ways of looking at the world. Consideration and sometimes adoption of other ways of understanding can broaden our skills and make us better leaders. As William Blake wrote (as quoted in Whyte, 1996, p. 131):

If the doors of perception were
cleansed everything would
appear to man as it is, infinite.
For man has closed himself up, 'til
he sees all things thro'
narrow chinks of his cavern.

Leader should encourage employees to enlarge their perspectives and to share those with the leaders and each other as part of the freeing concept mentioned earlier. Even if the leaders are finally unpersuaded by alternative approaches, they will still be better for widening the views from their cavern and encouraging the employees to broaden theirs.

A related aspect of finding meaning is illustrated in *The Odyssey* (Homer, 1996, p. 100). Mentor was

Odysseus' friend-in-arms to whom
the king, sailing off to Troy,
committed his household, ordering
one and all to obey the old man and
he would keep things steadfast and
secure.

Mentor was entrusted with many things, including guiding Odysseus' son. At several points in the narrative, however, Athena assumes the form and voice of Mentor and provides wise direction at those critical moments.

Leaders (and leaders to be) are often advised to find accomplished people in their fields to serve as mentors for their careers. I think the wise leader will look for mentoring more widely, observing and thinking about the practices of other leaders, colleagues, and employees, and gaining insights from biographies of leaders. Wisdom can appear in surprising places, so the leader should be alert to the possibilities that there are

many people who can provide understanding and guidance for addressing challenges successfully. Mentors and mentoring moments are all around us, if we but look for them.

The Legacy

Even when leaders recognize that change is in order, they may have unreasonable expectations about the strength of their legacies or the endurance of their creations. The sad truth is that remembrance of great things (at least great in the minds of the departing leaders) is often fleeting and that the organizations that they built change, sometimes in directions the leaders wouldn't have approved. Shelley's (1962, p. 418) picture of an enormous statue that lies broken in the sand might be the equivalent of the leader's institution or policy.

And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

We may think that the monument, whatever its nature, will last as will our influence and reputation. However, we and our achievements are likely to resemble Ozymandias more than Moses. But that is no cause for despair, but rather we should accept the change as part of the natural and organizational orders.

I believe our best legacy will be the ways we comforted ourselves and the influence we had on those with whom we worked and lived.

Trust and Gratitude

Trust. One of the greatest blessings of my work life has been finding deputies who shared my interests, who were extremely able, who served as partners in building or guiding our organization, and whom I trusted completely. How much better I was at my work when I was not alone in leadership. Of course, trust should permeate the organization and, as noted above, ideas from employees should be encouraged, but for me, having one person to share the leadership was of profound importance. As Chesterton (2001, pp. 86-87) wrote:

" . . . there are no words to express the abyss between isolation and having one ally. It may be conceded to the mathematicians that four is twice two. But two is not twice one; two is two thousand times one."

My deputy and later co-director of the leadership institute (and of several centers that I directed) provided at least as much leadership to those efforts as I did. We worked as partners, sharing the strategy development, planning, organizing, and delivery of all our programs. When I think of that partnership, I recall Yeats' (1989b, p. 150) line: "She is foremost of those that I would hear praised." I tried to praise her (and the staff that supported us), but fear it was not as consistent and thoughtful as it might have been.

Of course, it is important for the led to have great trust in the leader. As noted earlier, leaders should have strong principles which characterize their leadership. We often remember Polonius' advice to Laertes: "This above all, to thine own self be true," but we sometimes fail to recall the rest of that passage: "And it must follow the night as the day/That thou canst not be false to any man" (Shakespeare, 1992, pp. 16-17). Acting consistently with integrity produces trust.

Gratitude. A long recognized failure of American managers (and perhaps most managers everywhere) is their reluctance to give praise and recognition for the work of their employees. This is true in bureaucracies and it was certainly true for me. Leaders' success is heavily dependent on those that they lead – those whose need and love and spirits have been joined to support the directions chosen by the leader. Being grateful is insufficient; that gratitude must be expressed.

A better leader would have shown that gratitude more clearly than I. Of course, the other side of this aspect of leadership is clear expression of areas where improvements might be made. A duty of a good leader is to develop the skills of their employees and this is often accomplished by improving criticisms. Alas, here, too, I was reluctant to provide the corrective advice or direction that on occasion was appropriate. Praise alone isn't sufficient for good leadership.

Life and Gratitude beyond Work

In my conception of leadership, the important work of the leader must be balanced by life outside of the organization. There, too, love and need must be joined. In my life, I have been blessed by a wonderful family. They provided solace in the dark times, humor as

needed, love at all times, a refuge from a work life that could have been all consuming, and a powerful corrective when my work seemed all important. So, to those who support them, leaders should often and vehemently give their gratitude. Yeats (1989a, p. 124) recognized this:

Now must I these three praise --
Three women that have wrought
What joy is in my days.

These three women are my wife, my daughter, and her daughter (and now further joy in a grandson). Where would I be without these three? It does not bear thinking about. I know there are those in any leader's life that are worthy of such gratitude and praise, too.

A Higher Power

In keeping with many of the earlier comments, I believe that leaders are wiser and stronger (and better able to confront the challenges and temptations of leadership) if they acknowledge and have faith in a higher power. Trying to live an honorable life based on principle was strengthened by my belief in God and the precepts of my religion. The Psalmist wrote in Psalm 31:3 (*The Holy Bible*, n.d., p. 616): "For thou art my rock and my fortress; therefore for thy name's sake lead me, and guide me." Such faith reminds me that there are higher standards than those, such as favoritism or popularity, that may seem powerful or persuasive in the moment. Kipling (1950, p. 575) asked:

Teach us to look in all our ends
On Thee for judge, and not our
friends;
That we, with Thee, may walk
uncowed
By fear or favor of the crowd.

Those without religious convictions must find their principles and actions on other grounds of course. Wherever one places their faith, the beliefs should be seasoned with humility and never become the basis of an arrogant sense of superiority and a self-righteous approach to leadership.

Memory

And finally, I asked on my retirement, what remains of the leadership institute and the centers of which I was so fortunate to be a part? They no longer exist or have taken on new forms. As I reflected on my work, I found this passage from Yeats (1989c, p. 46) to reflect my feelings:

And yet the beauties that I loved
Are in my memory;
I spit into the face of Time
That has transfigured me.

I believe it is the memories of all the beautiful times I've had, the wonderful people that I met over those years, and the friendships that keep alive those memories (perhaps at times embellished). And so, this old pensioner, however changed I have been, does indeed spit in the face of time. Its transfiguration has improved, not harmed, my life. Wise are the leaders who can, in looking back, think not so much of their glory or accomplishments but rather to the effects they had on those with whom they worked or lived.

Were they free? Were they happy?

If so, then I am content.

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W. Michael Reid (mreid@health.usf.edu) is an Emeritus Associate Professor, Department of Environmental and Occupational Health, University of South Florida College of Public Health, and retired Founding Director of the Public Health Leadership Institute of Florida, Tampa FL. Copyright 2014 by the *Florida Public Health Review*.