

Ethics and Leadership

Lenten Reflection

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Standing on the waters casting your bread

While the eyes of the idol with the iron head are glowing.

Bob Dylan, "Jokerman"

It has been an eventful two months. I replaced the engine in my car. That's how I celebrated New Year's Eve. Christmas was terrific. I hope yours was, too. January was snow-free. Who could ask for more?

The cheating New England Patriots finally lost to a monster defense (offense wins games; defense wins championships), and as of this writing Roger the Rocket may be in some very hot water.

Now we are in a forty-day period of reflection. The last period of winter's barren death before the new life of spring, and perhaps time for a thought on how we treat each other.

Well, the rifleman's stalking the sick and the lame,

Preacherman seeks the same, who'll get there first is uncertain.

With the Center for Ethics and Leadership, my thoughts turn frequently to the corporate world and now and again to a book I read a few years ago that still troubles me. I have known about childhood bullies, schoolyard bullies, "mean girls," you name it. But

workplace bullying, adult to adult, that was something new. There it was, however, an entire book devoted to a phenomenon researchers have dubbed “mobbing.” For the citation-minded: Noa Davenport, Ruth Distler Schwartz, and Gail Pursell Elliott, *Mobbing: Emotional Abuse in the American Workplace* (Ames, IA: Civil Society Publishing, 1999).

The phenomenon was first named about 25 years ago by a European industrial psychologist, Heinz Leymann, who defined it as “psychological terror” that used “hostile and unethical communication directed in a systematic way by one or a few individuals mainly towards one individual.” It starts with a conflict and escalates. The mobber gathers allies; sometimes management is complicit, sometimes actively mobbing also. The victim, like many abuse victims, gradually diminishes until he or she leaves the corporation or worse, suffers severe physical problems. By this point it is the victim who is labeled as unprofessional, difficult, or if actually impaired, unable to continue in the job.

False-hearted judges dying in the webs that they spin,

Only a matter of time 'til night comes steppin' in.

Mobbing suggests remedies for workplace bullying and holds out Levi Strauss and Co. as a model proactive approach. The clothing manufacturer stresses teamwork and trust, diversity, recognition, ethical management practices, communication, and empowerment as the foundation of its workplace culture, and the interview with its personnel policy planner published in the book shows that they have been successful.

It was with some disappointment that I read that mobbing is more prevalent in small non-profits, education, and healthcare than in larger corporations, perhaps because

of poorer management training. Yet, today, as if to tell me that I ought to believe what I read, I received an e-mail from Jossey –Bass publishers announcing a new book on mobbing in academe: *Faculty Incivility: The Rise of the Academic Bully Culture and What to Do About It* by Darla J. Twale and Barbara M. De Luca. The new book leans heavily on *Mobbing* for its theory; I have read only the promotional material and the first chapter, which was made available as a PDF. The book will be as hard on administration as it will be on faculty, and as critical of faculty as of administration.

It's a shadowy world, skies are slippery gray,

Ethically, workplace bullying usurps genuine leadership. Human beings are both creative and industrious. Not only do they take pride in their work, they achieve a sense of dignity in doing a job well. To tear at this sense of dignity for power's own sake is wrong. Academically, both books say that not much research has been done; there is room for a good deal more. Faculty and students in appropriate disciplines, take note.

Jokerman dance to the nightingale tune,

Bird fly high by the light of the moon,

Oh, oh, oh, Jokerman.

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