



The Center for _____
SOCIAL LEADERSHIP

The Uncomfortable Mirror

Overcoming Self-Deception Through the Study of History

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About The Center for Social Leadership

The Center for Social Leadership (CSL) is a think tank and action organization dedicated to building [social leaders](#) for the 21st Century.

Humanity is experiencing dramatic changes. Traditional leadership is broken. Conventional human organization based on hierarchies and formal authority is outdated. Technology has transformed the way we interact and enhanced our ability to have impact—for good or ill. The Center for Social Leadership was formed to steer these changes to improve the health of society, preserve freedom, and ensure peace and prosperity for humanity. A new vision of leadership is needed. Not the old, hierarchical, positional, authoritative, privileged-elite leadership, but a new democratic, action-determined, service-oriented leadership. Through this social leadership mankind can achieve unprecedented happiness and fulfillment.

Learn more and engage with CSL by [reading our e-book](#) and joining our mailing list at www.TheSocialLeader.com.

“It’s not about someone doing everything. It’s about everyone doing something.”



I am Rome, and Rome is me. I am Greece, and Greece is me. I have in me the best of humanity, and the worst of humanity, as we all do.

I am [Aurelius](#) and [Caligula](#). I am Socrates; I am also and the mob that murdered Socrates without legitimate cause. I am a [Stoic](#) and an [Epicurean](#). I am the Enlightenment, and I am the Dark Ages.

I, like every human being, embody every aspect of human nature—for good or for evil—that has been displayed throughout history.

History is the study of human nature, the museum of human action that tells us less about the past than it tells us about ourselves.

[Santayana](#) once said, “Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” This is so, not because we make mistakes through forgetfulness, but because humans have a predictable, homogenous nature. Our actions may be different from one another but we all act for the same reasons.

In other words, it’s not entirely accurate to say that the purpose of studying history is to teach us about the past, in order that we might better navigate the future. More precisely, the purpose of studying history is to learn about ourselves as



individual human beings. As historian [David McCullough](#) stated, “History is who we are and why we are the way we are.”

The more conscious we are of ourselves and of our nature the more capable we are of guiding and controlling that nature. History reveals that humans have a dual nature, and the struggle between our conflicting natures is the story of humanity.

It’s a dangerous mistake to read accounts of depraved individuals and societies and to be so shocked and disgusted by human depravity that the shock blinds us to our own depravity. One of the most important lessons to be learned from studying humanity is that *every* individual has the simultaneous potential for nobility and depravity, for divinity and degeneracy.

With the ability to choose comes good and evil options to choose from, and history is the collective record of human choice, and the most potent instrument for introspection into our own choices, our own intentions, our own desires. The adolescent, naive student of history will read about the Roman dictator [Nero](#) and, oblivious to the evil inside of himself, place a myopic label on Nero in an unconscious effort to separate himself from Nero.

When the student thinks, “How could anyone do such horrible things?” what he is in actuality trying to believe is that he could never be capable of such blatant evil; his thoughts are more about what he wants to believe about himself than they are about Nero. Although few may admit it, our shock as we study Nero’s atrocities comes from a desperate need to deceive ourselves by denying that we could possibly have the same vicious tendencies, the same desire to find satisfaction through sadism and the desecration of all that is good and holy. In other words, our shock is more feigned

than real; no one is shocked by something that they understand and accept as reality.

Why study history then? Not simply because if we don't we are doomed to repeat it, but to gain insight into what things humans choose, why they choose them, and to learn how to identify the things that lead to virtue, freedom, and prosperity and those things that lead to perversion, despotism, and poverty.

In short, it is to cultivate our ability to discern good from evil, truth from error, and to increase our resolution to choose those things that are good, true, and right. It is to come face-to-face and soul-to-soul with ourselves and become cognizant of our own base desires. It is to eliminate the naivety and self-deception that comes from not wanting to believe the worst about ourselves, and then to begin a deliberate, intricate, and lifelong process to extirpate the evil within us and to develop our intrinsic divinity.

Technology: The Lie of Modern Civilization

One of the lies of modernity is that we are somehow better and more advanced than other societies because of technology. But technology does nothing to change human nature; it may give us a greater ability to develop the good or evil in us as we choose, but it does nothing to fundamentally change who we are and why we do what we do.



Television, radio, electricity, computers, the Internet, and cell phones and the scientific discoveries that created them give us unprecedented opportunities to bring more light, truth, and goodness into the world and to uplift humanity. Yet they also bring with them pornography on a mass scale as well as the ability to destroy the entire earth with weapons of mass destruction. Creation and destruction are concomitant phenomena because they are mere reflections of our dual nature.

We must never buy into the lie that we, with our cell phones and Internet, are more advanced and are better people than our ancestors. As historian and philosopher [Will Durant](#) wrote:

“We have not fully recovered from the Dark Ages: the insecurity that excites greed, the fear that fosters cruelty, the poverty that breeds filth and ignorance, the filth that generates disease, the ignorance that begets credulity, superstition, occultism — these still survive amongst us; and the dogmatism that festers into intolerance and inquisitions only awaits opportunity or permission to oppress, kill, ravage, and destroy. In this sense modernity is a cloak upon medievalism, which secretly remains; and in every generation civilization is the laborious product and precarious obligating privilege of an engulfed minority.”

I would argue that not only have we not fully recovered from the Dark Ages, but also we will never be “fully recovered” and rid humanity of insecurity, cruelty, greed, ignorance, and superstition. We must study history in order that we might never deceive ourselves into believing that technology gives us the luxury of relaxation from our duties to maintain freedom. As

the American Founders taught us, “Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom.”

Two Forms of Self-Deception

We must learn to view history as we view a mirror, with conscious awareness that as we look at people like Caligula, Nero, Stalin, and Hitler we are looking at ourselves.

Of course, this is also true of people like Joan of Arc, Cicero, Epictetus and George Washington; our lives and our potential are reflections of the best and the worst of humanity.

It is imperative that we recognize that self-deception is manifested by two opposite tendencies, although they are two sides of the same coin. The first form of self-deception is not believing that each of us has the potential for committing the most inhumane and evil atrocities: the “deception of immunity.”



But the second, and perhaps the more destructive because of its subtlety, way that we deceive ourselves is thinking that we are not capable of becoming a Washington or a Joan of Arc. This is the “deception of inferiority.”

The Deception of Immunity

The danger of this deception is two-fold. The first danger is that it leads to a relaxation of discipline in the minds of naive—although good-intentioned—individuals. The second danger is that it can lead to extreme hypocrisy and self-righteousness.

Exterminating immoral tendencies and desires and cultivating divinity is a full-time duty that requires discipline, vigilance and, above all, conscious awareness. No matter how enlightened and praiseworthy our backgrounds may be or how pure we may be, it is imperative that we recognize that every single one of us is just a few choices away from perversion and destruction.

We find a perfect example of this in David from the Bible, the prophet and king who gave into temptation and fell from glory. Although called of God and having led an exemplary life, David’s “Achilles heel” was perhaps the failure to recognize his own capacity for evil, and this failure led to a relaxation in his discipline.

Many good people are also callow and naive, and social leaders must never fall for this trap. A social leader’s simplicity must be matured through the depths of complexity, which complexity comes from studying and understanding human

nature, using history as the methodology.

The beauty of having access to history is that we don't have to allow the evil that is in us to erupt and emerge in order for us to understand it; we can study the mistakes of other men and women to gain insight into our own evil tendencies. We don't have to murder or to rape to see the killer and rapist inside of ourselves; we have plenty examples from the mirror of history to help us to see our evil natures in order to avoid evil choices.

People who deny their capability for destruction also tend to be self-righteous and hypocritical. Their condemnation of the evil in other people is usually pride and comparison-based, and meant more to highlight and glorify their own righteousness than it is to condemn the evil. They criticize others while failing to realize that the only criticisms we have of others are for things that we see and dislike in ourselves, whether consciously or subconsciously. Those who are the most untrusting are the most untrustworthy. Those who are the most disrespectful are those who respect themselves the least.

It is ironic to find countless atrocities committed in history by hypocritical individuals overzealous for truth. The Crusades during the Dark Ages are a perfect example of this. One wonders how many people have been tortured, raped and murdered in the name of God and for the supposed cause of "righteousness." When we're deceived into thinking that we are more righteous and/or less evil than others, we find, in our self-perceived purity, justification to do anything necessary to "enlighten" the "barbarians."

"Why do people behave so unreasonably?" asked Leo Tolstoy. "Because," said Tolstoy, "from long continued deception,

they no longer see the connection between their bondage and their own share in the deeds of violence.”

The truth is that, deep down, nobody ever does something to another person; every evil act we commit towards another person is really directed, at a subconscious level, at ourselves. We only hate and destroy other people because we hate the destruction that we sense in ourselves; we may physically beat others, but in doing so we are psychologically beating ourselves in a violently misguided effort to get rid of our evil.

But, as Socrates wisely said, “If you think that by killing men you can prevent someone from censuring your evil lives, you are mistaken; that is not a way of escape which is either possible or honorable; the easiest and the noblest way is not to be disabling others, but to be improving yourselves.”

This concept, as I am describing it, may seem overly dramatic and removed from reality to those who have never been physically violent toward another person. But violence toward others need not manifest itself physically; the concept of which I speak is manifested in every derogatory word, every criticism, every harsh thought that we ever have for others. In other words, our misdeeds—as compared with those of the Crusaders—are not a difference in kind; they are merely a difference in degree.

We must never make the mistake of thinking that we are immune from destructive tendencies and desires. Every single human being has the capacity for committing the most violent and evil atrocities upon his fellow man. By recognizing and accepting this we are able to develop more discipline and vigilance, and we are also able to avoid hypocrisy and self-

righteousness.

The Deception of Inferiority

Many of us study the lives of great men and women and recognize how incredibly powerful they were, but think that we could never be like them.

In the first place, our mission is not to be like other people; our mission is to be the best of who we are, not to mimic the greatness of others. Secondly, every one of us was born for greatness, and to focus inordinately on the greatness in others—at the expense and to the exclusion of our own greatness—is a crippling form of self-deception.

Anything that limits our potential for greatness is evil. The destruction of the lie of inferiority directly corresponds to its subtlety—by posing itself as humility it is often difficult to recognize for the evil that it is. Self-deprecation is the complete opposite of humility, and is in reality the epitome of pride. As Ken Blanchard and Norman Vincent Peale wrote, “People with humility don’t think less of themselves; they just think of themselves less.”



Pride leads us to compare ourselves to others and to derive our self-worth from things outside of ourselves. But when we're truly humble, we're only concerned with our own progress relative to ourselves—not to other people. We must learn to be humble without devaluing ourselves, and to value ourselves without being prideful.

We are self-deprecating not because we truly believe that we are inferior to others, but rather, because we seek to avoid the responsibility of greatness. As Marianne Williamson wrote:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate, our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, ‘Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?’ Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

The danger of hero-worship is that it blinds us to our own potential and our own responsibilities. As long as we lie to ourselves by thinking that we can never be as great as the heroes we study in history, we never have to face the responsibility of doing what it takes to become great.

In the depths of our self-deception, we engage in fruitless searches to find satisfaction, enlightenment, and happiness in

things outside of ourselves. We fail to realize the truth spoken by Sir Thomas Browne when he said, “We carry within us the wonders we seek without us.”

We avoid and bury our irresponsibility in stifling layers of frivolity and hedonism. And many of us ironically escape through hard—yet thoughtless and fruitless—physical labor. We’re deceived into believing that working hard at doing the wrong things can somehow replace thinking smart and doing the right things.

Every individual was born for greatness. Every human being was born with their own genius. Galileo and Einstein were no better than any of us—they simply developed their individual genius.

We must study the lives of great men and women, not in order to forget our own greatness by worshiping them, but in order to light the flames of genius inside ourselves. Thinking that we are inferior to historical heroes is a crippling deception. When we study history, we must see great men and women as mirror images of our own greatness.

Look Into the Mirror

The most powerful way to learn from history is to understand it as a mirror that reflects who we are as individuals and teaches us about our own nature and our own potential. We must never make the mistake of thinking that the evil nature displayed by despicable historical figures is removed from us. We must also realize that the greatness we see in heroes in

history is a reflection of our own potential for greatness.



We were born for greatness. We were born to move the cause of liberty. But to discover and develop our greatness requires a high level of conscious awareness of our dual nature. By fully accepting the realities and responsibilities of our dual nature we can consciously create our ideal lives and our ideal selves.

Studying and applying history to our lives is like sculpture, which is, in the words of [Irving Stone](#), “an art which, by removing all that is superfluous from the material under treatment, reduces it to that form designed in the artist’s mind.”

We must study history to see ourselves through new eyes, with more honesty, expanded maturity, deeper wisdom, and greater awareness. As the French novelist Marcel Proust wrote, “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands but seeing with new eyes.” Let us look deeply into the mirror of history to see things as they are, and as they will be.