Leadership in Richard Wilbur's 'For the Student Strikers'

Jehanne Dubrow

Washington College, Chestertown, MD, USA

In 1970, at the height of American campus unrest over the war in Vietnam and domestic turmoil, the poet Richard Wilbur was asked by students at Wesleyan University to write a poem supporting their strike. The poem Wilbur wrote, 'For the Student Strikers,' displeased the students: not surprisingly, for it is less a paean to youthful zeal and idealism than a gentle rebuke or correction. Wilbur urges the striking students to listen to others' voices, and to recognize the humanity even in their most visible and intimate opponents, sheriffs and guardsmen. Wilbur's insistence on empathy is an enduring lesson for those who presume to lead and champion social and political change.

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Richard Wilbur (b. 1921) is best known for his translations of French playwrights Racine, Molière, and Corneille, and for his impeccably wrought formal poems that find a balance between the use of rhyme and meter and a contemporary American idiom. A former Poet Laureate and winner the National Book Award and two Pulitzer Prizes, Wilbur has a career that has spanned nearly 70 years. And while it is right to call him a *leader* in the field of American poetry, it's more difficult to claim that his writing frequently deals with the subject of leadership itself.

One of Wilbur's rare meditations on the topic is 'For the Student Strikers,' which was written at the request of Wesleyan students and first appeared in *Strike News* in 1970. As Wilbur explains in his *New and Collected Poems* (1988, p. 112), the text 'did not flatter the students in the manner to which they were accustomed' and 'was at first thrown into the wastebasket ... but later retrieved and published.' Reading the poem now, we can imagine why students were displeased. 'For the Student Strikers' functions as a how-to manual, offering its audience of protesters advice about group leadership. The poem urges the strikers to listen to others, to empathize with those who are different, and to recognize the humanity in the opposition. 'Go talk,' the poem begins, 'with those who are rumored to be unlike you, / And whom, it is said, you are so unlike' (ibid., pp. 1–2).

No doubt Wilbur was asked to write the poem because the students felt him to be sympathetic to their protests against US military involvement in Vietnam. But what he gives them is a guide in how difficult it is for a group to lead well, even when the cause is just or well-intentioned. In one of the poem's most powerful moments, he warns: 'It is not yet time for the rock, the bullet, the blunt / Slogan that fuddles the mind toward force' (ibid., pp. 5–6). The reader expects a third weapon to complete the catalog begun with 'rock' and 'bullet.' Instead, Wilbur rounds out the list with 'slogan'; by inserting a linebreak between the words 'blunt' and 'slogan,' he illustrates how easily words may escalate into physical aggression.

Throughout the poem, Wilbur's rhymes convey the difficult paradox of his instructions – that the student strikers must show strength through gentleness. Although the word 'strike' implies violence, the act of landing a blow, the poet argues that the strikers must strive to build connections. He pairs 'unlike' with 'strike,' 'force' with 'discourse,' using music to subvert our ideas about the kind of leadership that political protest demands.

This is a form of self-governance that requires the students to engage in conversation, to attempt dialogue even with the 'nightmare sheriff / and the guardsman's son' (ibid., p. 15), symbols of authority and oppression. But, the poem's most important lesson about leadership is in Wilbur's writing of the text, his decision to speak uncomfortable truths to an audience that had probably expected a different poem from him. They must have hoped for a rallying song or an ode to the bravery of strikers. Instead, Wilbur gives them a poem about the role of good communications, self-questioning, and open-mindedness in effective group leadership.

Richard Wilbur, 'For the Student Strikers'

Go talk with those who are rumored to be unlike you,
And whom, it is said, you are so unlike.
Stand on the stoops of their houses and tell them why
You are out on strike.

It is not yet time for the rock, the bullet, the blunt
Slogan that fuddles the mind toward force.
Let the new sounds in our streets be the patient sound
Of your discourse.

Doors will be shut in your faces, I do not doubt.
Yet here or there, it may be, there will start,
Much as the lights blink on in a block at evening,
Changes of heart.

They are your houses; the people are not unlike you;
Talk with them, then, and let it be done
Even for the grey wife of your nightmare sheriff
And the guardsman's son.

written for the *Wesleyan Strike News*
Spring, 1970

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REFERENCE

Wilbur, Richard (1988). *New and Collected Poems*. New York: Mariner. Print.