James MacGregor Burns, who died at the age of 95 after a scholarly career that spanned more than seven decades, transformed the field of leadership studies. To a loose congeries of scholars, enthusiasts, and practitioners seeking to draw a hook through the nose of the leadership leviathan, Burns brought clarity, urgency, and a common language. His classic distinction between transactional and transformational leadership in his seminal work, *Leadership* (1978), though over the years frequently criticized (and sharply questioned in the remembrances in this issue of *Leadership and the Humanities*), has helped shape the basic terms of analysis for two generations of scholars. Burns was a scholar with a heart, and to the uncertain discipline of leadership studies he brought both steel – careful historiography, immense erudition, and a Weberian ability to explore, across countries, cultures, and centuries, the social, political, and psychological relationships between leaders and followers – and soul – an unshakeable insistence on the fundamental human and thus moral dimension of the work of the leader. Burns’s faith in the underlying moral purpose of leadership served in turn to shape his view of the work of leadership scholars – as he observed in 2003, a quarter-century after the publication of his opus:

I feel even more strongly now that leadership must be judged not by an individual’s feats, but by explicit moral and ethical values. It’s an arbitrary matter of terminology, I suppose, but I reserve the word ‘leadership’ for use as a positive term and use ‘rulership’ to indicate most other forms of power. It seems important to keep leadership as a positive term, as in common parlance, when we ask for leadership. (Hogan 2003)

James MacGregor Burns was a great scholar. He was also a moralist, a skilled storyteller, a challenger of settled assumptions, and the purveyor of a frankly aspirational understanding of the role of the leader. His central insight, the disjunctive contrast between transaction and transformation as the two chief modes of leadership, was a genie that escaped the bottle. Burns originally employed it to distinguish between leadership focused on small or incremental change, and a more consequential leadership focused on radical – ‘transformative’ – change:

We must distinguish between the verbs ‘change’ and ‘transform,’ using exacting definitions. To change is to substitute one thing for another, to give and take, to exchange places, to pass from one place to another. These are the kinds of changes I attribute to transactional leadership. But to transform something cuts much more profoundly. It is to cause a metamorphosis in form or structure, a change in the very nature or condition of a thing, a change into another substance, a radical change in outward form or inner character. … (Burns 2003: 24)

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1. I am grateful to Stewart Burns for insightful comments on an earlier version of this essay; the views expressed herein are my own.
Over time – due perhaps as much to the ongoing work of Bernard M. Bass (1985; 1998) as to Burns himself – academic and popular interest in ‘transforming’ or ‘transformational’ leadership grew and grew, so that for many of those who study, teach, or practice leadership in the wake of Burns, transactional leadership is understood as transitory, superficial, or trivial, while transforming leadership has tended to be held up as the model to which true leaders should aspire. But for Burns himself this distinction was never so black and white. He retained great respect for transaction as a mode of leadership behavior, as for instance in his view of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt: ‘Roosevelt,’ he said in the 2003 interview previously quoted, ‘sparked my interest in what I call transactional leadership: he was just such a superb bargainer.’ FDR, due partly to his abilities and partly to his historical moment, was a deeply consequential president, whose ‘bargains’ proved far more enduring than mere temporizing or deal-making: as Burns understood and taught his story, FDR’s mastery of transaction became the way to forge grand coalitions that rebuilt and reshaped the American economy, won the Second World War, prepared the way for the galvanic legal and social changes of the 1950s and 1960s, and laid the foundations of the post-war world that would be presided over by America.

In fact it was the figure of Roosevelt himself who persuaded Burns that ‘transaction’ was not enough to make sense of some leaders’ enduring impact on their communities and followers: ‘when I came to study FDR’s war presidency for a second volume of my biography,’ he wrote in Transforming Leadership, ‘I found “transactional” leadership an inadequate tool of analysis for the broader and deeper dimensions of his actions’ (2003: 23). The fact of the Second World War, Burns believed, changed the circumstances in which Roosevelt sought to lead, and thus gave him more scope to drive truly transformational changes within American society.

The centrality of Roosevelt provides a striking clue to Burns’ approach to leadership: he was most interested in leaders of institutions, formally appointed or established leaders, figures often derogated as ‘great men.’ Interestingly, America’s greatest unelected leader, Martin Luther King Jr is not explored much in the pages of Transforming Leadership. He is mentioned, briefly, just three times, in the book – though, to be fair, King is included in the short concluding list of ‘moral leaders’ whom Burns sees as ‘transforming their societies with the mobilizing power of values’ (the others are Mohandas Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Andrei Sakharov, and Václav Havel (Burns 2003: 198)). One of the greatest divergences between Burns himself and the legion of those who have continued to explore transforming leadership has been the greater attention paid by others not only to movement leaders like Martin Luther King Jr, but to other, less heralded figures (see, for instance, the recollection by Stewart Burns in these pages).

Transforming Leadership is a remarkable, exhaustively researched work, which investigates leadership across historical eras, cultures, and continents. And yet, despite its global sweep, the book has a squarely American ethos. Published in the first years of the twenty-first century, it might be said to serve as a kind of proud summa of the nobler American aspirations of the previous century. James MacGregor Burns, across his career, developed an understanding of the best leader as she who draws the people toward a community founded in classic democratic (American) political and civic values. This becomes explicit in the final two sections of the last chapter of Transforming Leadership, which are titled, successively, ‘Life, Liberty, and …’ and finally, ‘… the Pursuit of Happiness’ (this latter phrase is also the book’s subtitle). This solidly American conception of the deepest aspirations of leadership raises a
question for leadership scholars in the twenty-first century: Is such an aspiration universal or parochial?

If we are cautious about imposing an American understanding of the deepest values of humankind across the board, then a bit of humility may be in order when it falls on us to ponder the legacy of James MacGregor Burns. Burns taught a generation of scholars how to think about leadership – but that generation was mostly American. The twentieth century, Jim Burns’s century, was the ‘American century,’ as Life magazine’s Henry Luce termed it in 1941. The twenty-first century – well, it is unclear who will claim it. And it is unclear which models of leadership are of most significance going forward. Not just Burns or America, but the entire Enlightenment project of rational yet passionate commitment to democratic citizenship in a capitalist polity, and the concomitant protection and expansion of individual human dignity and freedom, are under immense pressure from increasingly confident challengers, whether ancient (pre-modern interpretations of Islam, repurposed for the contemporary world), modern (today’s supremely confident instantiation of ‘socialism (+ capitalism) with Chinese characteristics’), or even post-modern (a host of western-centered ways of perceiving and describing social reality, drawing on and stitching together gender, racial, ethnic, sexual and even ‘transhuman’ perspectives). In such an ideologically and epistemologically fragmented world, it is unlikely that another way of making sense of leadership, akin to Burns’s brilliant duality of transaction and transformation, will emerge with anything like his influence and impact.

The passing of James MacGregor Burns represents the end of an era, and the silencing of a great voice that urged all – leaders, scholars, and citizens, men and women from every walk of life and every corner of the planet – to heed the better angels of our nature; to seek, to demand, and to enact patient and compassionate and courageous leadership; and to build a better world. Moving beyond American values, Burns ends his great 2003 book, *Transforming Leadership*, with a verse from the *Dao De Jing* of Laozi:

Bearing yet not possessing  
Working yet not taking credit  
Leading yet not dominating  
This is the Primal Virtue.

Jim Burns believed in, studied, and communicated the highest aspirations of what inspired and courageous human leadership can achieve. Is there room for his great, ennobling vision in the twenty-first century? Burns’s ‘primal virtue,’ if we may apply the Chinese phrase to his life and work, was to raise up our eyes and expectations of what leadership may achieve – and to raise up, as well, our faith in ourselves, and what we may achieve when we commit to working together, not in narrowly circumscribed roles of leader or follower, but as fellow citizens, comrades, and co-laborers.

Michael Harvey

REFERENCES


