



Ida B. Wells: Leadership through Rewriting a Bad Story

It is with no pleasure that I have dipped my hands in the corruption here exposed...Somebody must show that the Afro-American race is more sinned against than sinning, and it seems to have fallen upon me to do so.--"Southern Horrors"

A Preface

Lately I have been rethinking the value of studying leadership through the humanities, particularly the study of storytelling as a guide to one's leadership development and planning. I have been reading (and would highly recommend) Rutger Bregman's *Humankind: A Hopeful History* (pp. 22-39), in which he disputes, among other things, the impression left by William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* that human beings are constantly teetering on the brink of ruthless savagery, what is known among primatologists and social psychologists as "veneer theory." Bregman counters Golding's novel with the case of six Tongan boys who were stranded on the island of Ata for eighteen months in 1966. These boys seem to have gone to great lengths to take care of one another just fine, assigning chores, settling disputes, and even setting the broken bone of one of their comrades.

Regardless of which story you think is more representative of the human condition, the contrast made me concerned that the study of the humanities might infect us with bad stories, by which I mean stories that don't actually reflect the way the world really works, either in terms of historical accuracy or our own human nature. Today most of us who watch D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* walk away feeling like we understand the lengths to which white America may go to paper over the atrocities of slavery and the Jim Crow Era. But I imagine that a lot of people who saw the premiere walked out of the theater wondering how they might make a donation to their local Ku Klux Klan. So how can a bad story,

in and of itself, ever lead to better leadership? Wouldn't we expect it to lead to worse leadership? Should we then refuse to teach stories like this to young people, just as Plato in the *Politeia* would banish the works of Homer from the Kallipolis on the grounds that they showed gods and heroes behaving badly? Or must we at least explain why some stories are bad when we teach them?

The Story of Rewriting a Bad Story

[Ida B. Wells](#) (1862-1931) was born into slavery in Holly Springs, MS and later moved to Memphis, TN after both her parents died of a yellow fever epidemic when she was sixteen. Along the way she became a school teacher and was educated at Rust College, an HBCU in her hometown. In Memphis she co-owned a newspaper called the *Memphis Free Speech and Headlight*. In 1892, in a pamphlet entitled "[Southern Horrors](#)," Wells investigated the rampant practice of domestic terrorism known as lynching, which was being justified in the south as a response to the supposed raping of white women by black men. In case after case, with meticulous detail, Wells documented a pattern: white women were accusing black men of rape in order to cover up their own romantic relationships with them, which of course would have been a social disgrace. But Wells delves further into the social psychology of lynching as a broad response (= *phthonos*) by whites to the economic, political, and social freedom of African Americans after the Civil War. The population of MS after the Civil War was almost equal among blacks and whites and so the competition for everything was now in theory double. For almost 250 years white slave owners had unlimited access to the bodies and labor of black Americans and in that time had worked hard to convince themselves that there existed a natural hierarchy between the two races, in order to justify the political and social division. Now, with Emancipation, blacks could vote, hold office, start businesses, and frequent many of the spaces that had for generations been whites only.

To give you one example of the virulent ideology she was up against, here is a passage from the *Memphis Evening Scimitar* that Wells cites:

“Aside from the violation of white women by Negroes, which is the outcropping of a bestial perversion of instinct, the chief cause of trouble between the races in the South is the Negro's lack of manners. In the state of slavery he learned politeness from association with white people, who took pains to teach him. Since the emancipation came and the tie of mutual interest and regard between master and servant was broken, the Negro has drifted away into a state which is neither freedom nor bondage. Lacking the proper inspiration of the one and the restraining force of the other he has taken up the idea that boorish insolence is independence, and the exercise of a decent degree of breeding toward white people is identical with servile submission. In consequence of the prevalence of this notion there are many Negroes who use every opportunity to make themselves offensive, particularly when they think it can be done with impunity.

“We have had too many instances right here in Memphis to doubt this, and our experience is not exceptional. *The white people won't stand this sort of thing, and whether they be insulted as individuals are as a race, the response will be prompt and effectual.*”

For setting the record straight when uncommon moral courage and “shining a light of truth” on injustice, as she liked to say, Wells was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize just this past May (2020).

A reflection

To return to the challenge I posed to the study of leadership through the humanities, I think “bad stories” will remain a danger and the only way to process any story is if we dedicate ourselves, like journalists, to the search of the fullest set of perspectives, as well as an explanation, or excavation, of those perspectives, in order to figure out where they come from. There is thus leadership both in trying to get the story right and in trying to form the clearest understanding of why people see things the way they do.

This practice and skill is what gives us the ability to learn from others and to form trusting relationships that lead to collective action on behalf of the community. Indeed, how important is it to be able to say to someone, “I know where you’re coming from”? And how limiting is it when we cannot say this?

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