



# THE INSTITUTE FOR SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Fall Newsletter  
September, 1989

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## RISKING TO BE WRONG

H. L. Mencken (1880-1956) journalist, scholar and acerbic controversialist wrote in 1925 that the American people constituted "the most timorous, snivelling, poltroonish, ignominious mob of serfs and goosesteppers ever gathered under one flag in Christendom since the end of the Middle Ages." Predictably his mail abounded with outrage and denunciation. He answered every letter personally, using a standard one-sentence reply:

"Dear Sir (or Madam):  
You may be right.  
Sincerely,  
H. L. Mencken".

Years ago I had a friend in Baltimore who knew Mr. Mencken personally and loved him for the vigor of his intellect and the warmth of his humanity. I drew from those conversations about Mencken the impression of a man of searing honesty tempered with the twinkle of personal modesty. He knew both his own mind and its limits. In his commentary and his response to critics he carried two kinds of courage: risking to be wrong and readiness to admit it. Risk is the stuff of all that goes by the name of ETHICS.

But why call ETHICS "Risking to be Wrong"? Would it not be closer to the truth to call it "Risking to be Right"? Closer to convention, maybe, but not closer to the truth. By "convention" I mean the easier matters of discernment between right and wrong -- matters like whether to falsify your income tax return, or to cheat the customer, commit perjury, or lie to subordinates and superiors in self-protection. Issues like these are critically important to be sure, especially now. Lying has become so commonplace in public policy that lots of us on both sides of the conservative-liberal aisle are pained that many otherwise discerning people give the partisan patriotism of Oliver North higher marks than personal integrity and truth-telling. This seems precisely the sort of flag-draped goosestepping that aroused Mencken's disdain. No doubt many of the same people would take anyone to court who cheated on a business contract -- or would dismiss an employee caught stealing.

All of which demonstrates the difficulty of being morally consistent. Still, ethics at the level of easy discernment is vastly important to a healthy society, and Americans are right to be currently aroused over ethics in the

public domain. But in that same public domain Americans are fiercely divided over what constitutes the appropriate ethic in the abortion issue. Discernment in such matters is not easy! Nor is it an easy thing to structure just tax laws or to decide the proportionate claims of the poor against the Pentagon -- or, at the business level, how to confront the need to separate a person from his or her job -- or, at the personal level, what is best for children in weighing whether to keep or dissolve a bitterly destructive marriage.

Here convention will not finally serve. In the deep issues courage is required -- courage that risks to be wrong. Wherever truth is a matter of dispute, ETHICS needs to be known as Risking to be Wrong. In the all-too-human enterprise of ETHICS this is to be safeguarded against arrogance. Though we know our fallibility in aspiring to "do the truth", we commonly arrogate to our opinions and beliefs a self-righteousness that pours scorn on all who hold contrary views, often regarding such views and those who hold them as evil.

How much peace we might claim for ourselves (and add to the human community) if we could admit that on issues of moral dispute our decisions are far oftener high risks than dead certainties. Jesus warned against judging others at the cost of being severely judged ourselves -- by which I believe he meant the pain of so much human alienation, interpersonal strife and social violence.

Servant Leadership is a way to use one's personal freedom to hold convictions and make decisions without arrogance -- without pouring blame and contempt on other people. Servant Leadership seeks to hold one's self fully to account, and to hold others so -- accountability for courage and truthfulness, but leaving blame to a merciful God.

There is a poignant moment in the life of Martin Luther that makes him a kindred spirit with Henry Louis Mencken. Years after the great 16th century reformer stood before the tribunal at the Diet of Worms and declared his unyielding resistance to papal authority, Luther's old friend of their youth in the monastery asked him, "Martin, when you defied the powers of the Church on that fateful day were you absolutely sure you were right?" Pausing a long time in silence, Luther at last whispered simply "No".

This will be the stuff of the special seminar in November announced on one of the flyers enclosed. Bob Massie and I will share the teaching, Bob doing most of it. But we fully share the conviction that in the final analysis moral questions have to be decided within the horizons of one's own tradition, personality type, knowledge, courage and compassion. Certainty of being right in the great issues is seldom granted, especially at the moment of deciding. Sometimes it is years before real clarity comes -- and then often in the garments of forgiveness. Blessed is anyone committed to Servanthood as one's vocation in Christ, for this posture is rooted in the surpassing Good News that we are justified not by our works or by our deciding -- least of all by public opinion -- but by a saving Grace.

B.J.S.