

BY GLENN RIFKIN

Timeless Wisdom:

A Tribute to Warren Bennis, Author and Scholar

WHEN WARREN BENNIS DIED AT AGE 89 LAST SUMMER, he left a legacy as a visionary scholar on the subject of leadership. A seminal thinker who advised presidents and corporate chieftains and who taught at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business for more than 30 years, Bennis was also a warm, accessible humanist who fostered his career by remaining ever curious and asking as many questions as he answered.

A major part of Bennis's reputation was built upon the more than 30 books he wrote on his chosen subject, such as "On Becoming a Leader," "Why Leaders Can't Lead" and "An Invented Life: Reflections on Leadership and Change." All were transformative and insightful in ways that aspiring leaders had never encountered before.

"So many books on leadership make no sense," said William George, professor of management practices at the Harvard Business School and former CEO of Medtronic. "On Becoming a Leader' was down-to-earth and really spoke to me about what leadership was all about. In the same way that Peter Drucker could speak about management, Warren Bennis was the guru on leadership. No one came close to him."

In the foreword of "The Essential Bennis," a 2009 collection of Bennis's essays on leadership, Charles Handy, a noted Irish economist and author of books on organizational behavior and management, described Bennis's work. "His writing sparkles with analogies, is enriched by historical or literary vignettes, and is studded with telling tales from real lives. He is, quite simply, great fun to read. His work is, however, always based on his interviews and meetings with current leaders. His Rolodex is star-studded with names that most people could only dream of meeting. His is no empty theorizing but the encapsulated

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experiences of a huge range of influential people in all spheres of life. That is his huge gift: his ability to transform experience into wisdom, and then make it accessible to all, of every age.”

What stands out about Bennis’s work is its timelessness and continued relevance, born from not just insight but a vision and big-picture view of what lay ahead. In his most revered work “On Becoming a Leader,” published in 1989, Bennis shook up a generation of executives by casting a spotlight on what he perceived as a growing wave of failed leadership.

“We are at least halfway through the looking glass, on our way to utter chaos,” Bennis wrote, 20 years before the Wall Street meltdown set off by corrupt financial executives who forsook the nation’s economy for a chance at easy profits. “When the very model of a modern manager becomes CEO, he does not become a leader; he becomes a boss, and it is the bosses who have gotten America into its current fix.”



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But Bennis was the eternal optimist, despite those harsh words. His writing aimed at one thing: finding better answers to daunting questions, seeking enlightenment amid the toughest challenges. He wrote about context, about understanding and reflecting on the role of a leader and learning from failure rather than being defeated by it. He predicted the end of the Great Man era, the worship of the hero/CEO who single-handedly carries his organization to its loftiest heights. He understood that the flattened organization would spawn teams of leaders who would have far more positive impact than the one “mastermind” of strategy ever made.

“We have to recognize a new paradigm: not great leaders alone, but great leaders who exist in a fertile

relationship with a Great Group,” he wrote. “In these creative alliances, the leader and the team are able to achieve something together that neither could achieve alone. The leader finds greatness in the group. And he or she helps the members find it in themselves.”

Having lived a long and creative life, Bennis believed in the inevitability and benefits of change. In “Why Leaders Can’t Lead,” he wrote, “When we love our work, we need not be managed by hopes of reward or fears of punishment. We can create systems that facilitate our work, rather than being preoccupied with checks and controls of people who want to beat or exploit the system. Ultimately, in great leaders and the organizations surrounding them, there is a fusion of work and play to the point where, as Robert Frost says, ‘Love and need are one.’ How do we get from here to there? I think we must start by studying change.”

Mostly, his admirers pointed to Bennis’s belief in the authentic leader, that man or woman who personifies the Shakespearian maxim “To thine own self be true.” The authentic leader, be it on the battlefield, in the White House, on a college campus or in the corner office, allows the “self to emerge,” which is the essential task for leaders, he wrote in “On Becoming a Leader.” “It is how one takes the step from being to doing in the spirit of expressing rather than proving.”

With a remarkable collective wisdom and a command of metaphor, Bennis believed deeply in the power of the narrative. His courses at U.S.C. had long waiting lists of prospective students because he was an inspiring teacher who could draw relevant and fascinating stories from a seemingly bottomless well. An insatiable reader and traveler, he was equally comfortable quoting “King Lear” or Norman Lear.

Having been the one of the youngest infantry officers in Europe during World War II (at age 19), he served as president of the University of Cincinnati for eight difficult years and learned hard lessons about sitting where the buck stops. Discouraged but undaunted, he found positive avenues to move ahead.

“I believe in self-invention, have to believe in it” he wrote in “An Invented Life.”

“To be authentic is literally to be your own author (the words derive from the same Greek root), to discover your native energies and desires, and then find your way of acting on them. When you’ve done that, you are not existing simply to live up to an image posited by the culture, family tradition, or some other authority. When you write your own life, you have played the game that was natural for you to play. You have kept covenant with your own promise.”