

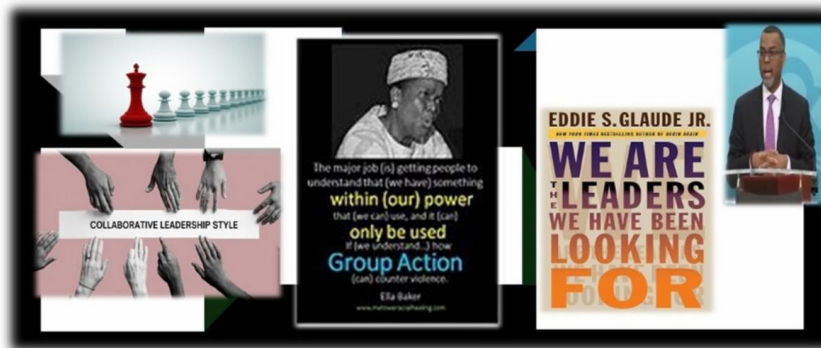
JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #190

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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

Glaude's Book Is About Far More Than Leadership



Global Summit XVI: “Professor/Instructor/Speaker: Eddie Glaude, Jr., Ph.D., will discuss his book ***We Are the Leaders We Have Been Looking For*** on Friday, Nov. 15, 7:30 p.m. at Gannon University’s Yehl Room at Waldron Campus Center, 124 W. Seventh St. Tickets at [Global Summit XVI - Jefferson Educational Society](#)

Confession time: Prior to reading his *We Are the Leaders We Have Been Looking For*, I was not familiar with the work of Eddie Glaude, Jr. A native of Moss Point, Mississippi, he is the James S. McDonnell Distinguished University Professor at Princeton University. Having read *We Are the Leaders...*, I need to read more of his work beginning with *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*.

Based on the title and my involvement with the Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy and its associated Rainy Fellows Leadership Program, I assumed it was — there are millions — yet another book peddling a theory of leadership.

I was wrong.

Yes, it advocates for a specific leadership theory, but the book is so much more.

It is a profound meditation on the centrality of race in America's continually evolving history and the burden, or one might more accurately say the self-limiting burden, that places on Americans of African ancestry. But not only Black Americans, for as Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave, and Thomas Jefferson, an enslaver, both observed slavery and its offspring bigotry and racism not only debase the enslaved and the excoriated, but also the enslaver and the bigot. Escaping that debasement requires that one not let the weight of that history or the bigot's excoriations define you and limit your possibilities to the bent shape of their intolerance.

My only quibble with Glaude is that this phenomenon not only shapes the experience of Black Americans, but it also molds the experience of all people of color (Hispanics, Asians, South Indian Asians, and Middle Easterners), women, and immigrants. Regarding the latter, this is/was particularly true of the original immigrants themselves, but also their children and, admittedly, to an increasingly lesser degree, their grandchildren.

It must be quickly admitted that for descendants of white immigrants, the challenge evaporates as they melt into the larger society. But not wholly or quickly, for one sometimes still gets a version of Ella Baker's question: "Who are your people?"

It happened to me in September when giving a talk about *The American Tapestry Project*. I mentioned that my mother was the daughter of Hungarian immigrants. An audience member, in a wonderful irony, since she, too, was an immigrant, asked me after the talk what my mother's birth name was. When I told her, it was apparently not the "right" Hungarian name, for she, a retired university professor and more recent immigrant of haute-bourgeois Hungarian status,

smiled at my answer and politely turned away. As most Americans, I am the proud descendant of peasants.

Bigotry based on a memory of other times and places is everywhere, but, as Glaude repeatedly asserts, one cannot let it define you. This is one of his four key takeaways, the others being a rejection of the leader as prophet (or the great person theory of leadership), a meditation on the nature of democracy, and, by extension, an attempt to define the democratic leader.

But he begins and ends with the message that we are all born in a certain time and place, or more precisely, born into a certain moment in a certain context. And moments are the stuff of memories. Memories are more powerful than history for memories are history distilled into living lessons, which are also, for better or worse, lessons for living – two different things. For as William Faulkner said, or something to the effect, ‘History isn’t dead; it’s not even past.’ Glaude, a Mississippian himself, for reasons not hard to imagine, eschews quoting Faulkner and favors the subtler observation of Eudora Welty: “The memory is a living thing – it too is in transit. But during its moment, all that is remembered joins, and lives – the old and the young, the past and the present, the living and the dead.” [1]

“All that is remembered joins, and lives” – which is to say, we live in a matrix of stories, the recollected moments, the memories more powerful than a textbook history telling us who we are, where we came from, and where we might be going. Those stories can be enabling or crippling; they can expand our *self* view, empowering us to imagine and seek greater possibilities – to be all that we can be. Or they can be degrading, demeaning, and disempowering, freezing us in a metaphorical cell of diminished possibilities, a *self*-devouring cancer of negativity.

Glaude begins and ends his book with two powerful stories about escaping the limitations of heritage – a weave of memories wrapping one in a *self*-defeating fabric of loss. In the first anecdote, Glaude relates a tale from Zora Neale Hurston about five Black men in Heaven who, receiving their angel wings from Gabriel, were told to sit down and wait until they were told what to do. But one took his wings for a flight around heaven only to lose his wings and to be chastised by Gabriel upon his return. The others mocked him saying, “Look, now everybody got wings but you.” To which the smiling man replied, “I don’t care. I sure was a flying fool when I had them.” [2]

A benign folk tale about the possibilities one can discover if one rejects the authority that limits you. Glaude concludes, however, with a powerful story from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Daughter of Sethe who murdered her infant daughter rather than permit the nightriders to return the child to the horrors of slavery, Denver’s ability to imagine a life beyond her current reality has been “bound up

and warped by the cruel realities of slavery and her mother's infanticide." [3] She is literally afraid to leave her home and step off its porch. Remembering a story her grandmother told her, she finally, in a powerful act of courage, decides to step off the porch, to break free of the metaphorical cell limiting her, and to encounter the world whatever the result. If she is to become, what other choice does she have? Her grandmother's story turns the memory of limitation and defeat into a challenge to live. Her grandmother tells her:

"You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don't remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother's feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that? Is that why you can't walk down the steps? My Jesus my."

But you said there was no defense.

"There ain't."

Then what do I do?

"Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on." [4]

The point?

The "it" one needs to "know" is that the world is a dangerous place. The only way to overcome it is to know it, to confront it, and in confronting it, transform its limiting stories and memories into a source of inspiration and strength. As Glaude says, "The past is transformed from a cage to a funded experience." [5] As we said in a previous **Book Note** about Montaigne, the only valid philosophical question is "to be or not to be?"

One can't let memories of other lives freeze you, one can't let the undeniable malevolence of some (much?) of the world deny you its light's life-giving warmth. You are not what other people think or say you are; you cannot let other people or the memory of other people's scorn and bigotry define you. You cannot let fear – both real and imagined and more real for the imagining – define you. You have only two choices: to remain imprisoned by their scorn and bigotry in a living death on the metaphorical porch; or to reject their debasing limitations by stepping off the porch and into a free life with all its perils and possibilities.

To be free, to live, there is really only one choice – "Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on."

Since I want you to join us at Global Summit XVI on Nov. 15 to hear Glaude himself, I will only tease you with his other takeaways. Based on his reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson and others, he rejects the notion of leadership as something only heroic individuals inspiring one to follow them can accomplish. He opts for a more collaborative style of leadership rooted in the people. His notion has merit but misreads the actual challenge of leading actual people to

accomplish anything. Still, not knowing what Glaude knows about 21st-century leadership theory and practice, it might surprise him to know that if any leader is to inspire any group of followers in pursuit of her vision or goal, then she has to speak to them in terms of their own needs and interests in order to act collaboratively in pursuit of what, transmuted by the group's needs and interests, has become a common, a shared goal.

As I have said before, the first rule of leadership is that nothing happens until someone makes it happen, followed immediately by the second rule, which is no one does anything alone. It is all about the team. In a slight irony, his great example of a post-heroic leader, Ella Baker, illustrates my theory. She is the first mover who makes it happen, whatever "it" might be, but is wise enough to know that she can learn much from those who would follow her. And, more importantly, to build anything that will endure, she has to empower them to create their own future, a future that blends her initiating vision with their needs and aspirations into a common goal. In the end, it is the team, or Group, to quote Baker, that determines the putative leader's success. It is the "we" in the photo above that makes things happen, or as she says, only the Group can counter violence, or less dramatically, only the Group can overcome the obstacles that prevent them from achieving their objectives.

This style of leadership Glaude calls "democratic leadership," for it emanates from the people bringing to life Lincoln's definition of democracy as government of, by, and for the people. It is necessary, for democracy itself is an ongoing experiment, an almost existential and continuing act of becoming. Never finished; always in the process of becoming. As Glaude says, it is a "tending" and not an "intending." It has no specific end in sight, only a "tending" toward something that refines and expands itself based on its experience of becoming. Which, as I re-read these words, smacks of the semantic fog that is Glaude's book's one occasional shortcoming.

Cutting through the fog, I think he means to say that democracy is the collective action of the people as they continue to experiment, refine, and seek to perfect, all the while knowing they will never completely perfect their project of perfecting government of, by, and for the people. Although Glaude does not say it, I would add that while the project is an ongoing "tending towards" that *end* towards which it *tends* is the final attainment of an America that lives up to its founding values of liberty, equality, and opportunity for all. Going a step further, I disagree with him that it is a vague, ill-defined liberal quest. It is, in fact, one of the most radical concepts in all of human history: that all are equal before the law, and from that equality, are entitled to liberty and opportunity. That Americans have frequently failed to live up to its transcendent spirit does not invalidate the spirit.

I want you to see and hear what Glaude has to say on Nov.15, for there is a great deal to learn from him. I could write two or three **Book Notes** just riffing on my marginal comments in my copy of ***We Are the Leaders We Have Been Looking For***. For example, on page 88, I scribbled that “today’s Democratic party leaders don’t get this ...” referring to John Dewey’s notion that building a party requires “the deliberate work of forging bonds of association.” Or on page 66, I wrote in response to Glaude’s critique of heroic leaders, that “the challenge is to go beyond one’s heroes,” that is, to not mimic them but to use them as a launching point for future action. Or, on page 93, I scrawled that “liberalism is about people as concepts and democracy is about people as people,” which is what I meant when I said America’s ideals are among the most radical in human history; for example, people are created equal before the law? What do you think Julius Caesar, Genghis Khan, much less Vladimir Putin, would make of that?

There are many more, almost one per page, but I’ll stop. I hope to see you on the 15th at Gannon’s Yehl Room as we both learn what Glaude has to say about leadership, democracy, democratic leadership, and the experience of being Black in America. If not, then I encourage you to read Glaude’s ***We Are the Leaders We Have Been Looking For***.



-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.
Scholar-in-Residence
The Jefferson Educational Society
roth@jeserie.org

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End Notes

1. Quoted in Eddie Glaude, Jr. ***We Are the Leaders We Have Been Looking For*** (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2024), p. 3.
 2. Glaude, ***cited above***, p. 1.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
 4. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
 5. *Ibid.*
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