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LIGHT AND SHADOW

Mother Teresa and Richard Nixon

Light and dark, good and evil dance together in both our internal and external worlds. Denying their interplay blocks our energy, distorts reality, and leads us into unnecessary traps and tensions. Knowing and acknowledging their coexistence lets us access their power in the service of worthy values and purposes. Two famous leaders—one who died reviled, the other revered—show us what's at stake. Consider first the tortured path of President Richard Nixon.

RICHARD NIXON: WOUNDED WARRIOR

After serving eight years as vice president under Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon narrowly lost his first try for the White House to the younger, more charismatic Jack Kennedy. Then things soured even more. Nixon's attempt at a political comeback crashed when he lost his bid to become governor of California. That prompted an embittered Nixon to make his famous promise that the press wouldn't have him to kick around anymore. He and almost everyone else believed his political career was over.⁶ But he nursed his wounds, rebuilt his political ties, and came back from oblivion to win the presidency in 1968 and again in 1972.

Among those who went to work for him was a young and optimistic David Gergen. Fresh from a stint in the U.S. Navy, he arrived at the Nixon White House in January 1970. His job was to assist Nixon's chief speechwriter, Ray Price. In his first months, Gergen rarely saw the brilliant, aloof, and intimidating president he served. But Price had known Nixon for years and willingly shared his insights about the maelstrom of forces swirling within the president's psyche. Gergen recalls, "Nixon, Price explained, was blessed with a very bright side, but mostly hidden from public view was a dark, thunderous aspect. Within the White House, a titanic struggle was under way between those who naturally appealed to his better qualities and those who played upon his demons. Our job, he said, was to strengthen his positive instincts."⁷

Ray Price and others on the presidential staff saw Nixon's potential for greatness but worried about the darker angels in his nature. These often rendered him insecure, secretive, angry, and vindictive. They made Nixon receptive to those on his staff who warned him about his enemies' evil deeds and urged him to take direct, even brutal steps to retaliate. "Nixon would easily succumb and lash out at his foes, real and imagined. If that side ultimately prevailed, Ray warned, the Nixon presidency was doomed."⁸

Ray Price's forebodings ultimately materialized in Nixon's self-destructive spiral following the "third-rate burglary" at the Watergate

apartments in Washington. After an ill-advised and bungled foray into political espionage by campaign operatives, Nixon stonewalled investigators. The cover-up failed, leading to personal disgrace and a national tragedy. Fascinating and shadowy, brilliant and petty, loved and hated, Nixon stands out as one of America's most controversial and cryptic presidents. As the only individual ever to resign America's highest office, he is conspicuously one of a kind. Yet the source of his fall—inability to recognize and manage competing demons—is the stuff of Shakespearian tragedy, a story repeated worldwide throughout history. Nixon's demons lurk in even the best of us. Few are aware of how deeply they haunted one of the most beloved and admired figures of the twentieth century, Mother Teresa, the “Angel of Calcutta.” As her Vatican biographer puts it:

Hidden from all eyes, hidden even from those closest to her, was her interior life marked by an experience of a deep, painful and abiding feeling of being separated from God, even rejected by Him, along with an ever-increasing longing for His love. She called her inner experience, “the darkness.” The “painful night” of her soul, which began around the time she started her work for the poor and continued to the end of her life, led Mother Teresa to an ever more profound union with God. Through the darkness she mystically participated in the thirst of Jesus, in His painful and burning longing for love, and she shared in the interior desolation of the poor.⁹



MOTHER TERESA: THE ANGEL OF CALCUTTA

Mother Teresa was born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu in 1910 to an Albanian Catholic family in the ancient city of Skopje, Macedonia. As a child she heard a call from God. At age eighteen, she left home to join the Sisters of Loreto, an Irish religious community with missions in India. From 1931 to 1948 she taught at a Catholic high

school in Calcutta, eventually becoming its principal. But, during a train ride in 1946, she received her “call within a call”—a direct invitation from Jesus to serve the “poorest of the poor.” In 1948, she received permission to leave the convent to pursue her new calling. Alone and without funding, she began her new mission. Daily, she went into the slums, looking for opportunities to provide care and love to those in greatest need.

Gradually, she began to attract followers, including some of her former students. In 1950, she established a new Catholic religious order, the Missionaries of Charity. The order eventually built missions worldwide to carry out its commitment of serving the poor. By her death in 1997, she had become an inspiration to the world for her commitment to doing “small things with great love.”

Why would such a saintly woman feel chronic emotional pain? Why would she harbor a prolonged feeling of separation, even rejection from God? She, like Richard Nixon, had her darker side. Admired by most, she also attracted critics who argued that the saintly Mother was a self-promoter who perennially inflated her achievements, harmed people she claimed to help, and stubbornly refused to account for millions of dollars in donations she received over the years.¹⁰ Her estimates of numbers of people served and abortions avoided in Calcutta varied from one occasion to another and appeared to significantly stretch the truth. She ensured that her dying patients, regardless of their religion, were baptized (to give them, in her words, “a ticket to St. Peter”), yet she provided haphazard medical care and emphasized prayer over pain relief.

How does a woman with few worldly resources, working among outcasts, win a Nobel Prize and the adulation of millions worldwide? Mother Teresa gave credit to God, but she helped the work along. She was a politician as well as a saint. Her passion and faith were deep and powerful. They fueled and sustained her commitment to her calling. But her impulses toward power and self-promotion were equally robust. Her political inclinations were at the heart of her spiritual struggles.

The “painful night” of her soul emerged during her decision to leave her spiritual and vocational home, the Sisters of Loreto and the school in Calcutta. Between the two she had devoted almost half her life. It was an agonizing choice, opposed by many of her superiors in the Catholic Church. It required her to back out of her promise of a lifetime commitment to the Sisters of Loreto. How much her decision was fueled by a call from God and how much by her own ambition is unclear. Both played a role. But the godly-worldly tension haunted her and made her who she was.

Richard Nixon and Mother Teresa were larger-than-life world figures, and both struggled to manage the conflicting forces in their psyches. Egged on by short-sighted advisers, Nixon let his ambition and his fears trump his genius, with devastating results. Mother Teresa’s triumph was to turn similar tensions into a powerful creative force. She successfully rode the tiger of conflicting impulses and aligned them in support of her call to serve the poor. Their divergent stories reveal deep truths about the risks and possibilities of leadership. Magic and power coexist in the world and in each of us. So too do self-interest and ambition. The forces of light and dark are uniformly real and powerful. Both are at the core of human existence. In the movies we see and novels we read, we rarely encounter anything else. Yet, as much as we are drawn to vicarious experience of others’ struggles, we often deny the same troubling tensions in our own lives.

Many of us hope to lead from our comfort zones. We deny our demons and avoid the inevitable tensions between passion and politics. We disavow both warrior and wizard, hoping that expertise and people skills will get us where we want to go. It is a vain hope. In limiting ourselves and playing it safe, we lose touch with reality and close off access to our deeper psychic and spiritual power. We also forfeit the likelihood that we will achieve anything interesting or important. In the short run, as leaders we may feel less pain and anxiety, but the escape is temporary and organizations suffer because what could make a difference is shunted aside. To lead with passion

and conviction, we need to embrace both power and spirit. We need to recognize and follow a path of paradox and contradiction, a promising route right in front of us. Yet because of our limited vision it is never easy to find or follow. This book is both a prod and a guide.

