

Selected and Implanted by Nature:
Leadership and “Manly Firmness” on the Lewis and Clark Trail
By Stephenie Ambrose Tubbs

When Thomas Jefferson entrusted Meriwether Lewis with the leadership of the Corps of Northwestern Discovery he wrote it was because Lewis possessed a “firmness & perseverance of purpose which nothing but impossibilities could divert from its direction, (he was) careful as a father of those committed to his charge, yet steady in the maintenance of order & discipline...of sound understanding and a fidelity to truth so scrupulous that whatever he should report would be as certain as if seen by ourselves, with all of these qualifications as if selected and implanted by nature in one body, for this express purpose, I could have no hesitation in confiding the enterprise to him.” It appears Jefferson himself would be inclined to follow Lewis to the ends of the earth. As we know forty or so brave souls did, and they came back alive with fantastic stories to tell.

In examining the record of the Expedition, and what makes Lewis’s achievement so memorable, I considered Rudy Giuliani and his book on leadership. For the former Mayor of New York City leadership comes from preparing relentlessly. It requires studying and learning independently. He mentioned that he loved to read biographies of great men for inspiration. Giuliani feels that a true leader has a sense of justice and accountability. A good practice for a leader is to under promise and over produce. I came across other insights into leadership from authors James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner who wrote *The Leadership Challenge* in which they identified key strategies for successful leaders, whom they felt should be able to, model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart. Most military historians agree that a good company commander needs to have a sense of fairness; a competence, a willingness to share the risks, and a sense of being a father to a family.

But I always come back to our Captain’s most underrated gift; an acute sense of timing. He knew when to be the Leader with a capital L., but he also knew when to be a co-captain, when to be the father/ disciplinarian and when to be the comrade. From the beginning Lewis displayed the unique talents of a man capable of leading other men. Under Jefferson’s guidance, he assembled goods, men, information, medicines, “muscatoe curtains” and his own mind with an eye toward the minutest detail. Included on his list of purchases in Philadelphia, such various and sundry items as 52 lead canisters (which kept the gun powder dry and could be melted down for bullets when empty), 12lbs of castile soap,, two pounds of tea, 45 Flannel shirts, 20 frocks, 15 painted knapsacks, 30 gallons of wine, and 36 pairs of stockings. At fifty dozen, he certainly made sure they had enough Rush’s Bilious Pills to treat any illness known or unknown.

During this preparation Lewis never shirked his duty, as laid out by President Jefferson, to learn everything he could about surveying and science. Jefferson sent him to Philadelphia to seek the council and be conversant with some of the most learned physicians of the day; he expected Lewis to carry a small pox vaccine into the wilderness and administer it himself. The lengths of Lewis’s preparations combined with his

inherent scientific curiosity, no doubt impressed his men. The careful way Lewis observed, collected and cataloged the flora and fauna along the river proved him to be a well-trained and methodical leader. And while we know they must have respected his facility with a hunting rifle, I have a feeling they were more heartened to know this was a man who would not be getting them lost in the wilderness. The Corps faithfully believed in his courage undaunted. Perhaps the best example of the confidence the men had in Lewis comes from the incident where Private Windsor almost fell off of the cliff, as Lewis describes it, "I discovered his danger and the trepidation which he was in gave me still further concern for I expected every instant to see him loose his strength and slip off; altho' much allarmed at his situation I disguised my feelings and spoke very calmly to him and assured him that he was in no kind of danger, to take the knife out of his belt and dig a hole with it in the face of the bank to receive his wright foot which he did and then raised himself to his knees; I then directed him to take off his mockersons and to come forward on his hands and knees holding the knife in one hand and the gun in the other this he happily effected and escaped." June 7, 1805. I like to imagine Windsor, at this moment, the happily effected, hugging Captain Lewis and thanking him 'most profusely' as they might say.

The good spirits and willingness to 'proceed on' without complaint must, in part, be due to the fact that the corps sensed they had some say in the outcome of their fate. From courtmartials at the Wood River and the whuppings they dished out, to the Marias or Missouri decision, the men were at each other's mercy. One of the privates told his grandchildren that 'lashes well laid on' meant lashes from a gun ramrod rather than from switches. The location of Fort Clatsop was a product of consultation. The ultimate treatment of William Bratton's back injury was the result of a medical opinion of fellow private John Shields.

I know from my own personal camping experience, when you have a say, or you think you have a say, you do not complain, which is probably the motivating factor behind consulting the crew.

As part of his supreme sense of timing, Lewis knew when to let his co- captain be his co-leader. We are all familiar with the fact that Lewis had insisted on an equal rank with Clark, even after Secretary of War Henry Dearborn refused to make it official. Although at times, after the Expedition, he claimed sole leadership, we know that Lewis desired the same compensation for himself as he did for Clark. Lewis felt perfectly comfortable walking on the shore and leaving Clark in charge of the command and the mapmaking. He let Clark handle his share of the discipline problems and gave him credit for being the favorite physician of the native peoples. The journals show the two captains consulted on names, routes, routines, medical treatments and demonstrated their friendship and cohesion at every turn. They set a fine example of the sort of heart felt friendship among men which inspires devotion in those who observe it.

Lewis knew when to take himself off. He knew not to inflict his bad moods and sour tempers on others. After witnessing the failure of his Experiment, the iron frame boat, Lewis's stoic response, as he related in his journal, "having nothing further to do I

amused myself fishing and caught a few small fish; they were of the white Chub mentioned below the falls, tho' they are small and few in number." (July 10, 1805.) That seems to me a wise and sensible thing to do.

As a leader Lewis knew when to use his commanding voice in dealing with both the men, and the natives. Despite all of the tangible evidence to the contrary he was able to deliver his harangues on making peace and trading with the Americans without losing points for lack of enthusiasm. Dressed in his elaborate uniform, holding his espartoon, Lewis must have looked and sounded quite authoritative, add to that the bit of sorcery he could perform with the compass and the air gun and it is no wonder the natives were impressed.

But did the message he was delivering ever come through to the deliverer? Lewis did not feel the need to go beyond the assignment and rarely showed any compassion for the people he encountered on the way to the Pacific. At times his disdain is palatable, to be fair Clark had those moments too, but in Lewis they always seem more pronounced. For example, Lewis's decision to appropriate a canoe without permission, and his deliberate act of defiance when he chose to remove the dead Piegan warrior, Side Hill Calf's amulets and leave a peace medal in their place so that they "might be informed who we were". (July 27, 1806.) Lewis seems to be always distancing himself from the fact that the natives were fellow human beings capable of understanding disrespect.

In their book, *Primal Leadership*, authors Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee assert that the emotions of a leader are contagious throughout an organization. This would have especially been true with the Corps as they were at times copying directly from the Captains' journals. On the return journey Lewis could no longer be bothered with practicing diplomacy and obviously just wanted to get home. He would suffer no insults or impediments to the Corps at this point. The dognapping of his beloved dog Seaman caused great consternation and prompted Lewis to order three men to pursue, "the thieves, with orders if they made the least resistance or difficulty in surrendering the dog to fire on them." (April 11, 1806.) Can you imagine trying to justify that decision to Thomas Jefferson? Around this time with his patience mostly gone, Lewis still manages to lead his men but he also took on unreasonable risks and seemed to fall victim to what could be perceived as his own faulty judgement. We can tell his confidence is at a high point because he splits his party into smaller and smaller groups; no one seems to question this decision, even though Jefferson explicitly tells Lewis in his instructions, "in the loss of yourselves, we should lose also the information you will have acquired. By returning safely with that, you may enable us to renew the essay with better calculated means. To your own discretion therefore must be left the degree of danger you may risk, and the point at which you should decline, only saying we wish you to err on the side of your safety, and to bring back your party safe even if it be with less information." (Jackson's *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* p.64.) When we look at the incident at Two Medicine in the context of this remark, it seems like Lewis is doing his best not only to take as much rein as Jefferson would give him, but to prove to himself and the men that his leadership knew no bounds. It seems not even the 49th parallel could contain the self assuredness of Meriwether Lewis.

Lewis knew when to be the father figure and when to be the strict disciplinarian. He let the men know that decorum mattered and that mutinous expressions would not be tolerated. When searching for the Shoshone and the herds of horses that would take them over the mountains, Lewis lost his temper because he assumed his men had scared them off. "I now felt quite as much mortification and disappointment as I had pleasure and expectation at the first sight of this indian. I felt so early chagrined at the conduct of the men particularly Shields to whom I principally attributed this failure in obtaining an introduction to the natives." (August 11, 1805). We know he loses his temper, because he admits that he "abridges the men a little for their want of attention and imprudence on this occasion." I pity poor Shields and the others when I think of a Lewis abridging right out there in front of God, on the windy high plains, with the Shoshone and their spotted ponies looking on.

At the same time one can find plenty of examples of Lewis's fatherly concern. He was genuinely concerned for the men's venereal complaints and did not hesitate to put modesty aside and extract a vow of celibacy from the injured parties. When the rain at Fort Clatsop seemed never ending he arranged to have conical hats made for all of the men. And as many times as Shannon got lost, Lewis always sent someone out to bring him back. If the men forgot something or let the horses get away, one senses them shrugging, turning back and saying, "we know what the Captain will say".

Lastly, Lewis knew when to be one of the corps, when to let his guard down and be just one of the mates. Recall Lewis once cooked suet dumplings to add to the dinner pot, as a well-deserved treat for his comrades. The humorous way he describes Charbonneau preparing the boudin blanc and its final step of baptism in the Missouri with "two dips and a flirt" indicates he could share a hearty laugh with the men. The evenings around the smoky fire, with the grog, and the fiddle, and the twinkling eyes were the times when Lewis showed himself to be a leader by being a part of the circle. As a lifelong canoeist I appreciated it when Lewis observes that according to his men, he could pull a tolerable good pole. He could also be a part of a community; I imagine that the men of the Expedition would have done anything for Meriwether Lewis. One of the sweeter moments at Fort Clatsop occurred when Joseph Field presented each of the captains with a writing desk for Christmas. No one ordered Field to perform such a kind gesture; he must have done it out of sincere affection.

Even though he was good at sharing his command, throughout the journals we can find examples of Lewis wanting to be the Cook or Columbus figure. He always seems to be way out ahead when important moments or discoveries were expected. He continually finds little ways of reminding Clark and the crew that he was the man in charge. At the Lolo Hot Springs for example he stayed submerged in the hot water a full nine minutes longer than Clark. Then he made sure everyone would know about it by recording the exact times in his journal. Sometimes Lewis seems to be portraying a character in a stage production, and there is no doubt in his own mind who has the lead role. When an Indian insults him for eating dog, Lewis shows the offender by signs that he would tomahawk him if he "repeated his insolence". At times he seems just on the verge of snapping, of

almost falling over the cliff.

If you study Lewis carefully I think you can easily accept the notion of his self destruction. And not to get too deep into his psychology I nevertheless think he reveals much about himself when he refers to Sacagawea's son as "it", "The child was very restless last night; it's jaw and the back of it's neck are much more swollen than they were yesterday tho' his fever has abated considerably. we gave it a doze of cream of tartar and applied a fresh poultice of onions" (May 24, 1806). From a man who referred to boats as 'she' and to Grizzly bears as "gentlemen", this is a bit hard to swallow. And when he said Sacagawea would be happy anywhere with a few beads and trinkets and did not acknowledge the strong emotional content of her reunion with Cameahwait. I object. Because he was afraid of being perceived as weak, Lewis would never admit that he cried for sentimental reasons. He could not admit that he cared for a savage's child and shared a common bond of humanity with him. Clark admitted it. Lewis never did. The weight of Jefferson's expectations, the reality of being an administrator, facing a deadline, insolvency, chemical dependancies, the lack of a significant other all contributed to Lewis's demise. But I believe it was his essential inability to admit he was just like the rest of us that finally brought him down.

In doing the research for our upcoming book *The Lewis and Clark Companion*, and in studying Jackson's Letters I came across an insightful quote from the artist Charles Willson Peale. He was writing to his son about Clark and his decision to use an editor for the publication of the journals, "I found that the General was too diffident of his abilities. I would rather see a single narrative with such observations as I am sure Clark could have made on the different Nations of Savages & things, which the Notes taken by Capt. Lewis would have passed over unnoticed." Jackson, Letters p.493-494.

Clark's letter to Charbonneau, in which he offers to educate his son in St. Louis and to help Charbonneau find a job, reveals he knew that the lack of compensation for Sacagawea's interpretive services was an injustice. When it became obvious that he was the only person who could insure the publication of the journals Clark stepped forward even though he doubted his own abilities. Getting the job done seemed to be his forte.

Is Clark the better human being, or perhaps just the one less preoccupied with being a hero? I think Clark was content to be mortal, and as we know from his treatment of York, and some of his questionable dealings with tribes East of the Mississippi, he was capable of regret. Lewis never seemed to want to acknowledge his mortality, or that he could possibly be flawed or regret any of his actions. When he returned it was "his late tour"; altogether his expedition, but in the end he knew that it would only be Clark coming to his rescue. If we go back to Guiliani and his advice for leaders, he said that the greatest ability a leader will ever have is the ability to lead his own life. Another tenet of leadership, we can all appreciate states "the fire of a truly great leader is always burning". Somehow when Captain Lewis returned from his rendezvous with destiny his fire went out. I respect and admire Meriwether Lewis, and I believe his men held him in genuine affection, but it is Clark who knew how to lead his own life, how to keep the fire burning. If I may be so bold, here at his Gateway, I would say Jefferson got it a bit wrong, when

he listed Lewis's qualifications as a good leader, "it was as if selected and implanted by nature" in two bodies; Lewis and Clark's. Perhaps the Corps understood this best. Alexander Willard understood this. He fathered seven sons and named one in honor of his Captain Lewis and another in honor of his Captain Clark.