COLUMN: Steadying the ship in stormy waters - A message to youth

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Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) and the ancient city of Ile-Ife have a special place in my heart. When I was a graduate student I often visited this campus for one conference or the other. I enjoyed walking with friends through the lush gardens and parks of this campus. Great Ile is easily one of the most beautiful campuses in Nigeria, and certainly one of the best universities in our beloved continent of Africa.

I am also conscious of the fact that this university is named after one of my heroes, late Chief Obafemi Awolowo. Statesman, economist, lawyer, philosopher and sage; former Head of State General (Dr.) Yakubu Gowon, under whom Awolowo served as Finance Minister and Deputy Chairman of the Federal Executive Council, declared that he is yet to meet the equal of Obafemi Awolowo. The saintly Yakubu Gowon is still living among us; the Abraham Lincoln of modern Nigeria; statesman, quintessential officer and gentleman. We have to believe what he says about Awolowo.

We must always honour the names of the great people who built this university. There was Awo himself, the visioner. And then you had the great Vice-Chancellors; the distinguished agricultural economist, Professor Hezekiah Oluwasanmi; the Dean of Nigerian Economics, Ojetunji Aboyade; the philosopher Wande Abimbola; and the neuropsychiatrist Roger Makanjuola.

During the most formative years of my career I was privileged to have met the late former Vice-Chancellor Ojetunji Aboyade. Aboyade was a first-class graduate of the University of Hull in England. He later completed his PhD at Cambridge as a student of the famous Joan Robinson, one of the collaborators of the great economist John Maynard Keynes. Aboyade was a frequent lecturer at the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS) where I began my career as a Research Fellow. The late Wolfgang Stolper of Harvard University testified that Aboyade did work of original importance on capital formation and was one of the most original economic minds to have come out of Africa. An electrifying intellect, Aboyade’s passion for the development of Nigeria was contagious. I have always felt privileged to have sat at the feet of this oracle of economics.

The Age of Turbulence

Former U.S. Federal Reserve Chairman has titled his memoirs during his nearly two decades as the world’s topmost central banker as The Age of Turbulence. It is a truism to say that we live in difficult times. The post-Cold War international order has led neither to “The End of History” as earlier proclaimed by the political thinker Francis Fukuyama; nor has it led to that post-industrial idyllic world that others have optimistically prophesied. From the September 11 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001 to the tumult unleashed on global financial markets by the sub-prime crisis of 2008 and the “Arab Spring” that has engulfed the Middle East; the world has been rendered more turbulent than ever before.

Added to this is globalisation and the attendant emergence of a more integrated global marketplace, with its complexity, uncertainty and increasing probabilities for non-linear, random, quantum changes. Indeed, there are some who look with nostalgia at the Cold War, because, at least, the so-called “balance of terror” between East and West ensured some form of equilibrium. The post-Cold War international is engendering new forms of instability and insecurity among nations and pupils.

The late Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington spoke about “the clash of civilisations” as the defining character of twenty-first century international society. The attacks on the Twin Towers in New York in September 2001 were emblematic of
the new disorder, with the emergence of al-Qaeda and other extremist movements committed to violence and fanaticism.

Globalisation is also one of the dominant realities of our emerging international economic system. Globalisation entails the internationalisation of world markets, production and capital. Market liberalisation has opened hitherto closed markets and has reduced the role of the state in the economy. The WTO liberal trading regime has given additional impetus to global trade through the removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers.

While opening up enormous opportunities for trade and wealth-creation, globalisation has also intensified global competitive pressures, particularly for developing countries. Inequalities are also deepening within and between countries, leading to new social and geopolitical tensions. Unchecked globalisation is also harming the environment and doing havoc to the biosphere which sustains all human and biological life on our planet.

One of the by-products of globalisation is the intensification of global turbulence. Because we live in an increasingly integrated global marketplace, the incidence of financial and economic volatility is higher, and with it the potential for negative contagion effect. For example, when the subprime crisis broke out in Wall Street, New York, in the autumn of 2008, the impact was immediately felt all across the world – Asia, Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. The price we have to pay for our emerging globalised economy is the reality of increased mutual vulnerability.

One of the paradoxes of globalisation is the increasing absence of leadership in the international system. The theory of “Hegemonic Stability” in the field of international political economy is premised on the proposition that the leadership of a “hegemon” who is willing and able to underwrite the stability of the global economy is essential to maintaining the international equilibrium. Britain and sterling played that role for much of the nineteenth century.

The American public philosopher Walter Lippmann described the twentieth century as “the American Century”. American statesmen such as Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt broke with their county’s long tradition of isolationism and embraced the challenge of world leadership. America took a leadership role in the Bretton Woods negotiations that constructed the post-war international economic architecture. American leadership was decisive in the creation of the United Nations, and Eleanor Roosevelt, America’s First Lady, was one of the architects of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

For better or worse, my generation grew up in the shadow of the American Imperium. Sadly, we find an America that is gradually descending the spiral of secular decline as predicted by world-weary historians from Oswald Spengler to Arnold Toynbee and Paul Kennedy. Having waged costly wars on two fronts; and having exhausted its financial and moral capital; America is, as it were, reaping the whirlwind. The Western world has not been sufficiently grateful to Barack Obama who has almost single-handedly salvaged the United States from the jaws of catastrophe. But we are yet to see the light at the end of the tunnel. The USA remains the most indebted nation on earth today, with a public deficit that currently stands at a staggering US$16 trillion.

The world in which you will be pursuing your careers in the near future will largely be dominated by non-Western economic powers. By 2030, it is projected that Asia will be ahead of Europe and North America combined in terms of population and GDP. It is clear that the emergence of a multi-polar world requires sharing the burden of leadership if international order is to be restored in our world.

Another global trend of note is the dynamics of population. While Europe and North America are regressing in terms of population, the emerging countries are experiencing a population explosion. The world’s population has recently reached the 7 billion mark. It is projected to reach 8.3 billion by 2030.
Africa’s population now stands at 1.1 billion, and is expected to exceed China and India by the year 2030. The continent has the world’s youngest population. The world’s middle class is projected to grow from 3.2 billion in 2020 to 4.9 billion in 2030. A recent report from the United States predicts that by 2050 Nigeria’s population will be about 440 million, way ahead of that of the United States.

Africa is currently experiencing the most rapid growth of the middle class as a percentage of the population. Globally, the middle class as a group will outnumber the poor – those characterised by the economist Paul Collier as “the bottom billion”. With a thriving middle class comes a mass consumer economy. This will provide opportunities for business, industry, agribusiness, banking and finance, infrastructures hotels, tourism and services.

Technology and scientific discovery is obviously another major force and driver of change in our contemporary world. The greatest centres of knowledge and scientific discovery are in Europe and North America. The world’s greatest universities are in the West. The Nobel Prize recipients in the sciences are still predominantly Westerners. The Fields Medal award, considered the Nobel Prize in the mathematical sciences, is dominated by a few countries, notably France, USA, Russia, Britain and Japan. African children score rather poorly on the world math and science Olympiads, although Nigerian pupils have acquitted themselves honourably in recent years.

British war-time Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill, once declared that “the empires of the future will be the empires of the mind”. Churchill meant that those who will command power and wealth in the future will be those who have mastery of science and innovation. Developments in new energy technologies, robotics, space science, nanotechnology and genetics will lead to profound changes in world economics and international relations. The lesson for our nations is that we will have to innovate or perish.

Another important global trend is the spread of democratisation around the world. The collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1989 and the spread of democracy in Eastern Europe opened up new vistas for Humanity. The totalitarian ideologies of the past have been discredited while democracy and the rule of law are now the accepted norms of the Global Standard of Civilisation. The American political thinker Francis Fukuyama coined the term “The End of History” to depict the spread of democracy and liberal market values across the world. One of my old teachers at Oxford, the late Sir Ralf Dahrendorf, termed it “the New Liberty”.

Africa too is basking in the warmth of the New Liberty. Democracy and good governance are taking root and being consolidated in many of our countries. Africa has come a long way. Until recently, our continent was considered a basket case. Wars, conflict and famine engendered by oppressive government were the popular image of our benighted continent.

While it is true that many of these conflicts in Africa were fuelled by the struggle over natural resources such as diamonds and oil, they also have much to do with poverty and the structural violence occasioned by horizontal as well vertical inequities. Above all, they have to do with the lack of good economic and political governance and the absence of the minimum requisites of the rule of law and civil institutions needed to sustain economic development, democracy and social justice.

Living in Europe’s capital of Brussels, I can say with all confidence that a new and more positive image of Africa is gradually emerging. Significant strides are being made not only in economic growth but also in social development, democracy and governance. A new generation of Africans tempered by war, tutored in the crucible of manifold upheavals and wizened by extraordinary suffering are irreversibly committed to the ideals of freedom, democracy and the rule of law. This is not to say, of course, that such progress is not without its challenges. But the trends, in my view, are largely irreversible.

Preparing to Lead in the 21st Century

There have been as many definitions of leadership as there are theorists of leadership. John Quincy Adams, one of Founding Fathers of the American Republic, conceptualises leadership in terms of the ability to inspire people: “If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, and do more and become more, you are a leader”.

The notion of leadership as a form of “steersmanship” is as old as the Greek philosopher Aristotle. The modern science of
cybernetics was invented in the 1940s by the MIT mathematician Norbert Wiener. It derives from the Greek word, *kurbenetes*, which means "steersman" and encompasses a framework of organisational thinking that links knowledge and information to different systems of command and control, from aeronautic engineering to computation.

**The Saga of Joe Boyle**

It reminds me of the story of a Canadian young man of seventeen by the name of Joe Boyle who decided to go on a sea-faring adventure. He wanted to see the world and learn as much as he could about shipping. This was as far back as 1884. The crew on the ship resented the fact that this fellow came from a wealthy family and took to sea merely out of a sense of adventure.

On the course of the oceanic journey, it transpired that, off the coast of South Africa, the ship went into very turbulent weather. It began to rapidly take in water. The ship was about to sink. We are told that everyone had to help in trying to pump out the water; failing which everyone on board would perish. After several days of working day and night, some of them began to weep. They were completely exhausted. When his comrades were about to give up, he deployed some humour: "We can't be shipwrecked here, there are no women on this coast!"

As everybody was giving up, Joe Boyle took over command of the ship. Because of the sense of initiative and leadership that he had, Joe Boyle saved himself and the rest of the crew and passengers aboard the ship. We are told that he went on to make a large fortune as an entrepreneur in gold and commodities trading. A lover of adventure, he was never afraid of adversity. He welcomed danger as an experience and an opportunity. He did not wait to be appointed. He always took the lead.

Joe Boyle had that rare ingredient of character that great leaders and entrepreneurs are made of. He had an insatiable curiosity and appetite for knowledge. He always made it a point to master his field. He radiated confidence and he led by example.

**Imperatives of Transformational Leadership**

There has been a long-standing debate among scholars of leadership as to whether leaders and entrepreneurs are born or made. Some would argue that people like Warren Buffett and Bill Gates are wired differently from the rest of us mortals. There are others, however, who insist that leadership and entrepreneurship can be learned; that it is a learning process and that individuals can be coached and mentored on the art and skills of effective leadership and entrepreneurship.

Harvard Business School professor Warren Bennis, in his famous book, *On Becoming a Leader*, starts from the presupposition that leaders are made, not born. He argues that the process of becoming a leader requires education, training and character formation. Bennis regards self-knowledge to be key to the process of becoming a leader. Leaders, according to him, "...know who they are, what their strengths and weaknesses are...They also know what they want, why they want it, and how to communicate what they want to others, in order to gain their cooperation and support".

A major distinction has been drawn between two main types of leadership, the first, "transactional", and the second, "transformational". Transactional leaders tend to use ‘carrot and stick’ approaches to achieve the results that they want. They engage with their followers using incentives and threats. President Theodore Roosevelt, one of the greatest leaders of the American republic, reportedly loved the African wisdom saying which admonishes the leader: “Speak softly, and carry a big stick; you will go far”.

Transformational leaders, on the other hand, tend to appeal to higher ideals and values. They offer a purpose for their followers that transcends short-term goals while focusing on higher-order ideals. Transformational leaders aim to change human conditions while empowering their followers to aim for the highest and best. According to the medieval Jewish sage, Rabbi Hillel, ordinary leaders create good followers, while extraordinary leaders make leaders out of others. Transformational leaders bequeath a legacy of creative change while building and mentoring other leaders who will carry on their work.

I happen to be a believer in transformational leadership. It is my belief that our country – indeed, Africa – is in dire need of transformational leaders and entrepreneurs if we are to take our destined place among the leading nations of the twenty-first
Seven qualities, in my opinion, are essential to the successful exercise of transformational leadership.

The first is character. It has been said times without number that character maketh the man. Character is indeed destiny. Without a good character and a good name, a man or woman is not worth very much. Character entails adherence to virtue ethics and to the old and time-tested attributes of honesty, loyalty, humility, respect, loyalty, goodness and faith.

The German sociologist, Max Weber, famously underlined charisma as the foundational element for that personal quality that makes leaders stand out from the crowd. Weber himself acknowledged that charisma is better felt than defined. It has to do with that personal magnetism that makes others want to trust and do the bidding of the leader. However we understand charisma, it is obvious to me that a healthy life-style and good grooming can only add to your image as a leader.

Secondly, leaders possess vision. According to the ancient Hebrew sages, “without vision, the people perish”. Leaders are those who are able to see tomorrow; providing a clear vision that rallies the people together for great national undertakings.

A third element of successful leadership is passion. Leaders are deeply passionate people. They believe in the cause they espouse. The American civil rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr., was deeply passionate about the cause of emancipation of his people. He once noted that unless we can find something worth dying for, we haven't begun to live.

Fourthly, leaders possess integrity. Because they believe in a cause that is greater than themselves, they are ready to make all the sacrifice necessary for the achievement of that goal. From Julius Nyerere to Nelson Mandela, the greatest leaders are known to be incorruptible. They identify with their people in their struggle for a better life. The people, on their part, repose their trust in them, knowing that their trust will not be betrayed.

Fifthly, leaders are learners. They are extremely curious people. They are always on the quest for truth. Jesus Christ of Nazareth said, “Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free”. If you desire to be a success in life, you must make books your unfailing companions. Leaders are people who are continually learning. They tend to be of an objective bent of mind. Whilst remaining faithful to personal principles, they are also ready to succumb to superior argument if logic and evidence are compelling enough.

Sixthly, leaders are men and women of courage. Sooner or later, every human being will come across one form of adversity or the other. It is therefore that we nurture the virtue of courage. As the great Nelson Mandela explains: “I learned that courage is not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers fear”. The late Harvard psychoanalyst and organisational theorist, Abraham Zaleznik referred to ‘born again leaders’ as those leaders who have gone through the crucible of adversity and have emerged out of it the stronger and wiser.

Seventh, leaders have mastery over the context in which they operate. Being learners and being supremely curious people, they tend to master their environment. Their feet are always rooted firmly on the earth; and they are ever ready to roll up their sleeves. Leaders appreciate the dignity of labour. They are ‘organic intellectuals’ in the sense understood by the Italian revolutionary intellectual Antonio Gramsci. They not only learn from their environment; they apply those lessons to bettering the organisations and businesses that they lead.

Lastly, leadership entails the pursuit of excellence as a life-long objective and commitment. Excellence, according to the philosopher Aristotle, is a state of mind. Excellence is about continually improving yourself in all areas; in intellect, soul and body. Centuries of oppression and humiliation have broken the spirit and confidence of the African people. We have been to believe that we came into this world to be spectators and that we would forever remain on the margins of world history. As a counter to this pernicious teaching, Kwame Nkrumah long ago espoused the ideal of the African Personality. His vision was that Africans must embrace excellence in all we do. Sloppiness or shoddiness must never be entertained. We must never settle for low quality because we are Africans. We must continually strive for the best and aim for the best. And we must always keep it mind that nothing but the best is good enough for the New Africa of our dreams.

Concluding Observations
Some of the most important things in life are never taught within the walls of the Academy. Universities do not teach how to find your life-purpose or how to choose your future spouse or raise a family. Universities never teach you about the laws of success. You will have to learn them on your own. And after graduation you will have to unlearn the dead weight of scholastic dogmas that have been bombarded into your brain.

My friends, it is never too early to start. Begin today. I urge all of you today to put down on paper the seven goals of your life for the coming five years. Be realistic. Put down goals which are feasible within the context of our country and its realities and limitations. But be creative. Never limit yourself. Never under-estimate your own God-given powers. And let it be said of you, as it was said of Daniel of old, that “an excellent spirit dwelt in him”.

The greatest danger that can ever befall a young man or woman is to not have a clearly defined goal whatsoever in life. You cannot afford to be an aimless drifter. Know your destiny and be clear about your life’s goals. If you are in doubt, talk to the Almighty, however you worship Him and however you conceive Him to be. He will speak to you in your night vigils and by dreams and revelations.

Above all, learn to think for yourself. The greatest gift we have as human beings is the ability to think. The British philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell famously noted that most people would sooner die than think. Thinking is the noblest quality of the human spirit. Rote learning is useless. Imitation is suicide.

Therefore, learn to think for yourself. Let no one do your thinking for you. Think, think and think! From deep thought, you will be able to map out a blueprint for action to realise your dreams and goals. Always think in terms of service. Be unselfish in your innermost motives. As you give, so much will the universe open up to you in greater measure than you have given. In the words of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, “Ask not what your country can do for you; rather, ask what you can do for your country”. And in that journey of a thousand miles, may God’s work also by yours.

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