

Dreaming with Open Eyes: Reflections on Leadership and Spirituality.

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*“I dream of the realization of the unity of Africa,
whereby its leaders combine in their efforts to solve the problems of this continent.
I dream of our vast deserts, of our forests, of all of our great wilderness.”*

– Nelson Mandela¹

“When we open our eyes and dream, we open our eyes.”

– Sam Phillips²

Something is seriously wrong in our organisations today. Many suffer from what Albert Schweitzer³ once referred to as a “*sleeping sickness of the soul.*” Its symptoms are loss of vision, community, morality and compassion. Many voices have been raised to lament the loss of soul and heart in our corporate jungles, where leaders blinded by fear either cower under the pressures and demands of the day or betray the fragile trust given to them with brazen attitude. It has become increasingly clear that there is a desperate need for an indigenous, innovative, values-based leadership approach in South Africa that could mobilize a wide variety of participants around the common goal of reconstructing our society that has been ravished by racial discrimination, disease prevalence, economic injustices, corruption, crime and abysmal leadership failure. Several leadership scholars⁴ have noted that there is a current, global paradigm shift from extreme individualism to communal leadership that stands in sharp contrast with the individualistic, competitive leadership approaches of the past. This new, emerging, post-industrial paradigm of leadership is helping South Africans to start to think of leadership as something that is done in community in stead of the isolated acts of one privileged individual. This

¹ Popular statement attributed to Nelson Mandela.

² Phillips, S 2001. *How to Dream*; from Fan Dance. Nonesuch Records.

³ Andrews, C 1997. *The Circle of Simplicity*. New York: HarperCollins. Page 3.

⁴ For examples of such scholars see (a) Greenleaf, R K 1998. *Servant-Leadership*. In Spears, L C (Eds.), *Insights on Leadership* (pp. 15-20). New York: John Wiley & Sons; and (b) Rost, J C 1991. *Leadership for the twenty-first century*. New York: Praeger.

global shift in the way we do leadership has been mostly marked by a renewed interest in spirituality, communal presence, trust, dialogue and mutuality.

The study of leadership is concerned with the understanding of reality. It is the pursuit of a deepening knowledge of how our world actually works. Joseph Jaworski⁵ echoes this notion when he writes: *“It’s not about positional power; it’s not about accomplishments; it’s ultimately not even about what we do. Leadership is about creating a domain in which human beings continually deepen their understanding of reality and become more capable of participating in the unfolding of the world. Ultimately, leadership is about creating new realities.”* Authentic leadership is marked by an active engagement with the problems and the joys of the world we live in. Seen in this light, leadership is more than just the skilful application of the newest management techniques peddled by motivational gurus and it is certainly more than the capitalist catnip of economic progress at any cost. Leadership is about dreaming with our eyes open, leading whilst present in the moment and to one-another and so finding ways to participate in the creation of a better tomorrow. Spirituality deeply informs this kind of leadership approach. In order illustrate this, I would like to explore in this short chapter how the affective spiritualities of the African social philosophy of ubuntu and the Christian theological and ethical construct of kenosis can work together to underscore and motivate an authentic indigenous approach to leadership in South Africa.

Seeing the Other: The African Philosophy of Ubuntu and Leadership.

The South African Nguni word ubuntu⁶, from the aphorism; *“Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu – a person is a person because/through others”*; can be described as the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, humanity and mutuality in the interest of building and maintaining communities with justice and mutual caring. More than a descriptor of African values, ubuntu should be seen as a social philosophy that is deeply embedded in African culture. Even though ubuntu finds its semantic origins in Southern Africa the concept is endemic to Sub-Saharan Africa. The African practice of affective community, as in ubuntu, is not a concept that is easily distilled by methodological scrutiny. Superficial and expedient adoption of the construct by

⁵ Jaworski, J 1998. *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers. Page 3.

⁶ For a fuller treatment on the meaning of ubuntu see (a) Mkabela, Q 2005. Using the Afrocentric method in researching indigenous African culture. *The Qualitative Report* 10 (1), pp. 178-189; and (b) Mnyaka, M and Motlhabi, M 2005. The African concept of ubuntu/botho and its socio-moral significance. *Black Theology* 3.2, pp. 215-237.

corporate South Africa has not helped to foster a deeper appreciation of its inherent spiritual values of interconnectedness, foundational humanity and responsibility. The South African theologian, Tinyiko Maluleke⁷ notes that, "...it (*talk about ubuntu*) has often been conducted in sporadic, unstructured, naïve and dangerous ways. This relates to the lack of deliberate and focused interest in issues of African culture on the part of African thinkers and the new government." A more correct way of thinking about ubuntu is to consider it as a basic approach to spirituality that is manifested in communal enterprise. It is part of the very fabric of African spiritual and intellectual identity.

South Africa as a country that has openly marginalized African indigenous knowledge is slowly reclaiming its foundational and identifying tenets of spirituality and philosophy. The study and exploration of indigenous systems of knowledge in South Africa is blossoming as a new and valid academic discipline and thus opens the door for multi-disciplinary dialogue and applications in many fields like leadership. Ubuntu, seen in the spirit of participatory humanism, has the power to effect a revitalized commitment in South Africans to the rebuilding of their communities. Leaders with the inherent values of ubuntu, as it might relate to leader/follower interaction, can be described as, people-centered, humble, ready to enter into dialogue, caring, tolerant, considerate, hospitable and as having an attitude of mutual acceptance or mutuality, amongst other descriptors. An ubuntu-based approach in leadership sees community rather than self-determination as the essential aspect of personhood. It is in reference to the community that a person is defined. The Venda saying, "*Muthu u bebelwa munwe – A person is born for the other*", captures the spirit of this approach of interdependence between self and community. This is more than mere interdependence, the identity of the self is defined in finding the other in community. It is in seeing and entering into honest dialogue and interaction based on mutuality with the other that the self is formed and defined. This central value of mutuality in ubuntu provides us with an opportunity to explore how this African philosophy might inform leadership approaches.

The value and practice of mutuality in ubuntu is defined paradoxically by the differences found in the other. Accommodation and respect for the differences in the other flows from a determined recognition of the common humanity of the self and the other. Mutuality in ubuntu sets the stage for the incorporation of the values of tolerance, respect and honest dialogue. The evident humane

⁷ Maluleke, T 1999. The misuse of ubuntu. *Challenge*, 53, pp.12-13.

values of ubuntu is obviously not unique to African culture, but provides leadership practitioners and scholars with a conceptual base to enter into cross-cultural discussions about what a value-based leadership approach might look like in a post-apartheid South Africa. Mutuality in ubuntu allows for the breaking down of the superficial and artificial barriers between the actors in the leadership exchange and allows both leader and follower to see the other, discover their mutual humanity and in doing so foster the construction of a caring community that allows for the respectful tolerance of social, cultural, economic and philosophical differences.

Becoming the Other: The Christian Concept of Kenosis and Leadership.

The Christian theological construct of kenosis is developed from the occurrence of the Greek word “*kenao*” (literally to make empty) in the Christological hymn of the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Philippians (2:5-11) where it describes the voluntary self-emptying of Christ in the incarnation. Many New Testament scholars⁸ have argued in the last century that the grammar, style and vocabulary of the hymn indicate that it was a Greek composition, that the author was most likely a Semitic language speaker, that it was part of the Eucharistic liturgy of the Christian community in Jerusalem and thus probably pre-Pauline. The Christological hymn contains some of the earliest doctrinal and ethical statements of the early Christian movement. Kenosis, as an ethical construct of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, speaks of a very specific belief in the mode of God’s interaction with the world. In the doctrine of incarnation, the Christian claim is that God actually lived the life of a man in Jesus of Nazareth and thus the kenosis (self-emptying) of God in Christ provides an ethical and philosophical mode of ministry and leadership that is based on voluntary abasement and mutuality with all of humankind.

The spirituality of kenosis, building on the doctrinal tenets of the incarnation, positions itself in a recognition and appreciation of a specific culture; in a sense the embracing of the self’s and by implication the other’s “*sitz-im-leben*” (context). Appropriating the values of kenosis in leadership requires the identification and acceptance of the social and cultural locality of the self and the other as the beginning point in the (re)building of community. Leaders with the values of kenosis can be described as characterised by, voluntary self-limitation, vulnerability, present to the other, voluntary powerlessness, continual purification from self-centeredness, humility, self-sacrifice, and openness to the other. Kenosis addresses the true challenge of dialogical

⁸ For a review on the literature of this text see Martin, R P 1997. *A hymn of Christ: Philippians 2:5-11 in recent interpretation and in the setting of early Christian worship*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press.

behaviour and as appropriated in the Christian past was often rooted in a mimetic re-enactment of the self-emptying (kenotic) Christ. This reading of kenosis⁹ became the hermeneutical key for Christian leaders in the past in which they interpreted the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and applied its meaning to leadership within their own temporal context. Kenosis was often seen as a mystical communion with the kenotic Christ that leads to personal transformation of both the leader and follower and enabled them to practice kenosis (self-emptying) as Christ did. This resolute divesting of the prestige and power inherent in the leadership transaction enables the leader and follower to enter into a new union that is marked by equality and service. Yves Raguin¹⁰, a Christian thinker explains the leadership implications of kenosis, when he writes: “...kenosis, then, is the gateway to mutual understanding, and beyond this, to an intimate sharing that is the consummation of a relationship in union...By dispossession of self we are able to absorb the amazing riches of others...”.

The value of mutuality in kenosis allows the leader to transcend narrow selfhood, to locate the other in love and to truly enter into the world of the follower where the leader becomes the servant of the other. This is a state of mutual acceptance, vulnerability and receptivity. This overcoming of the separation between leader and follower finds its deepest dimension in kenotic love and self-sacrifice that negates, in the words of Thomas Merton¹¹, the “*dream of separateness*” that so often pervades organisational leadership. The central value of mutuality in the theological and ethical construct of kenosis allows the leader to locate the follower in their mutual humanity and so find their deepest identity in a communal, redefining, and empowering relationship of self-sacrificial love.

Dreaming with Open Eyes: Ubuntu and Kenosis in Leadership.

Religious communities and leaders in South Africa have often suffered from a determined blindness to their own cultural heritage and of others resulting in leadership styles and approaches that seldom seemed more anachronistic than relevant. Authentic spirituality is rooted in an open-eyed acceptance of our own locality, our own context which in turn empowers us to honestly enter into dialogue with others. We have to accept our own truth before we can accept

⁹ For a full treatment on the theological and ethical ramifications of the concept of kenosis see Cronin, K M 1992. *Kenosis*. Rockport: Element.

¹⁰ Raguin, Y 1973. *I am sending you (John 22:21): Spirituality of the Missioner*. Manila: East Asian Pastoral Institute. Page 111.

¹¹ Merton, T 1966. *Conjectures of a guilty bystander*. New York: Doubleday. Page 156.

the truth of others. Contextual readings of religious texts facilitate an authentic response to the ethical demands of our own particular spirituality. An example of this kind of contextual reading of scripture is found in the South African theologian, Jonathan Draper's¹² writings, when he sees elements of ubuntu in the philosophical and ethical tenets of the early Jesus movement: *"The African practice of affective community, of fundamental humanity, seems to me to relate closely to what emerges from a sociological/anthropological analysis of the Jesus movement. We are human only in society; we attain full humanity only through a liberative, empowering relationship with other beings in community"*. Following on from the insights gathered from contextual readings of sacred scripture, South African Christian leaders, like Desmond Tutu, have slowly started the work of interpreting their Christian ethical norms in the light of their own cultural locality. This approach to leadership has been clearly demonstrated in the reconciliatory work of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee which has been fuelled by the ubuntu-informed theology of Tutu. Oppressor and oppressed can find another in the mutual pain that hate brings and work together as partners for a new future. Community is thus not build by a parading of our own individual strengths but in a humble acceptance of our mutual humanity that binds us together. The promise that mutuality brings are beautifully illustrated in the following inspirational words, attributed to arguably South Africa's most famous leader, Nelson Mandela: *"If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner."*

Ubuntu and kenosis finds common ground in the value of mutuality, where the wall of separation between leader and follower is removed as they locate and redefine one another in their common humanity and so set in motion a renewed ethical movement that facilitates the (re)building of a just and caring society. There are strong parallels between the Christian theological construct of kenosis and the African practice of affective community and fundamental humanity in the social philosophy of ubuntu. Ubuntu and kenosis, as related to organisational leadership, find common ground in the value of mutuality where both leader and follower locate the other in *"moments of incarnation"*¹³ and so enter into a redefining relationship marked by self-sacrificial love and common humanity. The parallels between ubuntu and kenosis allow for the construction of a value-based style of leadership in South Africa that is both African and Christian where leader and follower attain full humanity through a liberative, empowering relationship of mutuality.

¹² Draper, J A 1994. Jesus and the renewal of local community in Galilee: challenge to a communitarian Christology. *Journal of Theology of Southern Africa*, 87, pp. 29-42. Page 41.

¹³ Fleming, D 2004. *Leadership wisdom from unlikely voices*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. Page 129.

South Africa is in a process of regaining her identity and finding her place on the continent and the larger world. Authentic leadership informed by grounded spirituality provides a platform for the (re)building of a just and caring society. Now is the time for fearless honesty and vision. In this adventure leadership and spirituality should not be enemies, but rather close friends. They both help us open our eyes, find one another in love and together dream about the possibilities of tomorrow as we boldly do the work of leadership. The future of Africa lies in the hands of open-eyed dreamers.

*“...suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people,
that they were mine and I was theirs,
that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers.
It was like waking up from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation.”*

- Thomas Merton¹⁴

¹⁴ Merton, T 1966. *Conjectures of a guilty bystander*. New York: Doubleday. Page 156.