



The Heart of a Leader: Connecting Leading and the Inner Life

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I contend that Christ's mission as stated in Luke 4: 18-19 must be every Christian leader's call, regardless of our religious or organizational affiliations:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (New International Version)

Much is required of leaders, and much is at stake. "If any man sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task" (1 Timothy 3:1). Sadly, heightened scrutiny in the wake of corporate and political scandals and a seemingly endless wave of leaders' failures in every organizational and religious context imaginable has caused many to give leadership a bad name. Being a leader doesn't seem to be that noble anymore in the eyes of many. What happened to Paul's admonition to Timothy? What happened to *noblesse oblige*? Why the lack of integrity?

Leadership failure, according to Palmer, is not so much a failure of ethics as it is a failure of human wholeness.

The divided life, at bottom, is not a failure of ethics. It is a failure of human wholeness. Doctors who are dismissive of patients, politicians who lie to the voters, executives who cheat retirees out of their savings, clerics who rob children of their well-being – these people, for the most part, do not lack ethical knowledge or convictions. They doubtless took courses on professional ethics and probably received top grades. They gave speeches and sermons on ethical issues and more than likely believed their own words. But they had a well-rehearsed habit of holding their own knowledge and beliefs at great remove from the living of their lives. (2004, p. 7)

It is my growing conviction, that after it is all said and done, after all the leadership theory and tools have been studied, leaders ultimately lead according to who they are. Leadership is deeply personal. Let's linger, for a moment, on the implications of this assertion. If leaders are unwell, weary, unhappy, or demoralized, their followers will suffer. The consequences of leading without integrity are dreadful, especially for those who follow. The following represents a call to introspection, reflection, and learning to all who are open.

The Heart of a Leader

Vaclav Havel - poet, essayist, activist, and head of state – in one of his most compelling address to the U.S. Congress on the subject of democratic ideals and the rebirth of the human spirit in February of 1990 reminds us that “Salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart – in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and human responsibility.”

The heart of the leader, or of anyone else for that matter, hints of mystery and mostly hard to grasp qualities and elusive constructs such as emotion, intuition, and passion. The heart is often mentioned as critical to performance. Coaches want players to perform with heart. Employers want employees to put their heart into their work. No word or concept in the gallery of language and human thought has garnered as much attention as the idea of “heart. Heart is implicated as the center of vital functions, as the seat of life and mind, of feeling, understanding, and thought. The heart is also the setting for one’s innermost being and one’s soul. It is the core of our human self and according to those who study the self’s role, the coordinating center for our action in the world. For Baumeister (1998) the heart is the guide for our executive functions. Palmer defines heart “as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit will converge in the human self” (1998, p.11). According to Nouwen the heart “is not just the place where our emotions are located. The heart is the center of our being, the center of all thoughts, feelings, passions, and decisions.” (1997, p. 175) Kouzes and Posner add:

Developing leadership capacity is not about stuffing in a whole bunch of new information or trying out the latest technique. It’s about leading out of what is already in your soul. It’s about liberating the leader within you. It’s about setting yourself free. It’s about putting your ear to your heart and just listening. (2006, p. 98).

However, we consciously give emotions less respect than they deserve because of what we are taught by our culture: "Don't wear your heart on your sleeve." The message is simple: If you want to stay safe, hide your feelings. And conventional education elevates this "folk wisdom" to the status of "philosophical truth" by demanding that we stifle subjectivity for the sake of objective knowledge. More than a few academics dismiss appeals to the emotions as "touchy-feely," apparently imagining that disdain (also an emotion) will settle the issue. But the fact that good leadership requires emotional intelligence has been demonstrated time and again by leadership researchers. The effective exercise of leadership requires leaders to tap into their own and their followers’ feelings. Palmer (2007) contends: “Good teachers, lawyers, physicians, and leaders bring at least as much art as science to their work, art rooted partially in the affective knowledge that eludes empirical measurement.”

An online keyword search of the Bible returns 743 results with the word heart. Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible cites the heart 826 times. In the Bible the heart is considered the seat of life and strength. It encompasses our mind, soul, and spirit – in short our emotional nature and understanding. It is not surprising therefore that the heart is also considered as the primary source of immoral behaviors such as adultery, hatred, lust, mischief, pride, rebellion, greed as well as the well of life for behaviors such as desire, doubt, fear, gladness, love, obedience, and sorrow.

Moreover, the heart is said to have the ability to reason, question, meditate, motivate, and think. I find it interesting that God is described as being able to know, search, enlighten, open, recreate, examine, strengthen, and establish one's heart – and not one’s mind. One can have a clean, contrite, perfect, pure, or wise heart, but the Bible does not attribute those qualities to the mind.

The following are just a few examples of the Bible pointing us not only to the emotional state of the heart, but also to its mental abilities.

The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks. (Luke 6:45)

For as he thinks in his heart, so is he. (Proverbs 23:7)

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. (Matthew 5:8)

But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man... (Matthew 15: 17-20)

I have chosen the way of truth; I have set my heart on your laws. (Psalm 119:30)

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. (Proverbs 4:23)

The challenges of leadership are both practical and deeply personal. Ultimately, they must lead us to reflect on what we are committed to and what futures we desire to create. Such questioning and understanding is essential to our effectiveness as educators, trainers, coaches, and leaders. Our inward turn, therefore, is not idle self-absorption but is, in fact, critical to our effectiveness as leaders. Leaders must make a courageous decision to diligently examine their hearts, in order to identify areas of needed change and growth.

Out of the Shadows

[A leader is] someone with the power to project either shadow or light onto some part of the world and onto the lives of the people who dwell there. A leader shapes the ethos in which others must live, an ethos as light-filled as heaven or shadowy as hell. A good leader is intensely aware of the interplay of inner shadow and light, lest the act of leadership do more harm than good. (Palmer, 2000, pp. 78-79)

As leaders have the responsibility to influence, inspire, and motivate people, leaders must engage in a process of self-development and self-discovery because not doing so has serious implications for those around them and the organizations they lead. By failing to be aware of the interplay of inner shadow and light, leaders indulge in and enable a harmful deception: that their efforts are always well-intended, their power always benign, and the problem is always in those difficult people whom they are trying to lead! This, of course, allows the shadow to grow unchecked, until it emerges larger-than-life into the public realm. Robert Moxley wrote to that effect:

Of all the soft stuff that executives and managers, and all the rest of us try to avoid, inner consciousness may be the softest of all. Inner consciousness cannot be quantified, it cannot be studied empirically. It cannot be experienced by any of the senses. It is not part of the curriculum of the Harvard Business School. It is hard to understand, much less appreciate. Managers and executives have enough problems with which to wrestle; they see no need to go on an inner journey to find more....It is easier to operate on a belief that what you see is what you get. (1999, p. 129)

The more I talk to leaders and their followers, the more I am convinced that most of us don't make the connection between our inner life and the outer realities that we create as a consequence. While good leaders do not just focus on the inner life development at the expense of the outer competencies required of them, good leaders recognize the need for both. Bennis (1989) suggests that successful leadership has often been more about deep understanding of one's interior landscape than a keen ability to respond or manipulate an external landscape. Therefore, leaders must make every effort not to become another casualty in the growing number of those who have compromised their integrity, character, organizations, and ultimately legacy because they failed or refused to lead an examined and accountable life.

It is encouraging to see the literature on leadership increasingly acknowledging the need for those in leadership roles to develop a deep understanding of self in terms of beliefs, values, strengths and weaknesses before they can successfully lead others (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004; Livsey & Palmer, 1999). The inner life of the leader is the birthplace of moral values, character formation, concern for others, and ultimately ethical decision making. Badaracco and Ellsworth conclude that, "Outstanding leaders have sources of inner direction" (1989, p.100). Kouzes and Posner, based on the notion that all leadership starts from within, declare that "Becoming a leader begins with an exploration of the inner territory as we search to find our authentic voice. Leaders must decide on what matters in life, before they can live a life that matters" (2006, p. 90). Others also suggest that internal efforts lead to authenticity, character, improved integrity, trust, and engaged and better followership (Bennis, 1989; Kouzes and Posner, 2006).

The costs of an unexamined inner life are high. In addition to organizational damage, Bennis is very specific about his concern for what a lack of self-discovery in the realms of leadership can cause. He compares leaders without it to incompetent doctors who do more harm than good. A leader without the benefit of this internal work can become what he calls "carriers" making their followers ill (1997, p.86).

The Way Forward

The way forward seems clearly marked. Palmer, asserting that the connection between a leader's inner journey to identity and integrity eventually fosters undivided authenticity in leadership, encourages leaders to take this inner journey:

New leadership is needed for new times, but it will not come from finding more wily ways to manipulate the external world. It will come as we who serve and teach and lead find the courage to take an inner journey toward both our shadows and our light – a journey that, faithfully pursued, will take us beyond ourselves to become healers of a wounded world. (n.d.)

The question of leadership in general and Christian leadership in particular, is deeply spiritual. Leaders need not only the technical skills to manage and manipulate the external world—they need the spiritual skills to journey inward. Spirituality is not an easy concept to grasp and certainly not easy to define. The word spirituality, taken from the Latin root *spiritus*, refers to a person "of the spirit." The term is also frequently mentioned in the Hebraic Old Testament as *ruach* and the Greek New Testament as *pneuma*.

Fairholm (1997), calling for a return to the heart of leadership, referred to spirituality as "the essence of who we are, the intangible, life-giving force in self and all people" (pp. 6-7). Spirituality, thusly, informs the way people think and how they perceive the world around them - guiding their social, emotional and intellectual activities.

For most of the one-hundred year lifetime of modern management and leadership, we have ignored this idea [of spirituality]. It has not even been mentioned in our textbooks. Yet for that same period of time and, indeed, throughout all of social history, we have identified inner moral – spiritual – standards as the prime influence of human action. Our sense of spiritual wholeness defines humankind, determines our guiding values, and directs our most intimate decisions and actions. To leave spirituality out of our thinking about our leadership (or followership) is to diminish our theory, perhaps to make it irrelevant. (Fairholm, 1997, p.1)

Regardless of any definition, “the basic tenet is that the intangible ultimately bears far greater significance to human existence than the tangible; that that which cannot be seen, measured or quantified has direct bearing on that which can” (N. Gomez, personal communication, April 25, 2008). Failing, then, to connect spirituality and leadership would not only speak of our absolute and downright ignorance, but would also be a tragic mistake. Let’s not forget that people and nations suffer greatly at the hands of leaders “who possess the skill and the power to manipulate external reality but lack the foggiest idea of the inner dynamics that drive their actions” (Palmer, 2007, xxxi).

Sadly, this truth is not well served by the language of leadership theory, and as such has not yet found its way into the curriculum of most formal leadership development programs. The kind of leadership that is required calls for disciplines and habits of the mind and heart that typically are not addressed in leadership development programs: patience, humility, faithfulness, intuition, and spiritual grounding. Considering, however, the plethora of leadership development efforts and the funds expended upon these efforts, the overarching question that must remain at the forefront on any educator’s mind is: what kind of leadership education and development are we offering and for what purpose? If the inner life is as critical as indicated by so many, then we must look for better ways to incorporate inner work into leaders’ professional and leadership development. Furthermore, if leaders lead according to who they are, then it becomes critical for them to pursue with diligence a deeper and better understanding of their inner life. We need new models of leadership development that not only focus on developing skills to manipulate material, institutions and people, but that embraces the whole person. To that effect, David Gyertson proposes:

To succeed in this calling, we must embrace a whole person model of leadership learning, living, and serving, which, at its core, is a process of spiritual awakening and formation. At the very heart of this calling is a commitment to whole person development designed to produce spiritually formed leaders able to change their world through stretched minds, cradled hearts, and reformed hands known for their noble, effective, and sacrificial service. I believe we must address, more intentionally, the needs and means for an integrated view of whole person leadership development anchored to the fundamental elements of spiritual formation. (2007, p. 126)

At this point allow me to return to the most important matter concerning the heart and inner life of a leader. Christ’s mission statement begins with the words, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me.” It is imperative, therefore, that Christian leaders begin their journey toward their inner shadows and embracing the light at that very juncture. The inner life is only developed as one submits to the leading of the Spirit of God. The search for a Christian perspective on the spirituality of leadership is not simply an academic exercise. It is the search for a heart that truly has Christ at its center, wholly submitted to God’s sovereignty and grace; the search for a more *christianly* heart is in the end a search for Christ in us and through us to become healers of a wounded world.

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