

A Leader's Lifeline in the Crucible of Ministry

Ruth Haley Barton

“I didn’t want to be the leader because the leader always gets voted off the island.”

Gary Hogeboom
Survivor Guatemala

A couple of years ago, our family watched a season of the reality T.V. show *Survivor* because we were acquainted with one of the participants—former NFL quarterback, Gary Hogeboom. He emerged early on as a leader on his team—probably because of his age, his experiences on the football field, and even his responsibilities as a father of five children! After the season was over, an interviewer asked how he felt about the fact that he became a leader on the team so quickly and he said, “I didn’t want to be the leader because the leader always get voted off the island.”

I immediately thought, “Now *there’s* a man who knows something about leadership!”

During that time, I was also being drawn into the story of Moses and it occurred to me that this was an apt description of Moses’ leadership experience as well. The children of Israel were constantly trying to “vote him off the island” even though Moses had sacrificed everything to lead them. Most of us who have been in leadership for any length of time at all can probably resonate with Gary’s statement. We have all seen and experienced things in leadership for which we still do not have categories and may never this side of heaven. But one thing is sure: the choice to lead something, to orient your life toward some sort of vision or ideal, opens you up to a world of complexity, and even pain, that you might not otherwise have to face. The Scriptures are unflinchingly honest about that.

But Moses' story also casts vision for a depth of intimacy with God that developed *in the context of his leadership*, and that is perhaps the most significant reason I am drawn to his story. Moses' leadership challenges and experiences *catalyzed* and *drew him into* a level of reliance on God that he might not have pursued if it were not for his great need for God, which he experienced most profoundly in the wilderness places of his leadership. He literally had no place else to go!

Moses' whole life can be viewed through the lens of his private encounters with God and how his soul was strengthened through those encounters. He did not seem to have any great plans or strategies for his leadership except to seek God in solitude and then carry out what God revealed to him there. He routinely sought God in times alone (or God sought him) and then he emerged from that place and did what God told him to do. For Moses, leadership was that simple!

Today we might say that is too simplistic an approach to leadership given the complexities and the unique challenges of life in our culture. Perhaps. I, like many of you, have been around the leadership block too many times to accept simplistic answers to complex questions. However, I also believe there is such a thing as the simplicity beyond the complexity and I suspect this may be a part of it.

A Unique Challenge for Leaders

The discipline of solitude is a key discipline for all those who seek after God. However, a leader's journey into solitude and silence has its own unique challenges. One of the great and very subtle temptations relative to life in leadership is that the activities and experiences associated with leadership can be very addicting. The idea that I can *do*

something about this, that, or the other thing feeds something in us that is voracious in its appetite. That something is the ego or the false self that, over time, identifies itself and shores itself up with external accomplishments and achievements, roles and titles, power and prestige. Leadership roles, by their very nature, give a lot of fodder for the ego. To remove ourselves, even for a time, from the very arena where we are receiving so much of our identity can be difficult, if not impossible, for leaders no matter how much mental assent we give to the whole idea.

Many leaders preach solitude better than they practice it and I suspect this may be the nut of it. Leaders are busy, yes. Solitude necessitates that we pull away from the demands of our lives in ministry, which is never easy and involves many logistical challenges. But I wonder if the real reason we resist actually moving into solitude may have more to do with the anxiety that comes as we pull away from that which we have allowed to define us externally. Usually we're not willing to let go of all that unless we are desperate, which is certainly what drew Moses into solitude early in his development as a leader.

Moses was destined to be a leader. He was called by God to be a leader. And yet there were unresolved tensions within him that needed to be refined by the rigors of true solitude before he could become the leader the Israelites needed. His murderous rage, described for us in Exodus 2:11-15, put him in touch with such serious inner dynamics that he knew he had to leave his life in the company of others and pay attention. Like Moses, it almost always it takes some level of desperation for us as leaders to embark on the journey beyond mere dabbling in solitude to the kind of encounters with God that truly transform our leadership. If we can establish a pattern of seeking God regularly and routinely in solitude before situation gets desperate, so much the better!

As my own calling into leadership has deepened and the terrain has become more rugged, I have turned more and more often to the story of Moses. I have wanted to see exactly what happened to him in those times alone with God and how his leadership emerged from there. I have found myself in his story and have been jealous to experience even a fraction of the Presence that kept Moses faithful to his calling over the long haul. I have been inspired by Moses' tenacity in battling it out with God, rather than giving up (or dreaming about giving up) when the going got tough. I have asked God for the kind of courage and staying power that enabled Moses to stay faithful to his calling against all odds. And I have cried out for the grace to live with my own limitations and imperfections, as Moses did, and not be completely derailed by them

Moses' encounters with God in solitude were clearly his lifeline, his only means of survival. This was the primary place where his soul was strengthened for the long haul of leadership, and when he got to the end of his life he was described as the greatest prophet in Israel whom the Lord knew face to face. He did not achieve his vision the way he envisioned it, but he knew God and God knew him—which is perhaps the greatest achievement of all. These days, that is all I want. *If your presence will not go, do not lead us up from here.*

©Ruth Haley Barton. This article is adapted from Ruth's forthcoming book, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Experiencing God in the Crucible of Ministry* (InterVarsity Press, 2008).

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