

The Transforming Leader: Giving the Best I've Got

by Ruth Haley Barton

Spiritual transformation has become quite the buzzword in Christian circles today. The good news is that it speaks to our desire for more in the spiritual life: more than just head knowledge, more than rules that merely govern external behaviors, more than religious activity loaded onto lives that already feel unmanageable. The language of spiritual transformation holds the promise of intimacy with God and real life change; it helps us to name desires that are so deep and have been so often disappointed that many of us have given up trying to articulate them.

The bad news, or at least the news that makes us a bit uncomfortable, is that many leaders, in seeking to respond to these longings, are trying to lead their congregations and organizations into realities that they are not experiencing for themselves. They lack clarity about what spiritual transformation is and how it unfolds in the lives of real people. With little experiential knowledge of the practices and processes that open us to spiritual transformation beyond our own human effort, they are searching for a life-giving way of life for themselves and scrambling to put together a strategy that will make other people's lives work for them. As one pastor put it, "I am increasingly unsure about how one is supposed to navigate the time commitments of ministry and one's personal spiritual journey toward growth and wholeness. I find myself wondering if the two aren't mutually exclusive."

These are brave admissions, ones that give way to very productive questions about the nature of leadership. Is it enough to be able to articulate vision and set strategy, develop systems for managing everything from people to payroll to operations, motivate individuals and mobilize teams to get things done? What *is* the most important thing a Christian leader can bring to his or her church or organization?

Engaging the Process of Spiritual Transformation

The best thing any of us have to bring to leadership is our own transforming self. Why? Because engaging deeply in the process of spiritual transformation and choosing to lead from that place gives us the opportunity to forge a powerful connection between our souls—that place at the center of our being where God's spirit is at work, loving, transforming and guiding us—and our leadership.

Spiritual transformation is the process by which Christ is formed in us. It is an organic process that goes far beyond mere behavioral tweaks to deep fundamental changes at the very core of our being. In the process of spiritual transformation the Spirit of God moves us from behaviors motivated by fear and self-protection to trust and abandonment to God, from selfishness and self-absorption to freely offering the gifts of the authentic self, from the ego's desperate attempts to control the outcomes of our lives to the ability to do God's will even when it is foolishness to the world around us.

This kind of change is not something we can produce or manufacture for ourselves; it is a gift from God that is full of mystery—much like the formation of an embryo in the mother’s womb or the metamorphosis of the caterpillar in the cocoon. God guides the process and brings it to fruition; all we can do is create the conditions in which it can take place. The transforming leader is appropriately humbled by this realization and also relieved not to have to bear the heavy weight of changing himself, or others. The transforming leader is faithful to do the one thing he or she *can* do by entering into the spiritual practices that create the conditions in which spiritual transformation can take place.

Sane rhythms of work and rest

One of the earliest disciplines Jesus taught his disciples as they entered into their life in ministry was the importance of establishing a rhythm of working and resting that honored their humanness. Rather than getting caught up in their early excitement about being empowered to preach the good news, to heal the sick and to cast out demons (Mark 6), he became very intentional about helping them not to get so full of themselves that they forgot they were human. He did not merely preach about rest and send them off on their own; he invited them to come away with him, giving them concrete guidance for finding time and space and dealing with distractions. Even when the needs of the crowd pressed in, Jesus was resolute in guiding them towards a place of rest.

The issue of depletion is one of the most serious issues facing Christian leaders today. Many are completely unaware of the powerful undertow that has them imperceptibly drifting into the dangerous waters of spiritual, emotional and physical exhaustion. While all of us move in and out of the normal tiredness that accompanies a job well done, many are dangerously tired, plagued by a chronic, inner fatigue that has accumulated over months and even years of time.

When we are dangerously tired, our way of life may seem heroic but there is frenetic quality to our work that lacks true effectiveness because we have lost the ability to be present to God, to be present to other people and to discern what is really needed. The result is “sloppy desperation”: a mental and spiritual lethargy that prevents us from the quality of presence that delivers true insight.

Charles, a gifted physician illustrates the point: “I discovered in medical school that if I saw a patient when I was tired or overworked, I would order a lot of tests. I was so exhausted, I couldn’t tell exactly what was going on ...so I got in the habit of ordering a battery of tests, hoping they would tell me what I was missing. But when I was rested—if I had the opportunity to get some sleep, or go for a quiet walk—when I saw the next patient, I could rely on my intuition and experience to give me a pretty accurate reading of what was happening...when I could take the time to listen and be present with them and their illness, I was almost always right.” (Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*, New York: Bantam Books, 1999, p. 5-6)

When we are deeply tired, we become overly reliant on voices outside of ourselves to tell us what is going on and we react to symptoms rather than seeking to understand and respond to underlying causes. For some of us, the best thing we could bring to our leadership is a more rested self, one who is able to bring steady, alert attention to our leadership.

Solitude and Silence

One of the more sobering truths about life in leadership is that we can be very busy and look very important, yet be out of touch with that place in the center of our being where we know who we are in God and what he has called us to do—that place where we are responsive to the voice of God above all others. When this happens we are at the mercy of all manner of external and internal forces, tossed and turned by other's expectations and our own inner compulsions. These inner lacks then become the source of frenetic activity that is completely disconnected from true wisdom and insight.

Solitude and silence are disciplines that provide us with a place to regularly rest in the One who calls us his beloved in quiet, sure tones. Unfortunately, most of us have been schooled in traditional “quiet time” approaches that often feel like another place of human striving and hard work—even when our activities are as lofty as Bible study, prayer and journaling. For Christian leaders in particular, it can become hard to distinguish between the work we do *for* God and time for us to *be with* God, resting in him and enjoying his presence. Scripture can be reduced to a textbook from which we gain information for being successful in ministry and prayer can become an exhausting round of different kinds of mental activity.

The metaphor in Psalm 131 of the weaned child resting against its mother, on the other hand, offers a delightful picture of the soul at rest in God. Much like the young child who has been so nourished by a loving mother that he or she can rest in trust and love, solitude can be for us a time when we come to God with no agenda except to just be together in whatever state we're in. Here there is no need to put on airs. We do not have to try to make things seem better than they are or make ourselves appear to be someone we are not. We do not need to hold back squeals of delight, expressions of need or desire, tears of pain, sadness or disappointment. In such times, we rest in God by simply *being with God with what is* and allow God to love us in that place. The *experience* of God's unconditional love even (and perhaps most especially!) during those times when we are not doing anything, is our greatest human need. Such love then becomes the bed-rock of our being, the foundation of our true identity upon which our leadership is built.

Self-Knowledge and Self-Examination

Without the regular experience of being received and loved by God in this way, we are vulnerable to a kind of leadership that is driven by profound emptiness that we are seeking to fill through performance and achievement. This unconscious striving is very dangerous for us and for those around us. It will eventually burn us out since there is no amount of achievement that will ultimately satisfy the emptiness of the human soul. And

the people we work with will eventually notice that they are mere cogs in the wheel of our own ego-driven plans.

It takes a profound willingness to invite God to search us and know us at the deepest levels of our being, allowing him to show us the difference between the performance-oriented driven-ness of the *false* self and the deeper calling to lead from our *authentic self* in God. There is an elemental chaos that gets stirred up when we have stayed in God's presence long enough for pretense and performance and every other thing that has bolstered our sense of self to fall away. When we are stripped of external distraction in solitude, we inevitably become aware of false patterns of thinking and being and doing that have lurked unnoticed under the surface busyness of our lives.

We may even begin to see how these patterns have mis-shaped our leadership. Perhaps we glimpse an ego-driven self that is bent on control and image management. Perhaps we see an empty self that is hungry to fill itself with the approval of others. Perhaps we glimpse a broken self desperately seeking to preserve the illusion that we have it all together. Or maybe we see a wounded self that has spent untold energy seeking healing where healing cannot be found.

This is a devastating awareness and one that stops us in our tracks. However, it is impossible to overstate how dangerous we are as leaders when we have not faced into this kind of self-knowledge and allowed the healing love of God to touch in that place. The journey beyond our false, adaptive patterns to living and leading from our authentic self in God is harrowing one that is paved with truth-seeing and truth-telling. But it is eminently worth it because the truth ultimately sets us free to lead from our authentic self, compelled by truer motivations that God placed within us before the foundation of the earth.

Discernment

Beyond the chaos that is created by a more honest seeing of ourselves in God's presence, a quietness descends that is pregnant with the presence of God. As we cultivate disciplines of rest, solitude, silence and self-examination in our lives, we find that we are brought back from the brink of dangerous exhaustion to a state of quiet alertness that is able and ready to receive guidance from God. A knowing comes, a still, small voice whispers, a gentle blowing of the Spirit can be felt and we are awake and alert enough to recognize it!

Beyond our normal patterns of trying to wrestle from God the wisdom we think we need, the gift of discernment is given as pure gift. Through the gentle but persistent nudging of the Spirit we begin to know what is called for in those places where we need wisdom—or we are restrained enough to wait until discernment is given.

The transforming leader is growing in awareness that the things that most need to be fixed, solved, and figured out in our lives will not be fixed, solved, or figured out at the thinking level anyway. They will be solved at the *listening* level where God's Spirit

witnesses with our spirit about things that are true (Romans 8:16). This is the level at which God speaks to us those things that cannot be taught by human wisdom but can only be taught by the Spirit. It is the level at which spiritual discernment is given as pure gift (I Corinthians 2:12, 13). It is the level at which perfect love casts out fear so that we are free to respond to the risky invitations of God (I John 4:18). The leader who listens on these levels and leads from it is a different kind of leader indeed!

The choice to lead from the place where I am growing and changing is a vulnerable approach to leadership because it is a very tender place. It is a place where I don't have all the answers, where I am not in control. However, if I am willing to lead from this place, I finally have something real to offer that actually corresponds to what people around me are seeking. Furthermore, the *quality* of my leadership is decidedly different. Rather than leading from a place of being frenetically busy, I am leading from a place of rest in God. Rather than running on empty, I am leading from a place where my soul is being infused with the presence of God. Rather than being subject to the inner compulsions of the false self and the outer demands of other people's expectations, I am learning to respond to God's call upon my life in ways that are congruent with the self he knew and brought lovingly into being. While it may seem counter-intuitive and even dangerous to lead from this tender part of myself that I may be accustomed to keeping more hidden, true spiritual leadership hinges upon the capacity to lead from my own transforming center.

In short, the transforming leader is the kind that is most needed in our day.

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