

## What Does Your Soul Want to Say to God?

Ruth Haley Barton

*“It is not enough for the priests and ministers of the future to be moral people, well-trained, eager to help their fellow humans...the central question is, Are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God’s presence, to listen to God’s voice, to look at God’s beauty, to touch God’s incarnate Word, and to taste fully God’s infinite goodness?”*

Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*

Several years ago, during an unusually intense season of ministry, I made a comment to a friend that surprised us both. Before I could censor my thoughts, I heard myself saying, “I’m tired of helping other people enjoy God; I just want to enjoy God for myself.” This was both surprising and alarming because what I was really saying was that my leadership, which usually flows from what is going on in my own soul, was *at that moment* disconnected from the reality of God in my own life.

It was not the first time I had noticed such slippage—nor would it be the last—but it was certainly one of the most clearly articulated! As we sat quietly together, the words of a poem came to me—a poem we have used many times in the Transforming Center to guide people into an honest moment with God. Written by pastor Ted Loder, it started out something like this: *Holy One, there is something I wanted to tell you, but there have been errands to run, bills to pay, meetings to attend, washing to do...and I forget what it is I wanted to say to you, and forget what I am about or why. Oh God, don’t forget me please for the sake of Jesus Christ.*

As those words ran through my mind, I realized that there was something *I* wanted to say to God but had been too busy and too out of touch with my own soul to say. What I wanted to say to God was “I miss you.” This awareness came with such

force and the words came from such a deep and true place inside, that it felt like being knocked over by a wave that had been gathering strength while my back was turned.

### **Something's Not Quite Right**

Such moments come to all of us—moments when our leadership feels like something we “put on” like a piece of clothing pulled out of the closet for a particular occasion rather than something that flows from a deep inner well that is fed by a pure source. Perhaps you have experienced this dynamic in your own way. Perhaps you are preparing to preach or lead a Bible study and you have the sinking realization that you are getting ready to exhort others in values or behaviors you are not living yourself. Maybe you are a worship leader and notice that more and more frequently you are manufacturing a display of emotion because it has been so long since you have experienced any real intimacy with God. Or perhaps someone needs pastoral care and you realize that you just *don't care*. You rally your energy to go through the motions but you know that your heart is devoid of real compassion. You can make it look good on the outside but something's not quite right.

The soul-ful leader pays attention to these inner realities and the questions they raise rather than ignoring them and continuing the charade *or* judging him/herself harshly and thus cutting off the possibility for deeper awareness. Spiritual leadership emerges from our willingness to stay involved with our own souls—that place where God's Spirit is at work stirring up our deepest questions and longings to draw us deeper into relationship with him. This is not mere narcissistic navel gazing; rather, this kind of

attentiveness helps us to stay on the path of becoming our true self in God—a self that is capable of a truer and ever-deepening “yes” to God’s call upon our lives.

But right away this presents us with a challenge. For one thing, the soul is a tender thing and leadership can be very dangerous. As Parker Palmer says “the soul is like a wild animal—tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy. It knows how to survive in hard places. But it is also shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out.”

The settings in which many of us are trying to provide leadership are places where everyone is crashing through the woods together, harried and breathless, staying on the surface of the intellect and the ego while all things soulful flee deeper into the woods. Besides that, we know that the leader is often the one who gets shot at or voted off the island. The savvy soul knows better than to run out into the clearing, thereby giving everyone a better shot!

But the soul will come out once it is convinced that it is quiet enough and safe enough to do so. Solitude and silence are disciplines that usher us into a place that is safe enough for the soul to come out and say what it needs to say in God’s presence. In solitude we are rescued from our relentless human effort to solve the challenges of leadership through our own intellectual striving and hard work. In silence we give up control and allow God to be God in our lives rather than a thought in our heads or an illustration in a sermon. Solitude is the place of our own spiritual seeking where we listen for the still, small voice of God telling us who we are and what is real from a

spiritual point of view. Then we are not quite so enslaved by the demands and expectations of life in leadership.

### **Addicted to Leadership**

The discipline of solitude is a key discipline for all those who seek after God but for those of us who are in leadership it is even more crucial because it is *the primary place our souls are strengthened*. In solitude, far from the public view, we can allow the soul to say what it needs to say to God and listen for God's word to us in response.

But solitude presents a unique challenge for leaders as well. The activities and experiences associated with leadership can be very addicting. The idea that we 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 that this may be the nut of it. Leaders are busy, yes, and solitude necessitates that we pull away from the demands of our lives in ministry. This is never easy and it involves many logistical challenges. But I wonder if the real reason leaders resist actually moving into solitude may have more to do with avoiding 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 *that* unless we are desperate or experiencing desire of the deepest kind.

Someone has said, 'You'd be surprised at what your soul wants to say to God.' For those of us who are in leadership, it is often hard to find space that is quiet enough and safe enough for the soul to be as honest as it needs to be. We don't often take the time to sit quietly by the base of the tree of our own lives and wait for the wild animal we seek to put in an appearance. What does your soul need or want to say to God and are you willing to give your soul space enough to say it?

### **Practice**

Take a few moments now to sit quietly and allow your soul to say what it needs to say to God. Don't try to force anything or work hard to make something happen. The soul runs from such attempts. Just sit quietly in God's presence and see what shows itself. It may take time but when your soul has finally said that thing that it has been waiting to say, you will know. And if you sit long enough, you might also be surprised at what God wants to say to your soul.

*Holy One,  
there is something I wanted to tell you  
but there have been errands to run  
bills to pay,  
meetings to attend,  
friends to entertain,  
washing to do...  
and I forget what it is I wanted to say to you,  
and mostly I forget what I'm about,  
or why.*

*O God, don't forget me, please,  
for the sake of Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Ted Loder, *Guerillas of Grace*, (Philadelphia: Innisfree Press, 1984), p. 60.