

RUTH HALEY BARTON

Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership

SEEKING GOD IN THE
CRUCIBLE OF MINISTRY

Foreword by Leighton Ford


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*On the day I called, you answered me,
you increased my strength of soul.*

PSALM 138:3

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When Leaders Lose Their Souls

[Moses] is entrusted with all my house.

With him I speak face to face—

clearly, not in riddles;

and he beholds the form of the LORD.

NUMBERS 12:7-8

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 my friend and I sat quietly together, the words of a poem written by Ted Loder came to me—a poem we had used many times in the Transforming Center to guide people into an honest moment with God. It sounded 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 recited themselves in 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 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 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 get-

ting ready to exhort others in values and 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 too long since you 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.

In her book *Leaving Church*, former parish priest and award-winning preacher Barbara Brown Taylor describes what it was like to feel her soul slipping away. She says:

Many of the things that were happening inside of me seemed too shameful to talk about out loud. Laid low by what was happening at Grace-Calvary, I did not have the energy to put a positive spin on anything. . . . Beyond my luminous images of Sunday mornings I saw the committee meetings, the numbing routines, and the chronically difficult people who took up a large part of my time. Behind my heroic image of myself I saw my tiresome perfectionism, my resentment of those who did not try as hard as I did, and my huge appetite for approval. I saw the forgiving faces of my family, left behind every holiday for the last fifteen years, while I went to conduct services for other people and their families.

Above all, I saw that my desire to draw as near to God as I could had backfired on me somehow. Drawn to care for hurt things, I had ended up with compassion fatigue. Drawn to a life of servanthood, I had ended up a service provider. Drawn to marry the Divine Presence, I had ended up estranged. . . . Like the bluebirds that sat on my windowsills, pecking at the reflections they saw in the glass, I could not reach the greenness for which my soul longed. For years I had believed that if I just kept at it, the glass would finally disappear. Now for the first time, I wondered if I had devoted myself to an illusion.

Sometimes our sense that something is not quite right is more subtle, as it was for one young pastor who had come for spiritual direction. With keen self-awareness he observed, “I find [leadership] conferences to be very exciting on one level, but there is something darker that happens as well. Sometimes they leave me feeling competitive toward other churches and what they are accomplishing. I leave the conference feeling dissatisfied with my own situation—my own staff, my own resources, my own gifts and abilities. My ego gets ramped up to do bigger and better things, and then I go home and drive everyone crazy. Three months later, the conference notebook is on a bookshelf somewhere, and I have returned to life as usual with a vague feeling of uneasiness about my effectiveness as leader, never quite sure if I am measuring up.”

This was not meant to be a critique of any particular conference; rather, he was courageously naming in God’s presence and in the presence of another person what was taking place inside his soul in the context of his leadership. His desire was to hear from God in that place. He knew that if his soul was to be well, he could not afford to live his life driven blindly by unexamined inner dynamics.

HOW IS IT WITH YOUR SOUL?

When the early Wesleyan bands of Christ-followers got together in small group meetings, their first question to each other was “How is it with your soul?” This is the best possible question for us as Christian leaders in light of Jesus’ warning and in light of what we witness in and around us. So how is it with your soul?

Some of us know that we are losing bits and pieces of our soul every day, and we are scared to death that we might go over the edge. Others of us are still hanging in there fairly well, but we are not sure how long we will last. All of us have watched ministry friends and colleagues endure heartbreak, failure or betrayal so profound that they left ministry and are now selling real estate.

Those of us who have been in ministry for any length of time at all

are under no illusion that we are exempt from such outcomes. Even the young ones know better these days. One emerging leader wrote, “I feel the call of God to move deeper and deeper into service through preaching and leadership. At the same time I am keenly aware of what ministry is doing to the personal spiritual lives of almost everyone I know on staff or in key volunteer positions in the church. I am increasingly unsure about how one is supposed to navigate the time commitments of ministry and one’s personal journey toward growth and wholeness. I find myself wondering if the two aren’t mutually exclusive.”

These are uncomfortable admissions, and paying attention to them requires a certain kind of courage because we don’t know where such honest reflections will take us. However, if we are willing to listen to our uneasiness, it might lead us to important questions that are lurking under the surface of our Christian busyness. “How does spiritual leadership differ from other models for leadership?” we might find ourselves wondering. “And how can I be strengthened at the soul level to provide such leadership? What would it look like for me to lead more consistently from my soul—the place of my own encounter with God—rather than leading primarily from my head, my unbridled activism, or my performance-oriented drivenness? What would it be like to *find* God in the context of my leadership rather than miss God in the context of my leadership?”

THE CHALLENGE OF SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

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

stay on the path of becoming our true self in God—a self that is capable of an ever-deepening yes to God’s call on our life.

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 a clearing, thereby giving everyone a better shot!

Beyond the challenge of coaxing the soul to show up in such a dangerous environment, there are the many challenges that present themselves once the soul does make an appearance and starts sniffing around. As we become more attentive to our environments through the eyes of the soul, we might notice tension between what the spiritual life requires and what it takes to be (or at least appear!) successful in the current cultural milieu. On our good days, we might experience these tensions as a place of paradox where creative solutions might be found, but on other days they feel like polarities that are impossible to manage.

These days (and maybe every day) there is real tension between what the human soul needs in order to be truly well and what life in leadership encourages and even requires. There is the tension between being and doing, community and cause, truth-telling and putting the right spin on things. There is the tension between the time it takes to love people and the need for expediency. There is the tension between the need for measurable goals and the difficulty of measuring that which is

ultimately immeasurable by anyone but God himself.

There is the tension between the need for organizational hierarchy with all the power dynamics this creates and the mutuality and interdependence of life in community to which we as Christians are called. There is the tension between knowing how to “work the system” and entering into trustworthy relationships characterized by trust and a commitment to one another’s well-being. There is the tension between the need for an easy discipleship process through which we can efficiently herd lots of people and the patient, plodding and ultimately mysterious nature of the spiritual transformation process. And then there is the challenge of knowing how to speak of these things in fruitful ways in the very inside places of power without becoming polarized in our relationships with one another.

NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART

Leadership that functions creatively and spiritually in the midst of paradox is not for the faint of heart. It is much easier to give in to one polarity or the other. Peter Senge notes in *The Fifth Discipline*, “Emotional tension can always be relieved by adjusting the one pole of the creative tension that is completely under our control at all times—the vision. The feelings that we dislike go away because the creative tension that was their source is reduced. Our goals are now much closer to our current reality. Escaping emotional tension is easy—the only price we pay is abandoning what we truly want, our vision.” A spiritual leader is not willing to merely escape emotional tension; rather, he or she has the stamina and staying power to remain in that place of creative tension until a third way opens up that somehow honors both realities.

The temptation to compromise basic Christian values—love, community, truth-telling, confession and reconciliation, silent listening and waiting on God for discernment—for the sake of expedience is very great. In a high performance culture (both secular culture and reli-

gious), holding to deep spiritual values in the face of the pressure to perform—whether performance is measured by numbers, new buildings or the latest innovation—is one of the greatest challenges of spiritual leadership.

When I was growing up as a pastor's kid, my dad's responsibilities as a pastor were in some ways very simple. He preached on Sundays and sometimes Wednesday evenings. He visited the sick and counseled those in need of pastoral care. He sat with the elders, and they made decisions together regarding the ministries and business aspects of the church. That was about it and that was enough!

These days, the pastoral/ministry role is much more complicated. Now, in addition to those basic responsibilities, many pastors are expected to function like CEOs of large corporations. They are expected to be strategic thinkers and planners. They are expected to be good managers. They are expected to preach sermons that are culturally relevant *and* contribute expertise and innovative ideas regarding production and programming. They are expected to lead fundraisers and capital campaigns. They are expected to be skilled at interpersonal relating but also to command the attention of large crowds. Such expectations generate many places of paradox that will respond to nothing less than the tough, resourceful, savvy, resilient soul that was so hard to coax out in the first place!

The only way to begin facing these challenges is to keep seeking tenaciously after God through spiritual disciplines that keep us grounded in the presence of God at the center of our being. Solitude and silence in particular enable us to experience a place of authenticity within and to invite God to meet us there. In solitude we are rescued from relentless human striving to solve the challenges of ministry through intellectual achievements and hard work, so that we can experience the life of the Spirit guiding toward that true way that lies between one polarity and another. In silence we give up control and allow God to be God in our life rather than being a thought in our head or an illustration in a ser-

mon. In that place of our seeking we listen for the still, small voice of God telling us who we really 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.

*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*

WHAT I KNOW FOR SURE

The market is glutted with books on leadership, and many contain contradictory messages. I'm not sure anyone has the full perspective—really. But one of the things I know for sure is that those who are looking to us for spiritual sustenance need us first and foremost to be spiritual seekers ourselves. They need us to keep searching for the bread of life that feeds our own souls so that we can guide them to places of sustenance for *their* own souls. Then, rather than offering the cold stone of past devotionals, regurgitated apologetics or someone else's musings about the spiritual life, we will have bread to offer that is warm from the oven of our intimacy with God.

I often receive e-mails and questions about the “training” I received to prepare me for offering spiritual leadership through writing, teaching, retreat leadership and the work of the Transforming Center. What

follows their initial question is usually an inquiry about what training I would recommend for them as they pursue a similar path. This question always gives me pause, because it was not so much the training I have received that has prepared me for what I am doing now—although I have been privileged to receive some excellent training. It is the *path* I have been on that has prepared me for the leadership I bring now. And it was my desperate seeking after God that began when I was a young leader in my early thirties that put me on this path. Each and every risky step I took with God, along with willingness to move far outside of my comfort zone, prepared me for what I do today.

As I searched I had no idea or intention that I would lead anyone else in such endeavors. In fact, my spiritual search led me to drop out of ministry at one point, and I thought my life in leadership was over. But I was so desperate for God that nothing else mattered. God eventually called me back into ministry, but it was that time of intense spiritual seeking that set everything in motion, and it is all by God's grace. Reflecting back on those early experiences reminds me every day that the most important thing I can do as a leader today is to keep seeking God in depths of my own soul—no matter what it costs.

A LEADER WITH STRENGTH OF SOUL

As my calling into leadership has deepened and the terrain has become more rugged, I have been drawn to the story of Moses, because his hard-won strength of soul forged in his private encounters with God gave him the staying power he needed for the long haul of leadership. He made it all the way to the finish line of his life in leadership not because he knew how to *think about* leadership and conceptualize it in clever ways. He lasted because he allowed his leadership challenges to *catalyze* and *draw him into* a level of reliance on God that he might not have pursued had it not been for his great need for God which he experienced most profoundly in the crucible of 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 strategies for leadership except to seek God in solitude and then carry out what God revealed to him there. He routinely sought God out (or God sought him), there was an encounter, and then Moses did what God told him to do. For Moses, leadership was that simple!

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

A LEADER'S JOURNEY INTO SOLITUDE AND SILENCE

The discipline of solitude is a key discipline for all those who seek after God. It is the primary place where the leader's soul is strengthened. However, a leader's journey into solitude and silence has particular challenges. One of the reasons solitude is so challenging for leaders 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, which, 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 to 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 idea.

Many leaders preach solitude better than they practice it, and I suspect that this may be the heart of the matter. 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 that unless we are desperate. As we discover in Moses' story, it almost always takes some level of desperation for a leader to move beyond mere dabbling in solitude and silence and into the kind of encounters with God that Moses experienced.

And so I have found myself wanting to learn more about what happened to Moses in those times alone with God and how his leadership emerged from them. I have been jealous to experience even a fraction of the Presence that kept Moses so clear about his calling. I have longed to be as tenacious as Moses in battling it out with God rather than giving up (or dreaming about giving up) when the going gets tough. I have asked God for the kind of courage and staying power that enabled Moses to stay faithful over the long haul of leadership. 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. 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 had 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.

PRACTICE

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. Here is an invitation to sit quietly for a few moments for the sole purpose of allowing 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. This may take time but when your soul has finally said that thing that it has been waiting to say, you will know. 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,
arrangements to make,
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. . . .*

*O Father in Heaven,
perhaps you've already heard what I wanted to tell you.
What I wanted to ask is
forgive me,
heal me,
increase my courage, please.
Renew in me a little of love and faith,*

*and a sense of confidence,
and a vision of what it might mean
to live as though you were real,
and I mattered,
and everyone was sister and brother.*

*What I wanted to ask in my blundering way is
don't give up on me,
don't become too sad about me,
but laugh with me,
and try again with me,
and I will with you, too.*

TED LODER, *GUERRILLAS OF GRACE*