

Take Full Advantage of Your Most Powerful Weakness

LEADING WITH A LIMP



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AUTHOR OF *TO BE TOLD*

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LEADING WITH A LIMP
PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS
12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

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ISBN 978-1-57856-952-6

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

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Allender, Dan B.

Leading with a limp : turning your struggles into strengths / Dan B. Allender.— 1st ed.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Leadership—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Failure (Psychology)—Religious aspects—Christianity. 3. Integrity—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BV4597.53.L43A45 2006

253—dc22

2006003516

Printed in the United States of America
2014

10

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INTRODUCTION



WHAT ARE YOU IN FOR?

The assumption that guides what you are about to read is simple, yet for some reason it is almost always left unsaid. And when it *is* said, it is hinted at in terms that are far too polite and too highly polished. As a result the hints are not heard.

But this assumption is far too important for us to settle for window-dressing, for sugarcoating. So here's the hard truth: *if you're a leader, you're in the battle of your life*. Nothing comes easily, enemies outnumber allies, and the terrain keeps shifting under your feet. If you've already tried the "easy" solutions, you have found that they come up empty. I know unvarnished truth like this is never easy to hear, but it's the only truth that will help you lead with inner confidence.

And you need confidence because nothing is more difficult than leading. Nothing else in life compares to the hardship of firing a friend or telling people that their work was necessary for a season but their employment has now reached an end. The graduate school I lead has been threatened with lawsuits, and my reputation has been sullied beyond repair by disgruntled employees. At times, the cost of leading an organization doesn't seem that different from the slow, insidious attrition of trench warfare.

Yet I have stumbled on moments of glory in the process of leading, moments that come from remaining in the game despite the apparent absurdity and incredible personal cost. At times all systems have hummed harmoniously—but only after days, if not weeks, of metal grinding against metal. At other moments complete failure has been imminent: the graduate school came

within inches of being closed down because an absurd law was reinterpreted by a state employee who had just taken over the job from her predecessor. (The predecessor, in fact, had worked to help us succeed.) A stay of execution came at the last moment, giving us a chance to mount a defense that eventually prevailed.

Grace. Loss. Fortune. Hardship. Victory. Sometimes the worst seat is the best seat in the house, and it comes as a result of leading. I have been asked many times if I would repeat the process of starting a graduate school. I've said, "Never. I don't hate myself that much." Yet while I have no regrets, I do have much grief and brokenness to show for the effort. The bottom line is simple: it is in extremity that you meet not only yourself but, more important, the God who has written your life. It is through leading that I've known the greatest need for a deep, personal, and abiding relationship with Jesus. I wouldn't trade that for all the money, fame, glory, and honor in this life. I suspect the same is true for you.

You may wonder how you arrived at your leadership position. You may wonder even more if you can continue in it. You may also be at war with wanting to be successful no matter the cost. But if you will ponder the call of your loving God as the core of your labor and life, I believe this book will guide you to a new and profound joy in leadership.

Leading is very likely the most costly thing you will ever do. And the chances are very good that it will never bring you riches or fame or praise in exchange for your great sacrifices. But if you want to love God and others, and if you long to live your life now for the sake of eternity, then there is nothing better than being a leader.

THE CORE ASSUMPTION

Since we're talking straight, let's cut to the core assumption upon which everything else in this book is built: *to the degree you face and name and deal with your failures as a leader, to that same extent you will create an environment conducive to growing and retaining productive and committed colleagues.* Some-

times the quickest path up is down, and likewise, the surest success comes through being honest about failure.

This is definitely not an easy path, but consider the alternative. If you don't have the capacity to confess, acknowledging in real time how much you mess up, the result will be a workplace that becomes more cowardly and employees who grow more self-committed, more closed to you and to one another, and more manipulative. They will look out for themselves, not for you or the organization or their colleagues.

The leader's character is what makes the difference between advancing or de-centering the morale, competence, and commitment of an organization. The truth about confession is that it doesn't lead to people's weakness and disrespect; instead, it transforms the leader's character and earns her greater respect and power. This is the strange paradox of leading: *to the degree you attempt to hide or dissemble your weaknesses, the more you will need to control those you lead, the more insecure you will become, and the more rigidity you will impose—prompting the ultimate departure of your best people.* The dark spiral of spin control inevitably leads to people's cynicism and mistrust. So do yourself and your organization a favor and don't go there. Prepare now to admit to your staff that you are the organization's chief sinner.

But there is more. Much of the current literature on leadership is swelled with the notion of self-disclosure, the importance of authenticity, and the need to own one's weaknesses as a means of bolstering credibility. To connoisseurs of leadership literature, this is nothing new. What I am calling you to, however, is far more than the mere acknowledgment of your shortcomings. I'm suggesting an outright dismantling of them—in the open and in front of those you lead.

THE CHALLENGE

Leadership is far from a walk in the park; it is a long march through a dark valley. In fact, leadership has been described as wearing a bull's-eye on your chest during hunting season. Crises erupt at the least opportune moments, many times the result of poor preparation, a lack of planning, or faulty execution.

Your people will keep messing up just like you do. And, yes, every crisis involves people, will be managed by people, and will be resolved—or intensified and prolonged—by people in your organization.

Few crises—and even fewer of your routine decisions—will be simple. Complexity is the byword of our day. Each decision you make is a jump into the unknown, creating challenges that cost your organization time, money, and possibly morale. Few leaders escape the second-guessing or, worse, the adversaries that materialize in response to their decisions. Many times conflict escalates into assaults and betrayal—with the heartache that comes when confederates turn against you. No wonder leaders feel exhausted and alone. No wonder they suspect that other members of the team are withholding the very information they need to make better decisions. No wonder the intensity of the challenge causes so many to burn out or quit.

I won't be so naive as to say the long, dark valley of leadership can be avoided simply by learning to name your failures. In fact, new and, at times, more difficult challenges will arise simply because you begin admitting your status as your organization's head sinner, *and* the normal challenges will remain whether you confess your flaws or try to hide them. But realize that most leaders invest too much capital obscuring their need for grace, which not only keeps their staff at arm's length but also subverts their trust and steals energy and creativity they could otherwise devote to the inevitable crises that continue to arise. And, perhaps even more dangerous, hiding failure prevents leaders from asking for and receiving the grace they most desperately need to live well, not to mention lead well.

THE WORST REASONS TO HIDE

Why is it so rare for leaders to name their failures? What keeps leaders trapped in a siege mentality, cut off from the data they need in order to make better decisions? Three primary reasons—fear, narcissism, and addiction—come immediately to mind. If you are convinced that none of these affects your ability to lead, keep reading. You very likely will change your mind.

Fear

Most leaders avoid naming their failures due to fear, and fear is a completely understandable motivator. If a leader were to openly acknowledge that he is frequently mistaken, that he is deeply flawed, and that he will continue to miss the mark on occasion, the ramifications could be disastrous. A leader with that much candor could lose the confidence of his staff, his clients could take their business elsewhere, and his board could fire him. At least those are the fears that keep us silent.

But what actually does happen when we overcome this fear and come clean about our personal flaws? What happens when we begin to name our cowardice and admit our inclination to hide? Paradoxically, when we muster the courage to name our fears, we gain greater confidence and far greater trust from others.

Still, confronting your fears involves risk. In certain environments any honesty about one's failures can be the kiss of death. So if you love truth and are bound to its proclamation, flee the cults of pretense and Christian artifice. Seek out a new context in which to lead. If you find a church or organization that is not bound to pretense but might simply be ill equipped to admit what the Scriptures teach about our struggle with sin, you will be in a place where honesty has the greatest potential to alter the culture of latent deceit.

Narcissism

A second reason we hide is narcissism. It takes humility to name our narcissism, and we're too married to our image to come clean about how messed up we are. This focus on self strangles authentic confession.

What happens, then, when we finally find a way to divest ourselves of image and ego? When at last we admit flaws and failure, we gain a stronger personal center and greater peace. Fitness experts have emphasized the importance of "core" strength for years. Core strength is like the hub of our strength, and it is far deeper than our stomach muscles. Therefore, core strength isn't gained by doing a few or a thousand crunches; instead it grows to the degree we work at creating disequilibrium while we exercise. A set of push-ups now includes holding a small ball in one's hand while going down, and while coming back

up rolling the ball to the other hand. Disequilibrium requires more core strength in order to return the body to balance.

The first set of push-ups to build core strength feels like one is balancing on a rocking deck of a wave-swept boat. It feels uncomfortable and awkward. But in time the rhythm of disequilibrium intensifies our capacity to find a new sense of balance and strength.

Our attempt to not feel off guard actually leads to greater self-absorption and the foolish conviction that we can control the world. True core strength is willing to feel helpless and disturbed, and it results in a self-disciplined and passionate life rather than in a controlling life that fears what may surprisingly arise.

The lie of narcissism is that we can control a world that is spinning out of orbit by narrowing the field of ambiguity into a simplistic perspective. We choose this perspective—a path of rigidity and dogmatism that limits options and lets us deny complexity in the world. We do this even though complexity is inevitable, and no leader will succeed if she closes herself off from it. Only by letting go of dogmatism and embracing complexity can a leader open her mind to a greater capacity for creativity, leading to success.

Addiction

Finally, the beleaguered leader can easily isolate himself and fill his loneliness with the cancers of addictive substances and behaviors, ranging from sex to alcohol to simple workaholism. To avoid this trap a leader must name his loneliness and his tendency to detach from others, then leave behind the addictions that promise to fill the void. Only then will his heart be freed both to receive and to offer care. The result is a healthier and more humane person, well connected with others in authentic relationships, not to mention a more confident and powerful leader who enjoys the benefits of having others invest in his life.

Every one of your weaknesses is the doorway not only to better character but to leadership dividends so enormous that avoiding the necessary risk is utter foolishness. So face your fear, your narcissism, and your addictions, and begin to enjoy the freedom, the peace, and the power of leading with a limp.

THE COST AND THE BENEFIT

The Bible offers this central paradox about life: If you try to keep your life, you are fated to lose it. If you give up your life, you will find it.¹ Whether you believe the Bible or ignore it, whether you think it's a collection of wisdom or insanity, you can't deny the irrefutable logic in the paradox of giving up your life in order to find it.

Think about trying to fall asleep: the harder you try to nod off, the longer you stay awake. Or say you forget someone's name. Ransack your brain trying to come up with it, and seldom will the name appear. But stop thinking about it, and often the name will surface. Even these simple examples reveal that life requires surrender for us to gain what we desire.

Leadership falls in this category, and leading with a limp will definitely cost you something. The cost involves naming some very painful realities about life and leadership, about others and yourself. Perhaps in these pages you had hoped to find pithy, uncomplicated steps guaranteed to turn your work and your personal life around. Get a grip. If life worked that easily, no one would need a book on leadership.

Life and leadership are anything but simple, immediately rewarding, and pain free. Leaders must deal with what is, not the rosy fantasy that we'd prefer.

To find life, you have to lose it. To broaden your effectiveness, you have to narrow your focus. To grow in confidence, connectedness, and success, you have to admit for all to hear that you are a failure. Remember that this truth does not define success the way we've been taught, yet it is the only path to authentic success as a leader.

Few leaders operate out of confidence built on anything but the crumbling foundation of arrogance. Few know peace that is not dependent on performance. Few exercise freedom and creativity that are not bound to conventionality. And few possess the capacity to care for people that is not shadowed by either the urge to please others or to knuckle under to the tyranny of "should."

Take a different path. As an act of leadership, consider the risk of giving up your life through facing, naming, and bearing your weaknesses, and imagine

the paradoxical yet promised benefits. Let's walk into that reality, but it's imperative to remember that all movement into reality requires enormous faith.

THE LEADER'S THREE-DIMENSIONAL LIMP

Given the chaos and complexity of leadership, there is no straightforward chart that can offer an accurate visual representation of the primary leadership challenges and the most effective responses to each of them. The challenges do tend to be universal, but the solutions vary according to the leader, the organization, the circumstances, the makeup of the team, and multiple other considerations. Plus, a solution that is presented as the best response to chaos, for instance, might end up being, in your context, the best solution to loneliness or betrayal.

Maybe if these words were printed on a cube and not on flat sheets of paper, I could come closer to creating a chart that would adequately present not only the challenges of leadership and the various solutions but also the multiple combinations and pairings of effective ways to address each challenge. As it stands, however, I suggest that you picture a Rubik's Cube as you look at the charts to follow. The process of limping leadership is so organic, so paradoxical, and so multifaceted that you would need a chart that could be folded, turned, twisted, and realigned in many different combinations to get the full meaning and complete application of what follows.

LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES AND FAULTY RESPONSES

Leadership Challenges	Typical Ineffective Responses				
	Cowardice	Rigidity	Narcissism	Hiding	Fatalism
Crisis					
Complexity					
Betrayal					
Loneliness					
Weariness					

Five universal challenges that every leader faces are listed on the vertical axis. Just as it is essential to recognize these challenges, it is also imperative that you identify your default response to each. The most common ineffective responses are listed on the horizontal axis.

Typically, when facing the problem of complexity, a leader will default to rigidity. By doing so, he narrows the available options in an attempt to bring order and sanity to the complexity he faces. But such a response cuts the leader off from the wide range of options that he needs in order to effectively address the problem of complexity.

While rigidity tends to be a leader's typical response to complexity, it's also true that many leaders respond by hiding or with some combination of the ineffective responses listed. Look again at this chart and consider the five challenges of leadership. As you think about each one, assess and note how you automatically tend to respond to it.

LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES AND EFFECTIVE RESPONSES

Leadership Challenges	Options for Effective Solutions				
	Courage	Depth	Gratitude	Openness	Hope
Crisis					
Complexity					
Betrayal					
Loneliness					
Weariness					

Again, the challenges that every leader faces are listed on the vertical axis. Now, as you think about each challenge, look at the effective responses (on the horizontal axis) that are needed.

Typically, when faced with complexity, a leader needs to avoid rigidity (see the chart on the previous page) and instead draw on depth. At the same time, other effective responses might also be needed. For instance, to effectively

address complexity, a leader might draw on courage or hope paired with depth.

As you read the chapters that follow, refer often to these two charts. Also think about the character trait(s) necessary for responding most effectively to each of the five leadership challenges.

THE PURPOSE OF LIMPING LEADERSHIP

Forming Character, Not Running an Organization

A leader who limps subverts the expectations of those who define leadership as running an organization. It is not that a limping leader does not hire, fire, advance, reward, discipline, and delegate. These are inescapable duties of leadership. But the aim of a leader's activity is not the growth of the organization. It's not even meeting needs or doing good. The purpose of limping leadership is the maturing of character.

As you may be well aware, the bigger-versus-better argument was fought in small and large organizations for most of the twentieth century, and it spilled into the twenty-first. It is a binary argument, and as such it misses the obvious point that numbers often grow when something is offered that touches the heart. In the words of the argument, bigger happens when better is provided. Consequently, many churches attempt to provide that which is better: day care, youth programs, Christian scouting, small groups, seeker-oriented preaching, convenient parking, and gymnasiums with small bowling alleys.

Even in the church, "better" has become a consumer-driven concept. We

ascertain the hot issues and the most winsome ways to win over the largest number of customers, clients, or congregants. In doing what is better, however, a more important value has been given the backseat. Perhaps in the work of growing the organization bigger through doing better, leaders lose sight of the goal of growing character.

Leadership is all about character. I am a character. I have character. And as a leader, I'm meant to be part of the transformation of your character. The word *character* comes from the Greek word for "stylus." It is an instrument used either to carve a piece of wood or to mark a piece of papyrus. It carves, marks, and shapes.

All leaders must have character and must embrace their character. I have a role to play in the story of God, which means I *am* a character. At the same time, I am to play that role with integrity and grace, which means I *have* character that can be measured as good or lacking goodness. My character is good to the degree that it grows Christ in other people.

GROWING CHARACTER

The purpose of all life is to present every person mature in Christ. Each human being is meant to become like Jesus—and to mark other lives with a beauty that draws them to Jesus. The scope of that calling is so enormous; as to be beyond comprehension. It means subsuming every dimension of life from how I eat and drink to how I vote under that one goal.

No wonder we attempt to separate the sacred from the secular. It is far easier to call certain behaviors civic or secular and then allow other activities to be uniquely religious. But the Bible won't allow it. Everything we do has the potential of giving glory or shame to God.¹ It's no wonder that we work so hard to figure out the "Christian" way to do life. For one large section of the Christian community, that means voting Republican and opposing homosexuality, women in church leadership, and Bill and Hillary Clinton. Others believe that the Christian way to do life involves spiritual disciplines, such as

prayer, contemplation, fasting, and giving. Still others focus on supporting agendas or organizations that do a Christian good, such as feeding the poor, building strong marriages, coming alongside the broken, or evangelizing.

I counseled a man of immense wealth who is the champion of several national Christian ministries. His marriage was crumbling, and he sought my help. When anyone asks this man what directs his life, he readily answers, "Knowing Christ and making him known." His life goal is to have all things submitted to Jesus, though he acknowledges that he fails daily in achieving this goal.

During one counseling session I addressed this man's tyrannical and belittling behavior toward his wife. She was present in the room, and as she listened, he sprayed me with a barrage of self-justification. When I pressed against it, I was told that I simply didn't understand the extent of his wife's failure. He argued that I had been swayed earlier in the counseling session by his wife's stated willingness to change. Around and around we went until I called his self-righteousness ugly. Then he stormed out of my office, flinging invective and leaving his wife with no way to get home.

This lion of industry and faith is a thoroughgoing narcissist whose wealth and power have shielded him from hearing anything that goes against the grain of his empty, indulged, and fragile self. He has been in fellowship and Bible studies with many famous Christian leaders, none of whom has ever called him on how he treats his wife and his subordinates. Neither have any of these leaders asked him to tell the stories from his childhood that oriented him to being empty and brutal. No one has attempted to grow his character outside of the conventional structures of right voting, Bible study, and organizational loyalty. And I believe this is the case for most Christians.

What exactly does it mean to grow character? Character is grown to the degree that we love God and others. Love that is true and eternal begins with worship of the God who redeems people by his unexpected and unreasonable grace. We grow in character, then, to the degree we are captured by gratitude and awe.

Gratitude

All of life is a gift, and we grow to be like Jesus as we embrace this gift. I need only lift my eyes from my keyboard to see my wife. She brought me a cup of coffee as I was working on this chapter. And that's not all. We're on the Big Island of Hawaii, and I'm sitting on a lounge chair overlooking the azure Pacific Ocean. The view is breathtaking. And I know that every breath, each heartbeat is a gift. Not a single molecule of what I see is deserved or earned. The matchless gifts of my wife, of beauty, of the sun, land, water, and air that surround me make any presumption of ownership or entitlement completely laughable. All is a gift. And if the material, tangible world is a gift, how much more so is the embrace of our resurrected God?

Now, growth in character occurs to the degree that we accept being forgiven as a greater gift than life itself. If the greatest gift is not what I see but how I am seen by the living God, then my gratitude knows no limits. It can grow immeasurably as I suffer through the loss of illusions, the death of dreams, and the shattering of success. Suffering grafts our heart to grace.

In light of this gift of forgiveness and life, what am I to be? The answer is as complex and as simple as the gospel: I am to be free. The fruit of gratitude is freedom from death and its countless cousins—fear, shame, estrangement, and more. And what grows from freedom? A playful, curious connectedness to the unveiling of new grace in pleasure and in sorrow. To those who have eyes of gratitude, all senses are freed to take in and participate in the smallest and most obscure as well as the most panoramic displays of beauty. Gratitude also frees the heart to suffer fury against that which mars beauty. Gratitude brings an imminent passion to all endeavors of life.

Consider this sharply contrasting picture: I recall being at a birthday party for a five-year-old terror who snatched his gifts from his mother and opened them with wanton disdain. He'd see what he had received, toss it down as if it were of no account, then move on to another present. His mother wanly tried to stop his juggernaut by saying, "Isn't that wonderful, honey? Why don't you say thank you to Uncle Joe and Aunt Susan?" The boy had no gratitude, in part because nothing brought him surprise or awe. His sense of being owed

the good things in life prevented him from being delighted by the undeserved gifts he was receiving.

It is impossible to be truly grateful without having some degree of awe. Just now my wife not only brought me coffee, but she also put her hand on my shoulder and spoke kind words. It was a simple but unexpected gift, and I was amazed. If we *expect* a gift—such as a birthday present—then we may be pleasantly surprised, but we seldom experience awe.

Awe

Awe is the capacity to bow in the presence of something or someone more glorious than ourselves. It is the proper posture of a creature before both the Creator and the Creator's greatness as expressed through creation. It is the experience of rushing to get a glimpse of a staggeringly beautiful sunset and remarking to a total stranger, "Isn't that breathtaking?" We prostrate ourselves before greatness because we were built to admire and honor glory. Awe is similar to envy but without envy's desire to possess or mar what we can't have or be.

I will listen and marvel for hours to the music of Ashley Cleveland or Lamont Hiebert. I may have heard a song fifty times, but the nuance of one syllable will finally capture me, and I feel awe that I can be in the artist's poetic presence even if only through the mysterious etchings on a CD. The mystery of presence is meant to take our breath away and remind us that each breath is not of our making or something we can control.

Each syllable of awe is meant to prepare us for the day we will stand face to face with utter glory—the very presence of God. To ride in the front of a roller coaster or to sit four rows from a virtuoso violinist performing a miracle on strings is a form of purgatory: it purges us of mediocrity and arouses us to desire something beyond ourselves.

Whereas gratitude calls us to be fully ourselves by embracing freedom, awe invites us to be fully part of something bigger and more glorious than ourselves. It is the mystery of other-centered sensuality. We feel pleasure not solely for ourselves but also for the sake of the other. We feel delight in giving to the

other. There is no loss of self as we give to someone else, and there is no absorption of the other person. Instead, there is a regard for the other that gives us great joy as we bring all we are to serve that person.

What does it mean, then, to grow the character of the other as well as our own? It involves being committed to all in life that leads to gratitude and awe rather than to the things that birth presumption and control. What you think you deserve will turn you into a slave; what you think you can control will devour you. Growing maturity demands that we expose false gods and invite our hearts to desire what only God can offer.

If your heart is full of gratitude and awe, what impact will this have on whom you vote for or how you use your money? The presence of awe will allow you to regard your vote or your use of money as an honor, as a privilege to be used with humility and openness, not with pride and dogmatism. You, therefore, approach every context as an opportunity for conversation with those who know more than you do. Awe enables all of us to confess daily our desperate need for a greater wisdom and glory than what we have today. We will one day apprehend God face to face; today we are given a gracious glimpse of his back. Each encounter with glory stirs a deeper desire for more. Therefore, we are called to be lifelong learners.

Leaders are called to lead with character. And leaders grow the character of others to the degree they bless the character God has written them to become. We can't grow glory in another person without embracing our own.

BEING A CHARACTER

"He is such a character," she said with exasperation. It would have been so different if my lunch companion had said the same sentence with whimsy or delight, but her words were accusatory. I knew that, from her standpoint, his character was not an asset.

The expression "She is such a character" is spoken positively about only a few when God means it to be used that way for every person on earth. We all are given roles, characters, to live out on the stage of life. God calls us to live

out our characters in order to reveal something about the character of God. Character reveals character. Character sets the stage for the unique role we are to play in revealing the story of God.

When I was researching and writing this book, my dear friend and colleague Stan Grenz died unexpectedly. I ate lunch with him two weeks before he died and asked him about his experience of teaching at Mars Hill Graduate School. He said, "I love the fact that we dream big, very big dreams, without any fear of being seen as foolish. We will fail at many of the things we are trying to do, but only because we have risked to dream far beyond what most others have considered reasonable." I was deeply touched by his assessment, and I asked, "Why do you suppose others don't do so?" He leaned forward and said in a hushed and conspiratorial fashion, "Most other seminaries don't hire a fool to be the president."

You would need to have known Stan to feel the fabric of his words. He was an immensely respectful and kingly man. He was brilliant and witty, common and corny. He could quote Luther in German, translate it into English, turn it all into a silly pun, and then return with great care to the heartache being discussed. His remark about my being a fool was both a gift and a warning that I still have much to learn.

There is not another Stan Grenz on the face of the earth, and there will never be another like him. What a wealthy man I am to have known him. And it is no different with any person of character.

To be a character requires gratitude for one's uniquely carved being. Do we delight in the strengths that are fearfully crafted into our characters? Do we bless how those strengths wondrously serve others? If we are not aware of our fearful and wondrous potential, then we probably aren't troubled by our failures or grieved by how we harm others. When we see the glory we can achieve, our choice of dross over gold will break our hearts.

Our calling, however, is often shaped as much by our weaknesses as by our strengths. We tend to run with our strengths and avoid those people and tasks that expose our weaknesses. But the story of God is not a saga of human potential; it is the revelation of the kindness and passion of the Father who

seeks and redeems sinners. Therefore, our strengths may help us with certain tasks and opportunities, but it is our frailty and sin that make known the glory of God's story.

The story of Sandy Burdick, the seventy-something director of SALTS (Survivors of Abuse Leadership Training Seminar), the most successful lay training program to address sexual abuse, illustrates how our weaknesses become God's strength. When Sandy was the director of women's ministries in a church, Sandy and her husband, Bill, sponsored a Wounded Heart Seminar in their church. Participants expressed that they had discovered their stories of abuse during the seminar. Sandy asked me what to do about it, and I suggested she have a small group. A group of woman joined her to review the material and began to tell their stories, then realized that there were many abuse victims who needed a safe place to walk through recovery.

Sandy was soon immersed in the subject, and more women heard about her willingness to talk about issues that most choose to hide. Her ministry grew until she was helping train leaders to run fifteen groups for women and five groups for men.

Sandy Burdick is a kind, thoughtful, easygoing leader. She hates conflict and is not a rabble-rouser. She would have been thoroughly happy to have remained a director of women's ministries in her church forever. However, she was forced into a fight, not merely for SALTS, but for a safe place for the wounded. Legalists in the church voiced concepts that re-abused hurting people: "Just read your Bible more and pray." "You need to forgive and forget." "Psychology is heretical." "A woman can't teach the Bible when a man is present." Many in the church believed victims needed to recover in twelve weeks or less.

Sandy Burdick is not only a reluctant leader, but she was also ill prepared to lead what she began. She has a high-school diploma and three years at the University of Michigan and is not interested in building an infrastructure to run a ministry. Many have come alongside her to build the organization that now trains men and women as widely divergent as Orthodox priests, indigenous American and Canadian peoples, and Bosnian refugees.

She is enthusiastic and perseverant. She didn't ask for the ministry to abused men and women, and it cost her dearly when she chose to leave her church in order to stay involved with those who had experienced the betrayal of abuse. Perhaps the hardest part of her work was facing her own abuse as well as the struggles in her marriage and with her children. It was as if a Pandora's box from hell were opened. She stepped into evil's line of fire.

Sandy did what a fool would do—she didn't quit. She let the conflict with her husband lead to more honesty, and they began marriage counseling when they were in their sixties. She didn't ignore the heartache with her children but encouraged them to step deeply into their struggles with their parents and one another. The result of this courage is sweet redemption for the whole family. Bill now leads small groups for abuse victims, and several of Sandy and Bill's children are also involved in leading small groups for abuse victims.

The glory of Sandy's paradoxical frailty and strength is that it has enabled many in her community to pursue both greater humility and greater boldness. She is a living conundrum: a wise fool, a courageous coward, a sinner saint. She is a living embodiment of "already and not yet."

Our sin, our failure of love, makes the story we live a gospel story rather than merely a successful and helpful story. We don't need to fail or sin on purpose to create a good story; we fail and sin quite naturally. This reality leads to a major leadership paradox.

A leader—whether in the home, church, business, community, or government—has authority due to her role, but her positional power will not bring about good for individuals or organizations unless it is backed up by the capital of character. You may obey a leader who has power and authority, but you will not strive to serve her or the cause of the organization unless you respect and care for her in addition to the ones with whom you serve.

A leader is called to go further than anyone else. As a therapist, I know I can take no one any further than where I've chosen to go. I can never ask or expect a client to be more honest, more humble, more forgiving, or more sacrificial than I am willing to live. Wherever I stop in the progress of growth is the unseen line dividing civilization from no man's land. Consequently, if a

person desires to lead others into maturity rather than mere productivity, he must go first. Otherwise, the discord that comes will derail forward movement.

But again there is a conundrum: I must go first toward maturity, and I will inevitably fail. I desire to treat the customer as the greatest priority and to serve the other as Christ. But how long will it be before my first failure? Perhaps I will be consistent for an hour or a day or maybe even a week, but I will eventually invalidate whatever value I hold, because I am a sinner.

What is the standard secular response? “No one is perfect; just do your best.” This is well-meaning but hollow encouragement. My best is not good enough—ever. If it were, we would have world peace, and we wouldn’t have to wait in line to get a table at our favorite restaurant. Something more than my best is needed. That something is the truth about who I am. I must confess that I am prone to wander, fitful in my loyalty, more likely to backbite than to offer grace—and that I am self-serving rather than committed to your good.

What benefit comes with naming what is true like this? The more honestly I name what is true about myself, the less I need to hide and defend and posture and pretend. And the freer I am to accept help from any source, the greater will be my gratitude for any sacrament of kindness I receive and the more I will desire to give grace rather than to make others pay for their real or perceived failures.

So a successful leader names his failures—without being a confession junkie or inviting pity from others. Admitting failure opens the realm for discussion and a plan for movement that addresses the harm without minimizing the injury. Acknowledging our failures is an opportunity to clear the air and open a new path for resolution.

The more I mature, the more I understand the high and holy glory of Jesus and how far away I am from his beauty. When I was much younger, I thought I was considerably more mature. The older I become, the more I am utterly amazed that anyone as screwed up as I am is allowed to be in the ministry at all.

This is not hyperbole: I am Mars Hill Graduate School’s chief sinner.

Admitting such a thing can backfire. It can fuel a flight from others or launch a headfirst dive into a vat of self-contempt. Yet opening the door of the heart to the power of forgiveness makes the potential misuse of confession worth the risk. After all, as a chief sinner I am called to reveal the patience and mercy of Jesus:

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.²

HAVING A CHARACTER

A leader must understand her unique blend of strengths and weaknesses, a blend that reveals the character of God, and then she must tell her story often and well. A leader is first a storyteller. She tells the story of her foolishness, redemption, reconciliation, and restoration to God and others. She is the canvas that God paints to reveal the beauty of his grace.

The better a leader tells the stories of grace in his life, the more he invites others to consider their own stories and calling. The more wholeheartedly he chooses a life of gospel passion, the more effectively he will call others to goodness. In that sense, a leader either has a character of goodness or not. There are indeed characters whose effect on others is to discourage or derail. They don't live with integrity or authenticity. But a person who lives out his calling to reveal his character invites others to freedom, kindness, and strength.

The church spawns many good-hearted people who don't know their own character. Therefore, they invite others to a life that is little more than middle-class politeness and cultural decency, mildly seasoned with a plenitude of Bible verses to justify a comfortable, bourgeois existence. When asked, "How do you uniquely reveal God? How does your story shape how you reveal God?" the answers tend to be "I have the gift of administration," "I teach Sunday

school,” “I love teenagers,” or “I give regularly to my church.” We are not used to thinking about our character and our role except in terms of what we do. We seldom consider our role in terms of *how* we do what we do.

I am a seminary president. But I am also, according to Stan Grenz, a fool. What did he mean? Well, he knew that prior to coming to Jesus I spent many years as a salesman of illicit pharmaceuticals. In this capacity, I spent considerable time raising funds to purchase more inventory. I learned to be persuasive and persistent. I also learned how to use a .9mm pistol. But even more, I learned that most people are afraid to admit both who they are and what they want. They are afraid to even take the risk of going after sinful dreams, let alone visions that move the soul. My experience in the drug trade taught me to take huge risks with my life and safety because a conventional life didn't seem worth living. I am eternally grateful for what I learned as a wicked man; it continues to shape how I live as a graduate-school president.

My character is a superb fit for a start-up, edgy, academic world, but I'd be a trapezoidal peg in a round hole if I were to try to teach or administer in a traditional academic world. Even more, I'd be a gaseous element in a world of solids if I were to try to pastor a traditional church. I am a character, but to live well and to do good, I must live out my character in the right situation. Otherwise the disconnection between my role and the needs of the immediate community would be so great that I would appear to have little integrity or any heart for good. Sadly, many people have attempted to play out their unique role in a theater production that was a mismatch for their character. They flopped not because they didn't live well but because their unique strengths and weaknesses were not apropos for the context.

A leader, therefore, needs to ask these questions: *Who am I? Where am I meant to serve? How am I to use my gifts and suffer my weaknesses for god?* A good story is one in which I co-create with those whom I serve. We are meant to be a community that loves the stories of our great need for the gospel, the stories of celebrating the glory of grace, and the stories of how we have come to be who we are. Indeed, our stories of risk are the tales that tell who we are longing to become.

THE COMMUNITY OF CHARACTER

No One Grows to Maturity Alone

Stories guide us in defining who we are, how we got here, where we are going, and what we must do to get there. Stories form the raw material for the development of our unique mission and vision or, better said, for the development of our unique culture. Every organization is a culture with its own language, ethos, and brand. The culture orients individuals to the organization's values and shows how they can be in accord with its purpose and perspective.

And where does the leader fit in this culture? Every leader is a storyteller who narrates on behalf of the community the core reasons for its existence.

To get a sense of the importance of cultural stories and their power to shape character, consider how elementary-school students are taught about our country's founding fathers. Every student is told about George Washington cutting down a cherry tree. When asked later if he had done so, he replied, "I cannot tell a lie." Usually this is followed up with a story about honest Abe. The moral of the stories: We are a nation that tells the truth. We don't harbor lies, so you'd better tell the truth just like our forefathers did.

To take this illustration a step further, we are a nation that is a light to the world. We not only tell the truth but we also live it. Consequently, we have an image to uphold and values to promote that define who we are. President

Reagan, the master storyteller, used the image of a city on a hill as a means to restore the luster of our glory after the cynical seventies that followed Vietnam and Watergate.

These stories, however, fail to acknowledge the dark and deceitful means by which we became a morally superior nation. We stole our swath of North America from its original inhabitants, and then we sequestered the indigenous people on land that is, to this day, mostly inhospitable. And we kidnapped massive numbers of Africans from their homeland to perform the backbreaking sweat-labor of planting, hoeing, and growing our nation's infrastructure. It is not a noble past no matter how many times we invite the Indians to our Thanksgiving Day feast or listen to Motown or rap music. It is a history of presumptive and self-righteous theft that puts might before right.

The United States is similar to the respectable-looking family down the street that harbors incest and alcoholism behind closed doors. The family's public face is hard working and morally upright so that the story told is not the story lived. The story line has been edited and rewritten to hide the sin that cries out to be named and forgiven.

Why is Thanksgiving a feast instead of the time we admit our theft of the land? Why is there no holiday that remembers the violence committed against African slaves? The reason is that greeting-card companies and supermarket chains could never sell enough cards, hams, and turkeys to warrant a holiday when the day to be remembered calls us to grieve and repent.

What is true of a nation and of families will shape the ethos of the culture, including the church and other Christian organizations. And since stories shape our identity and calling and, therefore, our character, we must work hard to tell stories that are not sugarcoated. We must tell the truth, the whole truth, and a whole lot of the ugly truth.

A community of good characters must tell honest and compelling stories in order to become a transformative community. Unfortunately, what most organizations offer instead of good stories is spin. Stories have the power to shape character; spin is a story without soul or suffering, a story which consequently creates hypocrisy. Spin is of the devil.

THE DECEIT OF SPIN

Spin attempts to tell a flawless story with sizzle and panache, whereas truth is always more complex and gray. Spin puts padding over the jagged edges. The place where spin most readily spins out of control is in the realm of relational crisis, such as someone's being fired.

Personnel law prohibits employers from telling the story of a person's employment record or the reasons for his or her departure. Unless the departure is amicable, it is shrouded in secrecy and silence, and the vacuum usually fills quickly with acrimonious gossip. For a season the wound bleeds away the organization's vitality. To staunch the hemorrhage, many leaders turn to spin.

We tell the congregation that Brother Jones will be pursuing other ministry opportunities, and we bless his endeavors and wish him the best. A tea will be held in the church library after the next service so parishioners can say good-bye. I have been there both as the one fired and as the one who has done the firing, and it stinks on both sides of the river. Little can be done in the moment either to tell the truth or to make the departure less painful, less gossip-ridden, or less destructive.

What *can* be told, however, is the truth about not being able to tell the truth. We could say, "Because personnel law forbids it, we cannot tell you why Brother Jones is leaving. But we can tell you that we all have labored to address this matter with honesty and kindness. None of us has handled the process without some hurt and misunderstanding, but there is agreement that brought us to this end. We ask that you not spend precious time speculating or passing on information that has not been sanctioned by the elders. Let us instead live into this moment with prayer and kindness."

A congregation or an organization must understand both the benefit of confidentiality and its possible misuse as a screen to hide an unconscionable misuse of power. Departures are inevitable and need to be acknowledged as a part of the recalibration of every organization. However, we should become wary if departures are excessive or if they are initiated by only one person or a

very small group of people. No organization ought to be run by an individual or self-appointed committee who can dictatorially hire or fire with impunity.

Now I have a couple of questions for you: Have you ever heard a sermon about how to end as well as one can when the ending is just not good? Or when have you heard a pastor, talking about being fired from another church, touch on the very things that led to his removal and detail what he learned from the experience? In both cases we spin instead of speaking forth truth.

Spin is also an effort to advance an organization. Consider that any new development, such as building, hiring, or growing, requires a period of preparation to help people understand why new chaos and sacrifice will be necessary. So the bugle rallies the troops to hear stirring speeches, vague plans, and the drumbeat of war. This is spin designed to enlist support and open pocket-books rather than to paint a realistic picture of the challenges, obstacles, opportunities, and uncertain domain of tomorrow. Leaders who rely on power and authority prefer certainty—and spin offers it—in order to get people on board with their vision.

Seldom do we hear of the high personal cost of change or the possibility of failure. There will be little or no mention of the major obstacles to be faced or the specific plan for addressing those impediments. Consider the spin offered to U.S. citizens on the taking of Baghdad and the liberation of the Iraqi people. We were told, “The Iraqis will be dancing in the streets. They will greet us as liberators.” The high probability of a prolonged insurgency was never acknowledged. Disbanding the Iraqi military set back self-determination by years. It was a huge mistake but was never acknowledged by the military or the Bush administration. Why?

The answer is simple: no president can continue to wield influence over Congress and retain the confidence of the American people if he acknowledges a serious lapse of judgment. We live in a culture where the acknowledgment of wrong or the ownership of risk and failure is paramount to forfeiting the game. The only way we can survive is to wink at personal failure and publicly offer a different face. This is called hypocrisy.

In Greek theater an actor held a mask on a stick in front of his face to portray a particular emotion or character. The mask set the context for what was about to be said. Using the mask came to be called *hypocrisy*, or “having two faces.” Later the word came to mean “duplicity.” Spin is a form of hypocrisy that tells only what can be stomached by those who hear.

I’m convinced that spin is also a form of brainwashing. Think about the confident assertions of political commentators. We hear something in the news and think, *That’s bad*, but then a commentator puts a spin on it and we see that it’s really not so bad. Spin softens our righteous anger and dulls our resolve to take action. Because, of course, we don’t *really* want to have to take action. Spin gives us the excuse to not act because it tells us that things probably aren’t that bad.

We listen to a public servant or a minister of the gospel talk about a problem or a potential gain, and we know we are not hearing the story of the raw reality of the situation. We are hearing instead the smoothed-over rough edges, the “truth” made palatable. A limping leader, however, chooses truth over spin. A leader who limps must tell stories that offer what Francis Schaeffer used to call “true truth.”

THE FREEING BURDEN OF TRUTH

Truth is sure and strong, and when it seizes us, we inevitably become vulnerable. The truth ought to surprise us and make us weak in the knees. That’s why I can best encounter truth in the context of community. Otherwise I won’t have someone to help me bear the freeing burden of truth.

Truth stands before us as the righteous and glorious light of God, yet it is ridiculously easy to suppress. It takes little more than a word or a euphemism to banish truth. For example, I caught my son practicing his guitar rather than preparing for his French final. I spoke to him with strong and uncompromising intensity. He said to me, “You’re being so mean. I was just taking a ten-minute break.” I walked away from the interaction knowing that I’d overreacted but

denying that I'd been mean. It was easier for me to say to myself, *I'm just ticked off*; rather than name that I was furious with my son for squandering his opportunity to improve his grades.

If I had faced the truth that I was livid, then I would have been forced to do more than shrug off my irritation. If I had told the full story, then I would have been pushed to begin to name all the things that I feel I've lost in life due to my own failure to perform well in school. My fury at my son, which I denied by using the euphemism "ticked," allowed me to escape the heartache in my own story. I fled from truth with a simple word.

Truth stands before us. She is fragile and inviting, yet relentless and unwavering in her passion to free the heart. We will not risk entering into truth unless we are surrounded by a community that seizes the opportunity to name the truth and then to stand with the one whose knees buckle when faced with truth.

The author of the book of Hebrews wrote, "But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness."¹ We are meant to encourage one another daily. If we don't do so, the concrete of sin will set and the patterns of self-protection will harden. Sin will then both define our personality and our way of handling the uncertainty and struggle of life. We are meant to be stirred daily to love and good deeds. Without that, the good food of our soul will settle to the bottom of the pot and burn.

The price for stirring the pot in people's lives, though, is often a backlash from those who don't want to be invited to repentance and faith. A commitment to living in God's glorious truth makes us a target for slander from those inside the organization who fear and hide from the truth. To admit we are foolish, weak, and in need of repentance gives the vindictive and self-righteous camp plenty of ammunition to turn against us and to turn others against our leadership. But the alternatives to living in and living out truth are far worse: we either hide from truth or we choose to spin our sin and our story.

HEARING YOUR OWN STORY

We can't offer our story to others unless we are aware of the bigger-picture context of our own story. Character is formed in the midst of hearing and telling the full story. And in order to better comprehend the story of God, a leader must first enter into his own story.

Since you were there when your story happened, entering it would seem like the easiest thing in the world to do, but actually nothing is more difficult. The reason is we only know—or let ourselves know—part of our story. We hold on either to what we wish to remember or to what serves us well to recall, and we flee from the parts of our story that most deeply expose and unnerve us.

In addition to hearing your own story, though, you also must step into the stories of others. A leader can't intrude into the private life of others by inviting them to tell their stories in a manner that is reserved for a counseling session or a discipleship group. But there is a value in a leader's knowing something of the stories of the people she works with. It is good to know a bit about what has shaped others, where they feel called to grow, and whether in the present they tend to deal well or unhelpfully with others.

But again, a leader must first walk into his own narrative. If he plunges into his own story, then he will understand better where he refuses to live with faith, hope, and love. He will better be able to name how he attempts to make truth serve his own idolatry rather than allowing the lies of his life to be exposed by the searing goodness of God. We lead others to God only to the degree that we are aware of how much we flee him, how little we truly desire him, and yet how God is also the deepest, truest, and sweetest desire of our hearts. In the midst of this tension, we can live in the truest truth.

Soon after the interaction with my son occurred, I told the story to a few staff members. I wanted their prayers, but I also wanted to invite further discussion of how easy it is for me—for all of us—to use words to escape the truth. It was a profitable discussion, and later in the day a person many would assume was many notches lower on the organizational chart came and asked

two simple questions: “Why do you suppose it is so hard for you to bless your own story when you’ve achieved so much? What do you still need to accomplish that keeps you from being able to bless your own life?”

They were gracious questions. I knew it would take much time and reflection to engage them, and I told her so. Then she asked, “Do you want to know from those who work with you when you do the same thing to us that you did with Andrew?” I was honored by her pursuit and blessed by her courage. In the many years since that interaction, she has encouraged me at times when the weight has felt too heavy to bear. Stories shared and entered—even to a small degree—weave our hearts together for a greater good.

THE TENSION OF TRUTH

Growing character in community requires entering into the tension that we want the truth yet we don’t want it. Pursuing truth with others regarding our growth in character requires us to be willing to be caught in this enormous tension.

Perhaps the greatest tension in ministry is that most people have not signed on to grow, let alone grow through encounters with their stories and the stories of others. If the truth be told, most Christians define growth as learning how to stop doing bad things or finding new ways to avoid bad things. If a person fails occasionally and does only a *few* bad things, then growth is not compromised. If a person does a few good things, like going to a small group or reading the Bible fairly regularly, then growth is a given. Few people take growth to mean that we are literally to become like Jesus, which is very different from wearing a WWJD bracelet and thinking about trying to do what he would do.

To be like Jesus means that we must enter the complexity of both dignity and depravity. We are made in the image of God—glorious. We have taken on Adam and Eve’s hiding and blaming—ruin. We are glorious ruins, bent glory. And it shows up in every moment of our existence until we one day see Jesus as he is and become pure as he is pure.

A pastor I know well is in the middle of a building program. Before they began, he confessed to his board what everyone already knew to be true: space was at a premium and they needed to build, yet a strong motivator to build at that time was the fear that a number of big givers in the church might be leaving in a year or two. Further, the pastor acknowledged that he felt a great fear of failure whether they did or did not build. He also felt he was in a bind between the attendance numbers growing (a reason to build) and his sense of success (not a reason to build). He asked for prayer as he confessed the war in his soul.

The board was stunned. The pastor had named both the goodness of building and the factors in his heart that would mar the project. He didn't deny the rightness of moving forward, and he acknowledged his own obstacles to leading well. He confessed both his dignity and his depravity, and he did so without self-pity or sabotage. He spoke with a voice of strength and mercy for himself.

The result was astounding. One of the board members who was wealthy and planning to move to a different city admitted he was not in favor of the building because he didn't want to be asked to donate when he knew he would be moving. The pastor pursued truth by inviting that board member to reconsider why he would be reluctant to give since he had been a founding member of the church and would likely be returning to the community often even if he moved. Others began to voice their ambivalence and fear, but before the evening was over, the commitments to build together with prayer and to acknowledge the issues of their hearts became as important as the building itself.

To grow character, we must not deny or hide from the reality of our unique dignity. We are made in the image of God, and we are uniquely woven with awesome beauty. We may be remarkably handsome or bright, possess great musical ability or a hysterical sense of humor. We may possess remarkable abilities to encourage others or to read the nuances of relationships. Whatever marks us with glory, we are meant to prize it and use it for the sake of others.

To grow character, however, we must also not deny or hide from the reality of our depravity. Each of us has a unique way of hiding shame and blaming others for our failures. We must admit the truth that we are a mess and that we mar everything we do with some stain of the Fall. We are meant to grieve this and to repent. We are both awful and awesome at the same time. Leaders must be able to see, name, and honor both dignity and depravity in all their endeavors.

Leading people requires throwing yourself into a process that is fragile and tension-filled in order to help them not only do their jobs and fulfill the organization's mission but also grow as characters with character. We must serve them by telling stories that clarify why we are doing something and how we are to do it, and we must tell these stories with the goal of growing the character of the individuals and the organization.

PARTICIPATING IN TRUTH

All systems—whether a family, a megachurch, a for-profit business, or a group of friends that meets to talk and pray about starting a coffee bar—must engage in a process of character development through story. The process that best grows character and vision is one that moves from exploration through dialogue and discernment to decision making. Leadership is telling and listening to stories in order to birth new stories.

Exploration

Exploring is the honeymoon stage of leadership. Generally it is characterized as “getting to know you.” Seldom are pressure and rigid expectations imposed. Whether it is the first six months of being on the job, starting a project with a newly formed committee, or having lunch with a new acquaintance, the exploration period is one of ambling discussion.

The work of exploration is an attempt to scan and appraise the terrain: *Who are you? Who are we? What will we do, and how will we do it? What needs to be done, and how can it best be accomplished?* It's like a first date where both

parties are trying to gauge what the future might hold by seeing how well the present moment works out.

Here's what I mean: I met with a woman who may lead a significant dimension of our graduate school. Her skills and work history were impeccable, and her credentials had been thoroughly investigated and discussed by others on our committee. I was to tackle the question of how she might fit with our culture. On a warm Seattle morning, we sat down outdoors for a lengthy breakfast. The discussion moved from conventional questions about our backgrounds and histories to issues of the unique good and ill of Mars Hill Graduate School. I attempted to name both the dignity and depravity of the school and of the school's chief sinner: me. The goal was twofold—to offer her an accurate picture of the graduate school and also to ask how she has operated in similar contexts.

Exploring is simply asking the first existential question in the Bible: "Where are you, Adam?" Exploring asks: "Who are you? Where are you/we going? What do you/we want? How will we get to where we want to go?" The only requirement for exploration is that both participants engage in an honest exchange.

Yet the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth will not be told by any party in an interview or conversation with someone who is not a long-established confidant. Does that fact mitigate the possibility of significant, honest discussion? I believe honesty is not the core goal in this situation. Instead, a leader is looking for this process to reveal, through honest exchanges about life, how the other person takes in data and uses it to engage the matters at hand. This exploration is best done when human dignity is loved and honored. If dignity is honored, the truth will eventually be told.

Dialogue

Dialogue carries exploration into the realm of interpretation. When we explore, we do so with a set of biases or presuppositions. We are aware of some of these, but we have never named most of them. There is no neutral discovery of data that eventually gets formed into a theory. Instead, we see everything

through a lens that orients us to what is important and needs most to be seen. That's why we must submit our way of seeing to others who see the world through a different set of lenses. Doing this is uncomfortable and scary, but it's absolutely necessary if we want to better see the world.

Dialogue is different from discussion, and it also differs from debate. Discussion is merely the sharing of ideas on a topic. Debate is an attempt to sway or dismantle the ideas of another. Dialogue stands apart from both: it is far more opinionated than discussion and far less adversarial than debate. Dialogue requires you to approach the matter at hand with a viewpoint—a way of seeing reality—and the desire to have that viewpoint tested, refracted, and re-formed. It requires that we hold in an open hand cherished notions of ourselves or truth. Dick Averbeck, an Old Testament scholar, is fond of saying, “When I approach the Bible, I always begin with the question: What is wrong with my understanding of this text? What is wrong with me that this text wants to reveal?”² He acknowledges that he has a bias and invites Scripture and the Spirit of God to open his heart and eyes. He extends the same invitation to those who engage in study with him.

This approach honors depravity by acknowledging our need for the eyes of another: I can do nothing that well on my own; I can do almost everything better once it has been submitted to community dialogue. Dialogue, however, is not merely a matter of listening to someone else's opinion and factoring it into one's own. Dialogue involves a push and pull, a hammering and stretching that inevitably causes pain. Being challenged or questioned can prompt us to hide or assign blame. Being told that our idea or project has significant flaws exposes to us the underbelly of our narcissism, and we must have fortitude and commitment to remain in the process.

So what do we do when dialogue tests our assumptions, questions our methods, challenges our motivation, and invites us to go back to the drawing board? For me the process is similar to having my writing edited. It's exposing, painful, and humbling. And it's even more so when I read what I've written aloud and solicit face-to-face feedback.

The process can seldom be done well with people whom you don't respect

or trust. If there is a breach of care or suspicion of ill will, the dialogue will not be collaborative or expansive; instead, it will be suspicious and judgmental. The process will result in one-sided attacks or assertions rather than an all-hands-on-board working together to take an idea to the next level of beauty.

Good dialogue tends to create more chaos and confusion than clarity. It tends to expand the realm of possibilities, both good and ill, that needs to be taken into account. It pushes the community to take ownership of ideas and plans because they are jointly created even if one author wrote the first draft. Now, with all the new potential and chaos teeming, dialogue must submit itself to discernment.

Discernment

One of the least utilized tools for developing individual and corporate character is discernment.³ It is not that we don't discern and make decisions, but often we don't do so as a formal, intentional process. Instead, we let the exigencies of a meeting bring forth the data (exploration), we debate a few of the options, and then we either default to postponing a decision, we let the leader decide, or we make a group decision. What happened to discernment? It is usually lost in the wash of busyness.

Often a group will pray and ask for the Spirit's aid in the process, and individuals may ask God for help. But these prayers still are not sufficiently communal. They require little of those in the group but to bow their heads and nod assent. The process of discernment requires time and trust. Questions must be pondered: Which option most honors the unique character (calling and story) of this person or organization? Given the current situation, what will allow this person or organization to best live out that unique calling and mission? (This process is necessary, but tragically it can become a form of coercion or manipulation. It is crucial for people not to pronounce the will of God for another person or to impose their will as a divine prerogative.)

Discernment is another word for dreaming on behalf of others. It calls us to ponder what this person or situation would be like if God were the center of desire, the sole purpose for what we are deciding to do. Discernment is

meant to serve the ultimate desire to be a living sacrifice for the glory of God. It is not merely an effort to answer the question of effectiveness, affordability, or viability. Yet in answering the question of what is most honoring given our current situation, the questions of practicality must not be seen as an absence of faith, but as the context in which we live out trust.

Through discernment, a radically personal and intuitive process joins with a radically interpersonal and prophetic path. It requires that I submit myself to spiritual reflection, including journaling, *lectio divina*, and spiritual direction. It calls me to open my heart in conversation with God and others to discern my motivation and the wisdom they offer. And then it calls for me not to assert with dictatorial certainty that God has revealed himself or that I know the will of God, but to offer humbly my understanding of what is best to do.

Decision

Individual discernment must submit itself to a community conversation with testing, refraction, and re-forming, and then the matter must be turned over to the designated decision makers for their responsible care. If implementation of the plan requires full agreement, then the result will often be a consensus-driven, watered-down plan that is designed to satisfy everyone and, therefore, pleases no one. Well before the process of communal exploration begins, the formal decision-making structure should be well articulated, put in writing, and accepted and blessed by the participants. No one should be allowed to participate who doesn't trust those who are called to make the final decision. Otherwise the labor will feel like a mockery or a ruse when a decision is made that contradicts what some stakeholders most deeply believe to be wise.

This is where a great deal of organizational politics, gossip, and harm arise. If the decision-making structure is not agreed to by everyone in advance, the people who helped form the plan often feel defrauded when the final decision is not what they desired.

Allowing sufficient time to discern how a community moves from exploration to decision making is, therefore, imperative. Whose voice predominates? Consider that word *predominates*. Who dominates before the process begins?

She may be the formal leader, or she may be someone who is not even in the room. It is crucial not only to know and understand the organizational chart but also to know the players whose presence is felt even when they are absent. How else will they be named and taken into account publicly at the beginning of the process? Can they be named or is the proverbial elephant in the room too big and dangerous to be acknowledged?

Truth is essential because organizations that won't tell the truth can't make good decisions. A community that hides the truth will lack character and will become a multifaceted hypocrisy. Such a community will make decisions based on the ability to hide and blame rather than on what might grow glory in both individuals and the corporate whole.

All processes committed to growing character must result in action. In meetings where discussion fails to move to dialogue or discernment, decisions will be postponed and needed action becomes futile inaction. In some instances postponement may be judicious, but it may also be a flight from the dying of deciding, from dividing and sentencing some options to death while choosing to give one possibility life.

Whether a decision is made in a committee, by a staff, with an executive team, or alone, the decision weighs on a leader. There is no way to be honest and, at the same time, wholly confident. But someone must decide and bear the mark. And as the leader, you must bear the mark publicly before your peers, subordinates, and bosses. It is for that reason you are meant to be a storyteller who tells about the character of the people in the process. The story is as much about the process and the people who wrestle well as it is about the outcome.

If the dream that most deeply motivates action and choice is the gospel, then you must publicly announce the truth of the gospel story as it weaves itself through the fibers of your story and the stories of your team members. You must do so with enormous wisdom and courage in order to invite your community to consider first its story and second how to journey more deeply into the truth that transforms your character. And you need to know this: journeying deeply will inevitably involve telling secrets and stepping into the wild water of confessing that, like everyone else, you are a limping leader.



THREE LEADERS YOU CAN'T DO WITHOUT

Why You Need a Prophet, a Priest, and a King

It should be clear by now: leadership is all about maturity. A leader's first calling is to grow, knowing that he is the one who has the furthest distance to mature. The more we walk the path first while becoming last and least in our organizations, the more we become like the Alpha and Omega whom we long to serve.

And what exactly does it mean to be mature like Jesus? To be like Jesus in character is to imitate his way of relating to others. We survived the "What would Jesus do?" (WWJD) craze. This is not a helpful question because what Jesus would do would be too odd for anyone to do and still keep his job. Jesus' radical and infinitely wise way of being with others enabled him to be both profoundly rude to those who needed to be disrupted and tender beyond words to those whose hearts were full of sin and shame. So if this sort of question is to be asked at all, it would be far better to ask: "How did Jesus relate to different kinds of people?" But, of course, HDJRDKP is not nearly as catchy as WWJD.

Jesus was an ambiguous, poetic parable-teller and a disruptive prophet to the self-righteous. He was a tender priest who offered the forgiveness of sin to the prostitute. And to the hungry and sick, he was a king who provided for

them and protected them from harm. For centuries this multifaceted work of Christ has been referred to in terms of the offices of prophet, priest, and king. Those offices are the highest callings for service in the Old Testament. The king ran the theocracy, establishing the realm by creating an infrastructure that maintained safety, justice, and order. The realm was given meaning by the stories, art, rituals, and comfort that were the domain of the temple and the priests. And when people wandered from God's desire for them, the prophet disordered both worlds by speaking on God's behalf.

Interestingly, each of us has skills and gifts that place us primarily in one category—prophet, priest, or king. Sadly, the crisis, complexity, betrayal, loneliness, and weariness of leadership transform most prophets into troublemakers, most priests into dogmatists, and most kings into dictators. Mystery and chaos send leaders spiraling into efforts to manipulate and manage the world without drawing on faith, hope, and love. Consequently, our striving for order and meaning must be interrupted by a prophetic voice that will sing cacophony to undermine our idolatry. Prophets challenge kings to fight injustice rather than devour the poor, and they call priests to speak of hope for reconciliation instead of promising peace without requiring the necessary honesty regarding sin. Theologian François Turretini wrote,

The threefold misery of humanity resulting from sin (that is, ignorance, guilt, and the oppression and bondage of sin) required this threefold office. Ignorance is healed through the prophetic office, guilt through the priestly, and the oppression and bondage of sin through the kingly. The prophetic light scatters the darkness of error; the merit of the priest removes guilt and obtains reconciliation for us; the power of the king takes away the bondage of sin and death. The prophet shows God to us; the priest leads us to God; and the king joins us together with God, and glorifies us with him. The prophet illuminates the mind by the spirit of enlightenment; the priest soothes the heart and conscience by the spirit of consolation; the king subdues rebellious inclinations by the spirit of sanctification.¹

THE THREEFOLD OFFICES OF LEADERSHIP

Turretini reveals the great richness of the threefold office of Christ. But do these three offices encompass all aspects of leadership? Yes and no. To the degree that any schema fails to encompass all of reality, that is, all of God, it is inadequate. The one to remind us of that will be the prophet. These three categories don't address every leadership issue or role, but they do offer us rich wisdom and a helpful perspective on the life of a leader.

We are not to be solely a prophetic leader, nor priestly, or kingly. We are to be all three, all at once, and with all three in play with, for, and against one another. To lead is to mirror Jesus in all three of these capacities. But the fact is obvious: we are likely stronger in one dimension and weaker in another. And we hold the strength and weakness together by middling abilities in the third office. My strength is as a prophet. My weakness is as a king. And I am a fair-to-middling priest.

God, however, loves to use our strengths to get us into situations where our weaknesses are exposed and used for his glory. I find it hilarious that I am a seminary president. It is not what my skill set would seem to indicate. There are no occupational tests, gift inventories, personality profiles, or gut intuitions that would ever have suggested "seminary president" as a possible job for me. In exposing and using our weaknesses like this, God reminds us again and again of our dependency on him and directs our praise to the only One who is worthy of it.

God intends my life to become a reflection of all three roles as I mature. I am called to personally be a prophet, priest, and king. God also intends for those three roles to be represented in an organization by different people, and I am called to create space in our organization for all three roles.

At Mars Hill Graduate School we have a brilliant king, Ron Carucci, a seasoned and sophisticated leader who knows how to grow both people and our infrastructure. He is at the same time an exceptional prophet and a middling priest. In our mix we also have Paul, a great priest who is also gifted as prophet and king, and Ronna who is a kind queen, a tender storyteller priest,

and a bold prophethood. Our leaders are breathtaking, and we need more men and women whose gifts bump up against our natural tendencies to create more chaos, therefore demanding more creativity and surrender from us all.

PROPHET, PRIEST, AND KING TOGETHER

How are these roles meant to be woven into the fabric of an organization? And what happens when a dimension of Christ's offices is lacking or is viewed as undesirable? We will look first at a secular parallel to these roles and then consider what is unique about the categories of king, priest, and prophet.

In her book *Connective Leadership*, Jean Lipman-Blumen argues that leadership involves three interactive dimensions: direct—the intrinsic, competitive, and power styles of leadership; relational—the collaborative, contributory, and vicarious styles of leadership; and instrumental—the personal, social, and entrusting styles of leadership.

The direct style of leadership takes charge and enters into the fray of competitive challenge. It calls forth excellence and uses power to move an organization through crisis and other inevitable tangles. This dimension fails when it becomes authoritarian and uses shame or fear to control the actions of others. This leadership style is successful when it continues to move toward a clear and ordered purpose. Without this leadership style, chaos will inevitably take over. This is much of the labor of a king.

The relational style of a priest, on the other hand, offers care and enters the heart with a commitment to enhance the value and significance of others. This style offers dignity, respect, and honor to those involved in an organization. The relational leader mentors and encourages personal and corporate growth through a greater focus on emotion, story, and ritual. This orientation fails when personal growth becomes self-absorbed and fails to have a goal or vision that is greater than oneself. This work is the domain of a priest.

The instrumental style of leadership influences competition and care by motivating others to new ways of seeing and acting. Lipman-Blumen writes, "[Instrumental leaders] are particularly adept at dramatic gestures and coun-

terintuitive (unexpected or paradoxical) symbols that communicate their vision and enlist others in their cause. Their finely tuned sense of theatre, sometimes bordering on eccentricity, brings excitement, fun, and sometimes awe to their supporters."² This style fails when it becomes disconnected from the other two leadership styles. This is the work of a prophet who exposes, arouses, and disturbs in order to call her people back into right relationship with God.

Lipman-Blumen's categories do not fit perfectly with king, priest, and prophet, yet they overlap in some significant ways. What the biblical model of prophet, priest, and king uniquely addresses is the tension inherent among the three roles and the utter necessity for all three to engage one another for the good of the community. If we want to both magnify Jesus and become more like him, then we must make room for each dimension in our organization and strive to grow the parts of ourselves that are weak.

KING: CREATING LIFE-GIVING STRUCTURE

A king builds infrastructure to provide for the needs of his people and protect them from harm. As he works for a fair and just society, a king juggles crises, decision making, allocation of resources, talent development, and issues of survival and growth.

A king is called to be a core go-to strength in the face of uncertainty and danger, so she must be wise, vigilant, strong, and bold. When we think of leadership, this is often the primary picture that comes to mind. We look to the king to handle the crisis, minimize the complexity, and bring the anxiety of her people to a tolerable level. She imposes order on the chaos, and she does so by holding together contagious optimism and brutal honesty.

In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins tells the story of meeting Jim Stockdale, one of his personal heroes who had been the highest-ranking officer in the infamous Hanoi Hilton, the North Vietnamese prisoner-of-war camp. When Collins asked Stockdale how he survived, Stockdale told him that he made it because of his faith that his story would turn out well. Collins

then asked what kind of people didn't survive. The former POW quickly answered, "The optimists." The optimists thought they would be released by a set date, such as Christmas, and when the date came and went, they lost their resolve to live. Collins writes,

Another long pause, and more walking. Then he turned to me and said, "This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be." To this day, I carry a mental image of Stockdale admonishing the optimists: "We're not getting out by Christmas; deal with it!"³

A king can't afford to be a pessimist, nor can he be an optimist. A king brings together honesty and hope in the midst of crisis. And he builds a team that can do the same. Jim Collins argues that people are far more important than the direction of the organization:

The executives who ignited the transformations from good to great did not first figure out where to drive the bus and then get people to take it there. No, they first got the right people on the bus (and the wrong people off the bus) and then figured out where to drive it. They said, in essence, "Look, I don't really know where we should take this bus. But I know this much: If we get the right people on the bus, the right people in the right seats, and the wrong people off the bus, then we'll figure out how to take it someplace great."⁴

A king must assess talent, recognize strengths and weaknesses, and ascertain openness or capacity to change. With this data, he then determines who stays and who goes. He decides not to harbor anyone in the organization who threatens its integrity and energy. This may be where most leaders in Christian organizations fail. Most churches and nonprofit organizations have too few

employees and resources to be able to endure a single piece of deadwood. The leader often fails to remove the deadwood in a timely matter, if at all.

We fail to live well as leaders if we are afraid of conflict or if we need the applause of the throngs. A king must be intimately connected to his people but also able to suffer loneliness when his decisions are not popular. He must be bold enough to make difficult decisions without being dogmatic and without adopting an arrogance that would hide his fear that his decision just might be wrong.

PRIEST: CREATING MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS

A priest helps create meaning for the people in her organization through story. Storytelling is neither just an entertaining pastime nor just an interesting way of communicating facts or values. In *Leading Minds*, Howard Gardner writes, "The ultimate impact of the leader depends most significantly on the particular story that he or she relates or embodies, and the receptions to that story on the part of audiences (or collaborators or followers)."⁵

Gardner argues that a leader tells stories that address three core questions: What is our identity? Where are we from? Where are we going? These questions have to do with identity, both individual and corporate. A priest helps define vision and mission and, in that process, connects people to how to live (delivery of the law), how to live well (creativity), and how to live well with others (connecting symbols and rituals).

Delivery of the Law

A story is not just interesting; it actually delineates how to live. When Moses went to the people with the Ten Commandments, he went as a priest. His people were delivered from slavery through an exodus—and that is the story to be told. Stories orient us as to how to shape and order our lives. Stories offer rules that are not easy to follow even if they are clear and concise.

Stories also order chaos to some degree, and then they call us to a new depth of relating to God and to others. Priests tell stories and extrapolate

principles and rules for living from that narrative. For example, priests use the Ten Commandments to reorient us to the relational implications of the story of the Exodus. A good priest establishes not only the stories to be told but also how we will relate to one another according to the core values and practices reflected in that story. A priest has to be able to articulate for his organization what values the story compels them to live.

Creativity

A priest helps the body connect to the soul through the physicality of worship, through movement and music, and by corporately creating something in an environment that is very different from home or work. By engaging a different part of the brain than logic and linearity, for example, music stirs emotion and moves us in a way logic can't. And the place of worship offers both rest and a blank canvas on which to paint something new as we engage with God and are changed by him. The priest also calls us to see and think differently as we engage our creativity, our hearts, and our bodies. The list of possibilities for bringing the body into play is endless: ropes courses, hymn fests, meeting in a cabin rather than in a boardroom, lighting candles, writing poetry, creating art.

Finally, a priest offers a context for creativity that introduces disorder, which compels new creation. The priest must lead in an engagement of the body that allows people to move through the process of order-disorder-reorder.

Connecting Symbols and Rituals

Priests brand their product, community, and story through symbols and symbolic processes. A brand is a mark, a symbol that in a condensed, poetic, intense fashion says far more than the mere sign itself. It may sound disrespectful, but sacraments are branding rituals. The cross is the ultimate brand of Christianity.

Priests use the cross and other symbols to tell the stories of faith in a more condensed and iconic fashion. University convocation and graduation ceremonies involve rituals that have been part of the academy for centuries. These rituals, similar in symbolic richness to the Lord's Supper and baptism, present

the organization's core stories and truths. They connect us to those who came before us as well as those who will come after.

A priest is the master of ceremonies, the narrator who helps us find in the sermon, the sacrament, or the symbolic gesture a new lens for looking at our lives. She is both the maker of metaphor and the exegete who reads our lives in light of a symbol or metaphor. She is not merely a storyteller but a translator who brings our individual stories into the larger story of the organization.

The Kingly-Priestly Alliance

Kings and priests get along like mashed potatoes and gravy. A king sets a direction and commands his subjects to go that way. A priest offers those subjects a rationale for going on the king's campaign. The commander in chief needs a story to justify either going to war or diverting needed resources from one cause to another. The priest provides a sense of purpose for the sacrifice and brings cohesion when there could be division in the ranks.

The priest will officiate (storytell) at state functions. The priest has nothing to gain by questioning the direction set by the king, so it can easily become a chummy, mutually beneficial relationship that leads to compromise. The prophet Jeremiah exposes such false priests with this indictment:

They dress the wound of my people
as though it were not serious.
"Peace, peace," they say,
when there is no peace.⁶

The dishonest priest allows the stories of the faith to be used to serve the political and social agendas of the status quo. The priest gains power from the king to the degree he facilitates the demands of the king. Such an alliance enables the priest to direct his violence against the sins that need to be banished from the kingdom as he serves the king's agenda. The king can send his spies to ferret out the rule breakers and then rid the holy kingdom of malcontents. A priest often blesses such violence and overlooks the king's excesses.

At the same time the king bows to the priest's stories, acknowledging the authority of the priest to be the teller of the great myths. The king submits to the processes and procedures established by the priestly caste to keep the kingdom organized, although he may violate those rules when it's to his advantage. Often he will pay for new churches, colleges, and hospitals that are run by priests who rule religion, educate the young, and care for the sick. For the king to maintain power, society must have strong glue, and the king knows that the priests provide this.

Though priests and kings often work symbiotically, for good or for ill, there can also be great tension between them. Senior management, for instance, tends to think of the HR department as a bunch of softies who spend the day resolving the complaints of whiners. The HR department often sees senior management as cowboys and cowgirls who will ride their horses until they drop and then put them up wet. The same tensions are often apparent between a senior pastor (the king) and the executive pastor or the assistant pastors (the priests). The assistants feel they are hired to do the work the king doesn't want to do, which usually involves talking to people. The assistant sees the senior pastor as out of touch and uncaring.

At their worst, kings are bullies and priests are wimps. But as long as they give one another what is necessary for their survival, a relative peace can exist, that is, until a prophet comes to town. It is no wonder that most organizations fall into the king-priest dyad. It is also no surprise that most organizations will only occasionally allow a prophet to come into their ranks, usually in the form of a paid consultant. Seldom will an organization have the wisdom to hire and keep on staff a prophet who disrupts complacency and awakens desire through dreaming. Prophets are not the easiest people to have around.

PROPHET: CREATING COMPELLING VISION

Most people want to grow, but the price of growth is pain. A grapevine will not produce excellent wine grapes unless it is pruned. It is the way of all

growth and excellence: submission to pain through discipline is the only route to maturity.

Discipline is the essential link between pain and growth. It lets the process of suffering shape us to a greater glory. Runners, for example, vary their workouts from day to day and before major runs. Otherwise the body becomes comfortable with the routine and conserves energy and reduces pain by offering only what is necessary to do the expected run. The body seems to say, "I know you. You want to run farther and faster than I'm comfortable doing, but I will make you pay if you try it. So slow down, enjoy the mileage, and there will be no pain."

Runners, therefore, employ training regimens that push them harder up hills, or they mix long runs with sprints in order to fool the body into improving without shutting down and saying, "No way." Likewise, in all of life discipline requires a breakdown of the status quo for the desired improvements to continue. Discipline reminds the body that it is the servant of the one who can imagine a faster time or a longer run.

As representative of discipline, a prophet is an odd interplay of coach, poet, visionary, and therapist. He disrupts the paradigm of comfort and complacency. But when he shouts at me, he also invites me to desire and dream of redemption. When he comforts me with the vision of what will one day be my future, he calls me to create it with a commitment to honesty, care, and justice. (If he were not a prophet but a good priest, he would tell me a bedtime story and comfort me. He might even bring me a cup of hot cocoa.) But a prophet is a far cry from a priest. This odd presence cries out, invites, and keeps telling me to move.

A prophet exposes our subtle turn to indulgence and self-congratulation. He points out our self-righteousness and underscores the evidence that our current condition is not true, good, or lovely. And often, in order to expose the unrighteousness of the current way of being, he allows himself to be a fool.

A prophet exposes what is not right in part by arousing dreams of redemption. She poetically touches ache for what is not and calls forth a vision of what

will come. A prophet is more a poet than a rabble-rouser, and her poetry often contains dense metaphors and complex symbols to tap into the deepest parts of the heart. A prophet connects with the unconscious motivations, desires, and dreams that surface more through symbol than by logic. In that sense, the prophet and priest overlap. The priest moves more toward order, but the prophet uses symbol to unnerve and reveal. Both prophets and priests are poets of the soul. The priest writes and sings the psalms to open hearts to desire, whereas the prophet utters dense and complex metaphors equally to awaken hearts that have grown dull and fat.

It's no surprise, then, that the prophet-poet-disrupter is often shunned as being too weird or eccentric. To normal people, a prophet may be intriguing but unpredictable and dangerous. So often prophets are not welcome in "normal" company; instead they find solace in communities of prophets who are notorious for being self-absorbed and destructive. Those cultures can be as different as the Village in New York or a seminary in the Midwest. Prophetic communities attract artists, poets, theologians, therapists, songwriters, producers, actors/actresses, and occasionally the literal prophet. All of these have one thing in common: they want to challenge the status quo of the king and the priest.

As a result prophets are often killed or sent into exile. And it's easy to understand why. Few people want their lives disrupted by visions, poems, and stories that wreak havoc on the comforts of daily life.

The three offices of leadership—prophet, priest, and king—complement but also irritate one another. There will always be conflict and misunderstanding among the three. Members of one office will inevitably hold the other two in some degree of suspicion and contempt. But if we want to magnify Jesus and become more like him, then we must make room in our organizations for each dimension and strive to grow the parts of ourselves (individually and collectively) that are weak.

Leaders also need to make room for all three dimensions in the space of their souls. It may sound like I'm suggesting that you become a haunted and deeply divided person. But actually, we are often called to fulfill all three

offices—to disrupt complacency, to bring comfort to heartache, and to direct others to life—in one sermon or a single counseling session. We must, therefore, create space in our organizations and in ourselves for this kind of rich, creative complexity.

COHERENCE WITHIN CHAOS

To the uninitiated ear, jazz sounds like a cacophony. But to the connoisseur, it sings not only with sound but also with color and texture. The rhythm of jazz may fail to offer clear order and harmony, yet over time it creates coherence without having to completely corral chaos. It forces the listener to live in the tension between order and disorder without finding resolution in the prison of regulation or the exile of anarchy.

When it comes to cacophony, nothing quite compares to the inevitable tensions between the prophet who exposes, the priest who reconciles, and the king who orders. The noise is more than most people or organizations wish to endure. Imagine, for instance, putting a tender heart (Andrew, a priest) and an impulsive troublemaker (Peter, a prophet) together with powerful leaders, such as Matthew (a tax-gatherer) and Simon (a zealot; an antigovernment revolutionary), both kings. It is a recipe for conflict. But it is God's plan to interweave chaos and order to create a mysterious music that bonds disjunctive forces into a new unity.

The king creates a strong center. The priest strengthens the center with myth and meaning. The prophet disrupts the center in order to keep it from becoming stagnant. In the disruption, a new center will be created and new meaning will be revealed. The process is unfinished until the true King comes to reign as a tender priest, to reconcile all that is broken, and to prophetically expose lies as he unveils his glorious truth.

Leadership is about making way for that day by prefiguring it in the way we both define maturity and create space for complexity to exist in our organizations. We invite that day to the degree that we give:

- kings the freedom to create infrastructure, policies, procedures, standards of performance, and compensation based on performance as well as the freedom to hire, fire, advance, and demote employees and to develop and retain talent
- priests the freedom to create mission, vision, and values that are centered on meaning, stories, and branding in order to foster connection, care, forgiveness, honor, dignity, and growth
- prophets the freedom to create new ways of thinking through encounters with truth that provoke disequilibrium, desperation, and suffering, yet lead to mystery, paradox, desire, and dreams

We must put all three types of leaders in a room and invite each of them to value the strengths of the others more than they value their own strengths. Seeing the others as more valuable and necessary can happen only to the degree that each one is a broken and limping leader.

Broken and limping leaders need one another. The king left alone will become a dictator who hates chaos. The priest on his own will fall into accommodation for the sake of avoiding conflict. A prophet alone will indulge in drama and self-absorption for the sake of escaping boredom. They need one another to elude the trap of their own narcissism. But the tension created by their interaction will inevitably be greater than the immediate benefits of that interaction. The best leaders strive to grow all three offices within themselves.

I must know my strength and natural abilities and call them good because God has blessed those traits. I must also name my greatest lack or weakness and consider why that dimension of leadership is so difficult for me. It may be biological. Very few leaders who struggle with ADD, for instance, will be inclined to be kings. For others, their struggle may be connected to personality: very few introverts will find their natural strength to be that of a priest. And there may be significant life experiences that shape our inclination as leaders: very few prophets come from well-adjusted, happy homes. Whatever the factors, God desires that we come to maturity by using our strengths to get us into significant trouble that exposes our weaknesses.

It is our weaknesses that make us most dependent on Jesus and, oddly and

mysteriously, that do the most to make him known to us. I wish it weren't the case. I often pray that there might be another way, but when I most exhaust myself in the crisis and complexity of leadership by my narcissistic efforts to control and manipulate, I find that I have no one but him—and that he is more than enough:

- not enough to resolve crisis, but enough to courageously enter into it
- not enough to simplify complexity, but enough to submit to a few truths
- not enough to escape betrayal, but enough to suffer betrayal with dignity
- not enough to escape self-absorption, but enough to know comfort
- not enough to find complete healing, but enough to rest in the promise of the coming day

So we must acknowledge and embrace our weaknesses, for good can come out of them. As a broken king, for example, I paradoxically promise a new reign of righteousness. As a broken priest, I invite the heart to long for the coming day of redemption. And as a broken prophet, my fumbling proclamation of truth sets my organization on an endless journey of asking, seeking, and knocking. God redeems our brokenness.

A limping leader makes Jesus known as she clings to King Jesus to lead her, to Priest Jesus to comfort her, and to Prophet Jesus to tell her the truth. We can expect nothing more or less from ourselves and our leaders than to know Jesus better through their brokenness as well as our own. We must demand of ourselves and our leaders to limp and fall forward into the strong arms of grace:

“My gracious favor is all you need. My power works best in your weakness.” So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may work through me. Since I know it is all for Christ's good, I am quite content with my weaknesses and with insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.⁷