

## A LEADERSHIP CONFESSION

### Flight is the Only Sane Response

I DON'T pet stray dogs. I was bitten on the hand when I was six. I recall watching this immaculately coiffed collie bound out of a neighbor's yard to greet me. Its elegant, effortless movement mesmerized me. I put my hand out and, in a split second, went from being a dog lover to a child wounded in hand and heart. Since that day I've never fully trusted a foreign pooch. I am dog scarred—a tad suspicious, but still open to man's best friend.

The same is true in my approach to leaders known as pastors. I seldom pet a strange or even a well-known pastor. This came about after I was bitten at age twenty-six. As a lowly intern in a local church, I was earning a whopping fifty dollars a week for services that included leading a Bible study, visiting church members, and walking the senior pastor's dog. I worked with the pastor for more than a year, and after I graduated from seminary, I came back as an assistant pastor.

The senior pastor and I often played tennis together, and after one afternoon match, we sat and talked about some of the things he wanted me to tackle in the coming year. He was my mentor, and I was his apt disciple. But it is also true that even though I had graduated from a fine seminary, I had the maturity of a street kid who had barely escaped death, jail, and excessive brain damage due to illicit drug, and I had little idea how to function in the business of organized religion. The church was as foreign to me as the Junior League.

I was grateful beyond words to have a job and a future with this man and his church. We left the tennis court at five o'clock and reconvened in an elders' meeting at six. An hour into the meeting, the senior pastor said to the leaders of our church, "I've come to the decision that it is best for Dan and the church to part ways." He offered no explanation. It was a clean, simple bite. Several of the elders felt the decision was abrupt and without due diligence, so I kept my job for another eighteen months. But the handwriting was on the wall.

Leaders are dangerous. They can bite without provocation, or at least without logic, and it is best to stay out of their way or you'll have to deal with the consequences. Leaders can seem capricious, aloof, narcissistic, and self-interested. I wanted little to do with their world, so I left the complex world of church politics and the rough-and-tumble culture of leadership to work on my doctorate. But I didn't escape political turmoil.

The academic realm involves politics similar to the clan warfare of early marauding tribes. It is all about loyalty—allegiance to the tartan, flag, and set of convictions that mark your community as unique. If you can wield a broadax or sword well enough and speak the language of the clan, your position is secure until death. This is called tenure. I entered the clan convinced that I would never again lead any group, community, church, school, or sports team as long as I lived. In fact, one of the great advantages of being an academic was that I was expected to complain about the administration, but I didn't have to take on any leadership responsibilities beyond teaching my classes.

Umpteen years later, six colleagues and I wrestled with the decision of whether to apply for accreditation for the graduate school we had haphazardly started in Seattle. We were in a quandary: The school that had allowed us to be a branch campus no longer wanted us. If we chose to disband, we would face humiliation as well as the possibility of lawsuits stemming from the school's inability to fulfill its promise of offering degrees. We decided to apply for accreditation. The application required the signature of the school's president—a position we had never discussed. We really didn't think we needed a president because we planned to operate as a nonhierarchical guild of peers without a central, decision-making figure. We would be a community, not an organization.

When the moment came for the president to sign the application, all heads in the room dropped, including my own. An awkward half minute

ensued, and I looked up. Someone noticed my movement and said, “You are the oldest and the best known.” I said, “Okay, but you all know I’m not really the president.” Everyone laughed. It was as obvious as a scream in the ear: I’d take the title, and we would all share the power and responsibility.

The dream of a nonhierarchical community of peers collapsed under conflicting expectations, bruised feelings, immorality, and—thank God—a board that intervened and began naming failures upon failures, and called us to become an organization and leaders. We’ve been in the process for six years, and I am still president. I don’t deserve to be. Perhaps that is one of the reasons I am still asked to serve in this capacity.

Everything I despised in other leaders I have replicated in our organization. Many times I have acted precipitously in panic before gathering sufficient data. Many other times I have failed to act at all. If in one circumstance I act too slowly, it seems that I act too quickly in the next. Leadership feels like playing the slot machine in a casino. You put your best capital into the machine, pull the lever, watch the wheels spin, and come up empty handed. The question lingers: what am I doing wrong?

My colleagues and I have gone through enormous heartache and tremendous change. We are still in the middle of profound transformation, and there are days I wonder if I will survive to see the sun rise again. Last night I tossed myself through a midnight aerobics workout that continued to the early side of three o’clock in the morning. I worried, prayed, and thought about personnel matters, finances, future hires, the school’s reputation in the community, tensions among the faculty, and a host of other concerns that zapped my mind like moths flying into a bug light.

No doubt every leader feels the constant and chronic weight of obstacles, but it isn’t one problem or even a whole set that eats our lunch; it’s that each problem requires a response that seldom resolves the issue. Instead, the response simply creates multiple new problems. The weedlike problem seems to have a pod stuffed with countless seeds that will be sown the moment it is pulled, seeds that will result in a host of new weeds. And if that trouble isn’t hard enough to swallow, the real issue is more personal—having to do with the decisions and choices a leader must make, alone.

Few decisions are simple. In fact, simple decisions are better called choices. Do I want to eat now or wait for my wife to get home? Do we cancel classes when there is a foot of snow in Seattle? We make choices every day

that require little thought, have few consequences, and are completed without much need for reflection or counsel. Leaders choose daily, but the real weight on their shoulders lies in the need to *decide*.

And there are no easy decisions. To decide requires a death, a dying to a thousand options, the putting aside of a legion of possibilities in order to choose just one. *De-cide*. *Homi-cide*. *Sui-cide*. *Patri-cide*. The root word *decidere* means “to cut off.” All decisions cut us off, separate us from nearly infinite options as we select just one single path. And every decision we make earns us the favor of some and the disfavor of others.

Budgetary decisions, for instance, seldom involve equal distribution of the finite resource we call money. The child who begins college may require most of a family’s disposable income. As a result, the rest of the family can’t take their summer vacation to the mountains. The decision blesses one and alienates others.

A good leader will, in time, disappoint everyone. Leadership requires a willingness to not be liked, in fact, a willingness to be hated. But it is impossible to lead people who doubt you and hate you. So the constant tug is to make the decision that is the least offensive to the greatest number and then to align yourself with those who have the most power to sustain your position and reputation in the organization.

Leadership is not about problems and decisions; it is a profoundly relational enterprise that seeks to motivate people toward a vision that will require significant change and risk on everyone’s part. Decisions are simply the doors that leaders, as well as followers, walk through to get to the land where redemption can be found.

## FLIGHT IS THE ONLY SANE RESPONSE

There are two common stories I hear from students who come to Mars Hill Graduate School. One group of students will say, “I didn’t want to be here. I was working in Washington DC/Portland/Charlotte/Chicago. I loved my job, my church, and my friends, but in a matter of months my life was turned upside down. It felt like God spun me around, headed me west, and here I am, not really sure why. But I am here, and I sense that this is where I am meant to be.”

The other group will say, “I knew this is where I wanted to study. I heard about the school through a book/a seminar/a student, and I have wanted to

be here for years. But since I've come, I feel like I'm going through a crisis of confidence. I don't know if this is really what I am supposed to do. I'm afraid, and I feel crazy for ever thinking I wanted to come here."

Doubt is the context for surrender. And flight is the path for obedience. When we're reluctant to lead, doubting ourselves and our call, we are ripe for growth as a leader. Likewise, when we hear the call to lead but we run in the opposite direction, God has a way of having us thrown off the boat, swallowed by a large fish, and spit onto the shore where we are to serve. If the situation weren't so serious, it would be hilarious. God invites us to run and yet to know that he will arrive at our place of flight before we arrive so he can direct our steps again.

Perhaps you doubt this is true. Or, more likely, you hope it might be different for you. But the data from the Bible seem to support this premise more often than not. God seems to choose leaders who don't want to serve, and when they do follow God's call, they often do so in a way that creates new chaos. Consider each of the three patriarchs: Abraham was a liar and a coward. Isaac, the least troubled of the three, was forced to live with the memory of his father's knife at his throat, and later he allowed his wife to manipulate the entire household. Jacob was so manipulative and self-serving that he was like Pigpen in the *Peanuts* comic Strip, billowing chaotic dust wherever he went.

Or think about Moses. In a ridiculous encounter, God speaks to Moses from a burning bush. Moses removes his sandals and acknowledges the place to be holy ground, yet he second-guesses God's command that he return to Egypt to free his people. (No doubt Moses was recalling his first effort to free the slaves—the murder he committed, a crime which sent him into a forty-year exile.) Moses' efforts to dissuade God led to a second plan that involved Aaron, his more articulate brother. This is not the behavior we would predict of Moses or God. It seems much closer to a script from *Monty Python* than *Ben Hur*.<sup>1</sup>

God's habit of calling reluctant leaders gets even odder. He calls young Jeremiah, a boy who is no more than eighteen years old. Jeremiah resists three times and secures a promise that God will protect him. As the story unfolds, we see that it would have been wise for Jeremiah to have pressed for a definition of *protection* and then read the fine print. His life was one of inexhaustible suffering and the absence of what most sane people would call protection.

And then there is Jonah.

Jonah is a world-class model of trying to flee the call of leadership. He runs away on a boat and is thrown into the deep chaos of the sea only to be swallowed by a piscine taxi that spits him onto the shore of the very place he was trying so hard to avoid.<sup>2</sup> Again, it is a bizarre story that makes our devotion to formal, academic preparation for leadership seem like it was invented on the dark side of the moon.

The kind of people God calls and their reluctant responses to that calling are not what we expect of professional leaders. We expect our leaders to eagerly and faithfully execute their duties. After all, they're trained professionals.

## THE FLAWED FORMAL-TRAINING PROCESS

The training process for leaders—secular or religious—can usually be broken into three areas: content, skill, and ethics/character. At the seminary I attended, 90 percent of the curriculum was devoted to content, 10 percent focused on skill, and our character and ethics, or how we lived in relationship with others, was never addressed beyond a few talks in chapel. It was assumed that who we were as people and how we related to others had been addressed prior to our arrival at seminary.

The place for personal growth was thought to be the church, not the seminary. The seminary trained men and women in the Bible, theology, church history, and other academic rigors, and then it taught those who would pastor how to preach and conduct themselves in the church. Practical skills were assumed to be learned from classroom input and field experience. We all knew that what mattered was how well we did on papers and tests.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, however, seminaries began to admit that their students needed much more. So professors of practical theology, who had been or were still in the “real world” of the pastorate, taught courses and occasionally took students into the trenches. But the focus was still about 80 percent content, 15 percent skill, and only 5 percent ethics/character, with a course on spiritual formation thrown in for good measure.

Oddly, the same is true in many MBA and other leadership programs. Content is king. In MBA programs, however, skills are wed more to the curriculum than in most seminaries. Yet character is equally ignored. As more business dishonesty and illegalities occurred and became public knowledge,

though, a cry rose to bring in ethics. The secular world has also been quicker to include psychology and its offspring in the mix. Most MBA graduates have studied personality profiles and data on their own work personalities. Folks who have been trained in or who have taught in the business world tell me that the mix is now likely 65 percent content, 30 percent skill, and 5 percent ethics.

Notice the pattern: teach theory and skill, and hope that somehow the issues of character and ethics will take care of themselves. The assumption is that parents have already dealt with their children's character issues or that the church, synagogue, or other religious institution will take care of shaping ethics and personal values. The academy is for content and practical skills. This is a problem because we in academia fail to address the narcissism that drives many leaders. We enable troubled and manipulative men and women to devour their colleagues, their staffs, and their congregations simply because they've passed exams, written papers, matriculated through a degree, and gained the credentials to be called professionals.

## THE ALTERNATIVE: GOD'S REQUIREMENT

What should we require of a pastoral candidate, a corporate CFO, or even a representative to the state legislature? What I am about to write is ridiculous. It won't happen in the public and secular realms. It could possibly happen in faith-based contexts, but it is far from the norm. Yet it is the model offered by most of God's leaders in the Bible.

We should bless men and women who have done their level best to escape leadership but who have been compelled to return and put their hand on the tiller. We should expect anyone who remains in a formal leadership context to experience repeated bouts of flight, doubt, surrender, and return. Why would this be God's plan? Why does God love the reluctant leader? Here is one reason: the reluctant leader is not easily seduced by power, pride, or ambition.

### *Power*

A leader inevitably uses his own power, or limits the power of others, to make things happen. And there are as many different kinds of power in an organization as there are people, but two forms are the most common: instrumental

and influential. Think of a family. The mother and father hold the instrumental power to control money and the family's schedule, so they plan the family vacation. But the volatile and moody middle child has the influential power to ruin the vacation.

The people in an organization who can hire or fire, set budgets, determine priorities, evaluate performance, and reward success hold the instrumental power. The influential power might be in the hands of a famous faculty member, a brilliant software designer, or the pastor who resigned but remains in the congregation. It is crucial to know who holds the power to set an organization's direction and tone.

A reluctant leader is highly suspicious of people who work to accumulate and hoard power. One of the reasons godly leaders are reluctant is that they have frequently seen power misused to build personal kingdoms. I have several friends who worked in education but were ruined by a bully school superintendent. This individual first emptied the school board of strong voices and then filled the empty seats with yes-men and -women who were not experienced in educational processes. She then began to remove school principals who questioned her authority. In one tirade she yelled at a principal, "I will not tolerate insubordination. You will not scream at me or humiliate me in public ever again." The preceding interaction had been heated, but no one else present at the meeting felt that the superintendent had been treated poorly.

This woman dealt with the school district's multimillion-dollar debt by cutting the programs and the positions of individuals who questioned her, and she rewarded the few who protected and promoted her regime. And there was nothing that the victimized teachers could do. The superintendent covered over her violence with school administrator rhetoric. She marginalized every critic as a miscreant. And because of her dictatorial rule, highly qualified teachers and administrators—the ones who weren't forced out—fled the sinking ship.

Reluctant leaders don't aspire to hold power; in fact, they avidly work to give it away. They attempt this even as they use power to create a context where power is used fairly, wisely, and with checks and balances. A reluctant leader does not hoard power because doing so creates more pressure and demand. Power is like a weighty gold bar. It can't be slipped into one's wallet; instead it must be carried obtrusively everywhere one travels. It elicits the envy of others and many will want to take it. The reluctant leader detoxifies

power by empowering others to bring their vision, passion, and gifts to the enterprise. She creates an environment of open debate that honors differences and where no one fears reprisal.

In the leadership approach of a reluctant leader, it is a blessing to give away power and a calling to monitor its faithful use.

### *Pride*

A reluctant leader is not likely to be caught in pride's limelight. Pride is a perverted form of worship. Pride basks in the light of its own glory and blesses its goodness as originating from within. Proudful people, however, never seem secure in their self-evaluation: they require a community to idolize their glory.

Self-glory pushes proudful leaders to remind others of who they know and what they've read and written, of their earned degrees and the programs they have created. Such leaders are seldom wrong, and they always are in the know. Pride is a sucking vortex that, vampirelike, draws into itself the goodness and glory of others.

Such pride is contagious. Being in the presence of a pride-driven soul begets a craving in others for more power. It is like being in a wealthy enclave of Mercedeses, Porsches, and Bentleys when you're driving a Ford. What once seemed like a good car no longer feels adequate. Similarly, the presence of a self-glorifying leader lures with a vanity fair of opportunity. Followers try to do whatever is required to keep their personal stock high and to avoid the danger of crossing swords with the narcissistic leader. This contagion is nearly impossible to escape. The only way out is to flee for one's life.

And a reluctant leader is one who has fled in the past. He knows he is a coward and a fool. He already tried to slip away, but he got caught. He went AWOL and, rather than being court-martialed, was advanced in rank. How does one fathom the absurdity? So it's no surprise that a reluctant leader is not impressed with either his ability or the results of his labor. This quality is why Paul underlined the type of people God calls as leaders. He said, "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong."<sup>3</sup> Why? Because such a selection process clarifies who deserves the glory and who is to be grateful just to have been a part of God's story.

A reluctant leader gets to boast in the foolishness of God. It is this wise conundrum that sets the tone for the unique mark of biblical leadership.

When something goes well, we are not to say, “It is all of God. He gets the praise. I was just being used by him.” That is partly true, but not true enough. We can more rightly say, “I had a great idea, and I worked like a madman. But left to myself I would have created a nightmare. God turned good, clean bones into dancing flesh.” The truth is that I am pretty smart and I work very hard, but the goodness of my creation, just like the breath of my body, is a gift. Can I take an ounce of credit for my mind or for my capacity to endure the high levels of boredom required to get a PhD?

A reluctant leader knows that her calling to lead is ridiculous, but she bears the high glory of God’s decision to call weak fools into the work of leading others. Consequently, a reluctant leader smiles at the striving ambition of power-hungry leaders to make more and keep more.

### ***Ambition***

The ambitious leader pushes relentlessly to do more, to build a bigger organization, and to attract more notice. Of course the reason for building something bigger is always to do more good for the cause. We can serve more people if we have more staff, more airtime, and more money. But enough is never enough.

It should be clear, however, that the issue of ambition is not primarily a matter of size. There are organizations with thousands of employees that are not driven by ambition. Conversely, I’ve met leaders of organizations consisting of two people who burned with the frenzy of growth. The mark of ambition is the zeal for bigger, better, and more—no matter the cost to people or the process. The ends justify the means because it is better to burn out than to rust out.

Ambitious leaders sing the vision and spin the cost. Rather than acknowledging what must be sacrificed to move from point A to point B, ambitious leaders extol the need and the benefits of the death march. The ambitious leader has a clean-shaven face, a stylish haircut, and a starched uniform. He plays a military march as his soundtrack, and when anyone questions the timing or wisdom of the plan, that person is viewed as a troglodyte or traitor.

Not so with the reluctant leader. He is more like the battle-weary master sergeant who has trained many freshly minted West Point grads in the realities of their craft. The reluctant leader has been to war and knows that almost nothing justifies sending men and women into harm’s way. The reluctant

leader knows that perhaps one war out of one hundred is fought for a just cause, so he is not caught up in the hoopla of bigger and better. He refuses to serve the larger good by telling lies to get people involved. When new buildings need to be built or new programs grown, the reluctant leader works hard to minimize the cost to the constituents and looks for every possible way of utilizing space or revising existing programs.

The reluctant leader is not looking for luxury or a large office, nor does she invest in the makings of a kingdom. One way to identify an ambitious kingdom builder is her refusal to plan for succession. There are countless horror stories about leaders of Christian organizations holding on to power late into life. Such refusal to prepare for succession in advance hamstring the organization from developing high-capacity leaders at lower levels. Meanwhile, the top executive begins to see every potential leader as a rival and a threat.

Perhaps just as destructive as having no plan is the ambitious kingdom builder who aspires for his son to inherit his throne. Seldom is the son equal to the father, and as a result the organization becomes a shell of its former self. There are significant exceptions, such as Franklin Graham, the son of evangelist Billy Graham, but the notable failures are too obvious and plentiful to mention.

The reluctant leader doesn't merely give accolades to others. It is her true joy to see others awaken to their potential and exceed their greatest dreams. It is the hope of every good teacher to have students who take their work further than the teacher was able to do. To be surpassed is the ideal. To be replaced is the goal, not a sign of failure.



These are the hard realities of reluctant leadership. It is a calling that is ridiculous and counterintuitive and paradoxical. And the only sane response is to run as fast as you can in the opposite direction. If you are, in fact, able to escape to a more private and quiet existence then count it a blessing of God's kindness. He has decided to spare you the costly experience called leadership.

But there is another possibility. If God is real and involved in your life and wants you to be a leader, he will corner you and direct you back into the

good that you are to live. So if God captures you, stop running, count the cost, and lead. The more passionately a leader tries to flee but is cornered by God to serve in leadership, the more clearly she understands that her service is an exposure of her weakness and a revelation of God's goodness. It is God's design to use reluctant servants to usher in glory.