

"Practicing Greatness"

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INTRODUCTION

"Deliberate mediocrity is a sin." (Elton Trueblood) Since then I have learned that greatness in the kingdom of God is a journey toward humility. Humility and celebrity can coexist (1) The difficulty with which some spiritual leaders acknowledge their ambition to seek greatness betrays its motivation. They are looking for greatness that is found in position and power (2) Jesus' idea of greatness revolves around humility and service (3) Unfortunately, plenty of people who posture themselves as spiritual leaders hunger for the worldly trappings of greatness: position, power, and privilege. Greatness is not just about character. It's also about effectiveness. (3) Great leaders leave people better off than they were before the leader entered their lives. (4) Leaders must make countless good choices and right calls to fashion greatness. Practicing greatness requires that the spiritual leader develop some key "disciplines."

1. The discipline of self-awareness
2. The discipline of self-management
3. The discipline of self-development
4. The discipline of mission
5. The discipline of decision-making
- 6 The discipline of belonging
7. The discipline of aloneness

THE DISCIPLINE OF SELF-AWARENESS

The single most important piece of information a leader possesses is self-awareness. When you add the word *self* to these, you get a good idea of what self-awareness includes: self-knowledge (knowing who you are), self-mindfulness (understanding your motives for doing what you do), self-vigilance (knowing what makes you tick and what ticks you off!), self-consciousness (knowing how you come across to others), and self-alertness (maintaining your emotional, physical, and spiritual condition) (10)

Leaders who operate without self-awareness run the risk of being blindsided by destructive impulses and confused by emotions that threaten to derail their agenda and leadership effectiveness. For followers, credibility rides or falls on consistency. They know how to measure their success. They know what they bring to the table in terms of talent and abilities. At the end of the road, great leaders are intimately acquainted with themselves. What's more, they are at home with themselves. (11)

Great leaders distinguish themselves by hitting the trail of self-exploration early and being unrelenting in searching for clues to their own formation. They are not afraid to push into uncharted territory, even when the road seems fraught with danger. They are determined not to let their past govern their present. (15) Leaders who do not excavate the family-of-origin site may miss some key personal insights that carry huge implications for their relationship skills, communication patterns, capacity for intimacy, conflict-resolution skills, view of authority—all enormously important behaviors and attitudes in determining how we relate and respond to others (16) From our family of origin we may take gifts such as humor, love, strong self-reliance, or emotional intelligence (17)

The issue for leaders revolves around the degree to which they have assessed these family dynamics, examining them for symptoms of trying to overcompensate in ways that contribute to unhealthy life patterns that can lead to failures. Addictions or compulsions such as problems with drugs or alcohol, sex addictions, a lust for power, compulsive eating, adrenaline addiction, workaholism, approval craving, just to name a few common ones, often stem from family-of-origin backgrounds (19) A skillful life coach helped Fred understand the underlying causes for his out-of-control life, reframe his assumptions about appropriate expectations, (20) The more self-aware leaders become, the greater their capacity to respect other people for who they are. (28);

Gary McIntosh and Samuel Rima identify five types of dark side leaders: compulsive, narcissistic, paranoid, codependent, and passive-aggressive. Narcissistic leaders combine intense ambitiousness, overwhelming feelings of inferiority, and excessive needs for affirmation. Paranoid leaders are suspicious of others and therefore extremely guarded in their relationships. (30)

Codependent leaders are often drawn to the ministry and to other helping professions out of a seemingly hard-wired tendency to be focused on others' actions and emotions at the expense of their own boundaries and emotional states. Passive-aggressive leaders resist others' demands by procrastinating and by being stubborn and forgetful (31) Great spiritual leaders understand that becoming acquainted with the dark is the only path to the light (33)

THE DISCIPLINE OF SELF-MANAGEMENT

Great leaders are great managers, but mostly of themselves (35) They know that internal self-management of their own mental, emotional, and spiritual health is the key (36) Mismanaged anger always exacts a price, either in the leader's relationships, health, or capacity to lead. Do others frequently annoy you? Do you often speak of changes others need to make? Do you frequently make disparaging remarks about others' behavior and appearance? (39)

Self-awareness helps leaders learn to calibrate their self-expectations. Great leaders do not engage in self-flagellation when they disappoint themselves. They are not afflicted with an inflated view of themselves (44) People who feel uncared for become disaffected pretty quickly. Leaders who are psychologically dependent on their followers for their own sense of self-esteem and self-worth create an unhealthy dynamic. Over the long haul a leader must do more to shape followers' expectations than merely to meet them. Expectations should be in line with the organization's mission and the leader's personal makeup, including his or her own individual mission, talent, passion, and personality. A leader who shapes expectations remains healthier than one who is primarily shaped by them (45)

Too many spiritual leaders, either due to a lack of personal confidence or because of misguided perfectionism, are too eager to please. Great leaders inspire people by calling them to do more than they think they are capable of (46)

Still other leaders who want to be liked or who are unwilling to risk any disharmony or tension go too far to another extreme, thus lowering the bar on expectations to the point where they fail to create a culture of achievement or excellence (47) Adopt a strategy of surrounding yourself with positive people as a proactive strategy.

Even leaders who do not count administration as a strength can be sure they don't sabotage their efforts through a lack of organization. You just want to defend against having a level of disorganization that creates a brain drain. (51)

THE DISCIPLINE OF SELF-DEVELOPMENT

The younger generations don't care about all the ways we measure our success." Another factor pushing the development of the learning community is the ascendancy of relational learning in the postmodern world. Intriguingly, this development actually goes back to the way education was done in the pre-modern world, when teachers and pupils were much more closely bound together in a learning relationship. (67) Find a great leader and you will find a commitment to lifelong learning as a core value. You will also find a cadre of learners around that leader. Many leaders spend all their lives trying to prove to someone they can overcome their weaknesses instead of capitalizing on their strengths. (69)

Remember, it is okay for you not to be good at everything. That qualifies you for being human. Being human is what qualifies you for spiritual leadership, not being perfect. The need to be good at everything is idolatrous. (73) As crazy as this sounds, much of the whining I hear from leaders about not having adequate talent, or not enjoying winning seasons—or whatever—is directly related to poor talent management. (74) Leaders who choose greatness decide to become better at what they are good at. They strategize as to how they can do more of what brings them energy (76) Although people need hope and confidence from their leader, they will not follow a leader whom they feel is not genuine. Leaders who demand everyone "get over it" come across as callous and uncaring (79)

Mark Twain once said of an acquaintance who had passed away: He died at 30 but they buried him at 60. Don't die in place! Keep learning, focus on your strengths, and grow through failure. Practicing these habits of self-development will help qualify your leadership for greatness (80)

THE DISCIPLINE OF MISSION

They don't have to fight every fight or take every cause. Great leaders pick the causes, seize the opportunities, and address the needs that fall in line with their mission. Talent, passion, experiences, successes, personality traits, opportunities—all provide helpful hints in this discovery process (84)

The venue is negotiable; the mission is non-negotiable (85) Spiritual leaders need to distill out the core, the essence, of their call from God. Some key questions might help provide some clues:

- What people or cause do you feel drawn to?
- What do you want to help people do or achieve or experience?
- How do you want to help people?
- What message do you want to deliver?
- How do you intend to serve or have an impact on the world?
- Why did you say yes to God to begin with? (86)

Your best shot at making your greatest contribution in the world is for you to get better at what you are already good at (89)

If you are not good at something, quit doing it, or at least do it as little as possible. But all too often leaders trip up their own potential for greatness by staying in positions that require them to spend too much time on areas where they are weak, (90) Great leaders are separated from good leaders by the degree to which their personal strengths match with their life and ministry.

Their mission is informed by what they bring to the table. Personality. The real issue is the leader's self-awareness about the fit between specific personality and spiritual leadership responsibilities (91)

The leader's personality also plays a significant role in shaping the composition of his or her leadership team. Others decide whether they want to or can be a participant in the leader's regime, often based on the leader's personality. Great leaders are stewards of their own personality. They know who it attracts and who will be repelled by it. They know when to dial it up and when to dial it down. They know how to recruit for the personality traits they don't have. And they also know how to build on the personality they do. The greatest leaders are those liberated by purpose (93)

Leaders on mission enjoy abundant energy, both in themselves and among those in their leadership team. (95) The other destination—abundant life—is experienced when the leader chooses to live an intentional life. Intentionality in the leader results from a compelling sense of mission. Decisions about relationships, time, talent, money, direction, place of service, ministry strategy—all these determinations are more intentional when powered and informed by a central life purpose.

The obvious lack of intentionality in their work reflected the internal fuzziness of their personal mission. When I asked the simple question, "What do you want to do?" I got several minutes of rambling discourse. (96) There was no center. Consequently, they had no direction. Mission had eluded them; so had intentionality. The latest idea they encountered at a conference became the mission du jour (97).

THE DISCIPLINE OF DECISION -MAKING

Unfortunately, these people didn't realize they were joining the cause de jour. Brett himself came to grips with his inability to stay the course, realizing that his shortcoming exhausted the energies of followers and threatened to keep the ministry organization in perpetual chaos. (101); Too many leaders forego good information because their mouths are too open and in motion. They are in a selling mode when they should be in a listening (buying) mode.

Exceptional leaders actually pay attention to the information they receive, especially if it indicates the situation is not as they imagine it. How the leader handles cognitive dissonance determines whether or not aides and coworkers will offer insights that challenge a view or course of action. (106).

Sometimes the right intentions of leaders fail because the right people do not get involved in the decision-making process. (109) Decisions that seem politically expeditious or designed to benefit the leaders' self-interest diminish the trust level. (113) Many leaders come up short in realizing their dreams because they never move past the dream phase. They fail to do the hard work of asking. How would we know if we made the right decision? Excellent decision makers know what they are trying to accomplish with their deliberations. Their clear understanding of the results they are after clarifies their thinking (114)

Many leaders make too many decisions. If they asked themselves why they needed to make a decisions more often, they might realize that they should offload some decision-making responsibilities to others. Their over-involvement in decision making might result from poor delegation skills, inadequate staffing, incompetent staff, or a need for control on their part. "Did I answer the wrong question?" "Was the timing right?" (116); "Did I get the right people involved?" "Did I act or react?" "Did I generate enough options?" "What outcomes did I achieve?" (117) One of the key psychological and developmental stages for spiritual leaders is to separate their personal identify from their ministry—a state that is known as self-differentiation. Many leaders seem unable to achieve this. They so identify with their ministry organization that they see it as an extension of themselves (119)

THE DISCIPLINE OF BELONGING

It is hard to be real when you are punished for vulnerability. Too many spiritual leaders have been treated inappropriately or even driven out of the ministry for having wayward kids or non-supportive spouses, as if the leader is responsible for and makes all the decisions for every family member,

including teenagers and young adults who choose behaviors that do not align with biblical values (126)

Time is always a precious commodity for leaders. Many existing friendships go undernourished or die for lack of attention because we don't have time for them. Many relationships never get established for the same reason, even when we identify people we would like to get to know better. We simply can't fit them into our already overcrowded schedule. Studies of spiritual leaders note that those who consistently work more than fifty hours per week frequently suffer relational deficits with families and friends, or both. (129)

Integrity is a character quality that permeates every area of a person's life, including the capacity for friendship. It means promises are backed up, confidences are kept, and people are treated with respect. Some leaders cannot have friends because they are in competition with everyone else. (130) A restless spirit or a leader who feels insignificant or inferior can rarely muster genuine humility. Great leaders know how to listen. The act of listening is a gift to a friend. It takes time to hear what someone is revealing about her heart, not just what she is saying with her lips. Active listening requires a commitment of emotional, physical, and spiritual energy. It is the single most important activity that promotes and stimulates growth in the relationship (131)

I just wish you would call every once in a while just to see how I'm doing. "drive-by" relationships. For younger generations it's all about authenticity and relationships first. For boomers it's about getting the job done first, then using any leftover energy for relationship building. In addition to emotional support, leaders signal their investment strategies for their coworkers by ensuring their continuing development. This involves training them in core skills, providing (133) learning opportunities, helping team players identify and develop their strengths, providing people with adequate resources to do their jobs, allowing them to risk, giving them new assignments, and debriefing their ministry experiences and job performances (134) People love to follow leaders who care for them (135)

THE DISCIPLINE OF ALONENESS

Leaders who achieve greatness in the spiritual world not only endure aloneness, they build it into their lives. They appreciate the depth of soul making that is possible only in solitude (143) In the end, the leader who can practice aloneness is the leader who is comfortable hanging out with God (144) The loss of Sabbath is one of the major failings of contemporary church life in North America. We are substituting frenetic activity for genuine spiritual vitality. (149) Sabbath affords us the chance to think back over our lives—the events and interfaces with people—to gain God's perspectives and insights (150) There is no silver bullet or formula to help the leader here. It requires an act of the will and an unswerving commitment to put solitude on the calendar and protect it.

The smart leader figures out the rhythms of time demands and schedules solitude appropriately. Some leaders struggle with leaving their gates open or allow their downed fences to go unrepaired. In many cases the leader has never conducted a property-line survey to determine where the fence should go or, in worse cases, never put a fence up to begin with. Appropriate boundaries enable leaders to exercise ownership and control over their lives. Struggles with boundary issues frequently reveal a lack of self-care. (154) Smart leaders turn off devices, retreat to solitary spaces, or do whatever it takes to dial down the background noise of life so they can hear themselves and hear the voice of God (156)

Properly practiced, the discipline of aloneness is an exercise in grace. Those who have never experienced grace simply don't grace others (159) Great spiritual leaders are not just given to great issues; they are given to people. In the end, this capacity to bless is the deciding category that elevates them to greatness in spiritual leadership (161)