

# Spirit-Led Leadership

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At the outset, let me note that I am a Caucasian woman religious over 60 years of age, who has lived most of my life in the Northeast United States. My leadership experience includes eight years on the council of my religious congregation, serving on boards of not-for-profit organizations, chairing committees, and directing a leadership and spirituality center. I recognize that I am both blessed and limited by my culture, my age, my history and my experiences. I offer my reflections on spirituality and leadership as one person's perspective, one piece of the truth, in the hope that readers will enhance these insights with their own wisdom.

In this article, after briefly describing the context for leadership in today's post-modern, transitional times, and presenting my understanding of both leadership and spirituality, I offer some learnings drawn from my personal experience. Then I suggest four aspects of the role of spiritual leader. Lastly, I share some reflections on the particular role of religious leaders.

## Leading in an In-Between time

Any person who is called to leadership today faces a challenging task. This in-between time in our post-modern world is characterized by a sense of chaos and contingency, of suffering and limits, of isolation and fragmentation. Many nations and cultures in the developed world find themselves at a moral crossroads, without a sense of shared history and meaning, without belief in universal norms, unable to reach consensus on the common good. Society's institutions, once respected

and trusted, have lost credibility, have sunk into corruption and greed, and have become unresponsive to the needs of those they were founded to serve. Many decry the seeming failure of our leaders, religious and secular, to awaken passion for a common human future. At the same time, the post-modern ethos has its constructive aspects: it values diverse viewpoints and experiences, and it seeks to build connections among peoples, nations, and with the cosmos.

Our transition-time in the evolution of the universe is called by some "The Great Turning." The term signals a time of danger and possibility, in which leaders play a particularly significant role.

## Spirituality and Leadership

What is a leader? The spiritual writer Parker Palmer describes leaders as persons with an exceptional capacity to project onto others either their shadow or their light.

We know that those who are called to lead, especially but not exclusively in religious, human services, and not-for-profit organizations, are expected to bring a high level of professional competence. They need to have knowledge of their field, administrative ability, awareness of cutting-edge trends, and skill in building and leading a team. They must be able to relate well to those who work in the organization, those served by it, its donors, and civic officials.

But there is more to leadership, as Palmer's description indicates. Leaders

need to be connected with their inner selves; they need to pay attention to the Spirit at the core of their spirits. They need to be persons with deep spiritual foundations, at home with their spirituality.

In these times of profound change, those who accept the spiritual dimensions of leadership, whether lay, religious, or clergy, all their organizations to remember who they are and what their mission is, just as the prophets of old did. They strive to see and interpret events within a larger context of meaning. For those in the Christian tradition, that larger context is, of course, the story of God's saving action, revealed in the history of Israel, embodied in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and continuing to flourish in the universe through the Spirit whom he gave us.

### **One Person's Experience of Spiritual Leadership**

When I began my term on the general council of my religious congregation, I knew that coming to terms with loss would be a major theme. Like most women's congregations in the United States, our median age was increasing, our numbers were decreasing, and many of our ministries were changing or closing. As spiritual leaders, we would need to help our sisters move beyond denial, anger, fear and all the other faces of resistance, and accept our reality as an invitation to discover new life within a "spirituality of diminishment" as described by Joan Chittister, O.S.B.

My eight years in leadership became for me a personal journey to Emmaus. I found that my plans, goals, visions and hopes for the community were deeply challenged, not just from external forces, as I had expected, but from within my own spirit. I wrestled with feeling both over responsible and

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inadequate as a leader. I found that I had to reshape my understanding of myself, others and God radically.

Again and again I asked, "What does all of this mean, for me and for my congregation? Where is God in it all?" I searched for a way of making sense of leadership as a Spirit-filled activity. Then, in a shadowy way, I began to sense that my search was linked to larger patterns and movements among us and beyond us.

At the same time several major studies of religious life in the United States concluded, not surprisingly, that in times of massive organizational transition such as the present, leaders play a critical role, and that the quality of leadership is perhaps the most significant predictor of a community's viability. Gradually I came to see that my struggles were not just my own, and that, on several levels, they were signs of the Spirit's nudging-toward my own conversion of heart, toward the deeper renewal of my community and the larger communities of church and society which we served.

What I have learned about spiritual leadership? I sum up my learning in three statements which are my foundational premises: First, that **leadership is more about spirituality than about skills.** It always calls us to go deeper into the mystery of conversion and transformation.

Second, that **the journeys of transformation-personal, communal, and societal - are interwoven.** The efforts of leaders to transform their world and to guide their communities through the process of change are deeply interwoven with, and

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often mirror, the story of their own inner, personal transformation. And vice versa. Spirit inhabits both inner and outer landscapes, and leaders need to attend to both.

Third, that **the journey of one who would be a spiritual leader is a perennial work in progress.** What Ernest Hemingway said of writers is also true about leaders: "We are all apprentices in a craft where no one ever becomes a master."

In the remaining part of this article, I offer my reflections on several aspects of the role of spiritual leaders. I wish to address my words directly to leaders, whom I invite into an imaginary conversation with me, in the presence of the Spirit.

### **Spiritual Leaders Hold the Community's Story**

As a leader, you know that your work always serves the community. In Catholic language, you share in the Spirit's work of building up the Body of Christ.

You exercise leadership in the context of a tradition that you have received. The collective history of your organization is a source of great strength, from which you will repeatedly drink as from a deep well.

You inspire your members to cherish the stories of those who have gone before you. You do this, not as an exercise in nostalgia, but rather as a confirmation that your group has a life larger than individuals, and its mission has a dynamism that has carried it through

good times and hard times, with the help of God.

You also remind the group that its story is not all sweetness and light. It is shot through with human tragedies, mistakes, and sins. Retelling this shadow side of your collective story can release the power of forgiveness, and free individuals to make their personal peace with the past.

As leader, you hold in trust the deep story. You hold up this story like a mirror. You invite the group to claim it as the pattern of its most genuine identity. You invite each person to look deeply and discover his or her own part in it. And as you move through communal times of clarity, peace and joy, or grief, turmoil and doubt, the wisdom of the deep story can nourish you again and again, healing, encouraging and centring you.

But the organization's history is ongoing; its deep story continues to be written in the lives of today's members. This too, the new chapter as well as the old, has to be part of the story that you interpret and tell.

### **Spiritual Leaders Try to See What is Really Going On**

Everyone wants leaders with vision. Sometimes by vision, people really mean, "Predict the future. Read the signs and tell us what will happen to our group tomorrow, or next year." You know how impossible this is. In your leadership role, you are called to see clearly and name truthfully what is before you and around you. You are called to "look reality in the face and also communicate hope" as the Leadership Conference of Women Religious put it in "Dimensions of Leadership."

The spiritual leader constantly asks not only, "What is happening, in me and in the organization that I am called to lead?" but also the deeper questions,

"What is *really* going on? What message is the Spirit of God writing in my journey, and in the ups and downs of our organization's story?" These questions are asked in times of crisis and diminishment, challenge and self doubt, as well as in times of success and growth. As the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote: "The task is not so much to see what no one yet has seen, but to think what nobody yet has thought about that which everybody sees."

Is this not what Jesus did? He saw possibilities where others saw dead ends, he saw human goodness where others saw outcasts. So in order to see what is really going on, you will need to learn to see with God's eyes.

### **Spiritual Leaders Tend the Whole Body**

A leader has to be attentive to the group's incarnate reality, to discern how its spirit takes flesh, here and now, at this moment in its history. To do this, you as leader must first take seriously your own incarnate reality.

- Listen to your body. Trust its wisdom. Know what it feels like when you are in balance and harmony, when you are acting from a deep centre of energy and peace, and how that feels different from acting in driven and compulsive ways.
- Live the life you've been given. You have accepted the responsibility of leadership for a finite span of time. So let yourself be there. Acknowledge what you've left behind, grieve over it, but then get on with life. Apply your energy to the life you've been given, not to the one you wish you had.
- Know what you need to keep yourself healthy in body, mind, and spirit. Be faithful to keeping Sabbath time. Be disciplined about your own quest for spiritual, psychological and physical

wholeness. The time you give to it is not a luxury; rather, it is of utmost significance for the group you lead

- Do not try to carry the burden of leadership alone. Not even Moses was able to lead all by himself (see Exodus 18:18; Deuteronomy 1:12). Seek someone outside the organization with whom you can share your concerns, frustrations, and questions. Find a trusted counsellor, spiritual director, or wisdom figure with no baggage or connection with your group, who can help you keep perspective on what is going on.

### **Tending the Body also Means Tending the Life of the Community**

- You as the leader remind the group that it is truly one body, in the Pauline sense of the term. You balance the needs of its various members, foster healing, and channel the energies of all so the body works as one organism.
- You see to it that the organization is aware of itself. You create a climate where information can flow freely. By expanding ways for people to shape the group's dreams and decisions, you invite the whole body to become a community of learners, and help to demolish the myth of the leader as the expert who knows all the answers – a myth which you already know is false.
- You tend the body by discerning the Spirit's movement in the life of the group, and in the signs of the times that challenge and stretch it. You encourage members to develop the gift of a discerning heart. You reflect back to the group the sometimes disjointed notes of its own self-understanding. By accepting your role as leader, the community gives you authority to perform this ministry of discernment, of truth-telling in love, on its behalf.
- You tend the life of the group by identifying members who carry its

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Spirit-life. I know the director of a mobile soup kitchen in a poor section of New York City. She could name, among the homeless persons whom she served, those known by everyone as wise, grateful, patient, good listeners. Think about those in your organization who embody its spirit in tangible ways.

- Lastly, your role as a sort of spiritual director for the body makes you an advocate for healthy institutions. It is not secret that the institutional substructures of our society and of our churches are in serious trouble. But if we believe that God's Spirit acts within us as a people, then institutions are the soil in which God's Spirit plants seeds of community, and so leaders must pay attention to the spirituality of institutions.

Some years ago, I participated in a consultation on "The Spirituality of Trusteeship." I was the only Roman Catholic; the 12 other women and men included business people, ministers and lay leaders from Christian, Orthodox, and Jewish faith traditions. All we had in common was that we had served on boards or as administrators in institutions both religious and secular, and we were people for whom faith mattered a lot.

For a week, at a Benedictine monastery, we talked, prayed, shared stories and faith, and drew on the expertise of our experience, trying to figure out why institutional life was in such crisis, and why the job of tending and nurturing organizations – the job of leadership – seemed to sap energy instead of sparking it.

In the statement which we finally produced, we said that we believed in the power of boards and other governance groups to be transformational, and that such transformation begins with, of all things, the creation of community within the board. To help us reconnect with our deepest resources of spirit, or community and of common purpose, we spoke of consciously adopted disciplines. We used the language of spirituality, not of organizational development, to describe those disciplines: discernment, listening, honesty, justice, love, humility, letting the Spirit work through us.

We spoke of our belief that our common life is at a point of crisis. Though we weren't sure we could continue to trust those institutions on which society depends for its welfare, institutions of which we ourselves were a part, yet we didn't give up on institutions. Rather, we joined our voices to the many others calling for renewed attention to their transformative potential.

### **Spiritual Leaders Foster Communal Connections**

With contemporary writers on organizations, you understand that group life, as well as the practice of leadership, is all about relationships. Listen to the poet David Whyte: "Whether it be the Berlin Wall, apartheid, the....old coercive Soviet system, or our own....old coercive business systems, it seems that any foundations not now built on the realities of human relationship are being swept away by the forces of our time".

In a world of broken connections, you witness that relationships are key. You are committed to building community as an antidote to "separatism, exploitation and vengeance," as the psychologist and religious leader Donna Markham, O.P., explains:

*Love in organizations, then, is the most potent source of power we have available.*

Leadership must be grounded in the capacity to stand in relationship, to foster connections across differences, to engage in dialogue in service of building global communion. Leaders who squander resources, use bully tactics, refuse dialogue, [and] devalue the vulnerable...are not only dangerous; they are acting in reckless violation of an emergent global ethic that reflects the simple mandate of the Golden Rule...People who cannot relate should not be in leadership today. It is too dangerous to our survival....*Lack of connection* is the breeding ground for violence.

This attitude presupposes and understanding of power that differs radically from the world's prevailing view. It reflects the Gospel understanding of leadership as self-giving service, power used on behalf of the powerless and vulnerable. Saints Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, founders of my congregation's spiritual tradition, understood this notion of power as service when they gave the name of "Sister Servant" to the local community leader.

Jesus fully possessed the power of the Spirit, gift of his *Abba*. Under the influence of that power, he healed, set free, empowered, raised up, and washed feet. What other leader, president, ruler, or head of state uses power this way?

As a spiritual leader following the example of Jesus, you seek to create and foster an atmosphere built on the power of love. Listen to organizational theorist Margaret Wheatley:

What gives power its charge, positive or negative, is the quality of relationships. Those who relate through coercion, or from disregard for the other person, create negative energy. Those who relate to others and who see others in their fullness create positive energy. Love in organizations, then, is the most potent source of power we have available.

(Cited in Bennett Sims, *Servanthood: Leadership for the Third Millennium.*)

### **Religious Life and Leadership**

Several years ago, I was part of a group that produced "Dimensions of Leadership" for women religious leaders in the United States. We identified three main dimensions – symbolic/meaning-making, relational, and organizational/structural – and abilities essential in each of them.

Spiritual leaders, we noted, are able to "connect the richness of the inner world with the significant challenges and movements of a given time." They give priority to "developing and animating relational skills in themselves and others." And they are able to recognize a group's "culture and climate" and create "learning organizations." All of these skills are Spirit-given and Spirit-led; all of them flow from and contribute to the leader's spirituality.

Part of the mission of religious life and its leaders today, I believe, is to respond to our world's profound hunger for spirituality and meaning. The institution of religious life has always witnessed to the presence of the Spirit in the midst of the most frightening chaos within and without, and to the peace that comes with giving oneself totally to the passionate search for wisdom, for God, even though that may lead through times of confusion and unknowing.

As those who hold their community's story, religious leaders seek to channel, boldly and wisely, the profound Spirit-energies that gave birth to their congregations. As those who try to see with God's eyes, they hope to summon the creative imagination that can dig deep underneath the multiple poverties of the world, the church, and their congregations, to uncover the abundance hidden there.

As those who are attentive to the whole body, religious leaders desire to reveal God's transforming grace, hidden in unlikely places and faces. As those who have a passion for relationships and connections, they commit themselves to be relentless agents of reconciliation and peace, called to give and receive forgiveness.

## Conclusion

Whether lay or religious, Spirit-led leaders can be a rich resource for those who are seeking to connect inner and outer worlds. In conclusion, I return to my belief that there are intimate connections between the processes by which persons, communities and societies are transformed. I ask these questions of leaders:

- What wisdom can you learn from your personal experiences of transformation and conversion?
- How might the lessons you learn from your inner journey help you to make sense of the dynamics of dying and rising in your organization and in the larger world, and vice versa?
- How might religious leaders bring the inner world of their personal transformation into the outer world of influencing society?
- As a spiritual leader, how do you hold and tell the community's story?
- How do you try to see the big picture, with God's vision?
- How do you pay attention to the body that is yours and the body that you serve?

- How do you foster connections and relationships?

The foundress of the Sisters of Charity in the United States, Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, led her community with vision, courage, and caring from 1809 to 1821. In the uncertainties of her time, as she sought to keep her Sisters focused on God and on their mission, she spoke often of the need to "meet our grace" in every circumstance, and to "keep well to....the grace of the moment."

As she faced the challenges of leadership, she gave herself to God, in trust that God would use her gifts and limitations. May her gentle advice sustain all who seek to grow in spiritual leadership: "Go to [God] with faith, love and confidence-he will help. Fill yourself with his Spirit and *He himself will govern.*"

## Recommended Reading

Chittister, J. *The Fire in These Ashes: A Spirituality of Contemporary Religious Life.* Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1995

"Dimensions of Leadership." Silver Spring, MD: Leadership Conference of Women Religious, 1997.

Markham, D. "The Leader's Mantle: Creating Connection in Chaotic Times," *Human Development* 27, 4 (Winter 2006)

Palmer, P. "Leading from Within," *Noetic Sciences Review*, Winter 1996, 35.

Whyte, D. *Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity.* New York: Riverhead Press, 2001.

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