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LEADERSHIP AND SPIRITUALITY

When individuals are asked to offer their thoughts on a particular concept, they scan all of their life experiences and then attempt to offer their thoughts. This essay is no different. Many who came before us have defined the concept of “Leadership and Spirituality.” For example, Thomas Merton always considered a man’s real self to be the spiritual self (Merton, 1999). If this is true, then can leadership ever be separated from spirituality? Furthermore, Robert Greenleaf, founder of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, always attempted to convince leaders that true leadership comes from serving others: to lead is to serve...to serve is to sacrifice (Greenleaf, 1996). Although Greenleaf doesn’t specifically mention this within a faith-based construct, the concept resembles the Jesuit tradition of “a man for others.” Stephen R. Covey consistently states that, “Correct principles are like compasses: they are always pointing the way. And if we know how to read them, we won’t get lost, confused or fooled by conflicting voices and values” (Covey, 1992). In fact, many years ago, Dr. Covey was asked by one of the authors of this essay as to why he chose to write a book on principles. His response was: “Because unfortunately, many leaders need to be reminded to have ethics, morality, and principles as their personal and leadership compass or true north” (Lynch, 2001).

So at first glance the title “Leadership and Spirituality” may cause some people to wonder if these terms might be mutually exclusive. After all, leadership is a very public and group-centered dynamic. In our contemporary society, spirituality would seem to be something that may be private and individual. The purpose of this essay is to explore the concepts of *leadership* and *spirituality* in order to ascertain whether, or how, spirituality can influence leadership. This is not as easy a task as it may seem at first glance given the variety and often conflicting definitions of both leadership and spirituality in our contemporary society. Therefore, it is necessary first to find a basic definition for both of these complex human realities.

Using Howard Gardner’s notion of existential intelligence in a 2002 article on the psychological view of spirituality and leadership, Jeffery Solomon, of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, defined spirituality as “a meaning system par excellence because it provides a

framework for making sense of so many of the intangible qualities of life, such as one's purpose within the grand scheme of life and perhaps even the universe. Ideally, people strive to align everyday actions and contexts, including their work lives, with the values of their spiritual meaning systems" (Solomon, 2002). On a most basic level, then, spirituality is a meaning system which assists an individual dealing with the mystery of life and influences that person's behavior, both in the internal realm and in dealing with others in their leadership roles.

Like spirituality, the concept of leadership is weighed down with multiple and often contradictory descriptions. In an article on the spirituality of leadership, Howard Gray of Boston College also borrows from Howard Gardner to provide us with this definition of leadership: an empowerment for influencing people toward ways of thinking, ways of action, and ways of renewing a tradition (Gardner, 2011). Like Gardner, Gray affirms that every leader has a story, an audience, an organization – the chance to embody what he or she seeks to accomplish, direct and indirect ways to present the message, and the exposure to give credibility to his vision (Gray: 2000).

In order to gain more insight into the important role that spirituality can play in the life of someone in a position of leadership, it might be fitting for us to consider the remarkable life of the late Pope John Paul II and the current Pontiff, Pope Francis. For more than a quarter of a century, John Paul was a major force on the world stage – not only for Catholics, but also for people of other religions or no religion at all. His message from the first days after his election until the day of his death was simple and clear: "Do not be afraid, live a life filled with courage and hope" (Harris, 2013). Most recently, Francis has opened new doors on how the Catholic Church looks at and influences the world.

For Catholics, the Pope stands among them as the successor to the apostle Peter, who was chosen by Jesus Christ to be the leader and source of unity within the church. For Catholics, the Pope is quite literally the "Vicar of Christ" on earth. For many other men and women throughout the world, John Paul and Francis represent values and attitudes that transcend creeds and beliefs. Even those who disagree with them on many issues, see them as possessing the qualities that, in some measure, every leader needs to embody. Their amazing appeal to young people is a testimony to those characteristics of leadership which are so evident during their life. The spontaneous calls for John Paul II being declared a saint, following his death, testifies to a spirituality that touched people to the core of their being (Lyman, 2013). What are the leadership qualities that drew so many to them? How did their spirituality influence that leadership? What can anyone involved in leadership, or aspiring to be a leader, learn from their lives?

John Paul was a scholar with two earned doctorates. His early studies in theology were in secret during the Nazi occupation of Poland. While he mastered the classic disciplines of anyone aspiring to the Catholic priesthood – philosophy and theology – he also was interested in literature, poetry, and drama. As a playwright, he pondered the meaning of human life and its mystery. His skill as an actor made him able to communicate to others and draw them into pondering the mystery of life through entertainment. He skillfully utilized the arts, his knowledge, and experiences as a way to lead others into a better understanding of themselves and their place in the world. A leader needs to be knowledgeable, well read, and able to draw from his or her knowledge to inspire and motivate others.

In order to be an effective leader, one could assume that John Paul knew that a priest had to acquire knowledge of the world, himself, and God. As a mentor and guide to young people when

he was a university chaplain, he would often go on camping and canoe trips with them. Yet, even during this time, he would take an hour or more to be alone in order to read, reflect, and pray. The current Pontiff, Francis, was first a chemical technician following graduating from technical school. Later, after deciding and becoming a priest, he initially taught literature and psychology while continuing a life of service in many and various capacities for the Society of Jesus (Jesuits).

“It is now, more than ever, necessary that political leaders be outstanding for honesty, integrity and commitment to the common good”
— Pope Francis

Francis said in 2015, “It is now, more than ever, necessary that political leaders be outstanding for honesty, integrity and commitment to the common good” (McGregor, 2015). William Vanderbloeman, who operates within an executive search environment, states in his book that Pope Francis exhibits the following leadership attributes: be accessible, don’t ignore social media, flatten your organization, take risks, and value input from your subordinates (Vanderbloeman, 2014). Although Francis has spent a large portion of his life as a priest, one needs to remember that he also had a career before the priesthood. The values he acquired prior to the priesthood also assisted in forming his leadership style — validating those characteristics described by Vanderbloeman.

Effective leaders need to know their strengths and weaknesses in order to truly inspire people to work together for a common goal. This is a life-long process. A truly effective leader continues to view self knowledge as something that is not static, but always growing. Life is filled with surprises, especially when we think that we have everything all figured out!

The papacy has been shaped by nearly two thousand years of customs, traditions, and rituals which might tend to isolate the Pope from the people. This was certainly not the case with either John Paul or Francis. Because of their deep spirituality and personality, they projected to others their genuine inner selves: two men humble and transparent to others. Without compromising their authority within the church, they engaged others with their humble and direct approaches to people.

The term “servant-leader” has become quite popular today as a style of leadership. In the book of Matthew in the New Testament, Jesus actually offers a definition of leadership. Jim Hunter paraphrases the verse quite simply, explaining that anyone who wishes to be the leader must first be the servant (Hunter, 2004). John Paul and Francis project this service in the reality of their day-to-day dealings, whether with the rich and powerful or the poor and disenfranchised. How well both exemplify one of the most ancient titles for the Pope: “Servant of the Servants of God” (Howell, 2003). Throughout history, so many other popes had held this title; John Paul and Francis both believe and live it because of their deep sense of humility.

Humility is not a characteristic that some would associate with leadership. Yet this spiritual virtue is one that effective leaders may do well to acquire. Effective leaders do not hide behind the titles and trappings of their jobs. Academic degrees, certificates, and other symbols of power — like the corner office of the corporate world — do not make effective leaders. The

spiritual value of humility allows leaders to see themselves as having been given much in the way of talent and abilities. Other people will more readily follow a leader who is willing to work with others to bring out in them the best that they can perform. Leaders who are in touch with themselves and see themselves in this way will more readily achieve the goals of the organization and allow those who work with them to maximize their contribution to a common goal. Hunter further reminds us that “humble leaders can be as bold as a lion when it comes to their sense of values, morality and doing the right thing” (Hunter, 2004). Both John Paul and Francis certainly are humble, but yet hold themselves and others accountable. Most recently, this is evidenced by recent Vatican transfers instituted by Francis.

In addition to the cognitive dimension of the personal development of a leader — which also can be nourished through reading, study, and meditation — leaders need to possess a strong, affective dimension in their personalities. This can be nourished by spirituality and reflected in interaction with others. This affective dimension can be evidenced by how the leaders live their lives.

The leadership of John Paul and Francis bring a sense of hope, dignity, and pride to those they touch. This type of leadership and spirituality serve as an inspiration as young people, in particular, see their style as genuine and loving. This style also serves to challenge them to believe in themselves and for those who share the faith, to believe in God’s plan for their lives. This gives courage to followers to live with integrity in a world with varied and contradictory values.

Effective leaders take time to develop and foster the affective dimension of their lives. For many, being grounded in a spiritual framework assists them to be able to reach out to those they lead and show them their true care and concern. The ability to touch people’s hearts is a gift and a quality that enhances the role of leadership.

We live in a world that most of the time is very unforgiving. The ability of a person in leadership to forgive is both critical and difficult. Forgiveness is a process that can take a lifetime, a process that perhaps is impossible without a spiritual foundation. One of the most moving pictures of Pope John Paul II is an image of forgiveness. The Pope visits Mehmet Ali Agca, the man who tried to assassinate him, in his prison cell and reaches out his hand in forgiveness (Miller, 1983). Another image of John Paul, this time a feeble old man, portrays another facet of leadership that is linked to a strong spiritual conviction. He is seen at the Western Wall of the Temple in Jerusalem where, as it is the custom, he puts a note into the wall, acknowledging and apologizing for the sin of anti-Semitism by Christians (Bard, 2000). How important it is for people in leadership to take responsibility for the actions of those who belong to the group. Pope Francis’s current images emanate from his trips to Cuba and North America in September 2015. One cannot forget his constant contact with the poor, the old and young, those in prisons and the school children (Anderson, 2015). In addition to Francis’s preference to live life as simply as possible, living outside the realm of royalty gives a certain presence to a humble character — a characteristic previously mentioned.

A final quality of leadership that can be enhanced by a person’s spirituality is the ability to stand up for what you believe in. From both within the Catholic Church as well as from the outside, John Paul and Francis have been criticized for many of the issues and values they support. Whether it was for meeting with a world leader, their affirmation of the church’s teaching on the dignity of human life from conception to natural death, or climate change, they never back down. A leader who has the courage of his or her convictions stands up for what

they believe is right, and they discern what is right from the inner spirit – “True North” – which is their guide (Covey, 1992).

At the beginning of this reflection, there was an attempt to give definitions of both *leadership* and *spirituality*. The qualities of leadership and spirituality found in the life of the late Pope John Paul II and currently Pope Francis embody both of those definitions. These individuals’ unique life stories and their influence on the world provides anyone involved in leadership with much to ponder. People of good will, faced with the challenges of leading others, can learn much from their spirituality which profoundly influenced their style of leadership. Although few of us will face the challenges that they did, all of us can learn much from the way in which they lead those entrusted to their care.

Both of these leaders serve others, and in doing so, others walk confidently and proudly. Success will also follow if they, too, are willing to serve first! With this responsibility to serve comes an awesome responsibility to give back. As with all of us, we use our personal life experiences for reflection, and for us that is Roman Catholicism, but the concepts spoken about herein transcend the boundaries of a specific faith. In fact, Black Elk, Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux, states that his spirituality was not limited to traditional Indian religion, but represented a convergence of traditional and Christian themes (Black Elk, 1953). Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, further establishes that to truly live an ethical life, the needs and happenings of others come first, which, if practiced, have positive implications for our society in general (Gyatso, 2006).

Throughout this essay, it is clear that we have made connections between leadership and spirituality by using “holy people,” yet most leaders among us do not carry religious titles. That stated, servant leadership or the spiritual capacity of the leader, is within all good or great leaders. It is widely known that General Norman Schwarzkopf was the general who wept in the dead of night, worrying about combat deaths yet to come at the beginning of Desert Storm. Lt. General William Carpenter, Jr., who served with Schwarzkopf in Vietnam, states, “The most important thing he cares about is ground troops, and he’s not about to get them chopped up (Schudel, 2012). In his autobiography, Schwarzkopf speaks directly of the well-being of the men and woman who are sent off to war as a sacred trust and having no time for glory hounds, i.e., self-serving staff officers (Schwarzkopf, 1993). Leadership lessons learned from this general sound eerily similar to that members of the Fire Department of New York (FDNY). Battalion Chief John Salka references leadership as where officers work side by side with firefighters and will only leave when the last firefighter leaves (Salka, 2004).

In conclusion, and by the examples we offer, spirituality, although rooted in a belief of one’s faith, transcends the boundaries of just one faith or career choice. If you truly practice servant leadership, your leadership is spiritually-based. It is our belief that it is our obligation to give back to those who were part of our life experiences while “paying it forward” to those with whom we come in contact (Ramsay, 2004). This style of leadership can change the world, and if spiritually serves as our leadership compasses, both personal and corporate greed can be reduced for the benefit of the world.

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