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The Salience and Substance of Spiritual Leadership

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The Question of Leadership

— Joseph P. Hester
Independent Scholar

What is leadership and why is leadership so darn complex? We listen to the President and then turn to Fox, MSNBC, CBS, and NBC News for their considered opinions. Depending on our personal viewpoints, we then judge the President's leadership ability. We have a right to do so, but honestly, this begs the question of how to define "leadership" in the first place.

As someone said, "It all depends." And that is true. Leadership is an umbrella word that we apply to church leaders, business leaders, political leaders, workers, moms and dads, and athletes. All of these differ, yet they seem to have something in common. This commonality we call "leadership." But we still haggle, because we believe this commonality is lacking in our leaders no matter on what level we find them.

Maybe we're asking the wrong question. It might be better to ask, "Why do we use the word 'leadership' to apply to almost anyone, and without qualification?" "Leadership" seems to have become a catch-all word we attach haphazardly to people, especially to those who have achieved financial success. If this is true, then it explains why we say some individuals are "good" leaders and others are not and why the media seeks the opinions of entertainment stars and athletes on question of political, social, or religious importance.

I'm not sure whether this speaks to our shallowness, biased interests, or just plain stupidity. The words "effective" and "ineffective" might be better words to use when evaluating leadership for we are a pragmatic people — people who want results. But this raises an even deeper problem: what is and what is not a moral leader. Surely we desire our leaders to act ethically. This is when we arrive at the gate of moral evaluation and the murky waters of what is and what is not to be counted as moral.

It is true that some lead from positions of power and others consider themselves as servant leaders understanding their role as helping, preparing, organizing, and managing the talents of others. We want our leaders to be strong, knowledgeable and authoritarian. We demand this of our President, ministers, our governor, and school leaders. We also desire them to be ethical, responsible, and fair. Shouldn't we demand this of ourselves as well?

Surprisingly, most leaders are not in power positions. They are the ordinary Joes and Sallys who go about their work and help and lead others without being asked or ordered to do so. Some say this is their greatness; perhaps it is. These people are not *reciprocal* leaders always asking for something in return for their help. They are people of purpose and desire who do their best and help others do their best as well.

Most leadership books don't talk about these "ordinary" leaders, just the rich and powerful regardless of their leadership style or ethical demeanor. Seldom is mentioned the quiet

demeanor of “ordinary” leaders. A teacher, factory worker, or a clerk at Walmart is apt to be one of these leaders. It could be a mother or father or even a Sunday school teacher. This makes positional leadership an oxymoron. We are all in a position to lead, like it or not.

So, before we get too troubled about leadership and what the experts say, perhaps we should ask, “Are we reaching for the stars—for greatness—or, like the humble worker who leads by example and a willingness to help and share his or her knowledge, are we tilling the fertile ground of human experience with an awareness of others and our role in their lives?” It’s in the fertile “ground” of ordinary human experience where we find genuine leadership.

Spiritual Leadership: Leading from Within

Throughout our lives much is added to our collective consciousness. Our own creative ability to signify, dream, think about the future, and build within us houses of wisdom adds to our collective nature, our spiritual individuality, and our morally connective relationships. This is perhaps more of a goal than a reality, but it’s a vision to which we should aspire.

From the memories and experiences that form the foundation of our identity, moral leadership that is transformational becomes the combination of collective insight permeated by our moral consciousness guided by empathy, compassion, and understanding. Morality is not merely transactional, something that is negotiated. It is our awareness of connecting with others in fair-mindedness and dignity that enlivens our moral awareness. This moral consciousness flows naturally from our relationships when we think of others as we think of ourselves.

Moral awareness and commitment are thus intrinsic and spiritual. We live in a tenuous time. Church attendance is falling; small congregations are closing their doors; and we are apt to give surprising attention to large – mega – churches as a business model that we all should follow. It appears as if we spend a great deal of time talking about planting new churches, tithing and bringing in new members, and little time enhancing the spiritual growth of those who regularly attend. We give our attention to multiple activities, some of which have little to do with our spiritual improvement.

The moral value of spiritual wisdom is often shelved in these debates as we whole-heartedly work to boost our own egos and points of view. We argue and debate and church-power groups are formed. We whisper to others, but our whispers more often than not echo our own biases and predispositions, the “tint” in our own eyes.” We bypass the moral vitality of love and its healing and growth potential. Moral superiority is a negative value that limits and brackets our moral response to others. It serves no one and puts on display our own prejudices.

It is our moral-awareness of others that lifts us beyond the vanguards of our self-serving motives. Moral awareness is fluid and adaptable; not something we possess but a way of life we grow into. It is letting love live through us, an activity of mind, an attitude, demeanor, and an unpredictable affiliation with others.

The hardship of letting spiritual energy live through us is its possibility. This energy is always working within us giving birth to our relationship with others. Yet, we must understand that the moral pathway is not microwavable or instant. Transformation is a slow and agonizing process. It doesn’t come easily. Enlarging our moral wisdom will always be a life-time process.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational Leadership recommends that leaders ground themselves in beliefs and values that define their purpose, promote cooperative effort, and direct the accomplishment of their mission through ethical processes; namely, treating workers and co-workers, church members and church leaders with moral integrity and respect. Transformation is especially difficult as many of us have become issue-oriented and expend much of our time defending encapsulated beliefs and ideologies.

As decision makers, we often move back and forth from transactional to transformation leadership. Two broad categories of value color our motives. The first is *intrinsic value*, grounded *in* personal integrity, dignity, fairness, and responsibility. It also involves respecting the beliefs and values of others and providing them opportunities for developing their skills as well as moral habits. Moral wisdom is an intrinsic value to which we should give our attention.

The second is *instrumental or utility value*, based on a top-down conception of decision making in which we are compelled to follow the prescribed practices of our work, political party, or church. “Following” and “obeying” are the operative words. *Instrumental or utility* are the values supporting transactional leadership. Little is offered that is transformational. Understanding these two meanings will help clarify their differences; however, both value-types are needed for leadership acuity. It’s a delicate task to keep them in balance.

Building relationships inside and outside our families, political affiliations, or religious identification is difficult. However, when relationships are not cultivated, those left on the periphery of decision making are more likely to experience diminished energy, feel stifled or disempowered in their ability to take action on behalf of others, have opinions they feel are left out of important decisions that affect them, and demonstrate a diminished sense of worth and a desire to withdraw from volunteering, visiting, or serving when ask to serve.

In these situations, transactional leaders will more likely than not use coercion to move others to serve and give. They will quote the Bible and instill a sense of guilt in those who are not actively engaged in the mission of the church. They will also quote political leaders whom they follow to give them assurance and direction. The authority of the Bible or key political identifiers such as “capitalism” and “socialism” become their “hammer” as the decency and respect are left lying in the dust of our moral nature neglecting the intrinsic values that bind us together.

— Joseph P. Hester