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EDITORIAL COMMENTS

LESSONS FOR HUMANITY

Spiritual Leadership: The Challenge

— Joseph P. Hester, Independent Scholar, Claremont, North Carolina, USA

For the past decade, I have been writing about values-based leadership. Perhaps unaware due to my philosophical background, I have sometimes ignored that which moves our values, that which stimulates our impulse to be moral. Having had this brought to my attention, I have published several articles identifying and explaining what is called our “spiritual” nature and including such within the parameters of values-based leadership. These writings expose the complexities of the human mind and the deep-seated values harnessed within, recognizing the moral consciousness as an internal moral capacity.

These writings have been difficult due to my training in analytical philosophy and because many of us – and perhaps others around the world – associate “spiritual” with their religious commitments. Being raised in a Southern religious culture, I am guilty of this as well. Giving this some serious thought and the strong association of “spiritual” with being religious

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doesn’t mean that the religious, especially the monotheistically religious, have a monopoly on being spiritual. Spirituality has a much wider exposure.

Harkening back to Descartes’ separation of mind and body, and

due to its complexities, many call the moral mind “spiritual.” Not wishing to bash any religious interpretation of “spiritual,” I have steered a more neutral course recognizing that “spiritual” is not limited to any form of religious expression, but is an intrinsic predisposition indigenous to all humanity stirring within us the recognition of humanity’s moral center. The spiritual, as I conceive it, is a gathering place of humanity’s sacred dimensions. It is a lived experience revealed in a meeting of persons. The spiritual is, and will always be, relational – revealing the confluence of human respect and dignity and dispelling the over-accentuated diversity that separates and divides. The spiritual is the connective tissue of moral life and knowledge.

In more than eight decades of living, I have discovered that life, all life, is about relationships and relationships are built on a self-giving love for one another. Living morally unites human life as we live in an inseparable web of human affiliations. Saying this, I acknowledge that values-based leadership is innately spiritual, but not in the traditional religious sense of being holy, pious, or devout.

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Thus, “spiritual” can be said to be a part of our human nature. That it is intrinsic doesn’t diminish its significance. As intrinsic, our spiritual natures will differ from that of others because it is subject to cultural influences. This makes it difficult to define, but, as we know, easy to manipulate. The spiritual is dynamic and energizing, a human action of moral discovery. This spiritual energy enables my giving and sharing, my ability to communicate with others, and my ability to build and sustain families and communities of moral strength. It is friendship-enabling and provides cohesion within the family and without.

I have found spiritual energy not to be unchanging, but a becoming — it is learning to see others with empathy and compassion. It involves a change of perception — a new framework of moral consciousness. Thus, the spiritual is growth oriented. The spiritual admits of possibility and not the lifeless statistical leveling we’ve become accustomed to hearing from our schools, politicians, and the media. It is the spiritual that excites moral possibility.

The pull of spirituality is its simplicity. It is available to everyone, young and old alike, but it’s a spiritual soil which must be diligently tilled. Thus, we are challenged to cultivate our communal and spiritual nature. Left unattended, our spiritual capacity begins to atrophy and lose its vitality and strength.

When our spirit is not open to others it will not grow; rather, it becomes encrusted and static lying lifeless in the topsoil of our values. It becomes just another icon to wave in front of others as a personal accomplishment of which to be proud. The spirit within seeks community and understanding; service to others and is possibility uplifting. To ignore the opportunities the spiritual provides puts at risk our valued relationships and, in the long run, our humanity and that of others.



Shaped but Not Fixed...We are Known by our Choices

We are indeed shaped by cultural values. The late 1950s were often described as the era of the “corporate man,” but the fifties were more than that. The myth of the corporate man was based on suspect ideas such as business is not concerned with the person, only the bottom line, and managers were automatons who took and gave orders. Favorite sayings during those days were “Let the buyer beware,” and “It’s nothing personal, it’s just business.” I never fully understood how Christian business men and women could say these things. I have found these attitudes lie in the background of many who espouse servant or ethical leadership. Some have trouble breaking free of past habits and even though they disguise them under the umbrella of ethics, they remain immersed in measurements, controls, and ego-centered demeanors.

Yet, like most youth, I looked to the future and perhaps cherry-picked the weaknesses and blemishes I saw in my elders. I was restless and wanted something, but what it was I didn’t then understand.

I grew to manhood as the feminist and civil rights movements were in full sway. The Cold War was at its height. As I exited college and entered seminary, these issues were reaching a fevered pitch. The idea of “the corporate man” is a metaphor that represented a predesigned model of the professional businessman, hewn in the military during WWII and

moved forward by business schools throughout the nation thereafter. Many neglected the restlessness of the baby boomers and those born just before and during WWII. This was a time in which the old stereotypes were beginning to give way to an impatient and creative generation, my generation. Today, many baby boomers are exhibiting these same stereotypical attitudes and behaviors. Yet, I find it amazing how rebellion often results in conformism. There is a distinctive cultural drift flowing through our society in which those who seek individualism have conformed and are conforming to the values instilled and institutionalized by others. Unaware, many of us are continually manipulated by cultural forces (authorities, the media, etc.) and, in fear, succumb to a herd mentality believing safety is found in numbers. This is definitely true, but lacks moral integrity. Conformity is certainly a characteristic of our time, but I am encouraged by today's youth who have begun to react to such political forces as the NRA and climate-change deniers. Maybe change is in the air?

By the late fifties, I was growing restless as well. Starting life as an adult is never easy. I had to reach down, way down, and begin to examine the fundamental beliefs I had inherited from family, friends, and church. During the feminist and civil rights crises, affecting me the most were the behavior of the adults I admired. This is where my learning began. Beliefs can be static and unchanging. They can block faith-activation. The civil rights and feminist movements are a case in point. In 1954, the Supreme Court case that would desegregate the American landscape was put into play. From age fifteen, I heard Christian ministers rail against integration. The Cold War was at its height and soon a new, young president would offer a more palatable vision of what America could become. It was an exciting time, but a time when the morally courageous had to step up and be counted. I lived in a society burdened with contradictory and overlapping values. Life can be confusing and it has taken me a lifetime to sort it all out. We are known by our choices.

In 1959, an old, fill-in preacher in my home church spoke in reaction to the civil rights protests going on around the country and in our state. He said, "God made the black birds, the red birds, and the yellow birds; and these birds don't intermix and we shouldn't either." "This is God's will," he shouted out, red face and fist pounding. Where did he get this idea? Did this come from the Bible? The land of the Bible was multiracial to its core. Did Jesus teach this? His reasoning was clear, and so was his intent. I remember sitting with my mother during the service and just rose to my feet when the preacher said those words. He asked, "Do you want to say something young man?" I responded, "You've forgotten, we are all - black and white, yellow and brown - created in the Image of God as Living Souls; and, by the way, we're not birds." I was 19 years old. This was a tenuous time for me. I had made a commitment, but still wasn't sure about the future. My doubts about the ministry were hardened with this event.

Within two years (1961), I was enrolled at Southeastern Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, just a year after the first African-American sit-ins in Greensboro, NC. Little was said in our Bible or theology classes about race, the coming war in Vietnam, or the feminist movement. Little attention was given to Christian ethics or Christian education. These courses were simply thought of as theological by-products and professors of little note taught them, lock-step, in the Baptist way. Nothing from my Biblical studies was given a real-world application. The abstractions inherent in theological reasoning and the inability of professors to make concrete applications in a world appearing to be imploding did little to

prepare me for the realities I would later face. Seminary provided no answers but many questions; for this I am grateful.

As a caddy at our local country club, I had become friends with many African-American kids in the years 1952-1954. For the golf pro, there was no discrimination in the way caddies were chosen – it was always first come, first to go out on the course. At age 16, I took a job driving a dray truck for a local grocery store. I mainly delivered groceries in the African-American community. Many were too poor to own cars. Some were just too old to drive. So, I took their orders by phone and delivered their groceries, often taking time to put them in their kitchens and in their cabinets. Here I made many friends with those who segregation had marginalized. I was able to personalize this cultural experience enabling me to respond to my customers as individuals, without labels and the stigma of racial prejudice. This changed my thinking and ultimately the very soul of my values. I was young, but serious. I asked: “Am I different from these people?” Their houses are no different than mine? “Why have we pushed these people to the edges of the city and to the backwaters of life itself?” I wanted some answers. My teachers never provided answers for me. Today, I questioned their moral courage but am aware they too were trapped in the presuppositional habits of a past society.

In the fall of 1961, about a year and a half after the Greensboro, North Carolina sit-ins, Southeastern Seminary assigned me to the federal low-income housing projects in Greensboro, about fifty miles west of Wake Forest. On Saturday and Sunday afternoons, I knocked on doors, made friends with as many residents as I could, and kept records of my visits. It took some time to build trust and friendships in this multiracial community. I had to overcome the distrust of these people and this took some time. I responded to each person I met as an individual and not some socially generalized stereotype. They soon began responding to me in the same way. I was charged with establishing a church in the recreation center situated at the heart of the projects. Why the local churches in Greensboro hadn't done this I questioned. This reinforced my negative vision of the church. Perhaps White Guilt was the reason the seminary sent me there; I'm not sure. In Greensboro, I reaped the benefit of my experiences as a caddy, delivering groceries in the African-American community at home, and my intermingling with friends of color. One can never discount experience. Experience teaches, but we must be careful, for some experiences are negative and reactionary rather than positive and moral.

The semester I spent in the Greensboro projects was indeed an adventure in both faith and learning. I think, looking back on those days, my Spiritual Wisdom was strengthened by the people whom I met there. They taught me more than a young man of 21 taught them. It must have stuck with me because of my actions during that school year. Two African students enrolled in seminary – sent from Nigeria by one of our missionaries but were not allowed to stay in the campus dormitories because of their race. Also, they were not permitted to join or attend the First Baptist Church which was located on the seminary campus.

I was working part time at Stevens' BookStore and on the weekends in the Greensboro projects. Dick Stevens was a seminary graduate and a great counselor for me. As students came into the bookstore, the fate of the Nigerians was always a hot topic for discussion. Under Dick's advice I began talking with them about going to the school administrators and insisting on housing those students on campus. We did and it didn't work. We then – and I

don't know whose idea it was, but a small group of us were always brainstorming ways to do things — decided to go to the campus church and see what we could do there. We (students) were members of the church because of our seminary enrollment — the church was a part of the seminary. So, we just went to the next monthly business meeting and voted those students into the membership of the church. We outnumbered the regular members two or three to one, so the vote was easy, but not without some shouting and putdowns.

We Baptists do love exercising our voting freedom, but that was just too easy! It worked and Isaac Beverly Lake, Sr., a member of the church and who was running for governor on a racist ticket in 1962, pulled out of the church and took about 100 members with him. They constructed a small cinder block church just east of town on Highway 98. He lost his run for governor. Sometime in the 1990s, I happened to be traveling through Wake Forest on the way to train teachers in Rocky Mount and noticed Lake's church was all boarded up and falling down. Good I thought. It takes courage to exercise Spiritual Wisdom. Looking back, this was a time of spiritual growth.

In the spring of 1962, I became pastor of Ridgecrest Baptist Church, just six miles from campus. The 35 members of this congregation had recently split from a larger church just across the road from the community center where they were meeting. I would be their second student pastor as the first had graduated from seminary and moved on. Within a year, we had built a new church and the membership had grown upward toward a hundred. We planned a big opening Sunday. I had invited the seminary choir to sing, the seminary organist to play a few select pieces during the service, and one of my favorite professors — Stewart Newman — to deliver the sermon. Also, the missionary from the Wake County Baptist Association would be there to say a few words and reaffirm his commitment to the church. When I arrived at the church, I noticed many of the men of the church were milling around in the parking lot and were not in their Sunday school classes. One of our members came into my office and said that the men had guns and knives with them. It seemed the opening of the new church had received a lot of attention in the Raleigh newspapers. They heard the NAACP would be sending members to the church opening. I also knew the church was located in the heart of KKK country and probably some of our members were also in the Klan. The NAACP wanted to make a statement, but so did I.

I found my wife in her classroom and told her what was going on. We went out to our car and I said to the men standing there, "I won't be the pastor of a racist and un-Christian congregation. My wife and I are leaving and won't be back. I'm sure you guys can carry on without us." One man stepped up and asked what they should do, since a large number of people were expected at the church opening; "who would lead the service?" My response was "Take the guns and knives back to your houses and come back to the worship service. Anyone who comes here will be welcomed as long as I am your pastor." They did just that, but I had the feeling my days were numbered there. From that time, I noticed a change in how I was treated by some in the church. I would be patient because I knew I would be leaving Wake Forest when I finished the school year ending in 1965. Breaking with tradition and ensconced beliefs is terribly difficult.

I was at Ridgecrest Baptist Church from April 1962 until August 1965. I would leave seminary and research and write my Th.M. Dissertation at my new post and graduate in 1967. In 1982, my wife and I returned to Ridgecrest for their homecoming service marking 20 years as an organized church. As the pastor read aloud the names of former ministers

my name was noticeably missing. One lady, who recognized us, raised her hand and told the pastor of his omission. He penciled in my name without looking up and went on with his reading. He never acknowledged my presence at the service. Somehow, I think my name was on the list but had an asterisk beside it because I had left the ministry for teaching, or worse, had pissed them off at their opening service twenty years before. Ironically, with the old members gone, I was invited to speak at their 50th homecoming reunion and turned down an invitation to speak at their 55th reunion due to my age and failing eyesight. Actually, they were having the same problems again and I just didn't want to be involved and make the 300-mile round trip.

About the Author

Joseph P. Hester is an independent writer living in Claremont, North Carolina, and serves on the Editorial Board for the *Journal of Values-based Leadership* and the Advisory Board for the *Humanities Bulletin*.

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