

Leading from the Centre

Meditation, Humility and Enlightened Leadership

*“If we have no peace,
it’s because we’ve forgotten that we belong to each other.”*

Mother Teresa

INTRODUCTION

I’d like to share some thoughts on a key characteristic of the radical expression of leadership we see in the life of Christ – humility - on what humility might mean, why it is so critically important in leadership, and how the practice of meditation (contemplative practice) can support the cultivation of humility.

Needless to say, we could spend several days considering all this, so I’ll proceed with humility and we’ll see where we get to in the short time we have. Let me frame what I want to say by reading some famous lines from St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians:

*“...be of the same mind, having the same love,
together in soul, minding one thing,
doing nothing according to rivalry or according to vainglory,
but rather in humility,
regarding each other as better than your own selves,
each looking not to his own concerns,
but rather to the concerns of the others.
Be of that mind in yourself that was also in the Anointed One Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not deem being on equal terms with God something to be grasped,
but emptied himself...”¹*

THINKING AND BEHAVING AS IF WE WERE SEPERATE

Everything I’m going to say is rooted in what you might call a “collaborative anthropology” and the belief that excellent, transformative leaders:

- Possess a depth of self-awareness;
- Embody a rare combination of humility and focused resolve (attention); and
- Are collaborative and other-centered.

We are contingent, interdependent beings who flourish (individually, socially, corporately) when we live and organise ourselves in ways that reflect and embody this. And we have a problem with this.

Using the parable of the vine to illustrate the point, you might say that the vine leaves often prefer to imagine they are in some way separate from the vine which gives them life and apart from which they could not exist.

¹ Philippians 2:2-7, sometimes referred to as the ‘kenotic hymn’ – the hymn of self-emptying humility.

Unfortunately, many aspects of our culture and education system promote a strongly individualistic anthropology. We are encouraged to view others as if they are largely or entirely separate from us, to live at a conceptual distance from each other: I am here, looking at an “other”, who stands at a distance from me, whether this “other” is another person, a group of people or the environment. And so it is no great surprise that we frequently organise our lives and places of work in ways which reflect this, which encourage rivalry and competition over collaboration and friendship, in ways which an increasing number of people say they experience as dislocated and dislocating.

Standing against this is a radically different way of seeing and encountering the world, which involves a collaborative anthropology and claims that we and all things arise within and through a network of relationships. From this perspective, anything we encounter in the world, anything we can grasp with mind or hand, is not separate and self-subsisting in the way we routinely imagine it to be: rather, it is contingent and composite, the result of a multiplicity of causes and conditions, including conceptualising consciousness, coming together each instant². So also, what we commonly refer to as “the self” is not a separate, self-subsisting thing, but is in fact received from those around us, a social phenomenon born in and out of relationship. In actual fact, we are “we-centric”³, collaborations in action, part of an interrelated, interdependent whole and, in this sense, connected to everything. This means that our actions have a direct impact, beneficial or otherwise, on this whole.

It’s not surprising, then, that the notion of the separate-self is threatened by awareness of its wholly contingent, interdependent nature, or that this awareness and the moral considerations that flow from it are to one degree or another sublimated and suppressed. If we can hold the world at a distance, whether consciously or unconsciously, we can find some grounds upon which to behave as if we are *not* part of the vine, as if our life is *not* intimately bound up with the lives of others. A conceptual distance can quickly become an emotional distance and a moral distance.

All of this might help us understand a little better why people found Jesus so unnerving, and still do when the radical nature of his life and teachings are lived and spoken by us.

In Jesus we see a life lived in complete awareness of its dependence on God, which is intimately bound up with and connected to the lives of others. We see a life unshackled from the heavy burden of having to assert, protect and justify the illusion of a substantially separate self, the yoke of self-justification⁴. Such an awareness was and is threatening to many. But it offers the extraordinary freedom we see in the life of Jesus⁵ - the freedom to enter the unfolding mystery of what it means to be fully, radically human, through giving ourselves away in friendship and the loving service of those around us.

HUMILITY AND THE DISCOVERY THAT WE ARE ONE

I believe that through the cultivation of a deeper awareness of our interconnected, interdependent nature and the alignment of our lives to this, the communities in which we live and work can be transformed. If we better understand how we are constituted and flourish in and through our relationships with others, we might have a better chance of living and organising ourselves in ways that reflect and support this, which must always mean our flourishing together⁶.

² For an excellent analysis of being and contingency from various philosophical, religious and contemplative perspectives, see David Bentley Hart’s *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (Yale University Press, 2013).

³ See Vittorio Gallese, ‘The Two Sides of Mimicry: Mimetic Theory, Embodied Simulation and Social Identification’, in *Mimesis and Science: Empirical Research on Imitation and the Mimetic Theory of Culture and Religion* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press 2011).

⁴ Matthew 11:28-30.

⁵ Romans 8:21.

⁶ My principal teacher at Prinknash Abbey, Dom Sylvester Houedard OSB, liked to say that we are not so much human beings as human becomings – and that we ‘become’ together.

There is clear and growing recognition in leadership literature that self-awareness, humility and focussed attention are probably the most important attributes found in exceptionally effective leaders, and that these leaders are characteristically collaborative and other-centered. And that's certainly been my experience working with leaders in the not-for-profit and commercial sectors over many years. Yet very few leadership development programmes focus adequately on the cultivation of these attributes: many favour a more "functional" pedagogical approach largely concerned with the transmission of information and models.

The Christian contemplative tradition offers an extraordinarily rich pool of wisdom to drink from, a doorway to a profound re-orientation in our understanding of ourselves and our relationships with those around us. And the cultivation of humility is right at the heart of this radical re-orientation. You won't be surprised that a developed understanding of humility presents us with some serious challenges. Humility threatens those aspects of popular culture you might describe as individualistic and self-orientated.

Some of you might know ground-breaking book, "Good to Great" by Jim Collins. Published in 2001, it still provides a strong benchmark as to the key characteristics of the truly excellent leader⁷. The book arose from extensive work undertaken by Collins and his research team to answer one, seemingly simple question, "Can a good organisation become a (sustainably) great organisation and, if so, how?" Collins had 21 research associates working in groups over a period of nearly five years, involving qualitative and quantitative analyses of 1,435 Fortune 500 companies.

Their research led to a finding that was quite a shock to Collins and his team, which boiled down to one clear message: we need to radically change the way we think about leadership. They concluded that the transformation from good-to-great simply doesn't happen without what they called "Level 5 Leaders" - ever.

What are the characteristics of the Level 5 Leader? What leapt off the page for me when I first read "Good to Great", is that the rare combination of personal humility and focussed will aligns very closely with the description of the qualities of the Abbot in the Rule of St. Benedict, written some 1,500 years earlier, and also with the what we know of how Jesus went about teaching and guiding those around him. Level 5 Leaders build great organisations "through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will" and are a study in paradox: modest yet resolute, seemingly shy and fearless at the same time. They tend to live quite simple lives in many respects, often occupying quite minimal offices at work. They are very different from some leaders we might have come across, including one who lives in a very substantial White House.

Collins' description of humility is a thousand miles away from the popular caricature of humility that you often hear bandied about. It's not at all about a self-deprecating, brow-beating, down-trodden understanding of yourself. And it's certainly nothing to do with being weak. The Level 5 Leader combines the ability to see clearly with a high degree of focussed resolve that is *other-centered*. These leaders give themselves away in the service of others and for something bigger than themselves. For Collins, humility in the truly exceptional leader means their ability "to subjugate their egoistic needs to the greater ambition of building something larger and more lasting than themselves."

Humility, for a host of Christian writers, incorporates Collins' definition, but then leads on to a profoundly deeper understanding of our life in relationship with God, each other and with all creation. If you were to ask the great 12th century Abbot St. Bernard of Clairvaux where the path of humility begins, he would likely answer "Know yourself".

⁷ If you have not read it, there is a very good synopsis available online, written by Collins for the Harvard Business Review: <https://hbr.org/2001/01/level-5-leadership-the-triumph-of-humility-and-fierce-resolve-2>

The anonymous English author of the extraordinary 14th century work “The Cloud of Unknowing”, defines humility as “a true knowledge and feeling of oneself as one is.”⁸ Now, certainly a true knowing of oneself necessarily involves facing and learning to address our weaknesses and failings and also accepting that we have a great deal to learn from others. And this fits with most people’s understanding of humility and is also how it’s defined in many dictionaries. But then the Cloud author leaves all modern dictionaries and most contemporary leadership literature behind, and says something which might sound very unusual to the modern ear. He calls the awareness of our weaknesses and failings “imperfect humility.”⁹ He regards what is commonly regarded as humility as a necessary, but *preliminary* level of awareness and self-knowledge which, through grace, opens into what he calls “perfect humility”.

So, what on earth might “perfect humility” be? For the author of The Cloud, perfect humility is that true self-knowledge in which we become aware that God “is your being, and you are what you are in him”¹⁰. In other words (and translated if you don’t happen to be Christian), it’s an awareness that *we are not self-made*, as people or as leaders: an awareness that all things, including each of us, are *created*, composite, the result of a multiplicity of causes and conditions coming together, *collaborating* each instant.

We are not self-made. We, and all we have and enjoy in the world, arise through a network of relationships. That’s quite a humbling thought. Even the thought “That’s a humbling thought” comes about due to the coming-together of the causes and conditions that led up to it!

We talk about collaboration in the workplace a lot these days. But we don’t talk so much about the fact that we are, quite literally, *collaborations in action* and are who we are because of our participation in an interrelated whole. We are intimately connected to everything. Which means that we have a moral responsibility towards this whole, because our actions have a direct influence and impact upon it (beneficial or otherwise).

To take this on board fully is, to use an enormous understatement, a big deal. To embrace this fully requires us to hear and embrace a very clear call to tread lightly and reverently as leaders, to be mindful of what an extraordinary privilege and responsibility it is to lead. It requires us to commit to this gradual work until, to paraphrase St. Benedict¹¹, this humble self-awareness has become so integrated into our daily lives that we manifest humility in our bearing no less than in our hearts, at work, at home, whether we are “sitting, walking or standing”¹². Ultimately humility becomes a sort of default orientation, a way of seeing and being that is not so much something we do, but simply part-and-parcel of daily life, so that all that we once had to remind ourselves of we now observe “without effort, as though naturally, from habit, no longer out of fear...but out of love...good habit and delight in virtue.”¹³ To paraphrase C.S. Lewis, the truly humble person will not be thinking about humility: they will not be thinking about themselves at all.¹⁴

A CONTEMPLATIVE LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVE

Why would we set out on this path? How might we begin to answer this question from what we might call a contemplative leadership perspective?

⁸ See ‘The Cloud of Unknowing’, Chapter 13, translated by A.C. Spearing (2001):

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See ‘The Book of Privy Counselling’, Chapter 1, A.C. Spearing (2001).

¹¹ See the 12th (and ultimate) Step of Humility in The Rule of St. Benedict.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See ‘Mere Christianity’, Book 3, Chapter 8, C.S. Lewis (William Collins 2016).

The simplest answer I have found is this - that we set out on this path in the hope that we will, through grace, come to see with ever greater clarity and come to act with ever greater love¹⁵; that we might learn to be more fully present, present with and present for those around us, *with* whom our lives are intimately bound up, *for* whom our lives must be given. As the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, put it with bracing clarity, “To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly.”¹⁶

We are not separate from those around us. We cannot be a person in any sense except in and by way of our relationships with others. Human personhood is entirely dependent on the relationships and loves, encounters and gifts that create and sustain it. Which means that if we are to live a life that is restored to anything approaching a full human life, we must learn to see and embrace the truth that we are socially, communally, corporately constituted, and strive to live and organise ourselves in ways that reflect and embody this.

Contemplative practice helps us to become increasingly aware of the dynamics and movements of desire and the habits and patterns of life that lead us into rivalry and conflict with each other. As we pass through successive doorways of practice, we become increasingly aware of the interpersonal and social antagonisms that ordinarily structure and influence our lives, and to which we reactively cling in the assertion of a separate identity. It is this notion of a separate identity, which we have been taught to grip so tightly, which creates the illusion that we are separate from God and those around us. It is this illusion that contemplative practice gently undermines and helps us to release.

It’s been well said that meditation is a way of humility. As Sylvester Houedard O.S.B. once wrote to me, “it is the meditation, not the obvious truth to which meditation is a gate, that people find difficult.”¹⁷ It takes time. It needs to be carefully nurtured and supported. The seemingly simple practice of noticing and turning away from our thoughts and preoccupations, can be hard work. Every time we sit to meditate, we are practising laying down our life as we have conceived it, so our true life may disclose itself¹⁸ - not just as something we have been told, but in our own experience, as a home truth we have touched and tasted and know to be true.

The decision to cultivate the awareness and attributes for truly collaborative leadership, for contemplative leadership, is profoundly counter-cultural. It is a choice to turn against the current cultural tide, to walk a path that will transfigure how we look upon the world and understand our place within it. It is a path of healing, of wellbeing, of fulness of life, where we are restored to ourselves as we are restored to each other, recreated in the image of Christ’s humanity, a contemplative humanity that finds its life in giving its life away.

We have a gift in our hands, a deceptively simple practice that can create a space of freedom and opportunity, so we may better see those around us, their needs, their mysterious beauty and dignity, which builds community as it disposes us to the peace that undermines all that we think separates us.

Leadership is an extraordinary privilege and gift. Not something to be grasped and worshipped, but acknowledged in self-forgetful service, friendship and love.

*“...be of the same mind, having the same love,
together in heart, minding one thing,
doing nothing according to rivalry or according to vainglory,*

¹⁵ See St. Augustine Sermon 38 on the New Testament: “Our whole business then in this life is to heal the eye of the heart whereby God may be seen.”

¹⁶ Rowan Williams, <https://zenit.org/articles/archbishop-rowan-williams-address-to-the-synod-of-bishops/>

¹⁷ From a private paper entitled ‘Rough Notes on Mind for Xphr Whittington’.

¹⁸ It is the conception of the self-subsisting-self which must be laid down, in order for our real life to disclose itself as both unique (loved into being by God) and intimately bound up with the lives of others (see John 10:18, 12:25 and 15:12-13; Matthew 10:39 and 16:25; Luke 9:24).

*but rather in humility,
regarding each other as better than your own selves,
each looking not to his own concerns,
but rather to the concerns of the others.
Be of that mind in yourself that was also in the Anointed One Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not deem being on equal terms with God something to be grasped,
but emptied himself..."*

PRACTICE

Let's have a short period of practice together. Make sure you are sitting comfortably, with your back as straight as you are able, with your body still and relaxed but alert.

Remember, the invitation to this path comes from God and God brings everything about. Our work is simply to cooperate with the process that God leads us through. We already have everything we need and our teacher is within us.

As we read in the Book of Revelation, "Behold, I have left an open door before you, which no one can close"¹⁹. No one can close the door. Let's practice walking through it.

- Take a few slow, deep breaths to gather your attention and still yourself.
- Choose a word or phrase to recite in your mind, in time with your breathing. For example, the Jesus Prayer - "Lord Jesus Christ..." with the in-breath, "...have mercy on me" with the outbreath - or a single word. Or just focus on your breath, follow it flowing in and out through your nose.
- We use the word or short phrase simply to help focus the mind and to deal with distractions, to bring body and mind together, to bring us to stillness.
- And when distractions come, don't fight them and don't be discouraged. This is entirely natural and in fact a good and necessary thing. We are not trying to have a "blank mind", we don't want to be "mindless".
- Whenever you notice your attention has followed a thought or feeling, just gently take your attention back to the word or phrase, or back to following the breath.
- It's precisely this practice of noticing yourself noticing thoughts and feelings, then gently turning back to the practice, which helps loosen their grip on you.
- And very importantly, do not place any demands or expectations on yourself. You cannot judge or evaluate your own meditation, or anyone else's.

If you want to root this simple practice into your life, I would recommend starting with 15-20 minutes each day (morning and evening if possible), building up to 30 minutes.

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¹⁹ Revelation 3:8.