

Give and take: Leadership as a spiritual practice

by [Anthony B. Robinson](#) in the [October 4, 2005](#) issue

Is leadership, specifically pastoral leadership, a spiritual practice? Dorothy Bass has defined practices as “those shared activities that address fundamental human needs and that, woven together, form a way of life.” Does leadership address a fundamental human need?

Effective leaders engage communities, congregations and institutions in addressing their most difficult and pressing problems, and mobilize those organizations to address their most important challenges. In these ways leadership does address a fundamental human need—our need to respond to challenges. When no person or team of persons provides leadership, communities and congregations are disabled.

Craig Dykstra adds, “Practices are those cooperative human activities through which we, as individuals and communities, grow and develop in moral character and substance.” If leadership is a practice, then it forms not only those who are led, but also those who lead.

Pastoral leadership addresses fundamental human needs and shapes moral character. This kind of leadership is not easy; it’s a high-risk and often dangerous endeavor. As Ron Heifetz of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government observes, “You appear dangerous to people when you question their values, beliefs and habits of a lifetime. You place yourself on the line when you tell people what they need to hear rather than what they want to hear. Although you may see with clarity and passion a promising future of progress and gain, people will see with equal passion the losses you ask them to sustain.”

As a naive young pastor, I expected people to thank me for questioning their values, beliefs and habits, and I was perplexed by just how tough and dangerous that can be. Of course, one might observe, “Just what part of the cross did you not understand?” Another way to frame this would be to say that I slowly came to see leadership as a spiritual practice. Leadership has a cruciform shape. But then we’ve heard this story before, haven’t we? Peter’s “No, this shall never happen to you, Lord!” only thinly veiled another protest, “No, this shall never happen to *me*.”

True leadership does not simply influence the community to follow the leader's vision, but also enables the community to face its most critical challenges and to be what God calls and enables it to be. There is too much stress today on the leader as the person of vision. A vision is not imported from somewhere else, and it is not the idiosyncratic vision of one charismatic woman or man. A vision arises from a careful reading of the context and the work required by God of a particular people with a particular identity.

Moses exemplifies this kind of work when he mobilizes a people to engage its most pressing and difficult challenges. He led a journey of "adaptive change," to use Heifetz's term—a journey that involves loss and risk, change of hearts and minds, loss of known worlds and ways, and an introduction to the unknown. The journey also requires trust in powers beyond one's own. The resulting transformation is intrinsically spiritual in nature: it requires spiritual leadership.

Leadership is not the same as expertise, although the two are often confused. Experts come equipped with a variety of technical fixes, new tools. These are fine as far as they go, but they don't engage people in loss, risk and trust. In fact, people may try to avoid the challenge of the more difficult work by preoccupying themselves with the latest in tools and techniques. Experts do things for us; leaders go with us.

Moses had a few "technical tricks," expert moves like turning a staff into a serpent, doing that little number with his hand—kind of a "now you see it, now you don't" trick—and turning the water from the Nile into blood. So do most pastoral and community leaders, whose expert moves may include a new technique for building small groups, the latest stewardship methodology, or the ability to preach without a manuscript ("Look, Ma, no hands!"). But these tricks will not sustain leaders in the long run.

This is not only because leaders eventually run out of tricks. It's because the point of leadership is not to dazzle people but to challenge them, to assist them in growing and changing as they answer God's call. Moses leads his people in a transformation from being "no people" to being "God's people." There is no magic wand or four-step formula for that one.

Five episodes from the Moses story illustrate five different aspects of leadership as a spiritual practice. In several of these instances I draw upon Heifetz's work to deepen

our understanding as well as to name particular aspects of leadership as a spiritual practice.

“Then Moses said, ‘I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up’ (Ex. 3:3). This, of course, is part of the story of Moses’ initial encounter with God at the burning bush and God’s call to him. Heifetz says that leaders need to “get to the balcony.” Perhaps it seems a little pedestrian to describe the burning-bush moment as “getting to the balcony,” but Heifetz means that Moses had to step away in order to get a better look at things. Moses had stepped away, far away, to Midian. In Exodus 3, he was summoned “to the balcony” for a better look at what was going on back in Egypt.

Congregational leaders who are caught up in the close encounter of congregational life need to step away in order to see more clearly what is really going on, including their role in things. Doing so is not without risk. Moses began to see what God was doing in and through what appeared an utterly hopeless situation.

And he was called to leadership. Moses had tried leadership before, jumping into the fray when he saw one of the Hebrew slaves being abused by an Egyptian overlord. But this brief and inglorious fling was leadership by his own power; it was of this world. Now Moses received authorization for his leadership. It lay not in himself, but in God and God’s call. This work was not his idea. Or as Jesus put it to his own disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you.”

Five years into ministry I experienced a baffling and terrifying depression. Looking back, I would say that before this experience I had tried, for the most part, to do leadership in my own strength and by my own wits—a recurring temptation. After coming through that dark-night experience, I learned that ministry is done, if at all, “in the strength of the Lord.”

With the people mobilized and the Red Sea behind them, the real work began. “Moses said, ‘When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaint is not against us but against the Lord’” (Ex. 16:8).

The people had complained against Moses and Aaron, saying, “You have brought us out here to kill us.” This was a wonderful moment, one that anyone leading change will recognize. Not only have we heard the complaint from our people, we have also

spoken it ourselves, if only in our own hearts and minds. “Why not leave well enough alone?” “What if they’re right?”

Moses worked to keep the real issues before the people and to keep himself from becoming the issue. Another way to put this is to say that Moses did not internalize the struggle. The people wanted to make his leadership the issue. There are times, of course, when leaders are misguided or manipulative and need correction. But the real issue—the adaptive work—is learning to trust in God’s leading and God’s power to sustain God’s people. Again and again, Moses framed and named what was really at stake, and it wasn’t food or his leadership. It was learning faith and learning this God.

In Heifetz’s terms, Moses maintained “disciplined attention” and resisted the “work avoidance” of the murmuring people, the tried-and-true gambit of blaming the leader. Moses does not allow himself or them to fall into that trap, but named it, then drew attention to the real work and the real issues. “Your murmurings are not against us but against the Lord,” he said. That language can, of course, be misused, either to stigmatize or to induce guilt. With those dangers in view, leaders must keep the greater issues before the group and not take murmuring personally, even when some want to make it personal. Moses did not internalize the conflict and resistance that came his way. It was not about him, but about God and God’s plan to create a people who know and serve God.

In the very next chapter of Exodus, the people complained about the lack of water. Again, Moses directed their attention away from himself and toward God. And God responded by putting Moses on the spot.

“Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink’ (Ex. 17:6). In this story two related elements of leadership as a spiritual practice are evident: first, leaders lead. At some point and at some times, leaders must be willing to step ahead, to take risks and to lead. I have experienced this when I initiated new ministries, led capital-fund drives, started new churches and entered into community conflicts. In Exodus 17 we see Moses not only engaging in the risk of leadership, but also holding steady despite increasing resistance. What could be riskier than striking a stone in the desert with the expectation that water would flow from it?

This is a powerful metaphor for holding steady amid rising resistance. The value of persistence as a quality of leadership cannot be overestimated. Most social communities will test leaders to see if they mean what they say, to see if they will hold steady, not losing their nerve or their cool. When congregations and communities sense that a leader will persist, then something shifts and the next steps are possible.

Another quality of leadership as spiritual practice is suggested by Heifetz's comment that leaders must "give responsibility back." As a young pastor I had a tendency to be overly responsible. I suspect this to be true of many who are called to ministry and to leadership. We are not reluctant to step up and say yes to responsibility. But this virtue can become the vice of needing to be in control and failing to give responsibility back.

When I heard members earnestly say that the church needed to do something, I tended to take on the responsibility myself. Crazy, I know, but I was not entirely alone in thinking this way. I had learned that many church members who said, "The church needs to do this," did not intend to put their own shoulders to the wheel. They were happy to have the pastor take on the task.

Eventually I learned to give responsibility back by offering to help people discern their own sense of calling in relation to what they thought needed to be done. This is an important and challenging part of the spiritual practice of leadership. What is fascinating in Exodus 33:16 is that Moses gave responsibility back not to the people (he did that elsewhere) but to God. This too is a good skill for pastors and part of the spiritual practice of leadership. More pastors should sit down on with a cup of coffee and remind God, "These are your people. This was your idea!"

In Exodus 33:16 Moses said to the Lord, "For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us?" Just prior to this, of course, the people had enjoyed the golden calf dance, after which God said, "That's it, I'm outta here. I'm done with this stiff-necked rabble." At which point Moses said, "Consider that this nation is *your* people." The unspoken thought here is, "They aren't *my* people; this wasn't my idea."

If there is a time for giving responsibility back to the people, is there also a time for giving responsibility back to God, for letting God be God, for calling on God to be God? Is this audacious move also part of leadership as a spiritual practice?

At the end of Deuteronomy, after Moses' long exhortation to the children of Israel at the boundary of the Promised Land, he climbed Mt. Nebo to see the Promised Land from a distance. That was as close as he would ever get. The text records, "Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord's command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day" (Deut. 34:6).

What a strange and haunting ending to such a long and glorious story! Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land. But this gets to the very heart of leadership as a spiritual practice: it is not about the leader. We may lead for a chapter, but the story is God's.

My early efforts at leadership were too much about me. I expect that this is not unusual. People are drawn to leadership roles, in part, because they hope for admiration, affection and attention, if not validation. If we do actually lead, however, we soon learn that this is not what we get. Leadership is, as Wendell Berry said about parenting, "a vexed privilege and a blessed trial."

It is in this way, however, that leadership is most of all a spiritual practice. Leadership requires a transformation, a dying to the self. "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). It is not about you. It is about the work. And, for us, it is about God and God's dream.

This is not to say that leaders are to be egoless. Leaders need strong egos (but not big egos; there is a difference). And the fact that leadership is not about you does not mean that you can be unaware of yourself, your needs or your emotions. Leaders must be keenly aware of themselves. Self-aware, but not self-absorbed.

As a spiritual practice, leadership is as demanding as any other, and yet as promising and transformative as well. It is important work. Leadership addresses a fundamental human need: the need of communities, congregations and institutions to address the pressing problems and challenges occasioned by change in the environment and culture. Leadership helps people to discern both new occasions and new duties. And leadership is a practice which can shape moral character and deepen personal substance. Leadership is good and godly work.