

The way things work

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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I recently spent part of a morning catching up on some reading on “leadership” for a conference call later in the day. I have a tough enough time convincing myself that I am a leader at the best of times, but the task is made even more difficult when I spend even a minimal amount of time reading articles peppered with words like “visionary” and “outcome analysis” and “dynamic action strategies.” But good leaders use (and understand) words like these, apparently. Leaders look and sound a certain way. That’s the way things work.

I was recently at a routine hospital visit. Things had been more or less proceeding according to script. We talked, we prayed, we read scripture, we sat in silence. As I was leaving, the comment came: “You know, one of my former pastors used to sing songs during visits.” I wasn’t quite sure how to respond. Was I supposed to sing now (God help the other patients and hospital staff!)? Was this a crucial omission from the hospital visit checklist? Had I failed the pastor test? I wasn’t sure how to take this piece of advice or even how it was intended. But in this person’s mind, at least, that was how things were supposed to work.

Several weeks ago, my wife and I were in Cuba celebrating an anniversary and enjoying the company of some good friends. I had high hopes for finding some “spiritual” time for reflection and prayer over the course of the week. I was looking forward to idyllic walks along the beach where waves of inspiration and illumination and tranquility would inevitably wash over me. Or spending time writing deep and meaningful things in my Moleskin notebook under a palm tree. Or getting lost in contemplation in a Havana cathedral surrounded by saints and icons and impressive architecture. Or being moved in new and profound ways by the plight of the poor on a grimy, stinky street corner far from the kitsch and commerce of well-traveled touristy areas. I was looking forward to reconnecting with God in spaces and places that looked blessedly unlike my ordinary life. Because that’s where spiritual insights and experiences happen, right? That’s the way things work.

It's funny how infrequently "the way things work" doesn't exactly line up with "the way *I* work."

After the trip, as I began to climb—slowly, painfully, intermittently—out of the inevitable mountain of e-mail and catch-up work that seems to accumulate over the course of even a bit of time away, I pondered the way things *really* work. The way *I* really work. I am a human being, not a generic part to fit into an existing template or ideal description. I have my own peculiar set of strengths and weaknesses, gifts and insecurities, tendencies and competencies, hopes and fears that I bring along with me wherever I go and whatever I do. Just like everyone else on the planet. Of course, we still try to improve, to build upon strengths, to whittle away at weaknesses, to steward what we have been given to the best of our abilities. But "the way things work" can be an unhelpful category to drag along with us, I think. At times, "the way things work" can be a useful goal to strive for; at other times, it can just look and feel like a straitjacket.

One of my favorite of Jesus' parables is the parable of the prodigal son. It is such a beautiful picture of how we come to God. We don't come when we have all the thorny intellectual issues sorted out in our minds. We don't come when we feel peaceful and tranquil or "spiritually open." We don't come when we have slotted ourselves into some predetermined category of the way things work—when we are the right combination of curious, penitent, reverent, ecstatic, morally upright or whatever else is supposed to categorize a "religious" or "spiritual" person.

We simply come as we are—needy, poor, beat up, encumbered by the messes we have made and the damage we have done, hearts full of hope, spurred on by rumours of forgiveness and mercy at the other end. We don't come as we *should* be or how *others* think we should be or how we *think* that others think we should be or how we think that others think that *God* thinks that we should be or any permutation or combination thereof. We come knowing that we will never *be* enough, never *do* enough, never fit enough of the right categories in the right ways for the right people.

We just come. And we *keep* coming, as we are. And clinging to the joyful conviction that the way things work is not the way God works.

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