

## Leading and Letting Go<sup>1</sup>

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*Excerpt from the Reading: Who's a Leader?*

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The deep and abiding reality is that we are interconnected beings born in and for community.... When we live in the close-knit ecosystem called community, everyone follows and everyone leads. Leadership, I now understand, simply comes with the territory of being human. ...with every act of leadership, large and small, we help co-create the reality in which we live, from the microcosm of personal relationships to the macrocosm of war and peace... I am responsible for my impact on the world whether I acknowledge it or not.

*Sermon:*

Before I was ordained as a minister I served as a ministry intern for a year at the First Church in Belmont, Massachusetts. My supervisor and mentor was the Rev. Victor Carpenter. I think I learned more from him than anyone else in my life about good ministry and good leadership. I still call him on the phone when I need advice. Victor expressed an unflagging faith that I could do the work of ministry. When I was anxious about a new task, his faith in me gave me the courage to jump in and do my best. And here's the thing—the most important thing that I learned was that believing in people is the best way to help them grow.

I was reminded of Victor when I read these words from *The Parent's Tao Te Ching*, by William Martin. He wrote:

You can watch over [your children's] every movement, every action, every decision, making sure they do it "right,"  
and they will learn to always doubt themselves.  
Or you can love and guide them without controlling or interfering,  
and they will learn to trust themselves.<sup>3</sup>

The leadership required to grow a family and the leadership needed to grow a community have a lot in common. Good parents guide their children with the hope that they will learn an inner capacity for responsibility, so that eventually they can move on to their own independent adulthood. And similarly, in a church community, the goal of leadership is to empower everyone and to nurture the potential leadership of all. Whether it is the leadership of the minister or the president of the board, the chairs of committees or the teachers of children, leadership is not about telling other people what to do. Leadership is nurturing and supporting the gifts and energies that people already have within them. The best church leadership is inclusive and expansive.

This philosophy of empowering leadership was expressed in ancient times in the Chinese philosophy of Taoism. In the Tao Te Ching, we read:

When the [best leader] governs, the people  
are hardly aware that he exists...  
When his work is done,

the people say, "Amazing:  
we did it all by ourselves!"<sup>4</sup>

The topic of leadership is of critical importance in our church right now. When a community is growing, its structures of leadership become stretched beyond their original capacity. This stretching affects staff and volunteers and old-timers and newcomers. And so it becomes more important than ever to look at how leadership works, and what helps it to expand as a community is expanding.

I have found some useful insights in the work of the Evangelical Christian minister, Rev. Dale Burke, senior minister of a 6000+ member church in Fullerton, California. We do not agree on theology, but one day while I was browsing in an airport bookstore, I was drawn in by the title of his book. It was called, *How to Lead and Still Have a Life*.<sup>5</sup>

Especially when a community is growing, the temptation can be for its leaders—whether staff or volunteer—to try to keep up with growth by working harder and harder. So many people put in longer hours and more effort, until they burn out, or neglect their family relationships, or even get sick. Burke explores what practices can help leaders maintain balance in their lives. We might like to think of this as creating sustainability in our leadership. He calls it “Less is More” leadership.

How can we do less and accomplish more? The Tao Te Ching says “The ordinary man is always doing things, yet many more are left to be done. The Master does nothing, yet he leaves nothing undone.”<sup>6</sup> John Heider, in *The Tao of Leadership*, has this interpretation: “It puzzles people at first, to see how little the able leader actually does, and yet how much gets done. But the leader knows that is how things work. After all, the Tao does nothing at all, yet everything gets done. When the leader gets too busy, the time has come to return to selfless silence.”<sup>7</sup>

Sustainable leadership is rooted in the recognition that we have limits. Each human being, no matter how talented and dedicated, has only so many hours in the day, so much energy to give. If we try to do more and more, we become less and less efficient in our doing. Research has shown that productivity increases when workers take a five minute break each hour. There is a stillness that we need to be good leaders, an ability to pause, to notice our own energy and the energy in the group, to listen to what is going on.

If we take time to pay attention, we may notice more easily when we are trying to work too hard, to carry too much, for one person. Human beings seem to have the capacity to imagine much more than we can actually carry out. So part of sustainable leadership is about inviting others into the team. Leadership includes the ability to organize the efforts of many individuals—to delegate tasks, and get people involved. When people showed up yesterday to participate in the church work day, I’m sure they were grateful that someone could say, “We need you to rake the back yard,” or “Can you clean the gutters?”

But if the leaders are stressed out or burnt out, our approach to involving other people is more like that of desperation. “Help!” we say, “We are in dire need of more people to work on the church yard sale.” And what do the listeners feel? “Yikes! I don’t want to get involved in

that—everyone is burnt out who is working on that.” No one wants to crew on a sinking ship. On the contrary, if we are enjoying our work, having a lot of fun, and invite others to join in, they might feel, “Gee, I’d like to be working with that group of folks, maybe I can.”

So, inspiring others to join in the tasks can be useful, but delegation alone is not enough. A growing community doesn’t just need more people to do tasks, it needs more leaders. It needs more people who can encourage people to share their gifts, and build a community together. Part of the challenge for those who are already in leadership is to mobilize others to share the leadership. Rev. Burke calls mobilization one of the key principles in “less is more” leadership. He offers a suggestion for this process of mobilizing new leaders: He says “Let them dream, let them do it, and then let them go.”<sup>8</sup>

In other words, if we want to empower new leaders, we need to let people be part of the creation of the ideas and goals of the work, then let them take it over and do it in their own style, and then, get out of the way—let go. This is where faith comes in. Someone who is currently in leadership is very likely to know more about a project or need than a newer person. Burke says, “It can be risky giving control over to [someone else.] But there’s no other way to successfully keep yourself from becoming overloaded.” If we are all committed to the same vision, the same core of values, then the details can be open to multiple variations. He offers what he calls the 80-percent rule. “When someone else, or even a team of ‘someone elses,’ can do the job 80 percent as well as you can do it, let it go...” He says that they’ll start out doing okay, but “eventually, they will be able to do the job better than you could do!”

Sustainable leadership requires learning the capacity to let go of control. The Tao Te Ching says:

The Master does his job and then stops.  
He understands that the universe is forever out of control,  
and that trying to dominate events goes against the current of the Tao.  
Because he believes in himself, he doesn’t try to convince others.<sup>9</sup>

Letting go of control can be hard work. It can be much easier to do a task ourselves than to trust in the capacity of another person to carry it out. Or maybe that is just true for people like me who grew up as the oldest child in the family. Do you know what I mean? When I was six, my siblings were a 4 year old, a 3 year old and a baby. With peers like that, it was natural to internalize the idea that “anything they could do I could do better.” If I loaned them my toys, they were likely to break them. If they got into my crayons, they were likely to make a mess. So, like a little know-it-all, I would try to tell them what to do and how to do it. And I have to say, even a four year old isn’t too receptive to that.

Leadership is not about telling people what to do or trying to control things. But even those traits are not all bad. I figured something out, while watching the movie *Whale Rider* a few years back. You may remember the young Maori girl, Paikea, who felt called to lead her people, but was rejected because girls weren’t supposed to be leaders. I couldn’t help noticing how bossy she seemed in the story—always watching out for people and telling them what to do. Suddenly it occurred to me that bossiness can be the rough stone out of which true leadership can be cut and polished. Bossiness is an unrefined form of initiative.

Have you ever been in a group that can't make decisions at all? Someone asks, "Where shall we go to eat?" "Oh, I don't care, where do you want to go?" "I don't care, where do you want to go?" Eventually, somebody has to pipe in and say, "Let's go to Sala Thai!" To take initiative is a good aspect of leadership. But if only one person is always deciding the restaurant, or the movie, or the color of the room, or what the building needs...something is amiss. The best leader, according to the Tao, is the person who is able to ask the right questions, so that others in the group begin to share the initiative. As Paikea grew, she did less of telling people what to do, and more of involving them in the dreams of the community. In the end, she says, "We went forward with all of our strength."

The Tao Te Ching says:

All streams flow to the sea because it is lower than they are.

Humility gives it its power.

If you want to lead the people, you must learn how to follow them.<sup>10</sup>

Those of us who find it easy to be assertive and take initiative must take the next steps of learning to listen well and offer encouragement. We must learn to lead by following. Under the urge to control things is usually a feeling of fear. What are we afraid of? Who knows? For me, under the confidence of an oldest child was an anxiety that came from always having to figure things out myself. I didn't have a big brother or sister to pave the way for me in unfamiliar situations. That nervous child inside me wondered, what if no one is able to help me? What if someone messes things up? And so my impulse was to be on the lookout for mistakes and errors. I had to make a conscious choice to learn to trust, to learn to let go of control.

Once, I asked myself, what could happen if I let go of control? What came up was a fear that my needs wouldn't be met. And then I thought to myself—so what if my needs weren't met? How bad could that be? Certainly not as bad as letting fear try to control everything. Besides, I already have what I need right now: food, shelter, love. This stuff is deep inside us, my friends. This stuff is the essence of spiritual growth. What we really need to let go of are the old patterns of fear in our hidden hearts.

Empowering and expanding leadership requires that we trust people to grow. Like parents do with their children. Like my mentor Victor did with me. And growth is what human beings are most likely to do, most want to do. To grow children and to grow new leaders, we need a certain tolerance for the chaos of growing things—you know—there is a messiness that comes with the growing process. New things need fluidity, formlessness. If everything is perfectly organized, there is no room for a new idea, or a new leader. It helps to have some needs unmet. Some openings uncovered. Not in a desperate way—but with a kind of trust that needs will call out to gifts—that emptiness will attract something to fill it.

Each new child that is born offers a new promise of possibility to the world. Each new person we meet offers new possibilities to our lives and to our community. The writings say:

The Tao is like a well: used but never used up.

It is like the eternal void: filled with infinite possibilities...

Do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear?<sup>11</sup>

Thinking about leading and letting go, I was imagining a story about the Creator of the world. She started things off with stars and atoms and energy swirling about. She imagined the idea of life—of beings growing and multiplying and eventually evolving into consciousness. And then She let go. She, the all-powerful Mother of all, entrusted the care of the world to the little ones full of experiments and mistakes.

She created learning in them, so that it was possible to use a mistake to grow wiser. She let them dream, and let them do it, and let them go—these two legged creatures who banged on each other's heads at the slightest provocation, and tried to take all the food for themselves, and went to war. She let them run the world—even though surely She could have done it much better. But somehow this new way was more interesting and more joyful—to trust that they might learn from the experience. To be curious about what might unfold.

And so I said to myself, if She could trust us, who are so good at messing things up, then perhaps there is something more important than order or perfection. Perhaps trust is more important than order or perfection. So why not make that my aim—to more fully and wholeheartedly trust my messy siblings, my fellow creatures?

Now, as a spiritual leader in this growing, evolving community of Allen Avenue, I pray: Show us the way of the spacious heart. Help us to honor our limits and then wait in the void for the next new thing. Help us to do less, and listen more. Help us to loosen our grip and leave room for surprises. That is my prayer. May it be so.

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<sup>2</sup> From the Introduction to *Leading From Within*, edited by Sam. Intrator & Megan Scribner, (Jossey-Bass, 2007). For the full reading, see p.xxix.

<sup>3</sup> William Martin, *The Parent's Tao Te Ching, Ancient Advice for Modern Parents*, (Marlowe & Co.: 1999) Excerpt from Tao #17

<sup>4</sup> Tao Te Ching quotations unless otherwise noted are from *Tao Te Ching*, translation by Steven Mitchell, and referenced by their traditional chapter number. This quote is an excerpt from #17.

<sup>5</sup> H. Dale Burke, *How to Lead & Still Have a Life*, (Harvest House, 2004)

<sup>6</sup> Excerpt from Tao #38

<sup>7</sup> John Heider, *The Tao of Leadership*, (Humanics New Age, 1985), Excerpt from #37, p. 73.

<sup>8</sup> Dale Burke, p. 127.

<sup>9</sup> Excerpt from Tao, #30.

<sup>10</sup> Excerpt from Tao, #66.

<sup>11</sup> Excerpts from Tao, #4, !5.