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THE DISCIPLINE OF SELF-AWARENESS

Harold didn't quite see it coming. The young pastor had enjoyed phenomenal and early success in the ministry. Every assignment he had attempted went well. His reputation for being an effective leader grew right along with the church he had planted. However, without Harold realizing it, the church crossed a threshold. It outgrew him.

Harold was unaware of some basic truths about himself, for example, his tendency to micromanage at the same time that he resisted accountability. The first problem drove his staff crazy and led to constant turnover that greatly reduced his congregation's capacity to sustain ministry momentum. The second shortcoming—his unwillingness to be accountable—eventually got him in hot water with the church's key leaders. When the church was small, Harold could make unilateral, on-the-fly decisions. But when the church numbered hundreds, with dozens of leaders involved and vested in their own ministries, Harold's decisions rippled out into unanticipated consequences. Eventually, his shortcomings caught up with Harold. Leaders and many in the congregation questioned his credibility and lost trust in him. Eventually, attendance and membership began to decline.

Harold was bewildered by this turn of events in his ministry. He knew it wasn't working anymore, but he didn't know why. Yet he plunged ahead, doing all the wrong things. In his frustration, Harold began making even more decisions on his own, adopted a more frenetic pace, and became more anxious and demanding—all of which alienated even more people who could

have been great partners. His own fears about his ineffectiveness and what was going on in the church translated into a refusal to receive feedback, which drove him into a corner and accelerated his demise as a leader. Harold was suffering from a lack of self-awareness. And the costs of that deficit bankrupted his leadership.

Jim closed the door to his office, just as he did every day, but not so he could concentrate, or study, or pray. He closed the door so he could sleep. He slept for hours every day, but he never felt rested. Eventually, Jim recognized that he was depressed. He contacted his internist for a physical, then for a referral to a counselor. He also engaged a spiritual director. After a few weeks, Jim made the courageous decision to secure a sabbatical from his elders so he could concentrate his energies on exploring some personal demons that were threatening to destroy him, his family, and his ministry. Jim took a very intentional journey of self-discovery.

Some months later, Jim returned to his leadership responsibilities armed with new insights into himself. He established new accountabilities and boundaries for his life that were designed to protect him from a relapse of his emotional exhaustion. He implemented a new team structure, demonstrating his decision to trust other people with the church's ministry. His leadership, now vastly improved, guided the church into renewal. Jim went from being a leader on the way down to a leader determined to be great. His increased self-awareness set the stage for this transition.

The single most important piece of information a leader possesses is self-awareness. The dictionary uses a variety of words to portray the meaning of awareness: *knowledge*, *mindful*, *vigilance*, *conscious*, *alert*, to note a few. When you add the word *self* to these, you get a good idea of what self-awareness includes: self-knowledge (knowing who you are), self-mindfulness (understanding your motives for doing what you do), self-vigilance (knowing what makes you tick and what ticks you off!), self-consciousness (knowing how you come across to others), and self-alertness (maintaining your emotional, physical,

and spiritual condition). The discipline of self-awareness, then, is the leader's intentional quest for self-understanding.

The hazards for leaders of not being self-aware are serious and can even be deadly. Without this insight into themselves and their behavior and motivations, leaders become subject to unknown or underappreciated forces that influence their actions and that can sabotage their work. Without appropriate self-awareness, hidden addictions or compulsions may guide leaders to behaviors that create huge problems and may dismay, exasperate, and bewilder those they lead. Leaders who operate without self-awareness run the risk of being blindsided by destructive impulses and confused by emotions that threaten to derail their agenda and leadership effectiveness. They may overestimate or underestimate their abilities and respond unpredictably. For followers, credibility rides or falls on consistency—something leaders short on self-awareness usually do not have. In short, leaders lacking self-awareness are besieged from within. They often are their own worst enemy. And they don't even know it!

On the other hand, leaders who know themselves have gained their best ally—themselves! Self-awareness gifts them with significant insight. They know why they are on the planet and what contribution they intend to make—and they are in hot pursuit of making it. They know the behaviors and values that support their mission. They know how to measure their success. They know what they bring to the table in terms of talent and abilities. They know what they don't know, so they are constantly pushing their learning in strategic areas that support their personal growth and missional effectiveness.

Self-awareness touches all the other disciplines because it is foundational to every other element of greatness. Interestingly, it is also the capstone of the leader's journey. At the end of the road, great leaders are intimately acquainted with themselves. What's more, they are at home with themselves. This stands in sharp contrast to the legion of leaders who are attempting their assignment with nobody home.

The Self-Awareness of Biblical Leaders

Leaders in the Bible frequently reflect a high degree of self-understanding.

David

David demonstrates the power of self-awareness in establishing and protecting a personal sense of identity. He calls himself “the Lord’s anointed.” This phrase obviously called to mind the mysterious episode in David’s childhood when Samuel, the prophet, showed up at his home and anointed him as the future king of Israel.

This phrase—the Lord’s anointed—both captured and reflected a core understanding that David had of himself: he was the Lord’s anointed, not just Samuel’s. This meant he had a special relationship with God. One cannot read David’s psalms without encountering this conviction. Psalm 23 details the care of the Shepherd-God for the shepherd-king. Psalm 139 rehearses the extraordinary connections between David and God, beginning in the womb and throughout his life (his thoughts, his words, his physical location—even his sleep!). The confessions of Psalm 51 reflect that David considered his relationship to God to be more important than his pride. It frightened him that his sin might rupture this special connection, so he pleaded for God’s continued presence and restoration.

Paul

Paul’s autobiographical statements in Philippians 3 reveal how self-awareness can integrate key components of a leader’s life. The apostle’s sense of self was composed of his Jewish roots, his early training as a Pharisee, his passionate nature, and his hunger for significance. He admitted to the impact of his family of origin (“of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews,” v. 5). He acknowledged his early blindness to Christ (“in regard to the law, a Pharisee,” v. 5). The apostle did this without disparaging the underlying heart hunger

that drove him to devour the law. That unsatisfied appetite was finally satisfied in his relationship with Jesus.

Paul knew what he was after in life (“the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus,” v. 14). He had obviously nurtured a personal vision of what Jesus had foreseen that he could be when the Lord captured him on the road to Damascus. Paul’s sense of self was radically and forever altered in the dust, darkness, and light of that experience.

The persecutor-turned-missionary stamped the entire Christian movement with a missionary fervor. This zeal flowed directly out of Paul’s understanding of God’s merciful and relentless heart for him, even when he was God’s enemy. We know a God of grace partly because Paul knew a gracious God. The converted Pharisee was willing to rethink his monocultural worldview. This dynamic enabled the movement to spread cross-culturally under Paul’s leadership.

Jesus

Even Jesus had to grow in self-awareness. He evidenced an emerging self-understanding in his Temple visit at age twelve. He seemed to be coming to grips with his unique relationship with his Father. We can only imagine what triggered Jesus’ realization that he was profoundly different from all the other boys and girls. Surely, his parents’ recitation of the events surrounding his birth contributed to his understanding. However, Jesus had to explore these insights for himself, as would any human child.

Perhaps his cousin John’s outburst at his public baptism (“look, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” John 1:26, NIV), coupled with the voice from heaven, were the moments when Jesus crystallized his ideas about who he was and the nature of his mission. In the wilderness temptations that immediately followed Jesus’ baptism, Satan challenged key aspects of Jesus’ personhood. He attacked Jesus’ trust and dependence on his Father (by asking him to turn stones to bread), urged him to gain notoriety

without service (by inviting him to leap from the Temple), and offered him power and glory that avoided suffering and sacrifice (if he would acknowledge Satan as earth's ruler). Each of these temptations targeted a critical aspect of Jesus' realization of the nature and cost of his messianic identity and mission.

Jesus' public ministry and passion provide many instances of his self-awareness. Two examples, one from his early ministry and one from the last days, reflect Jesus' profound self-understanding. Early on, Jesus quizzed his disciples about what people were saying about him. Then he quizzed them to see if they could get it right.

“Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the son of the living God.’ Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven’” (Matthew 16:16–17, NIV). At the end, Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane reflected a full sense of who he was (“Glorify your Son that your Son may glorify you” [John 17:1]), where he had come from, and where he was going (“And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began” [John 17:5, NIV]).

Any less self-knowledge would have made it impossible for Jesus to endure the spiritual and physical agony of the cross.

These three leaders—David, Paul, and Jesus—certainly qualify for inclusion on anyone's list of great leaders. The foundation for their life achievements was dug and poured in their self-awareness. That is still today how great leaders secure their leadership.

But how do leaders go about improving their self-awareness? They do some serious investigating.

Digging into Who You Are

None of us can cultivate self-awareness without understanding how we've become who we are. Gaining insight into who we are and how we became ourselves requires some serious digging and inspec-

tion, much the way an archaeologist unearths the origins and artifacts of ancient civilization by excavating long-buried ruins. Leaders who want to foster greater self-awareness likewise need to reveal and understand the sources of their own identities, particularly their family of origin and its legacy and the significant personal experiences that have marked and shaped them.

Your Family of Origin

We learn our first life lessons in our family of origin, then we spend the rest of our lives either building on these lessons or trying to overcome them. We learn whether we are blessed or not well before we can speak. We learn whether we are safe or violated well before we can express the ideas of security and boundaries. These lessons, attitudes, and behaviors are so deeply imprinted on our psyches that it often takes years for us even to know they are there and what their content is; they just feel normal, whatever they are. They are the warp and woof of who we are.

For most people, the most intense years of exploring family-of-origin issues tend to be in the twenties and thirties, sometimes all the way through the mid-forties. During this period, leaders have to achieve enough independence and separation from their family of origin to gain perspective on where their journeys have taken them. Still, a learning leader never stops gaining and integrating insights from the past throughout life. It's never too late to begin this journey for personal development and growth. The problem is that some spiritual leaders never book this trip.

Great leaders distinguish themselves by hitting the trail of self-exploration early and being unrelenting in searching for clues to their own formation. They are not afraid to push into uncharted territory, even when the road seems fraught with danger. They are determined not to let their past govern their present. Intriguingly, the only way they can free themselves from the past is to explore it fully. Otherwise, leaders are dragging stuff around in their suitcases that they didn't pack and may not even know is there.

Leaders who do not excavate the family-of-origin site may miss some key personal insights that carry huge implications for their relationship skills. Communication patterns, capacity for intimacy, conflict-resolution skills, view of authority—all enormously important behaviors and attitudes in determining how we relate and respond to others—are initially formed and informed in our earliest years. Since leadership is mostly about managing relationships, this self-understanding proves crucial to leaders' effectiveness. Without this understanding, leaders might not know what is pushing their hot buttons or jerking their chain, so they condemn themselves to react to unidentified forces rather than to be in control of themselves.

Billy frequently lashed out in anger when anyone criticized him. As a result he created lots of problems for himself in terms of broken relationships. Even people who were Billy's friends found it difficult to make suggestions, lest they be dropped from the list of people he could "trust." Consequently, the leadership culture around Billy could best be characterized as a revolving door, where people cycled in and out. The problem was, they left bleeding. Only in marital counseling did Billy come to understand why he experienced such anger when challenged or confronted. He learned that his anger was a secondary emotional response to the primal emotion of fear.

The therapist helped Billy unearth the hidden secret to his flash-hot responses. As a kid Billy's mistakes or shortcomings were ridiculed and punished, often including physical whippings. He had learned to be afraid when he failed. Now years removed from that setting, the slightest hint of failure triggered his fear. Since Billy felt threatened, he fought back with his anger. Billy's "dig" into his family of origin armed him with a new awareness that allowed him to choose his responses rather than let his reactions be triggered by forces he did not comprehend.

All leaders have family-of-origin issues unique to them, even for those who emerge from the same family. That's because each per-

son in a family experiences it differently for lots of reasons. Families are dynamic systems. Children are born into different stages of the parents' lives. Siblings often grow up in different surroundings (houses, cities, and economic status). Each child has a unique relationship with every other person in the family. In my own family of origin the children are spaced over seventeen years. My oldest brother (fifteen years my senior) has told me that he regrets I did not know my parents when they were young. But I also missed setting up house in a one-room store building, with sheets serving as walls. That was his experience in the post-World War II family move back home to Gainesville, Georgia, from the shipyards of Wilmington, North Carolina.

Often we speak of family of origin only in negative terms, but our goal here is not to look for deficits alone but to look also for gifts. From our family of origin we may take gifts such as humor, love, strong self-reliance, or emotional intelligence, to name a few possibilities. And the intent is not to blame parents or other family members for our own shortcomings. Actually, the evaluation of the impact of our family of origin allows us to take responsibility for who we are and how we behave and feel. Once we can name our particular challenges, they are ours. A few common themes that we will mention here are usually worth investigating.

Your Blessing—or Not

The awareness of being a blessed child combines several key elements of experience in our family of origin, including a sense of being unconditionally accepted for who we are and not for what we do, being loved in an unshakeable way, and feeling valued and worthwhile. A blessed child has parents who provide positive expectations and experiences of empowerment, trust, and confidence. Blessed children build their lives on a platform of love, belonging, and acceptance.

We all want to be a blessed child. Not all of us are. But that doesn't stop us from searching for blessedness. That search can take a variety of forms. If we don't come from a family where we felt

blessed, we sometimes work hard to prove to others that we are worth something. Or as we desperately try to gain other people's approval, we hand over our lives to their expectations and demands.

Sheri worked herself into exhaustion, but still didn't let up. She took on any assignment, just so she could gain a word of approval. She even took affirmation from others' noticing how overworked she was. A sensitive supervisor finally recognized this pattern and helped her come to grips with the understanding that she was still trying to please a mother she never could, who was now a resident in an Alzheimer's care unit and would never be able to bless Sheri.

Some of us who had parents who did not bless us may harbor and nurture anger against them and rebel against anyone in authority over us. Pastors with this experience in their families of origin may resent the authority of the board. Staff members might resist the authority of the senior minister in a congregation or leader of the organization (which often shows up in criticism that is designed to diminish the leader's position and influence). Many spiritual leaders have derailed over this issue alone.

Jerry thought he knew more than anyone in authority over him. His criticisms grew increasingly public to the point that he lost his job for insubordination. He still thinks the boss was too incompetent to see his brilliance and that he, in fact, intimidated his boss. Jerry doesn't get it. He had been mentored early on in his career by a man renowned for conflicts with authority—all related to his own unfinished business with a father who failed to bless him. Jerry now has a pathology in his relationships with supervisors and with accountability that threatens to make him ineffective as a leader, no matter where he winds up.

None of this is to suggest that an unblessed child who becomes a leader cannot be great. Moses was not blessed, yet who could deny

his claim to greatness? The issue for leaders revolves around the degree to which they have assessed these family dynamics, examining them for symptoms of trying to overcompensate in ways that contribute to unhealthy life patterns that can lead to failure.

Your Hidden Addictions and Compulsions

Addictions or compulsions such as problems with drugs or alcohol, sex addictions, a lust for power, compulsive eating, adrenaline addiction, workaholism, approval craving, just to name a few common ones, often stem from family-of-origin backgrounds. We know that the “sins of the fathers” are visited on down the generational chain. Addictive environments spawn people prone to addiction, though the object of addiction may change.

Although many leaders may come to recognize that alcohol or drug abuse is a problem, legions of others are unaware they are using food or work to anesthetize their heart pain brought on through loneliness or their inability to experience intimacy though surrounded by admirers. Others have no idea that their need for approval drives them to physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual exhaustion. They are just dying (literally) to hear, “We don’t know what we’d do without you!”

Leaders can often be blessed in their dysfunction by unhealthy people and systems. Spiritual organizations are notorious for blessing workaholism, for instance. Without self-awareness of the dynamics of addictions and compulsions in their lives, leaders are doomed to be driven by them in unhealthy ways. “Adrenaline addiction” is an especially poignant case in point. Some leaders don’t know why they are unwilling to break their work rhythms, to take time off, even though they know their lives are way out of balance. They don’t like the “blues” they feel when they are withdrawing from adrenaline, so they maintain or generate artificially high stress levels, just to make sure their body is still pumping adrenaline into their system. They will even manufacture a reason for their body to stay at high alert to avoid the discomfort of coming down.

Fred, a spiritual leader in his late twenties, seemed unaware of the compulsions that were driving his choices and ruining his health, as well as threatening his family. He worked constantly, afraid to establish or to maintain any limits on what he was willing to do. His frenetic pace had little to do with loving people; it mostly had to do with pleasing them. Fred was afraid that he would be criticized for not being available when they called. His constant anxiety triggered another subconscious compulsion: Fred viewed food as comfort and nurture. Sleep-deprived, overweight, and anxious, Fred fell into a daze of being out of touch with others, himself, his family, and God. All the while he kept up appearances at corporate functions and fulfilled his leadership duties. But underneath the activity and the “God chatter” was a lonely, scared, tired person.

Fred’s wife finally intervened, persuading him to seek some counseling. A skillful life coach helped Fred understand the underlying causes for his out-of-control life, reframe his assumptions about appropriate expectations, and establish new limits and behaviors; the coach provided some ongoing accountability. The road to recovery was not without detours and reversals (as is often the case), but within six months Fred had lost weight, was getting adequate sleep each night, and enjoyed a day off with his family and several uninterrupted weeknights at home each week. As he emerged from his compulsions, the fog lifted and Fred’s personality began to reemerge. This took courage on his part, the loving support of his wife, and some good direction from an outside-the-system life coach.

Your Boundaries—or Lack of Them

Many spiritual leaders discover that they get into psychological, emotional, and spiritual distress because they have inappropriate boundaries. Boundaries are like fences. They let us know where we end and where the rest of the world picks up. Some leaders have left gates open; some have let the fence be knocked down, and others have never figured out where the fence goes.

Henry Cloud and Steve Townsend¹ have identified four problematic boundary types: compliants, avoidants, controllers, and nonresponsives. Each condition carries a set of potential pitfalls for spiritual leaders, especially if they are unaware of the boundary violation.

Compliants. Compliants are people who allow others to violate their personal boundaries, mainly because they don't want to "hurt others' feelings"—a telltale phrase indicating how compliants inappropriately take on the responsibility of managing other people's emotions. Consequently, compliants have a tough time saying no to people, even when the request for time or attention is out of line or too demanding. Even though compliants may be screaming inside for relief from others' demands, they usually give in and then seethe because of their lost time and energy.

Compliant leaders frequently harbor resentment toward the very people they claim they want to serve and blame others for their distress instead of recognizing that their own internal flaw is causing the problem. Because they fear abandonment or rejection, compliants leave the gate open when it should be shut, then blame others for coming in.

Chloe is the classic compliant. She can't say no, yet she whines incessantly about how others take advantage of her. On the outside she is the consummate servant, always attentive to people's needs. On the inside she is a cauldron of resentment waiting to spill over. Unless she gets a handle on this, she is headed for burnout and bitterness. She will blame others for it, but her burnout will be her own doing.

Many spiritual leaders wrestle with this boundary issue. After all, people go into the ministry to help other people. What they discover is that the needs are enormous and never-ending. If leaders have cracks in their own psychological foundation that they are looking for others to fill (high approval needs, for instance), they are particularly susceptible to compliance issues.

Treatment for compliants involves the twin remedy of awareness (here we are again!) and accountability. Compliant have to come out of denial and own the dysfunction as their own. They have to quit blaming others for their dilemma and realize it is their own needs and fears that are the problem. Since this issue didn't develop overnight, it won't go away overnight. Leaders who make themselves accountable to others often ask for help in creating space for themselves and in establishing new work rhythms that include scheduled time when the leader is unavailable to others.

Avoidants. Avoidants evidence another set of boundary problems. In effect, they shut the gates when they should let others in; these leaders withdraw under pressure. Early family-of-origin experiences may lie at the root of the avoidant reaction. They may have had some experience of psychological pain that taught them an unfortunate lesson: keep other people out. Avoidants are very hard to help because they keep people, even those who want to help them, at a distance. They keep people out in a number of ways: by verbal gate-shutting (cutting off conversation with a curt "I'm fine"), by creating emotional distance (keeping their guard up), and even by physically withdrawing (from keeping the door shut to being physically absent). Spiritual leaders with this boundary problem wind up lonely and isolated, lacking the emotional and psychological support they need in a leadership role that places huge emotional and psychological demands on them. As a result, some leaders who fail to recognize and address this boundary issue crater. Their burnout may be either explosive or implosive.

Eugene grew up as an only child of aging parents. Doted on and coddled, he developed high expectations of how others should treat him. Yet he never learned to play with other kids and was emotionally distant from his parents (they used material things as a poor substitute for emotionally engaging their son). Eugene became a loner. But he was a very competent leader, so his ministry experience for almost two decades was very successful. As his

church grew, Eugene found the pressure getting to him. He withdrew more and more, eventually becoming an absentee leader. Those who saw what was happening tried to help. He not only refused their offers of assistance, he withdrew from anyone who had “found him out.” When his board began to raise the issue of his absences, he refused to be accountable. He finally exploded in a board meeting and quit. The sad thing was, some of his best friends were on the board. Eugene further alienated the very people who were his best promise for help.

Leaders with this boundary issue are hard to help, because that’s the problem—being hard to reach and to help is the issue. It takes particularly committed friends who are willing to be patient and persistent in breaching the leader’s wall. Occasionally, in a time of failure, the leader is open to coaching. This window of opportunity should not be ignored by those who can provide emotional and spiritual support.

Controllers. Controllers are people who don’t respect others’ boundaries and, in some cases, don’t even realize that boundaries exist. Controllers come in two varieties: aggressive and passive. Aggressive controllers bull their way in where they shouldn’t and feel they have a right to be there. Spiritual leaders who invade others’ privacy or who are abusive with their spiritual authority fall into this category. They tell people how to think and how to live, and they even see others’ money as something they are entitled to. In extreme form these are cult leaders who manipulate and abuse their followers. Passive controllers achieve their goals indirectly through guilt and manipulation, deceiving their followers into doing their bidding while letting them think it is their own choice. They are experts at hooking people at their points of vulnerability.

Alan is a bully. He brings people on board his staff leadership team by wooing them with high salaries and promises of advancement. He then manages them through intimidation, reminding

them what they owe him and how hard it would be for them to find another job as good-paying as this. Alan is hardly subtle in his controlling ways. He's the aggressive type.

Sandra, soft-spoken and sweet as honey, is never someone you'd pick as a controller. That's because she's a passive type. Her favorite ploy is to use personal praise to control people. She heaps such praise on people that they find it hard to disagree with her or to turn her down when she makes requests for their time and attention. In this way she takes advantage of others' goodwill. When she senses people pulling away, she pours it on even thicker.

Controllers usually have to be very forcefully challenged in order to change. Unless they come to grips with their lack of respect for other people and with the sources of their need for control, they will continue their controlling ways.

Nonresponsives. Nonresponsives are leaders who have learned to deal with boundary issues by not responding to others' needs or problems. They have so walled themselves off that they are not drawn to alleviate others' suffering. Ministry roles don't usually attract nonresponsives, so the number of spiritual leaders with this true condition is fairly rare. If they do get into spiritual leadership, they usually don't last very long.

A clear exception is the case where nonresponsives are so insulated by an organization that the people they lead are basically unaware of their shortcoming (as, for example, when an unresponsive leader is surrounded by highly caring and responsive staff). People unmoved by others' needs typically require significant psychological coaching or therapy.

Clearly, boundary issues are serious matters for leaders. Self-aware leaders realize that these issues affect many different aspects of their leadership, such as time management, leadership focus, ministry intentionality, health of the church or organizational culture, appropriate responses to conflict, and genuine responsiveness to people's needs. Absent this awareness, the leader is left vulner-

able to a variety of derailments, from being jerked around by others' expectations to being so highly controlling that they lose their own emotional presence to being uncaring about others. The price to pay for unexamined boundaries is too high.

Personal Markers

Like markers in DNA that establish a person's key features, every leader has a set of personal markers (both positive and negative—even traumatic—experiences) that profoundly shape who the leader has become. Self-aware leaders learn to identify these markers and assess their impact on their life and leadership. Since the markers are as unique as the leader, it is impossible to note all of them. However, some fairly common markers inform the shaping dynamics of spiritual leaders.

The Call

For spiritual leaders “the call” frames the central story line in their life dramas. Sometimes the call is dramatic, like Moses' burning bush experience or Paul's Damascus road encounter. For others the call is progressive, like David's long journey between the anointing at his father's house by Samuel and the anointing as king at Hebron by the elders. Either way, leaders center their lives, their vocation, and their location around the call. The call is not an added dimension to their journey; it gives meaning to the trip. It is personal. Spiritual leaders cannot be understood apart from their call because it tells them what game they are playing and keeps them in the game, even when they are discouraged.

Even more significantly, the leader's relationship with God is inextricably linked to the call. Moses knew Yahweh as the voice from the bush and the subsequent fire of Sinai. The Jesus that confronted Paul in the blinding light was the fulfillment of the Pharisee's messianic hopes—the Resurrected One, leading the apostle to frame his most personal desire this way: “That I may know him, and

the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (Philippians 3:10, NIV).

Great leaders can detail their call. It is not guesswork for them, nor is it subject to revision, nor is it confined to a job description or the amount of salary it brings. Even though leaders sometimes wish they could escape the call (because of its demands), they center and order their lives around it. At the end of the day, they want to have been found faithful to fulfilling the call of God on their lives.

Jordan told her story to a group of seminarians. “Don’t even think about a life in ministry unless you have a call.” She went on, “But if you have a call, you’ll be miserable doing anything else.” Jordan recounted her journey into desperation as she slowly but surely grew disenchanted with the work she was doing on church staff. Even though she served a successful church, she felt they were largely keeping people busy in church activity but not actively transforming lives.

Eventually, she couldn’t do it any longer. She called up an old friend she had been to school with and asked him for a job in the hospitality industry (after all, she understood catering to people’s needs!). Her friend told Jordan she was making a mistake but wanted to help, so he signed her up for a position. However, Jordan told the class, her friend was right. Jordan was miserable—all because of “the call thing,” as she put it. She returned to spiritual leadership but this time to a ministry position that more closely matched her personal values.

God-Given Talent

Great spiritual leaders believe that they have been called, not *in spite* of who they are but *because* of who they are. This understanding is not a boast; rather, it is based on an honest assessment of their ability. Unlike many people and leaders who are naïve about their talent, self-aware leaders know what they are good at. They know what they bring to the table (and what they don’t). This gives them per-

mission to be intentional with their energies and time, always playing toward their talent. They do not practice wishful thinking when it comes to their abilities. They know their depth and take assignments that they can genuinely address with their skills and gifts.

Walt should never have taken the offer. He simply didn't have the talent for it. Yet it was a move up in his denomination, so he felt he couldn't pass up the chance to take on a larger leadership role. Since his talent had matched his previous job requirements so well, Walt had shined! He had attracted the attention of the folks at headquarters, so they recruited him to a new position they were creating. Unfortunately, Walt's star fell when he could not measure up to the assignment. After a miserable two years, he finally moved into another role, much like the one he had excelled in previously. Unfortunately, the wrong move cost Walt dearly—financially, as well as in reputation. Had Walt been more aware of the limits of his capability and what he is really good at doing, he never would have fallen victim to the siren song of taking the “better” position.

Being self-aware about talent does not mean leaders do not have to be humble, which is also a central component of greatness. In fact, leaders in true possession of their strengths understand the source of their strengths. They attribute their accomplishments to the Giver of their abilities. Without this clear grasp, leaders dishonor their design and can end up working outside their strengths, whether out of ignorance or from an inflated ego that craves talent that didn't come from God. These leaders even become a liability by underperforming and by keeping other people from operating from their God-given strengths.

Personal Traits

In addition to innate talents, leaders have other traits that are important parts of their personal markers. These include family relationships, temperament, personality, passions, and values, as well as

a host of preferences in lifestyle and ministry. One key personal trait that should be explored is leaders' cognitive style. *Cognitive style* refers to how a leader processes information. Some leaders work better from rules and principles, whereas others prefer to connect their own dots from conceptual components. Some leaders think more in case-by-case situations, whereas others gravitate to the 40,000-foot view—thinking in terms of systems and movements. While some cognitive styles begin with the here and now, others start in the future. Many leaders withdraw into themselves when making decisions, whereas others need to talk things through with others in order to arrive at a decision.

The point of leaders' understanding their own cognitive styles is not just for self-knowledge but also to help leaders appreciate the preferences of others. Otherwise, they may tend to impose their own style of thinking on others, believing that others begin their thinking at the same point they do and process information the way they do. One leader who completed an assessment of his cognitive style chuckled as he observed, "Until I knew how my mind functioned and that other people's brains actually process things differently, I just thought those who disagreed with me were either obstinate or ignorant!" This proves the paradox again: the more self-aware leaders become, the greater their capacity to respect other people for who they are.

Key Events in Life

This category of personal markers includes formative major events, successes and failures, and turning points in the leader's life. Key events may be positive or negative: significant encounters with God, separation or divorce of parents, death of a loved one, a great achievement, an educational milestone, a move to another part of the country or world, a failed marriage, being fired, or enduring a major conflict in ministry are just a few examples.

Reviewing and reflecting on these key events can help leaders connect the dots, recognizing God's providence across the

years. Leaders can also realize how they have been shaped both by crises and by routine rhythms of life. This awareness can inspire confidence and provide comfort, especially to embattled leaders who need reminding that God has not abandoned them. Such an analysis can be conducted on one's own or in a group, which can help leaders see blind spots they might not have found on their own.

At one retreat with a small group of ministry peers, Ruth, a young leader, shared stories of broken relationships and interpersonal conflicts. Ruth could explain each instance in terms of how others had disappointed and mistreated her. After hearing her story of a third failed staff experience, a concerned member of the group perceptively and gently asked, "Ruth, what have you figured out to be your contribution to each failure?" This question served to open Ruth's eyes and set her on a journey of self-discovery. She no longer views herself as a victim. Instead, seeing her own self-sabotaging behavior has enabled her to take charge of her next ministry chapter as a more whole person.

Great spiritual leaders have catalogued their positive and negative personal markers and gleaned the heart-shaping work of God in them. This understanding inspires both humility and confidence.

The Dark Side of Being a Leader

All leaders have a dark side, because every human being struggles with dysfunction to some degree. The dark sides of leaders are just more noticeable (to others more often than to themselves, unfortunately) because of the public scrutiny they receive and because of how their implications are amplified through their followers. Self-aware leaders come to grips with this dark part of themselves so they can take responsibility for it and learn to manage it. If they don't, they run the risk of becoming leaders whose leadership is characterized and shaped primarily by their dark side.

Gary McIntosh and Samuel Rima² identify five types of dark-side leaders: compulsive, narcissistic, paranoid, codependent, and passive-aggressive.

Compulsive Leaders. Compulsive leaders need to maintain absolute order. They feel that the organization's performance directly reflects on them personally, so they implicate themselves into every possible part of the organization. They are typically very status conscious and are eager to please authority figures, from whom they need constant reassurance. Their outward order (grooming, clothing, speech, family, work environment) betrays an inner emotional turbulence. They are often angry, rebellious leaders who tend to be excessively critical of themselves and others.

Narcissistic Leaders. Narcissistic leaders combine intense ambition, overwhelming feelings of inferiority, and excessive needs for affirmation. Unsure of themselves, these leaders view anyone else's achievements as threats because they take the spotlight off the leaders' achievements. Narcissistic leaders use other people and ministry venues as ways to feel better about themselves. Their grandiose plans often are camouflaged with statements about faith and the greatness of God (especially if raising money is involved). No amount of accomplishment will fill these leaders' need for affirmation, nor can these leaders fill their own emotional deficit through relationships, because they use other people to further their own ambitions.

Paranoid Leaders. Paranoid leaders are suspicious of others and therefore extremely guarded in their relationships. Because they are insecure, they are jealous of other gifted people. They tend to overreact to criticism and assume that any problems in the ministry organization pose a threat to them personally. These leaders sometimes conduct clandestine surveillance on other members of the team, even developing an extensive spy network in order to gather information that helps them stay in power. They may develop elaborate reporting mechanisms to keep themselves informed.

Codependent Leaders. Codependent people are often drawn to the ministry and to other helping professions out of a seemingly hard-wired tendency to be focused on others' actions and emotions at the expense of their own boundaries and emotional states. Consequently, they usually have a schedule that is out of control, overloaded with the cares of people in their ministry constituency. They often minister to others in order to feed their own need to be needed. Unchecked, this can lead to burnout.

Passive-Aggressive Leaders. Passive-aggressive leaders resist others' demands by procrastinating and by being stubborn and forgetful. If they choose to perform tasks that are expected of them, they do so with little enthusiasm, often feeling angry with those whom they perceive have forced them to work. Passive-aggressives on the one hand blame their failures on others' lack of support. Then if other people rally to them in supportive ways, these leaders claim that these same people are interfering with their leadership. Since passive-aggressive leaders can be irritable and impatient, they create an unstable environment in which people are on edge, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

If you recognize yourself in any of these patterns, be assured that others have noticed, too! Please get help. Your leadership is toxic to the people around you and to your organization. An able coach can clarify new behaviors to replace the current harmful ones. You may also want to choose a therapy route to deal with some psychological and emotional issues.

Destructive Patterns of Leadership

The dark side of leaders may take more forms than just the ones that McIntosh and Rima describe. David Dotlich and Peter Cairo³ also detail specific derailing behavior of leaders that draw on the dark side. They observe that leaders act, speak, and think in ways that often cause them to fail, often without even realizing they are doing this to themselves. These consultants identify eleven derailing patterns:

arrogance, melodramatic behavior, volatility, excessive caution, habitual mistrust, aloofness, mischievousness, eccentricity, passive resistance, perfectionism, and excessive eagerness to please.

After his third melt-down in as many months, Hal finally confronted his dark side, with the help of a ministry supervisor who insisted on it and a colleague who agreed to serve as a coach and accountability partner. Hal's pattern involved outbursts with coworkers, followed by tearful apologies in which he blamed family stresses and work pressures for his misbehavior. In his journey toward understanding his dark side, Hal came to realize he had a combination of melodramatic behavior, coupled with perfectionism. To subordinates he came across as arrogant, even abusive. This was hidden to superiors, because with them Hal was always eager to please.

To his credit Hal threw himself into himself as a priority project. He identified situations and circumstances that made him more susceptible to acting out. He made a list of behaviors that needed changing. He agreed to a weekly accountability session where his week would be reviewed. Even more significantly, he agreed to receive regular feedback from his entire leadership constellation, those above him as well as those below him in the organizational food chain. These quarterly feedbacks would form the basis of his performance review. Behavioral patterns like Hal's do not go away immediately. He had relapses. But his commitment to improvement earned Hal the grace from others to allow him time and room to grow.

Dark-side leadership is harder to challenge if it has been coddled or nurtured by a dysfunctional organization. "I have a problem," the new pastor confided during a seminar. "The worship leader in our congregation routinely launches into tirades with people. Just this week he lit into me." The startled pastor found out that this behavior had been going on for twenty years. "That's just Noah," people told him. When asked why the congregation put up with this outrageous behav-

ior, the pastor replied that Noah was an excellent worship leader. In essence, the congregation had enabled Noah's dark side because in the end he gave them what they wanted. This pastor's chance of successfully confronting this well-entrenched leader was slim.

The dark sides of leaders inevitably are exposed to those they lead; they are hard to miss. And the leaders are difficult and dysfunctional to be around. But leaders who are captive to such darkness may not become acquainted with it enough so they can manage it. And so the dark side manages them. Great spiritual leaders understand that becoming acquainted with the dark is the only path to the light.

The Price of Lack of Self-Awareness

If the path to self-awareness sounds long and arduous, full of insights that you may be thinking you'd rather not have to face, it's worth keeping in mind that there is a price to be paid for the failure to gain significant self-awareness. Neither alternative is good—for leaders or for those who follow them. Both alternatives keep leaders from freely giving themselves in service to other people.

One option is the hollow leader—a person with no sense of self, a person who works only from the expectations of others. Since such leaders have no inner core, no authenticity, they merely play a role of being a leader. Hollow leaders hand over the verification of their lives and ministry to others because there is no one home. They are functionaries.

The other danger of a lack of self-awareness is leaders who are so self-absorbed that they are unaware of others' needs. For self-absorbed leaders, it's all about them. In every situation their primary concern is about how they are being treated, how they are affected, how they look, how they are responding. They minister to others to get their own needs met. They are still in search of self.

Self-awareness is not automatic in spiritual leaders. It can't be assumed. It only comes to those leaders who see themselves as

appropriate and crucial fields of study. A spiritual leader does not arrive at self-awareness all at once. The learning about self may be jumpstarted or accelerated by precipitous events or challenges that thrust the leader into an inner journey. In a normal progression, the learning curve is typically steeper early on, as the leader grapples with early leadership assignments and life passages. However, not all leaders work on self-awareness in their early years. For some it is postponed until later life. "I didn't come alive until I was sixty," one leader recently confided in me. Up until that time he was working off of a borrowed leadership template, trying to be someone he was not. He is now free indeed and having the time of his life. He proves that it is never too late to learn more about oneself. But it is also never too early to start!

What are you waiting for? Greatness is waiting for you!