



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Leadership, Neuroscience and Pastoral Care

Carlos A. Raimundo

July 2021



Charles Sturt
University

I have been asked if I have any thoughts about leadership, neuroscience, and pastoral care. When I started writing about leadership, I realised that the topic of leadership is incredibly abundant in books, the Internet, YouTube, with specialists on the matter much better than me. Therefore, I thought of a different angle for this article. I decided to invite you, the reader, to a process of reflection on the leader you'd like to be. It will be achieved through contemplation on a gospel story, with snippets of neuroscience within the text, in indented paragraphs closing with applications on pastoral care.

About 'Your' Leadership

In his book *Heroic Leadership*, Chris Lowney says, "we sometimes forget that we're leading, well or not so well, all the way in everything we do in life." You are leading all the time.

What area of your life, personal, family or work would you like to lead better? Focus on something vital for you. What would be the consequences if you don't attend to it successfully?

Picture the leadership issue you want to face; call it a problem.¹ State the problem in a sentence, for example, "My team is not cohesive." Turn the problem into a question, "What can I do to make my team more cohesive and focused?" Use some creativity, do some drawings, take some notes to make the situation clear in your mind.² Make it a bit bigger than it is; this is called maximisation

Maximisation is a way of giving an issue or problem a higher level of relevance. For example, the brain usually minimises problems we face. Lifting the tone of the problem another octave brings it closer to what it may be.

For how long have you been facing this problem? Does it mimic any other present or past situations in your life?

¹ The word problem has become synonymous to the word challenge. While problem has been described as a more negative or pessimistic approach, challenge is something we face with opportunities to achieve—a more positive and optimistic side to the situation. However, minimising an issue to sound more positive could jeopardise a resolution of the issue. Charles Kettering, Head of Innovation of GM, said, "a problem well-stated is half-solved."

² You may expand look at the problem in a more detailed way by using the Play of Life app (www.App.Playoflife.com) or a social mapping using www.RCompass.Life

Visualise the present leadership problem as having being resolved or having changed into a better situation. Then, visualise yourself in that resolved or better place. How much would you want that?

Keep in mind that continuously thinking about desired outcomes or goals stimulates the reticulate system in the brain. It helps to identify if what we're thinking, feeling or doing conduces to the purposes we aspire to or moves us away from it. For example, Moses had a clear vision of the end goal—freedom and inhabiting the promised land. Paul had a clear vision to press towards the goal to win.³

Keeping the leadership problem in mind, read the gospel story of Jesus and Bartimaeus.⁴

Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus, was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." Then, throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him. The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see." "Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately, he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.

Reread the passage in a contemplative way by placing yourself into the story. Picture yourself immersed in your problem; who and what surrounds you? You hear noises; you know that Jesus, from whom you have heard great things, is passing by.

Would you call him aloud, risking being ignored and shouted down? If he's not calling you, for how long would you insist? If you have persevered and some people ask you to come, would you jump to the opportunity, or would you go hesitantly?

³ Philippians 3:14

⁴ Mark 10:46-52 NIV

What do you need to throw, leave behind, let it go? For Bartimaeus, it was his coat—probably the only possession he may have had. To what are you attached? Security, image, resentment, pride, other things?

If you responded to the invitation, you're facing Jesus; many others are watching. Do they bother you? How is Jesus looking at you? With what name does he call you? What is his tone of voice? Listen attentively, *“(your name, as he calls you) what do you want me to do for you?”*

What do you feel? What do you notice?

With the problem still in mind, which behaviour, personal character, or skill would you like to change? Some of the recognised leadership qualities you'd like to have in mind include:⁵ vision, empathy, integrity, confidence, resilience, stability, gratitude, influence, delegation and courage.

If you don't know what you need, stay with it. Accepting not knowing is a sign of strength. Stay with Jesus. You may answer him with another question, “Jesus, what type of leader do you want me to be? What character of your image in me do I need to be aware of?” This may open up a journey of discovery for you. A personal coach may be of great help.⁶

What do you hear back from Jesus? You may write it down and dwell on it.

The process of contemplation stimulates the senses,⁷ emotional and rational areas of the brain. It has a similar effect as Jesus' parables. When his disciples asked him about the Kingdom of God, he didn't answer with a list to follow, but with an “It's like....” The pictorial narrative stimulates the emotional brain, which informs the rational brain that forms a concept or belief. The answer to life questions is within us, imprinting in His image in us. Reading and meditating⁸ on scripture activates and enriches our experiences of God. The Judeo-Christian idea of the Image of

⁵ You may like to expand on those at <https://www.adamenfroy.com/leadership-qualities>

⁶ For more information about coaching contact Melanie@Realtionship.Capital

⁷ To expand on contemplation and the senses go to: <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/application-of-the-senses/>

⁸ Meditating like David Psalm 68



God⁹ resonates with contemporary neuroscience. Humans, being mammals, have distinctive needs compared to non-mammals due to a larger cortex—a neo-cortex—compared to other Great Apes. The neo-cortex is a rational brain that allows self-reflection, recursive thinking, discernment, the possibility of making choices, language, and the ability to change the environment for adaptation. Other biological species need to change themselves through thousands of years of evolution, such as the evolution of the eye¹⁰. Neuroscientists have found a brain area—the precuneus—located in the superior parietal lobe involved in reflections about self and consciousness. It appears that the precuneus and associated neuro-circuitries may send a warning sign when emotions or behaviours are not aligned with what is life-giving, a warning that human can ignore easily. Would that warning sign be part of an innate consciousness that assists us in discernment and decision-making between good and evil? Can this warning sign alert what decision to make in response to God’s direction through Moses to His people? “I have set before your life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life...”¹¹ Could the precuneus be part of the Image of God in us, integrating a moral life-guiding compass? If so, these innate life-giving cognitive circuitries may be competing, mostly loose, with the other natural force of selfishness. Two writers philosophically on the opposite side of the religious spectrum seem to agree. In Paul’s words, “put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness”.¹² The same text in Richard Dawkins selfish gene terminology could read, “chase altruism, the power of evolution through the new neocortical development by keeping under control the natural selfish gene. But don’t wait for biological nature to help you”. For Dawkins, working hard focussing on altruism could overtake the

⁹ The concept of differentiation between human and other beings is part of ancestral narratives in different cultures around the world

¹⁰ See a great description of the evolution of the eye at: <https://youtu.be/fzERmg4PU3c>

¹¹ Deut 30:19-20 NIV

¹² Eph 4:22-24 NIV

power of selfishness. For Paul, it can happen through Christ. They seem to agree that these two forces, not two self, compete for prevalence within us.

What have you discovered in yourself/What do you need to develop further or leave behind to become a better leader?

You may have discovered something easy to do to change. Enjoy it, make it happen. But, it may also make you realise that you're still in the "I don't know." You may also have discovered that the change needed seems too hard. If so, stay in prayer and find a prayer companion. Then, take this as an opportunity to bring those points to your supervision, counselling or coaching. It is also an opportunity to start the process with a professional to walk with you through your personal growth.¹³

How does it relate to pastoral care?

After Peter replies to Jesus that he loved him, Jesus reminds Peter to "Feed my lambs, and Take care of my sheep,"¹⁴ a reminder that must compel us all to action. It is a reminder, not a new commandment; it awakes the principle that we're created in God's image. Integral to that is that the other is my sibling and that everything created is for me to manage appropriately towards fulfilling the principles of the creation. In Ignatius of Loyola's words, "God created human beings to praise, reverence, and serve God, and by doing this, to save their souls" [5Principle and Foundation].

We're coded to care for one another; how am I doing it?

Let's go back to the Jesus and Bartimaeus story. First, you reflected on how you responded to Jesus' question regarding your leadership. Now you'll focus on how you respond to Bartimaeus' call for help. Reread the story sentence by sentence while immersing yourself in the story.

¹³ "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed." Proverbs 15:22

¹⁴ John 21:15-17

Picture yourself walking with Jesus; you're one of his disciples.¹⁵

Do you hear Bartimaeus calling for Jesus?

Sometimes we don't hear; we don't see people's needs because:

- We are coded to be aware of a limited number of things. The brain cannot absorb everything that stimulates us; it filters the information; if not, it would be overwhelming. My wiring may not allow me to be aware of certain 'needs.'
- The responses by the individual collectively or institutionally may depend on a non-exhaustive list:
- Different skills and gifts. One body has many organs with different functions.¹⁶ Gifts make us see the world through different colour lenses.
- Pain, suffering, and trauma can play a positive or negative influence. For example, a person who has personally experienced sexuality or gender issues in the family or among close friends may be more inclined to "hear, see and act" with those in the LGBTI community. However, others with the same experience may block, ignore the topic or say, "be quiet."
- Different emphasis on scripture or life in general. In front of a poor person experiencing hunger, those who take the passage "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"¹⁷ literally may not see their human-physical needs. They only focus on spiritual needs for the salvation of the soul.
- Politically, right-wing people would see people's needs and view wealth distribution differently from those left-wing.

¹⁵ During a personal contemplation on the passage, I noticed that at first, I didn't hear Bartimeus because I was so focused on my "being with Jesus." When I heard him, I felt annoyed and I ignored him; I didn't even look at him to tell him "be quiet." And when Jesus asked the disciple to go and bring him to Jesus, I did not go.

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Romans 12:4

¹⁷ Matthew 5:3 NIV

- Cultures of accepted codes of social discrimination may not see the cry of those in need. They might also not notice that those in need may not be calling for help due to “learned helplessness”[6].
- Those not part of their community are not under the umbrella of care, as Jesus’ first reaction to the request from a Canaanite woman who, like Bartimaeus, didn’t take no for an answer.¹⁸[7]
- A man who felt he was unfairly treated in court during their divorce’s financial settlement, and child custody may not see or might block any issues about women suffering domestic violence.

Whatever the reason, when the rational brain is responding from selfishness, it creates an internal narrative to justify any behaviour, including “Am I my brother’s keeper?”¹⁹ These processes are Cognitive Bias or defence mechanisms.

Am I aware of the needs I don’t see? Or do I put aside the needs I see? We’re not coded or emotionally free or healthy to notice every need or call for help around us. We need to have an insight into what we don’t see or notice and find people, programs or institutions that could help those in need. I am my brother’s and sister’s keeper. Like the disciples, they couldn’t heal the man but went and brought him to Jesus. How am I doing that?

Pastoral care is to care pastorally as a shepherd cares for the one that is lost or wounded. Using another metaphor from Jesus, we know that the harvest is plenty, but the workers are few.²⁰ Am I praying for the workers? Am I ready to be a worker if I’m called to hear and attend one person who’s calling for help?

We have explored that “we’re leading—well or not so well—all the way in everything we do in life.” We can enhance insight into what we need to be better leaders through reflection, contemplation and meditation. And we’re not alone; we are assisted by friends, brothers and sisters, professional accompaniment, supervision, or coaching. Those processes stimulate our internal resources

¹⁸ Matthew 15:21-28

¹⁹ Genesis 4:9 NIV

²⁰ Luke 10:2

coded neuro-physiologically. Using the scripture can further heighten our insight into what we need, and we have received the spirit of adoption that allows us to connect with Abba.²¹ As we need Abba, others need Abba too. We're called to hear their cry and feed and take care of those in need of all nations sharing the Good News. We're comforted by the certainty that Jesus is with us always, to the end of the age.²²

Heading 3

Lowney, C., *Heroic leadership: Best practices from a 450-year-old company that changed the world*. 2009: Loyola Press.

Corballis, M.C., "The Uniqueness of Human Recursive Thinking: The ability to think about thinking may be the critical attribute that distinguishes us from all other species". *American Scientist*, 2007. 95(3): p. 240-248.

Domming, D.P. and M.K. Hellwig, *Original Selfishness: Original Sin And Evil in the Light of Evolution*. 2006: Ashgate Publishing. 213.

Dawkins, R., *The Selfish Gene*. 1989, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Loyola, S.I., *The spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*. 2007: Cosimo, Inc.

Maier, S.F. and M.E. Seligman, "Learned helplessness: theory and evidence". *Journal of experimental psychology: general*, 1976. 105(1): p. 3.

Martin, J., *Jesus, A Pilgrimage*. 2014, New York: Harper Collins.

²¹ Romans 8:15

²² Matthew 28:20 GNB