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Spirituality and Leadership

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By: John O'Donohue, Ph.D.

[Spirituality and Leadership](#)

Genuine Leaders Recognize the Sacredness of the Human Presence

Summary

Functionalism, which is the dominant philosophy of our time, views the world externally and mechanically and describes things in terms of how they work. But it cannot answer the "why" or (especially) the "who" questions.

Leadership, however, requires an ability to recognize the sacredness of individuality. Each of us lives simultaneously in four different worlds: system, society, behavior, and experience. True leaders know that effecting change is possible only in the realm of experience.

Change often begins in the human imagination, from which true leaders draw five necessary qualities: integrity, a gift for awakening others, compassion, spontaneity, and an ability to make use of failure — which is of course at the heart of crucifixion, resurrection, and incarnation.

Healthcare today is caught up in a conversation between mission and market. Catholic healthcare leaders, who believe healthcare is a human right, will have to use all their powers of memory and imagination to invoke the vision of the ministry's founders. In that way, they may reawaken our numbed hearts.

Good leaders do what they do neither for profit nor to compensate for psychological deficiencies, but because they happen to be privileged with a vision. It is a vision that calls them to a kind of frontier.

This frontier has to do with human presence, which is one of the most exciting forces in the world. Nowhere do you meet such an intensity of presence as in the human face. The face is the expression of human individuality. In a world where nearly everything has been homogenized and turned into a marketable product, there is still something

subversive about individuality. Behind every human face there lies a hidden world of the self, to which only that individual has access. These inner landscapes subsist in solitude.

Unfortunately, the language we use to discuss the self has become brittle, clichéd, and empty. We need a new language that will somehow mirror the mystery each of us carries. Behind the facade of one's daily life — one's role, function, and image — there is something eternal going on. This is the subversive, sacramental nature of the person. Each of us was sent to earth for a special purpose, and to catch a glimpse of that purpose is really the true art of self-knowing. As the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova says in describing a marvelous sunset:

I just can't comprehend
Whether it is the end of the day, the end of the world
Or the mystery of mysteries in me again.¹

That is the magic of the human presence: secret and intimate. To be authentic, a leader must recognize its sacredness. Leadership is not about function or bureaucracy. It is about awakening and empowering human presence.

Functionalism and Experience

In postmodern culture, there is a vast reductionism at work. One could call it the "ideology of functionalism," and it is the exact opposite of any sense of the mystery in the human presence.

Each of us lives simultaneously in four worlds: system, society, behavior, and experience.

System "System," in this sense, might refer to the government system, the healthcare system, or some other. A system is a very strange kind of organism, with a life and idiom of its own. Trying to change a system is extremely difficult. We all know of very generous people who put their lives on the line trying to change systems — and ended up exhausted and empty. When a system loses its connection with human nature, it becomes destructive. This may be especially true of for-profit healthcare, an incredibly anonymous system that recognizes little of the mystery of the individual that Catholic healthcare focuses on.

Society Postmodern society is shaped by functionalism, which describes things in terms of how they work. The "how" question has driven the "why" question and especially the "who" question to the margins. This philosophy views the world externally and mechanically, and is primarily interested in utility, result, and product. Real leadership, however, helps people realize that there is something at the heart of human presence that can never be functionalized. Real leadership knows that the attempt to functionalize this presence only intensifies and marginalizes spiritual hunger.

Functionalism is the sister of consumerism, which in an important sense is the dominant religion of our time. Consumerism worships at the altar of quantity. The new god is Quantity. Advertising is its liturgy. Advertising is schooling in false desire. Consumerism, like Freud's "oral stage" of personality development, is an infantile strategy that postmodern culture has devised to give itself a sense of identity and to try to satisfy the deeper longings of the human heart.²

Consumerism is the ideology of greed, which is human longing that has somehow twisted itself and forgotten its source in human presence. Greed is one of the greatest perversions of longing because it is largely incapable of compassion or mercy.

If we look at the world today, we see that some people have many possessions while others have few and are marginalized. This is the result of greed. Once we note that fact, we are forced to ask ourselves whether we are not in secret complicity with the ideology of consumerism. We must come to terms with that question, lest we unknowingly serve the destruction of innocent, vulnerable people and ultimately the planet itself.

Behavior The world of behavior is the one that often seems most amenable to change, especially to leaders of organizations. Leaders tend to think they can prescribe change: "We should do this; we should do that." But behavior is an external layer of human presence. Those who try to prescribe change are still coming at things from the outside, still treating people as objects. And change brought about this way is not real change at all; it is merely the substitution of one mode of action by another. The real, undergirding questions are not actually engaged or explored.

Experience This is the world in which real change is possible, the world that real leaders focus on. When you make a change in the world of experience, you make it at the heart of things — the place where human identity unfolds and reflects on itself. If you manage to change the rhythm of experience, you will give thought, action, and reflection an altogether different quality than they had before. This is change that is real and irreversible. True leadership is artistry of the heart and awakening of the hidden sources of creativity.

Imagination and Change

The world of experience, then, is where leadership anchors its vision. "Vision" is an incredibly powerful idea. Vision is the source of meaning, and there is a deep need for meaning in every individual. Meaning is as important for us as food or rest. In a certain sense, your vision is your home.

A person who is alive and in conversation with his or her own depths is always revising, changing, moving the old thresholds of meaning within. Every individual life is on a threshold between the past and future, the inner world and the outer, quest and question, fact and possibility, memory and dream, the human and the divine. We are the place where infinite possibilities meet, where great change can occur.

Real change comes from the source of things and need not be threatening. It is actually a rhythm continually bringing us to new horizons both within and without. "Our thoughts are our inner senses," according to Meister Eckhart.³ If that is true, then our inner world is mediated to us through our thinking. If our thoughts are consistently harsh and negative, we will stay stuck in old patterns of recognition, doing the same thing day in and day out, until we build up a huge inner desperation. There is something in us that requires change if we are to be truly present. So the way we think determines how and what we see and how we choose to be. In a vital sense, thought is reality.

One of the most important faculties of thinking is the imagination; it is where the magic is. Unfortunately, though, imagination tends to be neglected when we talk about spirituality. Many good people, having chosen vocations in religion, have tried to hammer the wild complexity of their souls into a direction they believed the "will of God" called them in. Often God did not want them to go in that direction at all. The "will of God" idea was often used by their superiors to keep people under control. Many wonderful people have done damage to their own mystery by using that kind of hammer to flatten away the most interesting parts of their complexity.

The poet Keats, on the other hand, believed in what he called "the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of the imagination."⁴ One might base a whole philosophy of leadership on that insight. Imagination opens worlds to us that we would otherwise not see. It is the place within us where we are somehow eternal. The poet Wendell Berry says that, after a difficult day, he goes in his imagination "where the wood drake rests in his beauty." Then:

I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water
and I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world and am free.⁵

Imagination and Leadership

Imagination kindles the human presence necessary for leadership in five different ways.

Integrity Integrity can be seen in the person who insists on being true to his or her own nature, refusing to be obsessed with "image." A leader with this quality will have an incredible effect on any group he or she chooses to work with, because the leader's integrity will change the group's whole rhythm. People, being clever, will quickly see through the mask of a false leader, one who lacks integrity. Integrity is the cornerstone of leadership. There is no greater witness than the integrity of individual presence.

Gift for Awakening Others A real leader is also someone who can awaken life and creativity in other people. In the Symposium, Plato says that being a spiritual midwife brings new worlds awake in others. A leader has the responsibility of awakening individuals to possibilities in themselves that they cannot see.

It is this quality that can make leadership lonely — the fact that a leader must go out ahead of other people and bring back a report that will help them travel there, too. In its deepest sense, the spirituality of leadership is the ministry of service to possibility.

Compassion A real leader is compassionate. This is the core message of the carpenter-poet who founded our religion. Though we often forget it, Jesus lived his life on what we have called "the frontier of human presence." On this frontier he met many different kinds of people — including some whom we might consider "bad company" — and to all he brought a wonderful compassion. Anyone who was in trouble could approach Jesus and be totally accepted and free of shame. The quality and poise of Jesus' dignity were such that they could return to wounded people a sense of their own worth and open the doors of possibility to them. I often think that Jesus must have had beautiful eyes. Anyone he gazed on was changed forever.

Catholic healthcare leaders should be compassionate, of course. They would do well to be aware of the old Celtic belief that anytime you send love and goodness out from yourself to other people, it comes back to you a thousandfold. The market works differently; there the more I have, the less you have. In the spiritual kingdom, the more I have, the more everyone has. This is the law of inverse proportion, which subverts the god of quantity and brings in the graciousness of a larger eternal presence.

Catholic healthcare leaders should remember that the patient is at the center of all they do. One of the tragedies of being human is that you never fully realize the value of something until you are about to lose it. Of nothing is that more true than health. Illness is the greatest force of unmasking a person can experience. When you are ill or in pain, you quit worrying about how people see you; illness cuts nakedly to the heart of identity. Catholic healthcare leaders should realize that accompanying people on that lonely frontier is an incredible privilege. The patient — that icon of vulnerability — should illuminate every discussion Catholic healthcare leaders take part in. Christianity believes that vulnerability is poignant luminosity.

Spontaneity Another necessary quality of leadership is spontaneity. It is lovely to find in human presence a sense of wildness. You know a group or organization is truly alive when you find a little wildness around its edges — or even at its center. Such organizations leave room for the imagination. The great secret of imagination is inspiration, and inspiration is the sister of spontaneity.

Longing is one of the most precious things in the human heart. But, left to itself, longing becomes meaningless and absurd. Part of the art of leadership is awakening genuine human longing. To do this, to create something new and fresh, leaders need spontaneity.

Ability to Use Failure The corporate world is driven by its search for productivity and results. But one of the best things about the Christian tradition is that it allows the unexpected light that failure can produce to shine through. Sometimes the biggest apparent failures turn out to be precious moments of real growth and transfiguration.

This concept is of course at the heart of the crucifixion, resurrection, and incarnation. An incarnational spirituality not

only has the courage to travel the frontiers we have been describing here — it seeks out exactly such frontiers, knowing that work done on them will pay the highest dividends. A person who, in his or her work, is compassionate and respectful toward even apparent failures will find that this can be a transforming experience for everyone involved.

Mission's Conversation with Market

How can Catholic healthcare leaders bring this kind of presence into their work? Healthcare in our time is caught up in a conversation between mission and the market. All who are involved in it face a fundamental choice: whether care of the vulnerable is to be a commodity or a human right.

Catholic healthcare leaders, who believe it is a right, will of course play a vital role in this conversation. To be fully effective, they will have to employ all their powers of memory and imagination to reawaken the courageous vision of the founders of the ministry — the women religious who, working on the thresholds of desperation and poverty, created the institutions that over the centuries have provided care for the vulnerable. In recalling the passions that drove the founding sisters, contemporary Catholic healthcare leaders will discover the vigor and power necessary to take the ministry into a new era.

There is a great shelter in a kind and critical vision; it enables one to awaken the nourishment of memory in order to realize the eternal possibility that is there to be awakened all around us, especially in the chromatic corporate world, in numbed consumerism and in the neglected parts of our own hearts. As the Zen mystic said, "When one flower blooms, it is spring everywhere."

NOTES

1. Anna Akhmatova, "This Land, Although Not My Native Land," *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, translated by Judith Hemschemeyer, Zephyr Press, Boston, 1997, p. 496.
2. In the forthcoming book *Eternal Echoes: Exploring Our Yearning to Belong*, I have attempted a more comprehensive critique of functionalism and consumerism in terms of longing, belonging, presence, and the need for a modern recovery of the ascetic way of life. Our culture suffers from a huge crisis of belonging.
3. Meister Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, translated by M. O. C. Walsh.
4. John Keats, letter of November 22, 1817.
5. Wendell Berry, "The Peace of Wild Things," *Collected Poems*, North Point Press, San Francisco, 1984, p. 69.

Dr. O'Donohue is an Irish poet and philosopher, the author of *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* and the forthcoming *Eternal Echoes: Exploring Our Yearning to Belong* (both published by HarperCollins). This article is adapted from a talk at the 1998 Catholic Health Assembly in New Orleans.

Beannacht*
For Josie

On the day when
the weight deadens
on your shoulders
and you stumble,
may the clay dance
to balance you.

And when your eyes
freeze behind
the gray window

and the ghost of loss
gets in to you,
may a flock of colors,
indigo, red, green
and azure blue
come to awaken in you
a meadow of delight.

When the canvas frays
in the curach of thought
and a stain of ocean
blackens beneath you,
may there come across the waters
a path of yellow moonlight
to bring you safely home.

May the nourishment of earth be yours,
may the clarity of light be yours,
may the fluency of the ocean be yours,
may the protection of the ancestors be yours.

And so may a slow
wind work these words
of love around you,
an invisible cloak
to mind your life.

*From John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, HarperCollins, New York City, 1997, p. v. Beannacht is the Gaelic word for "blessing." A curach is a light canvas boat — a canoe.

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She is currently faculty at the Sophia Center for Culture and Spirituality at Holy Names College in Oakland, California, where she teaches courses on mysticism and contemplative spirituality.[3] She is also a Fellow at Santa Clara University. [3] In the past, Flinders taught at the University of California at Berkeley, the Graduate Theological Union, and elsewhere. Several additional books by Flinders have focused on various intersections of feminism, spirituality, and cultural and biological evolution. At the Root of this Longing: Reconciling a Spiritual Hunger and a Feminist Thirst (1998) chronicles her struggle to reconcile the claims of a lifelong meditation practice with her emerging feminism.

Spiritual leadership is a blending of natural and spiritual qualities utilized for influencing God's people to accomplish God's purposes. Even the natural qualities are not self-produced but God-given and therefore reach their highest effectiveness when employed in the service of God and for His glory. The work of ministry requires that it be accomplished by spiritual people, utilizing spiritual methods to accomplish God's objectives. If you take any of these out of the mix and you cease to have Christian work. Spirituality, Religion, and Leadership Spirituality and leadership are two concepts that have broad meanings and interpretations. According to Conger spirituality like leadership are two very hard concepts to describe (1994, 27). "So an exploration of these two words individually or in combination could be an exercise in frustration, especially for those who seek absolute answers." If a person has engaged a spiritual life, then it is personal integrity that brings spirituality wherever the person is.