Strenghtening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry

Title: ***Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry***

Author: Ruth Haley Barton

Copyright Date: 2008

Book Summary:

This is a book about the soul- - your soul, my soul and the soul of our leadership.

Jesus indicates that it is possible to gain the whole world but lose your own soul. If he were talking to us as Christian leaders today, he might point out that it is possible to gain the world of ministry success and lose your own soul in the midst of it all. He might remind us that it is possible to find your soul, after so much seeking, only to lose it again.

RUTH HALEY BARTON is cofounder and president of The Transforming Center, a ministry to pastors and Christian leaders. Barton has served on the pastoral staff of several churches, including Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois. She is also a trained spiritual director and retreat leader. Currently, she spends much of her time teaching, guiding and consulting with leadership groups in the areas of spiritual formation, community building and discernment.

Book Notes:

Strengthening the soul of your leadership is an invitation to enter more deeply into the process of spiritual transformation and to choose to lead from that place. (15)

In the process of transformation the Spirit of God moves us from behaviors motivated by fear and self-protection to trust and abandonment to God; from selfishness and self- absorption to freely offering the gifts of the authentic self; from the ego's desperate attempts to control the outcomes of our lives to an ability to give ourselves over to the will of God which is often the foolishness of this world. (16)

Many of us leader- types are unaccustomed to the language of the soul and its quieter ways. (17)

When the early Wesleyan bands of Christ- followers got together in small group meetings, their first question to each other was "How is it with your soul?" This is the best possible question for us as Christian leaders in light of Jesus' warning and in light of what we witness in and around us. So how is it with your soul? (24)

Spiritual leadership emerges from our willingness to stay involved with our own soul—that place where God's Spirit is at work stirring up our deepest questions and longings to draw us deeper into relationship with him. (25)

These days (and maybe every day) there is a real tension between what the human soul needs in order to be truly well and what life in leadership encourages and even requires. There is the tension between being and doing, community and cause, truth- telling and putting the right spin on things. There is the tension between the time it takes to love people and the need for expediency. There is the tension between the need for measurable goals and the difficulty of measuring that which is ultimately immeasurable by anyone but God himself. (26)

The temptation to compromise basic Christian values—love, community, truth- telling, confession and reconciliation,silent listening and waiting on God for discernment—for the sake of expedience is very great. (27)

In solitude we are rescued from relentless human striving to solve the challenges of ministry through intellectual achievements and hard work, so that we can experience the life of the Spirit guiding toward that true way that lies between one polarity and another. In silence we give up control and allow God to be God in our life rather than being a thought in our head or an illustration in a sermon. In that place of our seeking we listen for the still, small voice of God telling us who we really are and what is real from a spiritual point of view. Then we are not quite so enslaved by the demands and expectations of life in leadership. (28- 29)

But one of the things I know for sure is that those who are looking to us for spiritual sustenance need us first and foremost to be spiritual seekers ourselves. They need us to keep searching for the bread of life that feeds our own souls so that we can guide them to places of sustenance for their own souls. Then rather than offering the cold stone of past devotionals, regurgitated apologetics or someone else's musings about the spiritual life, we will have bread to offer that is warm from the oven of our intimacy with God. (29)

Reflecting back on those early experiences reminds me every day that the most important thing I can do as a leader today is to keep seeking God in depths of my own soul—no matter what it costs. (30)

The discipline of solitude is a key discipline for all those who seek after God. It is the primary place where the leader's soul is strengthened. (31)

Here is an invitation to sit quietly for a few moments for the sole purpose of allowing your soul to say what it needs to say to God. Don't try to force anything or work hard to make something happen. The soul runs from such attempts. Just sit quietly in God's presence and see what shows itself. This may take time but when your soul has finally said that thing that it has been waiting to say, you will know. If you sit long enough, you might also be surprised at what God wants to say to your soul. (33)

As Parker Palmer observes, "A leader is a person who must take special responsibility for what's going on inside him or her self, inside his or her consciousness, lest the act of leadership create more harm than good." (48)

In solitude we stop believing our own press. We discover that we are not as good as we thought but we are also more than we thought. (51)

In solitude our illusions fall away and we see—sometimes with disturbing clarity—our competitiveness, our jealousies, our rage, our manipulations. (52)

If we stay in solitude long enough, we become safe enough with ourselves and with God to say, Yes, this is who I am. (52)

If spiritual leadership is anything, it is the capacity to see the bush burning in the middle of our own life and having enough sense to turn aside, take off our shoes and pay attention! (64)

The soulful leader trusts that in the midst of one's very public existence something is going on in the deep interior spaces of the soul that warrants serious attention. (66)

For a leader to take time to turn aside and look is no small thing. In the rush of normal life, we often blow right past the place where God is creating a stir to get our attention. But at the heart of spiritual leadership is the capacity to notice the activity of God so we can join him in it. Amid the welter of possible distractions, an essential discipline for leaders is to craft times of quiet in which we allow God to show us those things that we might otherwise miss. (68)

The practice of paying attention awakens us to what is extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary. As we live our lives in humble response to the One who is calling to us out of the burning bush in our own lives, we discover that we are standing on holy ground more often than we think. (70)

Our transformation is never for ourselves alone. It is always for the sake of others. (74)

The soul of leadership begins with who we are—really. Not who we think we are, not who we would like to be, not who others believe us to be. (76)

Leadership call us to deepen our willingness to become more that what we are right now so that we can say yes to that which is ours to do. (76)

Solitude, then, is that place where we fight it out with God if we need to—all the way down to the mat. Leadership, even at its best is terribly demanding, and it is crucial that we argue out our ambivalence about our calling to leadership openly with God so that it doesn't leak out and create uncertainty in those we are serving. (81)

One of the main lessons we learn during this stage of the spiritual journey is that God is not in any particular hurry to get us to the Promised Land. He is much more concerned about the transforming work he is doing in us to prepare us for greater responsibilities of freedom living. (94)

What kind of leader is able to call people to wait on God in the face of real threat, when all of their survival instincts are raging? What inner strength does a leader need to be able to access in order to stay calm, to quiet the primal instincts of others, and to create space for turning to God in the midst of such fierce human reactivity? Only a leader who has waited for God in the darkest moments of his own deep need. Only a leader who has stood still and waited for God's deliverance in the places where she feared for her very life. Only the leader with inner spiritual authority that comes from his own waiting can ask others to do the same. (97)

A recent survey of twenty thousand Christians around the world revealed that many identify busyness and constant overload as a major distraction from God. Michael Zigarelli, who conducted this survey from his post as associate professor of management at the Charleston University School of Business, describes "a vicious cycle" prompted by cultural conformity. He says, "It may be the case that 1) Christians are assimilating a culture of busyness, hurry and overload, which leads to 2) God becoming more marginalized in Christians lives, which leads to 3) a deteriorating relationship with God, which leads to 4) Christians becoming even more vulnerable to adopting secular assumptions about how to live, which leads to 5) more conformity to a culture of busyness, hurry and overload. And then the cycle begins again." (118)

This in itself is a sad state of affairs, but it gets worse. Tellingly, this survey reveals that pastors and Christian leaders seem to be as caught up in culture of busyness as anyone else. A full 65 percent of pastors (right up there with lawyers, managers and nurses) are among the most likely to rush from task in a way that interferes with their relationship with God. "It's tragic. It's ironic," notes Zigarelli, "that the very people who could best help us escape the bondage of busyness are themselves in chains." (119)

Many, in their more honest moments, dream of leaving ministry altogether, having come to the conclusion that this is the only way out of an unworkable lifestyle. (119)

When we keep pushing forward without taking adequate time for rest and replenishment, or way of life may seem heroic, but there is a frenetic quality to our work that lacks true effectiveness because we have lost the ability to be present to God, to be present to other people and to discern what is really needed in our situation. (120)

There is nothing more crucial to the staying power of the leader than establishing rhythms that keep us replenished—body, mind and soul. (122)

Sabbath keeping is the linchpin of a life lived in sync with the rhythms that God himself built into our world, and yet it is the discipline that seems hardest for us to live. (122)

It takes profound willingness to invite God to search us and know us at the deepest level of our being, allowing him to show us the difference between the performance- oriented drivenness of the false self and the deeper calling to lead from our authentic self in God. (126)

It is impossible to overstate how dangerous we can become as leaders if we are not routinely inviting God to search us and know us and lead us in a new way. (127)

I have seen and experienced things in leadership for which I still don't have categories and may never this side of heaven. But one thing is sure: the choice to lead something, to orient your life toward some vision or ideal and to lead in that direction opens you up to a world of pain that you might not otherwise have to face. (139)

Any leader who cannot endure profound levels of loneliness will not last long. (163)

This kind of loneliness—being in a position where we must take total responsibility for ourselves and for what God is calling us to do no matter what others are doing—is an absolute truth of leadership. (164)

Thank God for it because this is the moment when you know down to the bottom of your being that the nearness of God is your ultimate good and you are not willing to go on without it. Thank God for it, because now you know that you are no longer willing to sacrifice intimacy with God for anything—even the Promised Land you have envisioned. (166)

The irony is that by now we have learned how to wax eloquent about the idea of community, how to cast vision for it and how to help others experience it (!), but we have lost it for ourselves. (170)

But as satisfying as teamwork can be, spiritual people who come together to lead churches or organizations with a spiritual purpose have a deeper calling—we are called to move beyond teamwork to spiritual community and to have our leadership emerge from that place. (174)

Experiencing spiritual community at the leadership level is one of the richest and most satisfying aspects of leadership, but it can also be one of the trickiest. (175)

Does your leadership team have a process for discerning God's will in these matters? (192)

At the heart of spiritual leadership and spiritual journeying is discernment—the capacity to recognize and respond to the presence and the activity of God both personally and in community. (192- 193)

Strengthening the soul of our leadership is an invitation that begins, continues and ends with seeking God in the crucible of ministry. It is an invitation to stay connected with our own soul—that very private place where

God's Spirit and my spirit dwell together in union—and to lead from that place. The choice to lead from our soul is a vulnerable approach to leadership, because the soul is more tender than the mind or the ego. This is a place where we don't have all the answers—or at least not necessarily when everybody wants them! It is a place where we are not in control; God is. It is a place where the quickest way is not always the best way, because the transformation that is happening in us is more important than getting where we think we need to go. (210)

Rather than leading from the unconscious patterns of the false self, I am leading from a self that is being transformed by my encounters with God in solitude and silence. (211)

And this is what I have come to see most clearly in the life of Moses: for Moses the presence of God was the Promised Land. Next to that, everything else had already paled in significance. (214)

It is possible for a leader to have encountered God so richly that no matter what we are working toward here on this earth, we know we already have what we most deeply want—the presence of God, that which can never be taken from us? (215)

This is a leader with strength of soul—one who continually seeks God in the crucible of ministry and for that reason is able to stay faithful to the call of God upon their life—to do their small part—until God calls them home. (220)