

A Deeper Calling

Cultivating an Organizational Culture of Spiritual Transformation

By Ruth Haley Barton



Have you ever had an experience like this? You're enjoying a personal interaction with another leader from within your church or organization and the two of you are open and receptive, able to listen attentively and willing to share your thoughts from the heart. You might even notice a prayerful spirit in that person or perhaps a deep wisdom you really respect. You might have several such interactions that seem particularly graced with goodness.

But then you show up in a leadership setting—a board meeting, an elder meeting, a staff meeting—and things are somehow different. An individual who expressed real wisdom privately is suddenly reticent to share openly. Someone who is normally kind and gentle exhibits a hard, defensive edge.

Relationships which, in other settings, are characterized by love and trust become tense or give way to maneuvering and posturing that speaks of a subtle distrust. Or someone who has, in other settings, expressed a sweet desire to know and do the will of God, can barely find time for a quick prayer at the beginning of a meeting where real guidance is needed. You wonder, what happened here?

Such experiences are disturbing, for they speak to the power of organizational culture to shape individuals and their responses. Although we don't often think of it this way, human beings are a lot like rocks in a riverbed. Just as the water flowing over the rocks day after day changes the shape of those rocks simply by virtue of the fact that they're in the flow of the river, we too are shaped by being in the flow of the different elements in our organizational culture.

The question, then, for the leader who is concerned about spiritual formation in his or her setting is this: How is the *organizational*

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culture shaping me and all of us who work and worship here?

Any approach to spiritual formation that fails to wrestle with the power of organizational systems to have a transforming or deforming impact on the individuals within the system will have very limited effectiveness over the long haul.

Exposing the Organizational Culture

One of the dangers inherent in many current approaches to spiritual formation is that we tend to reduce it to a privatized matter that can be handled primarily by offering a program or a retreat here and there. But the truth is that spiritual formation is not merely an individual matter.

Authentic spiritual transformation confronts us not only on the personal level, exposing our personal sin patterns, addiction to control and image-management, preoccupation with self-protective strategies, or performance-oriented driven-ness, but also confronts organizational realities as well. It confronts our systems and structures, exposing the ways in which our life together has a transforming or deforming effect upon us.

Every church or organization has its own culture—its own ways of being together and working together that have become normative over time. Some of these cultural norms are addressed through spoken or written communication; however, many are unspoken and involve a tacit agreement that everyone will adhere to these norms.

For instance, there might be an unspoken understanding that, even

though staff members are entitled to a certain amount of vacation time, the norm is that no one takes a full vacation, or is at least available, if needed. There may be more subtle norms governing what kind of information gets shared in what settings, or how truth is manipulated to be more palatable in meetings with senior leadership or in public communication to the congregation or constituency.

These are but a few examples of a wide variety of cultural norms that shape the environment of a church or organization, thus shaping the individuals who live and work in that organization. But there's an even more subtle reality functioning within churches and organizations; it's what Walter Wink identifies as the spirit or ethos of a place.

Referring to Revelation 2-3, where seven letters are addressed to seven churches, Wink points out that "the congregation was not addressed directly but through the angel [of that church]. The angel seemed to be the corporate personality of the church, its ethos or spirit or essence...the angel of the church was apparently the spirituality of that particular church."¹

That's why, Wink points out, the spirit of a church or institution can remain fairly constant over decades, even centuries, though all the original members have long since departed. It's why a discerning person can sense, at times, a spirit of fear and control in a place, a spirit of apathy and defeat, or a spirit of love, trust and deep faith. The more deeply an individual engages in the life of the organization, the more that person will be shaped by the spirit

of the place.

Cultivating a Culture of Spiritual Transformation

When it comes to the issue of spiritual formation, organizational cultures are rarely neutral. For the most part, cultural norms will support and catalyze the process of spiritual transformation, or they will work against it. Cultivating a culture of spiritual transformation does not happen by accident.

A culture of spiritual transformation is led very intentionally by leaders who are deeply committed to the process of spiritual transformation in their own lives and in engaging the other team members in the process. In this way senior management begins to live out and model a commitment to spiritual transformation together. Eventually this leads to the ability to clarify and articulate deeply held values, living them out in concrete ways.

Over time these values become embedded in the system, providing positive cultural norms. When cultivated, these values shape the spirit or ethos of the place, and individuals within the system experience life change just by being in the flow of the community's life together.

Values That Transform

Every church or organization must live out in their own experience the values that will shape their life together, and then learn to articulate those values in ways that are effective for others. Some values will be very general, appropriate for any Christian church or organization, and others will be more specific to the unique calling of that

organization. Ultimately you'll need to identify and articulate your own values, but here are a few of the values we, at the Transforming Center, seek to live out intentionally in our life together as leaders and with those we serve.

We would be the first to admit that we don't live these values perfectly, but we're clear about what we're living toward, trying to be very alert to forces that might cause us to compromise our values. Because we've clearly articulated those values, it's hard for us to slip too far without someone raising a red flag and questioning what we're doing.

■ **Living out of community.** In our very essence we're a spiritual community gathered around the presence of Christ. *What we do* flows out of *who we are* in Christ. Learning to come together—and stay together—in unity is our first and most enduring task as we pattern our relationships after Christ's relationships with his disciples. "He loved them unto the end" (John 13:1 ASV, also see John 15 and 17).

Compromising community would be to compromise our essence, leaving us with little of value to offer others.

■ **Embracing spiritual disciplines.** We're each committed to personal spiritual disciplines and community spiritual disciplines that support and catalyze our own spiritual transformation.

It's routine for us to check in with each other about our spiritual rhythms when we're sharing privately, or as a group, and talk about our pace of life, whether it's enabling us to remain healthy or whether we're approaching dangerous levels of exhaustion. It's routine for us to make scheduling decisions as a ministry organization on the basis of this kind of awareness and processing.

■ **Living authentically before others.** We won't teach theories or wishful thinking, but only that which we're experiencing ourselves to some degree. "We speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen" (John 3:11). Sometimes this means choosing not to teach certain things because we know we're not yet living them very effectively.

■ **Seeking spiritual discernment.** We're committed to the *habit* of discernment—seeking to be attentive and alert to God's activity among us day-by-

day—and naming that together so we can seek to respond faithfully.

We're also committed to the *practice* of discernment—proactively seeking God's guidance together when we need specific direction for decision-making. Because discernment often takes more time and a different kind of attention than decision-making, living out this value takes real discipline.

■ **Practicing truth-telling.** God desires truth in the inner being because truth leads to freedom, spiritual transformation and deeper levels of discernment. All truth, no matter how delicate or painful or seemingly inconsequential, contributes to the discernment process.

Since the Holy Spirit has been given to us to guide us into truth, we're learning to offer the truth in love and gentleness rather than hiding it or giving it a "spin." Anything less than this kind of honesty places the community in great peril, as we know from the story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5).

Because we know this is such a deeply held value, it guides us and gives us courage to go ahead and say the hard thing, and support each other in doing so.

■ **Celebrating with gratitude.** We believe celebration is the spiritual discipline associated with gratitude. Therefore, we look for every opportunity to celebrate God's presence with us and his activity among us. Our retreats often have one evening specifically designed for celebration.

■ **Showing kindness.** Kindness is a basic characteristic of mature spirituality, but often the Christian community is unkind. Choosing to enter into spiritual community together requires a certain tenderness with each other, so we're very careful to cultivate kindness and gentleness with one another.

Many people, particularly pastors, have been treated so badly in churches and Christian organizations that we've at times wondered, wouldn't it be something if we could be, at the very least, a place where people (including among ourselves) encountered true kindness and gentleness over the long haul? Even if that's all we accomplished, that would be significant!

■ **Honoring brokenness.** We acknowledge and honor the profound

role brokenness plays in the unfolding of the spiritual life and true spiritual community. We believe coming face-to-face with our weakness and sharing it together prayerfully opens us to the gift of community, releasing God's power among us, within us and beyond us (see 2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

■ **Listening to fear and resistance.** We all experience fear, particularly as we enter more deeply into community and calling. Fear causes people to behave strangely, even badly—self-protection, manipulation, combativeness, etc. When it isn't acknowledged, fear causes us to shrink back when God may be calling us forward. But it can also alert us to truly dangerous situations.

Over time, we've recognized the value of becoming a community that's safe enough to articulate our fear, so we can listen for greater discernment by asking, "Is there real danger here?" or be challenged to be courageous, paying attention to areas where our trust is weak and needs to be strengthened.

There are others values to embrace, but these will give you an idea of how to get started.

Brave Questions/Bold Decisions

Transformational leadership is courageous because it requires us to enter into our own process of spiritual transformation, engage others in spiritual community and willingly *lead from out of that place*.

The transforming leader is willing to ask brave questions: Do the cultural norms—those that have been developed intentionally or unconsciously—call forth spiritual transformation in and among us, or do they, in fact, hinder us in any way? Do the cultural norms encourage, even demand, that I be engaging in those practices that enable me to grow in love and truth, prayer and action, self-examination and confession, solitude and community?

Would individuals confess that their participation in the life and work of this community is helping them enter more deeply into the process of spiritual transformation, or are there elements in the culture they have to fight against—pace of organizational life, unspoken expectations, communication patterns

rooted in self-protection and fear, etc.—to protect their space for growing?

Transforming leaders are willing to make bold decisions based on the answers to these questions. They're willing to say with Paul that it's worth toiling and struggling with *all* the energy God gives us to present everyone mature in Christ.

The truth is that those of us who work in churches and Christian organizations often put our energies into many other things and lose sight of our deepest calling. But transforming leaders know that whatever else our church or organization is seeking to do, the transformation of persons into the image of Christ so we can discern and do God's will is our deepest calling.

Spiritual leaders are willing, through deep personal engagement, tenacious intentionality, and wise organizational investment, to pour every ounce of energy into this so they can stand in

God's presence one day and present everyone—starting with themselves, and then all those whom God has placed under their influence—as those who have been deeply and fundamentally transformed into the image of Christ. What a day of celebration that will be!

This is the third of three articles on The Transforming Leader. The first article, published in the June 2004 issue, was "Giving the Best I Have: The Process of Transformational Leadership." The second article, published in the August 2004 issue, was "Are You Feeling Isolated? Cultivating Spiritual Community at the Leadership Level." Another article that complements this series, by the same author, was published in the April 2004 issue, "Discerning the Will of God: Exploring the Process of Corporate Discernment."

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¹ From *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* by Walter Wink, page 3-4.

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