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## THE IMPACT OF FAILURE ON PERSONAL AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

### THE WORSHIP TALK

“Right message, wrong audience. This is for you, Jeff. Plan something else for them.” I felt God whispering this to me in the quietness of the flight from Miami to San Jose, Costa Rica this past summer. I had just finished planning my welcoming worship talk for a group of short-term missionaries who would be flying in from California in two days.

This was the first trip I had planned as the new Director of WeCare Missions, and since neither the group nor I had been to Costa Rica previously, it was inevitable that we would break at least a few cultural norms despite having researched Costa Rican history and culture. However, I was confident that as long as we showed love and respect as well as we knew how, then the nationals would overlook our offenses, “since love covers over a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8, New International Version).

Since the volunteers were from a Korean church and I had lived in South Korea, I planned to share stories of communication failures that were both embarrassing and comical. I would end with a clean, crisp moral.

“Once when ordering food at a local restaurant, my wife asked the cook not to use red pepper paste. At least that’s what she meant to say. Instead she said *joo-cha-jong* rather than *go-choo-jong*; she asked the cook to forego putting the parking lot on our dinner. Another time she asked for \$50,000 worth of dumplings, when she only wanted one meal’s worth. Also, a friend once introduced himself to his new class as their honorable fish instead of as their teacher (*sun-saeng-nim*, not *saeng-sun-nim*).

“I don’t have stories of mistakes like these about myself because I was afraid to practice and say something wrong. In the end, both my wife and this friend developed much better Korean skills than me because they were willing to accept mistakes and blunders as part of the learning process. As you serve here in Costa Rica, you will make mistakes. It is expected. Just keep learning and caring, and your trip will be a success in the end.”

That was what I planned to say until I felt God’s impression that the message was actually for me. I would make mistakes in Costa Rica. I would also make mistakes as the new director, mistakes more serious than ordering dinner sans parking lot. The important point was to learn quickly before small failures could compound into more severe failings.

## PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

Failure is not an option for leaders. Better said, failure is not optional; it is inevitable. We fail. In both character and in competency, we do not live up to our own standards twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, let alone God's standards. So what are we to do with failure? How should we view personal and professional failures?

Thankfully, as Christian leaders, we belong to a long tradition of honesty. God did not leave us with a whitewashed best-practices guide. Rather, He has given us the Bible with story after story of leaders and heroes who fell and yet got up again; stories of Abraham, Moses, David, the disciples and Paul. We find our lives in their stories, and we have the hope that even though "a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again" (Proverbs 24:16, NIV).

While my primary focus may be accomplishing strategic goals and objectives, God is equally concerned with my personal transformation and development. Failure is one of God's most powerful tools for changing us from the inside out. Since many of us have a tendency to seek God's guidance and wisdom most whole-heartedly when we are at the end of our options, times of failure become God's perfect teachable moment. By contrast, Christian environmental activist Matthew Sleeth, M.D., points out that "no one finds Jesus on the day they win the lottery" (personal communication, August 15, 2008).

God knows that our present failings can lead to future peace. Failures are certainly hardships, and we are told to "endure hardship as discipline. . . . No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:7, 11, NIV).

Furthermore, times of failure test our faith. "God, why didn't you help me avoid this?" "Why did you put me in this role just to watch me fail?" "Every day I pray for your wisdom, but this venture is still losing money." In response, the Bible teaches to "consider it pure joy . . . whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2-4, NIV).

The difficult times that make us "mature and complete" not only refine us into better leaders, but they also make us better parents, children, siblings, church members and community members. Personal transformation is important to God because He cares about all of these relationships, not just our organizational performance.

## SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Personal transformation does not lead solely to personal success; it also leads to higher functioning organizations and ultimately to social transformation. An understanding of this causal connection inspired six groups, including the Ford Foundation and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, to create the Seasons Fund for Social Transformation, with the goal of raising \$5 million for granting purposes (Moore, 2008).

The Seasons Fund website states that "no matter how many projects and campaigns and initiatives and alliances we set in motion, we won't find fundamental solutions to societal ills until we learn how to approach this work with greater awareness, compassion, and humility" (Seasons Fund, 2008).

The website drives the point further:

History shows that personal and social transformation are inseparably linked and mutually reinforcing, and that it's vital to move from contemplation to action and back again. Gandhi, fasting on the final night of the Salt March, knew this. So did King, engaging in solitary prayer just before he gave himself over to the Birmingham City Jail. But it wasn't just them; many of their movement colleagues embraced these practices too. (2008)

Jim Wallis (2000), noted Christian social and political activist, also highlights the critical connection between inner development and outward success. "Mature leaders are those who not only rely on their strengths but also learn how to deal consciously with their weaknesses. . . . Thus they guard themselves against the disintegration of their inward life that could finally result in outward paralysis" (p. 251).

### **TRANSFORMATIVE FUNCTION OF FAILURE**

The powerful role of failure in personal transformation is demonstrated by the lives of four respected Christian leaders—Rob Bell, Loren Cunningham, Rick McKinley and Matthew Sleeth. Larry Julian's (2005) *Partnership Roles* provides a framework for categorizing and analyzing the challenges experienced by these four leaders. Julian points out that overcoming obstacles is a joint venture between God and us. We must rely on God to do His part, and we must faithfully play our role, which is divided into two components—the *Surrender Posture* and the *Take-Charge Posture* (p. 21). That is, in every life issue, there are elements that we must surrender to God and there are actions that we have a responsibility to do.

The following stories demonstrate the importance of God's role, our surrender posture and our take-charge posture in four areas—purpose, perspective, provision and power—while Julian's matrix also includes protection, peace and prosperity.

A peer-reviewed journal article faces the same potential shortcoming as a television sitcom: even the thorniest problem needs to be neatly resolved in thirty minutes or less. Let us take the time to enter these stories and allow the messiness to instruct us without too quickly jumping to the resolution.

#### **Purpose—Pastor Rob Bell**

Rob Bell, founding pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan, tells the story of his emotional crash in *Velvet Elvis* (2005). As the church grew from 1,000 to 4,000 people in its first six months and then up to 10,000 by the second year, Bell felt he had to be the superpastor. He felt driven to meet everyone's expectations by writing biblical sermons and books, running church operations, leading weddings and funerals, spending time alone with God and visiting people in the hospital.

He followed this path until he hit an emotional wall one Sunday morning and realized he simply could not go on. Bell shares that he was sitting in a closet wondering how far down the road he could get before the next service began. "I was exhausted. I was burned out. I was full of doubt. I was done. . . . And it was at that moment that I made some decisions. Because without pain, we don't change, do we?" (p. 104).

However, the change was not immediate; the process takes time. Bell "found a thera-

pist and took a 10-week break” to began sorting through his motivations and fears that had roots in his teenage years (Hamilton, 2008, p. 13).

Eventually, “he set aside Fridays as his Sabbath. No cell phone, no e-mail. He turned over pastoring duties to another lead pastor, focusing on sermons he calls ‘teachings,’ his writing and [a DVD teaching series named] NOOMA” (Hamilton, 2008, 13). Speaking on the role of Sabbath as a means of rest and wholeness for those who are driven to produce, Bell (2005) reminds us that “Jesus wants to heal our souls, wants to give us the shalom of God. And so we have to stop. We have to slow down. We have to sit still and stare out the window and let the engine come to an idle” (p. 118).

In retrospect Bell says, “what happened to me in that storage room between the 9 and 11 a.m. services, in those agonizing moments of despair, was the best thing that could have happened” (p. 113). The resulting changes realigned him with his calling to “teach this book” (p. 40).

Mars Hill has continued to develop, and currently the weekly teachings are downloaded by more than 50,000 individuals ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mars\\_Hill\\_Bible\\_Church](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mars_Hill_Bible_Church)). Furthermore, the Mars Hill community has grown its ministry efforts in specific and meaningful ways. Groups have been formed for stepparents, couples who are adopting, military families, newlyweds and writers, as well as support groups for those dealing with financial burdens, infertility and substance abuse (What We’re Doing, <http://www.marshill.org/>).

While Mars Hill members do extensive volunteering in a wide range of areas, including HIV/AIDS care, clean water availability, and immigrant support, the church’s focus is on the XYZ initiative—housing in west Michigan (X), economic opportunities in west Michigan (Y), and micro-credit efforts in Burundi (Z) (XYZ Initiative, <http://www.marshill.org/xyz>).

Clearly, Rob Bell’s personal transformation enabled the church organism to transform and grow in its effectiveness at reaching people with a message of hope, at the same time allowing him to care for his family and his own body and soul. If he had not learned from this painful experience by setting boundaries, doing painful inner work, and restructuring Mars Hill leadership, the body of Christ would have lost the blessing of his God-given talents.

While I do not want to over-simplify the many lessons that can be learned from Bell’s story, Julian’s (2005) Partnership Roles matrix provides a framework for considering this and other struggles that we face.

God’s role in Bell’s story was “to give . . . life purpose” (p. 21). The corresponding *Surrender Posture* is to “understand and accept God’s purpose and your role in life,” while the *Take-Charge Posture* is to “follow through on God’s calling” (p. 21). Bell had to let go of all of the compelling and important work that had slowly worn him down emotionally, physically and spiritually in order to hold on to the one purpose God had called him to—teaching the Bible. He would be most fulfilled, and the body of Christ would be most blessed, by him embracing God’s call whole-heartedly.

### **Perspective—Loren Cunningham**

While Bell’s story is one of purpose, focus and boundaries, Loren Cunningham shares a personal story of perspective and repentance in *Is That Really You, God?* (Cunningham,

2001). From a vision of young missionaries going out like a wave across the earth, God led Cunningham to begin the outreach organization Youth With a Mission (YWAM). As YWAM grew, Cunningham believed God was calling him to use a ship to reach people with both medical care and the story of Jesus. “We’d have medical teams aboard and hundreds of young people carrying the Good News to off-load at the international ports the ship would dock in” (p. 127).

God’s providence seemed to be leading these plans, and when Loren saw the 450-foot long ship, the *Maori*, in New Zealand in 1973, he was confident this was to be their ship. After YWAM and the Union Steamship Company agreed on a deposit of \$72,000, a businessman from England said God was calling him to support YWAM. His donation was more than enough to pay the *Maori*’s down payment. “Every day, we saw some new release for the ship—either a volunteer or money or a special offer. . . . Everything seemed to be falling into place, and the fulfillment of the vision of the ship was happening fast” (p. 130).

As the amount of time and energy required to prepare the ship increased, Cunningham felt the need to slow down and spend “a week alone with God to fast and pray about all the development” (p. 130). During this quiet time, he began to sense that the project would be shaken, that Jesus was no longer supporting the project. Soon, Cunningham was convicted that they were cheering the ship but neglecting Jesus.

Cunningham shares, “Yes, God had told us to get a ship, and repeatedly He had confirmed His guidance. . . . But we had failed in the way we had carried out His guidance. We had subtly turned from the Giver to the gift” (p. 134). When Cunningham met with a large group of other missionaries, they too were convicted of this wrong perspective, and spent six days confessing ways they had put other things before God.

As feared, the flow of money, gifts and volunteers that had been streaming into the project mysteriously stopped, and within a matter of weeks the plans for purchasing the *Maori* were sunk. However, through the days of repenting and confessing, the group felt that God would resurrect the dream when His time was right, and that they would be careful to give God all the glory when the opportunity arose.

A number of years later, God did resurrect the dream by providing a ship in Venice, Italy. Cunningham had been reluctant to board the ship because he was fearful of becoming overly excited about the possibility. Finally, once other leaders had arranged the purchase of the ship, Cunningham boarded the *Anastasis*, Greek for *resurrection*, “still determined not to glorify a mere tool in God’s kingdom” (p. 179).

YWAM’s ship ministry has grown and branched into two organizations—Mercy Ships and Marine Reach—both of which travel the world sharing God’s love ([mercyships.org](http://mercyships.org), [marinereach.com](http://marinereach.com)). The thousands of lives touched each year by the volunteers on these ships (social transformation) was made possible by the days and weeks of fasting and praying (personal transformation). Only when these Christian leaders confessed and repented of their pride and loss of perspective were they able to know and follow God’s guidance. Expressing great hope, Cunningham says, “Thankfully, even when we fail, God does not take back His gifts and callings” (p. 164).

The story of YWAM and the *Maori* illustrate Julian’s (2005) teaching on Perspective. God’s role is “to provide wisdom and guidance” and our *Surrender Posture* is to “prepare

the way to hear God's voice" (p. 21). Cunningham and YWAM's leadership spent days and nights in prayer, getting their hearts right with God and listening for His guidance. Then their role in the *Take-Charge Posture* was to "do what He says," and also to keep the focus on Jesus while doing it. Cunningham states bluntly, "One of the difficulties of being led by the Lord is keeping perspective" (2001, p. 178).

### **Provision—Matthew Sleeth**

Matthew Sleeth, M.D. (2007b), was "chief of staff and head of the emergency department—at one of the nicest hospitals on the coast of New England" (p. 17). Sleeth comments, "I enjoyed my job, my colleagues, my expensive home, my fast car, and my big paycheck" (pp. 17-18).

However, one tumultuous week acted as a catalyst that launched Sleeth on a new mission. Sleeth shares that "in one week's time I admitted three women in their thirties with breast cancer, all to die. I decided that it was time to 'stop running for the cure,' and to start looking for the cause" (2007a).

These tragedies, true failures from a healthcare perspective, motivated Dr. Sleeth to begin researching the causes of cancer. As he studied the environmental factors that play a significant role in cancer and other diseases such as asthma, Sleeth realized that treating the symptoms in medical facilities was not getting to the root of the issue. For that, he would have to leave medicine and become an environmental activist, and before he could be a vocal advocate for creation care, he would have to make significant changes to his own lifestyle.

Dr. Sleeth describes his family's current lifestyle:

We no longer live in our big house; instead, we have one the exact size of our old garage. We use less than one-third of the fossil fuels and one-quarter of the electricity we once used. We've gone from leaving two barrels of trash by the curb each week to leaving one bag every few weeks." (2007b, p. 18)

This personal and familial transformation coincided with leaving behind his lucrative medical practice to take on new roles as writer, teacher, preacher and advocate of creation care. In order to make this significant shift, Sleeth had to embrace what Julian (2005) terms Provision, where God's role is "to provide you with security" (p. 21). Our *Surrender Posture* regarding Provision is to "trust Him in the present and do not worry about the future," while the *Take-Charge Posture* is to "be a good steward of the gifts and resources God gives you" (p. 21).

Sleeth's medical and scientific training were resources that he could uniquely use to lead others to live more sustainably on the planet, but he had to trust God to provide for his family in order to leave the hospital and start working on the root of the issue.

In order to begin living in better harmony with the earth, Sleeth (2007b) teaches that, "What we need most is a change of heart" (p. 193). He recognizes that meaningful and lasting change, and he is calling for serious social change, begins with the heart.

### **Power—Rick McKinley**

Imago Dei, a church body now consisting of approximately 2,000 people, was birthed in early 2000 by lead pastor Rick McKinley (Ken Weigel, personal communication, September 12, 2008). Beyond the programs and small groups common to many churches, this faith community in Portland, Oregon, is heavily involved with social issues in its local neighborhood as well as around the world. For example, formal support groups help people deal with destructive habits, day-long service events provide health care, neighborhood partnerships encourage economic development, mentoring collaborations help the next generation learn needed skills, missional communities build relationships with a purpose, and advocacy work benefits those dealing with poverty, AIDS and homelessness (Imago Dei, n.d.).

Imago Dei also supports international missions through sponsoring organizations such as International Justice Mission and Living Water International, as well as by sending individual missionaries to such areas as Central Asia, Uganda and Sudan. Special attention is given to Liberia, where Imago Dei works with local partners to sponsor children, start schools, build churches and make clean water accessible (Imago Dei, n.d.).

However, Imago Dei has not always been this successful at bringing Christ's love and goodness to hurting people at home and abroad. The pathway was difficult and uncertain—the means untested, the outcomes unknown. Donald Miller (2003), author of *Blue Like Jazz* and an early attendee of Imago Dei, writes about the early days:

We didn't grow much, to be honest. We stayed at about thirty or so. . . . I know that numbers shouldn't matter very much, but to be honest I kind of wanted Imago to grow because I wanted my friends at my old church to know we were successful; but we didn't grow, we stayed at about thirty." (p. 134)

Pastor McKinley shares his own view of the early days of slow growth in *This Beautiful Mess* (2006). "Week after week in that basement, we prayed for Portland and told God the truth about our own hearts. For six months we prayed. Would anything ever change? I wondered. Was I failing as a church planter?" (p. 51).

The prayer for church growth was truly a prayer for changed hearts, a prayer for personal transformation. "We realized that if we wanted to live out the kingdom, we would need to get our hearts before God. . . . We needed God to change us" (p. 51).

As the months went by and the group continued to pray for God to change their hearts, to give them love for the people around them, things did begin to change. Miller (2003) relates that "lots of people started coming to our church after that. I don't know why, honestly, except that we all agreed we would love people and be nice to them and listen and make friends" (p. 135). The growth in attendees and in practical services offered to those in need began to increase after months of prayer for personal transformation.

Using Julian's (2005) Partnership Roles matrix, I would describe McKinley's story to revolve around Power, where God's role is "to give you power to overcome obstacles" (p. 21). It was God's responsibility to supply the power to overcome the hindrances to growth. The fledgling group did not have power to do this on their own. The young church's *Surrender Posture* was to "relinquish control of the outcome to God." It would do no good for the band of believers to be consumed with the outcome of the venture,

growth in attendance. They had no power over this outcome, so they had to surrender it to God.

Conversely, the *Take-Charge Posture* regarding obstacles is to “do what is within your control” (p. 21). Imago Dei could pray for a change of heart. They could pray for a new love for the people of Portland. And as they did what was in their control—showing up for prayer meetings—God opened their eyes to local needs and supplied the power to love radically. The resulting growth and honor belong to God alone.

Consistent with Julian’s view of doing what we can and trusting the results to God, Thomas Merton once wrote to a younger activist:

Do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on . . . you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless. . . . As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. (as cited in Wallis, 2000, p. 255)

### GROWING THROUGH FAILURE

The lives of these four successful Christian leaders demonstrate the power of failure to lead to personal transformation. This inner change enabled them to achieve even greater results through their recalibrated organizations.

Yet there is no simple answer to overcoming failure or even knowing what lessons we should learn from any given situation. Should we use the experience to point us in a new direction, like Dr. Matthew Sleeth did when he left emergency medicine to pursue the root causes of diseases like asthma and cancer? Should we realign our actions with our calling, as Pastor Rob Bell did? Should we press on with the belief that God's blessing and great effort will eventually bring success, as was the case with Pastor Rick McKinley?

The fact that there is no obvious, straightforward answer reveals the need for leaders to be what Wallis (2000) calls contemplatives. We must slow down and take the time to do the inner work exemplified by Bell, Cunningham, Sleeth and McKinley. May we face our failures and in God’s grace grow through them in order to become the people God wants us to be and to develop organizations God can use to improve the lives of His children.

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