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LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT FROM THE MASTER STUDENT

And when He became twelve, they went up there according to the custom of the Feast; and as they were returning, after spending the full number of days, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. But His parents were unaware of it, but supposed Him to be in the caravan, and went a day's journey; and they began looking for Him among their relatives and acquaintances. When they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem looking for Him. Then, after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers. When they saw Him, they were astonished; and His mother said to Him, "Son, why have You treated us this way? Behold, Your father and I have been anxiously looking for You." And He said to them, "Why is it that you were looking for Me? Did you not know that I had to be in My Father's house?" But they did not understand the statement which He had made to them. And He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and He continued in subjection to them; and His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.
(Luke 2: 42-52, NASB)

This passage is packed with deep meaning about the boy Jesus' growing understanding of His own mission to teach and to do His Father's will—to become our Sacrifice. It also has the added purpose of demonstrating something about how leadership skills develop, and about how individuals come to recognize their own callings to leadership roles. And it can help us as adults to understand our own role in helping leadership develop among our children and other young people whom we are able to influence.

Signs of Leadership Development

There are several key phrases signaling leadership development in this passage—and indicating the framework into which this type of growth works best. I'd like to highlight just two of these—which happen to refer to the seemingly conflicting ideas of faithfulness to tradition (“According to tradition”) and individual action (“He stayed behind”). Each of these concepts is an important aspect of leadership development and is essential in developing strong individual identity. And achieving this balance between caring for the good of the community and one’s own personal calling is perhaps the first step in developing a mature character as a leader.

“According to Custom”

Jesus and his family took their journey “according to custom,” showing that as a child, Jesus was developing within the framework of his religious cultural values and identity. His parents did not shirk religious training nor avoid following difficult religious practices. They were willing to travel regularly to Jerusalem—which was both a financial hardship and a dangerous undertaking because of the foreign occupation. This seems to indicate that leadership develops best in a home that encourages integration with the cultural community and that helps the child come to a realization that his or her identity is bound up in the culture of the group as a whole. He or she is part of something bigger. This recognition provides grounding that is vitally necessary to a solid sense of identity and purpose. Benson’s (2008) extensive study on the role of community in sparking youth leadership development demonstrates just how important adult responses are to young people in search of identity.

“He Stayed Behind”

But following tradition itself is not enough for leadership development—as the passage clearly demonstrates when Jesus does something surprising and unexpected—“He stayed behind.”

Even at this young age, Jesus knew when to stop following tradition—when to move against the crowd, even if it was a good crowd on a good mission. While thoroughly grounded in His culture and its expectations and respectful of these, He ultimately deferred to what He knew to be His particular purpose. The powerful phrase “stayed behind,” juxtaposed to His earlier movement with the crowd, shows the tension of leadership development as it is both created by and within commu-

nity, and leadership as developed in isolation, experimentation, and moments of “wilderness living.” Jesus’ decision to stay in the temple was not an act of rebellion or sloppy disengagement. On the contrary, staying behind not only demonstrated a deeper engagement with His religious tradition, but it was also a pivotal moment in His own growth as a learner and a leader. At this point, it is likely that He had begun to connect His mother’s stories of His own birth with the reality of His coming sacrifice. In staying behind, Jesus began to understand more fully who He was and what His unique purpose was.

These kinds of moments of deep discovery are always magical. This is what we see in this story—Jesus and a group of adults engaged in a conversation that caused all of them to lose track of time. A classroom in a synagogue in a religious city, engaged in deep discovery . . . and the most amazing part is that the God of the universe was discovering as a human child what He had already planned as a deity. Jesus was, to use the sports term, in the zone—not only as a teacher, but as a learner. Grasping, connecting, resolving age-old issues, and coming up for air to ask more clarifying questions. He taught and learned simultaneously—perfectly at home in both zones.

Developing a Leadership Identity

In *The Hungering Dark*, Buechner (1985) discusses the many voices that call us to do things, to live, to lead, to act or react. But he correctly identifies what he terms “the voice of our own gladness” (p. 31) that most resonates with our deep identity as individuals. It is in those moments of holy joy, dancing with our work, that we most fully come to see ourselves as ourselves. We are glad, and those around us are glad, and that gladness fits us and it serves them. It is the voice of our calling. It is a voice that is sweet to us, comforting, like coming home to our true selves.

Similarly, Karl Weick (2001), a sociologist most known for his work on meaning-making among leaders, describes what he calls “sense-making.” In his attempt to describe his life of teaching people about sensemaking and construction of meaning, he has come to appreciate how much he learns as a teacher from his students—not only from them, but with them. He has come to think of teaching as “public learning.” Public learning takes place when students actually watch their teacher learn. They watch as the teacher wrestles with his or her own limits. They learn not only the content of learning but also the process of learning. This is not always an easy task for the teacher to

endure. Teachers engaged in public learning have to become vulnerable to their observing students, showcasing ignorance as well as discovery. But the teacher who is always in control of the material may actually rob students of the experience of observing this important process of judgment and thinking.

It appears that this kind of public learning is what was happening for Jesus in the temple. The phrase showing the type of learning activity He was engaged in (“both listening to them and asking them questions”) seems to demonstrate this kind of learning and represents the central call of leadership development. Leadership is learning. It is the process of pulling together old and new, tradition and innovation, the known and the unknown. And from this often confusing mix new visions emerge. They did for Jesus, even as a boy. He was engaging those around Him—not only with the purpose to teach them, but to develop His own deeper understanding. Leadership emerged in Jesus’ life precisely because He learned. By doing this, He showed the leader He already was and the leader He would demonstrate two decades later in a more powerful way.

Helping Young People Develop as Leaders

The passage begins by stating Jesus’ age at the time of this significant event: “When He became twelve.” In Jewish custom, children of 12 or 13 became responsible for their responses to God. While they were not considered fully adult in the sense that they would necessarily marry immediately or raise children and care for aging parents, or even work full-time—unless they had to because of the death of a family member—the importance of the custom signified that at this age, a young person began to realize his or her own deep purpose. They began to know what their responsibilities were, both to God and in service to others. It is from this deep belief that the traditional Bar Mitzvah for boys and Bat Mitzvah for girls are celebrated. But Jesus, rather than going through a traditional “coming out” ceremony that acknowledged His growing responsibility and maturity to the entire community, simply took off and began to demonstrate His calling without notifying His parents or anyone else. When Jesus’ parents finally found Him, they seemed annoyed by His behavior (“Son, why have you treated us this way?”). They don’t appear to have seen the beauty of what He was creating with the group in the synagogue. They could pick their son out of the crowd, but failed to see Him for who He truly was.

This scenario is no doubt familiar to those of us who deal with chil-

dren and youth and see their emerging identities in late junior high and high school. While their behavior may not always make sense to us—and might sometimes frighten those of us who want to protect them—it is important that we affirm these identities and help the youth channel them to appropriate experiences and additional education where their leadership will continue to grow into full measure. Unfortunately, we sometimes miss the expression of their deep identity or, in the crush of pressing demands—school work or life’s chores—we do little to help the spark become a flame.

Conclusion

Listening and discussing frames our growth together because we are learning together. This happens when we have the humility to realize that we can always learn from each other—we adults can even learn from children. As the passage states, “all who heard Him [Jesus] were amazed.” But in order to be amazed, we first have to be listening, fully engaged and ready to understand. Are we learning from each other in this way? Are we uncovering what motivates our callings, our strivings and our joys? Are we developing and recognizing our own unique purpose through our conversations with others? Perhaps more importantly, are we helping others to find their identities through our learning, listening and leading?

References

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