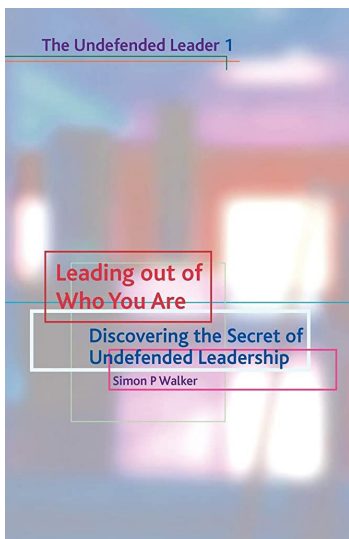


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Leading Out of Who You Are

THE SUMMARY

Introduction

As I grew into adulthood, I realized that, although I had followed Jesus for nearly a decade and was involved in Christian leadership, my understanding of power and leadership was still basically informed not by the life and death of the man I followed but by the values of the playground, the sports field and the market. Jesus' life and death confronted me with a story of power at the centre of which lay an act of weakness and self-emptying, I had to try to grasp the reality that power is not located only in might. I had to begin to revise the terms in which I made sense of what power is and how it can be used. Any account of power would have to place at its peak the exercise of vulnerability and self-emptying.

Throughout history there have been “powerful” men who changed the course of the world. Military leaders like Alexander the Great and Napoleon; tyrants like Hitler, Stalin, and Mao. In all these cases the will of the leader was imposed, by sheer force or some other kind of coercion. Dictatorship is hugely destructive and rarely lasts long.

There is another possible approach—undefended leadership. At the summit of the leadership mountain can be found a few extraordinary individuals whose occupation and application of power is of a different order altogether. These are the ones whose life and philosophy have involved deliberate acts of weakness and courageous self-sacrifice. Up here we find the likes of Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Gandhi, and Jesus of Nazareth. It is these undefended leaders who are associated with the greatest revolutions, and in whom we glimpse our true potential.

Leading Out of Who You Are

Chapter One: What Makes an Undefended Leader?

What exactly makes an undefended leader? Is there something that these great ones have in common? To identify that, we need to consider the particular nature of the task of leadership. Leadership is about who you are, not what you know or what skills you have. Fundamentally, leadership is about trust and power.

A leader leads people from their current place to another, which is at first unknown. To get there they have to leave the safety and familiarity of their present situation. The people don't know the future they are being invited into, but they do know the leader. He represents safety and security. People follow him because they trust him. If trust breaks down, either the followers no longer follow, or the leader finds other means to ensure that they do, through coercion, manipulation or the like, and begins to exercise power inappropriately.

For the leader, trust is everything; without it, leadership begins to resort to unhealthy strategies to ensure people will follow. One of the things that gives a leader his ability to lead is his "moral authority." Moral authority is different from other kinds of authority bestowed by election or appointment; it has to do with the kind of life one has lived. Very often it is acquired only through personal struggle and loss.

Think of Mandela, Mother Teresa, Winston Churchill, and Moses. All went through the fire of personal experience, by which their characters were tested and refined. For all to see, their personal integrity was put under scrutiny, their motives were examined, their commitment and dedication were exposed, their moral courage was revealed. Their suffering refined them into more human and courageous moral agents, into people with *compassion*. In contrast, suffering makes many more ordinary leaders cruel, hard, and manipulative. Leaders are formed, not simply appointed.

Circumstances create an environment where character is put to the test. Here combatants do battle with themselves, wrestling with their inner demons of anger or the thirst for power that can lurk within us all. Their public battles are mere reenactments of the internal battle they had already won. Indeed, their moral courage and conviction, their personal freedom and security, their willingness to embrace personal loss, are available to them only because they have already won the war within. They are free of the need to dominate, to conquer and oppress, to consume, to acquire—whether it be land or power or reputation—because they are free within themselves. Their leadership is an expression of who they are inside.

PART I: HOW LEADERS DEFEND THEMSELVES

Chapter Two: The Hostile World of the Leader

In a sense, Leaders live in a hostile world. They often experience three things that other people experience to a much lesser degree: idealization, idealism, and unmet emotional needs.

Idealization is about "hero worship." Many followers need their leaders to be everything they struggle to be: competent, never doubting, never defeated, etc. And so they idealize ordinary people who have taken up the burden of leadership. A kind of transaction actually takes place in which we allow the leader to become the person we need him to be, and the leader, gratified by the attention (adulation?) seeks to live up to the standards being set for him. Both parties are meeting their needs through each other.

The second experience common to leaders is idealism. Most leaders are to some extent idealists, who have a desire for things to be better.

Leading Out of Who You Are

The leader then lives all the time with a discrepancy between the world that he wants and the world that actually is. Psychologists call this “cognitive dissonance.” This can be constructive, generating passion, but it can also be destructive, producing frustration and disappointment.

The third common experience is that of unmet emotional needs. Not all those in positions of leadership are what you might call “appropriate” leaders. Appropriate leaders take responsibility for people other than themselves. A person who feels little or nothing for another person regards them merely as a commodity or a utility for their own benefit. Appropriate leadership, in contrast, involves being open to the other person’s agenda, and genuinely responsive to their needs. However, the leader often discovers that by attending to other people’s needs, and neglecting his own, he receives approval and appreciation from his followers, which comes to compensate for his unmet needs.

Idealization, idealism, and unmet emotional needs together contribute to making the environment the leader inhabits an isolated and rarefied one. In that environment, leaders can often develop strategies to protect or defend themselves. Some of those are bad strategies, at which we will now look.

Chapter Three: Strategies of Defence: Front and Back Stage

Back in the 1960’s, psychologist Erving Goffman developed a theory about human behavior using the metaphor of the theater. We all have a “front stage” and a “back stage.” The front stage is what we present to others. It’s where we do impression management—the selective revealing or concealing of our personal story in order to secure the response we need from our audience. It’s a public life that conforms to followers’ expectations.

The front stage performance cannot take place without a back stage in which a whole host of other things are going on. There are many things that the leader learns can’t appear on her front stage: the audience wouldn’t allow it. They need the leader to act out an idealized life—so where does all the less-than-ideal stuff in her life go? Out the back. And so the leader’s back stage may become the repository for all that he cannot make visible. The front stage is the place for conviction and confidence; the backstage is the place for struggle and uncertainty. It’s the place where the leader struggles with her own unmet needs and unresolved problems.

The first thing we need to understand is that the two are always connected. In fact, their relationship is reciprocal. When expectations on the front stage are very high, the back stage becomes the necessary place to live out another kind of life, free of that pressure.

The second thing to appreciate is that the more attention we pay to one of our stages, the less we will be able to pay to the other. The person who devotes all their energy to their front stage performance has very little spare attention to give to their backstage life, and vice-versa. Think of the academic who is so absorbed in his private world that he is unaware of his shabby appearance, or the executive so focused on her status and performance that she doesn’t notice the disintegration of her personal values and relationships.

Finally, we need to realize that the two stages can never be kept completely separate. They will leak. Often a leader’s backstage life will leak onto their front stage, and this is particularly true when the front stage requires a high degree of emotional discipline and other-person-centeredness. This often happens to social and spiritual leaders. Their own unmet emotional needs, pushed backstage, can generate resentment, envy, pride and anger, until they leak out on the front stage.

Leading Out of Who You Are

Alternatives to leaking include exploding, when the stored up “stuff” comes out like a volcano, or collapsing. In this case the burden of sustaining the front stage performance simply becomes too heavy. The exhausted leader continues on until there is nothing left.

What lies behind the creation of a front and back stage is the sense that we can't entirely trust our audience, and so we need to manage what they see of us. It can be a tremendous relief for a leader when they finally “come clean” and let people see what really is happening on the back stage. People will often begin to confide about their own failings, doubts, and discouragements. People only become undefended—they only stop protecting themselves—when they feel safe.

Chapter Four: Strategies of Defence: Power

Another way leaders defend themselves is found in how they exercise power. All leaders have power (influence is power—the ability to effect change). There are many different kinds of power, and most leaders have a variety of them:

- *Personality power* enables leaders to influence the emotional state of their audience through the exercise of empathy, which helps them tune into and understand other people's emotional states.
- *Resource power* has to do with the ability to affect the success or failure of an operation because you have leverage with regards to the resources needed. They could be financial, technical, or something else
- *Experience power* comes from having been in a situation for a long time. Related to that is *expert power*, which derives from having a greater degree of expertise than others have.
- *Positional power* is acquired when someone is appointed to a position of authority. Connected to that is *given power*, which comes from underneath. While positional power is given from above, given power comes from your followers—it is the power gained through trust.

There are many other kinds of power a leader could have; the point is that they have it. The most dangerous kind of power is *unacknowledged* power. The most dangerous kind of person is the one with a great deal of power who denies that they have any, or who denies that power is a factor in their leadership. A leader who doesn't acknowledge his power avoids accountability for its use. He can exercise tremendous influence while denying it at the same time. That is a dangerous person.

The undefended leader, on the other hand, does all he can to acknowledge his exercise of power, and the flow of power in the organization, and to make them both explicit and accountable.

Chapter Five: Strategies of Defence: Control

The world is an unpredictable and risky place, and can be a hostile one, especially for leaders. One of my tasks as a human being is to find a way to be safe in it, and one of the ways I can do that is by being in control. Control offers us a sense of security, (or at least the illusion of security, since nothing we can do actually guarantees it). But that doesn't stop us from trying.

Control is not in itself a bad thing. There are times when it is completely appropriate. However, wanting to be in control can become destructive. Leaders who need to be in control may manipulate people or seek to micromanage them in order to protect themselves. Needing to be in control is often what prevents leaders from collaborating with

Leading Out of Who You Are

others—collaboration always involves creating space for others to genuinely express themselves, which is antithetical to control, where people just follow your script.

The damage that can be done by those in control has long been recognized by civilized countries, and systems of checks and balances have been put into place to curb their power and authority. While this may help to limit what the leader can do, it does nothing to help make the leader free within himself. The leader who is free will still exercise a degree of limited control—leadership is impossible without some element of it—but he will recognize and acknowledge his exertion of control and make it explicit.

This happens when the leader isn't exercising control just for self-protection, but for the good of the organization, to help it move forward.

PART II: LOCATING THE ROOTS OF THE DEFENDED SELF

Every leader's approach to leadership is strongly informed by their early experiences as a child. This doesn't mean it's always their parents who shaped their behavior; it is also siblings, peer groups, teachers, and other leaders. The root of their defendedness, their need to protect themselves, and the strategy they use to make themselves safe, lies in the experience of trust (or lack of it) that they had as a child.

According to psychologists Kim Bartholomew and Leonard Horowitz, there may be four different "shapes" of ego that emerge out of differing nurturing environments in infancy. A *secure* ego is gained by infants who have a positive view of both themselves and their environment. A *dismissing* ego is gained by those who receive over-intrusive care and end up with a positive view of themselves and a negative view of their world. A third ego, *preoccupied*, is gained by those who don't get sufficient attention as children. They develop a positive view of their caregivers but a negative view of themselves, which predisposes them to a preoccupation with trying to find secure emotional ties. The fourth type, *fearful*, is gained by infants who get unpredictable care, which gives them a negative view of both themselves and their world, and predisposes them to fear being hurt.

How do these various experiences affect how people lead?

People with a *Shaping ego*—who have a positive view of themselves and others, tend to be very positive about what can be achieved. Where others see threats, they see opportunities. Shapers can also be prone to self-inflation. At a moderate level, this generates confidence; at a more extreme level, it can produce a will to dominate and to absolve oneself of responsibility.

Shapers tend to define their own reality. This gives them the ability to survive in tough situations that would overwhelm others: they simply do not experience those situations in the same way. As leaders they need the least amount of approval or encouragement from others around them. This can make them free in their choices; it also gives them a tendency toward unrealism.

What marks out the person with the Shaping Ego is their general feeling of security. The other three egos have one opposite characteristic in common: to them, the world can never be unconditionally safe.

A leader with a *Defining ego* has a high level of trust in himself and little trust in others. His expectation is that others will judge him on the basis of his performance, not on who he is. He can end up trapped by the sense that he can always fail next time and must therefore drive himself on, avoiding failure, and avoiding letting himself down.

Leading Out of Who You Are

Definers will create around them a culture driven by the pursuit of better performance. However, improving performance is not the same as achieving success. What is actually achieved is avoidance of failure.

In an environment of fear, control is everything. To lose control is to risk error and therefore failure. Definers move away from spontaneity towards conformity, and delegation becomes more about following operational orders. Freedom to trust yourself and think for yourself is sacrificed on the altar of control. When failure is the enemy, the possibility of taking risks is diminished, because taking risks involves the freedom to fail.

Definers are often the highest achievers, able to marshal considerable personal resources of discipline, focus, and self-belief. But in order to maintain their sense of self, they invest huge amounts of energy in working hard, and often become driven or full of anxiety, never able to relax. That can result in an emphasis on the front stage, where all the emphasis is on performance and results, and the back stage is neglected or ignored.

The other option is to move towards the back stage. These definers keep their standards secret, so any failure isn't public. They become experts at avoiding defeat by eliminating things from their life they can't succeed in. They also learn how to keep their achievements quiet (since no one likes a bighead) and are often known as modest people, although they can end up feeling disappointed that they cannot be publicly who they privately think they are.

The Shaping Ego and Defining Ego both have a high level of trust in themselves. The *Adapting Ego* is different—the Adapter has little trust in himself, but a high level of trust in others. Adapters grow up with a sense of the fragility of relationships, and are often acting in ways to reassure themselves.

Some become attention-seekers, who always need people's attention on them. Others become the "team glue," always making sure that everyone is doing OK, and working to smooth over any conflict in a group. Finally there are the problem-solvers, the ones who cannot be without something to contribute. They may even manufacture a problem just so they can fix it.

For Adapters, leadership is a daily battle. Things can go one of two ways. If he goes toward the front stage, leadership becomes about popularity, approval, and attention. In this case, they actually follow rather than lead. They find ways to ingratiate themselves, keep people on board, and paper over conflict.

If they go back stage, they keep their insecure selves hidden. They present a persona that is excessively confident and in control. They can push themselves to the point of exhaustion while trying to cover up their insecurities and present a bravura performance.

Ultimately, Adapters tend to become compliant and adaptive, finding ways to fit in while repressing their own needs. They will often allow others to win, and will accept blame that isn't properly theirs. Giving to others is what gives them their sense of identity.

The last of the egos is the *Defending Ego*. Leaders in this category have little trust of themselves or others. Defenders divide the world into the safe and unsafe; to them the world is a dangerous place, and they approach it with a sense of powerlessness.

For the Defender, life is about stopping people from hurting them. They long for secure relationships, but sometimes prevent them by ending a relationship as soon as there is any hint of rejection.

Leading Out of Who You Are

Defenders offer people one of two things: respect or suspicion. As leaders, they will tend to gather round themselves people to whom they are deeply loyal—perhaps being willing to accept input on the basis of who gives it, rather than on its merits. They will make it clear, both explicitly and implicitly, that loyalty is highly valued—and that disloyalty is a serious violation of trust.

All of these egos are shaped in childhood by people's experiences of trust and security, and those experiences continue to shape how people lead, for better or worse. The question we must now look at is, "Can people change?" Can we be liberated from lifelong attitudes and anxieties? I believe the answer is a resounding YES, and to that we now turn.

PART III: THE SECRET OF THE UNDEFENDED LEADER

As long as we fear for our job, our salary, our reputation, our popularity, our credibility, our wealth, or our control, we cannot be truly free in our leadership. We will defend ourselves against the loss of the asset we value most. Only the person who is secure against the loss of all these things can be truly free. The secret of effective leadership is the freedom to live an undefended life.

Freedom comes from knowing that you are approved of. Freedom to perform comes from the knowledge that there is someone rooting for you, whose opinion you value more than anyone else's. Indeed, you can perform with nothing to lose, because you are secure that your identity, your future and well-being, does not depend on the quality of your performance. Freedom to lead depends on us finding a source of unconditional approval that is not jeopardized by our performance.

The idea of undefended leadership is that we cannot be secured by our skills and resources; we are secured by our attachment to another—to someone who is big enough not to be overwhelmed by our failures and weaknesses. Freedom to lead an undefended life, and freedom to lead others as an undefended leader, involves finding a relationship like that. One where we are safe—made secure by an unconditional regard and affection. It is actually another kind of defendedness, in which we are defended by another rather than by our own strategies.

Leaders who are free from having to protect or defend themselves, who have experienced unconditional approval, are the ones who are able to demonstrate true servant leadership. Servant leadership, by definition, puts the priority on service; it insists that leadership not be self-serving, but other-serving.

People with a heart for servant leadership give their time, skills, and energy not in hope of reward or to advance their careers but out of a desire to do good. However, in the course of working with a great number of such people, I have encountered four problems. These problems reveal other issues underneath the surface.

First is that some of these people are unable to give up their roles as volunteers when it is time to do so. It becomes clear that while they are ostensibly serving in this role for the benefit of others, they are also receiving something in return which they are unwilling to give up.

Secondly, many people require affirmation or approval for everything they do. Affirmation is a good and important thing, in its place. But sometimes the appreciation people receive becomes more than something they are free to simply enjoy. It actually is the motivation for their service; rather than giving it freely, they are seeking to earn the "wages" of thanks or praise.

Leading Out of Who You Are

Third is the problem of those who cannot be served. They find it very difficult to receive from others (which means they are not entirely free).

Finally, there are people who resent what they have given. When someone feels bitter about what they have given, something has gone wrong. Their service was not given as a gift but as a duty.

Undefended leaders are those who can move beyond a world of duty, fear, and self-protection. They are free to give of themselves without expecting or requiring anything in return, are able to take risks and be vulnerable, and both give and receive freely.

Attaining this way of being in the world requires intention, will, and discipline. Discipline is often taken to mean subjugating your own feelings and desires for the sake of a greater goal. The discipline an undefended leader requires is different; it is the discipline needed to prevent their defenses from reforming. Our defendedness gives us a sense of security and control, so the moments when we feel insecure and out of control will be when we are most tempted to resort to those strategies again.

Becoming undefended is somewhat like becoming childlike again. Children trust; they don't put up walls and try to protect themselves. Trust involves risk by making yourself vulnerable, and letting down the barriers of self-protection. While difficult to come by, trust is a powerful glue between people. Remember what it feels like to be trusted: trusted with a task, a treasure, a secret, etc. When you are trusted by someone you feel important, valued, and respected. As leaders, we can give that experience to another person any time. It involves taking a risk and making yourself vulnerable in some way, but the impact is significant.

The Formation of Moral Authority

We began this book by taking note of some of the world's most undefended leaders. All of them had "moral authority"—that quality in their lives that gave them authority among their peers. We can also note that these leaders often also shared a history of struggle. Indeed, they were shaped by it in significant ways.

It is an uniquely modern idea that we should eliminate struggle through constant improvements in our socio-economic conditions. We try to defend ourselves against pain and loss, through technological advances and growing economic power. Maybe that isn't a good idea.

For example, if you see a butterfly struggling to escape from its chrysalis, you may be tempted to help it. However, you would be condemning it to an early death. The butterfly's struggle is vital for strengthening its wing muscles. Nature builds in struggle as an essential part of the formation and development of healthy life.

Perhaps, like the butterfly, we risk being weakened if we embrace such a vision of ease. Could our desire to defend or protect ourselves from hardship actually make us more fragile as a result? Could there be strength in those who, by choice, live lives undefended against distress?

Struggle can come in a lot of forms. It can be physical, emotional, intellectual, relational, or even spiritual. Whichever it is, struggle plays an essential role in the formation of leaders. What choices do those we recognize as having moral authority make when faced with pain in their own lives?

Leading Out of Who You Are

The first choice is between purpose and purposelessness. When we are in pain, we ask the question: Why? In the face of this question, the need to find a purpose to the experience, a meaning to it that makes it significant, is acute and pressing. The person who chooses courageously to hold on to a belief in the purpose of their life and the value of their experience of pain will emerge refined, able to carry others through their own suffering.

Those who manage to make meaning out of their own pain go on to the second choice they have to make: that between love and anger. The pain we suffer forces us to struggle to find the resources to cope, and sometimes anger can seem to offer a wellspring of motivation that can get us through it. However, for an activity or a mission to be inspired and driven by anger is dangerous. Ultimately, anger overturns and tears down. The deeper struggle is to find a source of power, an energy, drawn not from anger but from love.

The third choice that struggle forces us to make is that between knowing who we are and knowing what we do. In a place of struggle, we must find an answer that is not related to our activities or roles. We are challenged to find an identity that is not threatened by the loss of such things, one that is deep enough and robust enough to survive when our props are torn away. The question becomes simple: Do I know who I am? This is not just an academic question; it is urgently practical.

In a place of struggle, we are forced to choose: whether we see our pain as pointless agony, or as a period of growth, possibly even transformation, in which a deeper and bigger Presence accompanies us. Oppressed by loss—of our role, our job, our health, a loved one, etc—we are forced to come to know ourselves, not as people defined by such things but as people who choose not to be overcome. It's the presence of, and our relationship with, another, that enables us to persevere in the journey.

As we find meaning in the journey and recognize that it hasn't been a solitary one, but one on which we have been accompanied, known, loved, and understood, we gain the freedom to face the future. It is then that as leaders we find the freedom to "lead out of who you are."

This kind of leadership does not offer easy promises or wide, open roads; rather, it recognizes and embraces a future of obstacles and opposition. Such leadership requires the leader to be in a place of personal security, where their own success, comfort, reputation, and popularity do not impinge upon their purpose and direction, where they are genuinely free to "lose" their personal status to achieve the greater goal of leading others to freedom. They are free because their identity doesn't depend on their success; and they are followed because everyone else recognizes this to be the case. Their moral authority, forged in the flames, is clear for all to see.

This approach to leadership changes the focus of leadership itself. Most books on leadership emphasize the importance of setting clear goals, in order to help people be deliberate in their choices and activities. But there is a deeper goal to leadership.

I want to suggest that the ultimate goal of leadership is this: to enable people to take responsibility for their lives and move towards fully mature, responsible personhood. In other words, the goal is for both the leader and the follower to be changed. Our task is to grow up. It is to learn through our experiences who we are—what it means to be courageous, to be real, to be fully human. True leadership is leading ourselves and others into this kind of life: embracing our full humanity, and participating fully in the world.

Leading Out of Who You Are

Leadership is not about helping people escape from their pain. Leaders try this by taking responsibility for their followers' choices, or by offering premature solutions that undercut their struggle. Like the butterfly analogy, it hinders people from developing.

Leadership then, is about enabling others to identify and embrace who they are. It is helping someone else to come to understand what their unique and specific calling in the world may involve, and even how to step into it.

We are called to have moral courage, to pursue an undefended life, to resist the forces that lead people into defended places. Our moral choice begins in simple ways, with our lifestyle, and ends in our own enjoyment of undefended freedom. The happy coincidence is that as we ourselves enjoy this undefended life, so others, too, begin to be led into freedom.