



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SERIES

THE SUMMARY OF THE LEADERSHIP ELLIPSE

Robert A. (Bob) Fryling
IVP 2009

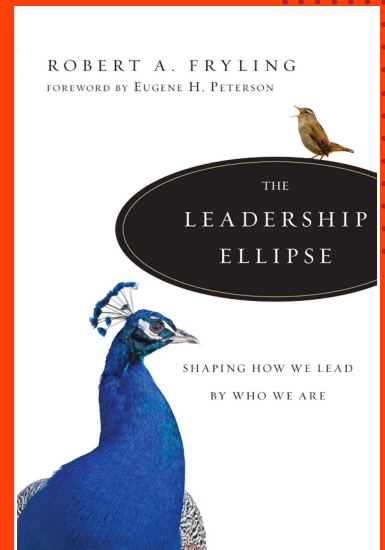
Introduction

Carmen Bernos de Gasztold's *The Creatures' Choir* offers poetic prayers that reflect deep human longings. My favorite is "The Peacock," proud of its beauty yet humbled by its "discordant cry" and "meager heart." It prays, "Lord, / let a day come, / a heavenly day, / when my inner and outer selves / will be reconciled in perfect harmony." This captures every Christian leader's desire to align an inward spiritual life with outward leadership demands.

We often divide these worlds. Many books teach business and organizational success; others explore inner spiritual disciplines. But they rarely intersect. Is the world of success so different from the world of the soul? I personally wrestled with whether to retreat from leadership or to reject a deeper interior life. I needed another way of thinking and living.

I found it in the ellipse:

In spiritual leadership, one focal point is our inner life—affections, loyalty to God—and the other is our outer world—how we work



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and influence others. Both of these shape us. Jesus exemplified this tension. He spent time in solitude but also served tirelessly.

Authenticity alone isn't enough; our inner and outer lives must align with the call of God's Spirit. A purely "get real" approach doesn't lead to spiritual maturity. Instead, we need harmony between who we are internally, how we act externally, and what God calls us to be.

This book unfolds in three parts: shaping our inner world, engaging the outer world, and ultimately leading others with integrity and courage. My hope is that these reflections encourage you to live and lead as a whole person—reconciled in perfect harmony.

PART ONE: SHAPING OUR INNER WORLD

1. A Weaned Soul: The Practice of Sabbath

I was not content. Though I led 600 staff and oversaw budgets for 30,000 students, I was physically, emotionally and spiritually drained. I valued both my external achievements and my inner life, but they felt "in competition." Desperate to reconnect with God, I enrolled in a contemplative spirituality class called "Quiet Heart, Dancing Heart." On the first day, our instructor asked us to draw our spiritual longings. I awkwardly sketched a barren tree and wrote Gerard Manley Hopkins's words: "O thou Lord of life, send my roots rain."

When I returned to work, the external pressures were still there. But inside, the seeds of spiritual life began to grow. I felt a new contentment within myself. Psalm 131 describes it vividly: "I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother."

Leaders often go solely after growth and success, but this image of a "weaned child" can help us shift our focus to peaceful reliance on God rather than striving constantly.

How do we cultivate such rest in a 24/7 world? Through Sabbath. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. This simplest and sanest recommendation helps us cease our work. I realized my Sundays were full of meetings, sports, and emails. Gradually, I began to carve out a true Sabbath: worship at church, time in community, journaling, and avoiding draining tasks. I learned to be alone with my soul.

Sabbath is not a suggestion but a command. Jesus taught that the sabbath was made for us and not us for the sabbath, freeing us from legalism while calling us to true rest. Stepping back from nonstop activity helps us receive God's love and share mercy. We may fear losing productivity, but ironically, living within our God-given limits multiplies effectiveness. Fallowness comes before fruitfulness.

Sabbath-keeping won't solve every anxiety, but it "weans" us from our grasping and reminds us that God is God—and we are not. "Weaned" from immediate gratification, we discover a deeper contentment for our souls.

2. A Growing Strength: The Practice of Pruning

Our leadership ellipse shows how our inner life intersects with outward leadership, yet it also reveals when we must refrain or cut back. Growth is a leadership assumption and aspiration. We want to see our churches, companies, and ministries expand, and we want personal growth in mind, body, and spirit. But this doesn't happen automatically, and growth alone doesn't guarantee spiritual strength.

We often worry about our legacy and how others see us. Yet beneath a desire to leave a strong legacy of-



ten lurks ego, pride, or fear. Politicians like Andrew Jackson illustrate how craving for popularity can lead to moral compromise. Leaders in any field face similar pressures: “Do I make decisions for what is best for others or what is best for my reputation?”

We also have conflicting passions. Bill George writes that we must lead from our “true north” and passions, but we can’t always trust them. A hole-in-one brings joy, but it’s hardly a life purpose. Worse, negative passions—envy, greed, addictions—can derail us. Psalm 139 reminds us God has already “searched me and known me.” David’s prayer—“Search me, O God . . . see if there is any wicked way in me”—becomes our honest plea for discernment.

Scripture repeatedly shows that growth often requires pain or sacrifice. Gideon’s army shrank, and circumcision—embarrassing to discuss—became a spiritual metaphor for hearts dedicated to God. Like vulnerability in David, Paul, and Augustine, circumcision points to letting God cut away pride and pretense. More openly, Jesus likened spiritual growth to pruning vines: “Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.”

I’ve identified three temptations needing pruning. First is self-righteousness: We need to be pruned from having to be right. Second is a compulsion “to be all I can be” at the expense of rest, relationships, and healthy limits. Third is soliciting praise: wanting constant affirmation from others. None of these can be fully weeded out by our own efforts. Thankfully, Jesus promises, “I have called you friends”—he prunes us with love, not anger.

One discipline that helps is the “daily examen.” Each night, I reflect on two questions: “When did I have the greatest sense of God’s presence?” and “When did I feel most frustrated, dissatisfied, or alone?” This reflection reveals where I need God’s pruning. Without pain, there is no growth, and through pruning,

we discover a growing strength that is both spiritual and practical for our leadership.

3. A Renewed Mind: The Practice of Humble Thought

Jesus was once asked the greatest commandment. He quoted Deuteronomy—“love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might”—but added “and with all your mind” (Lk 10:27). This emphasis on loving God with our minds has become an inconvenient truth.

The apostle Paul exhorts us to “be transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Rom 12:2), warning us not “to be conformed to this world.” Wrong thinking, especially about God, leads to what Paul calls “every kind of wickedness” (Rom 1:29). True transformation involves resisting worldly influences while “thinking about whatever is true, honorable, just, pure . . . worthy of praise” (Phil 4:8). Psalm 1 similarly celebrates the nonconformist “who delights in the law of the Lord.”

Our minds are renewed by God’s grace as we live daily in his presence—like a goldfinch’s dull feathers turning bright yellow with each passing day. Paul tells us that a “spiritual mind” speaks truth rather than falsehood and rejects anger, malice, or slander. When conflicts arise, prayer is essential. Moses prayed for Miriam’s healing after she betrayed him. Such prayerful thinking fosters humility and helps us see that we are sinners working with sinners.

Peter adds, “Prepare your minds for action” (1 Pet 1:13). In an age of shallow entertainment and constant electronic demands, we need serious reading and rigorous thinking for the hope that is in you. Historian Mark Noll decries “the scandal of the evangelical mind,” while J. P. Moreland laments our “impoverished souls” from intellectual laziness. A prepared mind fights worldly wisdom by “taking every





thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor 10:5).

Finally, we need “a humble mind” (1 Pet 3:8). Daniel models this: exiled in Babylon, he became an influential leader without moral compromise, for he had “set his mind to gain understanding and to humble [himself] before God” (Dan 10:12). Above all, Jesus showed the perfect example of humility: “knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands,” he took a towel and washed his disciples’ feet (Jn 13:3-5). He acted from self-awareness and strength, not insecurity.

Henri Nouwen’s phrase (from Theophan the Recluse), “Descend with the mind into the heart,” need not mean abandoning the mind. Rather, we bring the mind along on our inward journey so it may tutor our hearts with biblical truth. We are called to “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5)—a renewed, prayerful, humble mind shaped to serve God and others.

4. A Dancing Heart: The Practice of Involvement

One Sunday, my heart was strangely warmed by a church announcement about building houses with Habitat in Coahoma, Mississippi. Though not handy and wary of humid heat, I went. Free from leadership responsibilities, I discovered a joyful dancing-heart experience in simple teamwork, forging friendships, and serving people facing deep poverty, racism, and alcoholism.

Moments like these don’t typically show up on a leader’s to-do list. Good leadership should involve delegating, strategic planning, and measured control. But shielding ourselves from hands-on involvement can rob us of God-led spontaneity and the joy of serving alongside others.

I once lamented to my friend, Koichi Ottawa, about

balancing inner devotion with outward demands. He quipped I needed “presence” with God to become “presents” for others. Similarly, Gregory the Great struggled when chosen pope in the sixth century: he carried civil and military burdens yet protected time for inner reflection. Modern communities like Richard Rohr’s “Center for Action and Contemplation” or Taizé in France illustrate how profound prayer fuels outward service.

We live in a “make it happen” culture. One renowned leader barked at staff, “Just make it happen.” At first, I admired his confidence; later, I sensed “functional atheism,” the assumption we can accomplish everything by ourselves. But “let go and let God” can also be a passive cop-out. True spirituality is about blending quiet trust with responsible action.

I’ve learned how powerfully affections shape us. Jonathan Edwards believed authentic faith springs from “holy affections,” especially love. Bill Cosby once advised that to stop violent acts, we must “change their desires.” If our hearts aren’t transformed from self-centeredness, our leadership inevitably distorts reality.

A “dancing heart” unites body and soul, discipline and freedom, reverent stillness and active engagement. Spiritual disciplines help tune our hearts to God’s “music,” but they’re not the goal; they free us to respond joyfully.

For me, daily Scripture reading, prayer practices like *lectio divina*, and reciting John Stott’s morning prayer cultivate openness. Like in *The Painted Veil*, “when love and duty are one, then grace is within you.” It’s not a mindless ritual but a devoted posture of listening.

We also walk with Jesus, asking not “Will God show up?” but “What are you saying, Jesus?” In Luke 24, two disciples’ hearts burned as they unknowingly



walked beside the risen Christ. When we're alert, we realize he's been with us all along.

A dancing heart doesn't mean perpetual cheer. Even Jesus was acquainted with grief. But a heart alive to God—ready to serve, love, and respond—is more than mere marching; it truly dances.

PART TWO: SHAPING OUR OUTER WORLD

5. In a Frenzied World: The Perspective of Prayer

In *The New Yorker*, a cartoon shows two couples crossing paths in a grocery aisle. One calls, "You're on our 'to do' list," summing up how busyness often prevents actual connection. Leaders likewise crave real time with people, but "hurry sickness" or a "hurry-go-round" consumes us—both a burden and a perverse badge of honor.

We live in an "exploding, digitized, fast company culture," echoing Tocqueville's description of America's "feverish ardor" for gain. Endless regulations and demands for participation tangle organizational life. Oliver Wendell Holmes yearned for "simplicity on the other side of complexity," but our rapid-fire reality keeps us in a swirl of details.

Like Genesis's tower of Babel, we strive to make a name for ourselves. Pride infiltrates even churches and ministries, fueling exhaustion and shallow self-promotion. A fourth-century B.C. poem laments, "Produce! Get results! Make money! . . . Or you will die of despair!" revealing how ancient—and universal—these compulsions are.

Mere time management can't remedy our deepest disquiet. Jesus' Lord's Prayer offers a guiding pathway. Addressing "*Our Father in heaven*" establishes both intimacy (Father) and transcendence (in heav-

en). "*Hallowed be your name*" instructs us never to invoke God's name for personal agendas. "*Your kingdom come, your will be done*" reminds us to align with God's plan rather than our own Babel-building. "*Give us this day our daily bread*" echoes Israel's manna—depend daily on God, not stockpiled reserves. "*Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven*" confronts our duty to extend grace, since harboring resentment traps us in bitterness. Finally, "*do not bring us to the time of trial . . . deliver us from the evil one*" acknowledges spiritual realities beyond our control.

These requests—all "disciplines of restraint"—free us from self-imposed overload. We discover, as Augustine said, that we are never more like God than in forgiving, and we embrace the truth that prayer is not an add-on but the bedrock of our daily life. Through it, we gain renewed perspective and find both rest and resolve in a frenzied world.

6. In a Lonely World: The Promise of Belonging

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is the most anguished cry of loneliness in history. Jesus, who said "I and my Father are one," felt utterly forsaken, surpassing any isolation we experience in leadership.

We often suffer emotionally and spiritually in our leadership responsibilities. We can be lonely despite and even because of all the people around us.

Overwork is one seedbed for leadership loneliness. We morph from being effective in leading others to being exhausted in being led by the demands of others. Another is boredom. Henri Nouwen noted how we can be "busy and bored at the same time." King David was victorious until a lull left him restless, leading to adultery and murder. Such boredom and loneliness in organizational life can trigger destruc-



tive behavior.

Jesus' prayer in John 17 addresses a more hopeful belonging: "They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. . . . As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them." Our calling is to "belong to God," "belong to each other," and "belong in the world," without being "of the world." Belonging has a far deeper meaning than just a statement of formal relationship. Belonging is a strong word for identity. When we belong to God, we avoid arrogance and hypocrisy. When we belong to each other, we pursue unity without compromising Christ's command: love one another. Christian unity, Jesus says, is a sign by which others believe the Father sent him.

Finally, we "belong in the world," for "Our God is a sending God." Jesus declares, "As the Father has sent me, so send I you." We neither hide from the world nor mirror its rebellion; rather, we witness through humility and hope. A sign of contradiction in the world, we hold fast to Jesus' promise: "Take courage; I have conquered the world!"

The leadership ellipse can also illustrate our loneliness: the focal point of our interior life is boredom while the focal point of our exterior life is overwork. But an intentional belonging—"to God, to each other, and in the world"—transforms loneliness into a "more vibrant and peaceful sense of our calling."

7. In a Fragmented World: The Pursuit of Shalom

In a previous job, I was the supervisor of a very talented but stressed-out woman. I met with her one Friday afternoon and heard how discouraged she was. I tried to be sympathetic, then prayed with her and left for the weekend. By Monday, I learned she was telling others I had fired her by encouraging her to consider other work. After many hours of mediation,

we agreed I had not fired her but had miscommunicated by offering a solution instead of hearing her emotions. We thankfully restored our friendship, but I wish I had taken more time to listen.

This one vignette illustrates our daily reality as leaders. Despite good intentions, relationships fracture under cultural and personal tensions. Even well-honed communication skills can fail. Why is unity so elusive? Because two powerful tributaries—cultural difference and human sinfulness—merge into turbulent rapids in our lives and workplaces.

Regarding culture, we inherit gender or ethnic traits, absorb family and national values, and learn new behaviors in schools and organizations. These differences need not be destructive, but when combined with sinfulness—our innate hardness of heart—conflict abounds. We see it in "the battle of the sexes," racial hostilities, and ongoing mistrust.

Biblically, the antidote is shalom, a social, ethical, and spiritual peace that envisions "how things should be." Jeremiah 29:7 calls us to "seek the welfare [shalom] of the city." Paul proclaims Jesus "is our peace" who breaks down dividing walls (Eph 2). Shalom demands action and transformation.

In "gender shalom," we address tensions going back to Adam and Eve. While laws can curb discrimination, genuine healing requires humility, listening, and fair policies—like Moses adapting inheritance laws for Zelophehad's daughters (Num 27; 36). Such changes, though disruptive, honored women without penalizing others.

"Racial shalom" also calls for intentional reconciliation. We honor every person as bearing God's image, reject racism, offer confession for our complicity, and extend forgiveness. True multicultural unity requires openness about authority, power, and respect. It's never simple, but hope in Christ fuels our efforts.



The path of shalom is not homogenization but harmonization, modeling how diverse people can live in peace. It may be our greatest witness in a fractured world longing for wholeness. As leaders, we pursue shalom not by avoiding differences but by humbly engaging them—and trusting God to bring healing where we can't.

PART THREE: SHAPING OUR LEADERSHIP

8. As More Than a Grasshopper: The Practice of Wholeheartedness

In the 13th chapter of the book of Numbers, Moses sent out twelve handpicked leaders to explore the land that God had promised to give to them.

When they returned from their reconnaissance, the majority confessed great fear of the land's inhabitants. The most revealing statement in their report though is not just their assessment of military inferiority but this astonishing admission: "to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them" (Num 13:33). These senior leaders must have been really scared to admit that they felt like grasshoppers. Leaders don't admit such feelings of inferiority.

This "grasshopper" mindset emerges in three common giants. **First, the giant of failure.** Losing a job, a ministry, or a reputation can sap our identity. I once lost my dream role unexpectedly, feeling humiliated and angry. Only by reflecting on Jesus' words from the cross—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—and his forgiveness for those who crucified him did I avoid bitterness. Failure can undermine our confidence unless we remember that Christ understands our pain and calls us to forgive.

Second, the giant of self-pity. Fred Smith Sr. calls it "the most dangerous and addictive of all non-phar-

maceutical narcotics." Leaders often deny or hide it, but Moses and Elijah both succumbed after significant victories. Worn down by complaints and threats, Moses cried, "Put me to death at once." Elijah, after triumphing over the prophets of Baal, fled in despair. Self-pity isolates us from others and blinds us to God's sustaining grace.

Third, the giant of ego and jealousy. Men and women alike compare, posture, and envy. When El-dad and Medad prophesied outside the designated gathering, Joshua insisted they be stopped, worried it undermined Moses. Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake?" This points to our tendency to protect our status or reflect someone else's glory.

Wholeheartedness counters these giants. Caleb presented an "honest report" and believed God's promise. Rather than deny the giants, he trusted God in the face of them. Wholehearted leaders acknowledge fear, disappointment, and envy, but refuse to be ruled by them. They resist "spin" or divided motives and rest in God's perspective.

We needn't pretend life has no giants. But when we, like Caleb, follow God wholeheartedly, we learn we're not mere grasshoppers in his sight. Our quiet confidence in God's calling frees us to move forward with honesty, humility, and courage—more than grasshoppers, indeed.

9. As an Organizational Ecologist: The Practice of Attentiveness

Timothy George introduced me to the concept of an *ecotone*, "a place where two or more ecosystems come together," creating fertile new life from the clash of different environments. I see this as a powerful image for organizational leadership: holding diverse departments and people in healthy balance so they flourish, rather than become destructive.

Even the best organization can turn toxic if top lead-

ers clash. Like contamination in a river, tension at the top poisons everything downstream. Christian ministries aren't immune; spiritual zeal easily morphs into divisiveness when "defending truth" hides ego or self-righteousness. Workplaces can splinter when departments compete, or those with different gifts mistrust each other.

To keep an organization healthy, leaders must practice attentiveness—seeing God at work among people and being fully present. It's about noticing "the sacrament of the present moment," listening and responding genuinely.

1. Involved:

We give focused attention—listening well, learning humbly, and showing true care. Sometimes that means dropping our plans to address someone's crisis.

2. Investing:

We devote time to people, cultivate healthy "touch" (in both literal and figurative senses), and share our knowledge. Whether guiding them or granting flexibility, we equip them to grow.

3. Inspiring:

We articulate vision and encourage. Everyone needs empowerment and recognition. Even small affirmations can change someone's trajectory.

A leader is like an organizational ecologist, tending a complex ecosystem of human relationships. With humility and love, we create an environment where people thrive—where conflict lessens, trust grows, and creativity abounds. It's not easy. But when attentiveness is rooted in our spiritual integrity, we foster true health in the organizational "ecotone," and the potential for beauty outweighs the risks of chaos.

10. As a Grateful Creature: The Practice of Clarity

I first met Max De Pree at a board meeting, where people spoke of his wisdom, care for people, and competitive business success. Later, I attended a seminar he co-led with Lew Smedes on treating people ethically in our organizations. At first, it all seemed basic. But as we dug into our jobs' complexities, I felt like Paul in Romans 7—knowing what's right yet failing to do it. Max and Lew emphasized gratitude. Max famously defined leadership as "defining reality and saying thank you," and it struck me how an attitude of abundance, rather than scarcity, fosters genuine care for others.

I use the term creature not as an insult but to remind myself I'm created by God. Recognizing our creaturely limitations guards against pride. We're not God. Even angels refuse worship, telling John in Revelation, "You must not do that!" So we must neither idolize our gifts nor let others idolize us. When Gideon asked for a jeweled ephod as a trophy, it became his burden.

Gratitude is the natural response of the heart to all of life, ultimately to God. It's nurtured in humility—receiving what others offer. Even absorbing pain can be an act of gratitude: "Leaders don't inflict pain, they bear pain." I try cultivating thankfulness by praying for colleagues—naming their gifts before God, fighting my instinct to criticize or compare.

Gratitude thrives alongside clarity. Defining reality helps us and those we lead see why our work matters. In naming problems, we bring them into the light. The biblical shepherd image (1 Peter 5:2-3) reminds me that leading means tending a flock willingly, not for greed or power. Such clarity frees us from compulsions. Another source of clarity is spiritual direction: like a chiropractor for the soul, it



reveals hidden pain. Whether through one-on-one guidance or a covenant group, we need help listening to God.

Finally, I’ve found a rule of life invaluable. Historically rooted in Benedictine practices, a rule frames prayer, work, community, and rest. Mine flows from the Great Commandments: a “quiet heart” that rests weekly; a “pruned heart” daily cleansed by forgiveness; a “dancing heart” serving others; daily prayer, discernment, and Holy Spirit dependence; committed relationships with family, church, and the world;

and “wholehearted” leadership shaped by gratitude and clarity. I recite a simple closing prayer asking God for a contented soul, pruned attachments, a humble mind, and a dancing heart of joy.

Though I don’t follow my rule perfectly, it serves as a guide, ensuring my interior life aligns with outer responsibilities. We’re not saved by rules or restructure alone. But by embracing our creaturehood before God—defining reality, giving thanks, practicing clarity—we find both spiritual coherence and richer leadership.

