

Holistic Formation (Part 3): Emotional Formation – The Most Neglected Area of Growth

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It wasn't supposed to be this way. Ministry was supposed to be the most fulfilling of all professions. But I didn't want to get up in the morning – because I would have to face another day, and I didn't want to go to bed at night – because I'd have to get up in the morning, and I didn't want to answer the phone – because I didn't have the energy for another crisis or confrontation. To be honest, all I wanted to do was get away, as far away from people as I could get.

I didn't know what to do. I'd never felt such internal pain and struggle. Was this just a phase I was going through – or was I trapped in some kind of depression with no way out? I decided to talk with a pastor friend for some counseling and encouragement. He listened to my situation and what I was experiencing, and proceeded to summarize his "encouragement" by saying, "I don't know if it's ever justifiable for a Christian to be depressed." I remember leaving our meeting thinking, "Oh great . . . now I had depression and guilt."

My depression and living in this dark place lasted for eight long months. It felt like the most hopeless time in my life. But looking back on it now, I am very grateful for everything it taught me. In fact, I frequently share my story with churches and groups I'm with, and invariably people approach me afterwards. They usually look a little embarrassed or fearful to be talking to me. I've even seen them look over their shoulder to see who might be watching. Their comments are usually something like: "Thank you for talking about your depression. I've never heard it talked about in church before." Or "I've tried to talk about my depression (or pain, depression, addiction, feelings, etc.) with people around here, but they just want to fix me or tell me to read my Bible and pray more."

Emotions and all that go with them are still taboo in many religious environments. Negative emotions such as depression, anxiety, or anger are in many places very misunderstood, and in some places outright condemned. Those who struggle with them often feel like they are wearing some sort of "scarlet letter" that causes them to stand out from those who "have it all together." A couple of years ago a family left our faith community, and the wife honestly shared it was because everyone else seemed so normal and together. In comparison, she felt like her life and marriage were a mess. If the truth were to be known, everyone else was a mess too – we had just learned how to hide it better.

Emotional issues can also be the kryptonite of leadership. When emotional issues are well hidden, leaders can appear to function with the strength and fortitude of a superhero. When exposed, even the strongest and most successful leader shrinks under their influence. Those we lead are looking for cues for how to navigate this delicate part of our being.

Dealing with emotional issues is very much a part of spiritual formation, but formation in this area takes one's transformation to a different level. For when time is spent in intimate reflection with God and active participation in spiritual disciplines, the inner regions of one's life are ultimately revealed. This revelation is a fruit of spiritual formation and naturally leads to a more intent focus on emotional formation. It is in emotional formation that we are compelled to look inward, into the deepest parts of our being. However, the looking is not an end in itself. It is intended to uncover root issues that are poised to short-circuit the power and influence that we need to be healthy and whole.

Many spiritual leaders do not feel prepared or equipped to face the emotional challenges of leadership. They might have received some theological preparation. Some will have experience in the practical or pragmatic aspects of ministry. Others are fortunate to have received guidance in spiritual formation. Nevertheless, it is rare to find leaders who have received enough grounding, nurture, and preparation in the area of emotional formation to minister out of this self-awareness and personal healing. And when working with people, this becomes even more obvious. For in ministry leaders need to have the ability to express their own feelings and convictions balanced with consideration for the thoughts and feelings of others.

While I strongly believed I was equipped to face the challenges of leadership, it was not until after navigating the waters of congregational conflict, and wading through those eight months of clinical depression, that I became open to the suggestion that there might be parts of my life and formational development that had been neglected. It is often in the midst of pain, or at least after a crisis of some sort, that leaders begin to consider what might not have been learned in school or their formative leadership training. It might even be true that the amount of pathology and issues in a spiritual leader's life and ministry is directly proportional to how early that leader was faced with a challenging issue or pain that provided the opportunity to discover more effective ways of dealing with their emotional life.

What is Emotional Formation?

Emotional formation is a process that begins with bringing the emotional parts of one's being into conscious awareness and focus. This process is sometimes described as bringing issues that have been hidden in darkness out into the light. This includes aspects such as feelings, thoughts, addictions, pathologies, and family-of-origin issues. Emotions should not be underestimated. An excellent description

of the importance of emotional formation is given by Dr. Frank Green:

Emotions form an essential part of life and are the most important building blocks out of which happiness and enjoyment of life are built. To avoid feeling is to avoid life and causes us to lose touch with what really makes us tick. On the other hand, to feel too much and allow those feelings to control our lives has the potential of destroying our lives.¹

In the mid-1990s, greater attention began being paid to emotions with the release of the best-selling book *Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman, and its sequel *Working with Emotional Intelligence*.² Goleman asserts that a view of human nature that ignores the power of emotions is sadly shortsighted. Self-awareness, or the ability to be aware of both mood and thoughts about one's mood, becomes as essential as (and in some circumstances even more so) than intellectual intelligence. This skill is not something that is natural or even learned by most spiritual leaders, even though these leaders must daily confront issues that invoke an emotional reaction within them, not to mention the emotions of those they lead. Realities and feelings such as criticism, loneliness, fear of failure, bitterness, fear of rejection, and self-pity are a daily occurrence.³

In *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, Peter Scazzero calls emotional health "discipleship's next frontier." He states: "Despite all the emphasis today on spiritual formation, church leaders rarely address what spiritual maturity looks like as it relates to emotional health, especially as it relates to how we love other people." He describes how churches are characterized by an imbalanced spirituality, where people may present themselves as spiritually mature, but are stuck at a stage of spiritual immaturity that current models of discipleship have not addressed. Scazzero further shows how the roots of the problem lie in a faulty spirituality that stems from a faulty biblical theology.⁴

A lack or weakness in the area of emotional formation tends to surface during times of crisis. Personal crises, marital tensions, family problems, and ministry conflicts all can lead one into a process that opens up new and significant opportunities for emotional formation. This formation can be prompted and moved along by personal evaluation, counseling, a process of inner healing, or even contemplation.

Biblical and Theological Perspectives of Emotional Formation

In biblical terminology, emotional formation might be described as a process of moving from the false self to the real self. The combination of human nature and sinful surroundings drives humans to live according to a false self, or what Brennan Manning affectionately calls "the imposter."⁵ When the true self is in hiding, the false self takes over. The false self is what is presented to others when there is insecurity about one's inner life.⁶ The Bible speaks of this "false self" in Ephesians 4:20-25:

You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.

An excellent place to experience a multitude of biblical wisdom on emotional formation is in the book of Psalms. Philip Yancey has said, "Because many psalms were written by Israel's leaders, the book offers a unique behind-the-scenes view of a people's emotional history. I know of no comparable collection of private reactions to ancient history."⁷

In the New Testament, there are also many places where emotions are displayed in the biblical text. Jesus displayed many emotions during his earthly ministry. On at least one occasion, Jesus displayed anger at the selling that was taking place in the temple courts.⁸ After the death of his friend Lazarus, the text says "Jesus wept."⁹ The Bible also contains a record of how Jesus' emotional formation was tested. In Matthew 4:1-11, Jesus is tempted by the devil in the desert. There are many perspectives on why Satan tempted Jesus as he did. However, one thing is evident: Jesus was tempted in the area of emotions. These same temptations are common to spiritual leaders today. The temptation begins: "After

¹ Frank Paul Green, "What Have You Done with Your Emotions," <http://www.charisfoundation.com/emotions.html>.

² Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995), and *Working with Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1998).

³ Gerald Brooks, "The Emotions of a Leader" in *The Pastor's Coach* (Volume 4, Issue 17, September 10, 2003).

⁴ Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 17-18.

⁵ Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1994), 86.

⁶ For further reading on this, see Henry Cloud, *Changes That Heal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 27.

⁷ Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read*, 129.

⁸ John 2:12-17.

⁹ John 11:35.

fasting forty days and forty nights, he [Jesus] was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.'¹⁰ This was a direct temptation to the area of *physical need*, and plays on the felt needs experienced by every human being with a challenge to meet those needs in illegitimate ways. The text continues: "Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 'If you are the Son of God,' he said, 'throw yourself down.'¹¹ This was a temptation directed at Jesus' *self-esteem* and what people would think of him. For what leader does not struggle with people-pleasing tendencies? Finally, the passage concludes: "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and their splendor. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me.'¹² This temptation was directed at the *desire for power*, one of the most significant driving forces behind many leaders. In every instance, Jesus shows the strength of his emotional formation, and responds with a quote from Scripture, not from a place of emotional emptiness.

The topic of formation seems to assume that much of what "forms" a person is the direct result of some external influence. In Mark 7:20-23, Jesus challenged this notion following one of many interactions with the Pharisees and scribes:

He went on: "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'"

Leaders need to examine the fruits of their lives and evaluate where negative character originates. It is not uncommon for leaders to struggle with these things. Most leaders probably do not even consider the seriousness of these "evils." For example, *arrogance* is accepted and often even justified as self-confidence or assertiveness. This is especially true when a leader has gained the outward success and recognition that seems to justify such an attitude. Jesus says that this is evil and makes a person unclean.

The Importance of Emotional Formation in the Lives of Leaders

Spiritual leaders in the process of being transformed come to an understanding that emotional formation is an integral part of who they are becoming on their pilgrimage of life. They also know the impact that emotional formation has on their relationships. Spiritual leaders who relate well to others understand the need in their lives for appropriate vulnerability and trust. These leaders develop the ability to admit their imperfections and issues, yet keep working through them. They are oriented toward truth, and thus have the ability to observe themselves and their actions, versus waiting to be observed by others.

One of the most important principles for any of us to understand is that you cannot give away what you do not have. For example, if a leader does not understand what it means to live daily in a place of applied forgiveness and grace, that leader will not be able to help others understand forgiveness and grace in their own lives. Hence, the process of emotional formation allows leaders to give out of fullness. Henri Nouwen articulated this so well when he says: "Self-affirmation and self-emptying are not opposites because no man can give away what he does not have. No one can give himself in love when he is not aware of himself. Nobody can come to intimacy without having found his identity."¹³

Emotional formation is so significant in the lives of spiritual leaders because it is one of the few forces that move a leader from places of humanity and sin, to places of godliness and depth of character. St. John of the Cross describes this process:

*At a certain point in the spiritual journey God will draw a person from the beginning stage to a more advanced stage. At this stage the person will begin to engage in religious exercises and grow deeper in the spiritual life. Such souls will likely experience what is called "the dark night of the soul." The "dark night" is when those persons lose all the pleasure that they once experienced in their devotional life. This happens because God wants to purify them and move them on to greater heights. . . Through the dark night pride becomes humility, greed becomes simplicity, wrath becomes contentment, luxury becomes peace, gluttony becomes moderation, envy becomes joy, and sloth becomes strength. No soul will ever grow deep in the spiritual life unless God works passively in that soul by means of the dark night.*¹⁴

¹⁰ Matthew 4:2-3.

¹¹ Matthew 4:5-6a.

¹² Matthew 4:8-9.

¹³ Nouwen, *Creative Ministry*, 51.

¹⁴ St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul* (New York: Image Books, 1990), 33, 36.

The pain and disillusionment of this process is often one of the only things that will get the undivided attention of spiritual leaders. When we cannot be reached any other way, God will use pain to bring us low and teach us in order to bring us to true holistic health. This is what my depression did for me.

Issues Related to Emotional Formation

There are many issues that are related to our emotional formation, far more than we have the space to deal with here. But in order to get you thinking about this important area, I will merely list the primary areas of struggle that impact spiritual leaders, and leave it up to you to take some next steps as you identify which of these is hindering your own emotional formation. Some of these primary areas are:

- addiction
- stress
- anxiety
- depression
- burnout
- anger
- guilt
- lack of assertiveness
- poor self-esteem
- sexuality

At an even deeper level, there are serious pathological issues that spiritual leaders struggle with. In his book *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership*¹⁵, Gary McIntosh describes five primary leadership dysfunctions:

- the compulsive leader
- the narcissistic leader
- the paranoid leader
- the codependent leader
- the passive-aggressive leader

While there are certainly other pathologies characteristic of spiritual leaders, these five seem to be the most common and significant at the beginning of the twenty-first century. When leaders function according to one or more of these pathologies, they prevent holistic formation from existing in either their lives or that of their congregations.

Principles and Practices for Emotional Formation

Whereas certain areas of formation are more fun to talk about and work on, emotional formation can be rather intimidating. This is because it involves an in-depth examination of the deep parts of one's life as well as the way one functions in relation to other people. Much of this functioning, or in many cases "dysfunction," is rooted in family-of-origin issues, painful experiences, or ways in which a person has not been properly parented or trained. These are very personal issues that are close to the pain and hurt in one's past. Because of this, much care and sensitivity needs to be applied in the principles and practices for change and growth in emotional formation.

A Commitment to Authenticity and Vulnerability

The first step to healing and health in emotional formation is the ability to face honestly whatever issues one must deal with – a commitment to bringing personal issues "into the light." It is being honest about what one is feeling and experiencing, applying grace and truth to areas of pain and struggle, and being authentic and vulnerable. *Authenticity* has to do with genuineness. It is the quality of being genuine or not corrupted from the original.¹⁶ *Vulnerability* puts one in a place where there is the capability of being wounded or hurt. However, in an emotional sense, this vulnerability opens one up to a process of good hurt, as well as the risk that is involved in being rejected because of one's honesty and openness.

The sad reality is that many spiritual leaders do not open up to others until it is very late in the process, or much damage has already been done. Leaders do not like to be or feel dependent on others, hence their reticence to vulnerability. This is why a process of openness, honesty, authenticity, vulnerability, or whatever concept can help a spiritual leader get the needed help, is so important.

Understanding Brokenness

Most spiritual leaders are not comfortable with feeling weak. In fact, many go into people-helping professions in order to compensate for a sense of weakness. When emotional formation is ignored or neglected, many of the issues discussed in this article begin to invade the leader's life. Thus, there is a great need to understand brokenness. Brokenness is a way of saying that sin has affected the entire

¹⁵Gary McIntosh and Samuel D. Rima, Sr., *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997), pp. 85-137.

¹⁶*Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary*, © 1996, 1998 MICRA, Inc. www.dictionary.com, Internet.

human race. The “fallenness” of human beings means that there will be issues that keep them from being healthy and whole. The better one understands this reality, the better he or she will be able to accept and deal with personal struggles and challenges.

There are many ways of understanding brokenness and some excellent books written on the subject. It has been called a “spirituality of imperfection.”¹⁷ The late Mike Yaconelli identified it so well as “messy spirituality.”¹⁸ The sixteenth century Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross discussed the significance of “the dark night of the soul.”¹⁹ And Henri Nouwen described the process of becoming a “wounded healer.” He elaborates on the pain of spiritual leaders seen through their loneliness:

*. . . Loneliness is the minister’s wound not only because he shares in the human condition, but also because of the unique predicament of his profession. It is this wound which he is called to bind with more care and attention than others usually do. For a deep understanding of his own pain makes it possible for him to convert his weakness into strength and to offer his own experience as a source of healing to those who are often lost in the darkness of their own misunderstood sufferings.*²⁰

From a biblical point of view, the book of 2 Corinthians deals directly with this concept. The apostle Paul stresses the need to live as “a clay pot,” accepting the reality of fragility and the ability to break.²¹ By design, the vessel is weak, vulnerable, and has limits. This needs to be the foundation of a theology that drives the spiritual leader’s stress management. Actually, ministry is about dying. The spiritual leader dies to self-issues, desires, financial gain, and many other worldly pursuits. Later on in his letter, Paul instructs on what might be called “the power of weakness.”²²

In counseling spiritual leaders about their brokenness, Louis McBurney says, “Recognizing the humanity of those in Christian work is the first step in being able to help them deal more effectively with their stress.”²³ This takes leaders off a pedestal and helps them to accept that their brokenness, just like everyone else. If leaders accept this reality, healing can then take place.

The Spiritual Leader as “Person”

The ability to understand and grasp the ramifications of one’s brokenness goes to an even deeper level in a leader’s understanding of himself or herself as a person. This concept is dealt with very effectively in Gary Harbaugh’s book *Pastor As Person*. The thesis of the book is that most problems experienced in the parish by pastors are not because they forget they are pastors, but because they forget they are persons.²⁴ I think this truth is just as relevant for spiritual leaders at all levels as it is for pastors.

A chapter on the pastor as a thinking person deals extensively with pastoral perception. Extensive study has shown that being an effective pastor is based more on what a pastor perceives than what he or she knows or does. Harbaugh points out that “pastors who perceived themselves to be just people, like everyone else, are more effective than those ‘who perceive themselves to be isolated, or insulated, from the rest of humanity.’”²⁵ In another chapter on the pastor as a feeling person, Harbaugh shows how pastors learn not to feel, and hence, lose touch with what it is to be a person.²⁶

As Trappist monk Thomas Merton spent many years in a monastery, he began to see that the highest spiritual development was to be “ordinary.” Being ordinary means to become fully human, in the way few human beings succeed in becoming so simply and naturally themselves. “Ordinary” is the measure of what others might be if society did not distort them with negative character traits such as greed, lust, or ambition.²⁷

In conclusion, someone has said that it is essential to learn from the past, lean into the future, but always live in the present moment. This is an excellent summary of emotional formation. Emotional formation seeks to learn from the past. This is not to blame or avoid responsibility. On the contrary, an understanding of one’s past provides a foundation for the formation of the building. Whereas leaders desire to “lean into the future” by sharing vision and providing a picture of a favorable future, this cannot

¹⁷ Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992).

¹⁸ Michael Yaconelli, *Messy Spirituality – God’s Annoying Love for Imperfect People* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

¹⁹ St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul* (New York: Image Books, 1990).

²⁰ Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York: Image Books, 1972), 87.

²¹ 2 Corinthians 4:7-12.

²² 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, especially verse 9.

²³ Louis McBurney, *Counseling Christian Workers* (Nashville, TN: Word Books, 1986), 23.

²⁴ Harbaugh, 35.

²⁵ Ibid, 78.

²⁶ Ibid, Chapter 4.

²⁷ Manning, 48.

be done with integrity unless there is a process of emotional formation. Finally, the ability to live in the present moment grows out of a healthy emotional formation. Emotional formation is hard. That's why it's the most neglected area of our holistic formation. But when leaders see what authentically journeying through this dimension of life can do, it puts the journey in a whole different perspective.

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