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Spirituality, Ethics, and Leadership

By Walter Earl Fluker

Known as an expert in the theory and practice of ethical leadership, Fluker explores the inner core of our social lives as leaders, contending that "spirituality demands that leaders cultivate and nourish a sense of self that recognizes the interrelatedness of life or a sense of community" in practical, everyday encounters. Through an introspective journey of understanding ourselves through facing "the other," Fluker challenges readers to think about the dynamic relationship among spirituality, ethics, and leadership.

Discussions of spirituality cover a broad and increasingly complex spectrum of beliefs, practices and approaches within and beyond traditional religious circles. For our purposes, spirituality refers to *a way or ways of seeking or being in relationship with the other who is believed to be worthy of reverence and highest devotion*. In this definition, I am concerned with the *other* as inclusive of both individuality and community. The other is not impersonal, but intimately related to who I am and who I become. According to Emmanuel Levinas, the other has a *face* – and the *face* of the other is the foundation of ethics and the origin of civil society.[i] Beyond our private quests for meaning and authenticity, we are connected to others. Indeed, in order to be fully human and ethical, we must "face the other."

I encounter the face of the other in everyday life but also in its strangeness and transcendence, in its force of obligation and interdependence. James Hillman writes, "The Other's face calls upon my character. Rather than thinking my character shows in my face and that my face is my character exteriorized…character requires the face of the Other. Its piercing provocation pulls us from every possible ethical potential. In bad conscience we turn away from the face in the wheelchair, the face of the beggar; we hood the face of the executed, and we ignore the faces of the socially ostracized and hierarchally inferior so that they become 'invisible' even as we walk down the same street."[ii]

The human face is also the face that is hidden and present for me in all its power and meaning. Indeed, in its deepest expression it is s*piritual* – in the heat of passion and desire, lovers *face* one another; in courtrooms, victims *face* their assailants; in reconciliation, the penitent child *faces* a forgiving parent; and in reverence and conviction, the devout *faces* the God she serves. But in the final analysis, *spirituality requires that we face ourselves* – our stories and memories. The *face* invites me to revel in memory – my own memories and in collective memory as diverse and beautiful as the world. If such a *face* were to visit me, I would understand that I am not alone, unrelated neither to history nor to memory.[iii]

In C. S. Lewis's classic retelling of the story of Cupid and Psyche, *Till We Have Faces,* the dying Queen Orual remembers her sad story and comes to the great realization that Psyche, the sister she envied because of her beauty and Cupid's love for her, was never the problem that she *faced*. Nor was it the faceless stone gods in the temple who needed faces. Rather, she first had to see her face, which she despised, before she could see the god's. In the end, she discovered that her face and the face of Psyche were one and the same, mirroring the mystery of all that was and is to come. How can the gods speak to us face to face till we have faces? And how shall we face ourselves until we have faced the *other?*[iv]

Spirituality involves *facing* the other as we *face* ourselves. This experience of *facing* the other reveals the deep longing and yearning to be in unity with ourselves. The following meditation from my journals speaks to this dimension of *facing the self*:

> *I am climbing the mountain with Him who has invited me to come.* He is climbing as though there were nothing to it. He must know the mountain well; he seems to like the climbing itself. My joints ache and I have the wrong attitude for climbing. I am fussy and absorbed in myself – my struggles, my pain, my loneliness, my likes and disappointments. I have not noticed that he is really tired, too – but for Him the journey is non-negotiable.
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> I fear that tomorrow I will awaken from this sleep and will curse myself for being so easily deluded, smooth-talked into making this climb, knowing my temperament and deep feelings about such things. "I am a mother hen!" "There I go again. Stop it! Just climb!"
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> "I believe I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." "I would have fainted if it had not been for the Lord."
>
> "Now faith, hope, love abide – but the greatest of these is love." "I believe in the universal church, the resurrection of the body…I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and the earth…I believe all mountains are illusions and only faith says that we have arrived."
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> "I believe that the Transfiguration is completed not when we arrive at the top of the mountain, but when we come down."
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> "Maybe today, I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living…maybe…if I continue to climb."
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> *I am climbing the mountain today. I am alone with the Alone. Who then is this fellow-traveler? His face is very familiar. I must become better acquainted with him if I am to continue this journey. Friend, tell me, who are you? And what is your name?*

Spirituality is also a discipline that places emphasis on *practice* – spirituality is something that we *do*. Prior to any act of cognition, spirituality has to do with the practical, day-to-day encounter with the other; the other being both friend and stranger, comrade and opposer, individual and collective, divine and demonic. In its active, dynamic expression, spirituality is *life-generating* and *disfiguring*.

Using these indicators, spirituality can be viewed from three perspectives: 1) formal notions of spirituality that are related to established religions; 2) informal notions of spirituality that are "self-actualized" or self-defined by individuals or small groups that may or may not be associated with an established religious institution; and 3) philosophical or ethical notions of spirituality related to values and perceived goods, (e.g. truth, beauty, justice, etc). I also use these three categories as heuristic devices that provide lenses through which to look at the vast landscape of a developing literature that incorporates ideas, beliefs and practices from an array of traditions and perspectives – health, science, technology, politics, business and education.[v]

Spirituality plays a key role in the development of ethical leaders. Moreover, spirituality demands that leaders cultivate and nourish a *sense of self* that recognizes the interrelatedness of life or a *sense of community*. *A sense of community* refers to the larger extended ecological sphere made tangible by nature, defined as the universe and the cosmos, but in its final essence, it is *spirit*.

This idea of *spirit* finds resonance with Peter Paris's definition of spirituality in the African context, (i.e., spirituality is never individualistic, but is part of a larger sphere of unity that is diverse in its dynamics and character). "The spirituality of a people," he writes, "refers to the animating and integrative power that constitutes the principal frame of meaning for individual and collective experiences."[vi]

For Robert M. Franklin, spirituality refers to "a person's sense of identity in relation to other people and that which is conceived as ultimate concern. Rooted in spiritual identity are a person's fundamental values, moral commitments, and ability to engage in ethical reasoning. Spiritual health is reflected in a person's ability to trust and care for others."[vii] In summary, spirituality demands that we *face* the other, personally and collectively – and in facing the other we are transfigured and transformed and called to the larger quest of building community in the world.

Spirituality is the core of the inner and social lives of ethical leaders. It informs the relationship between the private and public spheres of leadership at the intersections where worlds collide. How then do leaders utilize spirituality as a resource in making fitting ethical decisions in the various contexts and situations that lead to transformation of powerful, intransigent systems?

The relationship among spirituality, ethics, and leadership is important because leaders in many public venues are increasingly turning to approaches that emphasize some form of spirituality as an authoritative source in making decisions that impact the lifestyles, attitudes, and behaviors of many people, especially in the areas of education, government, health, science, and business. Often these appeals to spirituality fail to address the larger ethical questions of justice, equity and truth-telling that are raised in public life.

They also speak to the role that spirituality and ethics will increasingly play in the development of leadership for the future. A significant challenge for the next generation of leadership is the increasing promotion and advancement of science, technology and business to serve the interests of human development and the environment. The changes produced by this triumvirate have already resulted in a significant upheaval in society, the meaning of life, intelligence, and work. For example, there is a growing movement within non-profit and for-profit sectors to incorporate ethical principles and practices pertaining to issues of transparency, diversity, trans-cultural dynamics, sustainability, the environment, and human development. Increasingly, large corporations, think tanks, and political leaders are relying upon spirituality as a form of human resource development to address these larger structural issues.

Finally, in order for a just civil society to exist, persons in responsible leadership roles must make decisions based on ethical guides.[viii] For historically marginalized peoples, the relationship of spirituality, ethics, and leadership is most urgent. With the long-range economic, political and social costs of war, a troubled market economy and rapid advances (crusades) in technology, science, and global democracy, we now have the makings of a social anarchy that threatens the very foundations of our social purpose. The impending catastrophic fallout of the present situation will have far-reaching negative consequences for the least of these, those whom the late Samuel DeWitt Proctor called "the lost, the left-out and left behind."

At a deeper level, however, there *is* a spiritual malaise, a nihilistic threat promoted by the predominance of a utilitarian individualism that appeals endlessly to therapeutic remedies that begin and end with *self*. Who will lead in the 21st century? Better yet, how shall they lead*? Who will go for us, and whom shall we send?* For answers to these questions, it is instructive to inquire regarding fundamental assumptions of ethical theory and how these inhere in our construction of spirituality and leadership.

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References

[i] "The face of man is the medium through which the invisible in him becomes visible and enters into commerce with us." Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, translated by Sean Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1990), p. 140.

[ii] James Hillman, *The Force of Character and The Lasting Life* (New York: Random House, 1999), p. 142.

[iii] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, translated by Alfonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 201. The question "Can things have a face?" is important for the definition above. Levinas suggests that art may be an appropriate lens through which to identify "being" in the face of a thing. He asks, "Is not art an activity that lends faces to things? Does not the façade of a house regard us?...We ask ourselves all the same if the impersonal but fascinating and magical march of rhythm does not, in art, substitute itself for sociality, for the face, for speech." Emmanuel Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?", in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, edited by Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) p. 10. An important source for this reading of Levinas has been James Hillman, *The Force of Character and The Lasting Life* (New York: Random House, 1999).

[iv] C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956).

[v] Examples of the first perspective on spirituality are those promoted within established religious institutions. Here, there is a vast array of definitions and approaches to the subject. See, for instance, Felix M. Podimattam, *Global Spirituality: Ecumenical, Inter-religious, and Continental Spirituality* (Delhi: Media House, 2005); Arthur W. Chickering, *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006); Cathy Ota and Clive Erricker, editors, *Spiritual Education (*Brighton, Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2005); Robert Fuller, *Wonder: From Emotion to Spirituality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Ravi Shankar, *Wisdom for the New Millennium* (Mumbai: Jaico Publishing House, 2005); James A. Wiseman, *Spirituality and Mysticism: A Global View* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2006); Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright and Edward Yarnold, eds. *The Study of Spirituality* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1986), especially "Note on Spirituality," xiv-xvi. Emphasis is placed on traditions of contemplation, reflection and mystical life practices within institutionalized religious forms. In recent years, there has been growing interest and awareness of ecumenical and interfaith practices of spiritualities that enhance understanding of respective religious traditions through common dialogue and sharing. See Thich Nhat Hahn, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995); Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999) and *Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber, editors.* A Strange Freedom: Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life *(Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).* African-Americans tend not to place emphasis on "formalized structures" of spirituality. However, there is a significant presence and a growing literature that suggests that the place of liturgy, ritual and inherited practices have long standing in the life of African-American churches. In this perspective, one finds the recent writings of Peter J. Paris, Cheryl Sanders, Carlyle Fielding Stewart III, Dwight Hopkins and Renita Weems very helpful.

In respect to the second usage of spirituality, a stream of public conversations from Parker Palmer to Deepak Chopra, which incorporate therapeutic and self-actualization discourses, have found audiences beyond the traditional academic and ecclesiastical institutions that have long dominated the contest. African-American women writers, theologians, preachers, clairvoyants, movements like the broadly defined New Age Spirituality, Promise Keepers, are among the many competitors who compete for voice and place on a quickly changing playing field. See Deepak Chopra, *How to Know God: The Soul's Journey Into the Mystery of Mysteries* (New York: Harmony Books, 2000); and *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success: A Practical Guide to the Fulfillment of Your Dreams* (Amber-Allen Publishing and the New World Library, 1994); Herbert Benson, *Timeless Healing: The Power and Biology of Belief* (Scribner, 1996); Larry Dossey, M.D*., Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and The Practice of Medicine* (Harper San Francisco, 1993); Larry Dossey, M.D., *Prayer Is Good Medicine: How To Reap The Healing Benefits of Prayer* (Harper San Francisco, 1996); Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

The third area refers to the broader philosophical and ethical notions of "spirit." Here, spirituality is discussed as source of authority for private and public discourse that again is located across the spectrum of conservative, liberal and progressive ideologies. William Bennett, editor, *The Moral Compass: Stories for a Life's Journey* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995); Steve Barboza, editor and with commentary, *The African-American Book of Values: Classic Moral Stories* (New York: Doubleday, 1998); Marianne Williamson, *Healing the Soul of America: Reclaiming Our Voices as Spiritual Citizens* (Touchstone Books, Simon & Schuster, 1997) and Michael Lerner, *Spirit Matters* (Charlottesville, Va.: Hampton Road Publishing Company, 2000), may well represent the broad social and cultural context for the language game of spirituality in this perspective. See also Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, *Balm in Gilead: The Journey of Healer* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1988**)**; James M. Washington, *Conversations With God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African-Americans* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997), Michael Dash, Jonathan Jackson and Stephen Rasor; Peter Paris, Robert Franklin and Stephen Carter are outstanding exemplars of theologians, ethicists and educators who have done some significant work in the area of African-American spirituality.

[vi] Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for A Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), p. 22.

[vii] Robert Michael Franklin, *Another Day's Journey* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997) p. 86. See also Franklin's taxonomy of "The Spiritualities of the Black Church," where he places King in the social justice tradition, p. 42.

[viii] Arising here is whether we must become "ethical" in order for society to exist or we are necessarily "ethical" in so far as we enter into the make-up of any actual society. The latter, of course, means that society is always, already directed by "ethical" – technically directive – principles and could not otherwise exist. But this forces us to distinguish between the "ethical" principles that happen to exist and competing ethical principles that are after. Hence, ethical principles are always embedded in actual practice, which means that leadership principles are necessarily based on ethical guides. In this view, the problem cannot be to categorically intrude ethical guides, which did not previously exist, but rather first to disengage the guides we know must be there; and second, to confront these with alternates, which we seek to demonstrate to be better. This is another way of saying there is always room for argument and discovery in ethics as a science, and that we must press on with counter-arguments and open ourselves to its inherent possibilities, if we are to make spiritual progress. (Many thanks to Preston King for this observation).