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## LEADERSHIP: A CALLING OF COURAGE AND IMAGINATION

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**Abstract:** In a rapidly changing church and culture, leadership is essential, and women in leadership and ministry offer unique gifts, insights, and tendencies based on their experience as women. This article presents one woman's experience and reflection on the essential components of leadership—courage, imagination, compassion, collaboration, and humility—and challenges both men and women to look at their strengths as well as what unique cautions each gender must consider in order to lead into God's preferred future.

### A Great Cloud of Courageous Women

Rev. Clare Fergusson is the main character of a murder mystery series by Julia Spencer-Fleming. In the first of the series, *In the Bleak Midwinter*, Rev. Fergusson, an Episcopal priest, finds herself helping to solve a murder connected to her new parish in an otherwise sleepy town in New York State.

I enjoyed the novel because, as with any good murder mystery, I did not know what was going to happen next, but also because this woman clergy demonstrates a deep compassion for the people of her community and a willingness to jump feet first—quite literally into a rushing river—to help. Her efforts at helping are sometimes misguided but motivated by a willingness to risk caring for others. She gets tricked into going out into the woods alone to help someone and is nearly killed herself—by a parishioner, although she doesn't know it at

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the time. She risks her own life to save a child's, all while preparing for Advent and Christmas.

The novel is as improbable as a Nancy Drew mystery, but the image of a woman in ministry jumping into a rushing river, surviving in the woods at night with an aggressor in pursuit, reaching out to those who were committing crimes (or accused of them), while caring for those who were the victims of crimes, violence, and hurt, inspired me. We all know that popular images affect real impressions, and that clergy are often depicted as weaker characters in movies, television, and novels, so Rev. Clare is a refreshing image of strength, courage, and compassion.

Reflecting on the inspiration I received from Rev. Clare made me wonder about women who inspire us in leadership today. Few women of my generation were raised to be courageous. It was an era when, frankly, we might have been told we could do whatever we wanted, but it usually meant that doing whatever we wanted was going to give us great privilege, status, and comfort, not require us to jump feet first into anything—especially the rushing rivers of adaptive challenges that we face today.

As a child, I combed the library stacks for biographies on women. I was given very little direction in this regard but ended up reading many old biographies about women that were probably written decades before I was reading them. The women included Clara Barton (who started the Red Cross), Florence Nightingale (who significantly advanced the profession of nursing even with aspersions cast upon her throughout the years), Elizabeth Blackwell (one of the first women physicians), Jane Addams (founder of Hull House, a community center in Chicago), and others whom I never learned about in the classroom. I note that there were no biographies on Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Phoebe Palmer, or Anna Howard Shaw, but then I don't know that there were any biographies written about them in the 1960s, either.

The books I read were about inspirational women with leadership skills that defied perceptions about women in their time as well as mine, who organized and

mobilized people to do a new thing and, as a result, were accepted by them in a new role. Every one of them was dedicated to helping others, not merely to advancing her own career, which at the time would have been an alien notion. These biographies had a huge impact upon me then, and still do. Reading about the lives of courageous women has inspired courage in me.

When I became a United Methodist bishop, I discovered that many of the male retired bishops were experts on one or more presidents of the United States. One retired bishop has what I would call a shrine to Abraham Lincoln. His admiration and knowledge of Lincoln set me on my own exploration of Lincoln's leadership during a very divisive time in our country's history. My conference chancellor, who is in his seventies and has been a community leader throughout the years in addition to his own legal career, also can rattle off countless lessons from numerous presidents that he has read about and studied.

We rely on contemporary leadership literature to inspire and shape our skills too often. Biographies, memoirs, and people around us are full of leadership lessons. I'm struck how different the leadership literature can be in its theoretical approach from the real life and lived-experience of a variety of people, especially women, who have brought their gifts to make a difference in their time and context of history.

Women who inspire courage have a focus and drive centered on neither self, career development, nor even the desire for fame or money; their motivation is determination that makes a difference for others—women on a mission. I'm reminded of the women who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Leymah Gbowee, and Tawakkul Karman. These are all women who have worked hard and sacrificed for others, seeking major changes in difficult if not desperate situations. Their courage inspires us, especially as women, to lead in difficult situations, often without recognized authority or positional power, to make change for our own lives and the lives of others.

When people ask me what I like about being a bishop, I tell them that I like the same thing I have always liked as a pastor: meeting interesting people. A few years ago I had the opportunity to meet Nelson Mandela's wife, Graca Machel, a woman of courage in her own right, whose story speaks to an essential component of courage in leadership. The United Methodist Council of Bishops met in Mozambique in 2007. We were all excited that Nelson Mandela, who reportedly lived down the street from where we were staying, was coming to dinner! Along with him came Graca Machel, whom few of us knew.

Were we in for a surprise. Graca Machel is the widow of the former president of Mozambique who brought the country into independence. She became the minister of education following independence. After the war, the literacy rate was seven percent literacy, but five years later, under her leadership, it was ninety percent.

She has a Methodist background and so had been asked to address the Council. She began her presentation by saying, "I am standing here as a Methodist child." She was the youngest of six daughters. Before her father died, he made her mother and sisters promise that Graca would get an education.

When she was old enough to go to school, her mother was reluctant to let her go. Getting an education in Mozambique was no small endeavor, far more complicated than putting a six-year-old on a yellow school bus; it involved moving away and not seeing her family for months at a time.

She reflected on how her mother and sisters, a significant teacher, and others had "done the impossible" and gifted her with an education. She said that it was a gift she wouldn't have chosen for herself, but once it was given, she had to give the gift to others. In our culture today, even within the church, we focus on vocation in terms of the "purpose-driven life," suggesting that, like a mystery to be solved, we must go out there and discover what the meaning of our lives will be. Machel reminded me that we have a "purpose-given life," in difficult

contexts of ministry, and it takes courage and imagination to live it out.<sup>1</sup>

It is a temptation to simply be impressed by someone like Machal instead of imagining what her life has been like, the challenges that existed to mitigate against her leadership, and the tremendous physical, mental, and spiritual strength it has taken to be who she is and to do what she has done. To be a man in her situation would have required great courage, too, but Machal's life exemplifies to me how women often exist in the same situations as men and yet, to rise to leadership and influence, they must show even more courage to overcome the added burden of social biases.

Yet, my love for meeting interesting people isn't fueled just by meeting those who are famous like Graca Machal. I have met countless women over the course of my ministry who have demonstrated and thereby inspired courage: African-American women who have faced racism and sexism with a spirit unbowed by despair; women raising children on their own and barely eking out food, clothing, and shelter, yet facing each day with hope; women who have left abusive relationships; and women who have held family and career together. The list is long and their names aren't well known to others, but they too demonstrate courage in their lives. Their courage is marked by joy and an absence of victimhood.

These and many other women I have met, read about, and love deeply have taught me courage, courage which is essential in living out the faith today, being in ministry, and providing leadership in a changing church and culture. As women in ministry and leadership, we must surround ourselves with this great cloud of courageous women!

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<sup>1</sup> Retold from Sally Dyck, *A Faithful Heart: A Daily Guide for Joyful Living*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 37–38.

## Reclaiming the Role of Courage in Spiritual or Pastoral Leadership

*In the Bleak Midwinter* tells us that the police chief in the town where Rev. Clare lives and serves has never encountered a clergyperson like her before. He is always having to check his language (and is usually apologizing for his “French”), and scratching his head at her interest in the problems of the community. He can’t understand why she would want to ride in the cruiser with him to discover the community’s problems; that is when they stumble upon their first murder together. Ultimately, Rev. Clare’s commitment to her community is what spiritual leadership or pastoral leadership is meant to be.

In some religious circles of church leadership, it’s very unpopular to talk about having “spiritual leadership” or “pastoral leadership.” They both sound so passive and disconnected from life around us. I’d like to take the (unpopular), tack of trying to reclaim these descriptors regarding what is needed in church leadership today. I believe we have lost the expectation that we need courage for leadership because pastoral leadership has become equated with the image of clergy sitting around in neat, clean offices and reading scholarly and edifying books instead of being out in the community with all kinds of people, doing the countercultural, often controversial work of ministry.

The root of the word *pastor* is shepherd. In many churches across the United States, there are stained-glass windows with the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, triumphantly returning with the lost lamb in his arms and the flock obediently grazing around his feet as he walks through a beautiful green valley. This image is one, mostly idealized, notion of the shepherd.

Yet first-century shepherding was much more like an old painting by Alfred Soord. His Good Shepherd has left the safe level ground for a mountainous cliff and literally gone over the edge in pursuit of the lost lamb. He is holding precariously onto a scrub brush. An eagle is circling overhead, waiting for sheep or shepherd to be

dashed to the rocks below to become its next meal. The lost lamb is piteously clinging to the edge of nothing. The viewer is caught in the tension and uncertainty of whether the shepherd will rescue the lamb before the eagle snatches it away or whether the shepherd will plummet to his death in the attempt to rescue the lamb. The image is literally a cliffhanger because the shepherd is still in the process of reaching out to the lamb in the cleft of the mountain.

Shepherding was not for the faint-hearted. It was a job that required physical, mental, and even spiritual strength to withstand the extreme physical, mental, and spiritual conditions: steep mountains to climb, predators requiring acute awareness, and lonely nights with just the sheep and God. It was risky, dangerous, life-and-death work; their own lives were collateral for the safety of the sheep. A *good* shepherd might have been considered an oxymoron, because shepherds were treated with suspicion, made low wages, and had no status in society. Yet King David's leadership training began with his years of shepherding and carried over into his leadership with the people of Israel: he was a good shepherd who cared for the sheep, was trusted by the sheep owner, was disciplined in his physical, mental, and spiritual ability to face the dangers.

Rather than discard the pastoral image of leadership, we need to reclaim it by recasting it with contemporary images. It may help us, for example, to think of firefighters, putting their lives on the line every time they answer the alarm, rushing into a burning building to save lives at the risk of their own. They don't get to pick and choose who they will save; they're called to save the worthy and the unworthy, the victims of the fire and sometimes those who set the fire, the down-and-out in our society as well as the most prestigious. This is the Good Firefighter. Firefighting is not about sitting in the station, shining boots, and making chow for the crew, but putting lives on the line to rescue and save. Likewise, the pastor or spiritual shepherd's life isn't about living on the

level, safe, and easy plain but going over the edge for those in need.

What is the image of the good pastor today? And how do women in particular embody it? Our image of pastoral leadership must be rooted in the life-and-death conditions in which people live their lives and at the same time in the life-giving gospel of Jesus through word and deed.

The best thing that happened to me in the early years of my ministry was to land on the near west side of Cleveland, Ohio, in 1979 for my first appointment to a small church. The neighborhood was already suffering from the collapsing steel industry and corresponding struggles. That year the Cleveland school system was undergoing desegregation (Cleveland was the second most segregated city in the country), and families fled to the suburbs in droves, driving back into the city to go to church—often forgetting the neighborhoods that had been their communities for generations.

Leadership in that church required an indomitable spirit, as the people struggled with the notion of a woman minister. The man who introduced me on my first Sunday literally said, “This is our new minister, and I like her better than I thought I would!” Faint praise! Many of them had Catholic or Baptist family members and friends. As soon as they got their own heads around having a woman minister, they would encounter someone’s insistence that women could not be ministers and they would waffle again and again.

The church became a fortress against the neighborhood. For a while there was a Friday evening program where neighborhood kids could come in and play games, but even that became too much for the few suburbanites who ran it. One Friday night when the adults did not show up, one of the children wrote in chalk on the step of the church “Open up!” It was a message to us all that the church has to be out in the community or at least open to it. Bringing people inside the building wasn’t enough; we needed to be a witness to the neighborhood.



Although the parishioners weren't always the ones involved in the community, the clergy in the area still lived in the parsonages in the neighborhood—so it was our community—and we banded together ecumenically to make some major changes. Across the street from my parsonage was a pornographic theater and bookstore. The ecumenical leaders of the community worked with the city of Cleveland to get the city to purchase the property. They did, then tore it down and built a city library. That branch had the highest book circulation rate in the system for a long time!

Another one of the community improvements we worked on was to increase safety by removing the motorcycle gangs from the area. There had been violence and murders over the years, centered in the bar right across the street from the parsonage. Through the efforts of the ecumenical leaders, we were able to dry up the precinct so that no alcohol could be served over the counter, which essentially drove the motorcycle gangs out of the neighborhood. At one point in the process, the city councilman and I went to the state liquor board, and before we left, the councilman told me that we had been offered police protection in this project but he had refused it for us, saying he didn't think I'd want it. Yes, but he could have asked!

Over and over again, the leaders of the religious community worked together with as many of our parishioners as we could rally to bring improvements to the neighborhood to make it safer and more attractive. The efforts never brought droves of people into our churches—one or two from time to time—but they did bring vitality to our congregations. We were in a sense living on the edge of some difficult changes. They involved some level of risk to person and property at times, depending upon the reaction of the “powers that be,” such as motorcycle gangs who didn't want these changes in the neighborhood. But ministry felt vital, significant, and life-changing for us and the community.

Courageous leadership is needed to reach new people with the gospel because we have to go to where people

live; many people do not live on level, secure, and cultivated ground anymore. They live on the edge of financial disaster. They live on the edge of emotional meltdown as families are torn apart from brokenness in what are supposed to be the closest relationships. They live on the edge spiritually, wondering where God is in their lives and figuring that once over the edge, God will never find them again. Or their biggest fear may be that God does not care to even look for them. They feel too far over the edge for rescue.

My experiences were hardly as exciting or glamorous as Rev. Clare Fergusson's. Instead they were fraught with uncertainty, challenges, and obstacles both within the church walls as well as in the community; but I discovered a deep grounding in faith in this context for ministry as in no other. Neither faith nor ministry is for the faint-hearted. Like Rev. Clare, the focus has to be on those who are entrusted to our care and in need of whatever leadership we can provide them.

In my experience, I find that women are more likely to recognize that people in their churches and communities are living on the edge. But women who are raised to be more nurturing than courageous may view ministry only from the role of listening, praying, sitting with or accompanying, and offering encouraging words. In a changing culture, pastoral leadership requires us to exercise courage and "go over the edge" to rescue and help others, risking our own comfort and safety. Being active in the community, as clergy are encouraged to be today, means that we put ourselves on the same mean streets as the people in our churches and communities. We are not protected from the harsh realities that they face and so we need courage to be in ministry and to provide leadership to in dangerous situations.

The first wave of clergywomen who entered ministry before and into the early 1970s had a much more difficult time than those of us who came later in the decade up to the present day, but we all have our battle scars resulting from congregations who still don't "believe in" women clergy. It can be a temptation to think that the cause to

work for is the advancement and rights of women. But if we regard our ministry from the perspective of what has been given to us and therefore what we have to give, our courage increases and we will jump feet first into the rushing waters of adaptive challenges, the icy hardships of gender resistance, and the mysteries of a changing culture within and outside of the church that impact us all today.

Women in the church have often focused their advocacy on the need for their own rights within church and society. As those rights have been afforded, women's advocacy groups such as the Commission on Status and Role of Women in the United Methodist Church, have struggled for meaning. Advocacy for our own rights is tied to the advocacy for others, specifically women and children who lack basic needs and rights to health care, equal job opportunities often precluded due to race or gender, and safe families, churches and communities in which to live. I firmly believe that when we focus on our community's needs, we have a better platform from which to advocate for our own rights and privileges. Advocacy requires courage, too, especially for women who are conditioned throughout our lives to please those we serve and not to disturb the comfortable.

My focus on advocacy has been on women and children and their needs in the church and community. As a new bishop, people asked me what my "theme" or focus is in ministry. I replied that my special focus in ministry is on children. At first I'm sure that people thought that children are such a nice, warm, "namby-pamby" sort of cause; truly, children couldn't be too controversial! Yet everything about caring for the children in our communities is controversial. We agree on most of the problems—our poor education system and how it is funded, our state budgets balanced on the backs of children, levels of poverty for children and their experience of daily food scarcity, cuts to art and music as well as science and math, financial tensions in families that cause children to be neglected if not outright abused,

and the list goes on. But we rarely agree on how to solve these problems.

Children have no voice or vote about their present and future needs to grow up strong and healthy in body, mind and spirit. I was asked to speak at a rally held in the rotunda of the State Capital in support of K-12 funding in relation to the state budget one year. I don't know what I expected, but I was a little unprepared to see an entire floor filled with kindergarten children sitting in front of me. They had a supporting cast of adults scattered throughout the room, but I was addressing early elementary-age children with a political message!

I didn't want to lose my crowd so I quickly changed my approach. I looked right at them and asked them, "Did you get here by yourself today?" "No!" they all responded in one voice. "Did you drive the bus or the car that brought you from home to here where people will make decisions about your school?" "No!" they cried again and began to wonder what in the world I was thinking! But I explained to them—and any adults who would listen—that just as they couldn't get there by themselves without assistance from adults, they need the assistance of the adults in our communities around them to help give them what they didn't even know they needed yet: a well-funded and good education.

Caring for the needs of the community, especially the most vulnerable, is an essential part of pastoral leadership. Involvement in the community is more than attending some city council meetings or giving the Memorial Day invocation. Caring for the most vulnerable requires not only providing mercy ministries—such as taking food to the hungry and coats, mittens, and gloves to children—but also making sure that their long-term needs will be met through the common good of government as well as church people. Justice ministries are directed at the root causes of what makes women and children vulnerable, poor, and suffer from violence. Justice ministries require working with others and therefore are collaborative in nature: not just with others in the church or other churches but with government and

non-profit organizations. Justice requires putting oneself and the church on the front lines of the community's needs for the sake of the gospel. And that is not always neat and clean, popular and well-received. But this work does bring vitality to faith and a local church.

Justice ministry requires courage in pastoral leadership accompanied by an occasional unpopular stance based on our faith. In our divisive culture, which has bled into our churches and overwhelmed a gospel-centered worldview, courage in pastoral leadership requires having the guts to stand up for what we believe in and stand with those who are voiceless and invisible. This kind of leadership requires jumping feet first into the controversies that are gospel-based, going over the edge for people who are clinging to a mere thread of hope.

In my second church, where I was appointed for thirteen years, I had the experience of needing to stand up for what I believed and stand with those who were invisible and in the margins. It began with the wonderful experience of shepherding a congregation that was becoming more and more racially and economically diverse. The church grew and was by all accounts a vital congregation that radiated with energy through its opportunities of worship, service, and study. Although I learned that not everybody likes the church to grow, seeing vitality in quantity and quality of lives was incredibly exciting, challenging, and fun.

As a result of the multicultural growth of the congregation, people began to attend, get involved and join because they trusted that if a congregation could look so diverse on the outside, then maybe there was room for diversity on the inside as they came with questions about God's existence and God's love. Their challenge to any platitudes and easy answers about their deep theological questions energized and gave vitality to us all.

But also people who were gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (and we had them all), began to feel like it might be a safe place for them. We estimated from what

we knew about the congregation that sitting on every pew there was someone who fit one of those categories or had an immediate family member who did. I promised that people could be assured that they would not get “beat up” from the pulpit, a concern that many had with other churches of all kinds. But as their numbers grew and as awareness and visibility of the GLBT community grew in culture, it became safer to talk about sexual orientation in light of the faith rather than remain silent about sexuality.

And we did, and we did, and we did talk about sexual orientation, and acted on it in declaring the church to be open to all people. Such action forever marked them and me. I would never have imagined that I would be at times on the frontline of advocating for the full inclusion of all people, including GLBT folks, in the church. The challenge has intensified as a bishop since I am required to uphold the current disciplinary policies around homosexuality in the United Methodist Church, which state that we are to be in ministry to all people, but that homosexuality is “incompatible with Christian teaching.”

In our present divisive culture, one role of leadership is to help people talk to each other in the midst of their differences and for groups to make decisions that are forged as much in *the process of* decision making as in *the results of* the decision. I wonder if women have more practice in life when it comes to listening to each other’s differences and trying to help people who see life differently find a way to live together. Every mother I know wants that for her family! Could working for unity be a unique skill that women as leaders bring out of life experience to conflicted and divisive situations? Like the mother of a quarreling family, a woman leader is looking for the wider community to understand each other better, to give witness to an alternative to divisiveness, and to learn to live with each other in the multitude of relationships that involve differences. With the prevailing divisive attitude within and outside the church, it takes courage to guide people through a process that creates community instead of alienation.

## In Order to Have Courage, Imagination...

Leadership requires courage, and courage is fueled by imagination. I've always believed that the depth of our faith is determined by the capacity of our imagination. Imagination isn't something that spins mythical tales, but imagination is really vision: the ability to see beyond what is and what can be through the presence and power of God.

Leadership requires not too much and not too little imagination. Too little imagination is to fail to see what is possible, beyond the immediate, beyond the crisis, beyond now. I often bemoan the fact that I know my leadership is limited, not so much by my lack of skill in any area but my lack of imagination in what else could be.

Yet too much imagination can lead to paralyzing fear and worry as one imagines all the possible negative outcomes. Again, my observation and experience is that women are prone to having too much imagination at what can go wrong and therefore don't act. But I've also observed and experienced that men are more likely to have too much imagination that results in an inflated sense of possibility about their capabilities which can keep them from realizing their full potential. A little imagination about what could go wrong with the possibilities can lead to an effective strategy that leads to change. In other words, the Goldilocks balance of imagination is crucial: not too much, not too little. Collaboration between men and women or at least people with the tendencies to have too much or too little imagination may empower a vision of what is possible with God connected to the capacity of the unique and diverse gifts of a community to bring about change.

Spiritual leadership has emphasized imagination from the very beginning. The ancient prophets imagined what could happen if things continued the way they were going (in a bad way), and also what God's preferred future would be for the people. Prophets communicated their messages through alternating and rapid-fire images of judgment and hope. Leadership today must also paint a

picture of what happens when we stay on our present trajectory when it consists of harsh realities, but leadership must also help provide a glimpse of God's preferred future for us and with us.

As the church and culture both find themselves in rapid and uncertain change today, jeremiads paint pictures of ecclesiastical apocalypse and dystopia. Just as rumors in the 1960s cried that God was dead, so the dystopian rumors that the church is dead are unhelpful and unfaithful to the creative, courageous, and compassionate imagination that God's prophets of old and today possess. What is God's preferred future for the church today? It's neither utopia (which literally means nowhere to be found), nor dystopia (the worst case scenario of destruction and doom).

We recognize that we are in a process of change but every business, corporation, industry, and institution is also changing. We are in a time of dismantling in order to rebuild, and we don't know what the rebuilding of any businesses, corporations, industries, and institutions will look like in the future, including the church. We can't just hope for a future; we must imagine a new reality and put the hope for that reality into action.

Recently I heard the author Ann Patchett talk about hope on a radio program.<sup>2</sup> "Hope is a plague," she said, referring to Pandora's box, where hope was the last of the evils to be released. Hope-as-an-evil kept people from acting. Therefore, Patchett argues, hope is too passive and keeps people from doing what they need to do, because they are hoping something will change or be different or someone else will make the change so that no personal courage or action is needed. In her novel, *State of Wonder*, a character who hopes her husband is not dead says,

Hope is like walking around with a fishhook in your mouth and somebody just keeps pulling it and

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<sup>2</sup> Minnesota Public Radio, "Midmorning with Kerri Miller," June 28, 2011, <http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2011/06/28/midmorning2/>



pulling it. Everybody thinks I'm a train wreck because Anders is dead but it's really so much worse than that. I'm still hoping.<sup>3</sup>

Hope, Patchett suggests, keeps us from moving on. One doesn't *hope* to write a novel; one writes a novel. One doesn't *hope* for good health; one does what one can and then deal with what happens.

She said that it is a “horrific suffering to hope” because it keeps one from action. “Hopin’ and wishin’” doesn’t get anywhere or anything. Therefore, we can’t hope that the church will face change and find its way forward. We must provide imaginative and courageous leadership to put hope into action.

Are women any better at imagining God’s preferred future and putting hope into action? I believe imagination is nurtured within us and comes in non-linear ways through quiet, solitude, and meditation while we wash dishes and fold clothes as well as read enlightening books and make goals and strategies for effective change. In other words, I think women are (still), nurtured to consider the ways the bring out the strengths of both sides of our brains and to value the resting, gestating, dormant creative time as well as the active, emerging, and productive work.

Imagination gives us the vision and sense of our neighbor as oneself. J.K. Rowling, who wrote the Harry Potter series, spoke at Harvard University’s graduation in 2008. In her address, she credited the development of her imagination to working for Amnesty International. Amnesty International is an organization that monitors human rights violations around the world. At that time in her life, she spent all day reading reports of torture and working with people who had been political prisoners, displaced from their homes, living in exile as refugees for years. She claims it caused her to imagine other people’s lives, even if at times it made her very

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<sup>3</sup> Ann Patchett, *State of Wonder* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), 43.

uncomfortable with the amount of suffering she was reading on the page.

But she said, imagination is what makes us uniquely human; it gives us the ability to imagine others' experiences that we have not had.<sup>4</sup> The capacity of our faith, especially its desire to share God's love and grace with others, is dependent upon our imagination of what it is like to be our neighbor, near or far, now or in the future. Imagination is what produces the compassion that acts on behalf of or with others to bring hope into reality.

As a leader in the church, I don't spend too much time reading reports that depict the absolute destitution of people—I'm more likely to get that through the newspaper with my morning coffee. But leadership's imagination is critical in listening to other people's experiences—those who visit local churches where they are met with barely a glance instead of a warm welcome, when conflict results because clergy and laity don't know what each is really supposed to do anymore, when pews grow emptier by the year, and worse, when no one seems to care or if one does, he or she doesn't know what to do about it. Imagination feeds on listening, learning, and relating to others about all the hurts and hopes of people in our churches and communities. Without imagination, leadership falters. Imagination requires time to hold significant conversations with others who may not have our experience or perspective. Through significant conversations in community we learn what we need to know in order to jump feet first into the adaptive challenges of our day.

Learning what we need to know is more intuitive and comfortable for women than men in my observation and experience. The experiences, thoughts, and feelings of others is the stuff of life that matters and when we take the time to listen to others, we can weave their

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<sup>4</sup> J.K. Rowling, "The Fringe Benefits of Failure, and the Importance of Imagination" in *Harvardmagazine.com*, <http://harvardmagazine.com/2008/06/the-fringe-benefits-failure-the-importance-imagination>

experiences, thoughts, and feelings into a fabric of reality that helps us to understand more deeply what is happening in people's faith in the midst of a rapidly changing church and culture. We can't wait for books to be written and we can't take the time to read that many books! We have people around us with stories to tell us that can literally change our lives, the church, our culture and world if we will listen to them.

When it comes to the ability to listen deeply to others, women have it hands down over men nine times out of ten! I have also observed that the more success men achieve, the less able they are to listen deeply to others around them, especially those they consider to be in some way less important or able or interesting or insightful than themselves. I would go so far as to say that I wonder if women achieve much of their success because they do listen to others. Listen up, men!

## **Framing the Master Narrative of Courage and Imagination**

As Einstein once said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge." A story—even if specifically and uniquely one's own—can draw in or elicit the commonalities and depth of feeling that exists among us. A story captures the imagination in a way that a report from a well-documented survey or study can never do.

Part of the role of leadership is to provide the narrative that accurately reflects both the harsh realities that we face with the courage and imagination needed to face them. What we tell ourselves about who we are and what is happening to us becomes the "master narrative of who we are," Leonard Pitts, Jr., wrote in the *Miami Herald*.<sup>5</sup> A master narrative is powerful, especially at the right time and in the right way to help people put a

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<sup>5</sup> Leonard Pitts, Jr., *Miami Herald*, June 7, 2011, "Don't Blame Sarah Palin for Lack of U.S. History" <http://www.miamiherald.com/2011/06/07/2255658/dont-blame-sarah-palin-for-lack.html>.

meaningful context around their situation including both harsh realities as well as courage and imagination to move forward.

Recently I was asked to preach at a church that had decided it needed to discontinue, therefore merging its members with other churches nearby. It was reported to me that the church was very angry at the annual conference for “never sending a good pastor.” Whether that opinion is true or not, the story parishioners told themselves was that the annual conference never did anything to help them, financially or in terms of good leadership. It could be true, it could be partially true, or it could be false. But it was the story that they were telling themselves and they were sticking to it.

In the course of the worship service, we celebrated the ministry of the congregation existing for over a century. There were pictures and stories told about this congregation that included its role in the earliest presence and outreach of Methodism in Minnesota. One story told of a white Methodist buying a slave’s freedom so that the former slave could help with the mission of Jesus Christ and Methodism in Minnesota through his ability to translate the native language of the local tribe; the former slave was married to a member of the tribe. He had learned the language which he was now willing to use in order to share the gospel. The congregation was mesmerized by this story from their own past.

The celebration also told the story of the congregation’s hard work in building a church and renovating it over the years in order to be a presence in its community. And then there were community leaders from the school system who told how the congregation had a long-standing and continued impact on the elementary school across the street. In fact the celebration of ministry included the commitment to give a share of the proceeds from the sale of the building to a scholarship program.

The celebration also included the telling of the story about a neighborhood association which was started in the early 1970s when the stockyards in the area went out

of business. The church had spearheaded the effort to provide food and basic necessities for families who were affected by the adverse economy in the community. The association will continue into the future, and in fact, the head of it is a member of the church where some of the members will be joining nearby.

Other historical and ongoing outreach into the community was celebrated by the leaders who came from these organizations. Then I talked about how their master narrative will determine who they are even as they go to other congregations, encouraging them to remember their past and to take the best of it into their future.

Afterward one of the leaders of the church said to the pastor, “We should have been telling ourselves these stories over the years.” He recognized that while the stories they had been telling themselves may have given them an angry head of righteous indignation, these narratives had not served them well. In fact, he realized that if they had been telling their own historical stories, the power of that narrative might have made a difference in the situation they now found themselves: grieving the loss of a beloved faith community.

Leaders have the ability—actually, the responsibility—to capture quickly and to articulate the master narrative of a community in a given moment. For pastoral leadership, this articulation occurs not only in preaching, but even in public prayer. We fritter away the power of prayer when we forget that prayer calls us to capture and articulate in the moment whatever the occasion is. One of the reasons that people hesitate to offer public prayer may be that it takes courage to set into context even the most ordinary of situations so as to help us imagine what is needed to set hope into action through the presence and power of God.

We must constantly ask ourselves what the master narrative is that we are telling ourselves and those who are entrusted to our leadership. Is it an apocalyptic message of dystopia painted with a dull and dim view of others and our future and mission? Or is it one that captures the imagination in such a way that hope is fueled

with courage to do impossible things with God? Pastoral ministry and leadership require the latter from us all!

Unfortunately, I observe and experience more women than men telling their story from the position of victim, much like this local church, rather than that of someone who has learned, grown, and been strengthened in body, mind, and spirit through adversity. Men recall stories of their own times of adversity in such a way that embolden, bring laughter at the absurdity of it all, and provide confidence to face the next challenge. As women recall their stories of adversity, we are more likely to devolve into feeling even worse about ourselves and our ministry, feeling even less empowered today than before, as a result of the retelling of the story and making us more timid about the next challenge. How women tell their narrative is essential for strong, courageous, imaginative and hopeful ministry and leadership. Remembering strengths rather than victimization is the key to courageous, imaginative narrative.

### **Out of Imagination and Courage...Humility**

Leading change requires the collaboration, courage, and imagination of many people working together, rather than an old image of a solitary hero marching onto the field of challenge to solve the problem, living and dying alone. Women in leadership seem much more likely to be collaborative because they are more likely to recognize that they do not possess all the skills, insights, and gifts needed for the challenges we face in the church and culture today.

Leadership requires the courage to be humble about our work and ministry. There are no easy answers if there are any answers at all; we are all seeking to find our way in a rapidly changing culture. Collaboration is needed in order to move forward. When we collaborate we empower a community, causing us as individuals to diminish as the community's sense of itself increases. That shift requires humility because to work with others means that we surrender credit for whatever transpires.

There is the potential arrogance and pride that is always threatening us as leaders, especially when we're doing a good job and are successful.

I heard a woman theologian from Brazil tell a folk story at a recent World Council of Church's meeting. A rooster went up on the roof of the hen house just before dawn to crow the sun up. Every morning he would crow and crow, and sure enough, the sun would rise. He was quite proud, and everyone gave him due credit for crowing the sun up each morning.

But one day, he overslept and the sun came up anyway! The hens in the hen house realized that they didn't need him to crow the sun up each day. The rooster didn't come around for a while, and when he did, the hens made fun of him for thinking that he crowed the sun up. Then one morning, the rooster showed up on the rooftop of the hen house just like he used to before dawn. But this time, he crowed *because* the sun came up. He said, "Before I thought I sang the sun up but now I'm a poet who sings because the sun comes up."

More than anything else, perhaps women's spiritual and pastoral leadership of courage and imagination contributes a component of leadership that is more likely to sing praise rather than crow about oneself. A church leader was recounting all the wonderful successes he had before he retired. After listening to him for a while, I asked him, "Was that because you were such a good leader or were there other factors involved?" He looked me straight in the eyes and said, "Because I was a good leader!" This kind of arrogance can in the end trip us up as leaders.

But humility is another Goldilocks phenomenon: not too much, not too little. Too much humility and one lacks the confidence to act on the vision. Fearful and insecure about the ability to move forward, too much humility is paralyzing. Yet too little humility—being too full of self—doesn't make room for the insights, skills and gifts of others. Overconfidence prevents one from seeing and appreciating the contributions of others. Therefore, too little humility often results in a lack of

collaboration; a collaborative work style is essential in our day of rapid change. None of us has all of what it takes to observe, analyze, strategize, and implement change. We need each other and therefore collaboration is key to unlocking the door to the future.

Often women suffer from too much humility, uncertain of one's abilities and insights but usually more willing to collaborate with others. I know of no woman in leadership who would have credited only her own ability to any of her success as the male leader described above did. Most women I work with find it easier to work together than alone in terms of generating ideas and planning. Often we go our separate ways to implement but then come back together again to evaluate, reconnoiter and collaborate again.

If imagination is essential in order to create a sustaining vision for people to see beyond the day-to-day work, to see beyond the details and even the sacrifices, and to put hope into action, we must be careful that we do not reduce God's vision to a program of our own making to suit our own needs out of our own hubris. I'm reminded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's warning about focusing on our visions versus God's vision:

God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. The one who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by oneself. They enter the community of Christians with demands, set up their own law, and judge the (people), and God accordingly...This dreamer acts as the creator of Christian community, as if their dream binds all together. When things do not go their way, the effort is called a failure.<sup>6</sup>

Bonhoeffer's words are cautionary for the way in which we impose ourselves on others with our visions. A

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<sup>6</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, translated and with an introduction by John W. Doberstein, *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 27-28.



temptation of leaders today is the persistent question, “What is your vision?” as if it were truly our own. When I became a bishop, I was asked that question over and over again. My response was, “I get my vision through my ears.” In other words, it is important to listen and then cast the vision as the story that frames the context, recognizable to others and therefore has credibility, integrity and humility.

On Christmas Day, 2011, an unsigned editorial in the *New York Times* opined how “it would be nice if there really were a Santa Claus. Imagine it. No lists, no shopping, no gift-wrapping, no bills, no shipping costs, an extremely low carbon footprint—and on Christmas morning the miraculous appearance of presents” and all that makes a wonderful celebration.<sup>7</sup>

I imagined a woman editorial writer, exhausted from a season of making Christmas happen for her family wishing that instead of having to do all of those things herself, she had some mythical help from Santa Claus. Then she, if it was a she, went on to say that

it would be wonderful, too, to be woken in the earliest hours of the morning by the heralding of angels proclaiming peace on earth. Not just laying down of arms and an end to war, but an end to the conditions that cause war: gross inequality, intolerance, the endless, destructive struggle over natural resources, and the ease with which we dehumanize our fellow human beings. Imagine in its place good will and, more important, the deeds that create and embody good will.<sup>8</sup>

Again, I imagined the writer to be a woman inspired by a vision of peace on earth, emboldened to do the “deeds that create and embody good will.” But then the editorial took an unexpected turn as it concluded: “but the work

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<sup>7</sup> *New York Times*, December 25, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/25/opinion/sunday/the-miracle-and-the-means-of-christmas.html?>

<sup>8</sup> *New York Times*, December 25, 2011.

that lies ahead, finding peace on earth and good will toward others, is wholly human, wholly our own.”<sup>9</sup>

Now I wasn't sure if it was a man or woman writer! It seemed so like a woman to me that she identified how the details of the miracle require human effort but so like a man to think it is all up to us. No, my sister or brother, it's not all up to us. None of us could jump feet first into the rushing waters of adaptive challenges like peace on earth, facing the icy hardships of “gross inequality, intolerance...and the ease with which we dehumanize our fellow human beings.” Yet that is what we are called to do in pastoral and spiritual leadership, but not by ourselves alone.

Pastoral leadership requires a spirit of humility and praise for that which God and the community can do in collaboration together. We sing because God gives us the gifts to be in leadership, not because we make it all happen. When we collaborate with each other and with God we not only survive but live with hope and joy. Pastoral and spiritual leadership is both miracle and means, not just human and not just divine. Through the miracle which is God and the means which we provide, the world can be a better place for all.

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<sup>9</sup> *New York Times*, December 25, 2011.