
**PRESENCE, DISJUNCTION, AND INTENTION:
A WOMAN'S REFLECTION ON LEADERSHIP**
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Abstract: This essay reflects on my own experience of leadership as presence; the disjunction between the perception of leadership roles and the experience and appropriation of leadership roles; and the intentional choice to lead from within a paradigm characterized by virtue and hope. This work also reflects on the context (here referred to as a “tradition”), in which leadership takes place and recognizes that tradition is received and then transformed by one’s participation within it.

“Tradition is not simply a precondition into which we come, but we produce it ourselves, inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition and hence further determine it ourselves.”¹

Presence

This fall (2011), a female student came to my office for a mandatory conversation as part of my institution’s Christian Formation Program. This meeting was our first, and I had never formally met this student. We spent about an hour together talking about Christian formation and what we would do together over the course of her time with us at seminary. At the end of our hour, I said to her, “Do you have any questions for me?” She said, “I don’t see many women who get to the Ph.D. level in biblical studies or theology. Will you tell me your story of how you got to where you are?” And so I did.

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¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1975), 261.

A day or two later, a male student came to my office. He had been a member of a large introductory-level course that I had taught the previous semester, and he was now a member of a slightly smaller course I was teaching on the book of Hebrews. He came with two or three questions about the book of Hebrews and about the assignments that were due, but at the end of our time together he asked, "I have one more question, but it isn't related to the book of Hebrews." I gave him permission to ask his question and he asked, "When we don't agree with the biblical text is it okay to say, 'They just got it wrong?'" I thought about that for a moment, and then asked him, "What's making you ask that question?" He replied, "Well, I've been thinking about women in ministry, and I fully support the position that women are called to the ministry, but there are these passages that don't support that position. Can we just say they got it wrong?" In my evangelical institution, such a response is not an option. However, I sat with this student and laid out for him a variety of ways that people have thought about the issue of inspiration, and I spoke with him about how particular views of inspiration lead to particular ways of understanding the authority of Scripture. After I had laid out a variety of options in as unbiased a manner as I could, I told him, "Your question is a very important one because it raises issues around what you believe about the Bible, about God, about the Word-Jesus, and about the work of the Holy Spirit. You'll have to think and read and pray about these things, but I cannot make up your mind for you. You will have to make up your mind for yourself about these things." And, I invited him back for further conversations either this semester or any other time, even if he was not in one of my courses.

These two encounters with students brought me full circle. I remember when I first came to college as a young student of seventeen. At that time, I really did not understand that we addressed our professors as "doctor" because they had done original research in their field and published that research in a dissertation. No one in my

family had a Ph.D. When I first entered college, I never dreamed that I would one day have a Ph.D. Similarly, when I first entered college, I had never met a woman who had been ordained to the ministry. At that time, I don't think I even knew that could happen. The women I knew in my Baptist context who were gifted Bible teachers and communicators were mostly those who had spent their lives working abroad as missionaries. And my view of Scripture, inspiration, and authority did not allow for women to be ordained to the ministry.

When I went to college I had two loves—stories and the Bible. So, I decided to major in both of them: English literature and biblical studies. I discovered almost immediately that at my undergraduate institution these two majors were populated in a very gender distinctive way. While I was at this university, I was one of three females who majored in biblical studies out of some sixty undergraduate majors. I became used to being the only female in many of the upper level courses that I took. I did not think much about this situation, but I also knew that I worked very hard to show that “I was just as good as the guys.” All of my Bible teachers were men. In contrast, my English literature courses often had more females than males, and my courses were equally split between male and female teachers. I did not feel the same need in those classes to “prove myself.” In many ways, the experience I had as a woman in those Bible classes shaped the means that I used to move ahead in the academic system: hard work, determination, and intent to show that I was just as capable as the next guy.

Both of these majors shaped my worldview—my understanding of the tradition I had come from and the tradition I would inhabit. In my upper-level English classes, I first met the worldview-changing experience of hermeneutics. This was my introduction to a variety of literary critics ranging from Aristotle and Longinus to Derrida and Foucault. In upper-level biblical studies classes, I was introduced to the possibility that women might participate in ordained ministry. Still, my understanding of the Bible did not allow for the full

validity of such ministry. At the end of my four years in college, I began to dream about my next step, and I heard about a degree that looked at the Bible as literature. It seemed that this area could be where my loves might meet. But when I talked to my family about going on for more study in this area, at least one person challenged me and asked why I was going to study in that area because “there are not any jobs for women” in that field. Still, I was given the opportunity to go on, first for a master’s and then for the Ph.D. in biblical studies, and my family helped to support me in that endeavor. Far away from the geographical and religious setting in which I had grown up, I encountered, for the first time, ordained women. I lived alongside these women for four years and saw from their lives and from their reading of Scripture (we were all pursuing the Ph.D. together by this time), that these were women who were living out a call of God in their lives. By the time I finished the Ph.D., I could not imagine living in a world where women were not fully supported when they exhibited gifts for ordained ministry and experienced a call to ordained ministry.

Some years later, I was hired as assistant professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary. One of the attractions of the seminary was that it was a place that explicitly supported the ordination of both women and men. This support was explicit in the foundational documents of the institution. The revised vision statement for the institution states, “Asbury Theological seminary is a *community called* to prepare theologically educated, sanctified, Spirit-filled men and women...”² The educational goals of the institution state that the seminary “nurtures men and women called of God for parish ministry and other forms of servant leadership” and that it “prepares women and men for prophetic ministries of redemption and renewal.”³ In addition, the

² Asbury Theological Seminary, *2011–2012 Catalog*, 16.

³ Asbury.

seminary explicitly seeks “inclusion of women and minorities on the faculty.”⁴ Yet, when one of my female students comes to my office, she can say to me, “I don’t see many women working in biblical studies and theology.” And when I look around at my area—biblical studies—I am well aware that I am currently the only full-time woman working in that field at my institution. And, in this way, simply by being here and doing the work I do and doing it well, I have become a leader—one who demonstrates by the life that I live that women are indeed capable of going on in this particular area of study. My presence is a form of leadership.

Disjunction

My awareness that presence is a form of leadership is important to me because generally, in my own understanding, I don’t think of myself as a leader. When I think about who I am and what I do, I think about a woman who is generally quiet, reflective, and careful with her words—a person more content with the back row than the front stage. In addition, when I think about the backdrop that forms my view of leadership, I think about presidents and pastors, provosts and deans, and since I am not one of *those* people, I do not think of myself as a leader. Even now, having been appointed as the chair of the New Testament department and having been appointed to chair one of our major faculty committees, I do not think about myself as a leader. Even though “appointed leadership” is part of my traditional script, it is not a script that I appropriate for myself.

I have understood leaders as individuals who led from the front, while I knew myself to enjoy the group where one knew each individual, had an understanding of what made both the individuals and the group tick, and a feel for what might inspire the whole group to rise to the occasion before us. I could not understand myself as a

⁴ Asbury, 17.

leader who was separate from the group even when I was appointed and identified as such. And thus, in my mind, I was not a leader.

The caricature that I had of leadership was one that involved roles, position, and authority rather than personality and character, creativity, an authentic voice, and the capacity to listen. Leaders were those people who stood up and swayed opinions, pressed their ideas and visions forward, gave direction, and had access to budgets. Since I did not do those things or have power over any money other than my own, in my understanding, I was not a leader. But I've come to understand that I am indeed, in my own way, a leader, and that such leadership comes out of the character that has been formed in me and is evidenced in a set of character traits that come to the fore in my own leading. I am becoming a leader who leads out of who I am.

Intention

As a leader, I am located in time, and my presence within time means that I am not static and that the situation around me is not static. And yet, in order to function within time one always works from within a particular, located understanding—a tradition—an understanding of the institution in which one works, an understanding of the self, an understanding of the way the world operates, an understanding of gender. Such a system of understanding is not static like a still photograph; rather, it morphs with the unfolding of time. In this way, understanding itself is not static but changes and is shaped or developed in response to a wide variety of inputs, and this experience shapes one's response to the place one finds oneself and the events happening

therein.⁵ This matrix forms the pre-understanding that allows one to operate in the world.

At the same time, this pre-understanding is in constant flux, repeatedly rewritten and redefined, at times by a little tweak or twist or modification to a way of seeing; at other times, the script seems to be so rewritten as to make the former understanding no longer believable. And yet...that former understanding is not dismissed; rather, it is acknowledged as a previous way of being that no longer adequately accounts for the tradition in its current form.

I find myself in the process of moving from one pre-understanding to another. I am aware of leadership as presence; I am aware of the disjunctive thinking I have had about leadership; and I am increasingly aware that I can engage in leadership within my institution in a way that aligns with who I understand myself to be.

That which has been formed in me: The matrix of the institution—its commitments to the Wesleyan theological tradition, its attention to corporate worship, its heavy reliance on policies to order institutional life, the informal structures of collegial friendship, its stated support for women, the movement or lack thereof across disciplinary boundaries, its internal and external political struggles, its appointed leadership—forms some of the background that generates my own leadership. There is no context-free locality from which to reflect on the nature of leadership. And it is here that I begin to reflect on the significance of my gender to the manner of leadership that most suits me.

From the very beginning of my time at the seminary, my identity as a woman mattered. Two other women joined the faculty at the same time I did. This event raised the number of female faculty to nine out of about fifty full-time faculty. Only one of the nine women was

⁵ For discussion of the topic of “pre-understanding” and the constructive process of knowing, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 13–16.

married. None of us had children. In contrast, more than ninety-five percent of my male colleagues were married. The vast majority of those had children. The female faculty welcomed new women to the faculty with joy and with the anticipation of friendship and support across disciplinary boundaries. The eldest among us often told the story of her arrival at the seminary as the first full-time female faculty member and, perhaps more important, of her joy when she was joined first by one more female colleague and then by another.

The female faculty became a network of support in a geographical context where we did not have our own immediate biological family. These women who met together at the beginning and end of each semester for shared meals, celebrations, and storytelling form part of the background for my leadership. These women reminded each other of the ongoing need to raise awareness about the call of women to equal ministry and leadership in the church. These women moved to support our female students in a variety of ways. These women provided a set of relationships in which one could express one's true voice. In other words, these women provided trust, welcome, joy, and sharing. This connection became part of the frame for what I would become and grow into as a leader. Here was a place where each voice was valued, heard, supported, and encouraged. It was not that my voice was not heard in other places—it certainly was, but the voice I spoke with in other contexts was more guarded, controlled, and self-effacing. Those first years at the seminary, I spent a lot of time watching and not very much time speaking.

Early on as a member of several committees and departments in my institution, I observed that there were particular strategies that “won” the day at meetings, and that there were other strategies that produced very little forward movement. At our institution, the person who showed up with a well-constructed written document to distribute to the group almost always succeeded in moving that proposal through the institution with only minor revisions to the document itself. People came to

own their participation in the document by suggesting minor tweaks and revisions to the wording. The wrangling over individual words sometimes seemed interminable. Usually, these changes did not substantially alter the direction of the proposal. On one hand, I observed that this produced material that could help the institution operate; on the other hand, sometimes the larger conversation about vision, dreams, and ideals was cut short by turning our attention to a sheaf of papers. I wondered—sometimes to myself, sometimes to others—whether there could be a better way.

That which has been formed in me—character: Be kind. That is: I want to be a person whose character is one of care and consideration for others, and I want to demonstrate this kindness in the manner by which I lead. As a leader, one of the best ways I know to show care for others is by true listening. There are many forms of listening, but what I am referring to here is a listening that is attached to a deep regard for the person who is speaking. I want to listen to others with as much care and respect as I have received from gracious others on more than one occasion in my life. Such listening moves beyond the therapeutic, “I hear what you are saying,” or the summary statement, “What I hear you saying is X.” This listening takes into account the concerns of another in such a way that one is willing to take action on behalf of such a person. Such action may not be the action anticipated by the speaker, but it is action that demonstrates hearing rather than solely speaking a word of affirmation.

In a recent leadership situation, I was the authority appointed to oversee the continued development and revision of a program that had been unanimously voted into existence by our faculty. As it turned out, enthusiasm for the program was not as unanimous as the votes might suggest. Some faculty had voted for the program not because they thought it was a good idea for students, nor because the seminary should focus on it for the next ten years; rather, they voted for it because they thought there was no other option, that failure to support this option

might result in ramifications with external groups that would impinge on the future health of the seminary. In this context, the ability to listen, to really hear the frustration of other faculty members and to address their frustration as a valid concern while still enlisting them as participants in and supporters of the program became a significant task. This task was accomplished with meetings in smaller groups, meetings with large groups over a free lunch, and conversations with key individuals. All of this conversation led to more willingness to work together as a whole faculty even if some still saw the program as flawed in a variety of ways.

As I reflect on this leadership experience, I think about the important book *Women's Ways of Knowing*,⁶ which describes “connected knowers”—people who find it easiest to learn and understand through an empathetic relationship with another. Often that other is significantly different from one’s self. The process of learning takes place because: “Connected knowers begin with an attitude of trust; they assume the other person has something good to say.”⁷ As a leader, I have generally begun with the attitude that everyone has something to say, and that what they have to say may be a valuable contribution to the work that we will do together. It is challenging to go out of one’s way to try to understand a perspective that is different from one’s own, but it also strengthens the process, as the whole group comes to see the work that they do as belonging to the group rather than to one person’s vision and/or agenda. Similarly, “[c]onnected knowers do not measure other people’s words by some impersonal standard. Their purpose is not to judge but to understand.”⁸ From this understanding a

⁶ Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

⁷ Belenky, et al., 116.

⁸ Belenky, et al.

way forward that includes the whole, or as much of the whole as possible, can be made.

At the same time, it can become clear that further conversation in a given direction will not result in further understanding or empathy. This is particularly true when speech becomes aggressive, demanding, or accusatory. As a leader, it is important for me to be aware of the effectiveness of a soft answer (Prov. 15:1), or a deferral. Not every conversation needs to happen here and now. Sometimes even a pause that admits silence into the room before redirecting the conversation may allow for new direction or a new way of understanding. Not all conversations result in connected knowing; rather, there must be a trust and empathy between the speakers. This development happens over time as a group works respectfully together. On one hand, this trust begins when I as the leader bring together a group and lay the set of problems we need to address before them and then open up a conversation in which multiple possibilities can be explored. On the other hand, the group also places their trust in me—both in the integrity of my character and that I will present the material for review as clearly and carefully as possible.

This approach forms a circle of trust that allows us to hear each other and to move forward in ways that will eventually reach beyond the boundaries of our small group and into the organization itself. Decisions are made in this context that will be brought to the larger institution for consideration. And once again I find myself coming full circle. Now I am the leader who brings a sheaf of papers to the larger meeting for discussion, and there are a few tweaks to the language but mostly affirmation. And I find myself wondering if we have done anything that creates a vision or whether we have just signed a policy that we will work to implement out of duty rather than joy. And in this context, I find myself wondering if we might do it some other way. And I find myself considering the role of care, respect, listening, connecting, and trusting as means of leading in different ways.

That which has been formed in me—hope: I find myself more aware of human weakness, fragility, and sinfulness. I see this in my own self and in my very closest relationships. But I am also aware of human resilience and the grace of God that is able to use tragedy and even the manifestations of sin itself for the purposes of God. This grace gives me hope. Without this hope, it would be tempting to think that I must always be in control to make sure that the work gets done right and done well (the old survival strategy coming through). But I am growing in my awareness that even if everything were to come undone—even that can be used by God. This is not an excuse to do poor work but a realization that there is only one ultimate source of good, and that ultimate source of good is neither myself nor my committee nor department nor institution. It is God alone. When I forget that truth, my leadership is no longer hopeful; it becomes anxious, for then my leadership depends on my own performance and abilities. When I remember God's redemptive capacities, then I can dwell in trust and lead from my location within God's hope where Christian character is formed.

Conclusion

I have come full circle. I am no longer the young college student who knew nothing about Ph.D.s and the place of women in ordained ministry. Now, I am the one who offers to students an example of female leadership. This leadership is demonstrated in a variety of ways: through my presence in a particular field, department, and institution; through my participation in appointed leadership roles; and through my reflection on the ongoing leadership tradition that exists and is being built in my institution. It is my desire to lead in such a way that I reflect the virtues that are formed in me through hope and faith in God.