

The Leader as Shepherd

By

*Blaine McCormick
Baylor University
Hankamer School of Business
P.O. Box 98001
Waco, Texas 76798-8006
(254) 710-4158
Blaine_McCormick@baylor.edu*

The Leader as Shepherd

God demonstrates a preferential option for shepherds from the earliest pages of the Biblical record and the leader as shepherd remains a powerful theme throughout both the Old and New Testaments – particularly in the 23rd Psalm. This essay introduces the idea of shepherd leadership and examines the characteristics of the shepherd leader. The shepherd leader and the servant leader are framed as complementary models and contrasted with one another. Psalm 23 is used as a lens to take a closer look at the implications of the leader as shepherd.

The Art and Soul of Leadership

How do you become a better leader? Social scientists have written dozens of empirically-driven books (see Collins, 2001, and Kouzes & Pozner, 2002, and Kotter, 1990, for a few examples) and published hundreds of articles (see King, 1971, for a singularly excellent example) to help answer this question. Science is indeed useful in helping us become better leaders because we live in a material world that can be examined and measured.

Undercutting science's usefulness in this matter is that we live in a material world and a spiritual world at the same time. Though scientists would claim that there's no empirical evidence for the existence of the human soul or the afterlife, most people would have trouble dismissing the spiritual side of life simply because of a lack of evidence for it. In fact, a recent survey by the Barna Group (*The Barna Update*, Oct. 21, 2003) reported that 8 out of 10 Americans believe in both the human soul and the afterlife despite any confirming evidence from scientists. How can we capture the spiritual side of life and a fuller picture of the world when it comes to developing leaders? Put differently, how does one become a fuller leader? Looking beyond the sciences to the arts is a beginning.

Few paintings have become as iconic for Americans as Emanuel Leutze's portrayal of *George Washington Crossing the Delaware*. Painted in 1851 seventy-five years after the actual crossing, the canvas is anything but an accurate portrayal of the historical events. Even people without detailed knowledge of the crossing notice several inaccuracies beginning with the flag. The "Stars and Stripes" didn't replace the Grand Union flag Washington carried with him until six months after the crossing. Second,

being a military operation, the crossing occurred under cover of darkness rather than at the breaking of the dawn. Third, Washington crossed near the end of the operation rather than at the beginning. Finally, Washington crossed the Delaware sitting safely in the boat rather than on his feet facing forward. If you've ever tried standing up in a canoe then you understand the difficulty.



Given all the discrepancies, it's clear that Leutze's goal was not to tell us about the actual crossing as much as it was to tell us something about leadership. From this perspective, Leutze's painting is no different from some of the leadership research cited earlier. Both the artist and the social scientist have something to say about leadership. Furthermore, there's more to say about leadership than the social scientist, however talented, can capture in his study. This is the comparative advantage of the arts over the sciences and why leaders need to consider claims from both disciplines – and I use the word *disciplines* intentionally. Undisciplined art is as dangerous as undisciplined science when making claims about leadership.

So what might Leutze be trying to communicate to the viewer about leadership? One lesson must be that leadership matters enormously in the course of history— no small claim in and of itself. Surprisingly, this beloved American painting was painted in Germany by a German artist reflecting wistfully on the failed German Revolution of 1848. Leutze suggests that had a leader as strong and daring as Washington emerged during that revolution, Germany might have become a democratic republic like the United States. Given a different 19th Germany, the “what if’s” concerning two wars in the 20th century are intriguing.

Leutze has other leadership lessons for the patient observer. He certainly suggests that leaders lead visibly from the front. Though Washington crossed near the end and was often behind the lines of the actual battles, he is intentionally portrayed as the tallest and most prominent person in the picture. One almost has the sense that Washington is the bow which breaks a path through an otherwise static and frozen future. At the same time, Washington is literally and figuratively “in the same boat” with his followers. By portraying the crossing at dawn Leutze teaches us that good leadership brings optimism and the hope of a better tomorrow. Leutze’s inclusion of a black soldier in Washington’s boat was a strong statement against the institution of slavery and reminds viewers that great leadership crosses racial boundaries. Finally, given the long-standing popularity of Leutze’s painting, his most basic lesson may be that leadership is inspiring.

Artists working in other mediums have also made powerful claims about leadership. Consider Michelangelo’s sculpture of the young David just after he killed Goliath – a sculpture that more than one person has described to me as “overwhelming”. Again, note that accuracy is not the most important point as viewers quickly realize that

David is portrayed by Michelangelo as larger than life – and the result is awe-inspiring. Furthermore, David most certainly didn't fight Goliath in the nude so what is Michelangelo trying to tell us here? His most likely lesson is that David's victory was one of wit and intelligence rather than strength. Though David's sling is thrown over his left shoulder, it is not prominently displayed and is easily missed by hasty tourists.



By portraying David without any armor or shelter, Michelangelo also teaches the viewer that leaders are very vulnerable. This is a paradoxical and wise lesson for viewers who assume that leadership brings only comfort and protection. Finally, during a discussion of this sculpture in a leadership forum, one of the leaders stated that Michelangelo wished to teach us simply that, "Leadership is beautiful," – certainly a rare claim and a difficult one for an empirical study to make.

In the twentieth century, filmmakers have also offered us several vivid images of leadership. One of the most iconic is Fred Zinnemann's 1952 film *High Noon* starring Gary Cooper. Cooper portrays Marshal Will Kane who tries to rally the town to meet outlaw Frank Miller at the train station when he returns to town to take vengeance upon the people who sent him to prison. Those who have seen the film know that townspeople reject Kane's appeal using a variety of excuses leaving Kane to face down the villain and his gang alone.

High Noon has proven to be a popular film for American presidents from Eisenhower to the present. According to White House records, Bill Clinton screened the film 20 times during his presidency. Zinnemann's portrayal of the leader's lonely and

virtuous path resonates all too well with experienced leaders. Much like J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Zinnemann memorably portrays that naming and engaging evil is one of the key purposes of leadership. In the end, leadership might be the only thing standing between thuggery and the well-ordered society.

Moving beyond the visual arts, novelists also have provided us with a variety of both positive and negative leadership images. Melville's characterization of Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick* is a classic study in how bad leadership corrupts an otherwise good enterprise. More positively, decades of leaders have benefited from J.R.R. Tolkien's well-drawn leaders ranging from Gandalf the wizard to Aragorn the nascent king. One of the most influential leadership images to come out of literature was lifted from Herman Hesse's 1956 novel *The Journey to the East*. Robert Greenleaf credits Hesse's novel as the inspiration for his thinking on servant leadership. Reading about Leo, the humble servant and strong leader whose disappearance caused the narrator's expedition to fail, Greenleaf saw clearly a truth about leadership that had escaped other thinkers of his day. Put simply, one of the most significant leadership insights of the last century came to us through the world of art rather than the world of science.

In sum, those wishing to learn about leadership and become fuller leaders should look to both the visual and the literary arts for inspiration. In addition to studying the science of leadership, we should seek inspiration from the portrayal of leadership in novels, paintings, sculptures, film, and even poetry. Maybe these artists have something to tell us about leadership that historians and social scientists will never be able to fully articulate.

God's Preferential Option for Shepherds

Once we move beyond the truth claims of science, we can look to a broad variety of sources to learn more about leadership. Art, literature, and film at a minimum but Scripture has a great deal to say about becoming fuller leaders— particularly in its sacred poetry. God demonstrates a preferential option for shepherds from the earliest pages of the Biblical record and continuing through the New Testament. Genesis 4:2 informs us that, “Abel was a keeper of sheep and Cain was a tiller of the ground.” Not many verses later we learn that Abel’s sacrifice of one of his firstborn lambs was favored by God. In contrast, Cain’s sacrifice of his crops was not favored by God – if not outright rejected. At first glance, God appears to pass a rather harsh judgment on Cain for failing to offer a proper sacrifice. However, nowhere in the text did God command such a sacrifice. The text suggests that the ritual of sacrifice originated with humankind. Cain, for unknown reasons, initiates the sacrifice on his own terms and Abel, being the younger brother, follows suit.

Though God did not command sacrifice, He did choose to respond to this new ritual. In so doing, He demonstrated a preferential option for the shepherd’s sacrifice. What can we learn from the first shepherd in Scripture to find favor with God? Kass (2003) offers some possible answers. As a “tiller of the ground”, Cain engaged in a more technologically advanced work than his brother Abel. Agriculture became the basis of the first civilizations. Shepherding, in contrast, was the occupation of nomads and thereby set apart from the trappings of civilization.

Later in Genesis chapter 12, God begins something new with the calling of the patriarchs. Kass (2003: 248) makes the following observations about this transition:

“In keeping with its original judgment on cities and civilizations, the Bible’s new national solution pursued with the Children of Israel will not be, at least for a long time, civic or political in nature. On the contrary, the patriarchs will all be wandering shepherds rather than settled farmers or city dwellers, and this distinction will prove crucial for the differences between the new way and the ways of other peoples...”

When God chose to begin a new way he once again exercised His preferential option for shepherds by calling out Abram instead of reaching into the already existing civilizations of the day. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will all have encounters with kings and cities but their life and faith will be shaped by their dedication to shepherding. Though against his will, Jacob’s son Joseph departs from this way more than any other and becomes nothing less than a bureaucratic administrator in Egypt. When his family comes to live in Egypt to avoid famine, Joseph counsels his brothers to lie about their family’s true profession as, “...all shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians” (Genesis 46:34). This one comment throws into sharp contrast the differences between the ways of the shepherds and the ways of the most advanced civilization of that day.

Things do not go well for the Children of Israel after the death of Joseph and they soon fall into slavery. When it comes time for deliverance, God once again demonstrates his preferential option for shepherds by raising up Moses. Like Joseph before him, Moses was no stranger to the ways of the Egyptians and was even in line to become a powerful political advocate for his people. However, he also must learn the way of the shepherd before he can be used by God. After murdering an Egyptian, Moses escapes to Midian

where he becomes a shepherd. It is here, when he is "...tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian..." (Exodus 3:1) that God calls him to leadership – a leadership that will look strangely similar to that of a shepherd leading his flock through the wilderness.

God's preferential option for shepherds doesn't end with Moses. Even after Israel becomes its own nation, God will exercise his preferential option for shepherds to raise Israel to new heights by anointing the shepherd David as king of Israel in place of Saul. Thus, throughout the Old Testament record, God used the role of the shepherd to shape His chosen leaders. These chosen leaders would go on to define God's new ways whether the founding of a new family or the founding of a new nation.

The leader as shepherd is pervasive in the New Testament scriptures as well. In the John 10, Jesus reveals himself as "the Good Shepherd" and contrasts the role negatively with that of both the servant (or hired hand) and the thief. Peter also proclaims Jesus to be the "Chief Shepherd" (I Peter 5:4) underscoring Jesus' own claims to this image. When Jesus commissions his followers at the end of his earthly, he uses the imagery of the leader as shepherd. In John 21, when Jesus commissions Peter, a fisherman by trade, to be a leader of the church he tells Peter to:

- "Feed my lambs." (v. 15)
- "Shepherd my sheep." (v. 16)
- "Feed my sheep." (v. 17)

The rest of the New Testament writings and testimony are replete with the image of the leader as shepherd. Most clearly in Acts 20:28, Paul reminds the early church leaders of the role as shepherds in stark contrast to the wolves that will come seeking to

destroy the sheep. In addition, both Peter (I Peter 5:1-3) and Paul (Eph. 4:11) refer to the early church leaders as *poimen*, the Greek word for shepherds. In sum, despite the popularity of the image of the servant leader in Christian culture, both the Old Testament and the New Testament make a strong case for God's preferential option for shepherds when it comes to leadership.

Shepherd Leadership and Servant Leadership: Similarities and Differences

Comparisons of shepherd leadership with Robert Greenleaf's (1991) ideas on servant leadership are inevitable. Shepherd leadership is neither a rival for servant leadership nor a substitute. Rather, it's a complementary idea. The purpose of this section is to bring the similarity and differences between the two ideas into sharper focus.

Textual origins. A similarity shared by both concepts is that they each originated from texts rather than science. Greenleaf's inspiration for servant leadership came from Herman Hesse's 1956 novel *Journey to the East*. Likewise, shepherd leadership originated in deep readings of King David's 23rd Psalm. In contrast, a difference between these two ideas is that shepherd leadership has its origins in a sacred text whereas servant leadership has its origins in a mystical novel. Similarly, shepherd leadership originated with poetry whereas servant leadership originated in prose.

Images. Both shepherd and servant leadership are presented to the reader using a strong visual image rather than a theoretical model. In addition, the image of the shepherd and the servant are both ancient images though the servant image is a bit less archaic than shepherd. Finally, both concepts are considerably more complex than popular conceptualizations of the primary image. For example, the ServiceMaster corporation

believes so strongly in the power of servant leadership that a statue of Jesus washing the disciples feet now stands in front of their Chicago headquarters. Despite the power of this visual representation, advocates of servant leadership would contend that there's much more to the concept than this image. Similarly, contemporary Christian culture is awash in images of gentle shepherds cradling sheep in their arms. Like Jesus washing his disciple's feet, there's truth to this image yet it only captures a small part of the shepherd leader's role. Equally valid (and equally Biblical) are images of shepherds killing predators trying to take some of their sheep. In the end, both images of shepherds and servants are of limited relevance to modern audiences and require a good deal of elaboration for the contemporary leader.

Other associations readers might have with the two primary images serve to differentiate the two concepts. Shepherds tend to lead from the front in highly formal and visible ways. Servants, in contrast, are often described as "behind the scenes" leaders. The Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership notes that, "Servant-leaders may or may not hold formal leadership positions." Though the reality of servant leadership as defined by Greenleaf (1991) is often broader than the connotations that accompany the image of the servant, these connotations tend to drive initial perceptions of servant leadership.

Presence and absence. In Hesse's *Journey to the East*, the servant Leo disappears in the middle of the narrator's journey. The narrator realizes his need for leadership most in Leo's absence when the expedition falls into chaos and disorganization. As Greenleaf frames the story, the power of servant leadership is most evident in its *absence*. In contrast, the power of shepherd leadership is in its *presence*.

King David's psalm begins with an acknowledgement of presence: "The Lord is my shepherd." He celebrates the presence of the shepherd in several ways throughout the psalm. King David's use of phrases like "He leadeth me" and "For thou art with me" suggests that being present is central to being a shepherd leader. The health, life, and order pervading the 23rd Psalm highlight the good things that result from the presence of the shepherd leader.

Perception of the leader. Greenleaf (1970:2) contended that, "the great leader is seen as servant first, and that simple fact is the key to his greatness. Leo was actually the leader all of the time, but he was servant first because that was what he was, deep down inside." Greenleaf rightly recognizes the lasting power of first impressions, especially when it comes to how followers perceive leaders. Hesse's narrator in *Journey to the East* knew Leo first as a humble servant and only later learned that Leo was the successful leader of a large religious order. The follower's perception of the leader is forever altered by these initial perceptions and is often the motivation for bestowing the gift of leadership upon a person. Servanthood will always be part of the leadership equation as far as the follower is concerned and Greenleaf rightly notes this.

So what can we say to those who must lead without the benefit of such a generous first impression? For many leaders, a follower's first impression comes via the equivalent of a coronation or inauguration. A press release or a carefully-crafted memo trumpeting the leader's achievements and qualifications is the modern leader's most likely introduction to his followers. It's anything but a subtle, servant-centered beginning. However humane the leader's first personal contact might be with the follower, the proverbial die is cast and the leader is perceived as leader first rather than servant.

Thus, a servant leader is seen *by others* as a servant first and they later acknowledge this person as a legitimate leader. In contrast, a shepherd leader is seen *by others* as a leader first and may not ever be acknowledged as a shepherd by the followers (even though the leader is maintaining the integrity of the shepherding role). Thus, shepherds act like shepherds whether or not their followers perceive them as such. Like King David, the followers may ultimately acknowledge their shepherd – there is simply no way this can be guaranteed.

Awakening the Shepherd Leader

Just as there is a transformative power in the followers first perceiving a leader as a servant, there is transformational power in a leader perceiving himself or herself as a shepherd. This sort of self-perception can be known as an awakening and there are two awakenings along the path to becoming a shepherd leader. First, a person becomes a shepherd leader when she awakens to the presence of shepherds who have guided her through life and, like David, gratefully acknowledges their influence and impact on her life. Second, a person continues on the path to becoming a shepherd leader when they awaken to the impact that their decisions and behaviors have upon their followers. This section handles each of these awakenings in turn.

One interpretation of the opening verse of Psalm 23 is that of an awakening and recognition: “The Lord is my shepherd.” Psalm 23 – and the entire Biblical narrative – teaches us that shepherd leaders do not spring forth into the world fully formed. Rather, shepherd leaders emerge from a complex network of obligations both human and Divine. Every shepherd leader must first recognize and acknowledge that they were a follower

under the care of another shepherd long before they awakened to their own leadership potential. As such, Psalm 23, rather than “Invictus”¹, is a more realistic meditation for shepherd leaders.

Just how does one recognize and acknowledge the shepherds that have led you throughout much of your life? More precision in describing a shepherd leader will help at this point. First, a shepherd leader is an *authoritative guide*. That is, they have traveled the path ahead of you and offer reliable and expert counsel about the choices you’ll face. And this is counsel, not commands. In teaching us to recognize the authoritative guides in our lives, epistemologist Esther Lightcap Meek (2003: 101) offers the following reflection, “Even when we are old hands, some word, some norm, guides our thoughts. I remember my father’s maxim every time I set up a photograph with my camera. ‘Make sure there’s some foreground, and don’t put the subject in the middle of the picture.’ *Whose words do you hear in your head at the junctures of your life?*” (italics mine)

¹ “Invictus” by William Ernest Henley

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

We awaken to the shepherd leaders in our lives as we acknowledge the reliable counsel, guidance, and encouragement that we have been given over the course of our lives. In my own life, I can recall numerous pieces of counsel that people have given me over the course of my life – each one a shepherd. Phrases like, “You’re doing more good than you know.”, “Find out what your boss wants and give it to him.”, and – more humorously but no less true – “The secret to making a great hamburger is only turning it once,” come to my aid when I’m discouraged, making career choices, and grilling hamburgers, respectively. We awaken to shepherd leadership as we recognize those whose counsel has proven valid in our lives.

Second, shepherd leaders are *abundance creators*. Especially in the ancient near East, shepherds carved out of the wilderness whatever pastures and waters their flocks enjoyed. All too often our lives become closed systems in which we perceive selectively and move defensively. Those who have shepherded us through life have given us more relationships, more places to travel, more resources, and more wisdom. We awaken to shepherd leadership as we recognize those who given us the gift of a larger life.²

Finally, shepherd leaders are *advocates and guardians*. Natural historians contend that sheep would have become extinct long ago had they not allowed themselves to be domesticated by shepherds. Annie Dillard made a similar observation about wheat in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1975: 162), “Even ten square miles of wheat gladdens the hearts of most people, although it is really as unnatural and freakish as the Frankenstein monster; if man were to die, I read, wheat wouldn’t survive him more than three years.”

² I’m indebted to Dr. Jerry Rushford for this concept. He used it as the theme for his eulogy of Novel Young, former president of Pepperdine University.

The same can be said for sheep. They are virtually defenseless in the face of their natural predators.

Throughout history, sheep have lived fuller lives because of their relationship with the shepherd. Certainly, sheep were sheared and slaughtered as part of this relationship. Nonetheless, they could expect longer, healthier lives and significantly more offspring as a trade-off. Under the shepherd's care, sheep found protection from natural predators, deliverance from disease and affliction, and reliable supply of food and water. Greenleaf (1971) described the essential test of servant leadership as being, "Are the followers better off?" In the relationship between sheep and shepherd, the answer is a resounding, "Yes!"

Shepherd leadership demands a new question to assess the relationship between leader and follower. This test takes the form of the question, "Are *both* the followers *and* the leader better off?" Shepherding was not a one-sided relationship benefiting only the shepherd. Rather, the act of shepherding developed a symbiotic relationship between humankind and sheep. Just as sheep lived better lives under the care of the shepherd, shepherds derived enormous benefit from the domestication of sheep. Sheep provided a ready source of food and clothing for their human caretakers in the midst of the rather unreliable natural world. Thus, shepherd leadership provides a check on dysfunctional, one-sided relationships between leaders and followers.

If the first awakening is to the obligation of leadership, the second awakening is to the responsibility of leadership. Leaders do not act alone or in a vacuum. Rather, the quality of life her followers experience rises and falls on her leadership. A person becomes a shepherd leader as she offers reliable, authoritative counsel from which others

benefit, as she gives her followers a larger life, and as she protects her followers.

Answering the following three questions commits one to being a shepherd leader:

1. *What words do you want to resonate in the minds of your followers at which critical moments?*
2. *How can you give your followers a larger life?*
3. *Who cannot survive the pressures of the natural world or the marketplace without the benefit of protection?*

The commitment to being a shepherd leader may not be reciprocated by the followers. Most importantly, the leader must awaken to the role of shepherd. Whether or not the followers ever acknowledge this role is of secondary importance.

The Shepherd Leader in Psalm 23

Psalm 23 is the fullest explication in Scripture about the leader as shepherd. Psalm 23 is a poem celebrating the leader-follower relationship from the standpoint for the follower. Psalm 23's very existence begs the question, "If your followers wrote a poem about you, what would it say?" One wonders if it would be a gracious and complimentary as David's meditation the relationship between shepherd and sheep. A close reading of David's psalm suggests that the leader as shepherd performs a variety of roles for the followers. These roles include:

- Meeting the needs of followers
- Finding the right path and keeping followers on it

- Honoring and nurturing the souls of the followers
- Resolving conflict among followers
- Supplying followers to meet the demands of life
- Sharing a positive vision
- Being present with followers
- Getting followers through the valley
- Removing irritants that hinder followers from living full lives
- Cultivating loyalty among followers

The final sections of this paper take a closer look at how shepherd leaders remove irritants³.

Shepherds Remove Irritants – “He Anointeth My Head With Oil”

The Philadelphia economy was struggling in the 1750’s and no one could comprehend why. Other cities in Colonial America – like Boston and New York - were growing. It’s not that life was wretched in the City of Brotherly Love, it was just vaguely unpleasant and no one could put his finger on it. No one, that is, except Benjamin Franklin.

When economies struggle, big fixes are often tempting. The city leaders in Philadelphia could have tried any number of expensive solutions. They could have built more wharves and warehouses to increase trade. They could have improved the roads leading to the city or hired a full-time militia to increase security. Benjamin Franklin made a small, rather curious recommendation: hire some street sweepers.

³ For a fuller explication of the shepherd leader as presented in Psalm 23 see McCormick, B.& Davenport, D. (2003) *Shepherd Leadership: Wisdom for Leaders from Psalm 23*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Franklin observed a great deal of dust swirling around the streets of the commercial district in Philadelphia. When the dust got bad two things happened: the local shopkeepers kept their doors closed and people chose the comfort of home rather than the irritation of the streets. When a few people were paid to keep the streets as dust free as possible, people returned to the commercial district and business picked up. “Some may think these trifling matters not worth minding,” Franklin would later write in his autobiography. Dust in one person’s eyes, admittedly, is an inconvenience. Dust in everyone’s eye, he argued, could seriously hamper a city’s economic and social vitality. “Human happiness,” Franklin continued, “is produced not so much by great pieces of good fortune that seldom happen, as by little advantages that occur every day.”

Shepherd leaders are wise to seize the “great pieces of good fortune that seldom happen.” However, it’s a foolish leader that lets 1,001 small opportunities for improvement slip away while they pin all their hopes on another big event Why? Because a better life for your followers is more often a product of the “little advantages that occur every day.” At times the advantage is gained by adding something beneficial. More often, as in Franklin’s case, it’s often gained by the removal of something irritating.

A Sheep’s Worst Enemy

A defining characteristic of sheep is their herding instinct. That is, they are created to stick together and they do so better than almost any other animal. The good news is that this makes the shepherd’s task much easier. The bad news is that it significantly increases the chance for disease. In fact, there’s an old saying among shepherds that “a sheep’s worst enemy is another sheep.” Dysentery, tetanus, foot and

mouth disease, and even pneumonia can sweep through a herd of sheep if left unchecked. Furthermore, a variety of internal and external parasites can move from sheep to sheep with remarkable rapidity. Nematode worms pass between sheep by living in the pasture grass and they can kill a sheep in a matter of days if unnoticed and untreated.

A real scourge in the fields is the beginning of fly season each summer. The aptly named head fly can literally drive a sheep crazy when it swarms during fly season. The nose fly can be just as bad as it dive bombs the sheep attempting to lay eggs in the sheep's soft, moist nasal cavity. At a minimum, a sheep will stop grazing and hide in the protection of the brush when afflicted by flies. At worst, a sheep will ram its head into the ground, a post, or into another sheep when swarmed by either of these flies. A horde of flies left unchecked can transform a peaceful, healthy herd into a skittish, ailing herd.

The Psalmist David knew exactly how to deal with such irritants in the field. He would anoint, or medicate, his sheep rubbing ointments on their heads and faces (a common treatment, incidentally, even today). Thus the phrase, "He anointeth my head with oil." This ointment repelled the flies and allowed the sheep to continue grazing in peace. As the effects of the ointment faded and the flies returned, the shepherd would come around again for another application – witness once again to the need for present and attentive shepherds.

Removing the Irritants

Someone once asked French writer and filmmaker Jean Cocteau what he would take if his house were on fire and he could remove only one thing. Cocteau went straight to the source of the problem and coolly replied, "I would take the fire." Few people

suffering an affliction can see with this kind of clarity. Afflictions often blind us to good solutions and stop us dead in our tracks. Our own short-sightedness when faced with problems is testament to our need for shepherd leaders. Like Cocteau, a shepherd leader may have the ability to “take the fire” rather than just exit the building with one or two prized objects.

Of course, the best case scenario for any leader is to have your followers know their problems and bring them to you seeking help. Secretary of State Colin Powell said of his military days, “The day soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them.” Shepherds are not a grand inquisitor who shows up to assign blame. Rather, they are trusted mentors who help followers solve problems and get rid of obstacles.

Some of your followers will be optimistic, self-directed people who will come to you when faced with uncertainty. Colin Powell certainly must have experienced this as did Gordon Binder, former CEO of Amgen. Amgen is a biotech firm full of researchers and scientists possessing the highest degree in their field. Binder did not have to motivate his core workers nor did he have to tell them what to do. He concluded that his job was to listen to his people and remove the irritants and obstacles that they believed were blocking their path.

In the field, by contrast, the sheep rarely run to the shepherd when there’s trouble. Rather, it’s more often the shepherd who is seeking out the sheep and checking for problems. Imagine the two vastly different perspectives in the field between the shepherd and the sheep. From the shepherd’s perspective, the irritation is a group of flies easily

driven away with some ointment. From the perspective of the sheep, however, it is a pestilence which they have no power to stop.

A shepherd leader should understand that diversity extends well beyond gender and ethnicity and includes a diversity of moods, personalities, and abilities among their followers. The imagery of the shepherd is a reminder that some of your followers will struggle alone with their problems never seeking help. One of the hallmarks of shepherd leadership is the ability to view one's followers with a deep sense of compassion. That is, rather than despising one's "weak-minded" followers for struggling with an insect-sized problem, one is moved by compassion to serve the follower on their terms when necessary. When it comes to being a shepherd leader, it might be good advice to "sweat the small stuff".

So what might be some common irritants afflicting your followers? If you polled your followers, chances are that the word "uncertainty" would appear somewhere on the short list. Of course, some followers will find uncertainty invigorating, seeing opportunity within all the chaos. Many, however, will find uncertainty frightening and will await instruction rather than take a risk. This is when the shepherd leader comes alongside to clarify roles, directions, expectations, and the like. Others might cry "bureaucracy" and the shepherd moves in to remove outdated control systems and replace them with more agile service models.

Another common affliction might be low self-efficacy. The notion of self-efficacy was popularized by motivation theorist Albert Bandura (1997). Put simply, Bandura contends that individuals with low self-efficacy simply do not believe they have the ability to overcome whatever challenge is facing them. This challenge can be as simple as

logging on to a networked computer or as daunting as managing a legal challenge against the organization. The good news is that a shepherd leader can come alongside the follower and build self-efficacy a variety of ways.

Bandura's research demonstrates that one route to higher self-efficacy is simply talking with the follower. This conversation can be either simple words of encouragement and confidence or it can be a story about how a person similar to the follower conquered a similar obstacle. Another path to higher self-efficacy is helping the follower through a mastery experience. That is, the shepherd leader comes alongside the follower for a while and shows him how to do the task.

New forms of technology might seem like a daunting affliction to some of your followers. Switching e-mail programs can cause a surprising amount of crisis among people who are just now feeling a sense of mastery over the former program. A few words of encouragement and a demonstration will certainly do more to empower the follower than cynically suggesting that the computer's not going to blow up in their face if they turn it on. Encouraging counsel and patient teaching may be two of the most potent salves in the shepherd leader's medicine bag.

The Great Commissioning

Some irritants are easier to remove than others. For the shepherd in the field, ticks and headflies are simple to spot because they attack the outside of the sheep. Worms and other internal parasites are much more difficult to diagnose. The same principle holds true for shepherd leaders. Some irritants, like technology glitches or parking difficulties, will be obvious. Others will be much elusive. One hard to spot irritant is a negative - or

even non-existent – self-image. Thus, another way to look at an anointing is to see it as a way of giving followers a more positive vision of their role in the company.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul admonished the ill-treated Christians in Rome to “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.” Even though your followers may not persecute you as harshly as the early Christians were by the Roman Empire, you could probably admit that you’ve bitten your tongue once or twice to keep from cursing at your followers. The Apostle Paul’s counsel rings true as a starting place: Don’t curse; rather, bless.

Modern readers might assume that the curse mentioned by the Apostle Paul is something done at midnight, in a locked room, with a sorceress. If not that, then it’s just a good, old fashioned cussing out behind closed doors. On the contrary, a curse in the ancient Middle East was much more of a public event. When an adversary or child was cursed in ancient cultures, it was done on the street corner. Everyone knew that this person was cursed and that they should be avoided. An “old fashioned cussing out” stings for only a little while. A curse stung for life because it followed you in every interaction you would have in the future. Often, the only way to avoid it was to leave town.

In contrast to a public cursing, shepherd leaders can offer their followers a public blessing – what we call a commissioning. The notion of a commissioning is both ancient and powerful. While still a young man, the Psalmist David was commissioned by the prophet Samuel when Samuel anointed David in the presence of David’s family and proclaimed him to be the next king of Israel. The idea of commissioning (or blessing) people still resonates in religious circles as churches bless children, marriages, and even

animals. What is a wedding if not a community gathering to publicly commission a couple's union?

One positive residual effect of the practice of commissioning is the self-images left in the psyche of the follower. Self-image is a powerful catalyst for changing behavior due to the strong relationship between it and behavior. That is, the mental image we have of ourselves has a potent effect on our everyday actions. If a person sees himself as a poor speller, chances are he will misspell words more often than someone who views himself as a perfectionist (even though both self-images are extreme views). A commissioning is nothing more than helping followers see themselves in a new light with a different self-image. Once he was anointed, the Psalmist David could not help but to see himself as the future king of Israel and this helped carry him through some difficult times getting there.

Such a commissioning is illustrated in a story from the life of Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, the recently deceased rabbinic scholar from Jerusalem. A father and mother came to Rabbi Auerbach seeking his counsel about removing their mentally handicapped son from their home and placing him into a special school. This is a gut-wrenching decision for any parent to make and they were wise to seek counsel from Rabbi Auerbach as he was known for both his great intellect and his great kindness.

Half way through the conversation, Rabbi Auerbach grew concerned that the child would feel more betrayed than nurtured by his parents' actions. As such, he called the boy before him and did something rather unexpected.

“What is your name?” the rabbi asked the boy.

“Akiva,” the child replied.

“How do you do, Akiva? My name is Shlomo Zalman Auerbach. I am the greatest Torah authority of this generation, and everyone listens to me.” The parents were a bit shocked by this proclamation, as the Rabbi was also known for his great humility. He continued, “You are going to enter a special school now, and I would like you to represent me and look after all of the religious matters in your new home. I shall now give you rabbinical ordination. This will make you a rabbi, and I want you to use the honor wisely.”

Following his rabbinical ordination, Akiva went to his new home with a fresh sense of identity and mission. He flourished at the school and rarely wanted to leave the campus – even for a weekend – as there might be a question from someone that needed to be answered. Such is the power of a commissioning given leader to follower.

So what might a commissioning look like in practice for the modern shepherd leader? First of all, a commissioning is more than just a positive performance review. It’s common management practice to start performance reviews by stating a number of positive things about your follower’s performance this past year. Supposedly, this builds the follower’s esteem before the knife is slipped in when the negative aspects of the performance are reviewed. A commissioning is more than just reviewing the follower’s job success. In fact, a commissioning should be as non-job related as possible. Of course, it can happen in the work context but it should seek to affirming the whole person instead of just approving the person as they are valued by the organization.

Whenever possible, shepherd leaders should try to make times of commissioning as ritualistic as budget cycles. Employment anniversaries or traditional holidays might be good times for such an activity. A personal commissioning are always an ideal but a

corporate commissioning can suffice should an individual one prove impractical. Should the leader just feel too uncomfortable in the role of commissioner, perhaps he could call in a minister or clergyman to do it. At a minimum, the commissioning should be done in the presence of the follower. For greatest impact, it should be as public as possible. Job transitions are also excellent times for such commissionings. Imagine the power of going into a new job with the public blessing of your leaders as opposed to hurriedly moving your boxes to a new office and running even faster.

Conclusion

Social science has much to offer to those wanting to become better leaders. However, those wishing to become fuller, more complete leaders must begin from a fuller, more complete worldview than that offered by the materialist assumptions of the scientific worldview. Art and literature are very useful in such leadership development as is Scripture, particularly the sacred poetry of Psalm 23. Simone Weil wrote that, "Belief is aroused by the beauty of the texts and the light one gains upon the human condition through meditating on them." Psalm 23 is a rich, beautiful, and well-known text and most people can recite from memory. Leaders are encouraged to make Psalm 23 a regular meditation for strengthening and deepening their commitment to shepherd leadership.

References

- Bandura, A. 1997. *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: W.H. Freeman.
- The Barna Update*. Oct. 21, 2003. Americans describe their views of life after death. (available at www.barna.org).
- Collins, J. 2002. *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't*. New York: HarperBusiness.
- Dillard, A. 1974. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. New York: Harper's Magazine Press.
- Greenleaf, R.K. 1973. *The Servant as Leader*. Newton Center, MA: The Robert K. Greenleaf Center.
- Greenleaf, R.K. 1991. *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Kass, L.R. 2003. *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis*. New York: The Free Press.
- King, A.S. 1971. Self-fulfilling prophecies in training: Supervisors' expectations and workers' performance. *Social Science Quarterly*, 52: 369-378.
- Kotter, J.P. 1990. *A Force for Change: How Leadership Differs from Management*. New York: The Free Press.
- Kouzes, J.M., & Posner, B.Z. 2002. *The Leadership Challenge*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Meek, Esther L. 2003. *Longing to Know*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press.
- McCormick, B. & Davenport, D. 2003. *Shepherd Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.