

The
REAL
DEAL

Becoming more Authentic in Life and Leadership

By Dan Webster

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LAI D LOW BY LEADERSHIP

*“THE MIND OF MAN PLANS HIS WAY,
BUT THE LORD DIRECTS HIS STEPS.”*

PROVERBS 16:9

*“THE LORD HAS DETERMINED OUR PATH;
HOW THEN CAN ANYONE UNDERSTAND THE DIRECTION HIS OWN LIFE IS TAKING?”*

PROVERBS 20:24 TEV

Life Just Doesn't Get Any Better Than This...Really?

By the fall of 1989 I had arrived. Everything on the surface of my life glittered. I had a wonderful wife and three great sons. In my chosen career field I was on top of the mountain. I had close friends and an incredible work environment.

If you were in the world of student ministry, you had heard of me and may even have wished that you had my job. I was at the top of my game. Back then I was the Executive Director of Student Ministries at Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois, one of the most influential churches in the world.

The ministry I directed involved over 1500 high school students. As part of that ministry we ran an Internship Program that was producing professional Christian leaders. Our evangelism attempts were blessed by God, resulting in hundreds of students becoming Christians and pursuing full devotion as followers of Jesus Christ. My volunteer staff was made up of two hundred wonderfully capable people. The professional staff team that I'd recruited were all super stars. In addition to all this, opportunities to speak around the country were coming in every week. If you were a professional youth worker, I was someone to envy. On the surface, it looked as if I were living my dream.

Life Is Not Always What It Seems

We both know that things are often not as they appear. On a cold Christmas morning in 1989 the darkness of my inner world enveloped me. At 3 a.m. I found myself sitting restlessly by my Christmas tree admitting that I felt as if I were dying inside. While working at the largest church in America, my heart had somehow shrunk to the size of a pea. How strange things seemed...I was in the middle of fabulous ministry success and yet I was losing the energy and passion for ministry. I was putting strong wings on the weary hearts of students while my own heart was wasting away.

Have you ever experienced a time like that? A time when all the externals of life are contaminated by inner discontent and frustration? On that cold Christmas morning as the world sang *Joy To The World*, I was sinking in a whirlpool of confusion. I was experiencing a soul storm. What had happened to me? People around me seemed so strong and resilient, unaffected by pressures that were crushing me. What was I to do?

Hiding wasn't a good option. That's just not my style. My close friends were already noticing the cracks around the edges and my inner world *stuff* was spilling over into staff meetings. I was afraid and full of questions. What would happen if I honestly admitted to what was happening inside of me? What *was* happening inside of me? . . . I didn't know! What if I walked fully into my heart, faced my truth, and it violently knocked over my ministry apple cart? How could I be authentic and not face the landscape of my inner world? One thing was for sure, I couldn't go on anymore pretending that nothing was the matter.

One of my established spiritual habits at that time was journaling. I would write my feelings, prayers and

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thoughts in a bound notebook. True to form on that Christmas morning, I turned to my journal hoping to sort things out. Below is part of the Christmas morning entry from my 1989 journal. Like many low point journal entries, it's a mixture of confusion, questions and longings. As I read parts of it today I'm reminded of how difficult a time that was for me.

December 25, 1989

Something isn't right in my soul today, it hasn't been for a long time. I should be looking forward to enjoying Christmas with my wife and sons, but I'm not. An impatient restlessness grips me deep inside. I don't want to be with my family today, but worse, I'm not happy being with me. Fear taunts and presses in on me....

I know what my Bible says. . . "Fear not, for I am with you." I know the words, but I'm not fearless. What's the matter with me Lord? What robs my joy and simple faith in You? Why can't I enjoy life? How have I allowed life to swallow me? I've lost my way....

Is the answer as simple as "return to Me, I will love you, I will direct you?" But Lord, I've never left You! Do you want Your children to live like this? The Bible tells me to "cast all your cares upon Me, for I care for you." I do that, but I find no rest....

What a weird place to be Lord! Opportunities for ministry abound – external blessings overflow, but inner rest is absent. In truth I feel like I'm unable to control life....

My relationship with my wife feels unfulfilling — it's shallow and cluttered with expectations. My sons get a restless me — I don't seem able to help them with their lives....

My inner strength and convictions are not enough to lift me over the wall.... My friendships don't satisfy me either....

And Lord, I feel like I'm letting You down. "More, more, more — climb — set higher objectives and goals. Manage better, be more to more people." I'm just so tired Father....

Lord, I feel trapped!.....

I just want to run away and hide. Someone please take away all my responsibility and let me rest....

Free me from more Lord. In all areas, free me from more. More money, more sex, more giving, more people, more recognition, more ministry, more from myself — help me to settle into You and experience "enough." You are enough, I know that in my mind. I've given enough, but I'm not filled or satisfied....

I so long to be comforted by the Holy Spirit — to know the gentle blowing and renewing wind of Your Spirit - the flow of Your life.....

O God, help me please....

Kind of depressing, huh? This was my honest condition after fifteen successful high energy years of student ministry. This was more than compassion fatigue. We all get tired when we give our lives away, this was something different.

I hope you don't find yourself at a place like this today. If you are there, you have a challenging and exciting journey ahead. I can tell you that God invites the best and worst of us into His presence. The best of God's love welcomes the worst and most confused parts of us. He wants a real relationship with each of us.

MY REACTIONS • THOUGHTS
IDEAS • REFLECTIONS



Graces On The Other Side

When we hang on and walk through the difficult valleys one step at a time, we almost always discover “graces” on the other side. The great *grace* that came through my valley was the opportunity to rethink my life and leadership. C.S. Lewis said that pain is the best teacher. He’s right! Sometimes we simply are not teachable until life gets painfully uncomfortable. That terrible time has proven to be one of my best times because it opened me to growth and change. If any good comes from this workbook we have my mid-life valley to thank.

It was in my valley that I turned from seeing life and leadership as an outside-in proposition to an inside-out reality. Before my valley I considered carefully all the outside issues of leadership. I understood what it meant to have a God-given vision. I knew how to cast that vision in a compelling manner so as to attract a team around me to accomplish it. I could slot people based on their giftedness, set a strategy and then create a structure of ministry to accomplish it. I was working hard at blazing the trail into our preferred future as God directed. I understood all of these important leadership functions.

But it was in my valley where I came to believe something that the great Henri Nouwen said before he died, “*A real leader doesn’t just blaze the trail into the future, he or she courageously blazes the trail into his or her own heart.*” This book is about that process – walking into your own heart to experience growth and healing that will result in greater impact in life and leadership.



WHAT DO YOU THINK HENRI NOUWEN WAS TRYING TO SAY IN THE ABOVE QUOTE?

It’s been over a decade since that *soul storm* morning. Today I’m both different and the same. I’m different in that I have life in my soul again, that sure feels good. I’m different in that I’m wiser and understand how I got myself into the hole that I was in. I know myself better than ever, and that’s good. But I’m the same in that some of my inner villains that pushed me into the valley are still present inside of me. They will take careful monitoring the rest of my life.

The Authentic Leaders Creed

One of the fruits of my valley experience is *The Authentic Leaders Creed*, which reflects the focus of my life today. I don’t know what you believe about life and leadership, but each creed statement reveals a *lesson* I’ve learned from God and a *resolution* I’ve made before Him. Each of the study chapters in this workbook touch on at least one of these affirmations. You will see these statements highlighted at the beginning of each chapter. I want these to be true of me everyday of my life. They embody a series of truths that I want you to think about as you work through this book. They lead us in the direction of becoming more authentic as people and leaders. I invite you to consider them and let God point out where you need to grow. As



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you read the creed, circle or underline the statements that most resonate with you today. At the end of this workbook I will invite you to do this task again.

MY REACTIONS • THOUGHTS
IDEAS • REFLECTIONS

THE AUTHENTIC LEADERS CREED

I BELIEVE LEADERSHIP BEGINS ON THE
INSIDE OF MY LIFE AND MOVES OUT.

~

I EMBRACE THE TRUTH THAT LEADERSHIP
INVOLVES AUTHENTIC SELF-EXPRESSION.

~

I WILL NEVER SUBSTITUTE PERSONA FOR
CHARACTER AND INTEGRITY.

~

I WILL RESIST THE SHALLOWNESS OF CONFORMITY
BY CELEBRATING MY GOD-GIVEN SACRED TRUST.

~

I DETERMINE TO TAKE NO SHORT CUTS IN MY PERSONAL
AND SPIRITUAL PREPARATION SO THAT I WILL
LIVE WITH MOMENTUM.

~

I AFFIRM THAT GOD USES ALL THE EXPERIENCES OF
MY LIFE TO PREPARE ME FOR WHAT'S NEXT.

~

I WILL DAILY DOWNSHIFT MY LIFE SO THAT I CAN RECEIVE
GOD'S LOVE BEFORE I ATTEMPT TO SHARE GOD'S LOVE.

~

I WILL REMEMBER THAT SURRENDER UNLEASHES THE
POWER TO FULFILL THE COMMITMENTS I MAKE TO GOD.

~

I PLEDGE TO BE LED BY GOD BEFORE
I ATTEMPT TO LEAD OTHERS.

~

I WILL FACE THE TRUTH ABOUT MYSELF AND ADMIT MY
VULNERABILITIES TO TEMPTATION SO THAT I WON'T
SHIPWRECK MY LIFE.

~

I WILL ACCEPT THE PAIN THAT LIFE BRINGS MY WAY AND
ALLOW IT TO MAKE ME A MORE UNDERSTANDING
AND ABLE SERVANT.

~

I WILL QUICKLY ACKNOWLEDGE AND INTERCEPT ANY
PERSONAL ENTROPY SO THAT MY FATAL FLAWS WILL NOT
PREVENT ME FROM FINISHING WELL.

~

I WILL SURRENDER TO THE CHANGE PROCESS THAT
GOD IS WORKING IN ME SO THAT I CAN BE AN
AGENT OF CHANGE IN THIS WORLD.



Let me ask you at the beginning of this workbook...*how are you?* Really, *how are you?* What is motivating you to evaluate your life experience with God and its impact upon others? Why are you choosing to study through this workbook?

Maybe you are stuck just like I was over ten years ago and long for some help in getting through a dark time. You may simply be interested in growing as a leader and look to this study to stretch you. Maybe you are feeling victorious and strong and see this book as a next step in your personal development. Wherever you are, this workbook will challenge you to look at your life and leadership.

Caution...Enter At Your Own Risk...

For this workbook to make a contribution to your development and growth, you must do some work. My hope is to assist you as you get to better know yourself and God. If you are looking for a simple A-B-C curriculum to improve your leadership in twenty minutes a day, forget it! — it won't happen! — and I encourage you to return this workbook for a full refund.

Every chapter will have assignments for you to do. Sometimes you will respond to what I've written on an issue right in the middle of the text of the chapter. Sometimes you will quietly study through a passage of the Bible and look for insights on a specific topic. At other times you will answer a question or reflect on a verse of Scripture right in the middle of a chapter. At the end of each chapter you will find a **project** like that on the next page. They will be signified by the hand graphic that is there. Some will be fun, others will be challenging. There won't be a lot of easy work found here.

I need to warn you of a possible consequence to working through this book. Honestly facing your inner journey may make life uncomfortable for a while. Increasing personal awareness and assessing your present condition might stir up some needed areas of growth that you must face before you can move ahead in life. If that happens, face it and go after it. You will be stronger for the task ahead.

If you are going through this study with a group there will be plenty to talk about. You may use the OPTIONAL small group questions page at the end of each chapter as the content of your discussions. It won't be difficult to get into important life and leadership issues. Choose the chapters that you want to discuss, study through them alone before you meet, and then get into the issues raised together.

