

Reggie McNeal's book, ***A WORK OF HEART***, is one of the best books written on leadership in the last ten years. Here is a small section of Chapter 8 for you to read. Once you read this, get the book...it's wonderful! At the end of the reading you'll find a study I put together for you from Psalm 18.

Chapter 8

COMMUNION, REHEARSING FOR ETERNITY

COME IN.

Shut the door behind you. It does not want to close all the way. Usually you will have to lean up hard against it. Pressure from the outside threatens to blow it open—and will, unless you get it secured.

Have a seat. Or stand. Or lean against something. You can even lie down. You may go to work on whatever. Or you can choose not to. This is your room. Yours . . . and Another's.

The One who gave you life comes here too. The One who thought you up and imagined your leadership and knew you would be reading this page right now comes to this place also. This is where you let God work on your soul.

Sometimes the room fills with music. Fresh fragrances heighten the senses, sometimes. Light bathes the experience in a warm glow that gives rise to contentment. You want to stay forever. Sometimes.

Yet again you are sometimes startled in here. The entrance of the Other stuns you out of speaking, as if the wind is knocked out of you. What you expected is not what you receive. The agenda is not always yours. You both welcome and fear the intense interest the Other has in you.

Sometimes it stinks in here. The stench can be suffocating. Rotting, filthy, putrefying stuff gets dragged out from underneath hell. Stuff stuffed in closets you thought you would never have to open. Stuff that nobody but you and the Other know about. You recoil from the horror of it. You are repulsed. You want to get out of here. But the Other does not turn away. He wades into the mess. He is not put off by having to deal with this. Only His unflinching presence gives you the capacity to stay in, to overcome shame, to face down the unseemliness.

Then, sometimes, nothing happens. Or so it seems. He and you. Like a quiet night spent by the fire absorbed in a book, or like a long drive with a loved one shared without spoken words. Just there. Nothing much said. No big agenda. Comfortable.

For too many leaders, the room is musty. Shut for too long. Memory cobwebs go undisturbed by fresh air, the stir of encounter. The thrill of a rendezvous here with the Other is gone. Maybe the previous meetings too intense. Maybe what goes on here is too unpredictable and untidy. Unsettling. Not controllable. For many, the lure of this place cannot seem to compete with the sights and sounds of the "real" world outside. Trouble is, living life exclusively out in that real world keeps the leader from becoming really real.

Leaders often neglect communion more than any other heart-shaping arena. Many spiritual leaders seem oblivious to the battle that actually targets them. Perhaps they see the arsenal of weapons arrayed at them as benign. The leader often appropriates them, accommodating their deployment in self-destruction.

Fax machines, e-mail, telephones, beepers, an overcommitted schedule, the press of people's needs, program concerns, ministry agenda—these are the tools of mass destruction for spiritual leaders. Their development and deployment proceed often without inspection. They threaten to shut down the spiritual leader's communion with God. Once that happens, the leader's effectiveness is destroyed. The leader becomes a casualty of a struggle that is as old as humanity—the drowning out of eternity by the screams of temporal concerns.

A small neglect of God occasioned by an unanticipated spate of unusually consuming problems signals the beginning of a skirmish. Godtime yields to "more pressing" concerns. The leader's communication line with the commander begins to register static. In response, the leader sometimes does exactly the wrong thing. Instead of repairing communication by altering the busy schedule to make time for God, the leader compensates for the lack of divine guidance by increasing chat time with the established network. The only approval that satisfies, the "well-done" of the Commander-in-Chief, is set aside to curry favor from ministry constituents. Ministry efforts increase. So does the static. Episodic interruptions in the communication lines to God give way to a routine neglect. The leader goes off-line with headquarters.

Out of touch with command, the leader begins to operate from the memory of previous orders and directives. As time goes on, these seem increasingly unrelated to more immediate issues. Activity replaces productivity. Genuine missional enthusiasm and purpose give way to maintenance and routine, with an accompanying loss of joy and a rise in self-doubt.

Leaders who continue to act in this way become cut off from genuine divine intervention on their behalf. They begin to rely on their own diminishing reserves of spiritual firepower. Their activity becomes sustained either by adrenaline or perfunctory performance rather than the Spirit. They bank on their talents, their smarts, their relationship skills, and their position to cover their basic failure at the critical core function of their call. That function is to reflect God's heart to God's people. This cannot be done apart from a leader's firsthand knowledge of God's heart. This knowledge does not derive from historical encounters in a leader's past; it springs from a vibrant, up-to-date walk with the Almighty.

Devoid of a growing, personal, dynamic relationship with God, spiritual leaders become casualties. Some are

removed from battle, too wounded to go on. Some remain engaged but are missing in action. Others desert, going AWOL on God and his people. Perhaps the worst scenario is the tragic figure of a spiritual corpse going through ministry rituals like the zombies of science fiction horror movies. However, this is real, painfully real. No amount of promise or talent or intelligence can ultimately shield the spiritual leader from some variation of this fate if communion with God is neglected.

Communion lies at the center of heart-shaping. Through communion, the leader learns the lessons of God's activity in the other subplots. The examining and distilling of life experience occurs here. Through communion, the leader secures the relationship with the Heart Maker and Heart Shaper. In communion, the leader strengthens the spiritual foundation that will support total leadership effectiveness.

Lack of attention to this essential aspect of heart-shaping explains many spiritual leadership heart ailments. Anemic communion creates shallow leadership, the kind of leadership informed only by methods and style without substance. "Pop leadership" practices knee-jerk reactions, adopts the latest fads, uses "with it" vocabulary. However, without a real center this leadership is hollow at the core. It implodes, collapsing in on the leader, who frantically and frenetically tries to stave it off by paying too much attention to the props and not enough attention to the story itself.

"Faux leadership" can be explained, in part, by a lack of communion. Fake leadership comes in several distinct styles. In American culture, leadership often parades as charisma. It often manipulates and exploits to maintain its power. Spiritual leaders who mimic this kind of leadership do so because they fail to submit their leadership to the surgical knife of intimate communion with God. With false leadership, it is all about the leader and not those served. The leader's agenda. The leader's vision. The leader's passions. The leader's goals. People play a role in helping the leader get to where the

leader wants to go. People are not served. They are used.

These statements may seem too harsh. Unfortunately, I have seen too many wasted lives, too much pretension, and too much lost opportunity to pull punches. On the other hand, I have witnessed powerful spiritual leaders who attend to communion with God. They have a sense of presence that comes from only One source.

The noncommuning leader can hardly be a servant. Voluntary servanthood requires an intact self at the center. This self has to be developed in communion with its Creator. The power and mystery of Incarnation lies in its willful act of self-emptying. As we have seen, Jesus could stay on task with this constant servanthood only through vibrant communion with the Father.

A spiritual leader practicing communion leads from a solid, integrative sense of purpose. The vision of God's preferred future both for the leader and for those in the leadership constellation gives direction and meaning. This vision for the future grows out of time spent with the One who has already been there.

We need to investigate some critical aspects of the spiritual leader's communion with God. Those who expect a guide to "quiet time" activities will be disappointed in what follows. We often drain the Spirit from encounters with the Almighty by focusing on activities, on techniques, on more doing. A lot of busyness (a prevalent soul cancer that strikes leaders) gets imported into quiet times. We fill out workbooks, do memory work, study over texts (all good activities) rather than having genuine conversation with God. Much of what is written about spending time with God seems more like manuals for mechanics or tapes for aerobics enthusiasts than hints about how friends or lovers should spend time together. The discussion of communion in this chapter is free of mechanical how-tos.

Besides, the arena of communion encompasses a much broader notion than mere consideration of a slice of time given

over to a religious activity. We are talking about developing a life of genuine communion with God. A life that is really real because it is lived out of a sense of eternity, not just urgency.

Telling leaders they should spend time with God hardly accomplishes the desired results. Approaching communion from a sense of guilt or shoulds has the same lasting motivation as being told to clean up your room. Our marriages usually succeed because we develop a satisfying relationship, not because the wedding vows are posted on the refrigerator door. Communion is about relationship, not about fulfilling obligations.

Communion enables the leader to explore. It offers discovery about one's self. Remember, self-knowledge is the single most important piece of information a leader needs. Without it, there is no leadership center.

Communion also offers an opportunity to discover God. The One who made us intends us for himself. Our understanding of him will never be exhausted. Each new insight whets our appetite to know more. The more we know him, the more we want to know him.

In short, communion helps the leader make sense of it all. Here is where the lessons are learned and the insights gained that will help the leader leave a legacy of people who are better off because that leader's life touched theirs.

Moses' tent meetings provided him not only instruction from Yahweh but also some sanctuary from the press of needs associated with leading the emancipated Hebrew slaves. David forged his friendship with God in solitude while shepherding. Paul retreated to the desert to rethink his theology. Jesus withdrew often, not to escape people but to be available to the Father for instruction and nurture. The High Priestly prayer of John 17 reveals how these times of communion prepared him for his assignments.

To entice you to the place of communion, this chapter reexamines an ancient notion now lost on postmoderns—the place of Sabbath in our

lives. To draw you to the Person of communion, the chapter inquires into the

purpose God has for you in it...

REFLECTION...

Reggie nudges us to consider the two key results of communion with God. -- one is *self-knowledge* and the other is *discoveries related to God*.

- As you consider how your communion with God is going these days, i.e. your quiet times/Scripture reading/prayer and attempts to connect with God, are you getting the results you desire?
- Why not attempt today or tomorrow to heighten your attention to what you learn *about you* and what you learn *about God* in your times of communion with God.
- Here's a practical study for you. Take out a blank piece of paper or a new journal page and make two columns...in one column record insights about you and in the other column record insights about God. I did this with Psalm 18 yesterday – it was a great study.

Psalm 18

What I learn about me?

What I learn about God?