

Should We Try to Change Ourselves?

by Margaret J. Marcuson

How do we learn who we are as a leader? Not from a teacher, not from a book, but by leading. As we lead, we discover both our strengths and our weaknesses. Writing about spiritual practice, Ezra Bayda suggests, "Practice is about experiencing the truth of who we really are." (*At Home in the Muddy Water* p. 37) We might substitute for "practice" the word "leadership." "Leadership is about experiencing the truth of who we really are." Nothing will bring us face to face with the reality of ourselves more quickly than leadership.

Being in a leadership role, in church or elsewhere, can be a spiritual practice itself, if we choose to use it that way. We can learn about ourselves in the middle of the inevitable ups and downs. I can remember walking down the halls of the first church I served as pastor, as a 26-year-old, thinking, "I have no idea what I'm doing!" Yet in that moment of inadequacy, I found a way to begin to learn to lead.

If we are always trying to be different (even if we want to be "better"), how do we know who we really are? I've put a lot of energy into improving my leadership and overcoming my limitations. All that effort probably was worth it. But at the same time I find myself wondering whether we can't be as willful toward ourselves as we are toward our followers. "I should be more organized." "I should be less emotional." "I should be a clearer communicator." "I should read more." Or even, "I should take more time off."

Could we take a sabbatical from self-improvement? Could we take some time simply to experience ourselves as a leader? Stop and notice what goes on in us when *that* individual does *that* thing they always do? We might do some research on our own leadership, just observing rather than trying to change ourselves, at least for a while.

Esther De Waal notes Thomas Merton's suggestion "that while there was a need for effort deepening and transformation it was most important not to undertake any special project of self-transformation or some attempt to 'work on myself,' but rather, 'just go for walks, live in peace, let change come quietly and invisibly on the inside.'" (*Lost in Wonder*, p. 85)

We may think, "I don't have time to go on walks: I have work to do." We can always come up with more to do. But if we take the time to notice ourselves and how we lead, we may find ourselves getting "better" without even trying.