

Spirituality

The core of leadership

by LCDR Justin Top, CHC, USN

Leadership is big business. Corporations spend huge amounts of money to train their leaders to be effective at what they do. Leadership books regularly reside on bestseller lists. This is because good leadership is invaluable. In the civilian world, good leadership amounts to huge financial profit and makes the difference between the success and failure of the business. In the military, good leadership literally means the difference between life and death, victory and defeat. Finding good leaders who understand their followers and how to motivate them is certainly worth the effort and expense.

“Spirituality,” on the other hand, is a rather polarizing word and is certainly not something that is often associated with leadership in the civilian or military world. Most people immediately equate spirituality with religion. This either excites people or turns them away. Those who would get excited, however, are quickly turned away when spirituality talk becomes too generic and does not align with their own individual understanding. Thus, because of the controversial nature of religious topics, many leaders simply shy away from the talk of spirituality altogether. However, such a reaction can be an unfortunate neglect of a powerful and important tool for leadership.

The large majority of people in this country (nearly 80 percent), and an even greater percentage of the world, believe in some religious tradition or higher power.¹ Of those, a majority of people say their religious beliefs strongly influence their daily decisions. As a result of years of surveys, American researcher George Gallup, Jr., suggests, “The depth of religious commitment often has more to do with how Americans act and think than do other key



An individual's religious beliefs will influence his decisions. (Photo by LCpl Tawanya Norwood.)

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background characteristics, such as level of education, age and political affiliation.”² Of the small minority who do not believe in a higher power, a significant portion consider themselves “spiritual but not religious,” meaning they are influenced by spiritual factors. Consider the implications of that. Businesses spend billions trying to understand what motivates employees and potential customers. Military leaders are looking for ways to train soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and airmen to persevere through difficult conditions and stress. One major key to knowing what motivates people lies in understanding spirituality and religion; yet, few leaders seek to leverage the power of spirituality.

Despite what many people think, spirituality is not necessarily the same thing as religion. Spirituality is an internal experience that may focus outward (connection to something greater than self) or inward (connection to what we often refer to as the “human spirit”). Before “spirituality” became tied to religious experience, the Greek philosophers used the word *pneumatikos* (from which comes the Latin *spiritualis*) to identify the unique characteristics of humanity compared to non-rational beings. Unlike animals, they reasoned humans have spirit; they have the ability to understand themselves, make meaningful relationships, live for a cause, and make meaning of the world around them. Thus, spirituality is the unique characteristic of humans and is characterized by one’s personal experience of faith, meaning, values, connection, and transcendence. Religion, on the other hand, is an organized set of beliefs and practices adhered to by a community of

people. It is practiced externally with the intent to foster internal spirituality. Religion is extremely effective at developing spirituality because it provides a framework of meaning, values, and connections to a like-minded community and something greater than self. The effectiveness of religion in developing those core elements of spirituality should not be ignored. However, just being part of a religious community does not guarantee spiritual fitness. In fact, external religious activity without the internal spiritual experience is often linked to greater mental health problems.³ It is also quite possible to have a strong internal spirituality without practicing any religion.

What Is Spirituality?

At its core, spirituality is about why people do what they do. Psychologist Abraham Maslow theorized that humans are motivated by a “hierarchy of needs,” which he compared to a pyramid. At the base of the pyramid are our most primitive and basic physiological needs for survival and safety. These are basically the same needs that all living organisms have. After physiological and safety needs are met, humans then need connection and belonging; they need to live in a system that has rules, defines good and bad, and provides for respect and self-esteem. As they meet the needs of belonging in a system, they then begin to look to find out more about themselves and what their role is (self-actualization). At the top of Maslow’s pyramid is “Self-Transcendence,” which he added to his theory later in life.⁴ Transcendence is the ability to rise above the physical and find connection to something higher than the physical self. Though spirituality is involved to some degree on all levels, it is an increasingly essential component of Maslow’s higher needs. In essence, spirituality deals with core existential questions such as “Who am I?,” “What is my role in society?,” “What is the meaning of my life?,” and “How do I connect with others?”

What does all of this have to do with leadership? The answer: everything. Leaders understand that people need more than just having their basic needs



People need more than just their basic needs met. Leading means that others willingly follow you. (Photo by Sgt Timothy Valero.)

met. In a society where basic needs are generally secure, the higher needs tend to be primary motivators. When people are able to make decisions and take actions that appeal to their higher needs, they are more likely to be happy and effective at their jobs. Simon Sinek, best-selling author and presenter, explained:

Leading is not the same as being the leader. Being the leader means you hold the highest rank, either by earning it, good fortune or navigating internal politics. Leading, however, means that others willingly follow you—not because they have to, not because they are paid to, but because they want to.⁵

In other words, the best leaders *inspire* those they lead. The Latin roots of the word inspire (*inspirata*) mean to “breathe spirit into.” A good leader breathes spirit into those he leads by appealing to those higher needs of meaning, connection, and values.

The Importance of Meaning

While I was attending graduate school, I took a job as a car salesman to help pay the bills. I quickly found myself in a high-pressure environment where blowing past customers’ objections and making money were the marks of success. It felt as though my job was causing me to view people simply as

money—as objects for me to manipulate for my own financial benefit. I was absolutely miserable in that job because it went against my foundational values of serving others. The managers of the car dealership were frustrated with me because I was not a very good salesman. I was not making money, and, worst of all, I was miserable because I found no fulfillment in my job. One day, I was able to help a woman who was about to get really cheated by another dealership. I helped her better understand the process, helped her identify her own values and motivation, and helped her make a well-informed decision.

In that moment, everything changed for me. I realized I could help people understand the system and get something they really wanted in a way that minimized regret. Suddenly, I had a purpose. I had a way to fit my job within my framework of meaning and values. Because of that shift in meaning, my experience changed as well. I quickly became one of the top sellers at the dealership. I enjoyed my job. I got to help customers and even colleagues, and I made honest money in the process. I went from completely miserable to motivated and successful.

The thing that made the difference: meaning. I caught the *spirit* of my job. Once I clearly defined the why of what

I was doing and aligned it with my values, everything changed. I was able to connect the actions in my life with the inner spiritual values and beliefs that mattered to me. As a leader, it is essential to communicate the reasoning behind what you do in a way that resonates with your Marines. Simon Sinek explained, "People do not buy what you do. They buy why you do it. And what you do simply proves what you believe."⁶ People will not buy into you as a leader unless they can get behind your "why." A good leader not only makes his own values and purpose apparent, inviting people to get behind his cause, but he also helps others identify their own values; it kindles in them a desire to take action on those values.

Spirituality Motivates

Consider the spiritual zeal of sports fans. What is it that causes grown adults, who otherwise lead responsible and respectable lives, to spend large amounts of money on supporting their chosen team by traveling to games (often hours in advance); dressing up in crazy outfits with faces and bodies painted; then spending hours with their fellow devotees cheering at the top of their lungs; cursing officials, rival players, and opposing fans; and endlessly discussing obscure sports trivia and statistics about players they have never met? The thing that causes a city-wide party or riot when a local team wins a championship is team *spirit*. Think about how crazy it is that a simple game can have such a powerful impact on behavior. For many people, their devotion to a team is not only a major motivator, but it also has become part of their identity and influences how they interact with others. Why? It satisfies a psychological or spiritual need for connection with others and a sense of shared meaning and purpose. In many cases, it can create shared experiences and adversity—also powerful unifiers.

If something as arbitrary as a sports team can gain such loyalty and devotion, imagine the power that a higher cause might have on people. History is full of examples of how various forms of spirituality (religion, nationalism, honor, etc.) motivated and sustained



Spirituality can help people deal with stress and hardship better. (Photo by Sgt Timothy Valero.)

people through incredible sacrifice and adversity to do remarkable (or terrible) things. Imagine having the people whom you lead share that same level of zeal about your team and your cause. Good leaders understand how to motivate people by appealing to them on a spiritual level.

Spirituality Wins Wars

President Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "Physical strength can never permanently withstand the impact of spiritual force." Tyrants throughout history learned the hard way that only having military strength is not enough to sustain control over people. Eventually, people will rebel against injustice and are willing to sacrifice all in support of a higher purpose. Berlin walls eventually will come down. Iron curtains will dissolve. Using physical strength, rank, threat, or financial manipulation cannot maintain lasting control. History is full of stories of wars that were won by lesser forces because they had a greater cause. In the Revolutionary War, for example, colonists faced off against what was arguably the most powerful nation in the world. At first, they got beaten thoroughly and often. But patriotism was fueled by the belief "all men are created equal" and are endowed with important inalienable rights. That spiritual foundation allowed the colonists

to endure incredible hardships and defeats until, eventually, they were able to overcome a much greater power. This is what Abraham Lincoln was referring to when he said, "Let us have faith that right makes might; and in that faith let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it."

War is the ultimate adversity. That is why some of the greatest leaders the world has ever known emerged during times of conflict. But not all war is armed conflict. Some of the most difficult and bitter battles involve clashing values and ideals rather than steel and lead. Those whom we admire as the greatest leaders today earned our admiration because they met conflict head on, not with physical strength but with spiritual force. Martin Luther King, Jr., Winston Churchill, Helen Keller, and others like them are remembered because of their ability to inspire others to stand up for a cause despite the odds.

Spirituality Increases Resilience

One of the reasons spirituality wins wars is because it increases people's ability to endure stress and persevere. When times get difficult, people need to be able to answer the important question, "Why am I here?" They need to know there is meaning behind their suffering. Consider how differently veterans were emotionally affected by the hor-

rors of combat in World War II when compared to the Vietnam War. In both wars, military personnel were exposed to terrible conditions that changed them psychologically. However, each war held a drastically different meaning. In World War II, most military personnel willingly signed up for the duration of war with the goal to defeat evil. It was clear who the enemy was, and it was clear why they needed to be defeated. The Nation supported the effort and treated those serving as heroes. In the Vietnam War, despite many military personnel going only for a year, they often suffered greater and more lasting psychological and spiritual injury from their experience. One reason for this lies in the difference in meaning. The Vietnam War was hugely unpopular, and service members were often treated with contempt after they returned, despite many of them being drafted. The reasons for the war were often unclear, the enemy was unclear, and the objectives of the war were hazy. The lack of spiritual meaning behind the adversity compounded the moral injury. The result is even decades later, we have thousands of Vietnam veterans struggling with mental illness and drug addiction—still haunted by their trauma. When people are spiritually fit, they are more resilient. When there is a spiritual meaning behind conflict and adversity, people are able to thrive despite stress and struggle. When leaders create an atmosphere of spiritual fitness and shared meaning, they facilitate a resilient strength in those they lead that can withstand greater stress and opposition.

What It Means

As a leader who understands the power of spiritual fitness, what should you do?

Live a spiritual life. Good leadership naturally flows out of the spirituality of the leader. Remember, spirituality is about constructing a meaning system based on your values and then living a moral life based on those values and meaning. That should apply to every aspect of your life. Identify your own values and let them shine to others in all you do.

Understand your “why.” If you, as a leader, stand for something those who follow you will buy into, then leading will be natural. When you know the why behind your leadership and you make that why clear through the way you conduct yourself, others will follow.

Become spiritually literate. Understand and appreciate the spirituality of those you lead. That may include religious beliefs, patriotism, political causes, or even loyalty to sports teams. Use spirituality to understand and relate to meaning and motivation.

Create shared meaning. Make it clear to your team and to all who know you what your shared purpose is. Use a motto or visual reminders. Help your team understand the importance of its role.

These are the core elements of spirituality. They are more than just keys to leadership. They are the keys to a successful life. They can be found in every action and interaction we as humans make. Understanding the principles behind spirituality can improve personal happiness, marriage and family satisfaction, occupational effectiveness, and nearly every aspect of your life.

Notes

1. Staff, “Religion,” *Gallup*, (Online: 2016), available at <https://news.gallup.com>; and Staff, “American’s Belief in God, Miracles and Heaven Declines,” *The Harris Poll*, (Online: December 2013), available at <https://theharrispoll.com>.
2. Gordon Gallup, Jr., *Americans Celebrate Easter*, (Princeton, NJ: The Gallup Organization, 1999).
3. Kenneth Pargament, Julie Exline, and James W. Jones, *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality: Context, Theory, and Research*, (Worcester, MA: American Psychological Association, 2013).
4. Saul McLeod, “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs,” *Simply Psychology*, (Online: 2007), available at <https://www.simplypsychology.org>.
5. Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, (New York, NY: Penguin, 2009).
6. TED, “How Great Leaders Inspire Action,” YouTube Video, (Online: May 2010), available at <https://www.youtube.com>.



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