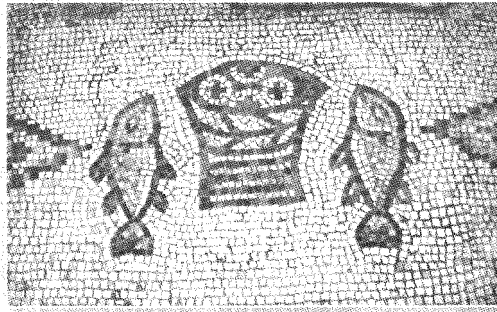


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YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE  
*TILL YOU GIVE IT AWAY*

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*And Other Important Lessons in Leadership*

**BRIAN C. STILLER**



CASTLE QUAY BOOKS

You Never Know What You Have Till You Give it Away: and other important lessons in leadership

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## Introduction

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These editorials began with the writing of the *Issachar Notes* online. A Jewish chronicler noted this about a Hebrew tribe King David had recruited in rebuilding Israel: *The sons of the tribe of Issachar had an understanding of the times and knew what Israel should do* (see 1 Chronicles 12:32).

This description defined my contribution in ministry. I early had an interest in how social and political dynamics shape faith and witness. While serving with Youth for Christ this interest grew, but found its real vocational opportunity in serving with which was, at first, a small and unorganized association—the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada.

As the topic of leadership—a relatively new discipline—only emerged in the late 1980s, I was interested but could find few substantive books. Later as president of Tyndale, I was encouraged by the writings of friend and spiritual mentor, Norm Allen, to reflect on leadership and its implications. I developed a habit of noting comments on leading and from that began to editorialize on the Web. I tried to point out the tough side of leading from those war stories we all have. Soon, readers gave feedback.

None of us in leadership are immune to weakness, self-doubt and making mistakes. We're human, and sometimes we get so caught up in our anxieties that we lose our focus. Keep these principles in mind:

- Jesus wants what others ignore.
- He blesses what others underestimate.
- Few give—most take.
- Take the gifts you've been given and give them away.

These are just the beginning of several lessons I've learned in my journey through leadership. How rich have been the insights and lessons given from so many.

For most of these editorials, Ruth Whitt carefully scrutinized language, grammar and syntax. My style was the subject of many conver-

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sations, but in the end she allowed pass this another of my idiosyncrasies. Janet Dimond has, with an amazing eye for content and selection, ordered and edited this final version, for which I'm so grateful.

I'm thankful for the opportunity to learn this trade of leading. Understanding our times, and from that developing strategies, is what we as leaders need to do.

September 2010



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You  
Never Know What  
You Have

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## Jesus Wants What Others Ignore

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Moses didn't know what he had—until he gave it away.  
He learned this rather dramatically:

*“What's in your hand?”*

*“Not much, Lord. A working shepherd's staff.”*

*“Throw it down.”* (It turns into a snake.)

*“Wow. How did you do that?”*

---

Most leaders have little idea what they have. The times we're filled with our self-importance usually end up in failure and embarrassment.

The story-classic is Jesus feeding the 5,000. His disciples downplayed any expectation that people could be fed. Why, even the small boy's lunch they found wouldn't give a few a meagre bites. Here the Creation story is played out. All sophistication of modern farming, the very best of entrepreneurial ingenuity, is reduced to the three elements of this story.

First, Jesus wants what others ignore.

Dr. Christiaan Barnard of South Africa was successful in performing heart transplants in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but within days all of his patients died. The new hearts were seen as foreign and were rejected by the body. At about the same time, scientists in Switzerland working to discover new antibiotics to fight infection found that fungi grown in soil samples from Norway and Wisconsin produced an opposite expected result. Instead of being useful fighting infection, they caused the host to be *more* vulnerable to infection by shutting down the immune system.

As the chief scientist was about to shut down this particular research, Jean-François Borel, remembering Barnard's problem, asked if he could continue the project. He did, and in a short time cyclosporine was developed, which revolutionized the world of medicine, and made successful organ transplants possible.

## You Never Know What You Have

What's in your hand? Do you feel unappreciated, overlooked, ignored? Do you feel a sense of failure, unable to find any life of significance? What others ignore, Jesus wants. Leave to Him what it truly is worth. You never know what you have till you give it away.

~~~~~

### Prayer—

My hunch, Lord, is that what I have isn't worth a whole lot. In fact, most others don't even know I have it. However, I've decided: I'll give you what I have. How and where You use it is now up to You. Help me to be faithful in giving every day what has come my way. Amen

## Jesus Blesses What Others Underestimate

Look over a crowd of teenagers, some rowdy, others withdrawn, and the majority buzzed by the noisy ones. Try to figure out who will influence significant change in the world. You can't.

Flip through your high school yearbook and read the quotes and aspirations. If you've attended a reunion, did you predict all those years ago who would step out onto a stage and shape their part of the world? Months after a sports team has spent millions on drafting and trading players, they bemoan those they missed who excelled elsewhere and those they recruited who disappointed. Every player isn't a Wayne Gretzky. There's no way to predict. Most often we underestimate others and ourselves. There are obvious ingredients of intellect and sometimes talent. What's more difficult to see is heart. Like the bumblebee. Engineering-wise, it can't fly. But it does anyhow.

Embedded in the fish and bread were the ingredients to make more. The disciples didn't see that. And neither did the crowd. They wanted to eat, and the disciples knew they had a disaster on their hands if they didn't do something soon. Money and buying food was their option. A young boy, prized by his mother and equipped to handle the day, didn't register with the disciples. In the boy's hands was the answer.

Underestimated.

The hometown folk wondered about Jesus, the boy who grew up with their sons. "Why, isn't he Joseph's son?" someone remarked. Ordinary. Unremarkable. Further, how could anyone they knew this well be significant? How dare He!

Floating around in conversations, I hear seemingly wise comments: "You know, we just don't have leaders like we used to." And people nod their heads and mumble foolish affirmations. It's always been like that. We see leaders in hindsight. Those who lead now are ordinary and like us. We would wish greatness, charismatic jumping-buildings-in-a-

## You Never Know What You Have

single-leap. If that's the kind of leader you have, they're probably better at grandstanding than leading.

Leaders emerge from among us. They're common. No signs hanging above their doors announcing their gift to lead. It's what we find when we give the underestimated the opportunity to open their hands and offer up their apparently meagre provisions. Goliath scorned scrawny David. Nazareth underestimated Jesus. Felix, the Roman governor, didn't realize he was up against the great first-century mind of Paul of Tarsus.

Most will underestimate you. But don't underestimate yourself. Allow the inner resilience of faith to hold on to the gifting that's yours by creation and nurture, ever willing in His time to take your modest offerings and multiply them beyond what you ever expected.

~~~~~

### Prayer—

Lord, they seem so insignificant. There are times I feel like the runt in the litter. Then I remember I'm Yours, and Your gifting is a gift I'm not to keep hidden, by either selfish interest or insecurity. So here it is. Surprise them, Lord, and may You be praised in the doing. Amen.

## Few Give—Most Take

There are two kinds of people in the world—givers and takers. And all of us are somewhere in-between.

What occurs to most as they set out for the day, especially those who work outside the home?

*Will I today find in my work and relationships the money I need to live, the feelings I require for well-being, and a sufficiently pleasant environment to get on with life?*

How often in the past seven days have your starting moments been framed by “How many ways can I give today?” This isn’t meant to induce guilt, but rather to alert us to the uncommonness of the intention to give. Giving isn’t an automatic impulse. Taking is.

Even in the feeding of the 5,000 story, only one gave. The boy. He gave up what was his. Was there a promise he would even get a morsel to eat? Jesus took from him. The disciples took from Jesus. The people took from the disciples. Then the disciples took back from the people what was left over. Out of over 5,000, only one gave.

I earlier noted the Creation story is played out in this moment. Farmers, investors and parents know it well. You begin with the essential elements. These are sown, invested, ploughed underground. They die. Well not quite, but it sure looks like it.

Only as it’s given away can it multiply. That one seed by creation is destined to become many—but only when given away. If hoarded, it sits in the granary. I know many who in generosity give and give and give. Their joy and pleasure in giving is unbounded. Then I meet those bound up in fear of giving. For them, it’s hard. The power and combined joy of those who live with generosity releases them, so that in the giving, their open hands are able to receive more.

But beware. There are those who imply that by giving, we’ll become rich. Their hucksterism corrodes the beauty of this Creation principle.

## You Never Know What You Have

Giving is not to get. You get in your giving, but if that's your motive, the very spirit of the Jesus we follow is violated and corrupted.

Leaders, we're to give, as is anyone out of their gifting. Leaders have a special need, for it falls in part to us to provide a flow of life, energy and hope as conduits of His grace. This necessitates learning how to give. It's a discipline. It's learned. In doing it—especially in times when it threatens our well-being—it becomes natural, and in time becomes the first impulse, the dominant instinct.

~~~~~

### Prayer—

Source of life, Giver of all that's good, help me break free from a spirit of wanting others to give me today those elements of life I want, need or request. And instead incline my heart and train my mouth to ever give. Amen.

## Who Was Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu?

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At age 18, she knew her life would be different. At 40, she founded the Missionaries of Charity. For another 20 years, she worked in obscurity. We know her as Mother Teresa.

---

No one in our generation defined Christian love as did Mother Teresa. Mention her name and images of care and compassion surface. I hadn't known her tough oversight of the worldwide ministry. A TV documentary showed her reviewing a new centre on the US west coast. With a quick glance at the furnishings, she ordered them removed and replaced with more modest ones. To romanticize her is to miss what she was about.

What we may also overlook are the years she spent in drudgery and obscurity before her name and work spread across the media. The model of service that had its larger impact years later was refined in those obscure years. That's not to say that what we do in obscurity will inevitably find its way to a Nobel Prize. Our work may not surface for years, and possibly not ever. William Carey's 40 years of missionary labour with one convert was not the measurement of his calling or effectiveness. That came decades later.

Paul maps out the process: "Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character hope," (Romans 5:3,4). There's a line each leader follows, like it or not. Farmers will tell you. The cold spring day and the harsh north wind remind them that unless the seed is planted, there will be no harvest. The obscure seed, germinating and growing oh so slowly, is the only way the multiple effect takes place.

Glamour, power and money seem to be an underlying measurement of some religious communities. Do you watch some of the high-flying media artists do their biblical act and wonder how they seem so successful, while you grind out in the obscure and small places? It seems so unfair.



## You Never Know What You Have

Mother Teresa modelled the Lord Jesus. That she became world-famous is counterintuitive. What matters is that she lived out the Gospel. She died the same day as Princess Diana. A columnist said, “Princess Di touched the poor; Mother Teresa took them home.”

Let the spin masters do their work with those they choose, but live out His calling and life, and may that be your reward.

~~~~~

### Prayer—

God of Eternity, the One who is in no hurry in working out Your purposes, keep me from thinking that if there's no apparent success this week or year, all is lost. The sowing and reaping cycle is Your design, and for good reason. This day, in my thinking, praying and managing, may the rhythm of Your good Creation be replicated. Amen.

## Blooming Where Planted

---

“Like a lot of beautiful things, tulips inspire malfeasance, and they take a lot of work to maintain. Careless people pick them. Mice, rats, voles, skunks, squirrels and deer eat them. Even in Holland, they need a lot of human intervention to thrive because they’d rather be on a rocky mountainside in Turkey, where they come from.”

—Constance Casey

---

Leading, like growing tulips, isn’t easy. Leaders start out with a particular DNA, a journey that inevitably requires a kind of death. This is like Jesus’ line: “Unless a seedling falls into the ground and dies, it doesn’t reproduce or grow—followed then by sprouts overcoming the resistant soil, pushing into the daylight, drawing in nutrients,” (John 12:24).

Recall the minister who stopped by his parishioner’s farm, and, looking over the meticulously cared-for field, commented, “Isn’t God’s Creation beautiful?”

“Yeah, I suppose,” the farmer grunted, “but you should’ve seen it when He had it all to himself.”

The gifting of God is not automatic. We’ve all seen tragic failures of those so gifted, yet by poor choices, crippling life experiences or laziness, fritter away life, leaving the bulb carelessly tossed aside in a corner of the garden. To those who have much, much is required. My sense is it’ll sound rather hollow as we enter the Kingdom and, when asked for His return on investment, mutter, “Well, I was persecuted.” “I ran out of energy.” “I felt insecure.” “I couldn’t make up my mind.” “No one would listen.” Blooming calls for daily, conscious choices.

---

Prayer—

Tulip Maker, Fashioner of the *imago Dei*, this Creation is of Your doing. Help me see what too is of my doing so in the course of this day,

## You Never Know What You Have

I'll not let the wish of the bulb to return to Turkey override the need to bloom where planted. Amen.

## Grace Costs

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“Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confessional, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ—living and incarnate.”

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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Walter Wangerin Jr., in his marvellous story-bible of the New Testament—*Jesus: A Novel*—describes what Mary sees when a woman dropped in her coins at the temple:

*A very old woman had just pulled herself up to her feet. She began to shuffle through the Court of the Women in a direction somewhat slant of us. She pressed a begging bowl in both hands against her stomach. Soon, though she took desperately small steps, we knew her direction, if not her mind: she was moving toward the treasury just to the right of us. As she crept by, I saw her in profile: a long translucent nose; eyelids loose, the low rims sagging from their eyeballs, her mouth working like a Pharisee at prayer. When she reached the treasury, she brought forth the begging bowl and turned it slowly over the bell-like mouth, and two tiny bits of metal fell from the bowl into the bronze.*

*We could hear nothing of the fall.*

*“Judas, my brother, my bright disciples,” Jesus said. “Know the difference. Live by it: those rich men who contributed wonderful sums to the temple were contributing something of their surplus. It never touched their need. But this woman who gave two copper mites—she has given more than ten such notables combined. For she gave all she had. It was everything she had to live on.”*

Bonhoeffer’s famous line about cheap grace warns us against assuming that life in Christ costs us nothing. Grace is a rich theological

## You Never Know What You Have

idea birthed in God's giving to us what we don't deserve. In offering grace at mealtime, we make known we're receiving from His hand what we don't deserve.

There are two implications. On the giving side, grace is grace when it costs us. On the receiving side, we cheapen it when we let others assume it requires no sacrificial response. Our eyes could do with a Jesus-clarity.

---

### Prayer—

My loving and truth-revealing Jesus, stressed by relentless requirements to balance budgets, I need to know, as well as my leader-friends, how You assess and judge our service. Keep me from determining my significance as a leader by my association with people of power. Help me, God of Stewardship, to know that grace in leadership is costly, and give me insight to see that those who give out of their need and not of their surplus truly understand sacrificial giving. Amen.

## Risk Is What We Practise

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“Don’t expect others to take greater risks or make greater sacrifices than you have.”

—Andy Stanley

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How easy it is for us to slip behind the larger vision, pressing others to join in, all the while keeping our powder dry. My argument goes this way: “I’m spending my energy in getting the idea going. That’s my contribution.” And in matters of giving, I slip into this rationalization: “I live on a modest salary, and because I get less than I might receive elsewhere, the difference is my gift.”

One day, while meeting with Henry Wildeboer, a friend and coach, he asked bluntly, “Brian, what are you giving to the campaign?” His reference was to a very large capital campaign—for us—of \$58 million. To many of whom I’ve asked to give major gifts, I’ve said, “If we don’t think in terms larger than we’ve ever thought before, we simply won’t achieve this goal.”

So when Henry asked, I told him of our commitment—the largest we’d ever made. His abrupt question was, “Is that a relatively easy gift or is it real sacrifice?” Here the Spirit bumped hard against my rationalization. In the end, Lily and I pushed ourselves beyond what was seemingly feasible. I knew that unless the sacrifice was a stretching of our faith, how could I ask others to do the same?

Missionary statesman Oswald J. Smith taught his church to give on a Faith Promise plan. It was simple, but profoundly biblical. Beyond one’s normal tithe, at a particular moment in the year, he encouraged people to pledge an amount to give in the next 12 months beyond what they in the normal course of living could do. The *promise* is made by *faith*, meaning the amount is predicated on the Lord helping me fulfill the promise. I know that by ordinary means I can’t, so I must rely on the Lord by faith. The income needed to meet the pledge will come from a variety of sources: Aunt Amy leaves a bequest; I find I can get on with

## You Never Know What You Have

less; a new job comes along with added income; I figure out a creative way to raise funds. The list goes on.

That simple principle has pressed us to give in new and deeply satisfying ways, for it becomes a partnership by faith—and by that we're transformed.

~~~~~

### Prayer—

Father, Owner of the cattle scattered across the hills of this country, may the risk of faith we ask others to exercise not be lost on us. For we know the joy of obedience is found in pushing ourselves in faith beyond what we can do ourselves. Amen.