



Counter-intuitive Leadership

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Today I want to share some personal thoughts on a key leadership lesson, at the heart of the Christmas story, the birth of Jesus.

There is a virtue, there is a characteristic, there is a way of living out our lives that will, among other things, elevate our skill as a leader, enable us to know healthy, happy relationships with others, help us experience a strong and intimate marriage, and birth in us a deep, confident, inner strength.

Now, here is what is interesting, and sad at the same time. If you were to go to Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia site, you will find a number of places that list the top virtues to be pursued and lived out in our lives. One list contains 20 top virtues. It includes characteristics like temperance, frugality, industry, contentment, courage. These are all great virtues. But nowhere on the list does it mention the virtue we are going to talk about tonight.

I believe that this is such a key characteristic that you and I cannot be healthy, successful leaders without it. It will not only be difficult to be a great leader without this virtue in your life, it will be *impossible* to be a great leader without it.

We're thinking a lot about Christmas these days, aren't we? The Christmas story, the story of the birth of the son of God, the birth of the greatest human who has ever lived. That event vividly displays this virtue. It seems as if every element in the account of the birth of Jesus whispers this word.

The word I want to focus on today, the virtue, the characteristic that is so strategic to being a healthy leader is "**humility**". Humility understood correctly, is an essential element in the life of a leader. Humility is at the heart of the Christmas story.

God chooses a poor teenage girl, living in a far-flung corner of the Roman Empire to be the mother of Jesus. Talk about humility. Jesus is born, not in a palace, but in a barn. The announcement of his birth isn't made to ambassadors and other government officials, but to a group of shepherds, outcasts who live a nomadic life on the fringe of society. Joseph and Mary are so poor that the sacrifice they bring to the temple, in gratitude for Jesus' birth, is reserved for those living below the poverty line.

Jesus is raised in obscurity in a tiny village and learns from his father the trade of a common labourer. But it isn't just his birthplace or the occupation that echoes the word "humility" in the life of Jesus. In Matthew 11:28, in the Bible, Jesus describes himself. He says, *"Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls"*.

I believe that Jesus is the greatest leader who ever lived. Just think of the impact of his life on this planet. Think of the art, the architecture, the music, the books, and the billions of people who follow him. Even our calendars have changed and been reset BC / AD by his birth. And at his heart is humility.

One way of defining a word is to describe its opposite. The opposite of humility is pride, self-centeredness, and a me-first attitude. Humility, on the other hand is gentle, teachable, content, a servant. Next to love, it is the most common virtue mentioned in the Bible. Humility brings many benefits to our lives.

Humility enables us to be content with things we cannot change like certain physical abilities, appearance, IQ and so on. Humility enables us to accept people without unhealthy judgement. Humility reduces the pride that sparks the hurt we too easily feel when we are not appreciated or recognized. Humility gets us off the hamster's wheel of chasing more and more stuff, and more and more recognition, so that we can feel valued. Humility stops us from the drive to impress.

I would argue that many of us are drawn toward humility even as we are prone to let pride grip our lives. We find humility attractive.

Compare these two men.

Mohammad Ali, at one time the World Heavy Weight Boxing Champion, was on an airplane that was going through tremendous turbulence. The flight attendant had announced that everyone needed to put their seatbelts on. But Ali did not do that. When the flight attendant saw that his seatbelt was not done up, she asked him to fasten it. To that request Ali replied, *"Superman don't need no seatbelt"*. To which, in a flash, the flight attendant responded, *"Superman don't need no airplane either"*.

Here's our second story.

At one time, in the 1930's Joe Louis was travelling on a bus. A small group of young men gathered around him at the back of the bus and started calling him names and insulting him. Louis didn't do a thing. When the bus reached his stop, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a business card that had on it the title "Joe Louis – Boxer". They were picking a fight with the man who would become the heavy weight boxing champion of the world from 1937-1949. Notice his humility!

Now, of the two men which one are you most drawn to?

As I look back on my life, I believe God has been teaching me, and moving me toward greater and greater humility. I am not there yet, but the older I get, the more I have come to realize the power and strength true humility can bring in to one's life.

Let me share with you a few lessons on humility that God has been teaching me.

My father was a cabinet-maker who left Germany in 1929. Very soon after coming to Canada he found himself without work. Unemployed and having very little money, my father bought a chicken coop, living in one half, and had his small business in the other half. It was called "survival."

My dad was a hard worker, who taught me the value of a dollar. He had a saying "*the impossible we do right away, the miraculous will take a bit longer*".

At the age of 20, in 1970, I started working full-time with my dad. At that time my father had a couple of part-time people in a small manufacturing shop, and a few local customers. Three months after I started, dad announced that he was going to visit relatives in Germany, handed me a list of suppliers and contacts, and said "You're in charge Richard; see you in 6 weeks".

My first and biggest challenge was to find more customers. I had zero training in sales. Dad was a hands-on cabinet maker. I had to do this on my own. So I started my sales career by going door-to-door with an industry credit book, my lunch, and a map of the city of Toronto.

Ed Leon, from Leon's Furniture, was the first large customer to give me an opportunity, by telling me what he was looking for, in the way of occasional tables. Leons had about 5 small stores at the time.

To be honest, the only thing I offered Leons was a can-do attitude, passion about making furniture, a willingness to listen, and the commitment to produce what the customer wanted at a low cost. Ed Leon took an interest in me. He was tough but fair, and today Leons is still one of our largest customers in Canada.

There is a sentence in the Bible that says:

**(God) guides the humble in what is right
and teaches them his way.**

-Psalm 25:9

I had to learn to listen to others.

It wasn't long, burning the candle at both ends, that I became tired and exhausted. I was working late into the night and all through the weekends. I was overwhelmed. I remember kneeling in my small shop one day, asking Jesus to give me his wisdom, and be my partner in my business and in all my decisions. This was a major turning point in my life. I needed to listen to God. He needed to be my life leader. That was 47 years ago. I have been far from

perfect, but I can tell you that learning to listen to God was the wisest decision I have ever made.

That night on my way home I simply prayed, “God I need help to lead. I’m in over my head. Please help me find a good experienced leader.” I had just finished my short prayer – (I pray with my eyes open when I drive), when the man I had asked some days earlier to lead manufacturing, flagged me down on the side of the road.

Ed was in a field, where he was tending his bees. He asked me if I was still looking for a manufacturing leader. Within a month Ed became part of our small team. His salary was profit-sharing, as I could not match his current salary. Was this roadside meeting chance? Not in my mind! It was a direct answer to my prayer!

Business continued to grow in the late 70’s, faster than I could believe! A friend of mine suggested I read one chapter of Proverbs in the Bible each day. There are 31 chapters in the book of Proverbs. Desperate for knowledge, I faithfully read a chapter each day for many years. The wisdom in this book is so good. The principles are so good for leaders ... dealing with people, principles of life, parenting.

Many people I interact with feel the Bible is not relevant today. However when I ask if they’ve read it, the sad answer is “No”! The book is full of wisdom. It is still consistently the #1 best-selling book each year! In Washington DC, a 1 billion dollar bible museum just opened. **The bible is worth checking out!!**

During this time period, I had copied several successful US manufacturers’ furniture designs. I became convicted that I was stealing designs. People would say, “But Richard, everyone does it!” But I knew God, my partner, was disappointed in me! “Richard it is stealing!” So I called the owners of two large US companies and asked forgiveness for stealing their designs.

That was very humbling but I had no personal peace until I made the call. The owners did not know what to do with my confession, but suggested I give any royalty for the design to a charity of my choice. It was quite a lesson in humility, but God, my partner, honoured our choice to be honest. I learned that copying generates lower margins; new designs generate more profit!

People listen to what we say and what we do. I’m convinced part of the reason we have such a strong work force of talented people at Magnussen Home is because of our values. I have learned business is all about people, and people are all about relationships, and people are drawn to honest values, and in particular, people are drawn to humility. Arrogance and pride can be our downfall.

In the 80’s, I started to see small amounts of furniture coming into California from Taiwan. The value was great, and I realized the potential risk to our then Canada-only-occasional-table-business. If this foreign furniture got a hold in our Canadian market, we would be in

trouble! My Sales Manager and I hopped on a plane to check out the source of manufacturing. It was really good product, from some really good factories.

Twenty years later the import competition started to really grow. The good news for us was that we were already involved in importing furniture. But while the import side of the business was good, we were having a very difficult time competing with pricing on Canadian-made products.

For three years we were losing \$1 million a year on manufacturing. At the same time, the Ministry of Environment said the dust collector in our manufacturing plant was creating too much noise. A residential neighbourhood had sprung up around us. The neighbours were complaining. But the cost to relocate our factory would run into multi-millions of dollars! We had no choice. We shutdown manufacturing and went 100% international, buying our occasional tables overseas, eventually turning our factory into a rental commercial property.

I prayed a lot during that time asking God why this was happening. But I later realized that he was closing doors of domestic manufacturing, and opening doors into the international world of business, that I would have never believed would be part of our small family business. This opened the door to new lines of residential furniture, that today include master bedroom, youth furniture, home office, dining room, entertainment centres, and so on. Today Magnussen Home is shipping 125,000 pieces of furniture every month, with sales to over 20 countries.

Business continued to grow. The K-W Record Business editor tracked me down, and published articles periodically about our growth at Magnussen Furniture. The reporter was intrigued with the business, but more than that he was most interested in my simple faith in God. After all, faith and business cannot work together, can they?

In 2008, our bank started to become very concerned about world markets. Our bank went from being happy to loan us millions, to giving us just a few months to find another bank. But who wants a leveraged furniture company when the world financial situation is so bleak.

People do not have an appetite for furniture when they're thinking survival. Magnussen Home saw business drop 40% in just 3 months. The only option I could find was to borrow money from a specialty company that dealt in high risk companies at a cost of 18%. Not much fun!! Our company was in jeopardy!

At that same time we had a 13 year lawsuit with a supplier who had not fulfilled their contract to us. Suddenly, out of the blue, our legal case was settled and the settlement we received was the exact amount the bank demanded we pay! The money was transferred to our account the same week the bank gave us a deadline ... chance?! I don't think so! There is no doubt in my mind but that God had orchestrated a miracle. He used the tough times to teach us a lesson about pride, and the need for us to humble ourselves and let him be the leader. God has been the one blessing us.

Magnussen Home has become a global business with over 3,000 customers worldwide, and with distributions centers in Vietnam and California. Our headquarters is in Canada with 300 team members managing 10,000 plus, contracted workers globally.

I HAVE LEARNED TO:

- TRUST GOD
- LISTEN TO OTHERS
- SEE TRIALS AS OPPORTUNITIES

I am a follower of Jesus Christ. I have learned so many lessons through my simple faith in the humble Jesus of the Christmas story.

Often over the years I would celebrate the business success, and personally take the credit, but today after seeing my career playing out, I know that Jesus is the real hero.

Jesus' humility was evidenced in his birth and throughout his life, but was especially seen in his death. Paul, a follower of Jesus, wrote these words about Jesus' death:

“You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, He did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; He took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.

Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honour and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Philippians 2:6-11

MAY YOU HAVE A BLESSED CHRISTMAS.