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### Shaping the Heart of a Leader

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# Shaping the heart of a leader



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SCAN FOR AUDIO

**L**ife does not always turn out as planned. Sometimes it turns out surprisingly better.

An example is the case of Joseph—one day, a slave in Pharaoh's prison, the next, propelled into top leadership in the land of his suffering. In charge of an unprecedented food security operation, his mandate was to insulate Egypt against a catastrophic seven-year famine. As the years rolled by, everything appeared to go as planned. He was at the height of Egyptian hierarchy, next only to the pharaoh.

But underneath Joseph's success lingered questions about how to make sense of the twisted trajectory of his life. God had been good to him. Yet somehow the troubling memories were difficult to forget. We get a glimpse of Joseph's lingering pain just after the birth of his firstborn son: "'God has made me *forget* all my trouble and all my father's household'" (Gen. 41:51, NIV; emphasis added).

I know the feeling of wanting to forget the past. I grew up poor. My father left our family before I was six. My mother's work brought in barely enough to pay the bills. So we rented out part of our apartment to make ends meet. Our clothes were hand-me-downs. Being Adventist, I was strange in the eyes of my neighborhood friends. I was different.

I still marvel at how Jesus drew me into His orbit. It happened during a week of prayer in my last year of high school. Although at first I resisted attending, God used the voice of a pastor to bring me to know Jesus as my personal Savior. Through the pastor's voice, Jesus called me to surrender my life to Him.

That changed my life. I had planned to become a doctor, but now I heard a clear call to ministry. After this were some of the happiest months of my life. Every morning, I would read my Bible and linger in prayer before getting ready for school. My grades soared, and I graduated from high school with distinction. I was on top of the world and thought I could finally leave my troubled past behind. Yet *forgetting* the past was not enough. What I had to learn was that my *whole* life story was about God shaping me as a leader.<sup>1</sup>

## Wanting to forget the past

Joseph had every reason to *forget* the past. Who would not want to *forget* the memory of your brothers ripping off your coat, pushing you over the edge of that pit, and leaving you to die? Who would want to replay that terror-filled journey through the desert that landed you as a slave in the household of Potiphar? How could he make sense of the years in the pharaoh's prison in return for faithful service in his master's household?

And now, the great reversal of Joseph's fortune—was this not a call for him to move on? We can understand how in that tender moment of celebrating the birth of his son, Joseph concluded: "'God has made me *forget* all my trouble and all my father's household'" (Gen. 41:51, NIV; emphasis added).

But he was wrong.

Just when Joseph thought he could finally lock up his life story in the memory closet called "forgotten," the trouble of his life showed up in front of him. There they were, on the ground, bowed before him (Gen. 42:6). They had no clue that the one who was looking at them was the very one they once wished dead (v. 8).

The victim meets his tormentors. The memories and feelings return. What would Joseph do now?

The almost unlimited power of his leadership position only intensified Joseph's dilemma. He remembered their crime and his dreams—now literally acted out just as God had shown him—that triggered their hatred. How do you use your power when God turns your enemies over to you?

Joseph noticed that Benjamin, his younger brother, was missing among them! Had these cruel men killed him? Can you imagine the raw emotion that flushed Joseph's heart? But he had learned not to let emotion hijack the cool of his leadership. Joseph would test them and, if necessary, break them. His stern voice left no doubt as to who was in charge.

As Joseph unforgivingly pressed them for the truth, a new story emerged. Instead of cruelty, he noticed unselfish commitment to each other. Instead of deception, Joseph sensed devotion to their father. As his ears tuned in to



their hushed conversation, Joseph overheard what he did not expect: they, too, remembered that bitter moment when they had ignored “the anguish of his soul” (Gen. 42:21, KJV). Their sin had imprinted itself on their hearts as if it could not be forgiven. Hearing their anguish over his destiny struck Joseph like a lightning bolt. Only a quick exit saved his face as Joseph broke down and wept as he never had before.

## God redeeming our story

Most of us are too familiar with the story of Joseph not to recognize what a crucial leadership moment this was for Joseph. Here was a leader choosing to work through his past rather than *forgetting* it. It paved the way for that ultimate moment of truth recorded in Scripture when he reassured his fearful brothers after the death of their father Jacob: “Don’t be afraid of me. . . . You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good” (Gen. 50:19, 20, NLT).

Did you notice that? God had not wiped away the truth of their guilt and his misery. God had entered it and redeemed it. Once Joseph realized God’s grace had always been in his story, he could *forgive* it. Joseph could finally embrace God’s grace in his whole story—both glorious and painful.

Many of us have a hard time with the story. We are not, of course, suggesting that God justifies cruelty done to any of His children. Yet when we suffer, God enters into our suffering with us (Isa. 63:9). All too often, the pain of the moment hides this reality from us. Thus, our unhealed wounds and stories of the past are buried deep in the closet of our memory. We wish to *forget* them. But even though banned from view, these experiences still affect our life and leadership and sometimes derail our best intentions. These hidden dynamics are one of the reasons leadership development is such a difficult undertaking.<sup>2</sup>

In a study of congregational leaders, Mike Aufderhar found that leaders “without an awareness of their family system patterns and reactivity often exercise their leadership in unhealthy ways that are damaging to their congregations.”<sup>3</sup> Why? In anxiety-generating situations, we tend to revert to behavior patterns we developed earlier in life. The stories of the past, which are thought to be overcome and discarded, if not forgiven, can still trigger emotional reactions to do their destructive work.<sup>4</sup>

Look at Moses, striking the rock in anger instead of talking to it as God had commanded. Why this overreaction? Fearful of seeing Israel repeat the rebellion, possibly causing their

exclusion from the Promised Land, Moses simply lost it. While we have great sympathy for his “losing it” when faced with the constant whining and rebelling of His people, God still held Moses accountable for his failure under pressure.

What can we do? One way to find healing is to realize that our life is a sacred story authored by God: “Everyone’s life *is* a story. But most people don’t know how to read their life in a way that reveals their story. They miss the deeper meaning in their life, and they have little sense of how God has written their story to reveal himself and his own story.”<sup>5</sup> Learning to read your life story is a core ingredient for leadership growth.

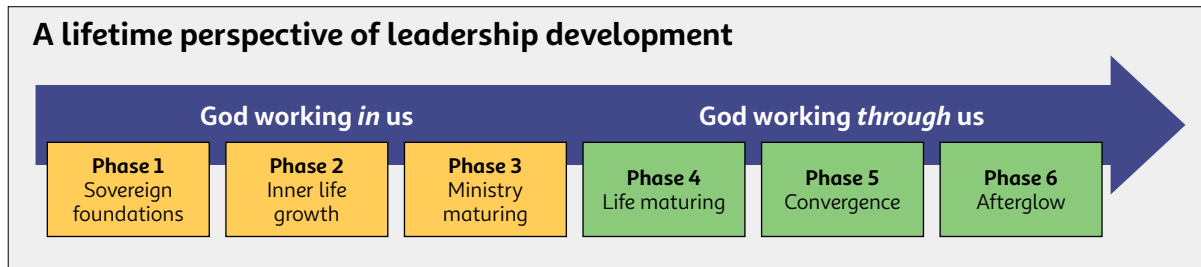
In our leadership program at Andrews University, we ask all leaders to write out their life stories. Then we help them plot their story on a timeline and track God’s fingerprints in the circumstances, events, and people of their lives.<sup>6</sup> Many leaders are profoundly affected by this exercise. The exercise assumes that if God has called you as a leader, He uses *all* of your life to shape the unique you, the good and the bad.

## God’s fingerprints in our lives

God uses all of our life to shape our leadership potential. One of the researchers who has greatly influenced the lifetime approach to leadership development is J. Robert Clinton. After studying the life stories of many biblical, historical, and contemporary Christian leaders, Clinton found six discernable phases in the typical development of a leader. While each life story is unique and does not exactly match these ideal phases, the following six-point review offers an important perspective on what God is doing in each phase to develop leadership potential.

1. *Sovereign foundations.* God works through the background elements of family, context, historical situations, and events to shape a leader. It is not always easy to see God’s hand in the circumstances of life. But reflection in later stages of life will often bring a deeper appreciation of the providences of God in this phase.
2. *Inner life growth.* Emerging leaders need to attend to the inner landscape of their hearts.<sup>7</sup> As they learn to hear God’s voice in Scripture and through prayer, their response to His voice will be tested. Thus, Christian character is formed as they grow in faith and faithfulness. All of life is a platform of service, no matter what profession they are in, and they usually get involved in some form of ministry.

## A lifetime perspective of leadership development



3. *Ministry maturing.* In this phase, emerging leaders reach out to others and begin experimenting with their gifts. They learn by experience how relationships in the body of Christ work—not always an easy thing. These experiences drive some to seek informal or even formal training. Through it all, God continues to shape the inner life of the leader.

In these first three phases, God primarily works *in* the leader, not *through* the leader. While we are evaluating success and productivity, God often quietly works *in* us because He desires us to lead out of who we *are*.

4. *Life maturing.* Leaders in this stage have identified their giftedness and experience ministry as satisfying. They are thus gaining a sense of priority. Often God uses conflicts, isolation, crisis, and destiny experiences to grow into mature fruitfulness. Experiencing God deeply may be valued even more than ministry success. Paradoxically, this is often a period of increased relevance and fruitfulness.
5. *Convergence.* This phase builds on the learning of previous phases. Some leaders experience God's guidance into a role and place that matches their giftedness optimally and maximizes the contribution of their ministry. Clinton warns that this is not something to strive for but a result of responding consistently to God's attempts to guide the leader.
6. *Afterglow.* For a few leaders, the fruit of a lifetime of ministry and growth culminates in a time of widespread influence and blessing to many. Sometimes their influence lingers beyond their life span.

Joseph's life as a leader illustrates God's commitment to growing us as leaders to full maturity. The leadership growth journey is not an easy road. It cultivates not only your competencies but also the inner landscape of your heart.<sup>8</sup>

When I stood that evening, turning my life over to Jesus, I fully expected him to end my troubles. I was ready to *forget* my past and embark on a journey of growth with Him. What I did not realize was how much I still had to learn and unlearn to be able to allow His story to shine through mine. Thus, in the costly twists and turns of my life, I have learned that life does not always turn out as planned.

If you are willing to allow God's presence to shine through the stories of your past, you might just find yourself with fewer burdens, more grace, and a renewed sense of purpose in your leadership and life.



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