THE HEART AND MIND OF A STEWARD LEADER

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Macliing Dulag was a little-known *pangat* (village elder) in his tribal community situated in Cordillera mountains in northern Philippines. A pangat is chosen by the community because of the courage and wisdom they had shown in the past. Macliing, a rice farmer, also had a weekday job as road maintenance worker for the Bureau of Public Highways.

In 1974, the martial law government under President Ferdinand Marcos, sought to implement a World Bank-funded hydroelectric power project along Chico River in the Cordilleras. The construction of four huge dams would have inundated 346,000 acres of homes, rice terraces, orchards, communal forests, and sacred burial grounds. The lives of as many as 100,000 people living in villages along the river would have been affected by the project and their indigenous way of life destroyed. The villagers strongly opposed the building of the dam, and Macliing emerged as a strong and articulate leader in the struggle between the government and the communities that would be displaced. Although without formal education, Macliing saw life sharply, and was quoted saying:

If you (government) in your search for the good life destroy life, we question it. We say those who need electric lights are not thinking of us who are bound to be destroyed. Or will the need for electric power be a reason for our death?[[1]](#endnote-1)

The indigenous people of the affected communities, and those who sympathized with their cause, argued that development should not be done with such extreme sacrifice. When he was asked to produce their land titles, Macliing said:

You ask if we own the land. You mock us. Where is your title? Where are the documents to prove that you own the land? Title. Documents. Proof. Such arrogance of owning land…How can you own that which outlives you?..To claim a place is the birth right of everyone. The lowly animals claim their place, how much more of human beings. They are born to live.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Village leaders were offered bribes, harassed, even imprisoned by the martial law regime, but they stood firm in their opposition. Macliing Dulag fought for his people with great self- respect and dignity. A story is told that when the Presidential Assistant for National Minorities asked Macliing to meet in a posh hotel in Manila and handed him a thick envelope, his reply was: “This envelope can contain only one of two things – a letter or money. If it is a letter, I do not know how to read. And if it its money, I do not have anything to sell. So take your envelope and go.”

Macliing was assassinated on April 24, 1980. A group of government soldiers raided his house and killed him with a rain of bullets in an attempt to intimidate the people. The Cordillera indigenous people were not cowed. On the contrary, Macliing’s assassination further solidified them. The government did not realize the strong communal ethos that existed among the various tribal people. The cause of the Cordillera people gained sympathizers nationally and internationally. In the end, World Bank withdrew its funding and the government was forced to abandon the dam project. In fact, this experience of the World Bank on the Chico Dam project resulted in the formulation of its operational guidelines of projects affecting indigenous peoples. The once divided Cordillera region formed the Cordillera Peoples’ Alliance for the Defense of the Ancestral Domain and for Self-Determination in 1984.

Macliing Dulag is a model of a community leader who is transformative. He upheld truth, justice, and righteousness, even in the face of powerful opposition, in this case, the might of the martial law regime. Such courage can only come from strength of the inner character of the man.

**Steward Leader as an Approach to Transformational Leadership**

Bakke Graduate University in Seattle, WA, where I obtained my degree in transformational leadership, teaches eight perspectives or approaches to transformational leadership. These are: servant leadership, reflective leadership, calling-based leadership, incarnational leadership, contextual leadership, global leadership, prophetic leadership, and shalom leadership.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Interestingly, it does not mention steward leadership as one of the transformational leadership approaches. The concept of a steward leader, however, is a biblical leadership approach that can bring together all of the eight perspectives on transformational leadership that BGU teaches. A steward leader embodies all these qualities—servant, reflective, called, incarnational, contextual, global thinker, prophetic, and a peacemaker. The steward leader approach is closest to *shalom* leadership where the leader pursues “reconciling relationships between people, people and God, people and their environment, and people and themselves.”[[4]](#endnote-4) The leader works toward the “well-being, abundance, and wholeness of the community as well as individuals. Cornelius Plantinga describes biblical *shalom* this way:

In the Bible, shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight--a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Saviour opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be. [[5]](#endnote-5)

The concept of the steward leader suggests a comprehensive way of looking at transformational leadership, one that seeks *shalom* in all areas of life and relationships. It embraces a fuller vision of biblical stewardship that takes into account social responsibility, public engagement, care of God’s creation, in addition to personal piety and worship of God.

**Comparing the Steward Leader with Servant Leader**

How is a steward leader different from the servant leader, which is the most popular transformational leadership approach in over three decades? Robert Greenleaf, who first coined the term in 1977, defines servant leadership as a servant first before he or she is a leader.[[6]](#endnote-6) For Greenleaf, a servant leader begins with the desire to serve others first before making the conscious choice of aspiring to lead.

Servant leadership springs from service and dedication to the welfare of others, “making sure other people’s highest priority needs are being served.”[[7]](#endnote-7) The focus is on others and on the delivery of service and results. A steward leader, on the other hand, is focused on God. The leader understands that his or her leadership is a trust given by God and therefore does only the desires and the will of the master. A steward leader, however, is also a servant leader because that is the model that Jesus taught us.

**THE PERSON OF THE STEWARD LEADER**

The term “steward leader” connotes that the leader is not the owner but a trustee of the leadership responsibilities entrusted to him or to her. He/she is a steward leader and as opposed to owner-leader. Peter Block, author of *Stewardship: Choosing Service Above Self Interest*, defines stewardship as “holding something in trust for another.”[[8]](#endnote-8) God is the owner, and he holds the rights when it comes to ownership. Because we are only entrusted by God with what we have, we can only operate in the realm of responsibilities. Our talents, abilities, and resources are gifts from God and all these belong to him. Our responsibility as stewards is to live by managing these things well according to his design and desire.

 The primary consideration in discussing the heart and mind of the steward leader will focus on the person and the transformational journey of the steward leader. It starts with the “being” of the steward leader. Scott Rodin refers to it as the “who question” and asks “who am I and whose am I?”[[9]](#endnote-9) Steward leaders know that they belong to God. They are created in the image and likeness of God. As such, the steward leader bears the representation of the Triune God. The Trinitarian God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit— live and operate in perfect harmony. It is the model for the steward leader to follow as he/she lives in a community of self, neighbors, God, and the rest of creation. This Trinitarian likeness shows us to live in communion with others versus living for the self alone. Stewards likewise are God’s representatives and therefore bearers of God’s truth, justice, righteousness and peace in the world.

 **Transformational Journey of the Steward Leader**

A steward leader is called by God, set apart to fulfill his plans and purposes. It begins with an encounter with God that brings about a genuine repentance or *metanoia,* a transformative change of heart and mind characterized by turning away from sin to God. This grace, initiated by God and responded to by the steward, is carried throughout the transformational journey of the steward leader. The call to conversion defines the outworking of the life of the steward leader.

Knowing the theology of conversion and calling can facilitate the personal self-understanding of the steward leader.[[10]](#endnote-10) A critical element in self-knowledge is an appreciation of one’s spiritual pilgrimage.[[11]](#endnote-11) The journey is important, not just the destination. The life of a steward leader is a journey of transformation (Rom. 12:2).

The journey of transformation of the steward leader involves stewardship of power and authority. The authority to lead is something that is not intrinsic to the one leading but one that is bestowed upon the leader by a higher authority. Steward leaders understand that God is the owner and final authority of such power henceforth, the steward leader only carries out the will of God. The heart and mind of the steward leader is therefore focused on God and what he wants to accomplish through him/her. This has tremendous implications in the “doing” of the steward leader. The transformational stages of the steward leader’s four relationships that Scott Rodin talks about in his book, *The Steward Leader, Transforming People, Organizations and Communities* are relationships with God, with self, with others, and with creation.[[12]](#endnote-12) In each of these transformational stages is what he calls trajectories wherein the work of the steward leader creates an impact in the workplace, in the community, and in other circles of influence that the transformational journey touches.[[13]](#endnote-13) As the leader grows in the grace of God, the transformation that takes place in every facet of the leader’s life can also transform those around him including people, organizations, communities, and the world. In my perspective, if the heart and mind of the steward leader is in harmony with God and with self, the other relationships with neighbour and creation will likewise follow. This *shalom* with God and the inner self will be reflected in the world of the steward leaders, as they relate with people and the environment. Having experienced the transforming grace of God, the steward leader is freed up to the work of changing hearts and communities that is both restorative and redemptive. Steward leaders view their responsibility as a partnership with God in his continuing work of creating, redeeming, sustaining, and consummating. Undergirding this mission is a recognition of the fallen nature of humanity and the world but the hope of a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21:1-5).

**Biblical Transformation**

The journey of transformation into the image and likeness of God is never just personal piety but a full-orbed biblical transformation. It is a transformation of the whole person, the inward and the outward, the spiritual and the political.[[14]](#endnote-14) Charles Matthewes, in his book *A Theology of Public Life,* speaks of how one’s faith can be involved in public life and, conversely, how participation in public life can strengthen the faith.[[15]](#endnote-15) He says that “we can know God through engagement with the world and know the world through deepening engagement with God.”[[16]](#endnote-16) In my own journey, I have come to learn that I need to engage myself with others and in the affairs of the community in order to grow and expand my knowledge of God, and fulfil my function as a faithful and obedient steward. As I walk my faith, fall down, get up again, my person is purified and my character is refined. Through my own journey of transformation, I have also come to believe that every steward leader needs a point of brokenness in his or her Christian life, and only then can he/she become a more effective leader. As David confesses in Psalm 119:71, “it is good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.”

 Robert Clinton speaks of life maturing processes that deepen our character and develop ministry skills.[[17]](#endnote-17) The spiral growth of “being-doing-being” according to Clinton is summed up as:

Being—conversion

Doing—leadership commitment

Being—inner life

Doing—development and use of ministry skills

Being—ministry philosophy becomes life based John 15:5 reality[[18]](#endnote-18)

This growth in being-doing-being can be comparable to the process of *action-reflection-action* that a reflective practitioner-leader performs as part of the rhythm of life. It is taking time to pause and reflect on one’s work, experiences, motives, and how these align with God’s agenda in the world, and in the life of the steward leader. A steward leader spends and guards the daily time alone with God to hear from him, to seek his direction for his/her daily walk and action. Prayer is part and parcel of the life of the steward leader.

**THE STEWARD LEADER IN AN ASIAN CONTEXT**

It is not possible to speak of leadership outside of a context. My perspective of the heart and mind of a steward leader drawn from the Scriptures is operationalised in my setting. Asian cultures are described as a high context culture where people have close connections over a long period where relationships are deemed more important than tasks. The self is understood in relation to others. High context individuals are comfortable in close-knit groups and place reliance on that group. A high context individual might be frustrated when people around them do not want to develop long- term relationships or do not want help on an ongoing basis. The practice of “handholding” in a leader-follower relationship is common in a high context culture. In this setting, people place high respect for those in authority. People in an organization know where they are in the hierarchy—who answers to them and to whom they are accountable. The leader is responsible and accountable to the group of people under his/her charge.

The leadership quality of many Asian leaders is influenced by the Confucian worldview. In this system of beliefs, the leader embodies god-like qualities of provision and protection. Rulers possess a mandate from heaven which grants them authority to rule. In order to maintain the right to rule, rulers must exhibit moral characteristics expected of rulers. The power and authority of the leader is balanced by the responsibility to provide and to protect those under him. This hierarchical paternalistic structure in Confucian societies guides the interaction among people. In a community-oriented society such as the Philippines and most Asian cultures, relationships take precedence over individual preferences. This serves as a check and balance for abuse of power and authority in a hierarchical and patriarchal leadership.

**JESUS AS THE MODEL OF A STEWARD LEADER**

Jesus is the perfect model of a steward leader. His heart and mind were focused on the will of God. In difficult times, Jesus draws strength by praying to the Father in solitude. When he was about to face his death and predicted that his disciples will be scattered and he will be left alone, he reminded himself that he will not be alone because he has the Father (John 16:32).

Leading like Jesus is leading with truth and humility. Jesus’ humility stems from knowing who he is, where he came from. Jesus always acted to glorify the Father. He did not speak of his own authority but the Father who sent him (John 12:49). Therefore, no words came out of his mouth that was not from God. Jesus was obedient to the command of God in what he should speak and say. As a leader, Jesus did not pursue his own agenda but always that of God. A steward leader cannot lead like Jesus if his or her heart is full of pride and self-interest. Ken Blanchard states that “the most persistent barrier to leading like Jesus is a heart motivated by self-interest.”[[19]](#endnote-19) He explains that people with hearts motivated by self-interest put their own agenda, safety, status, and gratification ahead of those affected by their thoughts and actions.[[20]](#endnote-20) Not so with Jesus who says “I do as the Father has commanded me.” (John 14:31) In John 5:19 Jesus says that the son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.

As a steward leader, Jesus is secure in his relationship and position with God. He knows that he comes from God and is going back to God (John 13:3). He can stoop down and wash the apostles’ feet—a lowly task of a servant—and yet this was Jesus’ model of leadership that the leader is a servant to others (Mat. 20:20-28). “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all” (John 13:16). A servant in not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them (John 13:17) Jesus led through example of his life that is anchored on personal integrity and genuine love and concern for people (Mark 10:43-44).

**Freedom To Follow God And His agenda**

When the heart and mind of the steward leader are steadfastly focused on God there is freedom to follow him and pursue his priorities. Steward leaders nurture and grow the ministry that God puts in their care but discern when it is time to move on and seek what is God’s next agenda. Steward leaders know how to let go and mentor younger leaders who will continue the work that God started through them. This is one mark of a steward leader that distinguishes him/her from those who think of themselves as owner-leaders. Steward leaders lead where they are called and make it count. They lead where they are and multiply leaders and leave a strong legacy through intentional succession planning. As the steward leader works with faithfulness, God will smile and say “well done, good and faithful servant.”

1. Bantayog Ng Mga Bayani Foundation. "Dulag, Macli'ing," <http://www.bantayog.org/node/96> (accessed March 29, 2014); foundation name translates as “Monument to the Heroes.” [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Bakke Graduate University, “BGU’s Eight Perspectives - Leadership Definitions,” <http://www.bgu.edu/bgu%E2%80%99s-eight-perspectives-leadership-definitions> (accessed January 31, 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. [Cornelius Plantinga Jr.](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/298045.Cornelius_Plantinga_Jr_), [*Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/528786) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Robert Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey Into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2002), 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Peter Block, *Stewardship:* *Choosing Service Over-Self Interest* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishing, 1993), xx. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Scott Rodin, *Stewards in Kingdom, A Theology of Life In All Its Fullness* (Downers Grove, Il: Inter Varsity Press, 2000), 10-22. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Gordon T. Smith, *Beginning Well, Christian Conversion and Authentic Transformation*(Downers Grove, Il: Intervarsity Press, 2001)10. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 10 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Scott Rodin, The Steward Leader, Transforming People, Organizations and Communities (Downers Grove, Il: IVP Academic, 2010), 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 91. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Charles Ringma, *Hear the Heartbeat* (London: SPCK, 2006), 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Charles Matthewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 86 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. J. Robert Clinton, *The Making of A Leader, Recognizing the Lessons and Stages of Leadership Development* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1988), 154-155. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid.,155. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges, *Lead Like Jesus: Lessons for Everyone from the Greatest Leadership Role Model of all Time*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)