



Leadership Letter

What is real?

“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit one day. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?” “Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real. “

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”

“It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.” (Excerpt from The Velveteen Rabbit)

When people are hard, prickly, proud or defensive, it’s difficult for positive feelings to flow. They find it difficult to reach out and touch others. Whereas when people are vulnerable it draws out our love for them. Is this why God made us with a capacity to be hurt, so that we can love and be loved more deeply? Celtic Christians were vulnerable. They had no riches stored up, no protected stone mansions – they were vulnerable to the elements, to predators and to visitors. And how they were loved – loved by the people and loved much by God.

The Rule of life of the Northumbria Community in England, a Celtic style community, seeks to develop this kind of vulnerability:

We are called to intentional, deliberate VULNERABILITY.

We embrace the vulnerability of being teachable expressed in a discipline of prayer, in exposure to Scripture, in a willingness to be accountable to others,

in ordering our ways and our heart in order to effect change...

by making relationships the priority and not reputation...

living openly amongst unbelievers and other believers in a way that the life of God in ours can be seen, challenged or questioned.

We all long for connections – then when we are connected, we long for deeper connections. Intimacy is a word that for many creates a purpose in friendship, marriage and family. God has created us with a desire for relationship. Often in evangelism we use the metaphor of a ‘God shaped vacuum in our hearts’. We are made for love and relationship and connection

with God, and one another. The challenge to us then is, why are there so many lonely people – even in the midst of community. Like the old song states, we can be ‘together all alone.’

One of the beautiful things that I have observed over many years now, is the depth of connections established in the 6-weeks of LDC (leadership development course). Perhaps you too can think back to times when you have experienced a depth of intimacy with a group of people. What is it that creates this closeness? What enables a depth to take place and why is it that we can experience it in a group of people that we have only spent a short time with and then struggle to find it with people we work with, or relate with socially in our home situation?

Let’s think for a moment from the opposite perspective - a lack of intimacy. Shame is the fear of disconnection. Is there something about me, that when others see, will stop me from connecting? Shame tells us lies that we are not smart enough, good enough, beautiful enough, or something enough to be able to connect. We tell ourselves, “Nobody will want to connect with me.”

Studies have shown that the outcome of relational struggles can produce either a strong sense of connection or disconnection, depending on what they believe. Those who connect, believe they are worthy of love and belonging whereas those who don't connect, feel they are not worthy of being loved.

So what causes someone to feel loved and have a sense of belonging? It starts with being given time and attention, being listened to and valued. As quality time is offered, there is an opportunity to open up our lives, share genuinely, with authenticity and with vulnerability. If we take that opportunity, life takes on a whole new meaning. Relationships become intimate, with deep connections, where we touch each other’s souls and spirits. We were made with the intention and expectation of our spirits communing but many of us have not understood or been unaware of the depth of relationship that is available to us all.

I have realised that as a long term leader in YWAM, there can be a status attached to the role. I might not feel like an important leader inside but others meeting me, who have heard my name or have known what I have been involved in, can put me on a pedestal. (Don't worry it doesn't last long!!) This pedestal I continually seek to step off in order to relate on the same level with those around me. Another challenge for me in relating comes from my personality profile. I am a high C personality on DISC, and an introverted-intuitive-thinker in Myers Briggs. That means, I am always thinking about something, working on a new development to implement or busy accomplishing goals in different categories in my life. This can come across to others as being more of a task oriented person and lacking warmth or desire to connect. I have noticed that often people will give positive feedback about my leadership to Rite, who is very approachable and warm, but not so often to me personally. Perhaps they feel I don't need to hear affirmation and that I am confident in what I do and don't need feedback! Or perhaps, and more likely, they think that I am not as approachable as I think I am inside! So my attempt at making myself more approachable is to share humbly and

vulnerably, sharing my weaknesses that underline the fact that I don't have it all together, that I have needs, that I am not perfect and actually I am very human. It's amazing how people can suddenly relate with me more easily after a session on sharing my signature sins! Perhaps I have finally stepped off the pedestal low enough and people see the real me behind any perceived or real mask that I wear.

It's all too easy to get into 'image management.' Have you noticed in magazines how people, gardens and houses all look so perfect? Any imperfections in a photo shoot with models, who already are looking pretty good, are taken out with Photoshop or a more sophisticated software. Gardens are groomed and every open space is filled with a potted plant (no garden has everything blooming everywhere at the same time – it's impossible), every weed is removed, every bedraggled flower pruned. Houses are pictured in that one moment of time when everything is put away in the right cupboard, all surfaces are shining, every room has had a fresh coat of paint and to be honest like no one has ever lived in it!

Of course we all know that they are faking it because no one and nothing is picture perfect. However for some reason we feel pressure that our life, garden and home should have the appearance of those in the magazine. So when you see someone's life that looks perfect on the outside – perfect marriage, perfect home, perfect children, perfect ministry – know that things aren't always as they seem.

So the questions remain: Why are we tempted to play the game of image management? Why do we want to give the appearance that everything is perfect? Why are we so afraid of being real?

Perhaps one reason is the fear of judgement. The woman at the well and the woman who anointed Jesus feet didn't feel judged by Jesus. He wasn't offended by their presence. But we may think twice about relating with women like this for fear of what others would say or think! Jesus made himself vulnerable. Our tendency is to appear as something we are not, to engage in image management. Faking it was a constant source of trouble for Jacob. He didn't believe that in his case 'the older would serve the younger!' So he faked his way through his early years, in order to be blessed by his father, causing him a lifetime of trouble. Moses faked his power in producing water from the rock for the Israelites and lost out on entering the promised land. David tried to cover up his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah. Ananias and Sapphira faked the measure of their generosity in selling land and giving to the church. The Pharisees tried to look perfect and as Matthew 23:5 states, "everything they do is for show." They were more interested in image management and looking good than being real. As a result they received the confronting words of Jesus: – hypocrites, blind guides, blind fools, whitewashed tombs and snakes. Doesn't that encourage you to be as real as you can be right now? That's the way that we will be able to touch people's lives in meaningful ways with compassion, understanding and authority – by being real.

Jesus started his ministry with vulnerability by being baptised by John. John responded perhaps as we would - "Jesus you should be the one baptising me!" Jesus insisted and experienced the affirmation of his Father. Many times Jesus declared, 'I can do nothing on my own initiative, I only do what I see the Father doing.' As he contemplates the cross, he is very vulnerable as he asks the disciples to pray with him and for him, as he is deeply stressed with the ordeal that awaits him.

Vulnerability is never easy. It's one thing to share an issue from the past, that I have now overcome. The challenge is sharing something that is current and that you are still working through. As I reflected on this subject my thoughts went to the recent leadership development course where the 40 staff and delegates had shared so much of our lives together. Here are a few of the key moments of sharing in a vulnerable way:

- The first evening we thought back over the last 6 months and pictured our life as a boat. Some were going through storms, coming home with battle scars, needing dry dock, etc. Once people had their pictures, we asked them to picture Jesus coming on board and hearing what he had to say. Then came the vulnerable part – sharing the picture with the whole group. In 30 seconds of sharing, people can know what kind of state your boat is in and perhaps a cry of your heart for the next 6 weeks. Then we had the privilege of praying for one another.
- Two days later we got to spend time in a triplet and the first activity was to make a mask. On the outside of the mask we wrote how others often will see us, and on the inside, how we see ourselves. It's not always easy to share the difference.
- At the end of the first week we spent 4 or 5 hours praying into our personalities, gaining revelation, insight and often with deep repentance when we recognise our belief and judgement about ourselves and others.
- The opportunities to be vulnerable continued in one to one relationships with mentors, stepping out of our comfort zones in breaking the fear of man, sharing lies we have believed about ourselves, dealing with our signature sins, identifying with the struggles in temptations of money, sex and power and on and on it goes.

The more we shared, the closer we moved towards each other and the easier it was to share deeper things – sometimes things that had never been shared with anyone else before. Why was this possible? – because now we were all human together – no comparison, no judgement, no shame – just a desire to see each other being loved and encouraged to grow in God.

Our staff debrief finished with an affirmation time for one another. As I think about it now, this lifestyle of affirmation takes vulnerability too. You are sharing your feelings, thoughts, observations and appreciation of others. It's not about 'me', it's sharing our need of others, often comparing in a positive way and sharing their strength and contribution that has been made into our lives. And what's the result? – well everyone is blessed, we come closer in relationship, trust rises and we become more of a closely knit community.

To finish here is simple but profound prayer:

Take from me, O Lord:
pride and prejudice,
hardness and hypocrisy,
selfishness and self-sufficiency
that I may be vulnerable, like you.

Until next month

Stephe

P.S The following are some common expressions in English, illustrating different elements of vulnerability

Out on a limb: In a vulnerable, compromising, or risky position; at a disadvantage. This expression refers to the predicament of a person in a tree who, having climbed out onto one of the branches (limbs), faces the prospect of injury if the limb should not be strong enough to support him. The figurative implications are that a person has shared an unconventional idea or cause, which, if it fails, may lead to his downfall, resulting in a loss of influence, prestige, and credibility.

Chink in one's armour: A weakness or vulnerability; an area in which one's defenses are inadequate or ineffective; a personality flaw. The phrase alludes to the armor worn by knights. A *chink* 'crack, cleft, or narrow opening' could cost a knight his life. Figuratively, a *chink in one's armor* refers to a personal rather than physical vulnerability. Some modern psychologists have adopted the word *armour* to mean 'character or personality,' emphasizing those aspects of one's character which are formed in defense and serve self-protective functions.

Live in a glass house: To be in a vulnerable position, to be open to attack; to live a public life, to be in the public eye. The expression plays on two well-known properties of glass—its transparency and its brittleness. The phrase is apparently a truncated version of the old proverb *people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones*, dating from the early 17th century.

Stick one's neck out: To expose one-self to danger or criticism; to take a chance, to risk failure; to invite trouble. This early 20th-century American expression plays with the idea that sticking one's neck out is equivalent to asking to have one's head chopped off. Thus vulnerability, usually nonphysical, is also implicit in the figurative uses of this expression.