

Leadership Letter

How's your pain threshold?



Pain is part of our normal human life and although God doesn't *create* pain for us through our daily circumstances and interactions with people, he is able to *use* every situation we have to face, to enable us to grow and develop – if we let him. It's been said that 'Pain is inevitable, but misery is optional.' Everyone experiences pain and disappointment, no matter how committed they are to God and no matter how flawless their character. However, we mustn't become victims of our pain otherwise misery will set in. We cannot stop what happens *to* us, but we can certainly stop what happens *in* us. I was reading these thoughts in 'Leadership Pain' by Samuel R. Chand and the following letter is inspired from his book.

Tanya is a four-year-old Indian girl. Her mother took her to the hospital and the doctor immediately noticed the little girl appeared totally calm as he removed her blood-stained bandages and examined her dislocated ankle. She felt no pain – she had leprosy. Many develop *Leadership Leprosy* by choosing to ignore pain, by trying to deny it, cover it up or escape it. But pain isn't our enemy. As we become willing to face our pain, we can experience some of life's most defining moments. One of the most powerful and lasting ways to raise our pain threshold is to accurately analyse the deeper source of our pain. Then instead of avoiding it or managing it, we can invite God to use the pain to teach us life's most important lessons and we'll become far better lovers of God, far better human beings and far better leaders.

Over these last few weeks I have spoken to a number of leaders who are experiencing pain of one sort or another. One leader lives with physical pain every day and receives grace from God to endure – most people wouldn't even know this leader has pain at all. Another leader lost their grandchild through a stillbirth and yet has been able to receive comfort from God to continue. Another is grieving from an unresolved conflict that continues to drain them emotionally and only prayer and forgiveness is able to bring peace. Another has been deeply disappointed with their leader's lack of integrity and modelling and is working it through with God. I have just returned from the UK where I visited my Mum of 92 who had just had a fall causing much bruising and pain. The emotional concern for aging parents creates an on-going pain too. So pain surrounds us daily and is there at every stage of life in a different form. The challenge for us is to be aware of it, recognise it and process it with the Lord and might I add, at least one other significant person in our life. As we make ourselves vulnerable, we are humbled, helped and on the pathway to holiness.

In considering this topic, I spent a couple of hours working through an inventory of the painful experiences of my own life to the present day, noting the lessons learned and the transformation that came as a result. I share this with the realisation that I have suffered very little pain in my life compared to

many others. The important thing is, that no matter how much pain we have experienced, make sure we find God in the midst of it. It was surprising to me as I logged 50 memorable painful experiences over the last 40 years. I began to see how God has shaped me through a leadership development tool of pain. Try the exercise yourself – you too may be surprised at your insights.

A change of mentality: Eight years ago we were still in transition through our move to Spain and then one of Rite's preschool team members experienced her third bout of cancer and Rite sat at her bedside through the last days of her life. Our youngest son had left for Canada and we were walking through the empty nest syndrome. So we were excited about a coming trip to Israel together. Just before our departure, having had a wonderful leadership development week, we stopped to see one last site before heading to the airport. We came back to the car to discover it had been broken into and everything had been stolen - passports, bankcards, money, camera, and my most precious possession - my notes and PowerPoint presentations of all my teaching for the last 20 years. My back-up drive unfortunately was thrown into the same bag at the last minute too and it was gone. Our hosts were wonderful and helped us out so much, comforted us and provided for us to get home. So we were blessed – it could have been a lot worse. Arriving home I felt numb from the experience. Rite was off on another trip and I had the opportunity over the next three weeks of walking, praying, crying, writing songs and having a deep encounter with God. When you are desperate for God, he feels so much closer to you and you experience his everlasting arms around you, bringing comfort and encouragement. I realised too, in this process, that things and teaching materials are so temporal. My most valuable possessions are my most recent experiences of God. All my teaching now would be fresh - pain can be our greatest teacher! One of the reasons that leadership development doesn't happen quickly is the fact that you have to experience your own pain. You can't learn it academically from someone else. Pain changes you from the inside out.

There are so many categories of how God uses pain to train us in leadership. All these experiences can leave us with emotional, mental or physical pain. There is a need to process each of these in order to make the most of our trials. Many of you have had an opportunity to do this in part through working on your timeline in LDC:

- Growth and Success: It seems strange to think of growth and success producing pain but it can. Our schedule becomes very full, there is pressure to keep up the momentum, there are expectations to meet, sacrifices to make that we are happy to do but tiredness is a result and often we lack privacy and space. It all adds up to some emotional pain.
- Stages of growth of ministry: Every stage has its own stress or pain connected to it.
 - Entrepreneurial – the team doesn't grasp the vision and isn't willing to take risks. You feel like you are having to drag people into the future.
 - Emerging – nothing is happening immediately and there are more questions than answers – doubts, concerns, pressures can mount.
 - Established – staff are not willing to change any operating systems

- and prefer to keep the status quo and cause frustration.
 - Erosion – growth has stopped, key positions need to be changed, and radical steps are needed which may upset or hurt people and you have to be the one to implement the decisions or receive them.
 - Enterprising – the need to continually innovate and develop the new while the present is going well isn't always well received.
- Leaders over us. They move in a direction we are uncomfortable with, make decisions we disagree with, hurt us with judgment, misunderstand us, reject our ideas or dismiss our concerns and disappoint our expectations. Let's face it no leader is perfect and we all will fail in some of these ways.
- Relational conflict: It's one thing to work through conflict but another when the conflict remains unresolved. This can create on-going frustration, anger and hurt unless it is worked through thoroughly.
- Difficult events: There are all kinds of traumas, accidents, illnesses, losses, attacks, near death experiences and daily challenges that cause pain. These too need debriefing.
- Marriage and Family: Relationships can plateau or go sour. There can be negative communication, competition, criticism, abuse, rejection,
- Personal failure: We can be perfectionists and aim too high, have a lack of follow through or fail to meet God's or our own standards.
- Relationship with God: We can fall into blaming God for all our negative outcomes, develop many questions and move into doubts and a crisis of faith.

All of these experiences and more can make us feel unsafe, abandoned or unloved or be a sacred moment where we encounter God in a whole new dimension. The bible is a very real book and shares the suffering and pain of leaders through the ages. Here is a small selection:

- Noah was told to build a boat but had to wait 120 years for the rain to come, growing in patience, perseverance and trust.
- Abraham was given the promise of becoming the father of a great nation but needed faith to see his barren wife give birth. This took 25 years!
- Joseph had dreams of his family bowing down to him but was sold into slavery, betrayed and forgotten in a dungeon. God worked a faithfulness, depth of character and a release of gifting in Joseph through this process.
- Moses grew up in the luxury of the palace but after defending a slave by killing an Egyptian, spent 40 years in the wilderness where he gained a fresh perspective of his real identity in God.
- Joshua saw the Red Sea open and Jericho's walls fall but learned the fear of God as he experienced the consequences of one man's sin on the whole camp of Israelites.
- Elijah saw God's favour and miraculous power at work in consuming the altar with fire on mount Carmel but then fled for his life from Queen Jezebel. In the depths of despair God met him.
- David was anointed king but took years of flight and fight to claim his throne learning important lessons of leadership and calling.
- Daniel had to deal with reprisals from the Kings officials, was fed to the lions but delivered in a miraculous way and learned faith, integrity and

wisdom.

- Peter denied Jesus but was forgiven, restored and moved on with greater authority and anointing than ever before.
- Paul was devout as a Pharisee, killing believers and persecuting the church but met Jesus in the process and was transformed overnight. His awareness of being the chief of sinners and going through unbelievable suffering in sharing the gospel brought incredible depth in his relationship with God and amazing anointing in leadership and in writing much of the New Testament that we enjoy to this day.

So the process of transformation goes on from generation to generation. And the major tool or school that God uses to develop us, is PAIN. We are made in his image – what do we expect!

In order to bring reconciliation to his creation, God knew there was a very painful process to walk through. Jesus laid aside his deity and became a baby, completely vulnerable and dependent on Mary and Joseph. He grew up with the pain of gossip and accusation around his birth. His teaching was questioned, his life threatened, his friends deserted him, one of his closest friends denied him and another betrayed him. He died a most horrific and painful death on the cross. All this pain and suffering for you and I.

Dr. J. Robert Clinton says, “Never trust a leader who doesn’t walk with a limp.” Pain helps us to recognise our limitations and reminds us that we are human. A. W. Tozer believed that “the experience of pain is essential for any leader to become pliable in the hands of God. It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply!” (this last phrase might need some meditation)

So what can we learn from pain?

- That we are human and frail and vulnerable. We are weaker, more self absorbed, and more fragile than we ever imagined. We aren’t in control anymore.
- God never abandons us, even when we can’t sense his presence and have no idea what he is up to.
- Like the Israelites going through the desert, our adversities test us and show us what we are really made of.
- Our faith and character - resilience, perseverance, patience, dependence, and qualities like these are developed most powerfully in times of trial.
- God sometimes delivers us *from* pain, but more often he delivers us *through* it.
- God hasn’t promised us a happy life but a meaningful one, one that involves pain.
- There’s no formulas – do this, do that and you will be fruitful. Life has all kinds of surprises. And God is more interested in *us* than what we can *do* for him.
- We become more grateful and stop taking things for granted.
- We find God to be beautiful instead of just useful. We have made God the means to the end of our growing dynamic ministers instead of the only one

who rightly deserves worship, love and loyalty.

- We become more tender, more understanding and more compassionate.

T.D. Jakes says, “When you’re born, you’re like a key with no cuts in it. As you go through life, each wound, failure or hurt, cuts into that strip of metal and one day there is a clear click - your pain has formed the key that slips into the lock and opens your future.” All the biblical leaders we noted earlier had a vision for the future, a calling to be prepared for, a sense of destiny and direction. Without this compelling vision or clear plan, every heartache, trouble or challenge has the potential to stop you in your tracks. The pathway may be different from what you expected but the outcome will be the same. Let’s not exit too early and leave our calling behind because we don’t want to face the pain.

So in conclusion: Don’t run from your pain. Don’t deny it exists. It’s the most effective leadership development tool that God has given to you. Process it with the Lord and with someone he gives you, to ensure our trials aren’t wasted.

Until next month
Stephe

P.S. A theme for our last couples retreat was the song – Sovereign. Listen to it, it will minister to you:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOy5fCmIX-k>