

Dorothy on Leadership

Or “How a Movie from our Childhood Can Help us Understand the Changing Nature of Leadership in the Postmodern Transition”

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OK, I admit it. I spent most of the 80's and early 90's wishing I could be just like Bill Hybels, Rick Warren, or John Maxwell. They were successful. They appeared unflinchingly confident. They were powerful, knowledgeable, larger than life. I'd go to their seminars, and return home feeling wildly inspired and mildly depressed. How could I feel those two things at the same time? If you've attended their seminars, you probably don't need me to explain.

But if you do need me to explain, think back to the Biblical story of David, when he tried to wear Saul's armour. Imagine that he had actually tried to go to battle with Goliath wearing armour that was XXL when he was a regular M (or even S) guy. He would have come back looking like a partially opened (and partially eaten!) can of sardines.

I wasn't the only one who thought that the best image of the successful pastor was the CEO, the alpha male, the armored knight, the corporate hero. Thousands of us tried on that armor, and the results – in our churches and in our personal lives – weren't pretty. Of course, the suit fit some of us (for example, I think that Hybels, Warren, and Maxwell really are XXL's), but most of us eventually realized that if we were going to be of any use to God, we'd better be ourselves. A novel idea!

About the time I was reaching that conclusion, I was going through my “postmodern conversion.” I was seeing the pattern or matrix of modernity giving way to a new pattern, and I was beginning to see how my whole understanding of Christianity fit snugly within the modern matrix. I wondered how ministry, theology, spirituality, and evangelism would change as the matrix changed. And I wondered how leadership would change too.

Somewhere in the middle of these musings, a strange memory returned ... the scene in “The Wizard of Oz” when little Toto pulls back the curtain to reveal that the great Wizard of Oz is a rather normal guy hiding behind an imposing image. It struck me that the 1940's world that produced the film was in many ways a world at the height of modernity, a world enamored with Superman, with the Lone Ranger, with Great Men. It struck me that by exposing the Wizard as a fraud, the film was probing an unexpressed cultural doubt, giving voice to a rising misgiving, displaying an early pang of discontent with its dominant model of larger-than-life leadership. And it made me wonder what image of leadership would replace the great Wizard.

The answer, of course, appeared in the next scene. No, it wasn't the lion, the scarecrow, or the tin man. It was Dorothy.

At first glance, Dorothy is all wrong as a model of leadership. She is the wrong gender (female) and the wrong age (young). Rather than being a person with all the answers, who knows what's up and where to go and what's what, she is herself lost, a seeker, often bewildered, and vulnerable. These characteristics would disqualify her from modern leadership. But they serve as her best credentials for postmodern leadership.

In the world of Christian ministry, we could identify ten Wizardly characteristics of modern leadership. (You'll notice the masculine pronoun used exclusively here.)

1. Bible Analyst: The modern Christian leader dissects the Bible like a scientist dissects a fetal pig, to gain knowledge through analysis, and in modernity, knowledge is power.

2. Broadcaster: Somehow, when one amplifies his voice electronically and adds a little reverb, his power quotient goes up in modernity. Being slick, being smooth, being big, being "on the air" – that's what makes you a leader.

3. Objective Technician: The organization (church, ministry, etc.) is a machine, and the leader knows how to work the machine, how to make it run, how to tweak it and engineer (or reengineer) it. It's the object, and he's the subject.

4. Warrior/Salesman: Modern leadership is about conquest -- "winning" souls, launching "crusades," "taking" this city (country, whatever) for Jesus, etc. And it's about marketing, getting buy-in, selling (and sometimes selling out).

5. Careerist: The modern leader earns credentials, grasps the bottom rung of the ladder, and climbs, climbs, climbs – whether he is a stock-boy-who-would-be-CEO or a young preacher on the rise.

6. Problem-Solver: Come to him, and he'll fix you.

7. Apologist: Come to him, and he'll tell you why he's right and your doubt or skepticism is wrong.

8. Threat: One of the most powerful and underrated weapons of the modern Christian leader has been the threat of exclusion. The sword is normally kept in its sheath, but through mocking caricatures and other forms of rhetorical demonization, a gifted orator can make you fear that if you don't agree with/follow/submit to his leadership, you'll be banished – like the Wizard bellowing threats from behind his curtain.

9. Knower: The modern Christian leader is (or appears) supremely confident in his opinions, perspectives, beliefs, systems, and formulations. While the rest of us question and doubt, he is the answer-man who knows.

10. Solo Act: There's only room for one in the Wizard's control booth, and there's only room for one at the top of the church org chart.

When you think of Dorothy, the picture is so different. Basically, instead of sitting pretty in a control booth, she's stuck in a predicament – still a little dizzy from the tornado, lost, far from home, needing to find the way. As she sets out on her journey, she finds other needy people (actually not people exactly, but you get the point), one

in need of courage, another in need of intelligence, another in need of a heart. She believes that their varying needs can be fulfilled on a common quest, and her earnestness, her compassion, her determination, and her youthful spunk galvanize them into a foursome (five, with Toto) singing down the yellow brick road together. Dorothy doesn't have the knowledge to help them avoid all problems and dangers; she doesn't protect them from all threats and temptations. But she doesn't give up, and her passion holds strong, and in the end, they all get what they need. Maybe one of the film's many enduring delights is hidden in Dorothy's unwizardly leadership charisma. Maybe people in the 1940's were just beginning to yearn for a way of leadership that now is becoming ascendant – a post-wizard kind of leadership:

1. Bible Analyst → **Spiritual sage:** As we move beyond modernity, we lose our infatuation with analysis, knowledge, information, "facts," and belief systems – and those who traffic in them. Instead, we are attracted to leaders who possess that elusive quality of wisdom (think of James 3:???), who practice spiritual disciplines and whose lives are characterized by depth of spiritual practice (not just by the tightness of belief system). These leaders possess a moral authority more closely linked to character than intellectual credentials; they are more sages than technicians; it's their slow, thoughtful, considered answer that convinces, not the snap-your-fingers-I-know-that kind of answer-man know-it-all-ness. Dorothy has this "softer" authority, a reflection of her earnestness and kindness as much as her intellectual acumen.

2. Broadcaster → **Listener:** In the postmodern world, it's not how loud you shout; it's how deeply you listen that counts. Just as Dorothy engages her traveling companions by listening to their stories and evoking their needs, the postmodern leader creates a safe place that attracts a team, and then she or he empowers them by the amazing power of a listening heart.

3. Objective Technician → **Spiritual friend:** Think of the difference between a scientist objectively studying chimpanzees, and a crusader dedicated to saving them from extinction. In modernity, a leader loves his organization and loves his ambition, his strategic plan, his goals; but on this side of the transition, leaders love their teams, and those to whom their teams are sent. (Or, more perversely put – in modernity, I Corinthians 13 would read, "If I have all love and would lay down my life for my friends, but have not knowledge, I am a wispy wimp and a poor excuse for a leader." Beyond modernity, we return toward Paul's original meaning.)

4. Warrior/Salesman → **Dancer:** In a world plagued by ethnic hatred and telemarketers, every voice adding stridency and sales pressure to the world is one voice too many. Nobody wants to be "won to Christ" or "taken for Jesus" in one of our "crusades," and neither do they want to be subjected to a sales pitch for heaven, that sounds for all the world like an invitation to check out a time share vacation resort. A presentation of the gospel that sounds like a military ultimatum or like a slick sales pitch will dishonor the gospel for postmodern people. Instead, think of leadership (and especially evangelism) as a dance. You hear the music that I don't hear, and you know how to move to its rhythm. Gently, you help me begin to hear its

music, feel its rhythm, and learn to move to it with grace and joy. A very different kind of leadership, don't you agree?

5. Careerist → **Amateur**: The root of the word “amateur” is “amar” – to love. Most of us in Christian leadership know that seeing ministry as a career can quickly quench the motivation of love. How can we keep that higher motivation alive? How can Christian leadership be for us less like the drudgery of a “job” and more like the joy of a day golfing or fishing or playing soccer or whatever ... not something we have to do, but something we get to do? The professionalization of ministry will be one of the harmful legacies of modernity, I believe ... a classic case of jumping from the frying pan of clericalism into the fire of professionalism.

6. Problem-Solver → **Quest Creator**: The man-at-the-top of modern leadership is the guy you go to for answers and solutions. No doubt, there are times when that's what we need now too. But postmodern leaders will be as interested in creating new problems, in setting new challenges, in launching new adventures ... as in solving, finishing, or facilitating old ones. Dorothy does this: she helps her companions trade their old problems (birds landing on the scarecrow, the tin man being paralyzed by rust, the lion faking bravado) for a new quest. Of course, this is what Jesus does too. He doesn't solve the problems of the Pharisees (How can we get these stupid crowds to know and obey the law as we do?). He creates new ones (Seek first the kingdom of God....).

7. Apologist → **Apologizer**: Instead of defending old answers, the new kind of leader will often apologize for how inadequate they are. In modernity, you gained credibility by always being right; in post modernity, you gain authority by admitting when you're wrong (think of the Pope's visit to the Middle East in early 2000) and apologizing humbly. That kind of humility, that vulnerability, was one of Dorothy's most winsome – and “leader-ly” -- characteristics.

8. Threat → **Includer**: The only threat Dorothy poses is the threat of inclusion, not exclusion. She basically threatens you with acceptance; you're part of her journey, a member of her team, unless you refuse and walk away. That kind of leadership strikes me as gospel leadership, and it reminds me of Someone Else.

9. Knower → **Seeker**: Oddly, Dorothy's appeal as a leader arises from her being lost and being passionate about seeking a way home. Does it ever strike you as odd in contemporary Christian jargon that it's the pre-Christians who are called seekers? Where does that leave the Christians? Shouldn't the Christian leader be the lead seeker?

10. Solo Act → **Team Builder**: All along her journey, Dorothy welcomed company. She was glad for a team. By the end of their journey, the lion, the scarecrow, and the tin man have joined Dorothy as peers, partners, friends. Her style of leadership was empowering, ennobling, not patronizing, paternalistic, creating dependency. So effective was her empowering of them that they were able to say a tearful goodbye and move on to their own adventures.

I know, you're thinking, why take a silly kid's movie so seriously? You're right – it's just a movie. But I find the film's repudiation of more traditional modern leadership to be fascinating, maybe an early expression of a cultural shift that we are more fully experiencing today.

And ultimately, of course, I find in Dorothy's way of leadership many echoes of our Lord's. After all, you can never imagine the great and terrible Oz washing his subjects' feet, or his voice booming out, "I no longer call you servants, but friends."

Maybe some of us are trying hard to be something we're not. Maybe we're imitating styles of leadership that are becoming outdated, inappropriate. That's not to say we don't have a lot to learn, but maybe the best thing that could happen to us would be to have the curtain pulled back to reveal us not as XXL superheroes, but regular size-M men and women. Maybe then, with the amplifiers turned off and the imaged dropped, we'll hear Jesus inviting us to learn new ways of leading in his cause.

From 1982-1996, Brian McLaren was a pastor at Cedar Ridge Community Church in Spencerville, MD (www.cccc.org). He is now an author, speaker, networker, and board member (www.emergentvillage.org and www.sojo.net). He and his wife, Grace, have four young adult children. He has written several books and his website is brianmclaren.net.