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Experts in Weakness

Mandy Smith

The week I stepped into my new role as co-lead pastor, I attended a major convention for Christian leaders. I went with an open heart, hoping it would equip me for all that was ahead in my new ministry. It certainly did, but not in the way I expected. The more workshops I attended and bookstands I perused, the more strange I felt. Suddenly, I was an artist at a business convention, a woman at a man's convention, an introvert at an extrovert convention, and a foreigner at an American convention. Everything that was going on there was good and godly and helpful to many but not much help to me. The programs and measurements of success being presented didn't represent me. The assumptions didn't include me (statements like "leaders will be motivated by..." and "your church doesn't want a leader like this, they want a *man* who..."). As far as I could tell, no one in this huge gathering of church leaders looked or sounded or thought like me. I hadn't gone with a chip on my shoulder, expecting to be marginalized. In fact, it was my expectation to be welcomed and included...so this marginalization left me spinning and sent me fleeing to my hotel room, where I told God, "*This job isn't for me. I have nothing to give. You've made a mistake.*"

The realization was so disturbing to me, after years of education and prayer and preparation for this role, that for the next twenty-four hours I couldn't leave that little hotel room. It's a blur to me now, but my memories of it include tears, dry retching, restless sleep, and the kind of prayer which scrapes your insides on its way out. In the middle of my despair, God's voice was, as usual, assuring but vague: "*A broken and contrite spirit I will not despise*" and "*In your weakness I am strong.*"

And so I began this new phase of leadership, not with assurances of my great ability, but with a mental map of every hollow of the cavernous emptiness within me. Yet a sense of God's strength was enough for me to falteringly step into the work before me and, in the process, to learn how very much I'm an expert at weakness and how very concrete strength from weakness can be.

What I am Learning

Being a woman can feel like weakness. Because your very body teaches you your limits. From the time you're small, there is always someone bigger, with a stronger body and a deeper voice. And as you grow you learn how little control you have over your own body, from a sometimes painful, often embarrassing inconvenience that will visit you every month to the strange season of having a person growing inside of you which, for nine months, does what it likes and takes what it needs. When the little bundle makes its appearance, your body goes from creator of life to sustainer of life, and all kinds of new systems kick into gear which, again, are beyond your control. As you go from mother to grandmother, your body begins to change again, throwing you into a state of confusion as the steady cycles you have grown accustomed to become syncopated and erratic and then finally stop altogether. Inhabiting this ever-changing form forces you to acknowledge (even celebrate) your limits and to sense your responsibility to and reliance upon the broader community.

So if being a woman teaches humility and collaboration, isn't it a strength to be a woman? *In the church, these are leadership skills.*

Being an artist can feel like weakness. You are spurred on by an unending search for truth and beauty. You can have your breath taken away by the smallest, seemingly insignificant thing and be unfit for anything else but crying or singing or writing it for the rest of the day. And once you've found that tiny sign of hope, you must make sense of it. And so you make things to process and express it, trying to capture all the feeling and meaning for others through the limited media of notes and words and paint. You step into a creative process which is sometimes cruel and raw, a little too close for comfort. Then, with shaking hands, you put that outpouring of your soul into a public form and hope that someone understands.

So if creative people know how to find truth and beauty, even when it's hidden in brokenness, if they're comfortable with mystery, failure and vulnerability, isn't it a strength to be an artist? *In the church, these are leadership skills.*

Being an outsider can feel like weakness. It means always having that vague sense that you didn't get the inside joke. You feel like a child again as you have to learn things that are obvious and basic to everyone else: How to ride the bus? How to turn on the shower? But over time you compensate. You learn not only to speak but to listen in other languages. You become self-aware as those things which were once transparent about yourself (back when everyone around you was the same as you) are suddenly glaring. For the first time you feel the weight of the lens of your own culture, your own assumptions, and eventually, you learn how to switch glasses.

If outsiders know how to be flexible and self-aware, to communicate in a relevant way in many contexts, isn't it a strength to be an outsider? *In the church, these are leadership skills.*

Being an introvert can feel like weakness. Thinking of the perfect answer a day after the question makes you feel dumb, even though your belated-but-perfectly-worded response is more insightful than the one given by the quick thinker in the room. Needing to recover from extended periods with people draws labels like "anti-social," even though you may have great social skills. Longing for depth and complexity and silence makes you feel like a precious egghead in a world hungry for sound bites and noise.

If introverts know how to listen, and are unafraid of silence, depth, and authenticity, isn't it a strength to be an introvert? *In the church, these are leadership skills.*

This spring, after a year of learning what it means to pastor from this strange place, I attended a different pastors' conference. I was inspired to hear every speaker calling for new kinds of leadership, describing a church in need of leaders who are vulnerable and humble, sensitive and collaborative, creative and diverse. And after the sessions, as I listened to conversations around me, I experienced something new. For the first time, I heard my friends—the men, the business-minded, the insiders and the extroverts—expressing the same lack that I had once felt, with phrases like "How can we do this?" and "We'll have to rethink everything!" I wanted to stand on my chair and declare, "It's okay! God has provided experts in weakness! We're the slightly odd ones in every congregation and we have been put here for such a time as this!"

Of course, we need men, people with a businesslike or scientific approach, insiders and extroverts, but some of us will never fit their familiar models of leadership and only feel silly for trying. At a time when the church is forced, by this dizzying culture, to rethink who we are and how we accomplish our mission, isn't it imperative that we invite new voices into the mix? If women, artists, outsiders and introverts can name their own leadership strengths (which may, at first, feel like weaknesses) and join with existing leaders, the church can express greater depths of humility, sensitivity, collaboration, and creativity. And we can go back to being known as the people who trust in God's strength and not our own.

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