



# ALBAN WEEKLY

Monday, June 4, 2007

## Following the Spirit's Leading

by Gary Shockley



**S**ometimes, without our prompting, life will alter our pace for us. The birth of a child, a promotion at work, sickness, marriage, divorce, the death of someone we love—these things make us stop in our tracks. All forward motion ceases for a time. We would be wise in these moments to rest for a while and simply survey the landscape, find the horizon again, get a sense of where we are, and seek God's presence.



Several years ago one of these painful experiences shattered my straight-course, driven life. My mother had been battling cancer for nearly two years, and suddenly the days, weeks, and months of slow physical deterioration quickly accelerated. My father called to tell me she had been admitted to the hospital for double pneumonia. I knew my mother was close to death. I made the trip from my home to the hospital in record time and arrived to find my mother in the critical care unit.

Five days after I arrived at the hospital to see her, my mom died. As painful as it was, my mother's death became the catalyst for some

**intense work in my life. In my drivenness I had lapsed into a kind of automatic pilot. Day after day, week after week, month after month, I kept an unhealthy pace. I got up early, worked way too late, and, to the neglect of my own well-being and that of my family, kept this unhealthy pace going. I had allowed ministry to become my life. It was predictable and controllable, and it gave me a sense of meaning and importance. What's not to love? Well, how about the feelings of loneliness, isolation, and shallowness it brought me?**

**After my mother died I stood still long enough to realize that—like a sailing ship without a rudder—I was being pulled by a strong current, a depression I could not steer my way out of. Sailing into what had become uncharted waters for me, I was losing sight of land. I needed someone to help me navigate this journey. I decided to seek help through counseling. Talking with my therapist once a week was like ducking behind an island to get out of the wind and find the stability I needed. In this time dedicated to me, I learned new things about myself, about life, about God. I learned some new ways to live again: to find a healthier pace, to embrace the journey from heartache to hope.**

**Although I still get caught at times in my need to succeed, still try to rush things along rather than wait on the Spirit's leading, I am trying to learn something at once both simple and incredibly difficult: the destination is not a place but a person—a person who loves me very much and more than anything wants to be with me along the journey of life. I am much more open these days to the idea that God isn't all that interested in getting me somewhere. God is just interested in getting me!**

**One of my favorite journey stories from the Bible is the Israelites' expedition from Egypt to the promised land. Some of God's best work, I think. A trip that easily could have been made in less than 40 days had they followed a straight line took 40 years. Their travel log must have resembled the kind of scribbled picture a two-year-old would draw. You have probably heard someone explain their meanderings in this way: "More important than getting the Israelites out of Egypt was getting Egypt out of the Israelites." Or "The Israelites were lost because Moses wouldn't stop and ask for directions." I think their time spent wandering through the wilderness had more to do with God needing to spend quality time with the people (and the people with God) so they could experience God's faithfulness over and over again.**

**God wanted them to trust him today. That's why God provided manna on a daily basis. Consider the definition of manna—"What is it?" They had to trust God to know that this nameless, unidentifiable, perishable whatchamacallit would be**

enough for now. They were to gather up only what they could consume that day. If they tried to keep some of it overnight, it spoiled. Tomorrow God would provide—again. They couldn't make it happen—no matter how much they might be driven by hunger. They just had to meander around, collecting manna as it randomly fell from the sky.

But these ancient wanderers were a hardheaded bunch. How else can you explain them witnessing with their own eyes the 10 plagues, the parting of the sea (twice), bread from heaven, water from rocks, quail blown in by the wind, and countless kingdoms obliterated by the awesome power of God—only to whine, beg, and plead to go back to Egypt, back to a life of slavery, back to what was a familiar, linear, predictable way of life?

Maybe God needed 40 years to nurture a new generation of followers who might just “get” him and be willing to follow. Maybe what God wanted most from them, and now us, is a willingness to put one foot in front of the other, step after step, alongside him, no matter the pace or how the path might twist and turn. Maybe God wanted them to grasp a greater purpose for their lives—to be people who would give witness to this unique and awesome God.

Are we eager to get through whatever task or challenge we face in life as quickly as possible, moving steadily from point A to point B to point C, ever closer toward whatever goal we have in mind? The Israelites' experience reminds us: the spiritual journey doesn't work that way. In the faith journey, we are not so much racing toward a physical finish line as meandering toward becoming all that God has in mind for us to be. Like the Israelites, our ability to discern and follow God's leading has far less to do with time in a chronological sense and much more to do with direction.

Steven R. Covey, professor of business management and organization behavior, writes in his best-selling book *First Things First* about how fixated our culture is on the clock. The clock represents our busyness—commitments at work, appointments, tasks, and schedules. The clock symbolizes how we spend our lives. The compass, on the other hand, represents the personal vision, core values, and principles that shape and guide our lives. Covey suggests that we ought to rely more on the compass than the clock, because the compass has more to do with the direction we intend to follow on our journey.

The Old Testament book of Jeremiah finds the people of Israel exiled in Babylon and restless for home. Their growing impatience made them susceptible to the false hope and promises propagated by some prophets who foretold an early release from captivity. These false promises fixated them on the clock. Like little children sitting

**in the back of the car on a long trip, they kept asking over and over again, “Hey, God, are we there yet?” Caught up in the clock, they lost sight of the compass. So God sent Jeremiah with the message, “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). No timetable. No drivenness.**

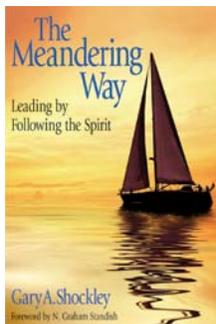
**God’s plan for the people was simple. Maybe that’s why they missed it. Look at the next verses: “Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me” (vv. 12–14). In other words, “When praying, listening, and looking for me become the focus of your lives, you will find me,” says the Lord. “I am your future and your hope!”**

**The spiritual journey rarely unfolds in a straight line. We go forward and backward, left and right. We make progress, and we fall behind. Sometimes we feel like we are simply standing still. The questions we need to ask ourselves are not, how far have we come? (How long have we been on the road?) How much farther is it? (Or, when will we get there?) Those are clock questions. Rather, we need to ask, am I pointing myself in what I sense through the Spirit to be the right direction? Am I continually orienting myself toward God? Those are compass questions.**

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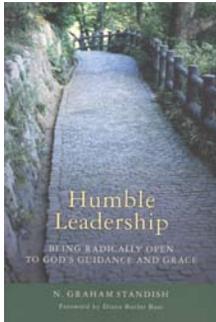
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## FEATURED RESOURCES



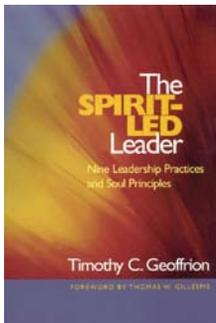
**AL332\_SM**The Meandering Way: Leading by Following the Spirit by Gary Shockley

**The Meandering Way offers a contrarian take on the more popular practices of leadership found throughout the church today. Meandering leaders are attentive to the promptings of the Spirit. They are guides and mentors who patiently journey alongside those they love and lead. Ultimately, being a meandering leader is about being on a journey with God--personally and corporately slowing down the pace of our lives and following God’s Spirit.**



**AL326\_SMHumble Leadership: Being Radically Open to God's Guidance and Grace by N. Graham Standish**

**Standish makes the case that humble leadership, grounded in the teachings of Jesus, means being radically and creatively open to God's guidance, grace, and presence in all things. He discusses self aware leadership, the need for prayerful discernment, overcoming divisiveness to be a unifying force, being spirit-led, and being effective through the practice of humility in all things.**



**AL307\_SMTThe Spirit-Led Leader: Nine Leadership Practices and Soul Principles by Timothy C. Geoffrion**

**Designed for pastors, executives, administrators, managers, coordinators, and all who see themselves as leaders and who want to fulfill their God-given purpose, The Spirit-Led Leader addresses the critical fusion of spiritual life and leadership for those who not only want to see results but also desire to care just as deeply about who they are and how they lead as they do about what they produce and accomplish.**