

## A Book Review of *Leading Out of Who You Are: Discovering the Secret of undefended Leadership*

by Simon P. Walker (166 pages. Carlisle: Piquant Editions, 2007)

This book is the first instalment in Walker's Undefended Leader trilogy, introducing many of the concepts with which he is associated. On some levels, it fits neatly into the canon of what we might call 'self-aware leadership', in that it encourages the leader to be deeply aware of himself, his background and his relationships with others. Yet there is also something radical, almost heretical about his argument: whilst acknowledging that leadership is about power, Walker insists that leaders should use this power for the good of others.

Typical leaders are 'defended' in the sense that they try to preserve their power and influence, especially by controlling what they allow others to see of themselves. Their defensiveness is entrenched through the idealization of followers; their own idealistic vision; and their unmet emotional needs. For Walker, deeper, 'truer' leadership must be 'undefended' by not grasping for power or seeking colleagues' approval. Instead, freedom to lead comes from "our attachment to another" (p.103) who offers "unconditional regard" (p.105).

Walker gently – almost in passing – argues that only God offers this unconditional love and a proper sense of perspective. For Walker is not only a leadership author, he is also a clergyman, who finds in Jesus the most remarkable example that "power is not located only in might" (p.3) but also in vulnerability and self-emptying. Whilst it is not uncommon for Christians to base leadership models on Jesus or other biblical examples, it is refreshing to find Walker reversing this approach and arguing from fundamental principles (including those of human ecology and social psychology) and then finding real life examples. These include trusted but over-familiar examples such as Churchill, Gandhi, Mandela and Gorbachev as well as Jesus himself; leaders with undisputed moral authority who point to an alternative to traditional models. (Walker makes an interesting aside that Western culture has been too in thrall to 'warrior' memes or images of leadership (p.20) and that our conceptualization of leadership rests unacknowledged on this military motif).

Walker contends that, rather than situations or even behaviour, leadership is fundamentally "about who you are, not what you know or what skills you have" (p.5). This is a minority view, as more commentators nowadays consider important the interplay between a leader, their context and their behaviour (contingency models). At this point Walker displays something of a universalising tendency: virtually all leaders are 'defended' and employ strategies to protect themselves (selective presentation, power, control); all are 'defended' because of their ego. It does not seem problematic for Walker that each of the four ego typologies he identifies results in the same condition of defensiveness.

By building on the work of psychologists Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991), Walker hypothesises how different childhood environments lead to different types of 'self': Shaper, Definer, Adapter and Defender. Each of these has a 'front-stage' or 'back-stage' tendency, not entirely equivalent to extrovert and introvert but sharing some similarities. Those familiar with Myers-Briggs profiling will recognise similar methodological limitations: are these forms truly representative, realistic and comprehensive in describing humans in general and leaders in particular? Walker may be correct in claiming 'defensiveness' to be a natural and even universal human leadership instinct – but his description of crucial, formative childhood



experiences is very western and more needs to be done to demonstrate his theory holds true in other cultural contexts.

Since Greenleaf's seminal work of 1977, the notion of 'servant leader' has been increasingly popular, so it is interesting that Walker challenges it directly, calling it "problematic" (p.125) on the grounds that serving and receiving are actually *equally* important. Walker's own ideal of leadership is "at its purest, concerned with truth" (p.124), not least the truth that we are accompanied and affirmed by a loving Other. Such acceptance means that the leader can "lead other people more deeply into... full humanity" (p.154), which to Christians resonates strongly with Jesus' words in John 10:10. People, rather than targets (or, more recently, vision), become the focus of leadership.

In later works, Walker develops his concept of human ecology and explores how leaders must be attuned to the state of social ecology. This introduction to 'undefended leadership' whets the appetite for more of his challenging thinking and careful argument. For, despite small reservations about the universal application of Walker's rationale, his call for more moral leadership is both demanding and persuasive. It is both *Leading out of Who You Are* – and *out of Who You Could Be*, a call to a higher yet paradoxically humbler form of leadership.

## References

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[<back to top>](#)

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