

Looking Back...

As I reflect back on my life, I can clearly see God grooming me for leadership. I can remember God stirring my heart to intercede conflicts toward peaceful resolutions and negotiate friendships of warring parties on the playground in my elementary years. I also remember the stirring of my heart beginning in the end of sixth grade to be an active part of serving my school through student leadership. Later in Jr. High School, I even ran for Class President as the new girl who had just moved into town. I knew I wouldn't win, but it was who I was and I could not help but try to find my place in the new school. In High School, I entered into Student Body Government, with Girls State Governor being the height of my high school leadership experience. I was also Speech Captain of my debate team and I lead and directed anything and everything I could get involved in. Part of this drive was most definitely God's design in me, but part of it became an identity to exchange the wounds of my heart growing up in a sexually abusive home for an external identity of perfectionism and performance. God's call for leadership in me and through me was getting muddled; and quite frankly, I was getting tired. By the time I graduated from high school I was burned out on leadership and life overall. I just wanted to find joy and love that was not measured by my performance. I was also starving for the very relationships I was either too busy to nurture or had shunned by using my leadership to distance myself from others to hide my inner pain. I didn't know how to be a whole person in touch with myself and others, and lead people at the same time. Leadership had become a burden to me that was threatening to steal all joy from my life. But I was trapped. Deep down I knew I was designed to lead, but I was clearly aware of my inadequacies and self destructive paradigm.

After high school I finally surrendered all my inadequacies and paradigms to Christ. I admitted I had made a mess of the package he had given me and I was desperate for unconditional love. I confessed I had violated his perfect holiness with my sins and I asked him for forgiveness. Finally feeling safe in the Father's love for me as I had never experienced before, I had no desire to throw myself back to the wolves. Coming to Christ was a life changing event in my soul; I wasn't sure leadership would be a part of this new person I was becoming in Christ. I fought any calling toward leadership since the day I gave my life to Christ, afraid of the criticism and pressures I was sure I would disappoint and fearful I would return to familiar self destructive habits of perfectionism and performance. At first, I enjoyed playing it safe. But within a few years, I became restless with my life, even depressed. Still, I hid from God's calling of leadership as well as my spiritual gifts. I did not want to crash and burn as I had done before. But denying God's call in my life required that I hid myself from people altogether. I had friends and family, but I remained distant in my relationships and I stayed at home where I felt safe, not working a job or joining anything that would tap into who I really was. Even though I am a social creature, extremely extroverted, my fears and insecurities developed into a social phobia of being in public. I found myself not able to be with people with hearing loud self condemning accusations of defeat and shame in my head. Even standing in line to get a cup of coffee somewhere became painful. I knew this had to stop. I also knew this was not who God made me to be. I wasn't being true to myself or my God.

After much internal suffering, I knew something had to change. If I didn't start embracing who God designed me to be, I would become so depressed and anxious I would either lose my mind or give up on life altogether. I could no longer deny the stirrings within me nor His divine design. I finally surrendered to God's call for leadership in my life, and gave Him permission to begin using me in that way. "Okay, God, I give. I will begin going in, not running from, the direction you are calling me. But I was cautious to make sure I did not define myself by what I do as I did before. I desired my identity to be securely upon the reality of who I am in Christ my Lord. I did not throw myself into busy work or find areas I could start leading right away. Instead, I entrusted myself to God's hand of preparation for whatever areas of leadership he might have for me, according to His timetable. Submitting myself unto God's design as I did as a child was scary, but I knew the leader He was making me to be would be very different from the leader I strove to be as a child out of survival. This time, I would lead out of God's love and service, not self-identity and emotional survival. God assured me He was in control of this season of preparation, making me into a very different kind of leader than I previously experienced leadership to be.

After a long and often painful season of emotional healing and further spiritual maturity, God began to open doors of leadership for me. The first area of leadership opportunity and development was to embrace more of the wife and mother God had designed me to be. It all had to start in the home. Home was the safest place to begin being true to myself as well as to my God. My husband and children deserved the mother God entrusted them to, not a mother who was hiding from God's design in her life. After a little while of building my confidence in who God created me to be at home, God then began to call me to lead outside of the home. My first position of leadership outside of the home was in a speaking and writing ministry, *Marilyn Williams-Ministry of the Word*. This ministry soon grew from me simply sharing God's work in my life as an encouragement to other women to a non-profit ministry, *Safe Harbor Ministries, Inc*. I was soon teaching God's truths and testifying to God's power of deliverance from shame and fear to women all over the world. My husband and I directed Safe Harbor Ministries together. After building the foundation for this ministry for the first five years, God brought other women to join us in this venture. God also began to stir my heart to return to school to begin a degree in Theology and Leadership.

Once again, I was scared and I fought God about returning to school for a very long time. I knew I had lost myself in my schoolwork before I came to Christ, using it as an escape from my pain. As a result, I had no life outside of hours of endless homework and a continual pursuit of perfect grades. But after seven years of God's relentless promptings to go back to school, I finally gave in. I am now in my last year of reaching my B.A. in Religion and Leadership at Vanguard University, and God has been faithful to teach me how to balance what He is calling me to do within right priorities, while maintaining intimacy with God, others, as well as myself.

I have gained a new peace and confidence to finally embrace the calling of leadership in my life. As I have stepped out into leadership opportunities, I have learned more and more about God's design for leadership. Recently, I was hired to direct the

Women's Ministry at Emmanuel Faith Community Church in Escondido, California, a church of approximately 7,000- almost 4,000 of them are women. I deliberately word my position, "I direct the Women's Ministry," instead of "I am the Women's Ministry Director." This is what I do, not who I am. I do not desire to find my identity in this position; but rather, I embrace the opportunity to put into practice the spiritual gifts and design God has given me for service as well as development.

It is my hope that you will do the same. If you are also called to leadership, on any level, my prayer is that my journey as well as the wisdom I am learning would encourage you to embrace your unique and divine design in Christ Jesus. He has entrusted us with His Kingdom Work for His return, there is no time to waste hiding or being ineffective. Jesus has modeled for us how to lead; and he is with us through the truth of His Living Word, along with His Holy Spirit in us to guide us into God designed leadership. Godly leadership has freed my old paradigms of destructive leadership both for myself as well as others. I pray it will do the same for you. As you read new postings each month, it is my goal to encourage, equip, and empower you to embrace and mobilize others into God's redemptive plan for mankind.

Marilyn Williams