

Make Your Mess Your Message

By Rankin Wilbourne

A few years back my wife introduced me to the novels of Louise Penny and her beloved Chief Inspector Gamache. Gamache possesses a compelling combination of courage and humility, which makes him able to empathize with the weaknesses of his coworkers as well as the criminals they pursue. Gamache is a compassionate detective.

In one scene, Gamache challenges a young investigator under his charge. Nicole is whip smart. Her intuitions are often on target. But her intelligence and her competence have made her arrogant. Eventually, Gamache confronts her:

“You need to learn that you have choices. There are four things that lead to wisdom. Are you ready for them? They are four sentences we learn to say and mean...*I don't know. I need help. I'm sorry...I was wrong.*”

“Four sentences we *learn* to say,” implying that this discovery takes time. It's a process, not an event. Ten years ago, I might have been able to *say* those four things, as a good pastor is supposed to. But it took a whole lot of pain for me to arrive at *meaning* them:

- “I don't know.”
- “I need help.”
- “I'm sorry.”
- “I was wrong.”

I Used to Be a Pastor

Until a few years ago, and for almost 14 years, I was senior pastor of a church in Los Angeles. Our church was “successful” by the measures often used to evaluate churches in the West. There was a solid core community in place when I arrived, and we happened to be at the right place at the right time. Almost overnight, we became a large, well-respected, gospel-centered, mission-minded church in the city.

Our staff grew from two people to more than 45, ministering to people around Los Angeles and beyond. Also, during the years I pastored there, I got married, we had three kids, and I wrote two books. By appearances, I was winning.

Though we lived in the middle of the city, I grew up in a small town in the other LA. In Louisiana, on some of the back country roads, it wasn't uncommon to see old wooden bridges posted with signs, “WARNING: Over 5000 Pounds Cracks May Begin to Appear.”

Under the weight and stress of leading a large church and a large staff, balancing the demands of pastor and preacher, entrepreneurial leader and organizational manager, husband and father, some of my own cracks began to appear. I had some unhealthy patterns in my leadership that I didn't see at the time, and though it was painful, I'm thankful God brought them to light.

I'm telling my story now for a few reasons. First, because after several years and having received a lot of help, I may be able to tell my story in a way that benefits others (2 Cor. 1.4).

Second, because I've recently taken a role on the staff of Relational Wisdom 360, a well-respected online resource for navigating emotional health and relational conflict. Years ago I would have been unqualified to accept such a position, and for me to serve in such a role today invites a fair question: who am I to speak to others about emotional health and navigating conflict? I'm someone who has experienced a lot of failure at things I used to think I was pretty good at.

But I've also received a tremendous amount of care from some wise helpers, who've helped me believe that if we can be vulnerable and ruthlessly honest about even the ugliest parts of ourselves, then, if the Bible is our guide, the Lord may choose to use us precisely in our places of brokenness, so that when we've "turned back," we might "strengthen others" from a place of compassion (Luke 22.32).

And that's a third reason I'm telling my story, because I've come to suspect that there are more than a few people out there, especially leaders, who might benefit from hearing my story. Being a pastor has always been a "dangerous calling," as Paul Tripp calls it. But there are reasons to believe it's never been harder to be a leader in a local church.

Tensions in a Leader's Life

I came into pastoral ministry after several years in corporate banking and carried some traits from my first job into my new calling as a church planter: a commitment to excellence and constant improvement, alongside incredibly high standards for myself and others. A recovering Type-A personality, I sincerely believed that my ambition was (mostly) for the glory of God. I wanted to play my role as pastor and leader as well as I could.

But beneath that persona, I was filled with fear and restlessness, an ever-present anxiety that no accomplishment could calm. I was also privately aware – but ashamed – that I was simmering with anger but didn't know why. So I stuffed my emotions and tried to avoid conflict at all costs. And I ran hard – just as I had as a competitive athlete in my youth.

I later discovered that I was also deeply depressed – but I didn't know this yet. Some depression is overt, with all the classic signs. Mine was of the "covert"¹ variety. Until I got some serious help, I had no idea how dissociated from my emotions I was, living in my own head. Detached from my emotions and my body, I couldn't feel how much sadness and grief were coursing below the surface of my life, how much my past and the experiences of my childhood were still affecting my reactions under stress or threat, real or perceived. I lived on constant high alert.

I'm not asking anyone to feel sorry for me. I'm telling my story in part to normalize talking about emotional health and mental health challenges in the church, even among leaders. I was highly

¹ [This book](#), while not written from a Christian perspective, was immensely helpful to me, so much so that as soon as I finished reading, I sent copies to several friends and read it through again in discussion with them. In a later post, I will write out a book list of the resources that have been most helpful to me on this journey.

theologically educated. I knew the right words to say and how to say them. But I also happened to be highly defended and terrified of genuine vulnerability. I had no idea that I was using my words and intellect, even my theology, like armor to protect myself and hide.

I could preach on the dangers of idolatry and the importance of rooting our identity in Christ, but my own sense of self-worth was still closely tied to my work. I spoke to others about the grace of God, but I was driven to perform, achieve, and avoid failure at all costs. I lived as if the church's "success" depended on me and used it to give me a sense of security and significance. As you might imagine, this left me exhausted and terrified, desperate to keep up appearances.

These contradictions were not lost on me. I could feel the tension every Easter Sunday when I privately cared, for all the wrong reasons, about how many people came to our church. But I had no idea how to break free. So I soldiered on like I always had. My strategies of working harder and hustling for my worth – doing more, better – had served me well all my life. They'd always worked. Until they didn't.

What Got You Here Won't Get You There

The problem with burying your emotions is that they don't go away. They're just buried alive. And when stress piles onto that old wooden bridge, the cracks get revealed and our emotions leak out onto the people around us, no matter how careful we try to be.

I dealt with my distressing emotions by reaching for my drug of choice: control. That looked like insisting overmuch on clarity, calling for accountability, and striving for what I called excellence, but was really closer to perfectionism. I saw these impulses as virtues, not as deficits. I was careful with my words, but my disappointment was palpable to anyone who threatened what I needed to feel good about myself: the church's "success."

Maya Angelou was right, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Eventually, some of the people who worked alongside me began to feel run over by me – because they were. I created a high-stress, performance-based workplace atmosphere in the name of advancing Jesus's gospel of grace.

In early 2016, some members of our team brought their concerns to our board of elders. I wish I could turn back the clock and choose instead just to listen and focus on understanding. To my enduring regret, I was convinced that I was not the root problem. *I was wrong.*

I was so convinced that *other* people and *other* issues were the root problem that I was blind to the truth. Nothing blinds you like being convinced that you are on the side of righteousness. Obviously, there are people who manage to wear all the hats required to lead a large or growing church. As for me, I was simply unprepared for the challenges of leading and managing a large staff. I was in so far over my head that I didn't even know it. *I didn't know.*

Things might have gone very differently if I'd responded in genuine humility and deep repentance. The energy behind my desire for vindication should have signaled to me: *I needed help.*

Getting the help that I needed ended up being the most painful, difficult work I've ever done. Initially, I didn't even want that much help. I resented the neediness. But in God's mercy, our elders hired the exact right helper – an old-school therapist named Thom. Like a Grand Master in chess, Thom was always several moves ahead of me. He could see right through my posturing and persona, what Thomas Merton called "my false self."

As Thom likes to say, "The problem with feelings is you start to feel." After months of therapy, I began to experience those buried emotions: sadness, fear, anxiety, shame. I felt like I was breaking, like if I let myself feel these feelings I was going to die. I felt stripped, descending down into those dark places I'd avoided my whole life.

Thom helped me begin to see how I had tried to manage my anxiety through control and work. I was addicted to stress. My body was so dependent on stress hormones that every time a deadline passed or a vacation rolled around, I would get physically ill from the withdrawal. Today I see myself as a recovering addict and very much relate to the recovery community. *I need help* and I'm still getting it.

I was shocked as I began to understand why and how some on our team had experienced me as intimidating, unapproachable, even domineering. I had grown accustomed to wielding words in such a way that I could "win" arguments even when I was clearly in the wrong. The same gifts that made me so effective as a public speaker enabled me to communicate disappointment without raising my voice or saying anything objectively harsh. I also used my words to cast myself in a better light, which the Bible more plainly calls lying.

About a year into therapy, I was able to see and grieve how I was using people around me to achieve the "success" I needed to feel worthy, in essence manipulating them. It seemed so ugly to confess that out loud. And this was *after* I had written an entire book on rooting our identity and self-worth in our union with Christ. But I hadn't yet internalized the kindness of God and the particular love of Jesus. I could talk about the love of Christ, but I had difficulty surrendering to it.

The lack of gentleness in my life was revealed when my expectations weren't met at work. I thought that's just what it meant to be the boss. I'd never before understood what Gamache meant, "You need to learn that you have choices." The day I realized I could make a different choice – that there was a different, better way to respond – was the beginning of a new life. But it's been a long road. There are no quick fixes. Change is slow, painful, and non-linear; transformation requires vulnerability in a community of solidarity.

My sins were not intentional. Yet my lack of awareness in no way exonerates me (Lev. 4.1). I wanted so much to be a great dad and a good husband and a faithful pastor. But I lost sight of the fact that, as a leader, one of the most important parts of my job was to care not only for our church but also for all those on our staff team. You can't lead people that you don't genuinely care about. And you can't genuinely care for people unless you are able to sit with them in their discomfort. And you can't sit with others in their pain unless you are in touch with your own. And I was not. As Richard Rohr famously pointed out, "pain that's not transformed gets transmitted."

Today what grieves me most is that my leadership hurt some of the people on our team and the church God had called me to serve. As a leader, I bear the responsibility. And I've been working very hard, for several years now, to make amends.

Conflict in the Church

If you've ever been around a church split, then you can predict some of what happened next. Gradually and then definitively, sides formed, lines hardened, and words became amplified. Our staff and then our leadership and eventually our church became sharply divided over my fitness to continue as pastor.

In 2019/2020, after several years of internal debate and several rounds of consultants, when a majority of our Board of Elders seemed poised to support me and forge a path forward, concerned parties presented their concerns to a group of denominational officials above our local church (called a presbytery in our context).

With some skilled helpers beside me and more than a year of internal work behind me, I had become able to articulate and own many of the concerns about my workplace leadership. Not wishing to defend myself any longer, I confessed all that I could, as ruthlessly as I could, giving a specific and lengthy confession, similar to the fourth of the twelve steps: "a searching and fearless moral inventory."

When I presented my confession alongside a detailed plan of repentance that I'd been following, the presbytery voted to remove me as pastor and revoke my ordination. The technical word was "deposed." In many ways, I had spent my whole life trying to avoid the very thing that ended up happening to me. I was devastated.

Without negating my confession, my wife and I decided to appeal the decision of our presbytery. The elders of our church also appealed the presbytery's decision, as did a few other pastors who had served on our staff team and had their own perspective on the dynamics in question.

We all appealed to our denomination's highest court, that the lower court's judgement was too severe for the sins confessed, especially in light of the steps of repentance I'd taken, and that the process by which they had arrived at their decision had been unjust.

The complaint took over a year because of COVID delays, but the higher court eventually found unanimously in our favor. They removed the censure from me and recommended that my time away be considered essentially "time served." They restored me to a minister in good standing.

Meanwhile, my family and I had left L.A. and moved to a farm in the Midwest, where I continued getting professional help and eventually was hired by a local church whose leadership was thoroughly aware of my story. That's where I've been gratefully serving until this new opportunity arose with Relational Wisdom 360.

Two Things Can Be True

A big part of my own healing has been the ability to say, “two things can be true.” Mine is the story of an emotionally unhealthy leader. I’m grateful for the growing awareness of the urgent need for emotional health among church leaders. The culture that ultimately poisoned our staff team – of avoiding conflict, not being vulnerable, whispering, triangulation, gossip, having meetings after the meeting to try and control the narrative – that is the culture I modeled and built.

Leaders, learn from me. As Edwin Friedman tried to warn us, we pass our own emotional dysfunction along to the organization we are leading, and sooner or later the bill will come due. One reason I’m joining the team of Relational Wisdom 360 is I am convinced that most church leaders need so much more help than we realize. Please learn from my mistakes and get professional help before the lines get too entrenched.

At the same time, mine is also the story of a leader in way over his head, terribly afraid, unaware, misunderstood and then cast out. That’s a story that needs to be told too, because there are more than a few leaders out there who aren’t malicious or sinister (though there’s some of that to be sure) but who are overwhelmed with anxiety and terrified of asking for help or letting ourselves be seen, fearing what it would mean for our reputations and livelihoods.

Yes, we need a culture of justice, accountability, and transparency. Sunlight is the best disinfectant. As church leaders, our lives should be open books. And appropriate consequences for our actions are part of making amends. Pastors like me may need to step aside for a season. When mental health reasons are part of the story, the church should know about those struggles too, to normalize them.

But if and when they are contrite and repentant, pastors need a clear path toward restoration, “lest [we] be overwhelmed with excessive sorrow” (2 Cor. 2.7). Churches need a culture that encourages all people, including leaders, to raise our hands and ask for help. Like the recovery community, churches need to do all we can to promote an atmosphere that encourages confession and celebrates stories of healing.

Perhaps the unique gift that the church of Jesus Christ has to offer to our cultural moment is holding out the possibility of genuine forgiveness and real reconciliation. If the church doesn’t model this possibility, where else can we hope to find redemption, freedom from our pasts, and the hope of restored community?

People Are Complex, Nuance Is Needed

We are living in a highly polarized time, and we get trapped in either/or, black and white, all-or-nothing, good-guys-vs-bad-guys thinking, that does not allow for complexity or nuance. Doesn’t the Bible remind us that a person after God’s own heart can still be deeply flawed? (Ps. 51.9, Exodus 2.12, Acts 9.1). People are complex. And pastors are people too. Pastors are human beings and need to be given what Parker Palmer once called “permission to be human.”

The way forward is to remember what the gospel tells each of us: two things can be true. John Newton’s final recorded words were, “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior.”

In my experience, it's one thing to *say* what Newton said, but another thing altogether to *mean* it. And when we do mean it, it will come out in how we navigate conflict. Nothing reveals our lived theology more than conflict.

Before I moved to Los Angeles, a friend of mine, an artist, gave me a painting. It was a portrait of me after I'd fallen asleep on a church youth trip and the kids had painted my face and put my hair up in all kinds of crazy colored hair ties. Beside the portrait are the words, "May you be embarrassed in front of the world, so that you may laugh and sing and dance before the God who is Father, Son and Holy Ghost." My friend was a prophet.

In my case, I had to be broken in just the place that was stealing my enjoyment of God's love – my need of others' approval – before I could finally begin to believe that I had been a beloved child all along. Descent turns out to be the only way to rest in the deep, deep love of Jesus.

Throughout this essay, I have put the word "successful" in quotes because I believe that is one thing leaders have to get ruthlessly honest about – defining what success is really going to mean for us (if we can't [let go](#) of it altogether). I now see my job in the second half of life to be a trophy of God's grace. I'm slowly learning to live into that new definition, and I hope along the way that I'm becoming a little kinder to others and to myself.

I hope one leader reading my story might be moved to go to someone and say, "*I don't know. I need help. I'm sorry. And I was wrong.*" Conflicts can't survive when people are willing to say those things and mean them. Whatever the problem, humility and repentance are the way forward.

Easter Sunday 2023.