

## Leadership at 50 -- Three Questions for Recovering Tenacious Leaders

Tenneson Woolf, with Glen Lauder  
February 2015

Thirty-five years ago, in my teen and young adult life, if I ever thought of myself as a leader it was because of my tenacity. In sports. I played ice hockey for many years. In my first part-time job, working at a grocery store. In helping my mom and grandparents with household chores. In school.

My job, as I saw it, was to try hard. Harder than anyone else. To endure. That's how I could be a good example. That's how I could prove myself. My job was to try hard at being smarter and more clever.

I was very competitive, sometimes besting others who were more talented than me. I didn't know then how transparent my insecurities embedded in such competitiveness likely were. But I remained defaulted to tenacity. Effort. Effort. Effort. It had a satisfying buzz to it.

Leadership as tenacity stayed with me in my twenties and thirties into the life experiences of missionary service abroad, university degrees in psychology and organizational behavior, the first stages of my career in leadership development, marriage, and raising a daughter and son. Hard work remained crucial to me, particularly when centered in values. Family, community, integrity, and seeing a bigger picture guided my efforts of leadership that was tenacity. Doing more, moving faster, squeezing more into the moments of a day, and staying up until 1:00 or 2:00 to accomplish what I felt I had to -- these were all common. They fit the story.

In my forties, this story started to crack. I'm a bit embarrassed to say that it took so long, but it is what it is. My forties took me into next stages of my career, starting a consulting business, raising kids that were now teenagers, adopting a newborn

child, and later, divorce. My forties were an opening to uncertainties, grey areas, and searching for other ways. Effort and tenacity were important, but were beginning to not be the game.

Respected as it was, leadership required something different. At minimum, in personal life and in professional life, the ability to pause and reflect became a keen marker of leadership.

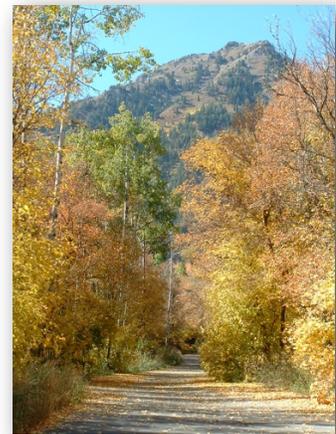
Now, here I am, it seems in a blink, in my 50s. I carry this life history with me. It remains a buzz to work hard, to work up a sweat every now and then. However, leadership -- me in relation with clients, community, and family -- now requires a changed orientation.

Leadership is no longer from "more." Nor from faster, and more efficient." Leadership is from "less." From more clear, and a disposition of stripping back, spaciousness, and central stillness.

These aren't the only qualities, of course, but they are the ones that feel surprisingly more helpful. More fruitful. It is less good soldiering forward, and being a good "doer." It is more pausing. More grounding amidst the complexity that is life.

In this realm, my friend Glen Lauder, a Scottish man living the last 45 years in New Zealand, is such a teacher to me. We have been meeting quite regularly over the last decade to share, virtually and in-person, experiences in life and leadership. We talk. We describe what has our respective attentions. We listen.

From a recent exchange, Glen remarked, "A day doesn't have to hurry to be a day." I chuckled out loud when he said it, a laugh that comes when a



truth is spoken so simply and accurately. "A day just is. It can't be anything other than what it is." Clock time, this amazing human construct that so often governs every aspect of our lives -- or inspires, or enslaves -- is only time.

A day is just a day. Varied in length depending on the season and one's position on the planet, but it remains only one spin of the earth in one annual rotation around the sun. A day is inherently and coherently itself, without trying.

Glen gets me curious and wondering, one of the things that good friends do. As I am now in my 50s, I wonder, what is inherently and coherently me? It is a question for all of us really, and at many ages, but particularly poignant at 50. What qualities have patterned across the decades? Like the day, what is it that I, or you, can't not be?

These questions are life-long questions that if one takes seriously, will likely involve significant personal reflection, and be asked with friends, colleagues, and even spiritual directors.

The 50s is a time to reexamine leadership assumptions and practices. It is a time to notice what we can contribute now that we could not before. What we can contribute to others in different stages of leadership. It is a time when "legacy" begins asking for attention.

For me, tenacity is no longer the way to offer the best of what I am. I'm glad to be with people who can offer their tenacity. But for me, leadership is no longer about a default of trying harder. It is about being clear. Stripping back nonessentials, creating ample spaciousness, and discovering a central stillness. It is presence, an ability to show up with self and with others, that has become the core competency.

So, I find myself asking these three questions as essential to the leadership paradigm that is the 50s.

### 1. What stripping back do you need?

When I was in my thirties I refinished an old kitchen table. The table had white pillar legs that were

significantly chipped and scratched. The varnish covering the oak table top was worn and gouged in several places.

Refinishing this table meant stripping back the paint and the varnish. It meant sanding back the finished surfaces. Many times. Dusting them off. Checking again to see if I'd stripped it far enough. Doing it again to get down to the wood itself. It took more time than I would have imagined. And patience. But the unfinished, exposed wood was beautiful.

1. What stripping back do you need?
2. What spaciousness do you require?
3. What central stillness is yours to fulfill?

In contemporary leadership, many of us have todo lists that are rather grand and large. We too have layers to strip back. I don't know many people that aren't involved regularly in leadership triage, needing to discern in an instant priorities that require action and good things that must wait for another day.

For many, our busyness includes an overloaded email inbox, what a friend once described to me as "someone else's todo list for you." Multiple projects. Multiple relations in multiple networks of people in multiple timelines. In our 24/7 virtual access to one another many are expected to be available and on call. Always.

That kind of lifestyle requires a deliberate choice of stripping back. Perhaps saying no to good things. A kind of stripping back to the essential beauty in the wood itself, the wood that is us.

## 2. What spaciousness do you require?

A couple years back, I started scheduling empty space in my calendar. Appointments with myself. Each Monday, I blocked out the morning. I protected time. I dared to claim some spaciousness.

I knew it would not happen every Monday. But I still scheduled it to repeat indefinitely. I needed a deliberate step to interrupt the pattern of always feeling that my life was over-booked. I needed to feel that there was room to breath. For me, to meditate. To be quiet. To welcome life to integrate within me. To deliberately let my focus on projects



rest. It wasn't time to do the laundry or catch up on tasks. It wasn't time to sneak away to focus on projects. Those Mondays were times to deliberately empty myself.

What became immediately clear to me in my Monday mornings was that this step of creating spaciousness, was not about laziness or escape. There is again, right. Tenacity beckoning! Always near, like an overly enthusiastic personal trainer demanding ten more pushups from me. Creating spaciousness was about getting further below the surface of things. Further into the rich and vibrant resources in the center of who I am.

Not everything is meant to be a three-minute speed date or a two minute report. Admittedly, I enjoy being able to do those things. But they don't get to enough of the juice for me. What does is a walk in the morning or evening. Removed from noise of what can be an incessant world. A return to self, and interestingly, productivity, that is accessed only by spaciousness.

## 3. What central stillness is yours to fulfill?

When Glen talks about central stillness, he speaks of fulfilling it. Not fabricating something. Not

masquerading as yet another facsimile of inner self. Central stillness is about essence, the day that does not have to try to be a day. The core that just is.

You know those times when you do something that is completely natural to you, yet others perceive it as miraculous. Perhaps it is the remark that you made in a meeting that nobody else was willing to say. Or that question that you asked when others were too shy to do so. Perhaps it is your prolonged commitment to a project that others had given up on. Perhaps it is the story you share of yourself that shows your vulnerability and willingness to be transparent. Others look at you like you've just turned into a super hero. Yet it was just natural to you. In fact, you might even be confused by the flattery. You were just being you. You were just doing what you couldn't not do. This is a central stillness.

Central stillness takes humility. It is a way of being. Less of a show put on for someone else to hide all of your imperfections. More of an unexaggerated quality of being. Central stillness takes boldness. More being clear on what is true and essential for you. Less bombastic grandstanding for the sake of selling somebody else's message.

Central stillness evokes transparency. Willingness to be open to those around you and to require it of them also. Central stillness is vulnerability, acknowledging that you aren't perfect, just like everyone else. Central stillness is not hiding your talents. It is standing in them fully with clarity, being who and how you are.

I love American Poet, Mary Oliver's words on this, in her poem, "On Meditating, Sort Of." Most of us benefit from the reminder, "how wonderful to be who I am."

*Meditation, so I've heard, is best accomplished  
if you entertain a certain strict posture.  
Frankly, I prefer just to lounge under a tree.  
So why should I think I could ever be successful?*

*Some days I fall asleep, or land in that  
even better place — half asleep — where the  
world,  
spring, summer, autumn, winter —*

*flies through my mind in its  
hardy ascent and its uncompromising descent.*

*So I just lie like that, while distance and time  
reveal their true attitudes: they never  
heard of me, and never will, or ever need to.*

*Of course I wake up finally  
thinking, how wonderful to be who I am,  
made out of earth and water,  
my own thoughts, my own fingerprints –  
all that glorious, temporary stuff.*

I loved playing ice hockey as a kid. I loved pretending I was Bobby Orr or Phil Esposito, my Boston Bruin heroes. I loved endlessly taking shots with a tennis ball against the basement wall. Most of us have something like this from our childhood and younger days. I loved trying hard. I still do. But in my 50s, my tenacity, perhaps now shape-shifted into discernment, requires expression through other choices. The wood, stripped back beneath its several coatings, is as it was for my table, rather impressive.



*Tenneson Woolf* ([www.tennesonwoolf.com](http://www.tennesonwoolf.com))  
and *Glen Lauder* ([www.cultivatepartners.nz](http://www.cultivatepartners.nz)) are  
long-time colleagues and friends working globally.  
Together they are exploring leadership across many  
decades, including work with senior leaders in  
retreat. They offer workshops, presentations, and of  
course, times to reclaim stripping back,  
spaciousness, and central stillness.