



THE

DISCOVERING YOUR
UNEXPECTED PATH
TO INFLUENCE

LEADER

IN

YOU

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CHAPTER ONE

THE POWER OF GOD'S PRESENCE

Moses said to the LORD, "You have been telling me, 'Lead these people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me." . . .

The LORD replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."

EXODUS 33:12-14

ON A TUESDAY EVENING in April 2012, I was in the middle of my weekly thirty-minute prayer call with a friend Ifeytaya Bulow-Deck. There I was, sitting in the foyer of my parents' home with my eyes closed when, suddenly, images of the men in my family marched through my mind one after the other. My father. My uncles. My brother. My cousins. With them came an overwhelming sense that someone was about to die.

I panicked. Was one of them *dying*? Why was I having these thoughts? While I thought about what to do next, I prayed for my father, uncles, brother, and cousins. Soon, I sensed the Holy Spirit leading me to declare Psalm 118:17: "[They] shall not die but live, and declare the works of the LORD" (KJV). I prayed those words repeatedly. At that moment it was all I could do. The intensity of

my prayer took on a form of its own as God led me to confidently pray the Word with authority and conviction. All the while my mind raced to understand what was seemingly a supernatural God encounter.

Ifeytaya was supportive as always during our prayer times. She prayed in agreement with me that these men would not die but live. She also expressed her belief that God would protect my family.

I got off the phone with Ifeytaya puzzled and concerned yet trusting that God had revealed what the enemy had intended. What was intended for evil, however, would be turned around for our good (Genesis 50:20). I wanted to tell someone but didn't want to alarm anyone. Instead, I prayed daily for the protection of the men in my family.

In May, my mom told our family that my uncle Tony (her brother) had been diagnosed four months earlier with stage 4 colon cancer and had only just shared this news after she asked him why he was in the bed all of the time. He was fifty-three years old.

I was shocked. Mad at him too. Why had he held this information for so long? Why was he resigned to die? We could have done something! Also troubling was the fact that I wasn't sure whether he had a personal relationship with God.

It was then that I remembered my prayer to the Lord the month before. *My uncle was the one I'd needed to pray for!*

My mom convinced Uncle Tony to allow her to make a doctor's appointment for him at Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York City for a second opinion. As Mom and I stood in the oncology department waiting room at Mt. Sinai waiting for the doctor to return with his report, I scanned the room trying to process the desperation and despair on so many faces. How did we get here? What would my family have to endure?

The doctor returned and said the cancer was indeed stage 4.

“How much time does he have to live?” I asked, a question I dreaded.

“Six months,” the doctor replied.

Six months! This can't be real! I panicked, tears flowing. Meanwhile, my mom remained calm and continued to ask wise questions about how we could care for my uncle. She didn't accept the timetable of death.

As thoughts of my uncle's life, his children, and the rest of our family flooded my mind, the Holy Spirit reminded me that God alone determines when we live and die. So I prayed again, *Lord, please spare my uncle's life. Don't take him from this earth until I have the assurance that he'll be with you in heaven.*

Uncle Tony received chemotherapy but continued to deteriorate. I felt so powerless against this disease. Though I was a minister in training, someone who was supposed to lead others, I was overwhelmed.

One Sunday after church at the home my uncle and grandmother shared, I looked at my uncle, now very gaunt and withdrawn, and I burst into tears. How full of life he used to be.

“It's going to be okay,” Uncle Tony said.

But I knew that wasn't true. This was not okay.

Watching Uncle Tony die was one of the hardest things I've ever faced. It was even more devastating knowing that he didn't want to die and hadn't made peace with his condition.

We decided that Uncle Tony would receive hospice care in his home. But he needed more support than we could provide. Since he was too fragile to be moved, we asked God for grace and strength. We knew it was only a matter of time before he would pass away. He was barely talking and had stopped eating.

Feeling desperate and unsure whether or not Uncle Tony had ever talked to God about forgiveness, I asked my mentor, Helen

West, one of the elders at my church—Bethel Gospel Assembly—to come and pray for Uncle Tony. I *needed* to know that he would be with the Lord after he died.

My uncle lay there as Elder West entered the room. I watched and silently prayed that God would show his presence. Elder West talked to him and read to him passages from the Bible. After that, she asked him if he wanted to have a relationship with God, to acknowledge that the wrongs my uncle had committed had been dealt with when Jesus died on the cross. Because of that, he could have peace with God. If he understood that, he was to raise his hand.

I studied Uncle Tony intently for any sign of movement.

Nothing.

Had he heard her? Would God answer my prayer?

I prayed again. Slowly, his right hand moved, lifting off the bed. He'd heard! He wanted to be at peace with God.

Four days later my uncle took his final breath. But I knew that death was not the final answer for him. He would be with the Lord for eternity. The joy and release that I felt were indescribable.

Elder West gave the eulogy at my uncle's homegoing service. We chose to call the service a "homegoing" instead of a funeral because we believed that he indeed went home to his final resting place in heaven with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8).

I couldn't help recalling my prayer for the men in my family back in April. God had answered by showing the power of his presence during one of the most difficult times my family had faced.

Have you ever felt out of your depth as a leader? Another man felt way out of his league when handed an assignment. His name was Moses.

MOSES MAKES A PLAN: TAKE ONE

Moses' familiar story has been the subject of films—*Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014), *The Ten Commandments* (1956)—and novels such as *Moses, Man of the Mountain* by Zora Neale Hurston. It began with a problem that needed a solution.

For centuries the Israelites—who were then known as the Hebrews—were slaves in Egypt. Slavery was Pharaoh's chosen means of population control (Exodus 3:8-14). Their cries of anguish had reached God (Exodus 3:7-9), and he decided "to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:8). But he would use a man to do it.

Moses was an unlikely choice for a deliverer—the kind of story Hollywood loves. He was born to Amram and Jochebed (Numbers 26:58-59) at the worst time for male babies to be born. Having survived Pharaoh's second method of population control—killing male Hebrew babies (Exodus 1:15-22)—he had been raised by the current Pharaoh's daughter (Exodus 2:1-10). So far so good. But around the age of forty, Moses witnessed an Egyptian's cruelty to one of his own people. Driven by concern for the oppression of his people, Moses saw this as his call to action. So, he murdered the man and quickly buried him (Exodus 2:11-12).

Not the ideal resume entry for the job of deliverer.

Moses had been seen and was forced to flee to Midian to escape Pharaoh's demand for justice (Exodus 2:13-15). He'd blown it.

MOSES MAKES A PLAN: TAKE TWO

You've heard stories of celebrities who were downgraded from fame and fortune to anonymity and sometimes poverty. Moses, the celebrity of his day, had gone from being the adopted son of the daughter of Pharaoh to being a nobody in the wilderness

with nothing but the clothes on his back. But there was a silver cloud on the horizon. After helping a group of shepherdesses (Exodus 2:16-17), he gained a wife, a new home, and a new responsibility: being a shepherd over the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro.

Despite Moses' failed attempt and forced retreat, God still had plans for Moses. Forty years of seasoning as a husband to Zipporah and a shepherd in the wilderness of Midian had rendered Moses ready to lead. But in Exodus 3, Moses encountered God's presence in a unique way

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell's seminal work on the hero's journey, one of the steps of the hero's journey is the call to action. Moses' call to action was literally God calling to him from a burning bush: "And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:9-10).

Imagine how you would feel if you heard the voice of God calling to you from a tree or a bush outside your home and giving you an assignment. What would you say first? Do first?

Keep in mind that Moses had never heard the voice of God. He wasn't exactly sure who was speaking to him. As Exodus 3:13 describes it: "Then Moses said to God, 'If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you," and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?'" (ESV). Sounds like a stalling technique, doesn't it?

Moses felt completely unqualified and lamented to God that he was a man of lowly position. Look at his list of excuses in Exodus 4. How could he be the best for this assignment?

The Leader in You Chart

Moses' Excuse (Exodus 4)	God's Response
What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, "The LORD did not appear to you"? (v. 1)	What is that in your hand? . . . Throw [the staff] on the ground. . . . This is so that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has appeared to you. (vv. 2-5)
I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue. (v. 10)	Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say. (vv. 11-12)
Please send someone else. (v. 13)	What about your brother, Aaron the Levite? . . . You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth; I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do. (vv. 14-15)

With every doubt Moses had about his ability to lead, God responded by showing Moses that he had already made provision for his journey—the provision of the Lord himself.

God showed Moses and us that he equips us with everything we need to effectively lead. Resources are already at our disposal, often already within us. We come to understand how the presence of God can be found in the promises throughout the Bible, the language of prayer, hearing the voice of God within our spirit, and also through those who provide wise counsel.

MY BURNING BUSH

I can relate to Moses' feelings of inadequacy. In 2001, after I graduated from the State University of New York at Binghamton, I moved back to the Bronx, where my family lived. It was a hard adjustment. I was no longer closely connected to my community of friends. I had become a working professional and resumed an on-again-off-again relationship with a guy I'll call Scott.

I met Scott when I was seventeen, a few months before I left for Binghamton. He had graduated from college a few months prior and was in car sales. He had some of the qualities I wanted in a man: handsome, stylish, confident.

Back then, I had so many unresolved issues from the absence of a relationship with my dad. I felt like a ship lost at sea with no sense of direction. I yearned for love and affirmation.

But I really didn't know what to look for in a boyfriend. Though I wasn't looking for marriage, I wanted the consistency of a relationship with someone I could be comfortable with.

A week after meeting Scott it became painfully clear that he was self-absorbed and in no way was looking to be in a committed relationship with me. Still, I continued to see him from time to time until I left for school. Over my four years at Binghamton I would contact him periodically with the hopes that there would have been some change in his posture toward me. On every phone call he was abrupt. He never asked questions about how I was doing, how was school, and the like.

After graduating, I went back to dating Scott. We only spent time together when he was available—no matter the time of day or night. I was so starved for companionship that I accepted whatever behavior was dished out despite how deeply those actions wounded me. I didn't value myself enough to demand better treatment even if doing so resulted in him no longer being in my life.

I'm ashamed to say how long I was in this relationship. We were in an on-again-off-again state for ten years. Where's the SMH (shaking my head/face-palm) emoji when you need one?

Finally, things came to a head in 2003 when Scott tried to convince me to (1) have a child with him and (2) accept that he would always be romantically involved with other women. Mind you, we were not yet in a committed relationship. And the crazy thing is I actually entertained his proposition, thinking perhaps this was as good as it would get for me. I had grown to love Scott. We had fun times together. But it was time to let Scott go.

I was hurting, lonely, and unsure of who I was. Throughout my academic career I had been a scholar, receiving countless awards. I had studied abroad in Paris and Voronezh, Russia. For three summers during high school, I had had a phenomenal internship at the New York Mercantile Exchange through Jobs for Youth, sponsored by Pfizer. Much of my identity was tied to my accomplishments. But after graduation the silence of my present life left me feeling empty.

As I was sitting in my bedroom one afternoon, I decided to read my Bible—something I rarely did. I opened to Matthew 15:8-9:

These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
They worship me in vain;
their teachings are merely human rules.

Tears streamed down my face as the words echoed within me. This was my “burning bush”—God reaching out to me through the Bible. Somehow, I knew that God was describing my spiritual condition as being *far from him*. My priorities in life were all about what I wanted or what Scott wanted. A relationship with God was nowhere on my radar. Other than a quick prayer before I ate, for protection before I traveled, or when I needed a job after graduating from college, there was no intimacy with God. I didn't desire it or see examples around me that would demonstrate that an intimate relationship with God was possible. My life was work, partying with friends, shopping, and dating. But at that moment, when confronted with that verse, I didn't want my heart to remain far from God. I asked God that day to draw my heart closer to his.

Months later, I wrestled with what that prayer would require of me. Though I knew that going to church was the first step toward this prayer becoming a reality, getting there was a

continual battle. My social life was my priority. The allure of the clubs on Saturday night was far too exciting. Yet on Sundays I always felt defeated, like I'd made a promise to someone and hadn't kept it.

I bargained with God: if he gave me a car, I would go to church. Back then I lived in a two-fare zone, which meant I had to take a bus to the train station. On the weekends, public transportation ran at a snail's pace. I eventually bought a car but reneged on my promise to go to church.

Two years later I began attending Sunday worship services at Bethel Gospel Assembly, the church where I had first come to know Christ as a child. It was the only church I knew and the only church we attended as a family.

One Sunday the senior pastor (and later a spiritual father and mentor), Bishop Carlton T. Brown, had just finished preaching and had invited anyone in the congregation who needed prayer for a fresh start with God to come to the altar. I knew that invitation was for me. I was so tired of hurting, so tired of the lack of direction in my life.

I told God, "I've tried it my way. Your way has got to be better." That was the moment I became willing to live on God's terms—his way, his will be done, not my way or my will.

During this time, I found the strength to completely sever my relationship and end all communication with Scott. We were parked outside of my parents' house in his car. Since I cared for him, I took the time to explain to him what God had done in my life and the life I now desired to live for God. But he didn't understand. In a moment of sincerity, he asked me if I thought he was the devil. Sensing how fragile he was, I tried to offer reassurance while speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). Because he had not given his life to the Lord, he would be a hindrance to what God wanted to do in my life.

I still can't believe the strength I exhibited during those moments. For many years afterward I prayed for Scott. I still do. I desperately want God to save his soul.

On December 31, 2005, I attended what we call the Watch Night Service—the yearly New Year's Eve worship service. The tradition at the church was for each person to receive a “faith promise”—a prophetic word from passages of Scripture, which was considered to be a word from God for the year. Receiving this promise was a highlight of the service. I picked out of the bowl a card with two verses:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household. (Ephesians 2:19)

The LORD replied, “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” (Exodus 33:14)

I smiled from ear to ear as I walked back to the pew. God had heard my prayer two years earlier and had been working in me to complete the good work he had begun in my life. My joy was indescribable. But I couldn't help wondering what was next.

HIS PRESENCE ALONG MY PATH

God sent me back to Bethel Gospel Assembly in New York City, the church where I first acknowledged that Jesus was my Lord and Savior at the age of eleven. There I joined the women's ministry, Alabaster Women of Faith, under the leadership of Rev. Wendie Gail Howlett-Trott.

Wendie was the first woman ordained as an elder at Bethel in the mid-1990s. She was and still is a trailblazer. When I enrolled in Nyack College's Alliance Theological Seminary and had to identify a mentor, she was my first choice. She graciously accepted and immediately asked me to develop a curriculum for a

women's empowerment group. I was honored to do so and put forth my best effort at a curriculum that I thought would serve *her* well as she led the group. What I didn't know was that she would give me the assignment of leadership.

When the leadership was offered, I was dumbfounded and felt completely unqualified. Have you ever felt that way? I didn't grow up going to church every Sunday. I was a "CME" Christian: someone who went to church for special occasions—Christmas, Mother's Day, and Easter! I was also twenty-nine years old! How could I lead women older than me, let alone my peers?

As I wrestled with all that I was being asked to do, I remembered what God said in Exodus 33:14. He would go with me and give me rest. So I accepted and wound up leading that ministry for five years. Hundreds of women from our church and the community took part in the Bible studies we offered.

I received my first preaching assignment to minister at a local Harlem church by way of a woman who attended an empowerment group. Empowerment was a group of thirty to forty women who were then divided into smaller groups of five or six, each with a small group facilitator. While I was the overall leader, our facilitators would colead a weekly study, focusing on discussion questions to unpack the ways God wanted to empower us. I can't help wondering: If I had not responded to God's invitation to a deeper relationship with him in 2003 where might I and all of these other women be today?

Those five years were a time for training, preparation, and instruction. The opportunity to lead the ministry launched me into a greater place of service and devotion to God. I would later be ordained and become one of the youngest elders of our church.

When we're in need of a fresh start, it can be easy to downgrade our past as memories to forget instead of blocks to build on.

Every measure of our life—good, bad, or indifferent—is a distinct marker that God uses to hardwire us for purpose.

The power of God's presence is not just for our benefit but for all in our sphere of influence. It's quite amazing how our obedience to God unleashes a ripple effect that can alter the destiny of generations to come.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. When was the last time you felt inadequate? What did you do as a result?
2. When did you first recognize your need for God? What happened after that?
3. What opportunities have you had to lead others?
4. What are you passionate about?
5. Who would you help if you could? Why?
6. What resources has God given you as a leader?
7. What skills do you have to offer?

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