



# An Unhurried Leader

THE LASTING FRUIT  
OF DAILY INFLUENCE

Alan Fadling

*Author of An Unhurried Life*



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# Becoming an Unhurried Leader

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AS I BEGAN WRITING THIS BOOK, I decided that taking unhurried opportunities to write might help me capture the spirit of what I want to communicate. I've long enjoyed road cycling as a way of getting some exercise and—maybe more important—of slowing from 65 mph to 15 or 20 mph, outside and in. So I packed a couple of cycle bags and left the house on my bicycle with my computer and a few changes of clothing. I rode to the nearest train station, took a train south to the coastal California town of Carlsbad and booked a couple of nights in a hotel room. As I traveled, I felt that familiar inner drivenness fueled by the false formula that busyness equates to productivity. I know slowing down inside is crucial to spiritual health and productive leadership, but slowing down remains a difficult spiritual discipline for me.

On my way south, I realized that both my dependence on train schedules and the limitations of cycling versus driving exposed the reality of just how little control I actually have in this world. Still, this little trip was one of many ways to become a more unhurried leader.

I want to be unhurried enough to discern God's voice and sense his guidance for my life, my relationships, and my writing. When my heart is a hamster wheel, my inner life becomes a blur.

My train route takes me south along the Pacific Ocean. I find that even a glimpse of the ocean helps my soul rest. There is something about the blue horizon that reminds me of God's immensity and just how spacious his love for me is. The ocean unhurries my soul.

The truth is that whatever progress I'm making, I continue to wrestle with my addiction to drivenness and anxious activity, and I expect I will struggle with this addiction to some degree for the rest of my life. I also expect the most challenging aspects of this journey will involve my roles and relationships of influence.

I'm a parent to three young adult sons. I'm a spiritual mentor to leaders. I'm the founder of a new nonprofit. And in these roles and relationships, I'm often tempted to frantically rush to take control of situations in hopes of making good things happen. That kind of unholy hurry may make me look busy, but too often it keeps me from actually being fruitful in the ways Jesus wants me to be.

Jesus modeled grace-paced leadership. To learn from him, we begin not with leading but with following.

## LEADERS AS FOLLOWERS

So what kind of book is this? A how-to book with simple-but-not-easy, clearly defined steps to leadership success? I've learned much from such books, but that's not the book I have written. Do books like these give me insight I can put into practice? Of course. Do they offer wisdom for all of us? Certainly. But this book is something different.

In these pages I hope to offer an inspiring vision of leadership that is less hurried and more fruitful, less hectic and more joyful. I will provide practical insights I've learned along the way to help you make your way fruitfully into all the unhurried leadership opportunities God has for you. I hope you'll discover with me that an unhurried

leader grows ever more confident that all the truth and all the wisdom we need is available to us in Jesus (1 Cor 1:30). There is no kingdom-fruitful wisdom apart from him.

Jesus sets the pace of my following, and I'm not trying to be super spiritual here. This is just basic kingdom reality: I cannot lead for the good or the honor of God's kingdom if I am not seeking his kingdom first and foremost in my life *and* my work. Otherwise, I end up promoting my own little kingdom agendas, all the while assuming I am doing so in the name of Jesus. It happens all the time. It's happened far too frequently in my own leadership.

Too often I've lived and led fueled by the idea that the one who hurries gets the most done for God. This is so different from the spiritual wisdom that the one who hurries delays the things of God. What I've been discovering is that unhurried leadership is actually more fruitful *because* it is more unhurried, not *in spite of* that slower pace. My mentoring of others, for example, is among the most unhurried ways to have lasting kingdom influence. There are no instant strategies to becoming a faithful disciple. Just like anything relational, such influence takes time—years or even decades. In this book, I'll share what I've been learning in my unhurried journey as a disciple of Jesus. After all, kingdom leadership is rooted in followership. I'll share from God-given successes and all-too-familiar personal stumbles along the way.

## HAVING A HOLY INFLUENCE

When I talk about leadership in this book, I'm not limiting that to people like CEOs and senior pastors who have a wide span of organizational responsibility. I certainly hope that what I have to say will be a significant help to fellow organizational leaders. But I'm writing not just about organizational leadership. I'm writing about life leadership. I'm talking about spiritual influence, about kingdom of God influence. Each of us has been planted in particular places among

particular people whom we might bless and benefit by sharing something good we're receiving from God's good kingdom.

We all have some scope of influence in the lives of others. We need not have a *position* of influence to be a *person* of influence. Many influential people in my life over the years had no position of organizational authority in my life, but the way they lived and worked inspired and motivated me to a better way of living and leading.

I would love for us to learn together how to live as blessed members of God's good kingdom who can share with others from his abundance in our lives. What a beautiful impact we would have on our world. We could grow in our trust of God's grace shown us in Jesus so that our lives actually become like an ever-expanding river of not only his grace but also his goodness and generosity. God might fill our lives with more of his love and compassion than we can contain so we can share that "more" with others. Our influence would be the overflow of God's very presence filling us and spilling from our lives in ways that bring refreshment, encouragement, and holy energy to others.

What if each of us lived this way? Imagine the changes that might come to our little place in the world! Wouldn't this be significant, even life-changing leadership influence? What if parents found the roots of their life sunk deep into the infinitely vast love of their heavenly Father, so much so that their parenting was simply the expression of that abundant divine love? What if men and women in business found in God inspiration for a creative, powerful, and unselfish vision of their work? What a profound impact they would have on their fellow workers and clients! So I'm speaking to anyone with an inner hunger to have a holy influence in this world. Where our lives touch the lives of others, may we enrich them rather than diminish them, may we generously give and not selfishly expect something from them.

Our influence will grow as we cultivate a way of living and working that feels far less draining over time and far more energized by the Spirit to the point of overflowing. We will experience more and more moments

when we feel as if we are living and leading from abundance rather than out of sheer willpower or our own detached-from-God human efforts.

Let's learn together how to more closely follow Jesus in his way of being open to the people the Father brought across his path. Let's learn how to put down our agendas and welcome divine surprises that weren't on our calendars or to-do lists. Let's learn to stop labeling as interruptions to our work what may actually be God-given opportunities to do his good work in that moment. Let's learn to make good plans rooted in our fellowship with God, but may we hold those plans loosely enough for him to guide us when we implement them. Jesus has invited us into this reality of an ongoing conversational relationship with God. I love this way of living and leading.

## SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

One of the ways inner hurry has hampered my leadership is when I've rushed to the conclusion that I am not a leader because I am not like a leader I admire. That person seems more like the ideal leader I imagine I'm not. But many leaders like me are more like Timothy than Peter: more tempted by fear than by pride, more likely to be self-deprecating than self-promoting. Unhurried leadership operates from a peaceful confidence that God has made me, that God is remaking me, and that God has invited me to live a life of influence from that very place and as that very person. God is making me to be the person of influence *I* was meant to be.

Some people might want to call being an unhurried leader "spiritual leadership." There's truth there, but I would use that phrase with a bit of caution. Some will hear *spiritual* as meaning somehow detached from a real life of parenting, earning a living, paying our bills, mowing the lawn, and such. I use *spiritual*, however, to describe the most essential inner reality of who we are. Therefore, I don't limit spiritual leadership to a leader's prayer life, moral character, or religious observances. Spiritual leadership is leadership rooted in the

deepest reality there is: living in vital relationship with God through Jesus, and then bearing the good fruit of that communion.

Furthermore, the term *spiritual leadership* can help us remember that while what leaders *do* matters immensely, who leaders *are* matters even more. Of course what leaders do matters, but we sometimes overestimate the impact of things we leaders do and pay insufficient attention to the impact of who we are becoming. And who we are is the substance that fuels our actions. What kind of person is doing the things we are doing? Are we becoming more generous, more others-concerned, or more patient? How might such a person do the same work differently than a person who is fine with remaining self-seeking, self-promoting, or impatient? Two people can do the very same thing with very different outcomes. The same task gets done, but the resulting fruit can be radically different.

I recently had lunch with a pastor of a church located in downtown Los Angeles. We talked about how too many people with a leadership title see their roles as something they must manage on their own *for* God, rather than being a means by which, *with* God, they might be a blessing to the people around them. The result is often anxiety, self-importance, fear, or self-promotion, the kind of fruit that bears no aroma of God's glorious and inviting presence. Spiritual leadership is not so much about managing something for God as much as it is expressing the life of God in the unique situation we find ourselves in. What if our leadership influence were more about overflow than about managing what we perceive to be the limited, if not meager, resources at our disposal? What if God's kingdom really has come and I'm actually invited to be a key player in people's vision and knowledge of their Creator?

## THE PURPOSES OF GOD

So this spiritual—this unhurried—leadership is a process of learning to work in harmony with the purposes of God. It is also the awareness that so much of what God does begins in people's hearts. How can we

as unhurried leaders be involved in this aspect of God's work? One way is to join Jesus and the Spirit in prayer. Jesus is never too busy to talk to the Father about our good. Are we too busy to seek the Father for the good of our spouses, our children, our friends, our neighbors, or our coworkers? If so, I'd say we're too busy.

Hurried leadership makes me think of a childhood toy called a Chinese finger trap. This long, narrow cylinder is often woven from bamboo strips. A child puts a finger from one hand into one end and a finger from the other hand in the other end and pulls. The trap tightens on each of the child's fingers. Without thinking, the child's instinct to get out of the trap is to pull harder. But the harder he pulls, the tighter the trap becomes. The child needs to do the opposite of what he assumes is right and instead push his fingers toward each other. Doing so will loosen the trap enough to extricate his little digits.

When we get into hurried, anxious places in our lives, how do we respond? Do we, like a child first experiencing a finger trap, try harder and go faster only to find that life gets even more hurried, worried, and cramped? What if we learned to do exactly the opposite of what we would do impulsively? We might experience what Isaiah described: "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength" (Is 30:15).

I've found those words from Isaiah especially helpful whenever I think about having a more unhurried approach to my leadership relationships and roles. To be specific, I see salvation and strength as leadership categories. Throughout Scripture, God's people seek human leaders like judges or kings who will be strong on their behalf and get them out of the messes in which they find themselves. It's not much different today. But, through Isaiah, God paints a very different picture of what true salvation and strength look like.

When we look for someone who will save us from our troubles, the qualifications at the top of the list are rarely repentance and rest. We tend to want leaders who will take charge and get moving. Repentance

sounds, to the untrained ear, like a reversal or perhaps like a lack of confidence. And as for rest? We want leaders who are going to work until they solve our problem—or drop trying. And when we think of strong leaders, we don’t tend to look for someone who would best be described by the words *quiet* and *trusting*. At least in North America, we often seem to be drawn to bombastic, self-assured leaders who seem to know what they’re doing—and we hope like crazy they’ll get something, the right thing, done. But Isaiah said that we’ll find salvation—help, wholeness, or rescue—in repentance and rest. He said that we’ll find strength—power, influence, and energy—in quietness and trust. Unhurried leaders are different.

- Rather than fill their lives with noise, unhurried leaders make time for silence in which to listen (quietness).
- Rather than allow anxiety to drive them, unhurried leaders learn to depend on a reliable God who invites them to join a good kingdom work already well underway (trust).
- Rather than tackle self-initiated projects under the guise of doing them *for* God, unhurried leaders humbly orient themselves to the Leader of all, learning to take their cues from him (repentance).
- Unhurried leaders also learn to rest as hard as they work.
- Rather than measuring the productivity of their lives only in terms of what they *do*, unhurried leaders understand the importance of certain things they *don’t* do.

*Quietness, trust, repentance, and rest* are words that speak, at least in part, to those things. So what was Israel’s response to God’s invitation to repentance, rest, quietness, and trust? Isaiah described it:

But you would have none of it.  
 You said, “No, we will flee on horses.”  
 Therefore, you will flee!

You said, “We will ride off on swift horses.”

Therefore your pursuers will be swift! (Isaiah 30:15-16)

Unfortunately, Israel answered God with an unqualified no. Specifically, they said, “No, we will flee on horses.” They decided to rely on horsepower. To try harder. Do more. Work longer. Hard work and effort are good, God-given capacities, but when these become separated from a living communion with God, they can become destructive rather than constructive. We can find ourselves running past God rather than walking with God. And, unfortunately, Israel would use horsepower to run away rather than engage or confront their enemies in the strength of God. And, sadly, if horsepower didn’t do the job, they said they would opt for *more* horsepower—not just horses but *swift* horses. In this case, Israel’s more horsepower was met with their enemy’s more horsepower (“Therefore your pursuers will be swift!”). Doesn’t it sound a lot like that child’s finger trap game, only with greater consequences?

When I have resisted relating to God and life on the basis of trust and humble respect, I’ve usually chosen the path of horsepower. When that doesn’t work, I’ve often upped the ante, choosing more horsepower. But those hurried, high horsepower ways of living and working leave me dogged by enemies that have even more horsepower than I do.

Practically speaking, when I wake up to being in horsepower-only mode, I feel angry, or anxious, or drained. In such moments, I seek to take even a few minutes to be quiet and still, to allow my heart and mind to remember that God is with me. When anxious thoughts start to invade and rule that moment of silence, I allow myself to gently remember God’s gracious invitation: “Turn to face me. Relax in me. Let me quiet your heart. Trust me.” Then I remember that I’m not doing this work alone or for a God who is distant or disengaged. I let myself remember that I’m doing this work because of God’s

invitation and in his loving and empowering presence. When I take this kind of break, I often find that a fresh sense of the salvation and strength Isaiah described becomes the context of my thoughts, emotions, and intentions as I move forward. I experience the fruit of the beautiful prayer Paul prayed for his friends in Thessalonica: “May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word” (2 Thess 2:16-17).

### LEADERSHIP: SELF-SERVICE OR SERVING OTHERS?

In my own leadership journey, I’ve found that a critical question I need to ask myself often is “What am I seeking?” How I answer that question determines whether or not my approach to leadership is healthy and sustainable. If I am truly seeking first the loving reign of God and God’s ways in my life and, through me, in ministry, then—in the spirit of Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount—I find that I have everything I need. Jesus says that “all these things will be given to you as well” (Mt 6:33). While he may be talking there about basic physical needs, I believe the application extends to whatever it is we might truly need in order to lead well.

When I seek God’s kingdom first, I find that my vision of leadership is rooted in the abundance of God’s presence; no longer am I adrift in experiences of apparent scarcity. Leading from a place of perceived scarcity can make me resentful, fearful, anxious, and controlling. Leading from a place of real abundance enables me to do so from a place of joy, peace, and security. I begin to find myself in trouble when my leadership becomes an attempt to find satisfaction for an empty soul rather than being a place where I can serve from a God-filled soul. My leadership has sometimes been a frantic attempt to establish some sense of an identity I feel I don’t yet possess. I’m seeking a God-honoring way of leading that is fueled by a secure sense of the

value and identity I have in him. But I've too often found myself leading from a place of unholy dissatisfaction rather than from a place of holy satisfaction.

In the past and especially at my low moments, my leadership efforts were basically my search for something to fill me. It was my anxiety hurrying toward some sense of control. It was my recognition deficit racing around, looking for someone to like something I've done or said. It was my self-doubt looking for some sort of outside reinforcement. What I'm grateful for is that, more recently and in my better moments, I'm discovering that leadership can be fullness looking for places to overflow. When I serve and lead from a place of being relaxed instead of anxious, I serve with far more creativity, compassion, and confidence. When I serve and lead confident in God's love for me, I don't need those I'm serving to say, "Well done!" I'm already living in God's affirmation and encouragement. I can welcome the affirming words others might speak as a free gift to me rather than something I desperately need.

I think of the words Jesus called out as he stood in the temple courts on the last day of a Jewish festival: "Anyone thirsty? If you are, come to me. Trust me and your soul will become a place from which rivers of living water flow" (Jn 7:37-39, my paraphrase). I see overflow from that river of living water as a metaphor for what I want to have happening in my leadership and ministry. What I bring to Jesus as a thirst can be transformed into more refreshment and life than I can possibly hold. That abundance, that excess, that overflow can become manifest in my work, my service, my leadership.

So unhurried leadership is *overflow leadership*—a term that always feels so pregnant and powerful. There is always an overwhelming and affirming response when I share this vision with fellow leaders. We all recognize the difference between leading from empty or leading from overflow. Our hurried approaches to influence usually find us functioning in the former category.

## RATHER THAN . . . INSTEAD OF . . .

As a leader, rather than acting like a needy person trying to get something from those I lead, I am invited to work like a generous and gracious servant. Rather than trying to prove something about myself, I can lead as an expression of something already God-established. Rather than leading in order to compensate for some sense of personal deficiency, I lead to communicate and share a fullness I already have. Patience, gentleness, kindness, and compassion are all expressions of that God-given fullness. Anxiety, anger, harshness, and selfish ambition are indications of my emptiness.

Rather than bringing my thirsts to my leadership roles and activities, rather than seeking something there to quench those thirsts, I can bring my thirsts to Jesus and find in him a river of living water. And in addition to satisfying my desperate thirsts, that living water can flow through me to bring the life, refreshment, and encouragement that people need in those places where I serve as a leader.

Instead of bringing my thirst for affirmation or recognition to my leadership roles and relationships of influence, seeking some positive response from those I lead, I bring this thirst to Jesus. I hear from him the same words he heard from his Father, “You are my beloved son. I’m so pleased with you” (see Mt 3:17). From this place of knowing the Father’s deep affection, I can bring an abundance of affirmation to those I serve rather than seeking affirmation from them. What a difference that makes!

Instead of bringing my thirst for security to my work, I bring this thirst to Jesus. I can then find in him the security I long for, and I can minister from security rather than for security. Rather than making the futile attempt to control people and situations in order to achieve a false sense of security, I can lead with confidence and peace because I have a deep sense of safety and a solid trust in God’s provision for me.

So, for example, when I stand to speak to a group, I sometimes feel anxious and self-conscious at first. If I stay in that place, I won't speak with much freedom or creative energy. But if I can relax, if I can remember that I am not there to speak on my own behalf but on behalf of Another, and if I can trust that what this group needs will be available to me to share with them, then I experience—by God's grace—a simple flow of good things to speak. I rest, knowing that what I need God has already given me. It reminds me of Jesus' promise to his followers who would find themselves in a much more serious situation: "When they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" (Mt 10:19-20).

So, positive expressions of leadership as overflow are not dependent on a favorable situation that easily gives rise to peace and joy. And I'm not talking about an emotional buoyancy or a good mood rooted in pleasant and preferred surroundings. I'm speaking of leadership that overflows from deeper places of confidence, joy, peace, and courage, from subterranean places of holy trust in God. Our fullness of peace even in a worrisome season, or our fullness of joy even when we're in a long, dark valley, or our fullness of love even when events seem to call into question the current level of God's care—the overflow from fullness like this results in rich, heartfelt ministry that is good for those being served and that glorifies God.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Let me give you a little look ahead at this vision of unhurried leadership as an expression of overflow. In the spirit of the counsel John Ortberg once received from a mentor ("You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life"), we must also eliminate hurry from our leadership. We hurry when we think that the first thing to be done as a leader is "do something." Of course there is action to be taken in leadership. We must not allow fear, procrastination, or laziness to

hinder fruitful activity. But often the first thing to be done as a leader is something more receptive than active, something like listening, seeing, or reflecting. I've done too many things that didn't matter very much because I felt I had to do *something*.

And in case you think I'm writing this leadership book from a place of ease, I want you to know that much of the first draft was written in a season when I made one of the biggest leadership decisions of my adult life. I stepped away from what felt like a familiar and safe place with good friends, a place where I'd served on staff for eighteen years, to launch a new nonprofit called Unhurried Living. I stepped away from certainty into uncertainty, away from security to insecurity. The temptation to rush into quick solutions and instant answers was great. But living in this place of new beginnings with an unhurried orientation has already been more fruitful than I could have hoped.

At the end of each chapter, you will find a practice in unhurried leadership that I invite you to try out as well as some questions for personal reflection or group discussion. I'm so glad to have you join me in this journey. It's so good to live and lead this way together.

### PRACTICE: *LEARNING TO BREATHE*

Just as the Chinese finger trap offers me a metaphor of unhurried living, breathing offers another metaphor that has helped me think about healthy rhythms of spiritual life and leadership. In terms of this metaphor, at times my way of life and leadership has looked like I was trying only to exhale. Output. Doing. Extension of effort. But breathing only works if we inhale as well as exhale. Besides, I don't have anything to exhale if I haven't breathed in first. So holy influence is not merely about my activities; it is also about my receptivities. Holy influence is about both what I do and who I am becoming.

Give this a try: exhale, but then don't inhale right away. After a couple of seconds, try exhaling without inhaling again. Then try

exhaling once more. It just doesn't work. Take a nice, deep, refreshing breath. Doesn't that feel good?

As a way of praying this way, you could try an inhale and exhale approach to the day ahead of you. Exhale and mention to God some appointment, task, meeting, or work that you expect to engage that day. Then inhale something of who God is and what God gives that would bless you and those you might be with later. “[Exhale] I think of my lunch appointment today with John. [Inhale] Thank you for the good words you'll give me to bless him. [Exhale] Thanks for the opportunity that we'll talk about. [Inhale] I welcome your creativity, your peace, your holy curiosity in our time together,” and so on. Try to breathe slowly and evenly. Let it be a way of becoming still and remembering that God really is God (Ps 46:10 paraphrased).

### *Unhurried Leadership Reflections*

1. In this chapter, we talked about a number of internal factors—like anxiety, anger, or insecurity—that can rev us up in our roles and relationships. What inner dynamics do you believe contribute to your hurry? When might you have an honest conversation with God about how you can stand strong against those dynamics and actually slow down?
2. What thoughts and feelings do you have as you begin reading this book about unhurried leadership? In what ways does the idea of unhurried leadership attract you? In what ways do you feel resistant or uncertain? Explain why.
3. We talked about leadership that learns how to “seek first God's kingdom and God's right way.” Other than the initial seeking that led to your salvation, what are you sometimes tempted to seek first or put first *instead* of God's person, God's presence, God's priorities? What might it look like in those very situations to truly begin to seek God first instead?

4. You read about the idea of leadership as overflow seeking opportunities to bless versus leadership as a thirst seeking satisfaction from achievements or the affirmation of others. In what ways do you identify with each of these two very different approaches to leadership? When and where do you tend to bring your thirsts to your work? Prayerfully consider what leadership might actually look like and how you might be blessed if you were to bring those particular thirsts to Jesus. Imagine what those thirsts would look like if God transformed them into springs of living water.

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