

## **Q&A with Pete Scazzero, author of *The Emotionally Healthy Leader: How Transforming Your Inner Life Will Deeply Transform Your Church, Team, and the World***

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**Q: So much of this book comes out of your own personal, painful journey toward being a healthy leader.**

**A:** Yes. It was a kind of second conversion and, much like the first, I had the experience of knowing I had been blind and suddenly received my sight. God opened my eyes to see I was a human being, not a human doing, which gave me permission to feel difficult emotions such as anger and sadness. I became aware of the significant impact my family of origin was having on my life, my marriage, and my leadership. Although I initially felt shocked by it all, the awareness also offered me a newly discovered freedom. I stopped pretending to be somebody I was not and took my first steps to be comfortable being Pete Scazzero, with my unique set of strengths, passions, and weaknesses. And Geri (my wife) and I discovered the importance of love as the measure of maturity and reprioritized our schedules to place our marriage before ministry.

**Q: How would you describe some of the “painful realities” about yourself that you could no longer deny?**

**A:** I was an emotional infant trying to raise up mothers and fathers of the faith. There were large areas of my life that remained untouched by Jesus Christ. For example, I didn't know how to do something as simple as being truly present or listening deeply to another person. While I was a senior pastor of a large, growing church who had been trained in two leading seminaries, attended the best leadership conferences, and been a devoted follower of Christ for seventeen years, I was stunted emotionally and spiritually. For nearly two decades, I had ignored the emotional component in my spiritual growth and relationship with God. It didn't matter how many books I might read or how much I devoted myself to prayer, I would remain stuck in repeated cycles of pain and immaturity unless and until I allowed Jesus Christ to transform aspects of my life that were deep beneath the surface. It wasn't until I understood that these beneath-the-surface components of my life had not been transformed by Jesus that I discovered the inseparable link between emotional health and spiritual maturity—that it is not possible to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature. In the months and years that followed, Geri and I changed much about the way we did life and ministry. We began by working a five-day week, not a six-and-a-half-day week. Leading out of our brokenness and weaknesses became a core value. Loving well was now the most important task among all our work for God.

**Q: How would you define a spiritual unhealthy leader?**

**A:** The emotionally unhealthy leader is someone who operates in a continuous state of emotional and spiritual deficit, lacking emotional maturity and a “being with God” sufficient to sustain their “doing for God.” When we talk about emotionally unhealthy Christian leaders, we are referring to the emotional and spiritual deficits that impact every aspect of their lives. Emotional deficits are manifested primarily by a pervasive lack of awareness. Unhealthy leaders lack awareness of their feelings, their weaknesses and limits, how their past impacts their present, and how others experience them, to name a few. They also lack the capacity and skill to enter deeply into the feelings and perspectives of others. They carry these immaturities with them into their teams and everything they do. Spiritual deficits typically reveal themselves in too much activity. Unhealthy leaders engage in more activities than their combined spiritual, physical, and emotional reserves can sustain. They give out for God more than they receive from him. They serve others in order to share the joy of Christ, but that joy remains elusive to the leaders themselves. The demands and pressures of ministry and leadership make it nearly impossible for them to establish a consistent and sustainable rhythm of life. In their more honest moments, they admit that their cup with God is empty or, at best, half full, hardly overflowing with the divine joy and love they proclaim to others.

**Q: Your book is divided into two distinct sections: The Inner Life & The Outer Life. Explain the distinction between the two.**

**A:** Most of us in leadership look for practical material and new ideas we can implement immediately. I discovered, however, that when we start with outer life practices without addressing our inner lives, the impact we make and changes we initiate unsustainable. In Part 1, I introduce the image of a Manhattan skyscraper where concrete or steel columns, (called “piles”) are hammered into the ground until they penetrate solid rock. This image effectively communicates the key point of the first half of this book—to be an emotionally healthy leader we must drive particular practices deep into our inner life if we are to build well. I defined these inner life issues as: face your shadow, lead out of your marriage or singleness, slow down for loving union, and practice Sabbath delight. Part 2 shifts from the image of a skyscraper to the ancient, imagery of a large, fruit-bearing tree. It captures more clearly the inseparable, organic connection between the roots (our inner life) and the

branches producing fruit (our outer life). A tree with a shallow root system may look beautiful on the outside, but it is incapable of supplying the water and nutrients for the long-term, upward growth of an entire tree. This is the great problem when we grow our ministries and organizations larger than our roots can sustain. Deep and wide roots provide anchorage for the tree, allowing it to pull plentiful water and nutrients from a large area of soil. These roots also provide the depth to survive the stress of storms that inevitably come to every leader.

**Q: What are the forces within church leadership culture that actually work against a leader being healthy—even offering unhealthy, unspoken commandments, or “friendly fire,” as you say?**

**A:** There are several things. One is the unspoken rule that “bigger or more is better.” When it comes to the church and numbers, the problem isn’t that we count, it’s that we have so fully embraced the world’s dictum that bigger is better that numbers have become the only thing we count. When something isn’t bigger and better, we consider it—and often ourselves—a failure. Another fault is thinking that what you do is more important than who you are. Who you are is more important than what you do. Why? Because the love of Jesus is the greatest gift you have to give to others. Period. Another unhealthy commandment is one that says superficial spirituality is okay. The problem is that in most settings, as long as leaders are doing their jobs (volunteer or paid), everyone is pleased. If their ministry is growing, we are thrilled. Who are we to judge if someone’s relationship with Christ is superficial or lacking? A fourth is one that says, “Don’t rock the boat as long as the work gets done.” Too much of contemporary church culture is characterized by a false niceness and superficiality. We view conflict as a sign that something is wrong, so we do whatever we can to avoid it. We prefer to ignore difficult issues and settle for a false peace, hoping our difficulties will somehow disappear on their own. They don’t. Mature spiritual leadership is forged in the crucible of difficult conversations, the pressure of conflicted relationships, the pain of setbacks, and dark nights of the soul. Out of these experiences, we come to understand the complex nature of our inner world. Moreover, as we develop new practices and rhythms robust enough to withstand the pressures that leadership exerts on the inner life, we naturally become stronger and more effective leaders. And we move on from simply recognizing and affirming truth and wisdom to owning and applying what we know.

**Q: What is the “shadow” that you say everyone has, and how does it reveal itself?**

**A:** Your shadow is the accumulation of untamed emotions, less-than-pure motives and thoughts that, while largely unconscious, strongly influence and shape your behaviors. It is the damaged but mostly hidden version of who you are. The shadow may erupt in various forms. Sometimes it reveals itself in sinful behaviors, such as judgmental perfectionism, outbursts of anger, jealousy, resentment, lust, greed, or bitterness. Or it may reveal itself more subtly through a need to rescue others and be liked by people, a need to be noticed, an inability to stop working, a tendency toward isolation, or rigidity. Aspects of the shadow may be sinful, but they may also simply be weaknesses or wounds. They tend to appear in the ways we try to protect ourselves from feeling vulnerable or exposed. This means that the shadow is not simply another word for sin. If that makes you think the shadow is hard to pin down, you’re right.

**Q: But acknowledging the shadow is the way to diminish its power over leadership abilities...**

**A:** There really are only two options when it comes to the shadow. We can ignore it until we hit a wall, and the pain is so great we have no choice but to face up to it. Or we can be proactive, courageously taking a look at the factors that have contributed to its formation. Each time you make a choice to face rather than ignore your shadow, you follow Jesus to the cross. It is an experience of nakedness, vulnerability, pain, scourging, loneliness, fear, darkness, and dark voices whispering that there is nothing on the other side but despair and death. There are seasons when God uses these experiences to strip us, exposing yet another layer of our shadow. It is very painful. The most important task during such times is to wait on the love of the Father as Jesus did while hanging on the cross. Remain. Endure. Abide. Like Jesus. As you wait, you anchor yourself in the truths that God’s love and grace are true and that resurrection is a certainty. Based on personal experience, I can promise that you will be reborn into a new place of maturity in Christ. You will become more compassionate, more vulnerable, more broken, and more loving. Each time you pass through a season of facing your shadow, you will be transformed even more into the image of Jesus.

**Q: You entitle one of your chapters “Lead Out of Your Marriage or Singleness.” What does that mean and how is that different than how it is usually understood?**

**A:** Understanding singleness and marriage as callings or vocations must inform our self-understanding and the outworking of our leadership. Our whole life as a leader is to bear witness to God’s love for the world. But we do so in different ways as singles or marrieds. For example, singles—vowed or dedicated—bear witness to the breadth of Christ’s love. Because they are not limited through marriage to love only one person, they are able to offer themselves in Christian love to a broad range of people. Married couples bear witness to the depth of Christ’s love. Their vow limits them to loving one person exclusively, permanently, deeply, and intimately. Both

vocations point to Christ's love in different ways, and both can learn from the other about these different aspects of Christ's love.

**Q: You say that your marriage should be the loudest message of the gospel you proclaim.**

**A:** Yes! So what does this mean in practical terms? How do Christian leaders make marriage the loudest gospel message we preach? When I moved from a non-vocational view of leadership (I am a leader who happens to be married) to a vocational view (I lead out of my marriage), several things changed. I began to identify myself first as Geri's husband, not as Pastor Pete. I embraced God's call to be "God with skin on" for Geri, seeking to be present and responsive to her as I am to my own body. I expanded my definition of leadership success beyond merely growing the church to being a good husband. My need to have my love-ability affirmed through ministry achievement dissipated as I more fully experienced Geri's deep love for and delight in me.

**Q: And it's the same with single leaders...**

**A:** Absolutely. The first ambition for single Christian leaders must shift from leading a church, organization, or team to investing in a healthy single life. Similar to married leaders, single leaders are called to lead out of an overflow of love—in this case, the overflow of their love relationship with Jesus and the giving and receiving of love from their close relationships. You can be sure God wants to use your vocation (as married or single) to make you a more effective leader. He wants to give you the grace of ambition, a passion to be other-centered, strength to prioritize self-care, and clarity about the ways your life and vocation communicate the gospel message. However, the choice to lead out of singleness or marriage is a radical one, both within and beyond the church.

**Q: Talk about the importance for leaders to slow down and experience "loving union" with God.**

**A:** Loving union is not the de facto equivalent of devotions and quiet time. Nor is it about engaging in a long list of spiritual practices. Or having emotionally intense experiences with God. Loving union is not about managing your schedule better or simply not being busy. It is not so much about having a sustainable pace of life or even about practicing a host of spiritual disciplines. As important as such things may be, it is possible to engage in them without necessarily experiencing loving union. Loving union means to lovingly allow God to have full access to your life. These are Jesus' words to the Christians in Laodicea and to us: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me" (Revelation 3:20). In loving union, we keep that door wide open. We allow the will of God to have full access to every area of our lives, including every aspect of our leadership—from difficult conversations and decision making to managing our emotional triggers. Cultivating this kind of relationship with God can't be hurried or rushed. We must slow down and build into our lives a structure and rhythm that make this kind of loving surrender routinely possible.

**Q: Explain the importance of keeping the Sabbath and how that terrifies many Christian leaders.**

**A:** After observing and talking with pastors around the world for many years, I believe the answer is shame. Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of being flawed and defective, unworthy of connection with God and others. Shame is feeling exposed, "fundamentally deficient in some vital way as a human being." So we work harder, and then work even harder. Sabbath can be terrifying because doing nothing productive leaves us feeling vulnerable. We may feel emotional exposure and nakedness before God or others. Overworking hides these feelings of inadequacy or worthlessness not just from others but also from ourselves. As long as we keep busy, we can outrun that internal voice that says things like: I am never good enough. I am never safe enough. I am never perfect enough. I am never extraordinary enough. I am never successful enough. Do you recognize that voice? Far too many Christian leaders and pastors use workaholic to run from these shaming messages.

**Q: In the section on planning and decision-making, you say that many leaders have too limited a view of success. What does that mean?**

**A:** Most of my efforts to apply what I learned about "success" focused primarily on externals—things like ministry expansion, mobilizing people to serve with their gifts, strategizing to add more people to our church, multiplying small groups, and pursuing excellence in worship and preaching so people would keep coming back. These externals were important. The problem was that the portion of our time and energy devoted to thinking about external issues far exceeded the amount of time and energy we devoted to internal measures of transformation, such as the depth of people's personal relationship with God, the quality of marriages and singleness, the level of emotional maturity, and the integrity of our relationships as a community. At the leadership level, we also minimized the importance of beneath-the-surface transformation in our own lives as the source of power from which we would reach the world. It wasn't that we didn't believe in it. I preached it from the pulpit as much as any good pastor. But in the flurry of ministry activity, we simply couldn't invest the time to

actually engage the spiritual practices that would make it possible. We were always preoccupied by our busyness and overloaded calendars.

**Q: How would you say you prepare your heart for healthy, God-focused decision-making?**

**A:** My goal is to remain in a state Ignatius of Loyola referred to as indifference. By indifference, he does not mean apathy or disinterest. He simply means we must become indifferent to anything but the will of God. Ignatius taught that the degree to which we are open to any outcome or answer from God is the degree to which we are ready to really hear what God has to say. If we are clutching or overly attached to one outcome versus another, we won't hear God clearly. Our spiritual ears will be deafened by the racket of our disordered loves, fears, and attachments. In such a state, it is almost a forgone conclusion that we will confuse our will with God's will. Ignatius considered this state of indifference to be spiritual freedom. If we are truly free, he argued, we wouldn't worry about whether we are healthy or sick, rich or poor. It shouldn't even matter whether we have a long life or a short one. We place our life in God's hands and trust him for the outcome.

**Q: Spiritually Healthy Leaders also are intentionally about creating both an emotionally healthy culture and a healthy team.**

**A:** It's true for every leader, whether that leader is a senior pastor, a para-church ministry department head, a nonprofit or a marketplace executive, a church board member, or a small group leader. And the task for Christian leaders is even more demanding because the kind of culture and teams we create are to be radically different than those of the world. Team building is fairly easy to define; it involves mobilizing a group of people with diverse skills who are committed to a common goal. Culture, however, is somewhat more challenging to define. Why? Because it consists primarily of unspoken rules about "the way we do things around here." Culture is that imprecise something, the invisible presence or personality of a place that can be difficult to describe without actually experiencing it. It is often more readily felt than articulated. Perhaps the simplest and best definitions I've come across describe culture as "the sum-total of the learned patterns of thought and behavior" of any given group; and "Culture is what human beings make of the world." As Christian leaders, we must be intentional about taking the chaos of what people bring to the organization (from their very different backgrounds and families of origin) and shaping it into a new culture that seeks to operate as the family of Jesus.

**Q: Describe the problem with leaders who don't understand the power they have.**

**A:** To a greater or lesser degree, everyone has influence, which means that everyone is power-full. And we all use that power—well or poorly, for good or for ill. The problem is that we do not understand where that power comes from, nor do we understand how to exercise it responsibly. Our understanding of power is incomplete and narrow. As a result, some carelessly wield their power with aggression, exploiting it to their own advantage. They function as the proverbial bull in the china shop, careless and self-serving with their power. They are unaware of, or perhaps worse, unconcerned about, the impact they have on others or how others perceive them. Scripture offers us plentiful examples of such leaders, including King Saul and King Solomon. On the opposite extreme are the leaders who shrink back from exercising their power. Their reluctance to assert themselves leaves the door open to the wrong people stepping into the power vacuum—which causes all sorts of chaos. In my years of teaching and mentoring leaders, I've seen just as much damage result from this second group, the leaders who are ambivalent and uncomfortable with their power. Perhaps it's because I identify with them. For these leaders, it somehow feels wrong and unbiblical to grab the reins and take charge because power implies privilege, a higher social status, being above others. The thought of having power as a leader sounds detached and cold. So they prefer to deny or minimize the very real power they have. Some may even feel unworthy or afraid to exercise power, especially in God's name. As a result, they live in a fog, feeling powerless internally, yet responsible to exercise power to lead others.

**Q: What is the value of transitioning well—learning to lead through endings into new beginnings?**

**A:** Embracing endings in order to receive new beginnings is one of the fundamental tasks of the spiritual life—and this is especially true for Christian leaders. Not every problem can or should be solved or overcome; some just need to be allowed to die. This isn't necessarily a failure. Often it is an indication that one chapter has ended and a new one is waiting to be written. This happens in our personal lives as well as in leadership. If we accept the broader culture's view of endings—as failure and something to be avoided—we will neglect one of the most essential tasks of leadership, helping others navigate endings and transitions well. To navigate transitions well means leading with care, helping others to avoid the traps of bitterness, hardness of heart, and resistance to the new thing God might be unfolding in our midst. To be able to do this, our view of endings must be shaped by the truths of Scripture. And yet, too often we are shaped instead by our cultural values.

**Q: You talk about a particularly difficult time when you transitioned out of role of Senior Pastor of the church you founded.**

**A:** Yes. I discovered that my identity was at least partially wedded to my role as senior pastor. After twenty-six years, it was only natural that my identity had attached itself to a particular role—Pete Scazzero, senior pastor of New Life Fellowship Church. Now there was a tearing, a separation. The best words to describe this kind of emotional cutting are bloody, excruciating, and horrific. I thought I was going to die—literally. The succession process opened up for scrutiny my strengths and weaknesses, my gifts and my limits, my successes and my failures. It was hard to see others slowly assume leadership and do things so much better. I remember watching Rich lead staff meetings. He brought a more natural gifting and creativity to our times together. I learned from him. Shaming internal voices, along with one or two external ones, bombarded me: *What good are you? Why didn't you do that when you were leading? Thank God you are leaving. People were probably praying you would give the senior role to someone else. Pete, you should have done this earlier. Look how much better things are.* All endings require inner work. Succession demanded a profound inner work that touched deep vulnerabilities and unhealed wounds. Now I understood why so few churches around the world do succession well. The pain is profound and unrelenting—particularly for the one letting go.

**Q: What is the good news you have seen emerging out of this transition?**

**A:** Well, first of all, most people forgot me before the succession was completed! There was such a sense of God's powerful presence in our midst that it didn't matter who was leading. People met and heard from God in new and fresh ways at Sunday services. People continued to be radically transformed. The church continued to get the best of Geri and me. Only now, New Life was receiving fresh vision, ideas, and energy from Rich and a new generation of leaders. The fruit these past couple of years has been far greater than any of us could have imagined. New Life has prospered and is preparing to move into a multi-site model. Emotionally Healthy Spirituality functions as a ministry that flows out of New Life and has spread to over twenty-five countries around the world. Geri and I continue to love our working relationship with Rich and New Life. Currently, we are near the end of year two in our new roles. Geri and I continue to adjust to our new normal. I find myself disoriented on certain days, but thus far, I would consider our ending and new beginning to be the greatest highlight of my twenty-six years at New Life Fellowship Church.

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***The Emotionally Healthy Leader:  
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Transform Your Church, Team, and the World***

By Peter Scazzero

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Contact Jana Muntsinger, McClure Muntsinger Public Relations,  
281-251-0480 or [jana@mmpublicrelations.com](mailto:jana@mmpublicrelations.com)

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