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Review of Flintham's "Reservoirs of Hope: Sustaining Spirituality in School Leaders"

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All eyes turn to school leaders in the midst of chaos and crisis. Leaders are expected to rise to the challenge and provide the strength and hope needed to guide the school through the turbulent waters. Even as leaders serve others at these critical moments, they must find ways to replenish their personal reserves. The stakes are high, as those who do not find ways to refill their tanks are at risk of losing their drive or leaving the profession. This book explains why spirituality is essential if a school leader is to weather these storms successfully, though “spirituality” is defined inclusively to embrace those of a confessional faith as well as those holding to a secular worldview. Flintham explains, “This book is about hope, and how it can be sustained by and in the leaders of our schools. It argues that a personal spirituality, be it sacred or secular, is the means by which that hope may be sustained” (p. xi). That dynamic is explored through the personal accounts of 150 headteachers who reflected on situations that profoundly tested their core values and beliefs.

The second chapter details conceptions of moral leadership and spirituality and the terms Flintham uses to label essential aspects of both. He supports the view that moral leadership is an aspect of all effective leadership styles. Spirituality is a key aspect of moral leadership because the introspection and reflection involved accommodate continued learning and growth as leaders encounter pain, success, and joy and wrestle with life’s mysteries. The term secular spirituality is used for this universal leadership essential, defined as “a system of beliefs and code of moral values which provide a personal paradigm for living, a moral prism through which the world is experienced and an implicit underpinning philosophy of ensuing practice” (p. 32).

Spiritual and moral leadership are viewed as “a lived faith in action” (p. 30), with “faith” understood to reflect the same inclusive range as “secular spirituality.”
This explains why Flintham asserts that “all school leaders can readily articulate a moral purpose: their core moral and ethical value system or ‘spirituality’, the ‘lived faith’ which underpins their leadership actions, particularly when the going gets tough” (p. 2). That inclusive conception of spiritual and moral leadership supports the central metaphor of the book: the “reservoir of hope.” Flintham depicts a spiritual leadership cycle of pouring out and refilling, distinguishing between the “external reservoir of hope” role of a school leader who serves as the resource for a community in crisis, and the “internal reservoir of hope” described as “the calm centre at the heart of the individual leaders from which their values and vision flows” (p. 41) that the leader must replenish to sustain personal well-being.

*Hope*, like *spirituality*, is an oft-used but vague term that Flintham clarifies for practical use. He details three aspects of hope central to the work of school leaders: “a vision of the possibility of a better future; the motivation to engender change in order to bring it about; and the maintenance of a value system which is based on promotion of ‘the common good’ in so doing, no matter what the contextual pressures” (p. 41). These features of hope stored in the leader’s “reservoir of hope” sustain the school community when under duress.

The heart of the book is comprised of chapters devoted to each of the three major groups of headteachers interviewed. The variety provides opportunities to spotlight those working in particularly challenging schools and those in faith-based institutions, but along the way Flintham shows that the common metaphors apply to all settings. As a former headteacher, he was able to present himself as a peer, offering his subjects an opportunity to reflect on challenges with someone who understands their world, and the interviews proved to be powerful for many. Flintham observes that “the process of reflection and discussion with a fellow practitioner in the research interview was in itself of sustaining benefit to the internal reservoir” (p. 52). The strategies leaders use to replenish their depleted stores of hope are noted. They include personal reflection time, networks of support, and interests outside education. The insights of 15 headteachers who left their school roles prior to retirement offer an interesting sidebar. Most moved on in a positive manner, but some left as “stumblers” who found their reservoirs of hope had run dry. They serve as cautionary tales for systems that do not attend to this aspect of leadership.

“Hope Springs Eternal” is a chapter devoted to the translation of theological terminology and concepts for broader use in educational leadership and, potentially, beyond. Flintham provides metaphors and “bilingual” vocabulary to bridge the worlds of spirituality and school leadership, especially in public contexts. He appropriates theological terms and recasts them to allow for use beyond their specifically Christian use. I found the results successful, but the question remains: is it ultimately a matter of cultural discomfort with the mingling of public practice and faith whether his terminology and the metaphor “reservoirs of hope” are embraced in the field of educational leadership or applied in other leadership contexts? In the end, he may have built a bridge that is just “too far.”

Though the headteachers Flintham included in his research were from the UK, Australia, and New Zealand, I believe the challenges and spiritual demands addressed in this book will be familiar to all school leaders. This is a particularly
timely book given the budgetary reductions and the increased focus on accountability that are the daily fare of most school leaders who may be tempted to assume that a state of crisis is the “new normal.” It will be a poignant read for individuals who are wrestling with their own “reservoirs of hope.” The book also offers important insights for those who prepare leaders and those who support them in the field. Many outside education, especially those in nonprofit, public service, and religious leadership roles, are also likely to find much of their internal world reflected in these pages. If nothing else, any work that encourages school leaders to tell their stories, especially to one another, and to be keenly aware of their need to refill their personal reservoirs of hope is a laudable contribution.

Gary Sehorn