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**Leadership as Body and Environment: The Rider and the Horse  
(Chapter 17 of The Gospel after Christendom: New Voices, New  
Cultures, New Expressions)**

MaryKate Morse

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# Leadership as Body and Environment

## The Rider and the Horse

*MaryKate Morse*

### Practices

Leadership is hard. Leading like Christ is even harder. Some fail. Many burn out. Most struggle with the people they are called to serve and lead. I myself feel that I make mistakes more often than I “get it right.” I want to be humble and lead well, but at times I feel threatened and frustrated. Sometimes the preaching is good and sometimes not so good. Sometimes people respond and lives are changed, but not as much as one would think, given all the resources, time, and talent poured out. Something crucial is missing from our understanding of servant leadership. I believe it is an awareness of where our leadership really gets shaped.

As leaders we struggle because we focus more on the rider and less on the horse. The rider represents the intentional part of our leadership, the conscious part. The horse represents the unconscious part, and it is powerful. The unconscious is interested in safety and well-being. It is constantly sniffing the air and watching for clues that things are stable and that survival is assured. When there is any type of threat the horse is alert and ready to run or stomp. We often underestimate the power of the unconscious body to influence our thoughts and behavior when it has picked up a scent of danger or distress.<sup>[1]</sup>

A body is interconnected in all of its systems with a primary goal of keeping itself alive and healthy. The brain receives information from the central and peripheral nervous systems, and then governs the body’s actions and reactions.<sup>[2]</sup> The information gathered is both conscious (the rider) and unconscious (the horse) data. The unconscious information includes the body’s response to anxiety or stress as well as regulatory functions such as sleep and digestion. The body is constantly adjusting and fine-tuning as it adapts to the environment, and this is all done without our thinking or deciding. We don’t have to tell the body to act or react; it will decide on its own. This fundamentally shapes our leadership, and we don’t even know it.

We assume that the cognitive functioning of the brain is under our complete control. However, the brain is much more than the sum of our thoughts. The brain is as influenced by the body as the body is influenced by the brain. The body absorbs all the messages it receives from the environment, the physical and emotional, and sends powerful unconscious messages to the brain, which can trump rational thought processes. These messages come in on a sensory train full of impulses for how the body should react to protect and thrive.

If I am leading a meeting and a person walks in late, I see the person and am aware that I am

already moving through the agenda. My conscious mind registers the arrival and my subconscious brain begins adjusting. Will I say something? Will I nod and continue? Will I experience frustration or anger or concern? A lot will depend on my threat sensors, the type of relationship I have with the person, the nature of the meeting, and the persons involved in the meeting. Does the room feel tense, relaxed, or ambivalent? The brain, in a matter of nanoseconds, will have formulated a response, and the response will be partially overt and partially unconscious. Leadership is not simply what I do and who I think I am. It is how I manage the billions of neurons firing in my brain, some of it known to me and much of it unknown.

The environment plays a major role in the messages the horse sends to the rider. As long as the environment is normal and anticipated, the horse is fine. If the environment changes and the horse gets spooked or upset, off it goes. Only the most experienced riders can stay on the horse and bring it under control. As leaders we need to be aware of the environment and how it influences the horse; otherwise the body will be leading us.

This is especially hard today when our environment is polarized and stressed. We live in a culture full of fear, which is heightened by a poor economy and ongoing wars. Church members often have unrealistic expectations for what a pastor should or could do. In a connected world concerns like terrorism, environmental disasters, natural disasters, poverty, and crime are on our doorsteps 24/7. All these environmental factors add a physiological burden to the horse. The environment creates a constant underlying anxiety in the horse. Leaders have the responsibility of motivating and guiding people toward purposefully following Christ. This is not normal to the human species in a stressed environment. Our basic motivation is stability and safety. So stepping into the unknown can have its perks, but the body resists the change. It is a journey that does not feel very safe.

The bottom line for leadership is this: There is much more going on inside us and shaping our leadership than simply our ideas about what leaders do and how they act. The good news is that the brain is plastic, so it can change.[3] When Jesus promised to set us free, it was not an empty promise for some mythical future kingdom. We can be transformed as leaders, and our transformation then impacts our environment and those we lead. I offer two suggestions to help the rider become more aware of the horse and the environment.

### ***Emotional/Physical Reflection: The Connection between Horse and Rider***

The more threatened a person feels, the more the unconscious takes control of the emotions. The threat can be minor, such as a disagreement with another person, or major, such as an accusation of failure. The threat can be real or imagined. The cognitive part of the mind can make very fine distinctions and quick decisions, but the emotional part of the mind is always a part of the process. Being human means experiencing the environment with emotional antennae. The entire Emotional Intelligence movement is directed toward exactly this awareness.[4] Managing our emotions requires active reflection that gets alerted as soon as we recognize anxiety in ourselves. If you are reacting with rebellion, blame, inner frustration, addiction, or disengagement, your body is protecting itself from threat. Even if you maintain a smooth professional facade, the roiling emotions will not be denied their day. After a while the horse gets bigger and wilder, and the rider is less and less in control.

I suggest three helpful steps to managing the horse. First, name the threat. Instead of the “dismiss, deny, or dunk it down deep” tendencies (which don’t help and waste time in the long run), name the threat. Second, reflect on its origin. The majority of our intense reactions toward a person or event in our environment are really a reflection of what is going on internally in our unconscious world. It is almost always about you. Become skilled in figuring out the source of the reaction. Third, pray. To keep the horse controlled, deal with it each and every time through prayer. Create a prayer to soothe the beast and draw attention to the bigger leadership picture, following Christ. “Jesus, I see you. I follow you. Give me grace.” No matter how many times you have to repeat it, say the prayer. Such repetition of prayer compels the body to come in alignment with its primary purpose: not survival, but following the Lord.

### *Environmental Attention: The Connection between Rider/Horse and the Environment*

Paying attention to the environment is also major, because we do it so poorly. For several years researchers have studied the phenomena of “inattentional blindness,” the reality that we perceive only what we pay attention to. This means that a gorilla can be walking through a room and we would probably miss it, if we were busy enough paying attention to something else.<sup>[5]</sup> Leaders have a lot to think about and do; they are on deck all the time. That is exactly why Sabbath and prayer practices are absolutely essential for those who want to lead like Christ. A leader creates space for paying attention to something other than what he or she is doing or thinking. Without this we develop an inattentional blindness to Christ. We do not mean to, but we do. This is why we need spiritual disciplines.

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Biblical spirituality . . . is concerned with bringing our body and soul into an intimate relationship with the heart of God. It is concerned with holiness, which means that it is related to every aspect of life, as lived from day to day, rather than focusing attention on transient experiences.

Eddie Gibbs (CN, 142)

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To pay attention to the environment requires taking mini spiritual-discipline breaks. We were taught as kids to “stop, drop, and roll” if our clothes caught on fire. Ministry is fire. It is meant to light up and warm, but if we are not careful it can burn up and destroy. The Holy Spirit came as fire. As Christ’s leaders we require the Holy Spirit perspective on the broader picture. Therefore, tuning into the Spirit matters throughout the day. We need regularly to stop, drop, and roll. For leaders, stop the clock, drop to the floor, and reflect. Create a rhythm for stopping the clock every few hours. Change your position. Either lay down on the floor or stand up and look out a window or kneel, whatever, but change your body to reflect your attention to the Holy Spirit. Then for five to ten minutes simply be still with the Holy Spirit and listen—not to figure something out or plan the next words, but to bring your attention back to Christ, to have the Holy Spirit’s perspective.

## **Culture**

### *The Horse and Rider in Creation*

Since our bodies are influenced by our environment, it is easy to see that the health of our environment is directly related to our own well-being. The first directive from God was to steward the earth. This entails its care, and its care is directly related to our survival. God created an interdependence between human beings and God's beloved earth. God sees creation as good; therefore, it is good for us to pay attention to it. It will change us and change our neighborhoods. Being involved with the care of the earth builds community and grounds our being as leaders. It brings the rider, horse, and environment together.

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This resonates deeply with what I have written in my chapter. *Jan Mobsby*

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For example, a church planter in a blue-collar neighborhood close to a major city decided that he and his community would turn a vacant lot into a neighborhood garden. The lot was full of concrete, broken bottles, needles, and weeds. As they began working on the lot, slowly people in the neighboring homes wanted to know what was going on. They got involved in different ways: picking up the trash, pulling weeds, creating the beds for flowers and vegetables, watching over it, and watering. One neighborhood alcoholic in particular took a deep fondness to the garden. He started talking to the faith community people. He would come by often to help out and then spend a lot of the day sitting in the garden on a bench. When asked why, he said, "It is so beautiful, and I am helping my neighbors. I am not just a drunk."

### ***The Horse and Rider and Hybridity***

Hybridity is taking two different things and making a new thing, such as a hybrid vehicle, which uses two different fuel sources to propel it. In a similar way male and female leadership are two different fuel sources to propel our kingdom work. Men and women bring different perspectives to ministry. The biological natures of maleness and of femaleness are distinctive enough that harnessing the horse takes different sets of skills for each, as well as the ability to notice different stimuli in an environment. On the *Mad Men* television show, Don Draper asks several men and women, "What do women want?" Yet he does not hear it when women give him the answer, and the men do not know. Seeing effective leadership from a male *and* female perspective would greatly increase the leadership capacity of the church worldwide.

God's kingdom is best represented by both sexes. The concerns, experiences, and insights of males and females bring a more complete understanding of the environment—allowing for better decision making and better service. For the best results, the executive or top levels of leadership should consist of at least 30 percent female leaders.[6] Tokenism, a commitment to a woman on a leadership team, gives the appearance but not the experience of the female rider on her horse. We would be a stronger team if the various experiences were all valued. We would be a stronger church if we rode together. I also believe there would be fewer problems with inappropriate sexual behavior by male pastors if female leaders were valued partners and not sexualized enigmas.

### ***The Horse and Rider and Pluralism***

Pluralism has a wide variety of meanings. Here I define it as a creative engagement with

differences—which is not easy, especially for leaders. Leaders help motivate and guide a group to becoming more Christlike in character and mission. Christ is truth (John 14:6), and often by engaging creatively with differences we grow beyond our finite and sometimes limited understandings of that truth. Because we prefer control and safety at a fundamental level, anything different from us will be a visceral, deeply felt threat. It is the leader's job to help people see a bigger kingdom than their corner church on 5th and Main. If the leader cannot rise above the perceived threat, it is extra difficult for the people he or she serves. Therefore, it is crucial that we keep our eyes on Jesus and relinquish control to him. From the beginning of his ministry when he was tempted in the desert, to the end when he prayed in the garden, Jesus gave control to God. By doing so, Jesus was able to love and serve on a plane that seems impossible.

What do we do with something like the proposed mosque and community center two blocks from Ground Zero? This proposal was incredibly divisive in a country founded on the fundamental right to religious freedom. The horse is running wild in an environment that fears for its very existence. The problem is not whether the mosque should be there; the problem is an inability to work through this highly sensitive issue. Therefore, leaders must go to the garden with Christ and relinquish control (of the wild horse running amok in our souls) to God. Then we are able to listen to the heart of Christ on the matter and respond as he would. Pluralism becomes less a threat and more an opportunity.

### *The Horse and Rider and Creativity*

Creativity is a physical experience that shapes the horse and rider and engages the environment. Creating involves all the senses. The body sees, smells, remembers, touches, and connects with beauty in a way that draws us to God's sovereignty and glory. Therefore, the leader can use imaginative creation to engage the community with God.

The challenge is to encourage creativity and not reproduction. For example, early Sunday school classes were much the same: Little chairs faced a larger chair for the teacher. On the wall would be pictures of Jesus with children or Jesus carrying a lamb. The children needed to have their minds and behaviors shaped. The teacher taught. Crafts involved reproducing the Bible story with colors, glue, and glitter.

Godly Play is a different experience based on two fundamental ideas.<sup>[7]</sup> First, children have their own leadership engine, and, second, the best way to tame the horse is to give the children space to know the rider and the environment for themselves through the imagination. The teacher is a "storyteller." Children step into "sacred space." They participate as the story is reenacted with figures and lots of imagination and questions. The children are then given a wide range of possibilities for reflecting the story as they heard it. Godly Play is a different way to lead others, and its principles work for adults too. Using creativity rather than telling empowers persons to independence and interdependence with God, rather than codependency on a leader.

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This dichotomy of creation versus reproduction is one I have thought about a lot. On one hand, the mastery of a classic can shape the skills of the artisan or musician. On the other hand, the freedom to reinterpret that classic after having mastered it is the power of the

greatest of artists.

In worship music leadership circles it is similar to the idea that people worship best “with the familiar,” and innovation is seen as aberration. Like many renewal movements that want to “get back to the biblical practices,” creatives struggle to get audiences to leave behind old hardened metaphors, worn-out songs, and predictable allusions. For me the key has been asking about the values we place on precedence. Instead of biblical imagery being evocative of deeper and deeper stories, we fall into the rut of domesticating stories, be they biblical, historical, even our own faith stories, to serve a single meaning. When we do this we miss the very function of beauty’s unprecedent to bring awe and wonder. Storytelling is a subversive approach to all our media as churches. *Troy Bronsink*

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### ***The Horse and Rider and Consumerism***

Consumerism is simply horses running amok. Horses cannot get enough to assure their feeling of safety and well-being. Whether their method of consumption is overeating, overrunning, or overstimulating their senses, it becomes all about the horse and less and less about the kingdom. They run wild and free with little regard for the devastation of the environment. To counter these powerful tendencies requires leadership that is in control of the horse, a rider who understands the pull of its surrounding culture and offers alternative perspectives and options.

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Creativity blossoms in an atmosphere of flexibility and freedom. It requires an environment where precedents and assumptions can be set aside and where there is a willingness to allow fresh thoughts.

Eddie Gibbs (LN, 140)

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The church from its inception understood the importance of simplicity. Christian leaders today can renew this call to a simpler, less distracted lifestyle. They begin with their own lives and then help their faith communities become places of simplicity, with regard to both the stuff the community owns and the things it calls its people to do. Dave Bruno is an example. He wrote *The 100 Thing Challenge*, describing how he simplified his life and ended up regaining his soul. He wanted “to free up physical, mental, and spiritual space” in order to live a more thoughtful life.[8] The church is exactly the place where the discipline of simplicity can be a powerful antidote to the addiction to consumerism. And the Christian leader is exactly the person who can prophetically live and call others to a countercultural lifestyle of simplicity.

### ***The Horse and Rider and Spirituality and Culture***

Today’s faith seeker is hungry to connect the fragmented self into one whole self. Who one is, what one feels and knows, where one lives, and what one does is integrated in Christ. There is not a church life, a spiritual life, a work life, a broken life, a community life, and a relational life. All is one in Christ. The horse and rider look to Christ for companionship and direction and healing. Leaders then create environments where horses and riders engage their desire to be conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others in the real world in which they live.


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The vision of the body of Christ is central to this and a gift for a world that often tends toward an edgy tribalism. New Age and pagan spiritualities are also seeking this holistic approach and whilst for some this proves illusory others seem to demonstrate it better than we do

in the churches. How we live as a diverse body of Christ and are whole in the way Morse rightly stresses is a major mission challenge. Will people look at us and believe we have reconciliation to bring to all humanity and creation? They will judge us by what they see of it in our lives. *Steve Hollinghurst*

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This requires accountability and authentic community, which leaders help create. For instance, many young people are seeking monastic-type faith communities. This is not a Catholic movement. This is a Pentecostal, mainline, fundamental, liberal, evangelical movement. Faith seekers are less interested in big church success and more in transformed lives and communities. They seek authenticity, which happens best when culture is engaged and where spiritual disciplines help shape the horse and equip the rider. New monastic movements are the desire to experience spirituality physically together and in community. The fundamentals are contemplation and community with a theology and practice of hospitality and serving the poor.[9] There are other possibilities, but all integrate spirituality with the whole person in local and global cultures.



Leaders mess up not because we love Jesus less or are full of ourselves (though sometimes that is true), but because sometimes we don't pay attention to what really shapes us. Leadership is defined as much by our bodies and the environments in which we live as by our actions and thoughts. This is one of the reasons why Jesus came in a physical body and to a specific time and place, to model for us our capacity for authentic spiritual leadership. This leadership thinks carefully about how the rider and horse interact with each other and is attentive to the larger environment of God's world and purposes.