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SUSTAINING **LEADERSHIP**

PAUL SWANN

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FOREWORD

I have the utmost respect and admiration for Paul Swann and am delighted to commend his book wholeheartedly. It has been a privilege to share Paul's painful journey with him in a small way over the last ten years.

Here, Paul offers profoundly insightful as well as practically useful reflections on that journey as he tells a powerful story of descent into utter powerlessness. We are plunged headlong into the sudden and terrifying loss of physical and mental strength that Paul experienced in the midst of an exciting, creative and demanding ministry, a loss he characterises as 'disintegration'. His openness about his chronic fatigue syndrome and his arrival on 'Planet Fragile' provides moving evidence of the way he has learned the difficult, painful yet ultimately life-restoring need to embrace vulnerability. He then moves on to a detailed analysis of the factors, forces and, yes, people who can drive any leader beyond sustainability. Paul writes from a deeply personal perspective, but his honesty and beautiful prose enable the reader to identify with his experience and to recognise within themselves some of their own fragility and weaknesses, as it certainly did in my case.

In the second and third parts of the book, Paul offers some profound theological reflection on reintegration, as well as a host of practical measures towards beginning and maintaining that process. Woven all the way through is the conviction, borne out by his experience, that dependence on God is the only sure way to avoid the lures and snares of leadership and to discover true human identity. Paul draws on a vast range of authors from a variety of backgrounds – spiritual, theological, literary and cinematic. On every page you will find

pearls of wisdom that provide stimulus for productive reflection, in addition to which Paul provides clear and challenging questions and points to ponder.

Those in positions of leadership in the church will find rich resources here to enable them to flourish. But this book is not just for them: it is for anyone with a lively interest in the dynamics and interactions of human community, and for anyone who seeks insights into the mystery of God. Paul's story is indeed a powerful account of powerlessness, and it is also more: it is an eloquent testimony to the God whose strength is made perfect in weakness, the God of resurrection.

John Inge, Bishop of Worcester

25 January 2018 (Feast of the conversion of St Paul)

INTRODUCTION

A chance meeting I have with a church leader catches him off guard, meaning he answers my ‘How are you?’ more truthfully than he intends. His face subconsciously relaxes from a forced smile into the more revealing weariness and disappointment which lie beneath his cheery countenance. His tale is a familiar, but nevertheless real and painful one of working himself into the ground in a context that is unresponsive and even hostile. When the time comes to move on, searching for a way to encourage him, I urge him to look after himself within that harsh environment, a suggestion which seems totally alien. I quote Parker Palmer: ‘Self-care is never a selfish act – it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer to others.’¹ I see from the almost imperceptible softening of his eyes that this is an entirely new but hope-filled concept. At no point in his long, faithful ministry has anyone suggested to him that self-care is a good, even biblical, value. Worn into the ground, wondering how much longer he can keep going, he receives this word like parched and spent soil welcomes a drop of refreshing rain.

A vicar shares her frustration that recruiting volunteers is growing ever harder. She notices that people in her church have historically been so committed and loyal that to volunteer for any role has become tantamount to taking on a job for life. That has turned into the unspoken and unintended model for lay ministry. When faithful volunteers become too frail to continue, they step aside, exhausted and empty. Is it any wonder that those asked to fill the role dare not risk taking it on? Wisely, she is planning a teaching series on the nature of rest and self-care within the church before the next round of volunteer recruitment.

A young man was making visits to the elderly. All day he experienced sharp pains in his abdomen but still did not want to neglect the final two visits. Surreptitiously clutching his stomach, he spent an agonising hour trying to listen to the needs of the first couple, while fighting the pain within. On arriving at the next address, it was with enormous relief that he received no response and finally went home to rest. That was not a decision he felt able to make for himself. Within hours he had been diagnosed with acute appendicitis and was receiving emergency surgery. Even under intense physical pain, self-care was not in his vocabulary.

This is what this book is about. These are real stories (with contexts changed). Similar stories are repeated daily among countless church and ministry leaders, as well as helpers and volunteers, all seeking faithfully to serve God and his people. I write from deep personal experience which has birthed in me a passion for us to learn what it means to take good care of ourselves in ministry. All Christians involved in some form of service have to make hard decisions to find the balance between giving to others and looking after themselves. This book contains hard-learned insights and practical tools that we can make use of to ensure this remains a short-term experience, through which we can not only grow personally but also continue serving with faithfulness, creativity and joy. *Sustaining Leadership* is not a book about what to do as a leader. It is about how to be as a leader.

You may already be in the distressing place of feeling trapped in a pattern that has become unsustainable, caught between the desire to keep going and the real fear that to stay might be seriously damaging to you and to those around you. This story and the lessons that emerge from it are for you.

Even if you are currently sailing along in ministry full-time or part-time, paid or voluntary, my hope is that this book will help you to keep on that track and continue to serve the Lord with joy for many years to come.

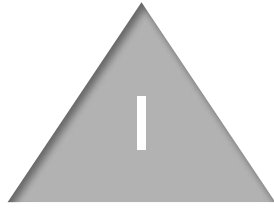
We need to know that even in contexts that are responsive, challenges will come. David Runcorn has said, 'It is one of the most frequent areas of neglect – the care for the strong in our churches... Often the most tired, isolated and discouraged were not those who had experienced failure in their Christian lives... They were those whose strength had run out in the course of loving and faithful service.'²

This is what happened to me. I came to a full stop. One day I was in my bishop's study, as if in some eerily calm nightmare, hearing myself say these words:

I can't do this any more.

I didn't know what would happen after making such a risky confession. In the days which unfolded from there, everything was scrubbed from my to-do list and I was left staring at a sheet of paper that was blank except for this one thing: 'Take good care of yourself!' The only questions were 'Is it too late to start?' and 'Do I even know what that looks like?'

I'm still working out the answers to those questions, but I have found as I share my story that the changes I have made and the things I have learned about myself, God and ministry have been encouraging to others in their own life and ministry. Now I am privileged to be able to make this offering to 'all you who are weary and burdened' (Matthew 11:28).



DISINTEGRATION

1

ENCOUNTERING FRAGILITY

Beginnings

When I was seven years old, I desperately wanted an Action Man for Christmas. I nagged my parents relentlessly and, sure enough, on Christmas morning, there was the right-shaped gift under the tree. But as I eagerly ripped off the wrapping, I could see immediately that there was a problem. This wasn't Action Man, but Fighting Yank! No, I hadn't heard of him either. That initial disappointment deepened when I removed one of his boots for the first time. Not only did the boot come off but so did his foot. The toy was broken within the first few minutes, and I didn't play with it much after that.

Looking back, that was my first real encounter with fragility. I decided I didn't really like broken things very much. Although I grew to find a place in my heart for the broken people I met along the way, it was a long time before I would be comfortable with the brokenness I found within myself. In the end, it would take a major encounter with brokenness in my own life to move me closer to being at ease with fragility. It's not a subject with which we are very comfortable. Mark Oakley has said, 'We're very good at truth in the church but not so good at honesty.' And he warns against the wearing of masks, which 'if worn too long eat into the face so that you lose track of where one begins and the other ends'.³

This book will recount honestly how the presence of my own mask was revealed only when painfully stripped away. Only then could I commence my journey of discovering where the mask ended and my true self began.

Treasure in clay jars

We should not be surprised by our fragility. The apostle Paul speaks of it clearly in his imagery of carrying the treasure of Jesus ‘in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed’ (2 Corinthians 4:7–9). In this passage of unadorned reality and profound hope, Paul refers to the sort of fragile jars which were two a penny in his day. Common, everyday items that could easily be replaced if they were broken, they were often used as household lamps. It was the very fragility of the clay that allowed the light to shine through. They were so fragile that they are rarely found by archaeologists because most simply have not survived.

In this first section, I will describe my plunge into fragility. It’s the story of how I found that peace comes not when we deny or even fight that, but when we embrace who we are. I want to share this because we can only start from where we are, but also in order to offer the sort of transparency that may help to shed some light on your fragility. As Sheila Cassidy says, ‘More than anything I have learned that we are all frail people, vulnerable and wounded; it is just that some... are more clever at concealing it than others! And... the great joke is that it is OK to be frail... because that is the way the almighty God made people.’⁴

Our inspiration to honesty comes from Psalm 34:

Never hide your feelings from him. When I was desperate, I called out, and God got me out of a tight spot... Is anyone crying for help?... If your heart is broken, you’ll find God right there; if you’re kicked in the gut, he’ll help you catch your breath.

PSALM 34:5b–6, 17a, 18 (MSG)

Arriving on Planet Fragile

My story of being kicked in the gut began in March 2005. I went to bed one evening exhausted, as I had many times before. I woke up the next day and found myself living on an alien planet. At first glance, everything looked familiar, but this planet had an accelerated rotational speed so that it was impossible to stop the bedroom spinning. Gravity was stronger, so the effort required to lift my head off the pillow was substantially increased. How could my limbs have become so heavy overnight? When I did get out of bed, I couldn't stand up.

The density of this strange planet exaggerated my fragility. Confidence-sucking black holes drew me into dark places. Wild whirlwinds of anxiety were liable to blow up at any moment. Soon, periods of drought blew in on hot, unforgiving winds, leaving the ground arid and fruitless.

My arrival here came as a complete shock. My journey had been going fine. University followed school and then I spent six years working in marketing and serving in my local church. In 1987, I trained for ordination before spending twelve demanding but fulfilling years in the urban Black Country of the West Midlands. In 2002, I moved to Worcester in response to God's call to plant a vibrant Anglican church there. It was brave and foolish, exciting and scary in equal parts. We started with no resources, but by God's grace we experienced rapid growth and soon had a viable and flourishing church. However, the investment of time and energy had been enormous and, at the very moment when things in the church were really taking off, my health plummeted in the opposite direction.

Initially thinking I had a 24-hour virus on that March morning, I crawled back into bed hoping that I'd be back to normal the next day. I could not have been more mistaken. The most significant consequence of the strong gravitational pull was extreme fatigue. Raising my hands above shoulder level was hard, as was undertaking

simple tasks like having a shower, getting dressed or walking more than a few yards. Alongside the fatigue there was constant muscle pain, which was bearable during the day but exaggerated in the long hours of the night so that it became impossible to sleep, adding further to the fatigue.

And the hostility of this new environment was not merely physical; some atmospheric poison messed up my head too. I lost the ability to focus, so that I could not read more than a paragraph at a time. I struggled to hold a conversation for longer than a few minutes. In addition, someone had turned up the stimulus intensity so that light and sound were hard to cope with or even painful. My new planet's array of germs meant that my compromised immune system left me vulnerable to frequent and persistent infections. This unfriendly environment was a deeply isolating place to inhabit.

Some will quickly recognise this planet, but many medical people I encountered had never been there and some denied its existence. It would take a host of futile and invasive tests over a period of 18 months before I was diagnosed with the condition I had long suspected I had, most commonly known as myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME) or chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS).

Hitting the buffers

I spent three years trying to manage my health, including one extended break which lasted a full year. Feeling better, I returned to work in spring 2008 and continued to try to balance health and church. However, by the summer it became clear that this was not sustainable and, if I was to survive and the church to thrive, I needed to step down from leadership.

The stress of trying to keep going had brought me to breaking point. My confidence was so undermined that even walking into a room full of my supportive congregation felt unbearable. Finally came a week

of painful yet grace-filled conversations with my bishop and church leaders, to whom I finally said, 'I can't do this any more. If I stop now there's a chance I might be able to be put back together again. If I don't, I'm not sure.'

Now came a host of questions: 'Will the flow of tears ever cease? What will happen next? How will we live? How will others respond? How can I let so many people down?'

Life on Planet Fragile

With my health at a low ebb, my energy levels minimal and my confidence in tatters, I and my family faced all the struggles that ensue from a loss of income and role for the main breadwinner. We gave up the house that went with the job, battled to find somewhere to live, and had to adjust to the change in responsibility, status and security.

This former apparently robust vessel had been placed under such extreme pressure that its true fragility had been exposed. I wanted to rewrite the apostle Paul's words into something more brutally honest: 'I was so hard pressed on every side that I was crushed; so perplexed that I reached the point of despair; feeling abandoned; struck down and facing destruction.'

After I stopped working, my health worsened for a while as my body was allowed to let go into its full brokenness, and I faded into a shadow existence, in which I became defined by illness itself. My first thought on waking was 'How am I today?' The activities of the day would be constrained by the extent of my energy. The world of the sick person is shrunk down to minimal size, like the mat of the paralysed man (Luke 5:17-26). Conversations with others revolve around the 'How are you?' question. This has to be asked, but it generates the pressure to respond with a positive answer in the face of the discomfort shown by others when that is not provided.

I echoed the psalmist's cry: 'I have become like broken pottery' (Psalm 31:12).

On Planet Fragile I found that it's not just that simple tasks become hard, and more demanding ones virtually impossible, but worse than that, even the things you love reposition themselves frustratingly beyond your grasp.

It is a desolate place. Life went from fullness of activity on Planet Busy to the vacuum of doing nothing. Occasionally I could stand the feeling of uselessness no more. Once I decided to contribute to life at home by defrosting the freezer. My wife came home from a long day in the office to find the job half done, and me sitting exhausted on the kitchen floor surrounded by rapidly defrosting food.

Some people handle suffering well and develop a sense of serenity. I am not one of those people! I became exasperated, frustrated and, finally, depressed. Those who had to spend the most time around me at that time will bear witness to the fact that I could be very difficult to live with.

The atmospheric pressure exposed more fault lines than I knew I had. Cracks in my faith, character, foundations and relationships were opened up for all to see. Shame and guilt were frequent visitors. Russ Parker speaks of a time of sickness: 'I felt guilty for not recovering. I felt a failure in succumbing to illness, and in not being able to do my work.'⁵ This burden of guilt further strained my limited reserves of energy. As the effects of the illness began to impact those for whom I felt responsible – my wife and children, wider family and friends, the church itself – this guilt became, at times, unbearable.

Darkness descends

Sometimes these moments come and go, but when the fragility persists, an unrelenting darkness can fall, creating a place of absence

more than presence. The God who I had known intimately for many years seemed to withdraw into the shadows just at the time when I needed him most. And that was probably the hardest loss of all. The Christian community has long spoken of ‘the dark night of the soul’⁶ as a very real experience. It’s a time when God’s people cry, ‘How long, Lord? Will you forget me for ever? How long will you hide your face from me?’ (Psalm 13:1).

And you can’t rush this experience, however much you want to emerge on the other side. There are no words to express the density of the darkness or the intensity of the isolation. I could be outside on the brightest day but experience total darkness. I could be in the midst of well-loved company and feel utterly alone.

I identified with how Elijah felt when he sat under a bush and said to the Lord, ‘I wish I were dead’ (to paraphrase 1 Kings 19:4). It was not the thought of taking my own life that surfaced so much as the desire to not exist, to not have to bear life any longer as it had become. Arguing with God about this journey through the darkness and pleading for escape, I sensed him saying, ‘The only way out of the valley is through the valley.’

I’ve told my story to set the scene for what follows and also to prompt your own risky exercise in honesty. My story is offered as permission to look your own fragility in the face.

Dare to offer God your experiences of fragility using these words inspired by Psalm 5:3: ‘Every morning I lay out the broken pieces of my life on your altar and I wait in hope for you.’

Pause to reflect

- What sort of word is ‘fragility’ to you? Is it in your vocabulary?
- Take some time to recall an experience of encountering fragility.
- What are the characteristics of your planet?

NOTES

- 1 Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the voice of vocation* (Jossey-Bass, 2000), p. 30.
- 2 David Runcorn, *Space for God: Silence and solitude in the Christian life* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990), p. 40.
- 3 Revd Mark Oakley, Canon Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral, London, speaking at the National Conference for Diocesan Spirituality Advisers, March 2014.
- 4 Sheila Cassidy, quoted in Chris Morley, *Caring Together: A study guide* (Kevin Mayhew, 2011), p. 14.
- 5 Russ Parker, *Free to Fail* (Triangle Books, 1998), p. vii.



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Many books on leadership and ministry are written from the point of view of success and strength. In *Sustaining Leadership* Paul Swann writes out of the raw experience of failure, getting to the heart of who we are as leaders rather than what we do. From this he offers both hope and practical resources for sustaining effective long-term ministry, looking at self-care, balance and healthy ministry, feasting on divine love, and more. As he says, this is the best gift we can offer those we serve.

Paul Swann trained for ordination in the Anglican Church and served in two growing parishes in the Diocese of Worcester. In 2008, he retired early and spent four years in the wilderness of total fatigue. Since 2012, Paul has begun to offer a new ministry from this place of weakness. He has served as diocesan adviser on spirituality, offers spiritual direction and leads retreats. He also serves part-time on the staff of All Saints, Worcester.

‘Paul Swann’s healing message is liberating and timely. It is a call to learn how to work with God, not just for God. It is a summons to dare to believe “I too am more important than my ministry.”’

Tony Horsfall, author of *Servant Ministry* (BRF)

‘Any leader, of whatever kind, committed to going the distance and finishing their race must read this book, carefully and prayerfully.’

Rich Johnson, New Wine Chair of Regional Directors,
vicar of All Saints Worcester



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