

RESEARCH REPORT

The Autoethnographic Reflection of a Christian Principal and His Great Desire to Know and Love Jesus Christ Wholeheartedly: A Story of Being Called, Encountered, and Changed by God While Growing as a Servant Leader

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This study presents a qualitative data driven account of highly personalized and transformative experiences that I reflect on, draw meaning from, and summarize the professional value of how I was called, encountered, and changed by God, as I pursued to know and love Jesus Christ wholeheartedly while growing in servant leadership as a (vice) principal at a Christian school. In 2014, I stumbled upon and pursued the notion of using my journal entries from May 2010 to December 2013 (271 pages), as qualitative data to write an autoethnography. The guiding research questions for this autoethnographic study were as follows: *What prominent themes did I, a young (vice) principal at a Christian school, naturally write most about in my journal? What meaning did I derive from the personal encounters recorded within the prominent themes of my journal? How did the transforming experiences in my personal life influence me as a growing servant leader, in the principal role, at a Christian school? What kind of encounters did biblical characters, who were seeking God wholeheartedly, have with God that were similar to mine? How are my experiences of being called, encountered, and changed by God supported and paralleled by Christian literature? What implications do my findings have for (future) principals practicing servant leadership?* My responses to the research questions offer valuable perspectives and unique insight from my view of the world, as transformation in my personal life led to transformation in my professional life.

Autoethnography was the chosen methodology to vividly express the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual details from my life, and analyze and interpret the meaningful encounters that I had journaled about. Themes were established through the inductive process of coding data, and findings were framed by the servant leader theory, which led to the writing of Chapters IV through VII. Chapter I is an introduction, Chapter II reveals the theoretical framework and worldview of the study in order to give the reader a grid with which to connect my thematic chapters, Chapter III presents my methodological framework, and Chapter VIII is the conclusion that discloses the inward and outward implications of my findings. It has a summary of how my personal encounters influenced my thoughts, feelings, and actions as a principal of a Christian school, and it also displays implications for principals practicing servant leadership and for teachers at public schools and Christian schools. The sources that contributed significantly to the credibility of this autoethnography were extensive Christian literature references, Bible verses, supportive research of the servant leader theory, and my authentic journal entries. Although my experiences were unique to me, many authors shared similar experiences in the context of their Christian communities. The life changing journey that I experienced, while growing as a servant leader, must be known among principals who also have a similar desire to hear from and know God, and be called, encountered, and changed by Him.

Seeking To Know and Love Jesus Christ Wholeheartedly

My desire to know Jesus Christ wholeheartedly motivated me to rearrange my priorities, habits, and schedule so that in my pursuit to hear His voice, I could experience His fullness. I relentlessly sought Jesus, as a flame leaps out desperately hoping to find more oxygen in order to grow and burn with fueled intensity, because nothing else would satisfy. I longingly desired to

encounter the fullness of Jesus, the source of knowledge, wisdom, and revelation, in worship, prayer, fasting, and His Word. I expressed my raw thoughts and motions in my journal and simply wanted to know my Creator. I was strengthened with comfort, encouragement, and inspiration when I became aware of other people who could relate to my insatiable hunger to know and love Jesus Christ wholeheartedly. God was overhauling my heart and my mind as He molded me into a humble servant leader who was called to build a strong, purposeful, and caring school community (Crippen, 2010, p. 28). He knew what needed replacing, repairing, and refurnishing in order to equip me as an effective principal. Everything changed in my life when Jesus began to answer my heartfelt cries by opening up my spiritual eyes and ears and revealing Himself and His call on my life as we fellowshiped in closer and closer friendship.

Fellowshipping with God

Nothing compares with having a real, personal, powerful friendship with Jesus Christ. I asked to know Jesus, and the Holy Spirit graciously revealed Jesus to me through powerful encounters. My spiritual ears and eyes were opened when I began to hear God's voice and see pictures and visions that stirred my spirit. He gently brought loving conviction and correction to my soul. The more that the Holy Spirit revealed Jesus Christ to me and conversed with me, the more I wanted to be near Him and know Him. I declared to the heavens and earth who the living God was and what He had done and was doing. The Holy Spirit caused the zeal of God to consume me as I read His Word and sensed Him speaking directly to me through it. I could not help but praise and thank Him for His goodness, kindness, and love for me. I was overwhelmed that He deeply loved and valued me. From a servant leader perspective, I grew in understanding of how Jesus modelled servant leadership to build His community of united and genuine believers. I learned much about the power of the sense of belonging and the feeling of being authentically valued as a result of His servant leadership (Stewart, 2012, p. 238; Sultan & van de Bunt-Kokhuis, 2014, p. 4) as I followed and fellowshiped with Him.

The more I discovered who He was, the more I communed with Him and expressed my love for Him. I fell in love with Jesus and realized that He is a passionate Bridegroom who wants to see His Bride, the Church, living victoriously with power and love, eschewing the lesser things of life. I submitted my life to the Lordship of Jesus, so that His will and ways would work their way through my spirit and soul, and then I set my heart to trust and obey Him no matter what the cost. Each transforming truth that I embraced, caused me to think, feel, and act differently because I was growing in confidence of who Jesus was and who I was. These changes affected me at home, at work, and in the community. I perceived Jesus differently, myself differently, and others around me different. I learned to love myself with more balance, love others similarly to how God does, and love Jesus more as my understanding of His love for me deepened. I also received a spiritual language of praying in tongues that God gifted me with to strengthen me, know Him more, and receive more revelation of the hidden mysteries of God. I was deeply and forever changed because I spent time daily in the presence of the sovereign God.

Receiving Prophetic Ministry

Receiving prophetic ministry from people who showed me God's love through it changed my life. As I became comfortable with the practice of people sharing with me what they believed God was revealing to them about me, I was encouraged, comforted, and exhorted. I believed that Jesus was revealing, by the power and activity of the Holy Spirit, what He was thinking and feeling about me. I was strengthened in my spirit to trust that God the Father was working out His plan in and through me, but most importantly I grew in confidence in the goodness and nearness of God. I left many evenings of prayer and worship cheered up and filled with joy, hope, peace, renewed purpose, and love. I wanted to understand the biblical grounding for what

was happening through the prophetic encounters, and I found solid foundational teachings in God's Word and other resources about the spirit, gift, and practice of prophecy. I learned how the prophetic ministry was different under the Old Covenant compared to the New Covenant; however, God's desire to reveal Himself to people never changed. I was astounded and inspired how God spoke to people by His still small voice, through His powerful and holy written Word, and through visions. When people shared the revelation with me, I wrote it down in my journal at home, compared it with God's written Word, and talked about it with Jesus. The spiritual, mental, and emotional equipping that I received through the spirit of prophecy prepared me as a servant leader to persevere with humility through hardships, negative thoughts, and temptations from the devil. I was being built up, equipped, and trained as a servant leader who would "truly offer hope and guidance for a new era in human development, and for the creation of better, more caring institutions" (Spears, 2004, p. 9). I do not fully comprehend God's plan for my life, but I am thankful for the prophetic ministry that I received and how God used it to transform me to live confidently and faithfully, and do my best serving staff members and students as the principal at a Christian school.

Dreams from God

God gave me multiple dreams that strengthened my faith, character, calling, and relationship with Jesus. He answered my prayers of desiring to hear His voice through dreams. The Holy Spirit continually uses these dreams to confirm how much Jesus loves me and cares for me, and how powerful the Name and Person of Jesus really is. The Holy Spirit instructed me, directed me, corrected me, affirmed me, called me, equipped me, and encouraged me through dreams. Goll (2012) summarized, "Dreams and visions are wonderful, but they must direct us to Jesus. It is Jesus we really want. Let Him be our goal. In all our getting, let us be sure to get Jesus" (p. 139). The more dreams that God gave me, the more that I understood Jesus' thoughts and feelings. The persistence of asking the Lord to open my spiritual eyes and speak through dreams led to life-changing revelatory edification (Goll & Goll, 2006, p. 42) that God provided through the calling, end time focused, direction, warning, split, heart revelation, spiritual warfare, and intercession dreams.

God has given me other dreams as well, where I was a student in a classroom (Schroeder, May 27, 2012, p. 131; Schroeder, June 30, 2012, p. 136), a teacher in a classroom (Schroeder, June 3, 2012, p. 132), or praying for God's justice to be released on earth as it is in heaven (Schroeder, July 29, 2010, p. 11). Such dreams affirmed God's desire for me to grow as a servant leader and take seriously the divine call associated with it, because "leaders are what they say and do" (Taylor et al., 2007, p. 416). God revealed to me many things through dreams to seal His instruction in me and equip me to know how to transform teachers and students by modelling what I desired to see and hear from them. I am very thankful that God heard my prayers and effectively spoke to me to influence me as a principal. I am humbled that God chose to give me dreams from His fatherly heart and mind, in order to communicate with me and allow me to clearly hear His voice!

Conclusions and Implications

My thoughts, feelings, and actions as a principal were influenced because of how God called, encountered, and changed me in my personal life. Fear was changed to confidence, insecurity was transformed to boldness, and pride was replaced with humility. The professional mistakes, failures, and regrets became part of my journey of hopeful examination as my story of reflection and revision continues. My great desire to know and love Jesus Christ wholeheartedly invited godly infiltration to the deepest parts of my soul and spirit, in order that I would surface victoriously as a changed man and servant leader in the principal role. Fellowshiping with God, receiving prophetic ministry, and being given dreams from God repositioned my heart and

renewed my mind, in order to see Jesus, myself, others, and the world around me differently. Through the consideration of my personal encounters, my thoughts, feelings, and actions as a principal growing in servant leadership were ultimately influenced for the betterment of the students and staff members whom I serve in my school community.

The implications of my experiences are for professional educators to draw ideas, models, and practical tips to educate students. Principals need to reflect on their value systems, get to know Jesus and understand His teachings and values, keep learning in a spirit of humility, and embrace the servant leader theory. "Principals and teachers have a very important function in school effectiveness" (Cerit, 2009, p. 616), and I hope that principals who read this study will develop as servant leaders and have a significant impact on their school communities. Teachers in public schools need a vision for their students to mature and learn from the regular practice of self-examination and reflective journaling. The freedom found in written expression of thoughts and emotions is unparalleled. It leads to personal growth because of the associated processes of metacognition and consciousness. The more time, encouragement, and opportunity that teachers give students to write reflectively, the greater vision and clarity students will have for their lives. Teachers in Christian schools have unique opportunities to pursue to know Jesus Christ and use the same journal writing strategies, except they can elevate the expectation that students will experience the presence of God and encounter Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. They can try holy experiments, which lead to holy expectations and holy encounters with God. Hope and the expectancy of good is needed by all students, teachers, and principals. My prayer is that this study will accentuate the goodness of God, reveal the love and truth of Jesus Christ, implicate the value and heavenly calling on each person's life, and encourage educators to embrace servant leadership and reflective journal writing.

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About the Author

Bryan and Amanda Schroeder are happily raising their four children, Mayla, Callie, Hudson, and Deacon in Brandon, MB. They attend a local church called Catch the Fire, and Bryan continues to serve passionately as principal at Christian Heritage School.