

Building community in freedom and order.

Building this kind of selfless, loving and serving community requires a steward leader and steward followers who are truly free. Only in freedom can a leader allow the room, the ambiguity and the trust necessary for such a culture to emerge. For the owner-leader freedom is a threat to control. Most all owner-leaders have a fear that, if people are given too much freedom, the result will be chaos. Owner-leaders believe people need order, control and boundaries; left to themselves, people will run amok. The steward leader will not deny that people

need some sense of order and a set of basic ground rules within which to operate. However, freedom is a highly prized value, and steward leaders excel in granting it and protecting it. How else could one who has been set free lead others?

Freedom and order are the ingredients for the healthy communities we seek to build. Far from being mutually exclusive, these two characteristics are perfectly matched for the task of developing communities of trust, energy and mutual interdependence. Margaret Wheatley's work in studying self-organizing systems in quantum physics is helpful here.

“The more freedom in self-organization, the more order.” This is, for me, the most illuminating paradox of all. The two forces that we have placed in opposition to one another—freedom and order—turn out to be partners in generating healthy, well-ordered systems. Effective self-organization is supported by two critical elements: a clear sense of identity, and freedom. In

organizations, if people are free to make their own decisions, guided by a clear organizational identity for them to reference, the whole system develops greater coherence and strength. The organization is less controlling, but more orderly.[\[1\]](#)

A steward leader can facilitate this because he or she is free to do so.

Here we see again the danger of owner-leaders who seek control as a means of establishing order. By trying to eliminate the risk of freedom and self-organization, they threaten the very life of the community they are called to steward. Life cannot be controlled. As much as we like to play the owner and exert heavy-handed guidance, we soon see clearly that we have far less control than we believe. As noted previously, Wheatley calls this living “off-balance.”

All life lives off-balance in a world that is open to change. And all of life is self-organizing. We do

not have to fear disequilibrium, nor do we have to approach change so fearfully. Instead we can realize that like all life we know how to grow and evolve in the midst of constant flux. . . . When leaders strive for equilibrium and stability by imposing control, constricting people's freedom and inhibiting local change, they only create the conditions that threaten the organization's survival.[\[2\]](#)

Although she does not come from a Christian worldview, Wheatley's work is interesting because she has discovered in quantum physics that relationships are the basic organizational systems by which all created matter exists.

She also provides a helpful comment on the importance of leaders—by any definition—standing in the midst of these relationships with people who allow us the extreme privilege of leading them.

Many writers have offered new images of effective leaders. Each of them is trying to

create imagery for the new relationships that are required. . . . No one can hope to lead any organization by standing outside or ignoring the web of relationships through which all work is accomplished. Leaders are being called to step forward as helpmates, supported by our willingness to have them lead us.[\[3\]](#)

Wheatley's work has intriguing implications for the steward leader. By discovering relationality as the defining organizing system on which all created reality is based, she has reaffirmed the most central tenet of Christianity: that the Creator of the universe is a wholly interdependent, mutually indwelling triune God. A cosmos in which all matter is defined by its relational structure is exactly the kind of universe we would expect from a triune God who created all things *in his image*. And the four levels of relationship into which we were created are exactly what we would expect as the image bearers of this triune God.

Finally, the freedom Wheatley has discovered is the very foundation for how relational beings are to operate in a world created by a God whose greatest gift to us is the freedom to love him, love ourselves, love our neighbor and love the world he created for us. The tragedy is that for all of her groundbreaking work that fits so compellingly with a biblical and trinitarian understanding of our relational Creator, she has missed the most compelling and critical point by not seeing in this beautiful and complex creation the Creator himself. She marvels at the *handiwork* of the Creator but never marvels at *him*.

And so we must add to Wheatley's work here the all-important corrective that it is only through the transformation of the Holy Spirit and the redemption of all things in Jesus Christ that all other relationships in creation find their being, their meaning and their purpose. Without that basis we are thrown back on ourselves to discover that meaning without its defining reference point. And once again we find ourselves playing the owner and

missing the opportunity for the joyful response of obedience and trust that is ours in Jesus Christ.

What this all means for steward leaders is that our work at building communities that value relationships as ends is an act of obedience that corresponds to both the triune nature of the Creator and the physics upon which his creation operates. While such communities may prove to be a critical component of organizational effectiveness and missional success, they are to be pursued and valued for much more than that. They serve as our greatest witness to the veracity of our faith and the extent of our obedience to the one of whom it is proclaimed,

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and *in*

him all things hold together. (Colossians 1:15-17,
italics added)

How will you, as a steward leader of your organization, build community that values relationships as an end? Will you hold such a process as your ministry's highest priority? Will you undertake this work through joyful obedience and trust God for the outcomes? That is your calling as a steward leader.