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*The Emotionally Healthy Leader* is a profoundly helpful and insightful offering. With remarkable honesty about his own journey, Pete describes key components of healthy Christian leadership, inspiring us to bring our transforming selves to the communities we serve—for the glory of God, for the abundance of our own lives and for the good of many.

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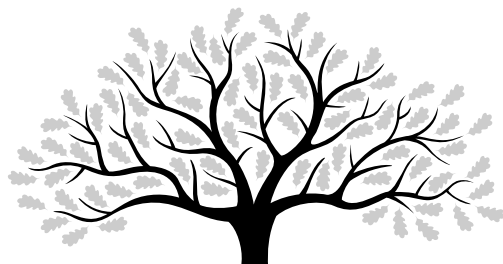
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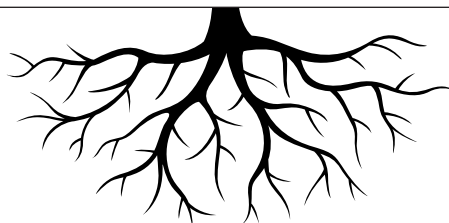
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Available at [www.emotionallyhealthy.org](http://www.emotionallyhealthy.org)

# The Emotionally Healthy Leader



How transforming your inner life will  
deeply **transform** your church, team, and the world



Peter Scazzero

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*The Emotionally Healthy Leader*

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To Geri

who taught me the meaning and  
implications of the word *integrity*



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## MY JOURNEY THROUGH EMOTIONALLY UNHEALTHY LEADERSHIP



I grew up in an Italian-American family in a New Jersey suburb just one mile from the skyscrapers of Manhattan. Although we lived within minutes of one of the most diverse cities in the world, our lives were narrowly defined ethnically, socially, and spiritually. When I was about ten, I remember my dad remarking one day that we were Roman Catholics living in a largely WASP town. I was confused because all our friends were Roman Catholic and most of them were Italian. What else could a person be?

My father was fiercely loyal to the church, but my mom was not. She loved gypsies, fortune-tellers, Tarot card readings, and a variety of other superstitions passed down for generations in her Italian family. When we got sick, for example, the first thing Mom did was call “Fat Josie.” Fat Josie was a medium who prayed some prayers over us to determine if we had the “eyes,” the invisible sign that someone had placed an evil curse on us. She then detailed the necessary steps to remove the “bad luck.”

My older siblings and I rejected both the church and Italian superstitions in our teens. My parents were devastated when my brother Anthony quit college to join the Unification Church, founded by self-proclaimed messiah Sun Myung Moon. At sixteen, I was already a committed agnostic, or I too may have followed in my brother’s footsteps. Neither of us could have known it at the time, but these early choices set us both on spiritual journeys that continue to this day. My brother remains actively committed to the Unification Church, and I have undergone not just one, but several life-changing conversions.

## A Spiritual Journey with Four Conversions

When I tell people I have had multiple conversions, I mean it quite literally. In fact, I've experienced four dramatic conversions, and each one turned my life in a radically new direction.

### *Conversion 1: From Agnosticism to Zealous Christian Leader*

Like many of my friends, I spent most of my teens searching for perfect love in all the wrong places. But everything changed my sophomore year of college when a friend invited me to a concert at a small Pentecostal church near campus. At the end of the concert, the worship leader invited those who wanted to receive Christ to raise their hand. When I tell this story, I often say, "God raised my hand without my permission." It sure felt that way. When the altar call was given, I bolted out of my seat and ran to the front of the church with both hands raised, praising God. I didn't know the difference between the Old and New Testaments, but I did know that I was blind, but now I could see. I also knew without a doubt that God had changed me and set his love upon me. Within nine months, I was president of a Christian group of sixty students, teaching and leading out of whatever I'd learned the week before.

The year was 1976.

I was so profoundly grateful for the love of Jesus, who lived and died on my behalf, that I could not help but share this great news with anyone who would listen, including my family. My father and I especially had many long spiritual conversations. We were sitting in the living room one weekend when I tried again to share Christ, but he remained skeptical.

"Pete, if this Christianity and Jesus you are talking about are true," he said, "then why haven't I ever heard of this 'personal relationship' thing?"

He paused for a moment, and I could see a mix of anger and sadness on his face as he looked out the living room window. "And why didn't someone talk to your brother before he destroyed his life ... before he destroyed our family?" He looked back at me and made a sweeping gesture with his hands. "Where are all these Christians you are talking about? How is it that I'm fifty-six years old and I've never met one?"

I didn't say anything because I knew the answer. Most Christians, especially those who grew up in evangelical homes, were insulated from our Italian-American world. Although my father later gave his life to Christ, I never forgot that conversation. It ignited a fire in my bones, and I set out to bridge that gap, sharing the gospel with anyone who would listen.

My career in ministry leadership continued when I joined the staff of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, an interdenominational ministry that works with students on university campuses. I traveled around New York City and New Jersey, doing open-air preaching and mobilizing students to share Christ with their friends. In my three years on staff, I witnessed many lives radically changed by Jesus Christ. At the same time, I was developing a burden for the church. I wondered what might happen if the richness and vitality of what I had seen with students could be experienced by people in a local congregation. How might the glory of Christ spread even farther if an entire church could be radically changed and mobilized?

So off I went to prepare for church leadership, with three years of graduate study at Princeton and Gordon-Conwell seminaries. During that time, I married Geri, a friend of eight years who also was serving full-time with InterVarsity. Shortly after graduation, we moved to Costa Rica for one year of Spanish language study. I had a vision that we would return to New York to start a church that would bridge racial, cultural, economic, and gender barriers.

When we returned to New York, I served for a year as an assistant pastor in a Spanish-speaking immigrant church and taught in a Spanish seminary. During this time, Geri and I not only perfected our Spanish but were immersed in the world of 2 million undocumented immigrants from around the globe. We became friends with people who had fled death squads in El Salvador, drug cartels in Colombia, civil war in Nicaragua, and implacable poverty in Mexico and the Dominican Republic. It was just the preparation we needed for starting a new church in a working-class, multiethnic section of Queens where more than 70 percent of the 2.4 million residents are foreign born. It also shaped our understanding of the power of the gospel and the church, and how much the largely invisible poor have to teach the prosperous North American church.

In September 1987, forty-five people attended the first worship service of New Life Fellowship Church. God moved powerfully in those early years, and it wasn't long before the congregation had grown to 160 people. After three years, we launched a Spanish-speaking congregation. By the end of our sixth year, attendance at the English service had reached 400, and 250 were attending the Spanish service.

It was an exciting and rewarding experience for a young pastor. People were coming to Christ. The poor were being served in new, creative ways. We were developing leaders, multiplying small groups, feeding the homeless, and planting new churches. But all was not well beneath the surface, especially in my own life.

### *Conversion 2: From Emotional Blindness to Emotional Health*

My soul was shrinking.

We always seemed to have too much to do and too little time to do it. While the church was an exciting place to be, there was no longer any joy in ministry leadership, just an endless, plodding duty of thankless responsibilities. After work, I had little energy left over to parent our daughters or to enjoy being with Geri. In fact, I secretly dreamed of retirement—and I was only in my mid-thirties! I also began to question the nature of Christian leadership. *Am I supposed to be miserable and pressured so that other people can experience joy in God?* It sure felt that way.

I struggled with envy and jealousy of other pastors—those with larger churches, nicer buildings, and easier situations. I didn't want to be a workaholic like my dad or other pastors I knew. I wanted to be content in God, to do ministry in the unhurried pace of Jesus. The question was, *How?*

The bottom began to fall out in 1994 when our Spanish-speaking congregation experienced a church split. I will never forget the shock I felt the day I walked into the Spanish service and two hundred people were missing—just fifty remained. Everyone else had left to start another church. People I had led to Christ, disciplined, and pastored for years were gone without so much as a word.

When the split occurred, I accepted all the blame for the problems that led up to it. I tried to follow Jesus' model of remaining silent

when accused, like a lamb going to slaughter (Isaiah 53:7). I repeatedly thought, *Just take it, Pete. Jesus would.* But I was also full of conflicting and unresolved emotions. I felt deeply wounded and angry at the assistant pastor who had spearheaded the split. Like the psalmist, I was devastated by the betrayal of someone “with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship” (Psalm 55:14). I was full of rage and hate, feelings I couldn’t get rid of no matter how hard I tried to let go and forgive. When I was alone in my car, curse words came out of my mouth almost involuntarily: “He is an @#&%!”

I was now the “cursing pastor.” I did not have a theology for what I was experiencing. Nor did I have a biblical framework for sadness and grief. Good Christian pastors are supposed to love and forgive people. But that wasn’t me. When I shared my predicament with fellow pastors, they were afraid I was sliding into an abyss of no return. I knew I was angry and hurt, but at a deeper level I remained unaware of my feelings and what was really going on in my interior life. My larger problem now was not so much the aftermath of the split, but the fact that my pain was leaking out in destructive ways, and I couldn’t control it. I angrily criticized the assistant pastor who had left. I told Geri I wasn’t sure I wanted to be a Christian anymore, let alone the pastor of a church! The most helpful counsel I received was a referral to a Christian counselor.

Geri and I made an appointment and went, but I felt humiliated, like a child walking into the principal’s office. In our sessions, I blamed my problems on anything and everything I could think of—the complexities of life and ministry in Queens, the unrelenting demands of church planting, Geri, our four small children, spiritual warfare, other leaders, a lack of prayer covering. It did not yet occur to me that my problems might have their roots in something to do with me.

I somehow managed to keep life and ministry going for another year before I finally hit rock bottom. On January 2, 1996, Geri told me she was quitting our church.<sup>1</sup> That was the end of any illusions I may have had about my innocence in the mess that had become my life. I notified church elders about Geri’s decision and acknowledged my uncertainty about what should happen next. The elders suggested that Geri and I attend a one-week intensive retreat to see if we could sort

things out. So we packed our bags and spent five full days with two counselors at a nearby center. My goal for the week was to find a quick way to fix Geri and end our pain so we could then get back to the real business of life and ministry. What I did not anticipate was that we would have a life-transforming encounter with God.

This was my second conversion and, much like the first, I had the experience of knowing I had been blind and suddenly received my sight. God opened my eyes to see I was a human *being*, not a human *doing*, which gave me permission to feel difficult emotions such as anger and sadness. I became aware of the significant impact my family of origin was having on my life, my marriage, and my leadership. Although I initially felt shocked by it all, the awareness also offered me a newly discovered freedom. I stopped pretending to be somebody I was not and took my first steps to be comfortable being Pete Scazzero, with my unique set of strengths, passions, and weaknesses. And Geri and I discovered the importance of love as the measure of maturity and re-prioritized our schedules to place our marriage before ministry.<sup>2</sup>

However, this second conversion also introduced me to painful realities I could no longer deny. I was an emotional infant trying to raise up mothers and fathers of the faith. There were large areas of my life that remained untouched by Jesus Christ. For example, I didn't know how to do something as simple as being truly present or listening deeply to another person. While I was a senior pastor of a large, growing church who had been trained in two leading seminaries, attended the best leadership conferences, and been a devoted follower of Christ for seventeen years, I was stunted emotionally and spiritually.

For nearly two decades, I had ignored the emotional component in my spiritual growth and relationship with God. It didn't matter how many books I might read or how much I devoted myself to prayer, I would remain stuck in repeated cycles of pain and immaturity unless and until I allowed Jesus Christ to transform aspects of my life that were deep beneath the surface.

I discovered that my life is a lot like an iceberg—I was aware of only a fraction of it and largely unaware of the hidden mass beneath the surface. And it was this hidden mass that had wreaked havoc on my family and on my leadership.

It wasn't until I understood that these beneath-the-surface components of my life had not been transformed by Jesus that I discovered the inseparable link between emotional health and spiritual maturity—that it is not possible to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature. In the months and years that followed, Geri and I changed much about the way we did life and ministry.

We began by working a five-day week, not a six-and-a-half-day week. Leading out of our brokenness and weaknesses became a core value. Loving well was now the most important task among all our work for God. We slowed down the pace of ministry at New Life. As we journeyed deep beneath our own icebergs, we invited our leaders to join with us. The result was nothing short of a Copernican revolution—in my journey with Christ, in my family, and in my leadership.<sup>3</sup> New Life Fellowship Church blossomed.

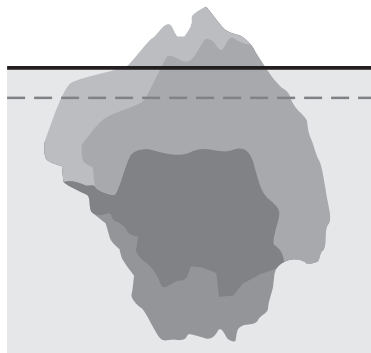
### *Conversion 3: From Busy Activity to Slowed-Down Spirituality*

When I first became a Christian, I fell in love with Jesus. I cherished time alone with him while reading the Bible and praying. Yet, almost immediately, the activity of my life (“doing” for Jesus) began to eclipse the contemplative dimension of my life (“being” with Jesus). I had learned early on about the importance of daily devotions to nurture my relationship with Christ, but especially as I entered ministry leadership, a daily quiet time was simply not enough. It wasn't long before I was engaged in more activity *for* God than my being *with* God could sustain.

My third conversion happened in 2003–2004 when Geri and I took a four-month sabbatical. I had been reading about monastic movements since my seminary days, and now we had the time and space to actually learn from them. We visited a number of monasteries (Protestant, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic) and embraced the monastic rhythms of solitude, silence, Scripture meditation, and prayer.

## **Iceberg Model**

What Lies Beneath the Surface



By the time the sabbatical was over, Geri and I had made radical adjustments to slow down the pace of our lives. Spending time in solitude and silence, praying the Daily Office, and practicing weekly Sabbath became our core spiritual disciplines. We experienced such joy and freedom—in our walks with Christ and in our marriage—that we wondered if perhaps God might be calling us to leave the intensity of New York City and move to a more peaceful place. But it soon became clear that these disciplines were in fact the foundational practices we needed in order to remain in Queens and continue leading the church.

As we began to teach about contemplative spirituality (which I define as slowing down to be with Jesus), integrating it with what we'd already been teaching about emotional health, great power and life were unleashed into our entire church. In every ministry—from small groups to Sunday services and equipping events—people experienced a radical resurgence of their life in Christ. And I experienced a resurgence in my leadership.

I stopped praying for God to bless my goals and started praying for his will.

I learned to wait on the Lord for the Lord himself—not for a blessing.

I worked less. God worked more.

I embraced a more balanced view of God as both immanent and transcendent, and I recognized and affirmed his work both within and beyond us.

I began to measure ministry success by the quality of people's transformed lives rather than by attendance and giving alone. The impact was so astounding that I felt compelled to write about what God was doing in our midst. The result was the publication in 2006 of *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*. The church was growing. Lives were being changed. I felt stronger personally and professionally. But one unconquered continent of my iceberg remained untouched, which was leadership itself.

#### *Conversion 4: From Skimming to Integrity in Leadership*

While New Life was flourishing on many levels, there remained a significant disconnect between what I had learned about emotional and

spiritual health and my leadership role as senior pastor. Specifically, although I was applying the principles of emotionally healthy spirituality (EHS) to my personal life, our family, our small groups and discipleship efforts in the church, I wasn't applying the same principles to my leadership. I was aware of the need to embed EHS more deeply into the organization, but I didn't know how. As I read books and attended seminars, it became clear to me that few others had done this level of integration. So I didn't either — for years.

I avoided making personnel decisions, managing staff and key volunteers, writing thoughtful job descriptions, taking time to plan for meetings, or following through on project details. On the rare occasions when I did do these things, I did so reluctantly. I saw things that clearly needed to be done, but I wanted someone else to do them.

Because I felt overwhelmed by too many things to do and attend to (sermons, pastoral decisions, leadership training events, crises among staff and congregants), I rushed and skimmed my way through some of the more difficult responsibilities of leadership.

- I avoided meetings I knew would be hard or stressful.
- I massaged the truth when being completely honest was too uncomfortable.
- I avoided performance evaluations when someone was doing a poor job.
- I failed to ask difficult questions or speak up when something was clearly wrong.
- I walked into important meetings without having taken time to be clear on my goals and agenda, or to be thoughtful and prayerful about decisions.
- I failed to allow adequate time to follow through on my commitments, which meant I dropped a lot of balls and made it difficult for staff to do their best work.
- I struggled to take the time I needed for silence and abiding in Jesus during intense planning and meeting days.
- Perhaps worst of all, I consistently disregarded the painful indicators that my life and my ministry might not be going as well as I hoped or imagined.

All of these behaviors came to a head in 2007 when several difficult events converged and broke my twenty-year leadership denial. Among them, I had to acknowledge that the church itself had hit a wall. Although we had grown in numbers and incorporated emotional health and contemplative spirituality into the lives of our people, the executive functioning of the church had gone on largely as before. And it was now obvious that addressing this failure had to begin with me.

Even so, I wanted someone else to come in and “get the house in order,” to do the dirty work of hiring, firing, redirecting, and leading the church through the painful changes before us so I could continue to focus on the enjoyable things like preaching and teaching. But in choosing to avoid these difficult leadership issues, both my integrity, and that of our church, was at stake. I finally admitted the truth to myself: the greatest deterrent preventing New Life Fellowship Church from becoming what God intended was *me*.

Once again, I had to take a hard look beneath the surface of my life—this time at the hidden mass of pain and failures related to my role as a leader. As I began to consider the changes I needed to make, I soon realized that applying the principles of emotionally healthy spirituality to the tasks of leadership and building a healthy organizational culture would be far more complex than I had imagined. It was a process that led to an intense and sustained exploration of my inner life and, ultimately, to a fourth conversion.

Common wisdom in leadership practice is to delegate areas of weakness to those who have strong skills in that area. But I knew this wasn't what I needed. Instead, I made the weakest area of my leadership a key focus of my work by formally incorporating the responsibilities of executive pastor into my job. Crazy, right? But I was determined to learn how to perform this role, at least for a season. I canceled speaking engagements outside of New Life, established a teaching team, said no to a book contract, and signed up for a round of intensive counseling to sort through my own beneath-the-iceberg blockages—everything that was getting in the way of being a healthy and effective leader.

Over the next two years, I learned some key skills, many of which did not come easily. In the process, I made mistakes that hurt people. At the same time, I also developed greater courage and a willingness to

have difficult conversations, to follow through on my commitments, and to gather data and facts before making important decisions. I learned that being misunderstood and having a few people leave the church as a result of my decisions was less important than losing my integrity. And even though it was often very painful, I learned to not only acknowledge the truth but to seek it out regardless of where it led me.

I was not and am not a gifted executive pastor. Yet, by investing myself in that role for a time, God was able to address issues within my character that needed to be transformed if the church was to go forward. And it was specifically through the crucible of leadership that God peeled off layers of my false self and taught me to integrate beneath-the-surface transformation with the tasks and responsibilities of leadership.

## You Will Be Challenged

*The Emotionally Healthy Leader* was born out of the struggles and growth I experienced following my fourth conversion in 2007. I have kept a careful journal during these past eight years, chronicling my questions, internal struggles with God, mistakes, and occasional successes. Even so, I was sorely tempted not to write this book. I remain profoundly aware that I am a broken companion on this journey. I write honestly from the hard lessons of my failures. I wish I had known in my twenties, thirties, and forties what is described here.

Every page of this book was written with you—the Christian leader—in mind. As I wrote, I often imagined myself sitting across the table from you over coffee, asking you to tell me about your hopes as well as your leadership struggles and challenges. Drawing on my conversations with the many pastors and leaders I have coached, mentored, and counseled over the years, I imagined you might say something like this:

*I want to be a better leader. I'm open and eager to learn, but I don't know where to start.*

*I know something's not right. I feel like it's only a matter of time before something bad happens.*

*I can't go on this way. I've hit a wall and I need help to make sense of what went wrong so I can get back on my feet and lead differently.*

*I'm stuck in an environment I can't change. I'm a mid-level leader in a negative situation, and I feel powerless to change it.*

*I'm doing the best I can, but I'm not having an impact. I'm running programs but not changing lives. I feel plateaued and stagnant.*

*I'm too overwhelmed by work to enjoy life — with God, myself, and others. I'm missing out on the joys of life because of the crushing demands of leadership.*

Do you relate to any of these statements? If so, then you are an excellent candidate for taking your next steps in leadership growth and transformation. As you read the pages that follow, I hope you will be sobered by the truths you may discover about yourself and your leadership, but I don't want you to despair about the possibilities for your future. I am living proof that it really is possible to tear down old ways of thinking about Christian leadership and make room for the new. I want you to be stretched theologically, emotionally, and spiritually as you discover new insights from Scripture for your life and leadership.

If you take this book seriously, it will require a lot from you — hard work, perseverance, vulnerability, humility, and a willingness to change. To be sure, you will be challenged. But my prayer is that the challenge will be matched by a compelling vision for how things might be different if you embrace the courageous choices that will allow God to transform you and your leadership. I hope you soon find yourself beginning to think things like this:

*Wow, leading can be way better than I imagined.*

*I feel like I've walked through a door into a new world and I never want to go back.*

*It's hard to face up to the ways I've failed, but I have renewed hope in leading again.*

*I finally feel like I'm growing. I'm going somewhere and I can't go back to the way I led and lived before.*

*My excitement for serving as a leader has been rekindled!*

By sharing my story and the hard lessons I've learned along the way, I hope to offer you the unique and personal perspective of one pastor who has been deeply engaged in a local church for more than twenty-eight years. For twenty-six of those years, I served as senior pastor; for the last

two, I have been a teaching pastor and pastor-at-large. Our church in Queens, New York, represents a lower-middle-class, poorer population with people from more than seventy-three nations around the world. It is not a cushy situation by any means, but it has been a rich and fertile field for growth and transformation—personally and in my leadership.

This book is written out of my passion to see the church be faithful and fruitful in her mission for the long term. However, if we hope to transform the world with the good news of Jesus, we must begin by embarking on a personal journey, one that will lead us through a deep, beneath-the-surface transformation in our own lives. On the pages that follow, I offer a road map of sorts for that journey, complete with specific ideas and practices to help you discern God's next steps for you. It's a road map not just for pastors, but for every Christian leader. Whether you are a senior pastor, executive pastor, church staff person, an elder/deacon board member, a small group or ministry leader, a denominational or para-church staff person, a missionary, or marketplace leader, I pray you will find here truths and guidance that will not only help you to become more effective in your role but also to be personally transformed.

### How to Read This Book

The chapters in the book are gathered into two parts, one focused on the inner life, and one focused on the outer life. In part 1, we'll explore the four core tasks of the inner life every leader must undertake: facing one's shadow, leading out of marriage or singleness, slowing down for loving union, and practicing Sabbath delight. If we hope to build strong ministries and organizations, these practices and values must deeply inform our spirituality.

In part 2, we'll build on the foundation of an emotionally healthy inner life by exploring four core outer-life tasks we routinely deal with in the course of leadership. These include planning and decision making, culture and team building, power and wise boundaries, endings and new beginnings.

*The Emotionally Healthy Leader* isn't a quick read. It is meant to be read prayerfully and carefully. I invite you to keep your journal or a pad

of paper with you, making notes and writing down questions as God speaks to you. If you want to maximize the impact of what you read, I encourage you to invite at least one other person—ideally your whole team—to read and wrestle through it with you.

My hope is that this book offers you a door into a whole new way of viewing yourself and a radically new way of leading. Just as our father Abraham was called, I believe each of us is called to leave our familiar country and follow God's invitation to the unknowns of new territory—one full of promise. My prayer is that you will meet the living God in new and fresh ways as you journey through these pages, discovering, like Abraham, that the Lord has gone ahead of you, preparing riches and revelation that will not only transform you but also those you lead.