# LEADERSHIP AND EMOTIONAL SABOTAGE

**RESISTING THE ANXIETY THAT WILL WRECK YOUR FAMILY, DESTROY YOUR CHURCH, AND RUIN THE WORLD**

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# INTRODUCTION

WE LIVE IN AN AGE OF ANXIETY, CONFUSION, and turmoil. There's something "in the air" that feels highly combustible, a highly reactive atmosphere that pervades all institutions of society: from families to churches to businesses to governments. There's a sense that we're sitting on a powder keg—one small match and *kaboom*.

In other words, we live in an age of angst and agitation, marked by fierce anxiety storms that shoot through society, and reactive social stampedes that trample everything in their path. Our world demands that whole communities adapt to their most reactive, unstable, and immature members. We've turned blame-shifting and excuse-making into an art, so that hardly anyone takes responsibility for themselves, their emotions, their actions, and their situation.

Instead, we point fingers and throw stones at "those people" (whoever they are) because *they* are the real problem. We live in a culture constantly looking for a quick fix, a silver bullet, a magic spell that will solve all our problems.

As a result, the individuals and institutions that ought to act as shock absorbers in crisis are instead held hostage and paralyzed by indecision and failures of nerve. Leaders are bombarded by interest groups and agitators, and then put in impossible situations: "We need you to fix the problem, but you can't bring up the elephant in the room." As a result, they adopt appeasement strategies in order to avoid conflict. When entire institutions fall prey to this spirit of appeasement, paralysis, and excuse-making, the most mature and motivated members begin to quietly drift away, which just makes everything worse.

So what should we do about it?

For years, I've recommended Edwin Friedman's *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* as an essential book for Christian leaders. The book is filled with clear-eyed observations about our societal sickness and the ways it manifests in our families, our churches, and our civic institutions. Friedman diagnoses our societal problem in terms of "chronic anxiety."

> Chronic anxiety is systemic; it is deeper and more embracing than community nervousness. Rather than something that resides within the psyche of each one, it is something that can envelop, if not actually connect, people. It is a regressive emotional process that is quite different from

> the more familiar, acute anxiety we experience over specific concerns. Its expression is not dependent on time or events, even though specific happenings could seem to trigger it, and it has a way of reinforcing its own momentum. Chronic anxiety might be compared to the volatile atmosphere of a room filled with gas fumes. Any sparking incident could set off a conflagration, yet rather than trying to disperse the fumes people blame the person who struck the match.[1]

Friedman's solution to this society-wide sickness is what he calls "well-differentiated leadership."

> [A well-differentiated leader is] someone who has clarity about his or her own life goals and, therefore, someone who is less likely to become lost in the anxious emotional processes swirling about. I mean someone who can be separate while still remaining connected and, therefore, can maintain a modifying, non-anxious, and sometimes challenging presence. I mean someone who can manage his or her own reactivity in response to the automatic reactivity of others and, therefore, be able to take stands at the risk of displeasing.[2]

"Differentiated" is a crucial term for Friedman. It summarizes a number of qualities and characteristics that are essential for healthy and effective leaders.

1. Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, rev. ed. (New York: Church Publishing, 2017), 65.
2. Friedman, *Failure of Nerve*, 15.

- Differentiation refers to a direction in life rather than a state of being.
- Differentiation is the capacity to take a stand in an intense emotional system.
- Differentiation is saying "I" when others are demanding "we."
- Differentiation is containing one's reactivity to the reactivity of others, which includes the ability to avoid being polarized.
- Differentiation is maintaining a non-anxious presence in the face of anxious others.
- Differentiation is knowing where one ends and another begins.
- Differentiation is being able to cease automatically being one of the system's emotional dominoes.
- Differentiation is being clear about one's own personal values and goals.
- Differentiation is taking maximum responsibility for one's own emotional being and destiny rather than blaming others or the context.[3]

All of this is helpful. Friedman was a Jewish rabbi, and in some respects, his mind ran in biblical ruts. As a result, many of his insights track with biblical principles.

However, as much as I appreciate Friedman, his theology and anthropology are lacking in some significant ways. He advocates a form of process theology, and his commitment to evolutionary biology is apparent throughout the book. As

3. Friedman, *Failure of Nerve*, 195.

a result, readers have to wade through piles of dodgy theology and evolutionary gobbledygook in order to get the good stuff. What's more, Friedman tends to operate with a specialized clinical vocabulary that often requires translation into more biblical language. What Friedman calls "self-differentiation with a non-anxious presence," the Bible calls "sober-mindedness." What Friedman calls "reactivity," the Bible calls "passions." "People-pleasing" and "fear of man" are the biblical terms for what Friedman calls "herding." And so on.

This book is my attempt to do justice to Friedman's insights while grounding them in the Scriptures, and extending and applying them in the home, the church, and the world.

The structure is simple. In Chapter 1, I use Shakespeare, Friedman, and the book of Genesis to diagnose our cultural sickness. In Chapter 2, I propo-se a biblical cure, oriented by the fifth, the tenth, and the first commandments. In Chapter 3, I summarize key challenges to biblical leadership. Chapters 4–6 then show what faithful, sober-minded leadership looks like in the home, the church, and the world.

My hope and prayer is that God will use this simple book to encourage and strengthen Christian leaders to fulfill their calling by leading with gravity and gladness, with sober-mindedness and maturity, with steady purpose and deep joy, so that we rebuild the walls of Christendom and show forth the excellencies of the living God in the joy and gladness of our families, our churches, our schools, and our communities.

CHAPTER 1

# A SHAKESPEAREAN POWDER KEG

AS WE TRY TO MAKE SENSE OF OUR CULTURAL moment, we often find ourselves baffled. Families, churches, and communities have been inexplicably torn apart by divisions and conflict. People who once were like-minded and engaged in shared projects find themselves incapable of working together. Many of us have watched in dismay as people we know—family members, church members, neighbors—have drifted, or even jumped headlong into foolishness and sin. We've seen otherwise godly pastors coddling sin and error and catering to agitators. Institutional leaders walk on

eggshells in their board rooms because of the crackle in the air. Government officials jump from crisis to crisis, and seem constitutionally incapable of making wise decisions. There's a palpable sense that no one is in charge, and no one knows what to do.

Everyone wants to blame the internet. Social media, they say, is responsible for the fracturing of our communities and the polarized tribalism that surrounds us. And there are material, economic, social, and technological factors that have contributed to this age of agitation: the Industrial Revolution, followed by the Sexual Revolution and Digital Revolution; the expansion of mobility, globalization, migration, and so on. And our technologies undoubtedly contribute to what ails us. They amplify and reinforce our spiritual and social sickness.

But the problem runs deeper than Twitter, Facebook, and cable news.

And so as we think about living in the midst of the Great Unraveling, in an age of anxiety, agitation, and turmoil, I want to begin our diagnosis in perhaps a surprising place. I want to begin with Shakespeare.

## THE FOUNDATION OF SOCIAL ORDER

One of Shakespeare's lesser-known plays is *Troilus and Cressida*. It retells the story of the Trojan War, featuring many of the heroes from Homer's epic poem.

In Act 1, Scene 3, the Greek generals are discussing why it is taking so long for them to defeat Troy. Despite seven

years of war, they are no closer to victory. Agamemnon, the supreme leader of the Greek forces, attributes their difficulty to the "trials of great Jove,"[1] who seeks to prove their constancy and mettle with adversity and hardship. Apart from such tests, there is no distinction between the bold and the coward, the wise and the fool, the hard and the soft. Trials separate the true men from the pretenders. Nestor, an older general, echoes his analysis: "In the reproof of chance [i.e. fortune] lies the true proof of men."[2] When the seas are smooth and the waves placid, even girly men will sail. But when the North Wind howls and the tempests rage, you see who the true sailors are. "Valour's *show* and valour's *worth* divide in storms of fortune."[3] According to both generals, the reason that the Greek army has been unable to conquer Troy is because the gods are testing them with trials and hardships. For these generals, the reasons for their failure are external.

And perhaps Agamemnon and Nestor have a point. External challenges do matter. But then Ulysses speaks and offers a very different analysis, concluding that Troy still stands, not because of its own strength, but because of a particular sickness among the Greeks. The problem, he says, is not external, but internal. And most importantly for our purposes, the sickness that Ulysses describes infects not only armies, but entire societies—including our own.

1. William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, ed. Kenneth Muir (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 1.3.19.
2. Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, 1.3.32–33.
3. Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, 1.3.45–46.

Troy, yet upon his bases, had been down,
And the great Hector's sword had lacked a master,
But for these instances:
The specialty of rule hath been neglected,
And look how many Grecian tents do stand
Hollow upon this plain, so many hollow factions.
When that the general is not like the hive,
To whom the foragers shall all repair,
What honey is expected? Degree being vizarded,
Th'unworthiest shows as fairly in the mask.
The heavens themselves, the planets, and this centre
Observe degree, priority, and place,
Insisture, course, proportion, season, form,
Office, and custom, in all line of order.
And therefore is the glorious planet Sol
In noble eminence enthroned and sphered
Amidst the other; whose med'cinable eye
Corrects the influence of evil planets,
And posts like the commandment of a king,
Sans check to good and bad. But when the planets
In evil mixture to disorder wander,
What plagues, and what portents, what mutiny,
What raging of the sea, shaking of earth,
Commotion in the winds, frights, changes, horrors,
Divert and crack, rend and deracinate
The unity and married calm of states
Quite from their fixure! O, when degree is shaked,
Which is the ladder of all high designs,
The enterprise is sick! How could communities,

Degrees in schools, and brotherhoods in cities,
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,
The primogeniture and due of birth,
Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,
But by degree stand in authentic place?
Take but degree away, untune that string,
And hark what discord follows. Each thing meets
In mere oppugnancy. The bounded waters
Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores,
And make a sop of all this solid globe;
Strength should be lord of imbecility,
And the rude son should strike his father dead.
Force should be right; or rather, right and wrong,
Between whose endless jar justice recides,
Should lose their names, and so should justice too.
Then everything includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite;
And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself. Great Agamemnon,
This chaos, when degree is suffocate,
Follows the choking.
And this neglection of degree it is
That by a pace goes backward with a purpose
It hath to climb. The general's disdained
By him one step below, he by the next,
That next by him beneath; so every step,
Exampled by the first pace that is sick

> Of his superior, grows to an envious fever
> Of pale and bloodless emulation.
> And 'tis this fever that keeps Troy on foot,
> Not her own sinews. To end a tale of length,
> Troy in our weakness stands, not in her strength.[4]

The key concept in Ulysses's speech is what he calls "Degree." Degree is the principle of cultural order or rule or hierarchy. It includes things like "priority, and place, insisture, course, proportion, season, form, office, and custom, in all line of order." It's the organizing principle of a social body, and is therefore essential to all social purposes; in Ulysses's words, it is "the ladder of all high designs." Communities, schools, guilds and businesses, trade between nations, peaceful relationships between generations, political order, and social merit all stand in their true place "by degree."

We might put it this way. Every society has relationships of difference: husband-wife, parent-child, customer-merchant, employer-employee, teacher-student, magistrate-citizen, elders-youth, pastor-congregation. Within a given society, there is a kind of family resemblance in all of these different relationships. There is a quality, an atmosphere, a common thread, that integrates and ties all of these various relationships together. This is Degree (with a capital D). It's the bond or glue that keeps people separate but connected, distinct yet related. It's the cadence that regulates a culture's rhythms and seasons, its offices and customs, its sense of propriety and justice.

4. Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, 1.3.74–136.

Once you notice it, Ulysses's idea of Degree turns up everywhere—and of course, this is because God made the world in a particular way. We see Degree in God's ordering of creation in Genesis 1. God separates light from darkness, but then binds them together as Day and Night. He separates earth and heavens, seas and land, fish and birds and beasts, and each of these according to their kinds. There are many separations and differences and distinctions that God makes, but they're all a part of one majestic whole, one natural order, one Cosmos.

Degree in the natural world finds its counterpart in the social world. As C.S. Lewis said, "I do not believe that God created an egalitarian world. I believe the authority of parent over child, husband over wife, learned over simple to have been as much a part of the original plan as the authority of man over beast."[5]

Degree is often embodied in a particular authority or authorities. In a tribal society, this might be the chief or the shaman. In an army, it's the general. In a monarchy, it's the king. In our society, it might be the president or perhaps all three branches of our government as an institution. Within the family, it's the husband or father.

Ulysses uses a number of metaphors to describe Degree. He depicts it using the sun and the solar system. Degree operates like gravity, regulating the orbit of all of the planets so that they don't collide with one another, so that their heavenly dance is flawless and harmonious. Planets orbit the sun, and

5. C. S. Lewis, "Membership" in *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 168.

moons orbit the planets. In the same way, families, churches, businesses, and states orbit around fathers, ministers, bosses, and kings. Degree, then, operates in the invisible and mysterious way that gravity or magnetism does in the natural order.

Or, to use a different analogy, Degree is like the melody line in a symphony that guides and governs the harmony of the song. The different spheres of society are the different categories of instruments: strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion. Each section has a representative leader—the first chair—who leads and guides the rest of the musicians in their performance.

## CRISIS OF DEGREE

This is how Degree ought to function. But in a fallen world, it frequently doesn't. Why not? According to Ulysses, Degree can be neglected, vizarded (or concealed), shaked, untuned, and suffocated. With what result? When the specialty of rule (i.e., the bonds of authority) is neglected, all you're left with are hollow factions. When degree is shaked, enterprise (ambition) is sick. Untune the string of degree, and hark, what discord follows. When degree is suffocated, chaos follows the choking. To be more concrete, when Degree collapses, soldiers are ineffective in battle, as envy and rivalry spread through the ranks like fever, resulting in either internal conflict or aimless malaise. That's why the Greek armies have failed to conquer Troy.

When gravity weakens, the planets wander and mutiny and collide with one another. When the melody line of a