

LEADERSHIP, SPIRITUALITY AND COMPLEXITY

Wilberforce and the Abolition of the Slave Trade

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Spirituality in the workplace and theories of complexity are two emerging fields of research that are making an important contribution to the study of leadership practice. In this chapter we take the opportunity of the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in the former British Empire to reflect on related ideas from these fields and apply them to a study of leadership in this movement. Our focus is the influence in Georgian society of William Wilberforce and the 'Clapham Group' from 1789 until the passing of the Slave Trade Act in 1807. This case study is chosen because of the extensive literature that details both the overt role of spirituality in the practice of this group and the issues of complexity in this social and political campaign.

In contrast to studies of Wilberforce that focus on his character as a leader (Guinness, 1999), this study of leadership and spirituality suggests an interpretation of transformational change as a complex process that is best understood as emergent rather than led (Stacey, 2003). From this perspective leadership is just one form of participation that is an important, but not determining, component of change as a process of self-organisation. This perspective has some links with the post heroic models of leadership (Badaracco, 2002; Heifetz and Laurie, 1997), with an emphasis upon leadership as a shared, relational practice. However, because of the centrality of power relating in Stacey's theory of complex responsive processes, the analysis is less benign than much of this literature (see Fletcher, 2004, for a helpful critique).

We begin by describing the involvement of Wilberforce and the Clapham Group in the abolition movement. This is followed by a brief outline of Stacey's theory of complex responsive processes, and key themes from the growing body of literature on spirituality and leadership. Stacey's theory draws our attention to narrative themes and a focus on conversation rather than on the character and behaviour of particular individuals. Two sets of narrative theme are identified that are common to the leadership and spirituality literatures: (i) values and beliefs, and (ii) community, connection and integration.

Whilst a fundamental implication of Stacey's theory is that the emergence of change cannot be understood as arising from the planned intentions of individuals, the theory does suggest that attention to certain factors by leaders may contribute to the potential for change to emerge. We will discuss three of these, the quality of conversation, participation, and diversity, in relation to leadership and spirituality in the practice of Wilberforce and the Clapham Group. We conclude with a review of the implications for the practice of modern day leaders.

WILBERFORCE AND THE CLAPHAM GROUP

Wilberforce was born in 1759 to a wealthy family at a time when Great Britain was plagued by significant social problems. Friends with the rich and powerful, he entered parliament in 1780. However, a major transformation occurred in his life in the mid-1780s when he converted to evangelical Christianity. This led directly to his involvement in the abolition movement (Hill, 2004).

Wilberforce came from the same privileged ruling classes who later in parliament opposed his arguments for abolition, many of whom had gained their wealth from the slave trade. Furneaux suggests that he had 'lived a life of pleasure for which his wealth, gaiety and charm made him perfectly equipped' (1974, p. 11). After graduating he spent £8000, a small fortune, purchasing his seat as MP for Hull – a common practice of that period.

At this time the evangelical movement was having a growing impact in the upper middle classes, as well as in wider society through preachers like Wesley and White. In October 1784 Wilberforce travelled by carriage around Europe with the clergyman Isaac Milner, an old friend. On this trip, just before they left Nice on the 5th February 1785 they decided to read and adopt as a theme for their conversation Doddridge's *Rise and Progress of Religion*. Wilberforce later recorded in his diaries that these conversations with Milner had an unsettling effect upon him until

'On October 25 [1785] he wrote: "[I] began three or four days ago to get up very early. In the solitude and self-conversation of the morning [I] had thoughts, which I trust will come to something." In these times of serious reflection, "the deep guilt and black ingratitude of my past life forced itself upon me in the strongest colours, and I condemned myself for having wasted my precious time, and opportunities, and talents.'" (Belmonte 2002, p. 83)

His popularity as a witty and engaging guest at the 'best' parties was replaced by a concern at his increasing melancholia. He met with John Newton, the ex-slave trader and writer of the hymn, *Amazing Grace*, who had converted to Christianity and became a clergyman. Under Newton's influence Wilberforce committed to 'real Christianity' (Wilberforce, 1830). Newton encouraged him to foster his relationships with the Thornton family, evangelical Christians whom Wilberforce had known for many years.

Following his conversion, through participation in a number of evangelical networks, Wilberforce was drawn in to the abolitionist campaign. One network of social-minded evangelicals would meet at Barham Court in Teston, the home of Sir Charles and Lady Margaret Middleton. The Middletons asked Wilberforce to lead the movement for abolition in Parliament. It was a year later, in 1787, at dinner with Thomas Clarkson and some other friends, that Wilberforce first went public with his intention to accept the Middletons' proposition. He subsequently spoke with Prime Minister Pitt, who was supportive. Taking a public lead in the House clearly played to Wilberforce's strength as an orator as well as his ability to mobilise support from his powerful friends.

In the preceding years Thomas Clarkson had been busy amassing evidence of the slave trade so that any motion in Parliament might carry the weight of the brutal facts of the trade, as well as an accurate assessment of its economic significance. He had visited the ports, spoken to slave traders and gained detailed information on the conditions in which slaves were transported and the manner of their treatment. Travelling throughout the country he befriended the editors of local newspapers, converted them to the Abolitionist cause, and founded new branches of the Abolitionist society. Eventually he had acquired a mass of evidence, including the names and histories of 20,000 seamen (Clarkson, 1808).

Clarkson worked with Wilberforce to prepare his first parliamentary speech on abolition in 1789. Belmonte (2002) suggests

‘Wilberforce’s speech had a powerful impact on the House. Burke stated that the speech “equalled anything he had heard in modern times...” Pitt later said, “Of all the men I knew Wilberforce has the greatest natural eloquence.”’ (p. 112).

Wilberforce’s leadership role as a hub for conversation was clear to his close friend and MP for Southwark, Henry Thornton, who encouraged a number of influential professionals to form ‘a colony of Saints at Clapham’. Furneaux (1974) argues that Thornton had a deliberate strategy for promoting the influence of evangelical Christianity in society through this group, and Wilberforce had a particular role:

“On the whole I am in hopes some good may come out of our Clapham system, Mr Wilberforce is a candle that should not be hid under a bushel. The influence of his conversation is great and striking.” (p. 117).

Throughout the abolitionist campaign Wilberforce was the parliamentary figurehead for a large and organised movement. Whilst a number of early parliamentary motions for abolition were to be defeated, the work of the Clapham Group finally culminated in the abolition of the trade in 1807. The participation of James Stephen, a maritime lawyer and member of the Clapham Group, proved decisive when he developed a brilliant legislative strategy that successfully outflanked the parliamentary opponents of abolition.

LEADERSHIP AND COMPLEX RESPONSIVE PROCESSES

The previous section outlined how Wilberforce came to occupy a position of leadership in the abolitionist movement. It also sought to locate his role and activity within a wider network of relationships, most notably through his conversion to evangelical Christianity. Stacey’s (2003) theory of complex responsive processes offers an explanation of the emergence of social transformation in the ‘micro processes’ of such relationships:

‘Instead of macro processes (systems) of participation and reification, the theory of complex responsive processes is one micro process (one social act) of gesture-response in which meaning emerges. This micro process is at one and the same time communicative interaction and power relating.’ (p. 355)

It will be argued that the leadership of Wilberforce and others within the Clapham Group may be understood as aspects of a complex, emergent social process. Our focus here will be on the role of evangelical spirituality in fostering a number of significant conversational themes, contributing to the emergence of an influential social movement. However, it should be noted that this focus does not suggest that the success of the abolitionist movement was achieved solely through those with an evangelical spirituality; in fact, quite the contrary. Different political groupings within parliament were compelled to cooperate in order to achieve the abolition of the slave trade. Stacey emphasises the importance of such diversity.

Unlike approaches to complexity that employ systems thinking (Fairholm 2004, Styhre 2002), the individual is not the prime agent of emergent change in the theory of complex responsive processes. Narrative *themes*, not individuals, are the basis of emergent self-organization, for it is not people but

‘...themes organizing conversations, communication and power relations. What is organizing itself, therefore, is not individuals but the pattern of their relationships in communicational and power terms...’ (2003, p. 332)

Stacey continues,

‘...conversational processes are organising the experience of the group of people conversing and from them, there is continually emerging the very minds of the individual participants at the same time as group phenomena of culture and ideology are emerging.’ (2003, p. 350)

In seeking to understand the leadership of Wilberforce and the other members of the Clapham Group, Stacey’s theory draws our attention away from the individuals and puts our focus upon the conversational processes, the culture and, in this situation, the ideology of evangelical spirituality. However, more than this, the conversational processes of parliament, professional business, and wider social movements need also to be considered. It is in the interplay of all of these that we see a challenge to accepted values and beliefs emerging, and as a consequence a fresh and contemporary ideology coming to have an influence at all levels in society.

Stacey suggests that it is necessary to give attention to the process of conversation, to its free flowing or repetitive character, and to the identification of themes. In the interplay of responsive processes, in which themes become significant, interact with other themes, and change form, it is possible to understand organisation as a pattern of interdependence, in which power relations form and develop.

These self-organizing processes of communicating enact webs of power relations, which, depending upon the quality of various factors such as the quality of participation and the presence of diversity, will lead either to novel forms of organising, in free flowing conversation, or to stability, in stuck or repetitive conversation.

The theory of complex responsive processes suggests an understanding of leadership as a theme in an emerging pattern of relating. The significance of positional leaders does not necessarily diminish, but power relations are understood differently. In particular, this view recognises that these individuals are not ‘in control’ and cannot present a blueprint for an innovative future (Stacey, 2003, p. 334). A process understanding of the role of positional leaders in conversations, and the importance of listening, is beautifully summarised by Chester Barnard in his now classic treatise on the *Functions of the Executive*:

‘many things a leader tells others to do were suggested to him by the very people he leads... this sometimes gives the impression that he is a rather stupid fellow... In a measure this is correct. He has to be stupid enough to listen a great deal ...and he has at times to be a mere centre of communication’ (Barnard, 1948, p. 93)

LEADERSHIP AND SPIRITUALITY

It has been suggested that our understanding of leadership in the abolition movement can be enhanced through an appreciation of the theory of complex responsive processes. It has also been argued that evangelical spirituality played a role in this movement, involving Wilberforce and the Clapham Group. We now turn our attention

to the growing body of literature that is shedding light on our understanding of leadership and spirituality. This literature identifies a number of the narrative themes that help us to understand the complex responsive processes at play in the emergence of the abolition movement.

Mirvis (1997), in his classic paper on 'Soul Work' in organizations, touches on many of the themes that are of importance in our discussion, not least with his emphasis on issues of conversation within communities. In making connections between leadership and spirituality he also draws attention to the importance of 'leading from within' (p. 198), which arises from finding a sense of meaning that has a mobilising effect upon the individual. We see an example of this in Wilberforce's conversion experience, with his diary account recording the 'inner conversations' and the personal transformation that took place over the period 1784-86.

A number of authors have suggested possible links between spirituality and organisational leadership (Fairholm, 1996; Strack, Fottler, Wheatley and Sodomka, 2002). In one form or another, the link between spirituality and leadership is to be found in the experience of a deeper meaning in life. This is referred to in many different ways, but appears to have the common characteristic of something important engaging the self, which constitutes a spiritual transformation, and this in turn engaging others, which is the basis of leadership.

Values are at the centre of Vaill's (1998) conception of spirituality and form the basis of the connectedness between organisational members, including between leaders and followers. He argues that where others experience the leader's values as able to stand up to scrutiny, then there is the potential for a deeper level of connection. These ideas are further developed in the literature on values-based leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1994; Fry, 2003; Shamir et al, 1993). Bennis and Nanus (1997) suggest that the ability to engage others is a function of 'trust, integrity and positioning' (p. 174), which combines core themes in the values-based leadership literature with Barnard's notion of leaders as occupying a position at the 'centre of communication'.

In relation to issues of participation and diversity that will be discussed in more detail in the following section, there is an important debate in the current literature on spirituality and leadership concerning the relationship between religion and spirituality (Bell and Taylor, 2004). Some seek to distinguish between, indeed to separate, the two. Steingard (2005) argues for focusing on spirituality rather than religion in organisations 'because we are far from realizing any consensual religion in the so-called everyday life of the workplace' (p. 228).

In the Clapham Group we see religion and spirituality as strongly interdependent. This was sometimes overt in the way Wilberforce took up his leadership role in Parliament. For example, in his first major speech on the slave trade, on May 12, 1789, he spoke for three hours calling for the abolition, making his Christian beliefs and values a strong element in his argument that the trade was murderous and inhumane (Belmonte 2002: 112).

From the perspective of complex responsive processes, this interplay of religion and spirituality in leadership is both significant and problematic. It is significant in the sense that the values and beliefs embodied in evangelical Christianity form the substance of the 'deeper meaning' for Wilberforce and for the wider conversations

that the spread of this religion was having throughout Georgian society at this time. These are the conversational themes that, through complex responsive processes, contributed to the social transformation that has been described. Wilberforce was able to 'lead from within' because of his religious and spiritual conversion. These conversational themes engaged others for whom the expressed values also resonated, not only within parliament but throughout the country and beyond.

This combination of religion and spirituality is problematic to the extent that religious language can be excluding and even offensive. It has the capacity to inhibit conversation as much as to facilitate it. Stacey argues that high quality conversation is essential for emergent change. This negative consequence of religion that Steingard identifies led directly to the fact that Wilberforce was unpopular with many in parliament.

However, whilst clearly a source of some conflict, this case study of the abolition movement suggests that it is not always possible to separate religion and spirituality, even if some might prefer to. It is our contention that it is more important to give attention to high quality conversation and participation in the presence of a diversity of values and beliefs, including religious ideology. This is addressed in detail below where we discuss how the abolition movement ultimately managed to transcend religious rivalries.

QUALITY OF CONVERSATION AND PARTICIPATION

The theory of complex responses processes suggests that the spiritual transformation in Wilberforce was essentially the same as the social transformation that was occurring within Georgian society. However, when considering transformation in an individual mind, the pattern of inner conversations must be considered. This is significant for our consideration of spirituality and leadership, because most forms of spirituality have developed some very specific forms of 'inner conversation', such as prayer, meditation and study. Stacey suggests that

'Mind is silent conversation, that action of a body directed to itself, which is private meaning, or consciousness. The silent conversation is the same process as the conversation of gestures between bodies and in this sense mind is always a social phenomenon.' (p. 322)

This is in keeping with Driver's (2005 p. 1096) psychoanalytically informed view of the self: "that we construct our selves and our identities in discourse..." Stacey elaborates,

'...power, ideology and emotion [are] at the centre of social relationships and therefore at the centre of conversation. All of these factors will, thus, characterise the silent conversations individuals have with themselves. Minds too will be taken up with power relationships, ideological and emotional interchanges of a body with itself, some of which will be the voices of group opinion.' (p. 326).

Wilberforce's two year struggle as he converted to evangelical Christianity may be better understood with an appreciation of this emotional mix of evolving power relations and shifting ideology. This was not an idle assent to a new set of values and beliefs, but a more profound re-orientation of his understanding of himself. This was

the basis of Wilberforce's leadership, 'leading from within' (Mirvis, 1997) with the capacity to connect deeply with others through being in touch with the deeper parts of himself (Vaill 1998, p.219).

However, Wilberforce's leadership, like the followership of those he led, is understood from the perspective of the theory of complex responsive processes as merely a part of a larger process. For our purposes, Wilberforce's leadership is merely an expression, not the source, of an ongoing and emergent conversation. Wilberforce's leadership as participation in a wider process is made clear by tracing the genesis of the abolitionist movement.

Wilberforce took up the challenge in 1787, more than one hundred years after the twin issues of the slave trade and slavery were raised at a meeting of German Quakers across the Atlantic in Germantown, Pennsylvania. Quaker friends were persistently advised to avoid the trade, until in 1774 a 'decree of expulsion from the Society was passed on any Friend who should persist in concerning himself with the Trade. At the same time, manumission of existing slaves was recommended to all Friends and in 1776 it was made compulsory' (Coupland, 1923, p.76). This graphically describes for the Quaker community the 'pattern of their relationships in communicational and power terms...' (Stacey, 2003, p. 332)

In Great Britain there were a number of lone voices speaking out in the late seventeenth century, including an Anglican clergyman named Godwyn, and Baxter, a well known non-conformist. However, it was again the Quakers who mobilised an organised movement against the trade in 1724. In 1761, like their Pennsylvanian counterparts, they passed a resolution to disown all Friends who continued to participate in the trade. Over this period the Wesleyans followed the Quakers' lead, with first Whitefield hinting that the slave trade was anti-Christian (1739); then John Wesley, in 1774, published *Thoughts Upon Slavery* (Coupland, 1923, p. 79). The values and beliefs of Quaker and evangelical Christian spirituality were increasingly mobilised to support the abolition movement, and the extent to which one was able or not to remain a part of these communities became an increasingly prevalent theme.

Over this period the same theme is evident in the popular literature of the time. Basker (2002) collected 400 poems from more than 250 different poets, arguing that 'poets were the most outspoken and persistent critics of slavery, and fostered massive changes in public perception and attitude.' (p. xvii). This is not a view merely promoted some two centuries later: both Thomas Clarkson (1808), a leader of the abolitionists, friend of Wilberforce and member of the Clapham Group, and Henri Grégoire (1808/1996) argued that writers played a central role in the demise of the slave trade and slavery.

QUALITY OF DIVERSITY

An understanding of the wide range of participation in the abolitionist movement also allows us to appreciate the diversity that existed in this movement. Stacey argues that diversity is essential for the emergence of novelty and change. We will consider the quality of diversity in two areas: firstly in the range of individuals, from differing professions, who shared Wilberforce's evangelical spirituality, and worked actively within him against the slave trade; and, secondly, those other groupings who shared

the ambition to abolish the trade, but held radically different, sometimes even opposing, beliefs and practices.

Firstly, those who worked closely with Wilberforce in the fight against the slave trade included a large number of evangelical Christians. Some of those closest to him lived on Clapham Common, and are referred to as the Clapham Community. The 'Clapham Group' was a wider network spread throughout the country. They possessed a wide range of skills, professions and abilities, including lawyers, academics, educators, writers, clergy, merchant bankers, researchers and politicians. As we have seen the participation of this diverse range of individuals provided the basis for extensive and creative engagement with the abolitionist cause. There was a third grouping in parliament, known a little disparagingly as 'the Saints', comprising 29 evangelical MPs who voted with Wilberforce on a number of key issues. These three groupings participated in a range of political, religious, and social movements, with connections to hubs of influence throughout the country and the wider empire.

Secondly, 'the Saints' in parliament collaborated with parliamentary groups who had philosophies very different to their own, including the Whigs and Dissenters. This tolerance of diversity made them possibly the first in British parliamentary history to identify and use 'co-belligerents' to achieve their objectives. In the period of nearly two decades in which Wilberforce and the Clapham Group worked to bring about legislative change to abolish the slave trade there was extreme diversity of opinion and argument. The extreme positions represented both within parliament and within society as a whole were held by the abolitionists on the one hand and significant sections of the ruling classes on the other. The wealth of the latter had been and continued to be generated directly or indirectly through the slave trade. Importantly, the participation and support of those who were at neither extreme was of critical importance in the success of either side. Perhaps more than most organisations, this battle for change would come down, ultimately, to a vote.

In this context it is interesting to observe the creativity that emerged in the actions of both sides as they sought to shift opinion in their favour. For example, in 1796 Wilberforce proposed the motion for abolition again. The first and second readings were both passed. On its third reading, however, it was defeated by 74 to 70. quotes Wilberforce recorded in his diary:

“Ten or twelve of those who had supported me were absent in the country, or on pleasure. Enough [were] at the Opera to have carried it”... His opponents, never ones to miss an opportunity, had given free opera tickets to some whom they knew would support his abolition bill.’ (Belmonte, 2002, p. 134).

It is a telling example of the nature of complex responsive processes that, ultimately, the abolition of the slave trade may have been delayed for over ten years by the micro process of the giving and receiving of a few opera tickets.

Finally, after Pitt's untimely death in 1806, at the age of 47, Wilberforce found himself working with Grenville, for whom he had some dislike, and Fox, leader of the opposition. Perversely, it was a motion set before parliament by Grenville that was ultimately passed and in working with an old enemy Wilberforce finally saw the fruit of nearly twenty years work:

‘The night of February 23, 1807 was unforgettable... The evening reached its climax when Solicitor-Captain Sir Samuel Romilly came to the closing

remarks of his deeply moving speech. Romilly [stated that Wilberforce would be]... able to lie down in peace because he had “preserved so many millions of his fellow creatures.” The House of Commons rose to its feet, turned to Wilberforce and began to cheer. They gave three rousing hurrahs whilst Wilberforce sat with his head bowed and wept. Then at 4 a.m., the Commons voted to abolish the slave trade by an overwhelming majority, 283 to 16.’ (Belmonte 2002: 148)

Whilst Wilberforce and the Clapham Group were overt about the religion that underpinned their own spirituality, they also worked actively with those of other beliefs (religious and secular) who shared a commitment to act, as Vaill suggests, “on values that transcend the sheer material conditions and events of the world” (1998, p. 219).

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERS TODAY

This paper has explored the contribution that can be made to understanding leadership in an emerging social and political movement through the lenses of complex responsive processes and spirituality. Many of the insights derived from this study, from two centuries ago, are as relevant now as they were at the time. Implicit in Stacey’s theory is the importance of conversational processes that comprise a high quality of listening. We see this not only in a preparedness to listen to others and the themes that emerge in public conversation, but also in a preparedness to listen in the private conversations of the leader’s mind.

Wilberforce was transformed by his inner conversations, and this transformation was important in his ability to play a role in an emerging social movement. This highlights the developmental potential for leaders of forms of meditative or reflective practice (see, for example, Jaworski, 1998) and the development of greater levels of self-awareness. Stacey refers to this development of self-awareness as ‘paying more attention to the quality of your own experience of relating and managing in relationship with others’ (2003, p. 422).

This is not necessarily a simple or pleasant process. There is a challenge to leaders to be prepared to serve (Greenleaf, 1977) and to pay a price in the struggle required to engage in the complex power relations that emerge and unfold. The two years of struggle in Wilberforce’s spiritual conversion were followed by participation in two decades of struggle in the cause of abolition. Similar modern day leadership exemplars include Ghandi and Mandela (Nair, 1997; Mandela, 1994).

Underpinning the theory of complex responsive processes is an awareness of the essential connectedness of human beings. The literature on workplace spirituality identifies this as the basis of a value set that challenges self-centred behaviours, particularly in the exercise of power. Wilberforce and the Clapham Group sought to acknowledge their connectedness with others – whether slave or free – and to work from a values base that recognised equality as a basic human right. This form of principled leadership stands in contrast to the unethical behaviour that characterises the way some choose to participate in their organisations, illustrated by studies of Enron, WorldCom, and Andersen.

This connectedness is also significant at a time when many social and global conflicts are characterised by fundamentalism and exclusivity. The ability to engage in a high quality of conversation and participation and with increasing levels of diversity seem more essential than ever. This does not need to be at the expense of one's own values and beliefs, but it does require a belief in the value of finding ways to talk and listen to one another.

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