

PRINCIPLES & PRACTICES »

- Thriving Communities
- Vibrant Institutions
- Christ-Shaped Leadership
- Traditioned Innovation
- Transformative Leadership
- Generative Organization
- Sustainable Design

ARCHIVES »

- Recently Published
- Browse by Topic
- Browse by Feature Type

STAFF & SERVICES »

- About Leadership Education
- Staff Directory
- Program Offerings
- Custom Services

BROWSE FEATURES

- Articles »
- Multimedia »
- Profiles »
- Q&A »
- Reflections »
- Sermons »

Call &
Response
blog 
READ. DISCUSS. IMAGINE. »

-  EMAIL |  PRINT |  SHARE

Reflection: [Christian Leadership](#)

Virginia O. (Ginger) Bassford: Adaptive change and transformation

Adaptive change demands new learning. A UMC district superintendent finds an example of adaptive change and transformation in the story of a courageous 7-year-old boy.

by [Virginia O. \(Ginger\) Bassford](#)



Freeze-frame from Volkswagen commercial

November 19, 2013

Even grown-ups like to play dress-up.

We revel in the crisp fall evening filled with masks and capes. The good saints barely have time to comfort our memories; before the stroke of midnight, Christmas begins to fill the stores, and carols to fill the air. Then the King cake is hardly in the oven before Mardi Gras arrives, and the masks and costumes come out again.

Who doesn't enjoy donning a mask, with its warm childhood associations of innocence and cheer? But for a leader, it's important sometimes to drop the mask, even though it can be frightening. Challenging. A step into the unknown.

Taking the step to drop the mask and respond to a problem honestly -- not with a "that's fine" or a "that's nice," but enacting what clearly needs to be done -- is what [Ronald](#)

Related Features

Multimedia



[Ronald Heifetz: The nature of adaptive leadership »](#)

Knowing the difference between adaptive and technical challenges is one of the key tasks of leadership, says Ronald A. Heifetz in an interview with Faith & Leadership.

Multimedia



[Marty Linsky: Pushing against the wind »](#)

Leadership is dangerous because people resist change, says the co-founder of Cambridge Leadership Associates. But leaders who care about their purpose should face that resistance.

More On This Topic

Article

[Series: Mainline Protestants and disruptive innovation »](#)

Q&A

[Tony Campolo: It was time to stop »](#)

Article

SUBSCRIBE

Enjoy our content?
Follow our content on
your choice of a variety of
formats, including [e-newsletters](#),
[RSS](#), [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#)
and [iTunes](#).



GO

[Heifetz](#) and [Martin Linsky](#) might call a “technical” change. Technical change entails putting in place a solution to a problem for which you know the answer. The change might be difficult, but it’s known.

“Adaptive” change comes in keeping the mask off -- making a change that’s not just routine but that also involves changing hearts and minds. Adaptive change can alter a whole system.

Perhaps you recall the mask and cape worn by Darth Vader. Not the original Darth, but the winsome boy in the Volkswagen ad during Super Bowl 2011.

I thought of this when I read that the actor -- a 7-year-old boy named Max Page -- has undergone heart surgery to correct a congenital defect. While his surgeons prepared to do the technical work of open-heart surgery, Max did the adaptive, internal work that would change his life and the lives of those he encountered.

As the surgery approached, Max focused on the possible outcomes. With the help of his mom and brother, he decided to make a “can do” list, and to “fun up” his house. He thought about life after surgery and all the things he *would* be able to do, as well as the things he *could* do beforehand to make ready, so he would be equipped to cope with the recovery.

Then he re-imagined his home -- turned it into a place of intrigue and creativity -- with themed rooms, special rules and secret codes. He utilized the resources that had been preparing him for just such a time -- his most articulate, adaptive self.

Perhaps that is the greatest attraction of adaptive change: the “can do” spirit of those who venture into the unknown and emerge on the other side. It’s neither “fine” nor “nice.” It is real.

I have some experience with this in my own life. It was a chilly day as the nurse assisted my dad into my car. I drove him from the hospital where he was a patient to another across town for specialized testing. He was in excruciating pain. The doctors couldn’t figure out why, but Daddy and I knew that the answer could not possibly be good.

At 20, I wasn’t ready to be without a dad. But we both knew that I soon would be.

“You’ll see, Daddy; I’ll grow up well,” I promised him. “One day I’ll do something that would make you so proud. I love God ... I’ll put God first. You’ll see.”

For two months after that car ride, I worked nights and stayed with my dad during the day. I grew up fast. He died the Friday after Thanksgiving. The conversations we had during that time were raw, authentic -- and life has never been the same. I had no idea at first how I would keep my promise.

I began by leaning into what frightened me most, by embracing a change, stepping out beyond the edge of my known world. Adaptive change demands new learning. Falling down, getting up; falling down, getting up. Adaptive change nearly always requires some sort of reconsideration of what we thought was so but have learned is not. Things concerning our family. Our work. And most often, our inner selves.

Taking off the mask requires immense courage. It is not work for cowards, or those who refuse to lean into pain. Whether at work or at home, on the playground or on campus, transformation begins within us. Speak the truth. Have the courage to confront. Stay focused on the purpose, and do not be drawn off. Risk hostility and sabotage. Be willing to choose between what appear to be conflicting values. Adaptive change does not happen without cost.

“Mighty Max” -- whose surgery was successful -- still uses his mask and cape to help kids like himself face their fears. He teaches us what he has learned: even intense pain can lead to great, new gain. He uses his talents to raise money for children with heart defects. His mom reports that he says to them, “Kids, if you use your FORCE and dream big, you can achieve anything. We may be small -- but we’re mighty!”

[Disruption and leadership development in mainline Protestantism »](#)

[Q&A](#)

[Emilie M. Townes: The church is being transformed »](#)

[Sermon](#)

[Luke Powery: Unless the Lord »](#)

I want to be like that kid when I grow up. I want to change the world with the purpose-focused force that comes from deep within, to love and serve God as I promised my dad. No mask and cape required.