



A Spirit Fit to Lead

How leaders can effectively manage their hearts and emotions.

2 INTRODUCTION

Spirit-Led Leadership

How the Holy Spirit molded me where I didn't expect it.

by Caryn Rivadeneira

16 PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

The Recipe for Peace

God can provide calm when busyness and stress threaten to take over.

by Teresa Turner Vining

4 GIFTED WOMEN

Winning Them with Kindness

A young mom's simple mission to transform her world.

by John W. Kennedy

21 BRINGING IT HOME

Wake-Up Call

What it took to rouse actress Nicole Johnson from her anger and rocky relationships.

by Camerin Courtney

7 BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Trying Patience on for Size

If Christians are to be clothed with patience, why do so many of us feel naked?

by Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.

26 LEADERSHIP TOOLS

A Daily Repentance Workout

Learn to build team "spirit."

by Frederica Mathewes-Green

14 PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

Anger with No Sin

It's not easy, but it's possible.

by John Ortberg

29 Resources

More places for more information.





Spirit-Led Leadership

How the Holy Spirit molded me where I didn't expect it.

by Caryn Rivadeneira

For the past several months—since I've been on a sort of maternity leave from my normally heavier workload—I assumed my leadership skills were on hiatus. I haven't led a meeting or a team toward a vision in months, so it didn't occur to me that God would use this time away from leading adults to hone my skills. And I would've never guessed that the area that needed the most honing was getting my spirit in better shape to lead.

As any parent can attest, kids are nothing if they aren't God's little mirrors to reflect what areas of our lives need work. Short on patience? A whiney toddler will show you that. Heavy on anger? A sass-mouthed preschooler will bring that to your attention. Lacking joy? A newborn who just won't sleep will make this clear.

Of course, in family life, all these things are disastrous. No matter how whiney the toddler, how sassy the preschooler, or exhausting the newborn, if your spirit isn't in check and you aren't seeking how God would have you respond, any attempts to lead your children through their issues will backfire ultimately. Happily, the opposite is also true. Godly leadership makes good parenting.

While it's easy for me to see these implications in family life, I realize how much this has been true in my other leadership experiences. How many times have I created challenges because I wasn't as patient or as

Introduction



A Spirit Fit to Lead

Spirit-Led Leadership

3

kind as God would've wanted me to be? When has my own anger (perhaps at something totally outside of work) brought difficulty to a situation that needn't have been there? When might I have sought peace and instead stirred up division? How often did I seek the Holy Spirit in handling the issues that arise every day as a leader? Not often enough. I know that a godly spirit makes a good leader—but seem to forget this too often.

If you can relate, you'll find some help and inspiration in the pages that follow. The articles in "A Spirit Fit to Lead" are from or about fellow leaders who have dealt with their own emotional and heart issues, and through their stories you'll learn some practical ways to keep your own spirit fit for leadership.

Blessings,

Caryn Rivandeneira
Managing Editor, GiftedforLeadership.com
Christianity Today International

Introduction



GIFTED WOMEN

Winning Them with Kindness

A young mom's simple mission to transform her world.

by John W. Kennedy

Re'na Garcia is a 24-year-old wife and mother of two preschoolers, a full-time nanny to two other children, and director of student ministries at a Nashville Evangelical Covenant church. She leads a busy life, but her favorite part of the day is when she goes out to RAOK her world—as in performing “Random Acts of Kindness.”

“God puts people in our lives everyday for us to touch,” Garcia says. “So many times we're too busy and we miss those opportunities.”

Garcia believes that RAOK—doing something nice for other people with no expectation of anything in return—is simply living out the compassionate and unselfish attitude that Jesus expects of his followers.

“People were drawn to Christ not because he stood on a mountain and preached, but because he filled their needs,” Garcia says. “He fed them. He healed them. He touched lives.” People may be more open to hearing about the gospel as they see us modeling Christ's behavior, Garcia says.

She and her husband, Aaron, are part of a growing network of Christians who exchange RAOK ideas with each other. The Garcias



A Spirit Fit to Lead

Winning Them with Kindness

5

have launched a website (www.raoked.com) to inspire other believers to join the RAOK revolution. Their list of potential RAOK ideas includes leaving a huge tip at a restaurant, paying for someone else's gas at a convenience store, leaving a roll of quarters at a self-service laundry, or mowing a neighbor's yard.

Part of the fun, Garcia says, is not sticking around for a thank you. For instance, when she pulls up to a fast-food-drive-thru window, she asks how much the tab is for the car behind her—and she pays it, too. She asks the clerk to pass along a RAOK business card to the driver. The card contains an explanation for Garcia's motivation and information about her church. There are no strings attached.

She says part of her biblical inspiration comes from Matthew 6:1–3: “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them ... when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do. ... Do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing.”

Says Garcia, “If someone is having a day in which his life is hanging in the balance, this could be his opportunity to realize what he's been missing. You never know how it might change a life if you buy someone dinner and they don't know who did it.”

15 Ways to “RAOK” Someone's World

- 1. Leave a roll of quarters at the Laundromat.**
- 2. Leave a large tip at a restaurant.**
- 3. Mow a neighbor's lawn.**
- 4. Pay for a stranger's dry cleaning.**
- 5. Pay for the person behind you at the drive-thru.**
- 6. Leave grocery gift cards in a mailbox.**
- 7. Plow or shovel the snow from a neighbor's driveway.**
- 8. Pay for somebody's gas at the pump.**

Features



A Spirit Fit to Lead

Winning Them with Kindness

6

- 9. Make dinner for a needy family.**
- 10. Stop to help change a flat tire.**
- 11. Pay rent for a family in need.**
- 12. Hand out water or sports drinks at a biking trail.**
- 13. Buy school supplies for a kid in need.**
- 14. Feed parking meters.**
- 15. Scrape snow off car windows in the winter.**

For more ideas or to order cards, visit www.raoked.com

John W. Kennedy is news editor of Today's Pentecostal Evangel, the weekly magazine of the Assemblies of God. This article first appeared in the November/December 2005 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN.

Thought Provokers

- *What might random acts of kindness look like in a leadership position?*
- *How do you imagine others might respond to this?*



BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Trying Patience on for Size

If Christians are to be clothed with patience, why do so many of us feel naked?

by Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.

Every day brings us an array of things that try our patience. You buy something that needs to be assembled and the instructions don't make sense. You're out on a golf course and you hit a straight drive; but when you get to where it ought to be lying, it's not there. You toss 16 socks into a clothes dryer and you get only 15 back.

As God's chosen ones, says Paul, clothe yourselves with patience. When we are clothed with patience, we can absorb nuisances. We can absorb them without fussing over them. We can absorb them the way a good cotton shirt absorbs a few drops of water from a sprinkler.

But how about people who annoy us? Well, we have to absorb some of them, too. Some are strangers. Pokey drivers in the left lane. People who let their dogs bark all night. Or the person ahead of us in the 15-item express line at the supermarket. This person puts 19 items on the belt, chats with the checkout clerk, fishes for a checkbook only after everything has been rung up, and then wants to review the bill.



A Spirit Fit to Lead

Trying Patience on for Size

8

Strangers try our patience in lots of little ways, but they're no match for members of our own family. The prime cases of annoyance are domestic. "When two humans have lived together for a while," says C. S. Lewis, "it usually happens that each has facial expressions and tones of voice that are almost unendurable to the other."

I think we understand. It's not that your family member does anything wrong, exactly. It's just that once in a while she lifts her eyebrows in a certain way that drives you nuts. It's just that he whines even when he's not complaining.

As God's chosen ones, says Paul, *bear with one another. Clothe yourselves with patience.* We need this piece of clothing, don't we? We need it to absorb the little drizzles of acid rain, the ordinary fallout of working and living together. We need patience to manage annoyances and the low-level anger that accompanies them.

Holy Hygiene

A big part of good spiritual hygiene has to do with controlling our anger. Have you ever noticed that when Paul wants to describe life outside of Christ, he often describes an angry life? What do you find out there, out beyond the reach of Christ? Paul says you find anger, wrath, slander, abusive talk. You find envy, quarreling, gossip, hostility, factions, and strife. You find war and rumors of war. You find split churches, broken marriages, fractured friendships. Everybody is so angry

That's life outside of Christ, and some of that life is in our churches and in our homes. It's angry life. It's angry politics and hostile sports and vengeful movies. It's angry talk shows and music with an attitude. It's "hired guns with law degrees," as somebody once put it—bright people who go to law school because they are permanently teed off and want to get their anger licensed.

Put it away, says Paul. Put it to death. Take off all those angry old clothes and put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. *As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with patience.*

Features



A Spirit Fit to Lead

Trying Patience on for Size

9

Patience means anger control. It means having a long fuse and a short memory where irritants are concerned. Patient people are hard to provoke. Their temper can absorb a lot before they “lose it.”

Spiritual Solvent

The Greek word for patience here, *makrothymia*, suggests having a large capacity for absorbing irritants without letting them paralyze you. Here’s a way to think about it: patience is like good motor oil. It doesn’t remove all the contaminants. It just puts them into suspension so they don’t get into your works and seize them up. Patient people have, so to speak, a large crankcase. They can put a lot of irritants into suspension.

Suppose the person behind you keeps cracking his knuckles. You put your annoyance into suspension. Suppose you can’t find your keys and you feel a little scuffed up. Put it into suspension. Suppose somebody is late for your meeting and you feel your anger start to rise. Into the crankcase it goes.

Patient people have *makrothymia*. They’ve got a big capacity for absorbing irritants without seizing up. They get annoyed, but they have a place to put their annoyance.

I think it’s important to add that patient people are not necessarily naive, and they surely aren’t stoic. They get indignant at abuse and injustice, just as they should. It is sometimes right to be angry. Holy people can get good and angry, just as Jesus did. If your child is abused, or your church slandered, or your spouse insulted, or your God blasphemed, you ought to be angry. If someone cheats you out of your job or your good reputation, you have a right to be indignant. Righteous anger, says Lewis Smedes, is “the executive power of human decency.

But we need patience even for these big angers, even for big abuses. Nuisances can go into suspension, and we can forget about them. But big angers have to go there, too, for a while. Because when we have been seriously offended, we have to stop and think about the right way to respond. Maybe we will have to rebuke the

Features



A Spirit Fit to Lead

Trying Patience on for Size

10

offender, but rebuke is delicate surgery that we can't do when we've got a storm in our innards and when our hands are shaking. Rebuke needs to be patient rebuke.

The same goes for forgiveness. You may be able to forgive a person who has hurt you, but it will take time. And when the day comes that you forgive, what you will do is to kill your anger against the offender. As Robert Roberts says, that's the main move in forgiveness; it is a move against our anger.

But when you go to kill your anger, where will you find it? If you are a patient person, you will find your anger in suspension where it belongs until you figure out what to do with it. Christian forgiveness is patient forgiveness.

Or maybe your righteous anger will prompt you to seek justice. But justice takes time and it takes cool heads. That is why in court we have all those rules—a time to stand up and a time to sit down, a time to speak and a time to keep still, a prescribed courtesy in our address to the judge. A lot of this is about anger control. The idea is that everybody's anger has to go into suspension while we wait for the wheels of justice to turn.

In the filmed version of Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), Gregory Peck plays Atticus Finch, a stalwart attorney of clean hands and pure heart. Atticus Finch does his best to defend Tom Robinson, a black man falsely accused of rape in Alabama in the 1930s. Atticus is eloquent and passionate about Tom Robinson's innocence, and he is right about it; but a racist jury convicts Tom anyway. What is so striking as you watch Atticus at work in the courtroom is the strength of his character

What is it about Atticus Finch? He is just and he is kind. But what you see in the courtroom is the strength of his patience. Do you remember the courtroom scenes? Can you picture Atticus there? He is angry. You can read anger in his eyes and in the way his facial muscles work beneath his skin. You can hear anger in his voice. You can see it in the way he moves. But he's got a governor on his anger, and the reason is that a terrible injustice is moving through the courtroom and Atticus's job is to try to stop it. He can't let his anger get in

Features



A Spirit Fit to Lead

Trying Patience on for Size

11

the way. He has to defend Tom Robinson. And that means that he needs to put his anger into suspension and do his job.

As God's chosen ones, clothe yourselves with patience.

Spiritually mature people are not doormats. They know what it is to be angry. But they also know a lot about anger control. They are as patient as Atticus Finch—which means they are very strong people. Patience takes spiritual muscle.

Godly Garment

If you have been raised with Christ (Col. 3:1); that is, if you have been baptized into the Christian community and publicly identified with Jesus Christ; if you live in the shadow of Christ, and in the world of Christ, and under the influence of Christ—that is, *if you are a Christian*, then clothe yourself with patience. Pull it over you like a garment.

Okay, but how? How do you get it?

Suppose that patience, like all virtues, is partly a fruit of the Holy Spirit and partly a calling; what can we do to answer the calling? What's *our* end?

Four brief counsels:

1. Following some good advice of Carolyn Simon, we can look at annoying people with the eye of imaginative love. Suppose you get behind a pokey driver in the left lane. Instead of trying to punish this person by tailgating him or her, try to deliberately imagine this person as somebody's grandparent. A good grandparent. One of the really good ones. And, of course, you don't tailgate people's grandparents. You don't push grandfathers or grandmothers. You protect them. One of the reasons love is patient and kind (1 Cor. 13) is that love is imaginative.

2. We can set our hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. This means enlarging our perspective and raising our hopes. God's kingdom will come, and God's will is going



A Spirit Fit to Lead

Trying Patience on for Size

12

to get done. In that big frame, a traffic delay doesn't really matter. The same goes for snubs, and for children's crankiness, and for the irritating habits of some of our friends. These things are like lost golf balls. In the long run, they really don't matter.

As for big offenses against our personhood, against our dignity—they do matter. They matter a lot. So maybe we will rebuke them. Maybe we will forgive them. Maybe we will seek justice for them. And maybe we will get justice.

But maybe not. Maybe not till God's day of judgment. Till that day we need a place to put our anger.

3. We can apprentice ourselves to patient people (see James 5:7–11, esp. 10–11). There are some around, wonderful people with huge crankcases. We can watch them, listen to them, learn some patient moves from them. If you have ever been dealt with by a truly patient person, you will never forget. This is a person who might be angry with you, but he puts his anger into suspension. He looks past everything about you that is irritating; he looks past these things into your core, your very essence—the part of you that shows you have come from the shop of a master.

We can learn from people who treat us this way. Learning patience is like learning a musical instrument. You need a good teacher or two. And then you need a lot of practice.

4. Patience fits people who have died and risen with Christ. To receive patience as a fruit of the Spirit of Christ and to adopt patience in imitation of Christ means that we will keep our eyes on him, not just on our own self-improvement program. We get to be Christlike not by looking at ourselves but by looking at him. And what do we see when we look at Christ with patience on our mind? We see passion and death in which Jesus absorbed not just nuisances or single instances of injustice. Jesus Christ absorbed the evil of the whole world: he absorbed maximum evil without passing it on, thus cutting the loop of vengeance in which an angry world is so terribly trapped.



A Spirit Fit to Lead

Trying Patience on for Size

13

To look at Christ staggering along the way to Golgotha, knees buckling under the weight of the cross, is to lose interest in life's nuisances. They don't seem cross-sized. They don't seem worth dying for. And the big injustices? They *have* been died for, and so we may release some of our anger to the Christ whose hunger for justice is infinitely greater than ours, and whose judgment of the world—including us—will be altogether righteous.

Patience is part of the uniform of Christ.

As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with patience. Patience fits people who have died and risen with Christ. Patience is part of the family uniform for the people of God.

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., is dean of the chapel at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan. This article first appeared in the February 8, 1999, issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY.

Thought Provokers

- *Who or what are some of the irritants you need to put into suspension right now?*
- *When has being patient paid off in your leadership? When has impatience made a mess of things? How might being patient have changed that outcome?*



A Spirit Fit to Lead

Anger with No Sin

14



PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

Anger with No Sin

It's not easy, but it's possible.

by John Ortberg

Lots of people have the power to hurt or frustrate me. Only one has the power to make me angry.

Me.

If it is true that no one else can make me angry, it is even more true that no one else can make me respond aggressively or inappropriately when I feel anger. It often seems that way because my response to feeling anger has become so routine that it seems “automatic.” It feels as if the person or event triggered my anger and caused my response.

The truth is my response is learned behavior. I learned it long ago, from people I grew up around, learned it so informally that I was not aware that I was learning anything.

Tommy Bolt has been described as the angriest golfer in the history of a game that has stimulated the secretion of more bile than any other single human activity outside of war and denominational meetings. One (possibly apocryphal) story recalls a time he was giving a group lesson on how to hit a ball out of a sand trap. He called his 11-year-old son over.

Features



A Spirit Fit to Lead

Anger with No Sin

15

“Show the people what you’ve learned from your father to do when your shot lands in the sand,” he said. The boy picked up a wedge and threw it as high and as far as he could.

The good news is what can be learned can be unlearned. It is possible for me to manage my anger in a God-honoring way: to “be angry and sin not.” Anger is an inescapable fact of life. But the experience of anger is different from the expression of anger. What I do with that anger, how I express and manage it, is another matter.

John Ortberg is pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in Menlo Park, CA. This devotional first appeared in LEADERSHIP journal.

Thought Provokers

- *How difficult is it for you to accept responsibility for your anger?*
- *How have others under your leadership “learned” from your anger—or your lack of it?*

Features



PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

The Recipe for Peace

God can provide calm when busyness and stress threaten to take over.

by Teresa Turner Vining

My husband and I had just returned home from a hectic shopping trip. As Erik pulled into the driveway, switching off the engine, we were suddenly surrounded by the silence of the night. We sat in the darkness, reluctant to give up the first quiet moment we'd experienced that entire day. I sighed, tired from the day's activities and the thoughts of the responsibilities tomorrow already held.

A question formed on my lips, but I hesitated to speak it aloud. It was a question that had been increasingly occupying my mind, but it didn't seem like one a "good" Christian should ask.

"Where's the peace?" I finally whispered. Erik glanced quizzically in my direction. "I mean, is this all there is to the Christian life?" I continued. "Doesn't the Bible promise something about 'peace that transcends all understanding'?" Erik didn't reply.

This question continued to haunt me long after that evening. Worn down by each day's responsibilities and worries, I longed to be enveloped in the "peace of God"—that deep serenity of soul where calm and joy grow. But I had to admit, in the many years I'd been a Christian,



A Spirit Fit to Lead

The Recipe for Peace

17

I couldn't say that peace had characterized my life. Was this "peace" the Bible spoke of just some cold, distant theological doctrine, or something I could actually experience now?

Several days later, I read Philippians 4:4–7. I was surprised to notice for the first time that this passage that speaks of the "peace of God" also states clearly how to obtain it: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. . . . Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. *And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*" (italics added).

While I was familiar with these concepts, I had to be honest—I wasn't actually practicing them. Did I really rejoice in the Lord *always*? Was my life characterized by *gentleness*? What about being anxious? Wasn't I the one who lay awake at night worrying about how I was going to get everything done the next day? Was it really possible for a person to live as the Scripture described? Since my heart longed for peace, I decided to test this "recipe" to see what would happen.

During the next few weeks, I was amazed at the impact those verses had on my life. As I tried to obey the commands of Philippians 4, I experienced a calm that transformed my perspective and gave me new vitality. To help remember these steps to peace, I created the acronym TLC.

T—Thank God in Everything

"Rejoicing always" means being grateful to God—no matter what. We must choose to believe God's good, and choose to rejoice in that goodness.

When I began attempting this, the best I could muster was remembering to at least be thankful for the "good" things. I started building a habit of saying two-second "thanks prayers" throughout the day. "Thanks for the cool breeze." "Thanks for that encouraging call from a friend." As I practiced this, I began to see more for which to be thankful.

Features



A Spirit Fit to Lead

The Recipe for Peace

18

This finally led to my being able to give thanks for those difficult things in my life—something I hadn't been able to do before. That forced me to acknowledge that no matter how bad things look, God would work all things together for good just as he promises (Romans 8:28).

I remember one night in particular, when God gave me an opportunity to test thanking him in all things. I was facing an impossible work deadline, and home responsibilities kept piling up. Every night I crawled into bed exhausted, trying to figure out how to squeeze just a little more into each day.

At 2 A.M., I heard my 10-month-old son's cry. When Zephan awoke in the night, it always meant the same thing—another ear infection. "No!" I protested. "This can't happen—not now."

I felt guilty for selfishly thinking of how this inconvenienced me, when I should have been thinking of my son. But that didn't change the facts: Zephan wouldn't be able to go to the babysitter's for the rest of the week. I might as well kiss goodbye the thought of sleeping for the next several nights. I had no idea how I'd get my project done.

Rocking Zephan in his room, I felt my emotions rage. *How could this happen? Didn't God realize this was the absolute worst time?* Then I remembered the thanksgiving command. It took me some time to find the words, but as I stroked Zephan's feverish face and consciously decided to be thankful for being able to care for him, the room around me seemed to become a sanctuary. I felt the comforting presence of God's peace allowing me to actually savor this moment.

L—Love Those Around You

The second command in Philippians 4 is to "let your gentleness be evident to all." When I first read this, I wondered, *What does this have to do with personal peace?* But when I attempted this step, I was surprised by its power.

Concentrating on showing gentleness to those with whom I came into contact cast my life in a new light. It took my focus from myself and

Features



A Spirit Fit to Lead

The Recipe for Peace

19

put it on others. And it kept me relying on God, because loving responses invariably didn't come naturally—especially when I was running late with a hungry one year old who was trying to eat through the yogurt containers in my shopping cart, while the slowest clerk in history made mistake after mistake in ringing up the groceries. *Let your gentleness be evident to all. ... Let your gentleness be evident ...*

One day my sister and I had an argument, and I felt certain I was right. However, even as I silently rehearsed a sharp rebuttal, God reminded me of this principle. *How can I show gentleness in this situation?* I wondered. The answer to this question totally changed my response to her and brought an inner peace that was now becoming more familiar to me.

Allowing God's love to flow through us gives us joy and purpose despite our circumstances. And these first two steps work together. When we get the first step down—having an attitude of thankfulness—it's much easier for us to react to others in love.

C—Commit Worries to God

We've all heard we shouldn't worry. Often my silent response to this concept is something similar to a teenager's remark, *Yeah, right!* Worrying seems to come as naturally to the human race as getting the hiccups—and about as difficult to cure.

But, fortunately, God's Word doesn't just tell us not to worry. It gives us practical instruction on *how* not to worry. "Do not be anxious about anything," it says, "but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."

I found I struggled with just *deciding* not to worry. But at least I could decide to pray—especially when this verse tells me exactly how—*with thanksgiving*.

When I was pregnant with Zephan, my physician told us our baby might have a mentally debilitating disease. Although he assured us this was just a possibility, I was heartsick. All my dreams for my child's future seemed to hang in jeopardy, and I had trouble concentrating on anything else. But I needed to commit this worry to God.

Features



A Spirit Fit to Lead

The Recipe for Peace

20

Doing that, I found, was a process, not a quick fix. But as I progressed in the process, true to God's Word, I felt an unexplainable peace. I wasn't sure God would spare our baby, but I became increasingly convinced that even if he didn't, he'd use the circumstance for good. A few months later, Zephan was born without any health problems.

Of course, the only thing that makes all these steps possible is being convinced of our heavenly Father's tender loving care. We can only be thankful in everything because we know he loves us. We can only truly love because he's shown us *his* unconditional love. And we can only commit our cares to him because we know he tenderly cares for us in every detail of our lives.

Some time after taking on the challenge of Philippians 4, I was traveling to help someone move when it suddenly struck me what a difference this Scripture passage had made in my life. I was still busy. I still had family, work, and church responsibilities. But somehow life was different—I was different. While it's happened subtly, I know now how it feels to be enveloped in God's peace—and I thank him for it.

Teresa Turner Vining, a freelance writer and speaker, lives in the Kansas City area. This article first appeared in the November/December 2005 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Thought Provokers

- *What areas of your life and leadership could use more peace right now? Which of the "TLCs" might bring it?*
- *Philippians 4:4–7 says to "let your gentleness be evident to all...." Is your gentleness evident to all whom you lead? If not, how might you change this? In what ways might a gentle leader be a more effective leader?*

Features



BRINGING IT HOME

Wake-Up Call

What it took to rouse actress Nicole Johnson from her anger and rocky relationships.

by Camerin Courtney

To say actress Nicole Johnson is passionate about coffee would be an understatement. After all, this warm, witty 33-year-old—who shares a marriage-focused drama ministry with her husband of 12 years, Paul—has searched for a perfect mug of java in almost all 50 states and in 11 different countries. “Coffee’s more than just a beverage. It’s an invitation, an experience, a good excuse to get together,” she explains. But it’s not just Nicole’s love for a steaming cup of joe that prompted her to write her first solo book, *Fresh Brewed Life* (Thomas Nelson), around a coffee theme; it’s coffee’s ability to wake us up.

“For years, I sleepwalked through life. I went through the motions, keeping busy so I wouldn’t have to face the hurt and anger I held inside me,” admits Nicole. “I tried to do so many things for God that I missed being with God. But I’ve learned—the hard way—life isn’t about keeping it all together. It’s about trusting the One who can.”

From the outside, Nicole’s life has looked very “together.” She and Paul—who met at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama, where they discovered shared passions for God and drama—have encouraged married couples through their self-written sketches about the trials and triumphs of matrimony. They’ve captured these sometimes poignant, sometimes hysterical vignettes on two videotapes, *To Have and to Hold*



A Spirit Fit to Lead

Wake-Up Call

22

and *Vive la Difference!* (Focus on the Family/Tyndale), as well as in their book of dramatic stories *Random Acts of Grace* (Broadman & Holman). They've also taken their unique brand of marriage ministry on the road for Aspiring Women, Marriage Builders, "I Still Do," Praise Gathering, and Life on the Edge conferences, and with Christian marriage author/speaker Gary Smalley.

But beneath the surface, life wasn't so tidy. Nicole's relationship with her mom, fragile before her wedding, completely fractured when her mom refused to show up for the event because she didn't agree with the arrangements. And Nicole's frequent temper outbursts created escalating tensions in her marriage.

Then eight years ago Nicole's wake-up call came. During a volatile argument, Paul lobbed her with five life-changing words: "You're just like your mother!"

His accusation was unbearable for Nicole, who for years had had a tough relationship with her mother, who'd been married and divorced several times. Enraged, Nicole grabbed her keys, slammed the front door of their home, and drove off.

"I didn't know where I was going; I just knew I had to get away," says Nicole. "But I didn't get far before I had to pull over because I was sobbing so hard."

There, at the side of the road, Nicole cried, yelled at the top of her lungs, slammed things around, and eventually realized that whether or not she was like her mother, deep-seated anger was poisoning her marriage and her relationship with God. So Nicole drove home, dragged herself through the front door, and crumbled to the floor in tears. Paul held her as she wept and quietly admitted to him, "I want to change."

This turning point led Nicole to Christian counseling. There she peeled back the layers of hurt from her past and began coming to grips with the pain and grief that had plagued her since childhood.

A happy, successful marriage is more about who you are than to whom you're married.

"I hadn't been aware of the impact these issues had on all areas of my life," says Nicole. "I knew that if I wanted to change, I needed to wake up to the abundant life God offers us."

Features



A Spirit Fit to Lead

Wake-Up Call

23

It's that two-year process that prompted Nicole to write *Fresh Brewed Life*.

Why did Paul accuse you of being like your mother?

I think they were just hurtful words. I was unloading my anger on him, and he knew saying that would wound me. What's sad is we were arguing over something little like Paul not taking out the trash. That should have been a sign right there—that I could get so angry over such a silly issue. But Paul's accusation felt like a physical blow; he had no idea his words would change my life—and our marriage.

Was it difficult to admit you had an anger problem?

Definitely. I think anger's hard for women to admit. We're afraid because there's a stigma attached to it. Men are considered powerful when they're angry; women are called irrational or out of control.

But my anger shouldn't have come as a surprise. It had been staring me in the face. I just didn't want to own it. None of us do. But when you stand in front of the dryer completely reduced to tears because you can't find the mate to your black sock, or you blow up in the grocery store because Starbucks Ice Cream is out of stock, you may need to admit you're not really angry about socks or ice cream—or the trash. Unfortunately, Paul received the brunt of my anger. Then, he would withdraw, making me feel alone.

What was the source of your anger?

Much of it stemmed from unresolved issues from my childhood. My parents divorced abruptly when I was six and my family was ripped apart. My mother, brother, sister, and I moved from Florida to Louisiana. My father made the seven-hour drive to visit us as often as he could, and we'd have joyful reunions and agonizing goodbyes. There's no way to explain divorce to a child. It's pure, undiluted pain.

Then Mother and Dad began vying for our loyalty. As a child, I was placed on a witness stand and asked if I wanted to live with my mom or my dad. It was an impossible choice, but I told them I wanted to live with my mother.

Features



A Spirit Fit to Lead

Wake-Up Call

24

How did this decision affect your life?

Unfortunately, it wasn't a final decision. I was forced to choose at every crossroad. If I wanted to invite my dad to something significant, such as a birthday or my high-school graduation, my mother wouldn't attend. Often, Dad just wouldn't make it anyway.

As I got older, I realized there was nothing I could do to fix my broken family, so I suffered in silence. But that day on the roadside after my blow-up with Paul, I broke the silence. I finally voiced my pain and anger.

What did you do?

I wrote Mom a letter. It had been a year and a half since we'd spoken. I went through four drafts, and the process took a couple of months. In it I told her about the road to healing I was on and invited her to come to Nashville to meet with my counselor and me. I wanted to have a relationship with her, I told her, but what we'd had in the past wasn't going to work for me anymore. I told her that if she'd be willing to meet with us, we could try to forge a new path.

And her response?

She wrote me back saying that of course she'd come and that she knew it would be a painful, but needed, process. And she told me she loved me. There was no trace of anger in her response to me. God must have softened her heart—as he had mine—because she was more open than I'd ever known her to be.

So we met with my counselor in June 1994. Over three days we wrestled and cried. Our viewpoints weren't always the same. Mother had hurts I'd never known about. She talked about the emotional pain of her marriages ending. We held each other. She saw the things she'd handled inappropriately and the ways she'd tried to control my life over the years, and asked for forgiveness. I gave it freely. And I realized how angry and withdrawn I'd become and asked for Mother's forgiveness. She lavished it on me.

It's been six years since that three-day session. Since then it's been a long, slow healing process. But God's done more than anything I could have imagined.

Features



A Spirit Fit to Lead

Wake-Up Call

25

What's your relationship with your mother like today?

The highest compliment I can give is to say we're great friends. She's become a confidante and a counselor, a shopping buddy and a traveling companion. She's not the same woman I grew up with. Her faith has come alive after decades of dormancy. She's a loving grandmother and an active member of her church.

My mother and I are living proof it's never too late to begin again. Our relationship isn't perfect; we still have our days, and we always will. But we're seeking to be honest with each other and keep short accounts. God's healing power is amazing.

Camerin Courtney is managing editor of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN. This article first appeared in the January/February 2000 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Thought Provokers

- *In what ways has anger impacted your family life?*
- *How might practicing forgiveness and letting go of anger toward others make you a better leader?*



LEADERSHIP TOOLS

A Daily Repentance Workout

Learn to build team “spirit.”

by Frederica Mathewes-Green

As we gradually gain more insight into ourselves, we are able, with God’s grace, to find ways to resist habitual sin and grow in self-control. We gain strength bit by bit, like an athlete striving for the prize, as Paul said. Gradually we reclaim more and more of ourselves and offer it to God’s transforming light. Thus the Holy Spirit works within us, sanctifying us from the inside out.

From the earliest centuries, Christians have identified certain practices that have been helpful to the “athlete in training.” Here are some of them:

Fasting. People are beset by different temptations, but everybody eats. Restricting foods—not necessarily a total fast, but simply declining favorites for a time—can be a way of strengthening the “willpower muscle” to be ready when needed to handle a bigger temptation. An athlete doesn’t lift weights just so he can lift more weights. Those healthy muscles are ready for any situation he meets. Turn down a doughnut today, and tomorrow you might be able to resist calling the driver in front of you an idiot.

Features



A Spirit Fit to Lead

A Daily Repentance Workout

27

Bite your tongue. Yes, not calling someone an idiot is a frequent theme in Scripture and early Christian writings. Both place great emphasis on controlling anger, perhaps as much as on sexual continence. Jesus said the penalty for calling your brother a fool was “the hell of fire.” That includes people who can’t hear you, like politicians on TV. It’s not the harm to them that’s at stake so much as the surging, disorienting pride in your own heart.

Mind your thoughts. Jesus said that to commit adultery in the imagination is the equivalent of committing it in fact. Nearly all sins begin with thinking about sin. Control the thoughts and you have a good head start on behavior. You may not be able to keep thoughts from appearing, but you can decline to entertain them; birds fly overhead, but you don’t have to let them nest in your hair. Paul counsels that we think about things that are true, lovely, gracious, excellent, and praiseworthy, so you might want to read some Dickens tonight instead of watching that sleazy sitcom.

Practice humility. Humility is not the same as resisting the urge to show off (which is modesty) or denying that you have gifts and talents (which is lying). Humility is remembering that you have a beam in your eye. In every situation remember what God knows about you, and how much you have been forgiven. You might think you can fool people, but no matter how charming you appear, spiritually you have spinach in your teeth. Account yourself the “chief of sinners” and be gracious toward the failings of others. Overlook insults and be kind to those who misuse you. Be swift to admit when you’re wrong. Ask others to forgive you, and forgive them without asking if you want God to forgive you.

Pray constantly. Try always to recall that God is with you, dwelling in you. (This helps a great deal in controlling thoughts.) For more than 1,500 years, some Christians have tried to form the habit of praying, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me” all the time, a kind of background music to other thoughts. It not only helps one resist more turbulent thoughts and deeds, but also creates a kind of mental foyer in which thoughts and impulses can be examined before they’re allowed inside.

Features



A Spirit Fit to Lead

A Daily Repentance Workout

28

Ask God to help you repent. We really don't want to do this and we find a million excuses to change the subject. Read stories about repentant saints, like John Newton, the slave dealer who wrote "Amazing Grace," or the once promiscuous Mary of Egypt. Those are reasonable models for you, not ivory-tower saints. Keep thinking of yourself as the Prodigal Son. Think over your deeds and conversations each evening and look for areas to improve. Read Psalm 51 before bed every night. Someday you may actually believe it.

Frederica Mathewes-Green is a wide-ranging author whose work has appeared in such diverse publications as the WASHINGTON POST, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, SMITHSONIAN, the LOS ANGELES TIMES, FIRST THINGS, BOOKS & CULTURE, SOJOURNERS, TOUCHSTONE, and the WALL STREET JOURNAL. This article first appeared in the February 4, 2002, issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY.

Features



Resources

More places for more information.

Learning to Forgive, from **TodaysChristianWomanStore.com**.

This downloadable resource you'll find great practical advice on the how to's of forgiveness as well as stories of the transforming power of forgiving someone.

Patience in Prayer, from **TodaysChristianWomanStore.com**. This downloadable resource offer advice on how to make it through periods of silence from God and be encouraged by others who have learned from waiting on the Lord.

The Other Side of Love: Handling Anger in a Godly Way, by Gary Chapman (Moody, 1999). Filled with insight and techniques to help families find better ways of dealing with this emotion, this book will help you understand the source of your anger and guide it toward a productive purpose.

60 Days in the Word: Devotions for Patience and Wholeness (Job and Colossians), by Warren Wiersbe (Cook Communications, 2006). This outstanding, undated collection of meditations by one of today's most beloved Bible teachers draws upon the teachings in Job and Colossians. Each devotional provides three questions to help you think through and apply God's truth to your day.

RESOURCES



A Spirit Fit to Lead

Resources

30



Do You Feel **Alone** as a Woman Leader?

IF you're a capable, called, and gifted Christian woman in leadership, join the conversation at **GiftedForLeadership.com**. This blog, along with downloadable resources, will help you safely converse with other women about the issues you face. You'll walk away feeling encouraged, supported, challenged, and definitely not alone!



www.GiftedForLeadership.com

**Join the
Conversation
Today!**

A service of  **CHRISTIANITY TODAY**
INTERNATIONAL