

THE

Will van der Hart & Rob Waller

POWER

— *of* —

BELONGING

DISCOVERING THE CONFIDENCE
TO LEAD WITH VULNERABILITY

DAVID  COOK™

transforming lives together

THE POWER OF BELONGING
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INTRODUCTION

‘Maybe the degree to which we belong anywhere isn’t actually measurable. Maybe it’s just a gentle onward movement.’¹

Naomi Reed

Are you looking for ways to improve your leadership, increase your influence, or gain authority? All great leaders are great learners, constantly trying to improve the way they lead others, and yet most of the leadership training we receive is external to us: vision, communication, management, strategy. But what if the greatest gift to your leadership was already yours? What if the power that you need to reach a new dimension of leadership was actually lying under a dirty sheet in your own basement?

This book is a guide to enable you to uncover what we believe is already yours—the power of belonging. And yet this is not a simple journey: that dirty sheet is the shame that hides the most precious and powerful leadership message we will ever know. The basement is often bolted and locked, lest anyone else realise that we are not as wonderful as we would like them to believe. Our stories seem to point in

the opposite direction—away from vulnerability and towards learned strength—and so we need to face reality before we find revelation. It is a struggle, but to uncover the reality of your belonging is to be transformed not just in your leadership, but in your life.

(Will): My first church in North West London had a problem with what I call, ‘Anglican Damp’; that sweet, mouldy smell that lingers in so many historic church buildings. Wanting to make the church as welcoming as possible, I set about trying my best to make the place smell better, and a toilet renovation project seemed like the logical place to start. However, even after installing brand-new loos, new flooring, and even air fresheners, the unwelcome damp smell persisted.

About six months later, I had conceded that ‘Anglican Damp’ was likely to be with me throughout my ministry, when, walking around the exterior of the building, I came upon a small locked door. It took some serious persuasion to get the key from the maintenance man who had claimed that it ‘wasn’t worth opening’. But after exercising what little leadership I had, I found myself holding a stick in one hand and a torch in the other, ready to battle my way through the cobwebs.

I was stopped abruptly after only two steps to find that the entire stairwell and basement beyond were completely flooded with putrid water. I notified the fire brigade, who later arrived on the scene to drain out the water. But even with their industrial pumps, it took over

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five hours to clear. What remained was the rusty carnage of ninety years of stored camping equipment and miscellaneous church junk. This had been the source of all my suffering! ‘Anglican Damp’ wasn’t an annoying but largely innocent smell; it was an indication that the whole building was flooded at its foundations!

Our work together is well illustrated by that flooded basement. Many leaders are plagued by a vague sense of fraudulence, unworthiness, or incompetence. They work tirelessly to improve the public-facing aspects of their life and leadership—renovating, polishing, and sprucing wherever possible. Yet, no matter how much effort they put in, or achievement they realise, the same feelings reappear.

According to the *Journal of Behavioral Science*, a sense of fraudulence is pervasive across our society. Impostor syndrome, as it is commonly known, affects approximately 70 percent of people at some stage of their lives.² Many reports suggest that it is particularly prevalent among people who are going through life transitions, such as students or those moving into new positions or phases of leadership. If you are battling impostor syndrome, you may recognise the symptoms: feeling trapped in a cycle of insecurity, performance, and defensiveness. An article by the American Psychological Association concludes, ‘Often the people affected by impostor feelings don’t realize they could be living some other way.’³

Ultimately this book seeks to take you on a journey with God through the locked door and into the shame basement in order that your sense of belonging might be restored and your leadership might be released from the grip of impostor syndrome.

WHAT COULD THE OUTCOMES BE?

(Will): A few months after our reclamation of the basement, a young man came up to me after church. He was newly married and said, ‘Have you got anywhere in the church building that I can work out? My wife is really unhappy about me having all of my weights in our living room!’

I didn’t skip a beat in offering him free access to our new rooms, now that they were dry and lit (although still slightly smelly). Over time, more people joined the work-out sessions. It became a huge comfort to me to know that early every morning a group of people were working out under our church building, listening to worship music and getting strong!

Our destination in *The Power of Belonging* is not just to drain the ‘shame basement’ but to turn it into an ‘integrity gym’! This is a place of strength from which we can exercise our leadership confidently because we have established two tracks of belonging: firstly, that I belong within my spheres of relationship and leadership, and secondly, that I have secure and infinite belonging to God Himself.

Success on this journey will largely depend upon your openness to and engagement in the material that you read. The process of change will probably be painful and frustrating at times, but the benefits will make it worthwhile. We want to encourage you to risk the house for the sake of the home.

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If you follow this path, we believe you are likely to see a positive impact in three areas of life:

Living Freely

For many people, shame (or a fear of shame) is a primary factor in their decision making. They live defensively to avoid humiliation or exert excessive control to mask their insecurity. Very soon these choices become automatic and are always heavily justified. Resolving shame enables you to make choices freely rather than under the threat of shame. At the heart of this freedom is a sense of true belonging, one that forms a foundation to healthy and unfettered decisions.

Loving Fully

The more life choices you make motivated by shame, the more you disconnect from your true self. This separation between the true self and the ‘presented’ self has a detrimental impact on relationships. Addressing your shame effectively enables you to accept and offer love—to welcome and celebrate those around you.

Leading Well

Resolving your shame could be the most powerful leadership decision you will ever make. You will move from leading from the margins to leading from the heart. Belonging undoes insecurities and defensiveness in leadership. It prophetically calls others to a place of authenticity and courage. Leaders who ‘belong’ create cultures that

nourish others. They make the leadership journey a shared enterprise, not an independent activity.

TIPS FOR THE ROAD

This road is fraught with difficulties. Resistance to belonging will rise up within you as we address the bonds of shame. Shame cannot survive being called out—but doing so will involve taking the risk of being known. Shame cannot coexist with empathy—but embracing empathy will mean allowing ourselves to be loved. There is no need to ‘bare all’, but there is a need to be honest and open with yourself. Jesus warns us: ‘Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it?’ (Luke 14:28). We need to enter this journey expecting some uncomfortable feelings and some unexpected realities. The cost of belonging is to carry the risk of rejection or humiliation. It is precisely because we want to avoid this cost that we lose the opportunity to lead securely; so make a commitment to the cost now and you will make great progress later on.

There is also a huge difference between knowing that something is true and allowing that truth to change your heart. You may put this book down because it is too challenging, but you are far more likely to read it through in a superficial way and nod in agreement without experiencing any life change. Shame-bound leaders are experts at deflecting anything that may engage with their shame, often without even realising it. They congratulate themselves for reading a book on shame and belonging, but the book’s message bounces off the Teflon suit they wear.

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Figure 1: Teflon leadership suit (not recommended).

With that reality in mind, we strongly recommend an active reading approach. Active reading involves a process of reading, engaging, reflecting, and applying. Each chapter ends with a study guide that includes exercises for your engagement and prompts for your reflection and that gives space for you to consider ways in which you can make direct application to your own life. We also believe God is on this journey with us—He is the ‘alongside presence’ and the ‘wonderful counsellor’ who can see the end of the road.⁴

There are other ways that you can read actively. You may choose to use this book as a small group study resource and work through

it with a couple of trusted friends, or you may simply journal along with the text as important things come into your mind. The key point is that you allow this to be a personal journey rather than just an academic journey. This is a heart transplant, not a skin graft.

DEFEATED BY 'WHACK-A-MOLE'

(Rob): When I was growing up, the Scouts always had a Summer Fete. Going back to their Fete recently, I was amazed that some of the games I played forty years ago were still there and my own children enjoyed them.

One firm favourite over the years has been 'Whack-a-Mole' in which moles pop their heads out of a grid of holes. The goal is to take the rubber hammer and 'whack' the head of each mole before it disappears again. The activity gets more frenetic the more success you have until the moles are appearing and disappearing at such a rate that it is impossible to react quickly enough. My children usually end up exhausted and in fits of giggles, but inevitably defeated.

The search for belonging can be just like 'Whack-a-Mole' in which we try to defeat each obstacle to belonging as it shows its head. We hit appearance, career, social life, church activity, academic credentials ... We smash the inner blockages of worry, perfectionism, anger, guilt ... But no matter how many 'moles' we whack, our sense of un-belonging persists. We just end up exhausted and defeated.

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This book is an attempt to unmask the mechanism that keeps the ‘moles’ from appearing because we need a deep solution that goes beyond the symptoms. This central mechanism is *shame*, a complex and often unaddressed emotion that we shall expose for what it is.

Shame-bound leaders appear ‘nearly perfect’ to those around them. They present brilliantly, work diligently, and serve humbly. They may even talk about community and authenticity. They don’t look broken to those around them, but they are broken to themselves.

They may feel like frauds or suffer from low self-esteem and be plagued by embarrassment, defensiveness. They may suppress these feelings in activity and overwork but feel deeply lonely. They might even feel secure in the perceptions of others but not in their self-perception.

A PERSONAL JOURNEY

When you are setting out on something big, it is good to know who you are travelling with: The fact is that this is our journey too! We have written three books together—on worry, guilt, and perfectionism. They drew on our professional skills in theology and psychiatry. In those works, we disclosed that we struggled with these things and had found help in the techniques we shared. We like to think that we successfully hit a few of those moles pretty hard. But if we were absolutely real, we also wrote those books to put off writing this one!

It feels far too exposing of the fact that we sometimes haven’t felt that we belonged, or fitted in. At times, we have lived and led with a sense of fraudulence and insufficiency that is exhausting and we have wondered what needs to change if we are going to live differently.

While accepting this fact feels humiliating enough, putting it on paper seems terrifying. Yet, it has also been our privilege to spend these last two years developing, researching, teaching, praying, and writing. This is our attempt to finally challenge the mechanism that keeps those moles from reappearing.

We also realise that we are not alone on this journey. The question of belonging is the question of our neighbours and our friends, our mentors and our pastors. It is a question asked in the high street, the gym, the shopping mall, and the church. It is a question that underpins all our work and relationships. It is a matter central to everyone's daily existence and eternal destiny.

The question of belonging doesn't only create a benign discomfort, but has a very active impact upon our decision making and leadership. We argue that our sense of positive 'belonging' has a transformational effect upon the quality of our leadership. It is our prayer that *The Power of Belonging* will be a significant part of your leadership formation and that it may play a part in raising up a generation of leaders who are not secretly bound by shame and feelings of fraudulence, but are liberated to lead well.

STUDY GUIDE: INTRODUCTION

How comfortable are you in your own skin? What do you worry about when no one is looking?

Do you identify with the need for a deeper solution to recurrent problems in your leadership? Which superficial things have you already addressed?

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What is the most important outcome for you—living freely, loving fully, or living well? How do they relate to each other?

How would you describe your sense of belonging at the start of this journey? To what extent do you believe shame has limited it?

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1. Naomi Reed, *No Ordinary View: A Season of Faith and Mission in the Himalayas* (Milton Keynes, England: Authentic, 2008).
2. *Journal of Behavioral Science*, cited in Danielle Page, 'How Impostor Syndrome Is Holding You Back at Work', NBC News, 25 October 2017, www.nbcnews.com/better/health/how-impostor-syndrome-holding-you-back-work-ncna814231.
3. Kirsten Weir, 'Feel Like a Fraud?', American Psychological Association, November 2013, www.apa.org/gradpsych/2013/11/fraud.aspx.
4. Whilst it is not necessary to be a Christian to have a sense of belonging, we believe that this is ultimately where belonging finds its own home. For many shame-bound leaders, God is distant—a figure of awe, or a strict headmaster. However, the Bible is full of descriptions of God as someone who walks alongside us and, being the Risen Lord, has walked this journey Himself already and knows its end.