

# This Hungry Spirit

**Your Need for Basic Goodness**

**C. Clinton Sidle**



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For Exercise 22, page 84, Ken Blanchard, et. al. *Leading at a Higher Level*, (New Jersey: Financial Times Press, 2007). Susan Fowler developed this process for the Situational Self Leadership program offered by The Ken Blanchard Companies.

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## INTRODUCTION

# This Hungry Spirit

It doesn't interest me if there is one God  
or many gods.  
I want to know if you belong or feel  
abandoned.  
If you know despair or can see it in others.  
I want to know  
if you are prepared to live in the world  
with its harsh need  
to change you. If you can look back  
with firm eyes  
saying this is where I stand. I want to know  
if you know  
how to melt into that fierce heat of living  
falling toward  
the center of your longing. I want to know  
if you are willing  
to live, day by day, with the consequence of love  
and the bitter  
unwanted passion of your sure defeat.

I have been told, in *that* fierce embrace, even  
the gods speak of God.

—David Whyte, *Fire In the Earth*

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I KNOW THERE IS A HUNGER IN YOU, longing to be filled. Just stop and look for a moment, and you will find it. You feel it don't you? You may be successful, yet still you strive. You may be wealthy, yet still you seek gain. You may be loved, yet you still wander. Where does this discontent begin? There is always something missing. What do you so long for?

For me, it has always been freedom. A long time ago I wrote about it just before entering a difficult time in my life.

Freedom has a new meaning for me. When I was younger it meant the freedom to travel, to pursue different relationships, and to follow my deepest yearnings. Above all it meant adventure—as in the year I studied and traveled in Europe, hitchhiking and sleeping under the stars.

I remember one trip in particular that captured the essence of this freedom. My friend and I hitchhiked from Belgium, down the Rhine visiting castle ruins, across Bavaria to the Oktoberfest in Munich, down to Switzerland, and back up the Rhine through the Black Forest. We followed our every whim, looking for adventure and asking people on the way where they were headed and what might be interesting there for us. We slept in a pedestrian tunnel to avoid the rain and were awakened in the early morning by a tractor that nearly ran us over—the driver just shouted something in German and laughed as he drove away.

We brawled at the Oktoberfest with some others, and I spent the night in the hospital where I had stitches for a cut from being hit over the head with a beer mug while protecting my friend during the fight. We climbed and spent the night on a Swiss mountaintop, passing farmers on the way carrying huge bales of hay on steeply sloped pastures and a hermit who was intrigued with my friend's nylon backpack. And we traveled to Freiburg in the Black Forest for a wine festival, where we spent the night in a residential downtown courtyard and found ourselves locked in overnight and forced to climb over a high wall to leave.

Never before had I had such a sense of complete freedom from responsibility, worry, or direction. For the longest time I yearned to return to that place.

As I've grown older, the meaning of freedom has changed. I still like adventure but it's no longer as compelling. Now I seek a different kind of freedom—the freedom to be vulnerable and emotionally expressive, and to be open, honest, and truthful about what I feel. Even more, I want to love easily and freely without condition or inhibition. I want to feel the pain and the joy of all of life with the greatest depth, but without attachment to the ebb and flow.

I want to be free in sensing and expressing feeling and emotion, to flow with them naturally without the suffering that comes from holding or rejecting. I want to become as one with them, because in separation I feel the tension and conflict of thinking I must do something about them. I want to be fully present with whatever arises, and flow with it freely, with full awareness, and without hesitation—that is total freedom, that is what I long for. To experience deeply the ups and downs, the love and anger, the compassion and fear of daily life, and to not judge, hold, or control.

It feels this longing for freedom is really about exploring my real self—finding the details in my daily existence that bring to life the different, and sometimes hidden, but more authentic parts of me. I have difficulty describing it because I haven't yet fully experienced it. Maybe it's a search for my soul. I'm not sure.

I'm only sure what it is not. It is not judging myself for being jealous. It is not willful behavior as when I shut everything out and focus only on the goal or idea at hand. And it is not living in the past or in the future, as when I dwell on a painful memory or a hopeful expectation. These are attachments to the known.

Freedom springs from experiencing the unknown, and that can only happen from moment to moment.

The driving force in my life has always been this longing. We all share

some version of it. It is a universal aspect of our nature and it underlies all that we do. We have many different words for it—yearning, questing, searching, craving, striving, seeking, thirsting . . . to do whatever we are compelled to do. It is as gross as a drive to accomplish a big goal, and it as subtle as an uneasy restlessness.

It is a pervasive energy I call our spirit, our hungry spirit. Different people call it different things; but whatever it is, it is your constant longing for success, recognition, influence, freedom, love, or whatever it takes for you to find your place in the world. All your worldly concerns are subordinate to it and means to its end. It helps you find and make meaning, and drives you to achieve and do something with your life. It is the seed of creation and drives the pulse of your evolutionary urge. It is your life force, your life energy: Every act, every word, every thought is a reflection of it in some way.

What is this hungry spirit really looking for? Aristotle said happiness, which he considered “the meaning and purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence.” But the trouble with calling it happiness is that in this day and age we tend to cheapen it into getting something for nothing.

Many New Age self-help/happiness programs, for instance, tell you that you can fulfill your desires by simply visualizing what you want—as if the Universe were a catalogue that you can flip through and shop with free and near-instant delivery. Sorry, it’s not that simple. Worse, these promoters of happiness can misrepresent how things actually do work, and often ignore the fact that there is something very valuable to learn from another part of yourself, from your suffering and other negative feelings.

Suffering is a fundamental truth of being human, and in that suffering often lay the seeds to our growth. Many of us already know, for example, that there is something to be learned from sadness: It reconciles us to reality and awakens us to the flowing, changing nature of life.

Most of what we take for happiness is delusional.

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The fact is that most of what we take for happiness is delusional. In spite of all our efforts to find it, get it, be it, we’re not getting any happier, and maybe we’re even getting worse.

Although our income has more than doubled over the past fifty years, research shows we have become no happier. When we reach a certain level—and that threshold isn't very high—money makes no difference. Yet still we pursue even more along with reputation, achievement, pleasure, and companionship, all in the name of happiness. It's never-ending, and when we fail to be satisfied, we are often overcome with resignation or depression. Today more than a hundred million people suffer from depression, and that number is growing. So in spite of all our pursuits, we still seem lost and confused.

The reason, I believe, is that what our hungry spirit longs for is not just about happiness. I believe it longs for what I call “meaning”—something that draws into us what matters most to us, and gives fullness to what we do and who we are. What we all really want to find is a sense of relevance, purpose, and belonging in our lives, and how well the pursuit of that goes is what gives us greater or lesser happiness. The question of “Who am I, and why am I here?” is the root to all of our pursuits, and the answer it draws can be the source of our deepest resilience.

As the old saying goes, “If you don't *stand* for anything, then you will *fall* for almost everything”; but if you know your *why*, then you can bear almost any *how*. Do materialistic pursuits and getting what you want bring lasting happiness? No, because they serve no lasting purpose and only demand you do more of the same. Your longing becomes a treadmill that just spins faster and faster and eventually begins to feel empty. No wonder we are stressed and depressed. What we typically take for happiness sells ourselves short. Like Lily Tomlin said, “The problem with the rat race is that even if you win, you're still a rat.”

The real problem is that you can't possibly know what you want if you don't first know who you are. And you can't possibly know who you are unless you challenge yourself to find what is most meaningful to you. Most of us never even really look, because it requires going inward. This is not easy in our fast-paced world, and not everyone has the courage for it. But if you invest the time, I guarantee that you will gain insights into what is otherwise

The real problem is that you can't possibly know what you want if you don't first know who you are.

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hidden, and slowly come to a fuller life. This takes you deeper into your own longing—well beyond shallow notions of happiness as simply getting what you think you want.

When I was a young man, a close friend shared an ancient notion that helped me frame this longing early in life. He said that in the Hindu tradition there are four phases of life, and each phase builds on the last in a progressive process that leads to finding deeper and deeper meaning as well as greater and greater happiness. I quickly adopted a version of it as a guide for my life and have since discovered a number of others in psychology and other spiritual traditions. In my version, there are just three phases:

Phase 1: Study and exploration—Acquiring the socialized self

Phase 2: Love and contribution—Discovering the authentic self

Phase 3: Spirit and devotion—Exploring the transcendent self

This book is about navigating the second, middle phase. It is about carefully unraveling the socialized, conditioned self to discover a truer or more authentic self. Your hungry spirit is constantly driving you to do and acquire things, and much of what you acquire in the first phase is a build-up of perceptions, complexes, and roles that you take on to deal with your world in becoming an adult. In the process, you very likely develop a self-image that is based on the expectations of others and the conditioning of your world. This separates you from your true self and eventually begins to cause you problems. *But it is supposed to happen this way—it's nature's big set-up to ensure you continue to grow.*

In the middle phase you unlearn a lot of that to find what is more meaningful and authentic—the real you. You dissolve the acquired in ways that help you discover the innate. In a sense, this unavoidably mysterious process *is about losing yourself in order to find yourself.* In that discovery, you begin to lose your sense of dependence on others and gain a sense of who you really are. You connect to a deeper, more authentic you, gain a deeper sense of confidence, and learn to open and extend yourself out in love and contribution.

The third phase is exploring the relationship of this authentic self to the cosmos. It is about divine love and transcending your sense of individual existence. I'll leave that part to you.

I've been a student of leadership for many years and there is one thing I know for sure: The better you know yourself and are grounded in the real, authentic you, the more likely you are to not only be happy, but also successful . . . and to want to do good in the world. When you feel good about yourself, you are more predisposed to being supportive, charitable, cooperative, and productive. So what *really* makes you happy also makes you successful.

I *could* frame this book around leadership, but I'd rather not. I would rather talk about it as human effectiveness. After all, that's what leadership is really about anyway.

Being an effective human being is less about mastering certain skills and more about fostering a certain attitude in yourself as well as in others. As management guru Peter Block says, "It is about confronting yourself and others with your own freedom." It's about learning who you really are.

In sharing with you what I have to say, I will reveal a fair amount of my personal history. I do this because there is a story to tell, and because I want to show you that this process isn't something abstract, some theory. It's a very doable and worthwhile way to live your life. Many happiness and leadership authors invent examples, use others as examples, or cite research to make their points. In contrast, I want to make this very real, practical, and convincing for you—so you'll want to try it yourself.