

THE MENTORING TREE: A LEADERSHIP PARABLE

BY LEIGHTON FORD

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Introduction

As chair of the Leighton Ford

Ministries board, I'm often asked by church leaders, "What is Leighton doing these days?"

The answer they are expecting to hear is about some project of scope like the significant ministry initiatives which have been an important part of Leighton's life, including leading the Lausanne I and Lausanne II congresses, preaching for huge crusades or conferences, or creating the Sandy Ford Fund and Arrow Leadership Program.

But instead of focusing on those public portions of his ministry path, I take great joy in sharing with them an entirely different priority that has become the center of Leighton's life - mentoring. Following the ministry pattern of Jesus, Leighton is investing in the deep relationships that equip a new generation of evangelists and ministry leaders, rather than being driven by the measurable ministry projects that can consume us.

Given the significance of Leighton's mentoring in my life and in so many others, I pray this parable will help change

senior leaders' perceptions of mentoring and understanding of their own responsibility to mentor. That is why the Board of Leighton Ford Ministries strongly encouraged Leighton to have this book written about the importance of mentoring in the lives all of us who minister, and in the future of the Church.

Ministers for the Kingdom desire to be used of God to reach scores of people for Christ, build programs and facilities that are lasting, and infuse our sphere of influence with Biblical ideas - but there is nothing farther reaching and more lasting than investing in leaders who will create a network of influence. All too often, however, we do not see mentoring as our "real work," but something that is squeezed in between appointments and projects.

If we can grasp the challenge of Leighton's parable of the Mentoring Tree, investing in younger servants of the Lord will become a high priority. As a Board, we felt this story needed to be told, because if Mentoring Trees could be planted and nourished by the Church, we

will regain the depth, effectiveness, and significance of ministry that is too often stilted when our ministry initiatives are planted in the shade of a Banyan Tree.

For Leighton and Jeanie Ford, it took the tragedy of their son Sandy's death at age twenty-one, to hear God's call to move away from large ministry platforms, and instead grasp the eternal significance of investing in mentoring relationships - some one-on-one, some in small groups. This dramatic shift took courage and boldness, because it ran so counter to the expectations of many. Leighton had to make some hard choices about his public ministry in order to mentor.

It is also important to know that Jeanie has been a linchpin in this shift, not only by teaming with Leighton in the change, but through her remarkable insightful wisdom in developing a model for mentoring, and her personal mentoring relationships as well.

We celebrate the life and ministry of Leighton and Jeanie. And through the years, while

their focus in mentoring has taken many forms, in all of them, it is the "personal touches" that made all the difference.

I've worked closely with Leighton for twenty years, and I know he would be the first to give all recognition to Jeanie, associates, mentors, leaders, supporters, friends, teachers, and a host of others who God has brought into his life to partner with him to develop this mentoring focus. And it is exactly that humble spirit that is the critical starting point for genuine mentoring.

Along with the entire Board of Leighton Ford ministries, I pray you will be encouraged by this very personal story of Leighton's ministry of mentoring, and most importantly, that planting a Mentoring Tree will move to the top of your own priorities.

Roger Parrott,
*Chair of the Leighton Ford
Ministries Board*

Dr. Roger Parrott has been a college president for twenty

years and is currently President of Belhaven College in Jackson, Mississippi. He began working with Leighton in 1986 as the U.S. Director for the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, and continues in leadership with the Lausanne movement serving as Treasurer, Chair of the 2004 Forum for World Evangelization, and as a member of the planning team for Lausanne III.

A Tale of Two Trees

It did not make the headlines, but not long ago there was a very important convention that met at a beach hotel in California.

It was a convention of leading trees, most of them old, some hundreds of years old, who had met to discuss the future of trees. They were very concerned that the world was running out of trees, and wanted to see what they could do about it.

But they also gathered because leaders like to meet other leaders. So the conference gave them the chance to get together with some very fine old trees from all over the world, enjoy tree talk, and just have a good time relaxing by the beach.

One afternoon two of these veteran tree leaders took a walk together on the beach.

One was Banyan, a very large spreading tree from Florida.

The other was Aspen, a slender tree with white bark and yellow leaves, who came from the slopes of Colorado.

Because they came from different parts of the country they were very curious about one another. So they decided to take a walk.

The banyan tree was very old, and bent over with the weight of his huge spreading branches. He walked with the aid of a handsome carved wood cane engraved with intricate designs like tree branches.

"Where did you get the cane?" asked Aspen. "It looks very fine."

Banyan shook it proudly. "Very fine indeed," he said. "It belonged to my grandfather. It's made from one of the finest old trees, which donated a branch to a woodcarver who gave it to my grandfather in India."

"Aren't there many banyans in India?" asked Aspen. "And India is a very religious country isn't it?"

"Very religious," nodded Banyan. "In fact over there some people worship banyans as gods. Not that we are, of course. I know better. I may live a few hundred more years

but not forever."

A fleeting look of sadness came over his face.

They walked a few more paces, dragging their roots in the water as children would, as if they were young trees again.

"Do you think about getting old?" asked Aspen thoughtfully. "Do you think of what you have done for the world? And what you will leave behind?"

"I do," said Banyan, "When I was a young tree I had so many dreams of what I wanted to do. Many have come true. Florida is a hot place and I have given cool shade in the heat of the day to many weary people. I have done what God made me to do and that makes me very happy. But something worries me."

He paused.

"And what is that?" asked Aspen.

"Who will replace me, and you?" said the banyan. "This conference has made me very worried. The trees of the world are dying out in many places."

Aspen nodded and his leaves shook.

"I wonder the same. In the hills of Colorado we don't hear a lot of news from other parts of the world. I hadn't heard how many trees are dying. Why, the other day the speaker said that a portion of forest the size of a football field is lost every minute of every day! Did you know that?"

"I knew it was bad," said Banyan darkly, "but not that bad. Deforestation, is that the word?"

"Yes," said Aspen. "After that session I saw some of our brothers and sisters from Africa and Latin America who looked devastated. They said all their tropical forests would be gone in the next five years unless something is done."

"My friend from Sri Lanka said the same thing," said Banyan. "More and more people are being born. So many trees are being cut down to make rooms for farms to feed more people. And then we need more and more houses, so more trees are cut down. Then

more firewood is needed to cook. On and on and on it goes."

"Yes," added Aspen, "and when trees go there's not as much water drawn from the ground and it gets very dry. There are deserts where there used to be forests."

"It does worry me," said Banyan, and with heads bowed they walked on, silent.

Then Aspen turned and looked Banyan up and down.

"You are a very big tree," he said. "Are you also very old?"

"Over a hundred years," Banyan answered proudly. "And over a hundred feet tall."

"Really?" exclaimed Aspen. "Do many banyan trees grow that old and that tall?"

"Many grow to be hundreds of years old," answered the banyan. "And very tall. But mostly" (and here his trunk shook with laughter) "mostly we grow very large around! We look like jolly fat men! Did you know the biggest banyan tree in the world is in India? It's the

Great Banyan in the botanical gardens near Calcutta. They tell me Great Banyan measures over three hundred meters around."

"That's one big tree!" gasped the astonished aspen. "Nearly a thousand feet."

"Yes," said Banyan. "And when I was in school my history teacher said that when Alexander the Great came to India he camped under a banyan tree big enough to shelter all seven thousand of his soldiers."

"How old is the Great Banyan?" asked Aspen.

"Perhaps two hundreds years" Banyan answered. "Some banyans may live over a thousand years."

"Amazing!" Aspen exclaimed. "And do they spread?"

"We do," said Banyan. "We grow up and spread out. And we also look very strange because our roots start above the ground. They grow down from our branches into the ground and hold up other spreading branches. I guess they are tree canes" he chuckled, waving his own carved

cane.

"Have you ever seen a big banyan?" he asked his companion.

Aspen shook his head.

"Well a single banyan tree can look like a forest. That Great Banyan near Calcutta may have what looks like a thousand trunks growing down."

They walked on, Banyan with his cane, Aspen thinking of what he had just learned.

"But I am being very impolite," Banyan said at last, "talking so much about myself. What about aspens?" Banyan asked. "Are there many aspens in your part of the world?"

Aspen smiled. "A few. In fact we aspens are the mostly widely growing tree in North America, all across the continent. There are many of us where I come from, in the mountains of Colorado."

"It must be a very beautiful place," said Banyan, "because you are a very beautiful tree. So slender, and such lovely

light trunk and yellow leaves; I wish I was as slender as you."

He laughed again, ruefully, shaking his many long branches. "I guess I would look better if I trimmed down a bit."

"And do aspens live a long time?" he wondered.

"Not as long as you," said Aspen. "Maybe a hundred and twenty years. But we do have a claim to fame."

"And what is that?" asked Banyan, curiously.

"Do you know where the largest living organism in the world is?" asked Aspen.

"Texas?" Banyan asked, "Isn't that where everything is the biggest?"

"No, not Texas, Oregon. And do you know what that organism is?"

"An aspen? How could that be?"

"No, a fungus. A huge fungus. But the second largest living thing *is* an aspen ...a 'quaking aspen' grove in the Wasatch

Mountains in Utah. It's said to weigh over six thousand tons!"

"My word" breathed Banyan.
"How did it get that big?"

"Well, you have to understand aspens," his friend explained.

"Have you ever seen an aspen grove? At first it looks like any other grove, a bunch of the same kind of tree. But it's not! An aspen grove is actually one tree connected by its roots and the roots are out of sight under the soil. An aspen tree spreads out its roots and grows many trunks. Those who count these things say that one grove, one they call 'Pando', probably has forty one thousand stems off one root stock. It's really one tree with many branches."

"Well!" Banyan was speechless for a while. They walked on a few steps.

"But how long did it take to grow that way?"

"Perhaps ten thousand years," said Aspen.

"Ten thousand years... but I thought you said aspens live

only a hundred years or so?"

"True. For the original tree," said Aspen. "But long after that first visible trunk is gone, the roots under the soil are there, waiting, patient, until some disturbance come and the sun stimulates another growth cycle and the tree pioneers on into new territory."

"Truly amazing." Banyan shook his head again. "I am glad to learn all this."

"There's something else I'm happy for," said Aspen. "We trees don't live just for ourselves, do we? We provide shade for young spruce and pine trees, and shelter them. We shed our leaves and let the sunlight filter through so they can grow too."

Then he asked Banyan, "But tell me more about why you are so concerned about the future of your tree family. With so many big trees, that live so many hundreds of years, banyan trees shouldn't have any trouble being around for many centuries to come. Why are you worried?"

Banyan did not reply for a moment. He walked a few paces, and kicked one of his roots in the sand. Then he looked up.

"We do have a problem," he admitted. "In India there is a proverb: nothing grows under the banyan tree."

"It's sad, but true. A banyan tree, especially a very big one, is so huge, and its foliage is so thick, it does not let the light through. It does not allow the little seedlings to grow.

"That's what makes me worry. I am still living. So are many other banyans. But what about the next generation? And the next? Who will provide shade for them?"

Then he turned and looked right into Aspen's eyes.

"Do you know what else that concerns me?"

"What?"

"It's about the human leaders in our country. Too many of our big important leaders are like a big banyan tree. They take up so much space; demand so much

attention. Even when they walk into a room they take up lots of space and suck up the air. And I don't see them letting light through to nurture the younger ones coming along.

"Our world has many other problems besides our tree problems. We need leaders who can see beyond themselves and their own interests. And where are those leaders coming from?"

He fell silent. Even his great branches seemed to bow low before these grave questions.

Aspen too was quiet. Then he slowly voiced his own reflections.

"You are a very wise old tree, Banyan. What you say about our country is true. We do have lots of leaders that take up all the attention. We do need to allow new leaders to grow and take us into the years ahead.

"We have something to learn from your wisdom. This walk on the beach has been more important to me than all the statistics we missed hearing at the afternoon session."

"Agreed" said Banyan. "And I think I have something to learn from you. That leaders may be visible and grow tall and spread widely, but unless they are growing a whole network under the surface, how will their influence last?"

It was getting late.

Banyan and Aspen watched the red ball of the sun moving down toward the far edge of the sea. At the horizon it seemed to duck its head and pull the sea over its brow, like a child snuggling under the covers for the night. For a few moments it let out winks of light that striped the edges of the evening clouds. And without a further nod it faded into the folds of the night.

The two old trees turned and headed back to the hotel, thinking about days past, and about children all around the world going to sleep, and dreaming of years yet to come.

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