



# INSIGHTS

THAT QUOTED **directly** FROM THE BOOK

## Everybody Needs a Fred

(Pastor Bob Merritt)

One thing I know is that every person has a dark side. You have personality and character flaws that you might not be aware of, but they are there. I have them too, many of them. Some of us have huge cracks, gaping holes that everyone else can see but often escape our notice. Some of you wonder why you fail to sustain close friendships or an intimate marriage or consistently get passed over at work.

It could be a relating pattern that pushes people away, and you're not even aware of it. It could be that you talk too much, don't listen, roll your eyes at others' suggestions, or sigh in meetings, which communicates boredom or disgust.

Maybe you're irritable, cranky, moody, easily miffed; maybe you're loud, arrogant, short-tempered, or selfish. Maybe you never pick up the tab, don't tip, and are rude to waiters and store clerks. Maybe you can't hold a confidence, which is why nobody wants to get close. Maybe you tend to power up and push your agenda. These are character flaws that negatively affect everything and everyone you touch. Deeper, darker flaws include dishonesty, anger, addictions, or sexual immorality.

It wasn't until I reached my fifties that I became somewhat self-aware and actually knew a thing or two about myself and about life in general. Seriously, what do you really know when you're in your twenties? Not much. In your thirties, you're consumed with proving your worth and climbing the ladder. In your forties, you've either found your groove or you spend all your energy trying to fix whatever you wrecked in your thirties. It's only in your fifties that you actually know anything, because you have more life behind you than you have in front of you.

By God's grace and a lot of family support, I was able to avoid any sort of fatal fall in my twenties, thirties, and for-ties. Even though I went through some very lean years, I never made any life-altering mistakes. I got a great education, was never fired from a job, married a wonderful Christian girl had two great kids, and kept advancing in my career.

But something happened to me in my early forties that was very confusing to me. The church I was leading was growing by 20 percent or more each year, and a couple years it grew by 40 percent. We were building buildings and adding staff, and the number of requests for me to lead and teach outside our church were increasing. Eventually, I was asked to lead the preaching department at Bethel Theological Seminary as a permanent part-time professor; I couldn't have scripted my life any better. Everything I was doing seemed to fit who I was.

**But about two years into it, I was miserable.** I didn't see it at the time, but the demands on my life had outgrown my ability to keep up. I felt tethered to so many people and obligations that one day I took my canoe out to a local lake in the driving

rain, paddled out to the middle, and just sat there for two hours. With rain and tears streaming down my face, I looked up toward the gray sky and said out loud, "What's wrong with me?" What confused me was that everything I was doing was good. But doing all of it was slowly sucking the life out of me.

## **Danger Signs**

The cracks started showing up in harsh comments and bursts of anger toward my wife, kids, and staff. **I had become a virtual recluse at the office. My staff no longer had access to me.** I sequestered myself behind my door, because I had to crank out a sermon, lesson plan, or news article. Tensions between my staff and me were completely dismissed and swept under the rug. If someone got hurt, it was tough luck, suck it up, and just do your job. There was no relating. Just get it done, and don't bother me, because I was in demand and people should understand that.

I was even worse at home. I was a brooding and angry man who reacted to the smallest things with hurtful comments and gestures. The kids learned to stay clear and wondered quietly to my wife, "Why is Dad like that all the time?"

Between Laurie and me there was plenty of yelling and tears, followed by days of staying out of each other's way. But I was blind to my problems and didn't understand why I felt or behaved that way. **I thought everybody else was the problem and that they just didn't understand my world. I excused my behavior because I truly believed I was doing what God had led me to do.** And that was true, I was doing what God had led me to do, only I was doing too much of it.

I had a sense that something inside me was breaking, but I didn't have the time or energy to address it. I was also too afraid to allow anyone to have access to my soul.

*Emotionally, I was depleted, and it showed up in my inability to love or laugh. Bill Hybels once said, "The way I was doing God's work was destroying the work of God in me."*

## **The Moment of Truth**

So God in his wisdom and grace sent me a messenger. Just like God sent the prophet Nathan to confront King David with his sin, **God sent Dean Hager to confront me. Dean respected my teaching and leadership, and so one day he wrote me a personal letter saying how God had been nudging him to find a role to play at Eagle Brook. One thing led to another, and after a couple years of being in a mentoring group together, Dean became our church chairman.**

One of the reasons Dean agreed to the role was because he wanted to help me become a better leader. As he got closer to me, he saw some of the deeper cracks, so he decided that the best way he could help me was to empower the board to help me work on my leadership skills. **But when Dean dug further into it, he began hearing disturbing rumblings from staff and lay leaders about my relating patterns.** Dean has always had a unique ability to discern a train wreck in the making, and this train was headed toward a big crash.

*Dean spent several months interviewing key lay leaders and staff. He always kept me abreast of what was being said and what he thought I (and the board) should do. I*

knew there were some serious problems, but I didn't know how serious until a board meeting in February 2004.

Dean had gained the full trust of the board and me, and he knew it was time to call for an executive meeting with my leadership role as the only agenda. Dean summarized his concerns, and though I had spent fourteen years leading our church, Dean said to the board, "The question before us tonight is tis this: is Bob Merritt the one who should continue to lead us?"

I was so stunned that I couldn't speak. To have that question raised shook me to the core. I realized that these eight people held my fate in their hands, and at that moment I knew I had some serious flaws to overcome or I'd lose almost everything I'd given my life to.

## Fred

The consensus that night was that I was still the guy they wanted to lead our church, but it came with a condition: I would enter a yearlong intervention with a leadership coach whose name was Fred. Fred has an office in Minneapolis, and he coaches CEOs throughout the country. The year would be filled with numerous one-on-one interviews with Fred, taking every personality profile under the sun, and with Fred facilitating several group interventions between the board and me.

Fred and his assistant interviewed all my family members, most of my staff, and all of my closest friends using sixty questions that essentially asked, "What's good about Bob, and what's bad about Bob?" Those interviewed held nothing back, and their candid responses were recorded in a two-hundred-page document that Fred and his assistant read back to me, word for word, during a two-day meeting. *When my leadership team asked me what that was like, the phrase "it felt like a leadership vasectomy" came out of my mouth. I felt completely exposed. And snipped.*

For two solid days I sat in a chair and listened to Fred read statements like, "Bob overlooks relationships and lacks interpersonal skills in working with people." "Bob doesn't listen well." "Bob doesn't manage his staff." "There's no love." "He's unapproachable." "Bob speaks before he thinks." "Bob has a love problem." "I know that Bob cares, but he's not gifted in showing it."

For two days I listened to page after page of how people didn't think I cared about them and how I'd been dismissive and hurtful toward them. I heard repeatedly that I needed to manage my mouth and measure my words and body lan-guage carefully. My colleagues and friends said some affirming things about my teaching and leadership, but what I learned is that those things get lost and don't matter if I'm a jerk.

But what really nailed me was when I heard these words from my son, David: "My dad is angry a lot." When Fred read those words to me, he looked up from the page and let them sink into my soul. I had to look away. After several seconds of silence, Fred offered some loving words of counsel and solace, but I was unable to hear him. I couldn't get past the raw emotion that I was feeling. I couldn't believe I had been so blind, that instead of love, laughter, and kindness, my son was experiencing anger from me. It wrecked me. Never in my life had I been so convicted of how flawed I was.

## Broken

When you hear the same themes repeated over and over again from a variety of people who've experienced what it's like to be on the other side of you, you know the truth. You can hear the same themes from your kids or your spouse, but you tend to blow them off. You assume they're just ticked off about something or they're being hypercritical. You hear them, but you dismiss them. But when person after person says, "Bob doesn't listen well," or "Bob uses hurtful words a lot," or "I don't feel like I could ever approach Bob with honest feedback," you know that you might have some issues.

It became clear to me that it wasn't very pleasant to be on the other side of Bob Merritt. Fred put the mirror up to my face, and for the first time I saw the ugly cracks.

**It broke me.**

**I was embarrassed and deeply saddened.**

**And it was the beginning of my new life.**

**Part of what confused me was that I had been successful doing what I had always done and behaving the way I'd always behaved. Why was I running into so many problems now?**

I learned a vital leadership lesson: what got you where you are won't get you where you need to go. Instead of leading a church of three hundred, I was now leading a church of ten thousand. Instead of leading three staff members, I was now leading two hundred. What worked before wouldn't work anymore; the landscape had changed. And when the landscape changes, you have to change with it. The number of people and systems depending on my leadership had multiplied exponentially, which meant that my leadership abilities had to grow in order for the church and my life to go forward.

## **Talent Isn't Enough**

I had always thought that as long as I delivered the goods, that was good enough. As long as I taught well, led well, and didn't screw up, that's all that was required. But I learned that being a competent teacher and leader wasn't enough. People expected me to be nice. Imagine that! They wanted me to be conversant, approachable, and interested in their lives. They wanted to have some access to my time and actually have some sort of relationship with me.

**I began seeing for the first time that talent can take you only so far. I was getting As on the talent side but Fs on the relationship side. *And what Fred and others were saying to me was that if I didn't start getting some Cs and Bs on the relationship side, I could take my talent and go find another job was on the verge of losing my staff, because instead of feeling encouraged and empowered by me, they felt devalued and defeated. What's worse is that my staff had begun to adopt some of my bad habits, because the leader sets the tone and pace.***

I've never had much trouble doing the task side of my job; it's been the relationships side where I've had a consistent struggle. If I could improve that side of the equation, the possibilities for influence and achievement would multiply, because then we'd be doing things as a team. And a good team always outperforms individual talent always.

**I think part of the reason I failed to see the value in teaming up with other people was that for so many years I had led solo, and it seemed like everything depended on me. I had to pay my way through school, get my papers written, recruit volunteer**

youth leaders, plan the youth retreat, arrange for the bus, even drive the bus.

When I got my first full-time job as a pastor in Falun, Wisconsin, I had no staff, so in addition to writing messages and finding musicians, I put together the weekly bulletin, photocopied them, and ran them through the folding machine. I did everything but hand them out on Sunday morning. **For the first twenty years of my professional life, I was a one-man wrecking crew. I had some volunteer help, but I carried the mother lode, and it seemed like people were happy to let me carry it.**

But then things started to grow and become complex.

There were more programs, processes, and meetings; more worship services, Bible studies, and small group functions. In short, there were more people, and I had never learned how to lead people well, because I never really had to. I mostly did my own thing without people. When I had to enlist the help of others, I had enough relating skills to get by. If I would happen to lose my temper, power up, or cut people off, most of them let it go and attributed it to my youthful immaturity. Almost nobody had the courage or permission to confront me with the ugly truth. And that's what landed me in front of Fred.

## **Was Change Possible?**

The question that haunted me was, could I change? Marcus Buckingham asks, "How much of a person can you change?" His response is, "Not much." You are who you are. And that's true. You are who God made you to be, created uniquely in his image. Much of who we are is hardwired into us.

But all of us pick up some additional junk along the way. We pick up weird ways of relating from our parents, siblings, friends, and TV that become habitual and hurtful. The goal was to identify the flaws that were a product of my own sin and selfishness and deal with them. The goal was to become aware of and correct my destructive patterns around the office and at home.

For example, Fred's data revealed that my body language and facial expressions were often dismissive and belittling to people, and so I lost credibility with board members, architects, consultants, and other leaders without even knowing it. I learned that my mood swings were potent and that my choice of words carried enormous weight. I unknowingly violated basic leadership rules like "Praise in public, admonish in private." I had a habit of admonishing in public and not giving much praise at all. This diminished my leadership and staff morale.

**These are the things that Dean and Fred began to teach me and to which they held me accountable.** I still slip up, especially when I'm depleted, and I have ongoing tune-ups with Fred, because lifelong patterns are difficult to overcome. But letting a professional counselor probe around in my life saved my career, renewed my marriage, blessed my kids, and caused our church to surge to new heights. I always thought I could avoid the proverbial crack-up. I'd read about other leaders who'd blown it and thought it would never happen to me. I was smarter than that. But there I was.

## **Permission to Breathe**

**One of the things Fred said I had to do immediately was resign my teaching role at**

**Bethel Seminary. When he evaluated my life, he wondered why I hadn't collapsed already.** He told me that no human being could sustain the pace I was keeping Who's your Fred? without doing severe damage to their soul and relationships. He said it was a deal breaker.

Why did I need to have a professional tell me that? Part of it was that I was filling a genuine need that Bethel had in the preaching department, and it seemed to be working. I was able to add value to young preachers, and what could be more honorable than that? Again, how could something so good be so wrong? The other part is that you don't know where the wall is until you hit it. Burnout was new territory for me. So I kept adding more roles and responsibilities, because I didn't know my limits. **Eventually, however, I found myself in a position where the demands exceeded my ability to meet them. But I didn't know how to get out of it. I felt like I would be letting people down if I stepped away from my obligations.**

Fred gave me the permission I needed to resign, and that single decision probably saved my career and kept me out of the loony bin. After three years of being away from Bethel, I agreed to go back and teach a one-week intensive preaching class. I was breathing again.

**from the pages 138-149** (pdf book)