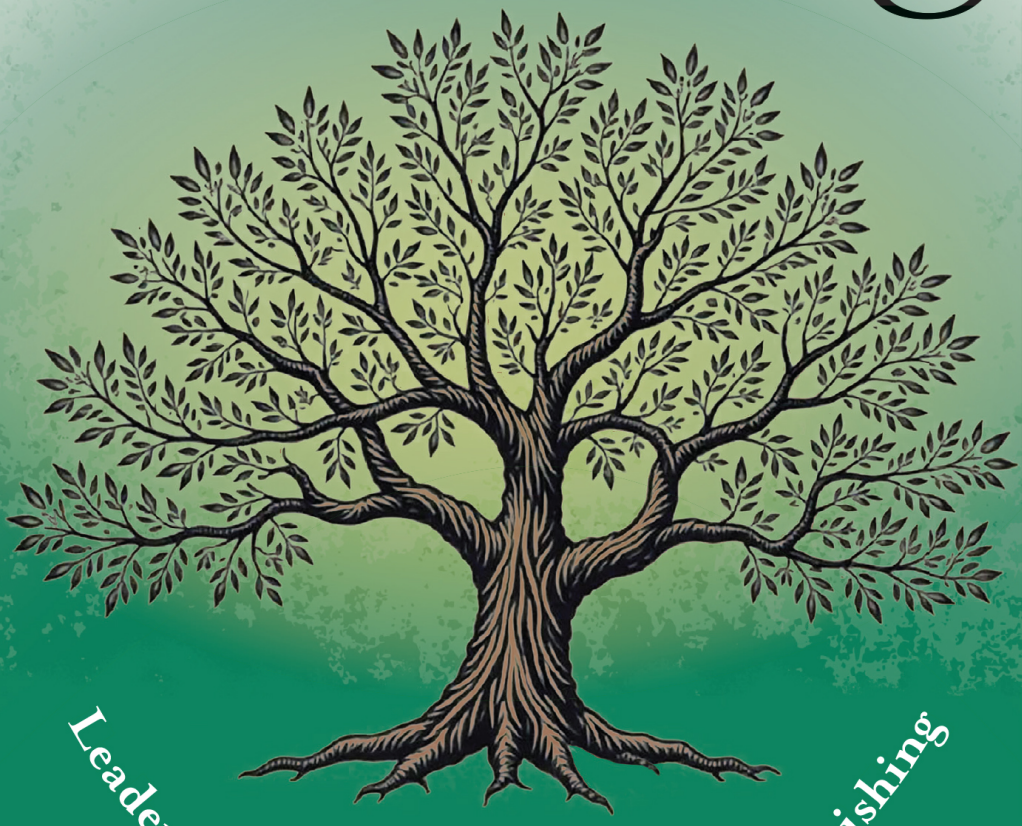
Soul Tending



Leadership for Strategic Human Flourishing

Virgil Tanner

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Thriving in Uncertainty

In this chapter we'll:

- Unpack how the 5DThrive Approach was hammered out over a decade across three continents
- Introduce the five dimensions of the human soul (spiritual, physical, cognitive, emotional, and relational) and how they work together
- Posit that it's possible to thrive in chaos and uncertainty

Central Asia, 2009–2017

I walked into the kitchen to find my wife, Joy, staring at her hands. The water in the city we lived in caused a strong inflammatory response in her skin, and because of the way life worked there, her hands were always in the water. When it got bad, the skin would crack and split.

Hands bleeding, she looked up at me and said, "I thought these were supposed to be the best years of our lives."

Before moving to the capital of a post-Soviet Central Asian republic a few years prior, we helped lead a wonderful church in Nashville, TN. I had studied biology in my undergraduate program and completed a Master's of Religion with a concentration in cross cultural studies while I waited for Joy to finish her degree in education. We moved to Nashville where I completed a Master's of Education, because we knew my seminary degree would be objectionable in a country unfriendly to the gospel.

We moved to Central Asia with friends from the church full of the certainty that only the young and naïve can muster. In our first year, we joined another team, helped start a business, worked hard on language and culture acquisition, and tried to put down roots in our new home, all while managing a growing family. It was a lot to take on. In less than five years, I'd held four different jobs, moved four times, and had an almost complete turnover of teammates. This kind of instability is incredibly hard.

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But there are different kinds of hard, and some places seem harder than others. The city we lived in seemed to chew expatriates up. I think it chewed up its citizens, too, but it was harder to see. By our fifth year, we had grown accustomed to near constant change and instability—it was almost comical. In one apartment, in order to get hot water, you needed the water, gas, and electricity to all be functioning. Most days, we were missing one or another of those utilities, and you never knew which one or for how long. When you're cooking for six and running four kids' laundry in a developing country, these kinds of things wear you out.

Everything was three times harder. In year one, we'd begin each day with ten things to do, and become frustrated when none of them would happen. By year four, we'd laugh when we started the day with three simple tasks and considered ourselves heroic for accomplishing one.

Some uncertainties were more serious. One day in 2015, I got a phone call from the kid who managed the visa applications at the university where I taught. The day before, he told me our visas were approved, and I should be ready to meet him at the immigration office the next morning with all of our passports and money for the processing fees. We were good to go.

When the call came that morning, things went a little differently.

"Hello, Virgil-teacher. How are you?" Anar asked.

"I'm well, Anar," I replied. "How are you? Are we to meet this morning?"

"I am afraid I think there may be a small problem." Given how indirect the culture was, I knew we were in trouble when he opened this way.

"Tell me," I said.

"The not-so-good news is that I have here an official letter from the immigration office stating your visas are all denied, and you have ten days to leave the country or you'll be arrested and deported."

"Wow, that is bad news," I answered.

"No, that is the not-so-good news."

"Okay," I sighed. "Let's have the bad news."

"Yes. Well, I'm very sorry."

"Just tell me, Anar. It's okay."

"The letter is back-dated nine days. You have twenty-four hours to pack your children and your wife, and to get out of the country, or you'll be arrested, deported, and denied any chance of coming back. I'm sorry."

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This set off a twenty-three-hour scramble to get tickets, pack, and fly out. Our departure kicked off a fantastic seven-month voyage around the eastern US for our family of six, living in basements and bonus rooms. We never spent more than two weeks in one city, and were never clear if or when we could get back home, which is how we had come to see Central Asia. Eventually we did get back and spent another fruitful eighteen months there before moving to Spain.

This kind of uncertainty, with the very real threat of the hammer dropping any minute, was normal there. It ground you down. One year, a colleague did an informal survey of the people who had moved to our city thinking they'd stay for decades. The average stay was 2.7 years. As much as we loved it, life there was like running blindfolded in the dark over uneven ground littered with glass. If you fell, you'd bleed, and even if you could get your eyes open, it wouldn't help. After a while, those of us who stayed resigned ourselves to never knowing when a trusted friend or confidante would have to leave.

A few years before our expulsion, we had begun to reconsider how best to make an impact in the city and among the people we had come to love. It occurred to us that some of the locals wanted only their own gain, while others wanted to make their city beautiful and filled with the image of Jesus. We noticed the expats in the city fell into those two groups as well. So, we wondered if the most strategic contribution we could make would be to give a portion of our energy to strengthening the hands of the people—local and expat—whose hearts held the desire and determination to see Christ formed in our city. This question, and the adventure that followed, was the beginning of our exploration of strategic human flourishing in Jesus.

Spain, 2017

While we were bouncing around the eastern US waiting to get back to Central Asia, the organization we worked with approached us about stepping into a broader leadership role. With considerable prayer and discernment, we agreed to join a team that would oversee and look after cross-cultural workers doing beautiful work all over the world, and particularly, in some rather hostile environments. In the summer of 2017, we moved to southern Spain and began a new chapter.

Despite the grace of our teammates and the beauty and hospitality of Spain, we had a rough start. The trials of the previous decade all seemed to come to a head at once. My strong, compassionate, and gifted wife had a complete breakdown.

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We learned that the body keeps the score,[1] and the bill always comes due. We learned how deeply each part of ourselves connects to the others, and we learned a bit about how to take care of each one in tandem with the others. We learned that breakdowns like Joy's were common among workers like us, and perhaps, they could be prevented. It was a trying six months, but Jesus held us through it, and we learned a lot.

The experience of breaking down and coming back stronger reinforced and accelerated the thoughts that had been percolating in us for some time. As our new team considered what our most strategic first step might be, we decided that the most impactful thing we could do for the communities our staff served would be to help our people become as healthy and vibrant as possible. For this to happen, things needed to change.

> This care would have to become proactive, not just reactive or palliative.

First, leaders at all levels had to understand that their work includes—and should prioritize—staff care. This care would have to become proactive, not just reactive or palliative. Cross-cultural Christian workers in caustic contexts face many of the same challenges that believers in their home countries face: marriage and family issues, professional development hurdles, emotional disturbances rooted in family-of-origin, leadership and teaming challenges, and the like. However, due to the remoteness of these environments and limited internet security, our workers were facing these challenges with little access to the mental health resources that their counterparts take for granted.

Add in challenges such as political instability, systemic gender inequality, and trauma—challenges which are ubiquitous across these environments—and you have a recipe for diminished capacity and attrition. Working and serving in situations like these is like playing a game where you lose half your pieces every few turns, and the remaining half is impaired. Such a game cannot be won. But this is the game we play when staff-care resources are limited and only employed when needs become critical. Too often, it's too little, too late. To reduce attrition and to keep our people vibrant enough to execute their callings, leaders need to recognize care and development as crucial to our leadership—not something we farm out to experts when things get bad enough.

1 van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score.*

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Leadership isn't all that needs redefining though. Our staff would have to understand that their work *includes* self-care. They have to assume the responsibility of investing in their own vibrancy. The mention of self-care can conjure images of pampering, navel-gazing, and lounging about sipping Mai Tais. That is not what we're talking about. Perhaps a better term is *self-leadership*.

As disciples of Jesus, we are convinced that Jesus is good, that he's brilliant, and that apprenticeship to him is the only real path to change for ourselves and for the world. So, when we stride out into the world to make disciples of Jesus, entering marketplaces as entrepreneurs, teachers, doctors, lawyers, accountants, scientists, clergy, or businesspeople, we are the message. The vividness of our lives and the wisdom with which we lead them says more to the world about our Teacher than most of us will ever say with words. We must understand that our work in leading people to Jesus must include leading ourselves well.

These two adjustments, one to our understanding of leadership and the other to our understanding of good work, formed the basis of what would become 5DThrive: a community approach to intentional self-care and development toward strategic human flourishing in Jesus.

Our staff would have to understand that their work *includes* self-care.

An organism thrives when it metabolizes its environment, both nutrients and stressors, resulting in growth and fruit. That's what we want for our people. The preposition is important. We aren't expecting that *from* our people. We want it *for* them. An organism doesn't bear fruit or grow by trying. Rather, growth and fruit are consequences of thriving. Thriving is the key.

The human organism in the Bible, and especially the Old Testament, is referred to as a soul. The Hebrew word, *nephesh*, doesn't refer to the immaterial part of you. It's not, as in Greek thought, that you have a soul trapped in a body. Rather, you *are* a soul, and the word refers to a complete, integrated, embodied self. To make caring for your soul simple enough to be achievable, we identified five dimensions—the 5 Ds of 5DThrive—that, if cared for and invested in properly, are likely to result in a vibrant, thriving human being. We want our people to thrive spiritually, physically, cognitively, emotionally, and relationally.

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