

**Shaped**  
*My Reading Life*  
A Travel Free Learning Article

by

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What has shaped you? I am not talking about your physical shape or even your SHAPE as Rick Warren talks about in ***The Purpose Driven Life***. What has shaped your view of life and ministry? What has shaped your ministry outlook? Or take another step. What has shaped the church where you serve? What has shaped their culture? Many different forces shape us: history, traditions, families, past successes, etc. Beyond these, let me introduce one additional way to think about our shape.

One of my latest reading adventures is a book by the Southern author, Pat Conroy. Many of you will know him for writing the book, ***The Great Santini***. This is a fictional account that chronicles some of his life story as the son of an Air Force pilot. I was re-introduced to him this summer when I picked up the book, ***South of Broad***. For some reason, this Southern author has my attention.

Two weeks ago, I downloaded a new book by Conroy onto my electronic reader. The name of the book is ***My Reading Life***. Conroy tells the stories of the people who influenced his life as a writer and a reader. He recalls teachers and books that have impacted his own journey. I have been enthralled with the stories of Conroy's journey.

This recollection started me thinking about the books and people who have influenced my journey. We all have significant people and resources that have impacted us. What does my reading life look like?

- **My Mother:** My earliest memories from family and church center around stories that my Mom told. Her two major resources were the Bible and the Baptist Hymnal. She taught me to value the stories in Scripture. I always knew she cherished her Bible, and she taught me to have the same respect for God's Word. She did not begin to understand all the dynamics of the historical-critical methods or other theories I learned in college and seminary, but she trusted that the pattern of her life and the life of her family should be built around the principles of Scripture. And she did not just read it; she lived it.

Mom also loved music. When she played the piano in our home, the Baptist Hymnal was always nearby. We learned to sing the songs of faith and probably developed much of our theology from the songs we sang on her piano bench.

- ***Are You My Mother?*** and ***Go, Dog, Go***: These books were by P.D. Eastman and shaped my early memories of reading. While I did not get much theology out of them, I did learn the value and fun of reading. My parents would bring these types of books to me regularly, and I could hardly wait to laugh and just have fun. Somehow, they taught me the joy of reading.
- ***The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*** by Dallas Willard: In many ways, Willard changed my worldview. In the midst of ministry settings, I was growing increasingly frustrated by the cultural Christianity in which I was living. Somehow, this book caught my attention. Dallas reminded me Jesus was the smartest person who ever lived, and my responsibility as a church leader was to help others catch the significance of living as Jesus called us to live. If we could just catch the importance of following Jesus, our lives and our churches would be transformed.

- ***To Kill A Mockingbird*** by Harper Lee: Atticus Finch and Boo Radley are characters who have stayed with me. My eleventh grade literature teacher, Mrs. Martin, introduced me to them. My Southern upbringing was challenged and forever changed.
- ***They Call Me Coach***: John Wooden was not my favorite basketball coach when I was growing up. His teams created a dynasty in college basketball in the late 1960's and early 1970's at UCLA. I cheered greatly when North Carolina State finally defeated the UCLA Bruins in 1974. But when I was looking for great leaders to model, I found a great one in this autobiographical book. Coach Wooden was a leader I wanted to emulate. He knew how to lead a team and bring out the best in others. When he died recently, I pulled out this old autobiography again. I cherish the leadership gems in the book.
- ***To Dream Again*** by Bob Dale: Bob was one of my seminary professors. His teaching and life impacted me in many ways. I will never forget my first introduction into the life cycle of a congregation from this resource. The book gave me an opportunity to take a careful look at the church in which I was serving, and see how to take practical steps for us to recover our sense of vision and ministry for the Kingdom. Through the ideas I learned in this book, I began to envision opportunities of ministry in helping churches re-vision and reshape their journey.
- **Ken Blanchard** – Somewhere in my reading journey as a leader, I was confronted with ***The One Minute Manager***. These best selling series of books by Ken Blanchard helped me take a careful look at how I worked with people. I especially learned the value of encouragement. When Blanchard and his friends began the ministry of Lead Like Jesus, I enjoyed interacting with leaders around the servant leadership concepts of Jesus.
- ***Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*** by Kennon Callahan: I will always remember my first journey through Callahan's materials. My own ministry had become focused on the weaknesses of the church. We were always trying to fix what was wrong. Callahan helped me transition my thinking from weaknesses to strengths. I long for churches to live out of their strengths, and one of my primary emphases for churches, pastors, and key leaders is to help them see where God has strengthened them.
- ***Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*** by Dan and Chip Heath: The Heath brothers provide an excellent analogy about change. The elephant, the rider, and the path stick with me as representations of transition and change that I have faced throughout my ministry life. I wish I could create a Change-O-Meter, an instrument like a speedometer in a car that would help churches and their leaders regulate the transition and changes that they face.
- ***The Leadership Challenge*** by James Kouzes and Barry Posner: I was struggling with my own view of leadership when I read this book. I knew that my personality was not going to allow me to become a demonstrative, heavy-handed leader. How could I find a place in leadership that allowed me to live my values and still function effectively in influencing the people God had placed in my circle of influence? I found a five step process that spoke to me in their process: Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart. The process gave me a model on which to hang my leadership hat.
- ***Pursuing the Full Kingdom Potential of Your Congregation***: George Bullard, my TCP ministry colleague, has played a tremendous part in my reading journey. As a consultant and coach for congregations for many years, I kept finding churches would appreciate my help and put together a strategic plan with my leadership, but when I left the plan would go on the shelf. They would not follow through with the plans. Through the principles he shares in his book, George helped teach me churches must discover the plan for themselves. My responsibility as a coach with congregations is to help them listen for God's voice and claim where God is leading them. George's Spiritual Strategic Journey process became foundational for me to help congregations and other organizations find their own understanding of God's direction rather than mine.

- **Eugene Peterson:** Peterson has a way of speaking words of encouragement to pastoral leaders as we face the struggles of pastoral journey. As I experienced personal burnout in a ministry situation, Peterson's books encouraged me and helped me look beyond myself to God's call and vision for my life.

I could keep going. I find new books regularly that God uses to somehow make an impact on me. Now I am even finding listening to podcasts and watching videos and movies are shaping me. I could tell you about books by Andy Stanley, Patrick Lencioni, Richard Foster, or biographies of leaders like presidents or business practitioners.

So what about you? Who are the people who have influenced your reading life? We are shaped by people and resources around us. Who and what has shaped you?

Who or what has shaped the people in your congregation? What resources can you put into the hands of your leaders to help shape the conversation of transformation in your congregation? Not everyone likes to read (it makes me sad to say that), but we are all shaped by other people. What are the stories or who are the people that can shape your congregation's journey for the future?

I know that God has not finished shaping me yet. I wonder what that next book or who the next person will be!

**Note:** Join us Wednesday, December 15<sup>th</sup> at 2:00 p.m. EST for the Travel Free Learning Dialogue as we discuss how each of us has been shaped by our reading life. We look forward to you sharing resources, books, and people who have shaped your life. If you miss this live dialogue, go to [www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org](http://www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org) and the *Travel Free Learning Dialogues* link to listen to the recording of this session.

### **Important Things to Know**

Ken Kessler is a Ministry Colleague with The Columbia Partnership. He is also on staff with the Virginia Baptist Mission Board. The Columbia Partnership is a non-profit Christian ministry organization focused on transforming the capacity of the North American Church to pursue and sustain Christ-centered ministry. **Travel Free Learning** is a knowledge sharing emphasis. For more information about products and services check out the web site at [www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org](http://www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org), send an e-mail to [Client.Care@TheColumbiaPartnership.org](mailto:Client.Care@TheColumbiaPartnership.org), or call 803.622.0923.