

MISSONAL ∅ RELATIONAL ∅ INCARNATIONAL



SO BEAUTIFUL



DIVINE DESIGN *for* LIFE AND THE CHURCH

LEONARD SWEET

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Introduction fMRI Forensics

HERE ARE SOME FORENSIC EXERCISES OF THE COMMUNITY THAT YOU'RE IN, AND YOUR OWN LIFE.

1) "She Hath Done What She Could." (Mark 14:8)

How do you propose to be remembered? What shall be your memorial? What aspects of your life do you wish to reverberate long after you are gone?

Write an obituary of your church: It has been closed, and you have been commissioned to write the obituary. What were its strengths, and what killed it?

Write your own obituary. How will you be remembered? How do you *want* to be remembered? You can have any success, you can have any fortune, you can die at any time. After you are gone—and you surely will be gone—how do you wish to be remembered?

Now that you've written your obituary, do two things:

1) Ask yourself this question: Are you living your life in such a way that your ideal life story is a real possibility?

2) Share with others for a reality check.

2) The MRI Scan

To have an accurate MRI, you first have to lie still for a while and listen to the banging. You also must relinquish any jewelry or metal that your body wears or hides.

After an MRI, you have to get moving and do something with what you've discovered.

The Check-Up requires stillness and rest and relinquishment.

The Check-Out requires motion and mobility.

a) Lie still first and let's listen to the banging: Let's listen to why the Christ's body is in the shape it's in and why you're there to get an MRI in the first place.¹

b) Stand up now and move about.

Without a Check-Up, you will Check-Out.

The Check-Up is what prevents a Check-Out.

3) fMRI

fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) has become the most scientific form of lie detection: It measures blood flow to the brain and the amount of oxygen being consumed.

Can you tell the truth? Can you conduct an fMRI scan of the four forces that can kill your church? Can you find them in your church?

Archaeologist Joseph Tainter nicknames three of them the Runaway Train, the Dinosaur, and the House of Cards.²

These usually act together. I would add a fourth: the Fire-Breathing Dragon.

The Runaway Train: forces we have unleashed that we can't seem to stop (consumerism, program mentality, Christendom mentality, "how do I stop decline" thinking [it's much more radical than "reversing" trends or "send a revival"], etc.).

Were Christians ever designed to be part of an establishment?

The Dinosaur Factor: resistance to change.

This can be defined as "hostility to change from vested interests, and inertia at all social levels."³ Working for the church is often a two-steps-forward-one-step-back kind of job for this reason.

If you always do, what you've always done,

You'll always be, where you've always been.

What is your technological literacy: How illiterate are you?

How open are you to change? How innovative are you? Or do you have a rich tradition in tradition?

The House of Cards: illusions, self-delusions.

Satan is the "father of lies" (John 8:44) and self-deception. The power of self-deceit and self-delusion would be hard to overestimate. French philosopher Jules de Gaultier's "The Law of Bovarysme" is a rule that says "every being which conceives of itself necessarily conceives itself to be other than it actually is."⁴

Is your past bankrolling your present?

Here is the "House of Cards" question: "But aren't some churches growing? Why can't we do what they're doing?"

What they're doing is the Wal-Martization of religion. When a Wal-Mart moves in, what happens to the mom-and-pop stores? When a megachurch moves in, what happens to the mom-and-pop churches? Fully 50 percent of U.S. Christians who worship regularly now worship in a megachurch.

The Fire-Breathing Dragon: Every person and every church has personal dragons. Get to know your church's personal dragons—its unique vulnerabilities that can become strengths. You can turn dragons into friends, whether they be ...

a) dragons of financial weakness

b) dragons of death

God's grace is like gravity ... it is inescapable.

Only God's grace can absorb the pain and poison of the world.

Only God's grace can defeat the dragons.

∞ Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage.⁵

—Poet Rainer Maria Rilke's famous words

4) Compare the design of a brain cell with the design of the universe, as found in this Web site:

http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_CD0JETuihEE/SRitMQdRsDI/AAAAAAD3M/Nw5TuVeywQQ/s1600-h/neuron-galaxy.jpg

Coincidence? Or connection?

5) How has your church dealt with the five biggest stories out there, the five biggest stories of the last fifty years,

which are still playing themselves out in the twenty-first century?

- 1) the demise of Marxism-Leninism as a potent ideology outside of China;
- 2) the rise of the Internet as the primary delivery system for communication and information;
- 3) the discrediting of Freudianism as a reliable guide to human choices;
- 4) the slow death of postmodernism, and the clash of premodern, modern, and postmodern worldviews around the world ... battle being fought on almost every front, both individual and social;
- 5) the resurgence of political Islam or what is called Islamism.

Any one of these can reassert itself at any time.

6) What do you think fills that gap between the outstretched life-giving finger of God and the limp hand of the reclining Adam in Michelangelo's fresco in the Sistine Chapel (1513)?

Notes

1. For guidance here, see the articles in *The Church of the Perfect Storm*, ed. Leonard Sweet (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2008).
2. Joseph A. Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, (New York: Cambridge University, 1988), 59–60. Tainter calls these three major kinds of trouble “assumptions that seem to revolve around three models of complex societies.”
3. Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005), 129.
4. The exact phrase is “tout être qui se conçoit, se conçoit nécessairement autre qu’il n’est.” As quoted in Justin Beplate, “Who’s Exotic Now,” *TLS: Times Literary Supplement*, 19 August 2005), 3-4. He is referencing Jules de Gaultier, *Le Bovarysme* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1902).
5. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1984), 92.