

Giants, Foxes, Wolves, and Flies: Helping Ourselves and Others

KO and MO

Overview: This paper is a collection of four short articles focusing on common areas of struggle and growth for mission personnel. Any of all of them can be used by individuals for personal reflection or by teams as part of team building sessions.

*Blessed be the Lord who trains my hands for war and my fingers for battle.
Psalm 144:1*

Have you ever seen the movie, "The Wizard of Oz?" Filmed in 1939, this fantasy classic portrays the adventures of a young girl who tries to return home from a magic land lying somewhere over a rainbow. During one scene, Dorothy and her companions approach a dark forest en route to the Emerald City. Anxiously wondering what wild beasts might lie within, they begin to chant, "Lions, and tigers, and bears, oh my!"

For cross-cultural workers, frequently beset with analogous challenges, a similar refrain can be heard: "Giants, and foxes, and wolves, and flies!" Who are these creatures, and what do they have to do with our life and work? In brief, they are Biblical metaphors representing the struggles that we often experience as we try to serve God in new ways or unfamiliar places.

Here's a quick overview. Giants seek to *disable* us by exploiting our vulnerabilities (2 Samuel 21:15-22). Foxes try to *distract* us and cause us to drift off our primary tasks (Song of Solomon 2:15). Wolves endeavor to *distress* us, keeping our stress levels high and our lives out of balance (Matthew 10:16). And *flies* purpose to *disgrace* us by the contaminating effects of sin (Ecclesiastes 10:1). The Enemy seeks to use all four of these creatures to sift us like wheat, and ultimately destroy our life and work for the Lord. Let's take a closer look at these creatures and explore some ways to deal with them.

1. Fighting Giants, Facing Vulnerabilities

There are some tall troublemakers lurking out there, waiting to take advantage of our vulnerabilities. How do we prepare our workers to handle these troublemakers--and their own vulnerabilities? King David's last battlefield experience highlights some strategies.

Once again there was war with Philistia, Scripture tells us in 2 Samuel 21:15. And once again David and the men of Israel made the familiar trek down to fight at Gob, lying on the border area between the two nations.

This time two things were different. First, David was probably an older man, without the robust strength of his youth. Second, a Philistine giant called something like Ishbi-Benob, was out to get David.

The battle commenced. In the midst of the fighting, David became exhausted. It would seem that the giant had been waiting for such a moment--when David was the most vulnerable--in order to make his move. So his assault was likely a deliberate, premeditated act. You might say that Ishbi-Benob wanted to shish-kebab David.

Interestingly, the text points out that Ishbi-Benob was wearing something "new" on his waist, perhaps a belt or a sword. The interpretation of this is not entirely clear, but its inclusion in the account is significant. One possible interpretation is that he was wearing a belt of honor, suggesting that he was a champion among the Philistines. Another possibility is that he wore a new sword, which may have been forged or dedicated for a specific task like killing David.

It's Abishai to the rescue, though. He comes to David's aid, surely at the risk of his own life, smites the giant and kills him.

Now comes the important epilogue. David's valiant men gather around him and make him swear that he will never go into battle again. Why? Well, not just for David's own safety. Something even more important is at stake. It was "in order that the lamp of Israel might not go out".

What does this phrase mean? As we understand it, David, as king, was like a lamp that reflected the character and purposes of God to Israel and the surrounding peoples. To extinguish this witness would be an assault on God's redemptive purposes for the nations. Sound familiar?

Christian workers likewise are lamps to the particular people groups and ministries in which they work. We are the light of the world, the Lord tells us (Matthew 5:14). As with David, the forces of darkness seek to prey upon our vulnerabilities in order to diminish the intensity of our light--our witness--among a people group (ministry to children, for example). It's an age-old tactic whose only antidote is to fight the giants and face our vulnerabilities with the strength of the Lord and with the help of close friends.

Training Suggestions--Watching Over Our Hearts

We see training as a time to not only develop additional ministry skills, but also as an opportunity to reassess one's strengths and weaknesses as a person. Indeed the former is often the primary item on our own training agenda, while the latter can be the primary one on the Lord's! Like David and his men, we must rise to the challenge, and venture down again into the border areas within our hearts, to take a closer look at our own giants and vulnerabilities. Unwanted habits such as eating struggles, or a need to control others, self-hatred, depression, and many painful memories can meet us there, ready to assault us.

These struggles are to be distinguished from more serious and long-standing patterns of depression, or significant marital problems, or sexual identity struggles related to, for example, childhood sexual abuse, or such struggles as addiction to pornography. These serious problems require professional help and can be identified through proper screening and selection procedures. Screening usually occurs before the training phase, but in many programs they actually overlap.

Even sharing about less serious struggles is risky, of course. And it is best done in training settings where there are caring people with big hearts and good helping skills, where confidentiality is honored, and where weaknesses are seen as opportunities for growth. If these are lacking, find another place!

In light of this, we suggest that Christian training programs for cross-cultural ministries include the following member care components: a) include relevant personal growth opportunities--times to look at oneself, and share from one's heart up-front with safe people; b) let applicants/trainees know in advance about this emphasis on both personal and skill development; c) use trainers and staff that model both vulnerability and strength; and d) thus demonstrate the overall organizational ethos (group culture) that allows for weakness, encourages appropriate self-disclosure with supportive people, and offers mutual care opportunities between staff. These components not only help to prevent problems later down the road, but also reflect an important part of the Body life described in the New Testament (e.g., "bear one another's burdens (giants!) and thus fulfill the law of Christ" Galatians 6:1ff).

Proverbs 4:23 instructs us to watch over our hearts with all diligence, for from it flow the streams of life. Self-awareness with accountability are key for both personal growth and ministry effectiveness. We see the training phase of ministry as a critical time to encourage and model this process for our future workers. One practical way of doing this is via small group Bible studies on this passage about David and other passages with similar themes. Here are some questions to get you going.

Applications

Let's look at the Biblical text again in 2 Samuel 21:15-17 and do some self-exploration. Read through the eight items below and answer each question. Take time to discuss your responses.

1. Like David, we all have vulnerabilities. These become even more visible for those who are in leadership positions. Sometimes we may not be aware of them until a crisis brings them to light. What are a few areas of vulnerability for you?

2. Apart from their literal meaning, what might the "giants" represent? Are they metaphors for spiritual forces, vulnerabilities, or what?

3. It was said that Ishbi-Benob had a premeditated plan for killing David. Do you think there is a similar spiritual strategy to hinder God's life in you and His work through you? If so, how?

4. David, as the leader of Israel, was a lamp reflecting the character and purposes of God. How is this true of your life? List three ways that you are practically doing the same.

5. Let's look at mutual support between workers. What does this passage imply about teamwork, our need for each other, and our willingness to let others speak into our lives?

6. David's battlefield experience started with a giant (Goliath) and ended with a giant (Ishbi-Benob). But these were not the last of the giants. Verses 18-22 of chapter 21 go on to talk about other encounters with giants. Which types of people and which type of gifts are needed to subdue the various giants? Are giants ever finally vanquished?

7. These giants did not just show up one day on the battle line in order to be promptly slain by a God-appointed warrior. Reading between the lines, there must have been many casualties inflicted on the Jewish army by the giants. Are casualties among workers inevitable? Which personal wounds are you aware of which have come as a result of your battles with giants? Take time to bring these areas before the Lord in prayer.

8. Can you make any other applications of this passage for your life, family, or your team?

2. Capturing the Foxes--Help for Cluttered Lives

Have you ever wanted to unclutter your desk, room, house--or even your life? You know, do a major Spring cleaning? We sure have at times. If only we could just magically jettison the myriad of internal pressures that can plague us, and the multitude of external demands that can distract us! Such are the yearnings of many of us involved in cross-cultural work. Let's take a closer look at some of these normal, though nonetheless unsettling sources of clutter, and look at a few ways to better organize our lives.

Solomon said: "Capture the foxes, the little foxes, that ruin the vineyard, while the vineyard is in blossom" (SS 2:15). What are these foxes? In the context of cross-cultural work, we would say that they are metaphors for the everyday distractions that take workers away from their primary tasks. They are the daily chores, the frequent interruptions, the legal red tape, the time needed to set up a tentmaking business, communication inefficiencies, and so on. And they are the internal preoccupations that demand our attention--concerns about family and work relationships, self doubts from the past, loneliness, the impact of others' pain and misery, and anxieties about the future. These all eat up workers' schedules and energy, and often interfere with the very reason they are overseas.

We like to refer to this distracting process as "worker drift"--the natural tendency whereby life's "currents" divert one's focus (time, activities, resources, and heart direction) to areas that are peripheral to his/her objectives. In other words, workers, families, teams, and even sending agencies succumb to the inevitable trend to "major on the minors". It is not simply an issue of time management, but something far more challenging: "drift management". Let's take a closer look at these distractions--foxes--to better understand what cross-cultural workers face.

Doing Good. It has been aptly said that the good can become the enemy of the best. Many good things demand the attention of frontier workers--like playing host or tour guide to visitors or entertaining nationals who are not members of the population you are trying to reach or serve. It is a real challenge to find the balance between involvement in such good activities (which may or may not help one connect more with the host culture) and pursuing one's primary call.

Demands of Living. Basic subsistence realities are a constant energy-consumer. Some wives, for example, can spend much of their day taking their children to different schools, shopping, and cooking, leaving little time for language study and other ministry-related activities. Tentmakers are frequently stretched by the need to blend their work demands with family life, social obligations, and time with nationals. The problem is there just isn't enough time!

Developmental Push. This refers to the normal internal tugs that we experience during different seasons of our life. For example: the male worker in mid-life wanting to change careers and/or see something concrete established as a result of his work; the couple who meet in the host country, falls in love, and decides to return to the home country to get married and live; the push to return home to care for aging parents; the question of whether to accompany adolescent children back home as they enter into a secondary school. These and other inner yearnings must be acknowledged and prayerfully resolved.

Deployment Issues. Many workers call this the "seven year itch"--the desire to move on, try something new, seek fulfillment by working in a different way. Some may feel underemployed (the person with graduate training who teaches six hours of English each week only), underutilized (the faithful full-time mom who wishes she had more time with nationals), or overworked (people in demanding jobs). Wrestling with the issue of personal fulfillment through one's work and embracing the need for sacrifice are an ongoing experience for many.

Defaulting to the Status Quo. There is a tendency in all of us to gravitate towards the familiar and the convenient. In a cross-cultural setting, this can present itself as a desire to speak/learn a trade language rather than a more difficult heart language; spending extra time with expatriates rather than pursuing relationships with nationals; or planning seemingly endless work strategies on a computer rather than seeking out additional time with nationals. It takes self-discipline, intrinsic motivation, accountability, and commitment to stay focused on difficult tasks.

Differences between Team Members. Our individual variations reflect the creative genius of God. But these very differences in stressful situations could appear as deviance, leading to division and conflict. Differences in work expectations, lifestyle, and relationships, must be discussed, understood, and harmonized as much as possible. No one wins when differences are either covered up or left unresolved.

Discouragement. Each of the previous six foxes feed into this one, making it the most menacing. Two reasons for discouragement include slow progress in one's work and having to say farewell to colleagues who move to another location. Although mourning a loss is healthy, unchecked discouragement frequently results in an inordinate self-focus that distorts one's understanding of God's perspective and decreases one's faith that God will move.

The above seven foxes (seven "D"s) in and of themselves are neither wrong nor necessarily problematic. What is troublesome, though, is their unrecognized, ongoing, cumulative effects, which subtly prevent us from "fulfilling our ministry" (2 Tim 4:5). Remember too that internal pressures and external distractions, though natural, can be used in unnatural ways by demonic forces. Satan is as equally pleased to sabotage one's work through distracting foxes as he is with ravenous wolves or fearsome giants.

Strategies for Capturing the Foxes

Have you ever seen a fox in the wild? We have--three of them, over a five year period, in the woods by our house. They just seem to pop up and then vanish before you can figure out what's happening. But if you think its hard to spot a fox, then just try catching one! In the same way *distractions*--the little foxes from the Song of Songs 2:15--can be difficult to identify and even more difficult to apprehend. Nonetheless there are some ways to capture these foxes. Here are two proven methods: connecting with ourselves (awareness) and connecting with others (accountability).

Awareness. There is an Central Asian proverb that says "A bitter truth is better than a sweet lie". Looking within is not always convenient or pain-free, but it certainly is far better than the alternatives: ignorance and denial. Take time to get quiet, and reflect.

Often we need a person to help us in this process--listening to the Lord, sharing with a caring friend, speaking to a counselor. We can all learn from successful "recovery" programs (e.g., dealing with unwanted habits) which emphasize a disciplined commitment to self-reflection and honesty. This is not a selfish pursuit, but rather is an important spiritual discipline rooted in classic Christian wisdom (see Foster and Smith, 1993; Huggett, 1993).

Keeping a journal is also helpful (see Shepperson and Shepperson, 1992), especially for those working in more isolated settings. One journaling exercise that we find useful was inspired by the book *Connecting with Self and Others* (Miller et al, 1988). Find a quiet place, take a few deep breaths, and then write a current concern in the middle of a piece of paper. Draw a large circle around it. Next respond to the five questions below, jotting down notes--that is, what you are saying to yourself--inside the circle. Pray about what you find and maybe share it with a friend.

1. What am I sensing? (physical sensations in muscles, stomach, breathing, etc.)
2. What am I feeling? (emotions)
3. What am I wanting? (changes in self, in others, in situations)
4. What am I thinking? (ideas, beliefs, themes, content)
5. What am I doing? (action and behaviors that I do related to the concern)

Accountability. There's a Jewish proverb which says "A true friend is the elixir of life. And those who fear the Lord make true friends." Mutual support on location, is a basic necessity. Strategize together and pray through solutions to the natural drift process. Sadly, many folks do not prioritize time to build close friendships where they are. Often it seems we are either too busy or too scared. Or sometimes the "right" persons are just not available. In the latter case, we can stay connected with confidants via letters and email. Friends help us see ourselves more clearly, and support us we set realistic limits around our work and lives (see Cloud and Townsend, 1992).

Here's an exercise that can help us build some more accountability. Get together with a friend, review this article, and talk about the five items below. You can also do this with your team and family. Discuss whether and how you would want to hold each other accountable for some of your "little foxes". Using a calendar/chart is helpful to daily record progress in changing your behaviors (e.g., praying with spouse, time with kids, use of leisure time, unwanted habits).

1. In what ways might you have drifted off your primary tasks over the past six months?
2. Which of the seven foxes previously described seem to pressure and distract you the most? Try your hand at drawing a quick picture of one of them--make it realistic, symbolic, or abstract.
3. Why do you suppose it may be hard for you to catch your foxes?
4. What helps you to stay focused on your work? List three practical steps you can take to help yourself.
5. Are there any other thoughts you have about the "little foxes"? If so, discuss your ideas.

A Final Thought

So why not do a Spring cleaning, and declutter some of your internal pressures and external demands? Connect with yourself more and with significant others. And as Gordon MacDonald (1989) encourages us to do, be sure to regularly seek out "still times, safe places, and special friends".

Occupational (job-specific challenges and pressures: work load, travel schedule, exposure to people with problems, job satisfaction, more training, government "red tape")

Organizational (incongruence between one's background and the organizational ethos: differing with company policies, work style, expectations)

Physical (overall health and factors that affect it: nutrition, climate, illness, aging, environment)

Psychological (overall emotional stability and self-esteem: loneliness, frustration, depression, unwanted habits, developmental issues/stage of life issues)

Support (resources to sustain one's work: finances, housing, clerical and technical help, donor contact)

Spiritual (relationship with the Lord: devotional life, subtle temptations, time with other believers, spiritual warfare)

Answers apply to (circle): self, spouse, child, friend, department, team, company, other

Stress assessment and management, must not occur solely at the level of the individual missionary. Rather, it is vital to identify and discuss the stressors that affect missionary families, teams, departments, the region, and the overall mission agency itself. The *CHOPS* tool, if diligently done at least once a year, is a useful means to understand and minimize stress at various levels of the mission organization.

Reflection and Discussion

Stress is the response of the whole person to the internal and external demands that we experience. These questions will help you become more familiar with how stress affects you. It will also look at some ways that you can use to deal with stress. Respond to each of the five questions below and then discuss them as a group. What insights can you get from one another?

1. How do you know when you are experiencing stress? What signals do you receive from your body, behavior, and emotions?

2. How does stress affect your interpersonal relationships?

3. When was the last time you went through a significant period of stress? What was it like? Briefly describe it.

4. What did Jesus do to manage stress--to deal with the wolves and potential wolves of his ministry? There are at least 25 different things he did to manage stress which are recorded in the gospels. How many can you identify?

5. What helps you to deal with stress, keep your life in balance, and keep the "wolves" at bay? What does not help?

4. Folly from Flies

Behind many of our inner struggles is the attempt to deny who we really are, and the attempt to be something that we are not. Personal problems often stem from our attempts to escape from legitimate suffering.

Many cross-cultural workers live in places where flies are common. So it's not too unusual to say, find a fly in one's glass of water, which I did, one hot and humid day in Thailand. Maybe it was just going for a swim, I told myself. Or maybe this is someone else's glass. Yet there I was, sitting around several tables in a conference room with 40 expatriate leaders, discussing work strategies and praying. This was the first time to be part of this group, and I was feeling, well, rather special. And everything was fine, except for that wee pest in my glass.

Contamination from Flies

Quickly I flashed back to my morning devotions, pondering the verse I had meditated upon that would help me make sense out of my unsolicited visitor: "Dead flies cause the ointment of the perfumer to putrefy and send forth a vile odor; so does a little folly (in him who is valued for wisdom) outweigh wisdom and honor" (Amplified). The application was apparent.

Was I fancying myself to be just a bit too special by virtue of my inclusion now as a "leader"? You bet. And this attitude was folly. Talk about starting out on the wrong foot! Moreover, I knew from past experience that this attitude would eventually contaminate the fragrance of Christ in my life and work (2 Corinthians 2:15), just as dead flies putrefy precious perfume. This special envoy had done its job by getting my attention!

Characteristics of Flies

No one deliberately adds flies, be they dead or alive, to valuable perfume. The two are incongruous. Likewise few of us deliberately try to pollute our own lives. Yet like flies in perfume, our folly--our sin--can alight in our souls, and wreak havoc on our wisdom, honor, and work. A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough, as Paul says (1 Corinthians 5:6).

Some types of folly are more damaging than others. A few household flies for instance, will only pester us. They are a nuisance. Think of these, analogously, as things like unwanted habits in our life and minor character weaknesses of which we are trying to rid ourselves. But lots of flies, especially those that can bite, sting, and carry diseases, could really hurt us. Think of these as serious folly: unconfessed sin, unrecognized arrogance, hidden compulsive addictions, and pervasive personality patterns that are unhealthy/unholy.

Have you ever noticed how just one public or even private manifestation of such serious folly--these wrong behaviors and attitudes--can neutralize our work effectiveness, compromise our integrity, destabilize our emotional life, and hurt others? "Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good" (Ecclesiastes 9:18). This is true even for "Christian" sinners!

Folly from flies comes in different frequencies and intensities. It can involve one-time events, in which we recognize the problem and then learn our lesson quickly. We can brush away such flies fairly easily. Folly can also take the form of intermittent events which can be hard to predict, and seemingly just creep upon us. Additionally, it can involve ongoing events in our lives, marked by a serious lack of self-control. These can feel like a host of flies swarming around us.

The bottom line is that folly, in whatever form, leads to disgrace. Just a bit of it is all it takes to damage our reputation--and God's--no matter how virtuous our life or noteworthy our accomplishments. Disgrace not only results from the actual content of the folly (e.g., rash words, questionable financial dealings, physical and emotional affairs). It can also come in the aftermath of our inappropriate actions, in which we do not avail ourselves of God's grace by either denying or minimizing our problem/sin or by not believing in God's restorative desire to forgive and help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16). Think of the latter as more like falling into "dis-grace".

Spotting Flies

It often takes an outside source, such as a close friend, the Word of God, and the Holy Spirit to help us recognize the flies in our life. One of the biggest sources of folly is not to be in regular contact with these three "fly spotting" sources! Let's give names to some of the more common flies. Sin--as in the lust of the flesh, eyes, and pride (1 John 2:15-15)--takes many winged forms!

Hidden Addictions (*mosca compulsiva*). These are closet compulsions that affect our time, judgment, and relationships. After awhile you can smell their stench, even though they may be covered up at first. Excessive behaviors involving exercise, sun-tanning, over/undereating, preoccupation with one's appearance/body, procrastination, withdrawing, shopping, TV watching, Internet use etc. are all part of this. We sedate and stimulate ourselves in many ways in order to avoid seeing ourselves clearly and dealing directly with problems. Major addictions, such as pornography, gambling, and drug dependence, are even more crippling.

Bitterness (*mosca vinegari*). Henri Nouwen has observed that in this life, "love and wounds are never separated". We hurt those we love and vice versa. Working through such hurts and forgiving, though challenging, is certainly more desirable than the alternative: harboring the hurt and developing a

pervasive, entrenched bitterness that can defile our souls and those of others (Hebrews 12:15). Forgiveness, an act of mercy which pardons others for specific offenses, is the only sure antidote for such bitterness.

Improper Comments (*mosca maximus moutha*). Our mouths are sources of honor and embarrassment for us. Surely no one can tame the tongue (James 3:8). Some of our greatest verbal "faux pas" include making hasty, inappropriate promises, especially to God (Proverbs 20:25, Ecclesiastes 5:1-7); spewing out "brain sludge"--nonsensical things, questionable stories or jokes, or coarse jesting--that does not edify (Ephesians 4:3,4); gossip, which involves repeating a matter that unfairly or unnecessarily damages other people; and insensitive (poorly timed and overly harsh) criticism.

Arrogance (*mosca maximus rex*). Some of us need and like to be the leader. Admired, in control, taking charge, leading the way. How easy it is to be seduced by our positions of influence, and our desires to be important. Inflated pride and self-aggrandizement are two of life's greatest dangers. They are the insidious winged companions of those who believe that they are more special than they really are, and that their success has come more through their own efforts than through God's favor and anointing (Deuteronomy 8:17).

Personal Flies (*mosca mia perpetua*). The list of flies that can plague us is almost endless. Can you identify any flies, dead or alive, floating in the waters of your soul?

Swatting Flies

How do we rid ourselves of such fallacious menaces? It can be tricky. And it is a process. We hit some and we miss some. The first line of defense is to proactively attend to our personal growth: staying close to the Lord, in touch with oneself, aware of the influence of our surroundings, and connected with confidants.

When flies do come around, they are best dealt with through honestly admitting their existence and impact (confession), choosing to make serious changes and amends in order to limit their influence (repentance/restitution), and getting ongoing supportive input from others to help us deal with them (accountability). Guidance from the Holy Spirit, trusted friends, Scripture meditation, counseling, and a good support group/"12 Steps" program, are all important sources of help, especially to deal with some of the more lethal varieties of flies. Confession, repentance/restitution, and accountability are like strands of the three fold cord that is not easily broken (Ecclesiastes 4:12). We can use this cord to knit a protective fabric, which like a mosquito net can keep the folly out, and like a safety net, can catch us if we fall.

We often wish to experience in this life what we can only experience in heaven. We ache for something more--to be clothed with the immortal. We yearn for our personal flies to leave us permanently. Even after experiencing the best that this life has to offer, we are still left with a deep longing for wholeness and a desire to be clothed with that which will never fade. Yet the aching soul is not evidence of emotional problems, but a sign of our facing reality. It is a sign of health.

In closing, let's consider Christ's words to Peter right before Gethsemane. "Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded permission to sift you (plural) like wheat; but I have prayed for you (singular) that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:31-32, NASB). Note that this is a prediction primarily of Peter's faithfulness, not of His failure. I believe the Lord sees us much in the same way as we struggle through areas of folly. He sees the potential in us. And in spite of our weaknesses, He still entrusts us, as he did Peter, to feed His sheep and to be His faithful and refreshing fragrance among the nations (John 21).

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