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# Enacting spiritual leadership in business through ego-transcendence

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Enacting  
spiritual  
leadership in  
business

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – By applying Parameshwar's (2005) ego-transcendence model to two influential business leaders, the purpose of this paper is to examine how social innovation is promoted by business leaders through spiritual leadership.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study used research tactics available within a phenomenological framework.

**Findings** – Based on the analysis of the two business leader case studies, several links between spiritual leadership and social innovation were identified. The central role of a higher purpose in enacting spiritual leadership as well as bringing about social innovation was most significant.

**Research limitations/implications** – Use of secondary data, the inherent weaknesses in analysis based on a single individual's interpretations and the analysis of only two business leaders were key limitations. A unique overlap was found between Dawson and Daniel's (2010) social innovation model and Parameshwar's (2005) ego-transcendence model.

**Practical implications** – As higher purpose was a key element in enacting spiritual leadership, leaders could look for the seeds of a higher purpose within the challenging circumstances of a situation. By shaping one's behaviour to a higher purpose-related social cause than merely following rules and procedures or social conventions, leaders are more likely to develop their own personal decision-making style. By highlighting the importance of paying attention to the suffering of others rather one's own suffering, the study also have implications for reducing the ego-based practices in day to day leadership in organisations.

**Originality/value** – Ego-transcendence model explains the link between social innovation and spiritual leadership in a non-organisational setting. The current study applies this link to the leadership context in business.

**Keywords** Phenomenology, Social innovation, Ego-transcendence, Spiritual leadership

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Ethical dilemmas in organisations can arise due to situational circumstances, the decision-making process and the conditions in which they are made. Academic literature offers some insights into analysing ethical decision making; these include guidelines on how to deal with ethical dilemmas (e.g. Abramson, 1985; Loewenberg and Dolgoff, 1996; Reamer, 1990). Recently, several prominent corporate scandals have been reported in the media. These include News International Limited, Barclays and BP. According to business ethics scholars, one of the causes for the escalating incidents of corporate scandals is triggered by the weaknesses in the leaders' decision-making process. For example, Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003) claim that ethical decision-making studies have been focused mostly on ethical codes, cultures and leadership styles. Scholars have shown that ethical codes on its own cannot be relied on to decrease unethical behaviour

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(e.g. Somers, 2001) and that leadership fails to promote ethical behaviour always (e.g. Victor and Cullen, 1988). More focus is called into looking into the “individual character, personality, and belief systems that may influence ethical cognitions as precursors to behaviour” (Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003, p. 86). One such individual focused approach to improve ethical decision making is based on spiritual leadership.

Spiritual leadership is not only becoming popular among the general public, but is also becoming an increasingly hot topic in education, healthcare, psychology and management disciplines. In the management discipline, the number of journal articles on spiritual leadership is increasing, demonstrating a rising interest in the concept (e.g. Chen and Li, 2013; Geh, 2014; Aydin and Ceylan, 2009; Baglione and Zimmerer, 2007; Benefiel, 2005; Dent *et al.*, 2005; Fernando *et al.*, 2009; Fry and Cohen, 2009; Karadağ, 2009; Kriger and Seng, 2005; Reave, 2005). The popularity of spiritual leadership is also reflected in the growing number of books devoted to the topic (e.g. Benefiel, 2005; Fernando, 2007a; Hicks, 2002).

Spiritual leadership can help leaders with ethical decision making and help their organisations create a healthy balance between profits, people and the planet (Fernando, 2011). It is in this context that this paper explores the role of spiritual leadership in generating profits whilst at the same time delivering win-win outcomes to organisation’s stakeholders and society through socially innovative ideas. By following a social purpose-oriented view, organisations can make profits and use its competitive advantage to tackle various social needs; promoting congruence between the competing interests of business and community (Porter and Kramer, 2006, 2011). Social purpose-related profit making often requires organisations to generate socially innovative ways of operating businesses. In this paper, we examine how social innovation is promoted by successful leaders in organisations through spiritual leadership.

The paper is organised as follows. Spiritual leadership is described next which is followed by an examination of Parameshwar’s (2005) ego-transcendence model. Then the methodology is explained along with an introduction to the two leaders in the study. This section is followed by the leader attribute analysis and discussion sections. Lastly, limitations and implications of the study are explained.

### **Spiritual leadership**

There are numerous models within the spiritual leadership academic literature. One of the most cited models of spiritual leadership was introduced through Louis Fry’s (2003) “Toward a Theory of Spiritual Leadership” article. This model is presented by Fry as a process; focusing on processual aspects associated with becoming a spiritual leader (Fry, 2003). The model demonstrates that hope, vision and altruistic love are required to be a successful spiritual leader. By enacting these three attributes, a leader can enable calling and membership amongst their employees and through this calling and membership, the leader is able to heighten organisational commitment amongst followers (Fry, 2003).

A variant of Fry’s process-based spiritual leadership model, the causal model of spiritual leadership is also widely used in the literature by academics as a basis to explain the phenomenon of spiritual leadership (e.g. Boorum, 2009; Richardson, 2007; Hurkens, 2007). Compared to Fry’s (2003) model, this model demonstrates the importance of effort, performance and reward for spiritual leadership. It also promotes the belief that these three attributes enable organisational members to embrace calling and membership, which in turn improves organisational performance and profits (Fry and Matherly, 2006a).

Fernando and Nilakant’s (2008) self-actualising spiritual leadership model reveals that self-growth is of critical importance for spiritual leaders; it is through self-growth

that spiritual leaders can embrace self-reflection. In this model, the authors contend that self-reflection is important to spiritual leadership because it allows leaders to better connect to one's self. It is through this self-reflection that spiritual leaders can enact their behaviour by practising values and accommodating others (Fernando and Nilakant, 2008). Then the leader opens the path to connecting with an ultimate, which is the goal of self-actualising spiritual leadership.

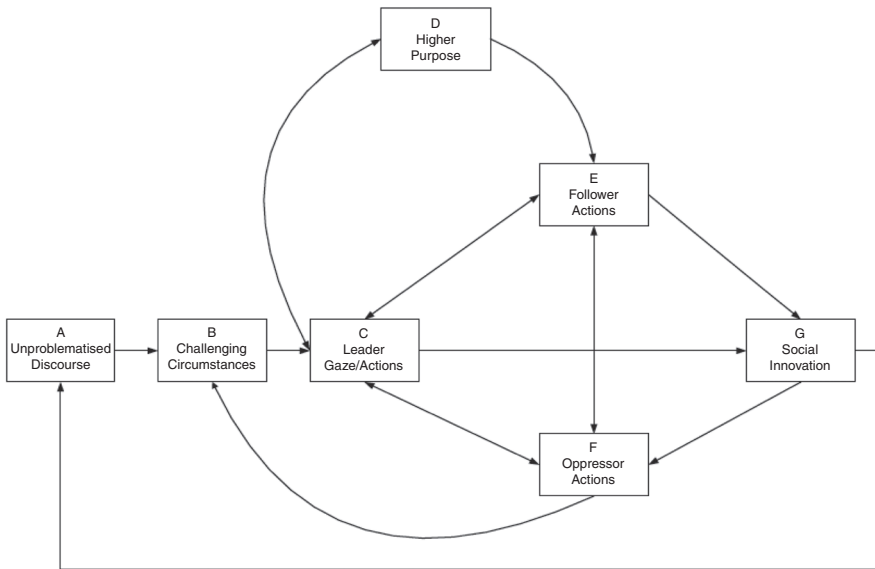
Kruger and Seng's (2005) spiritual leadership model is an extension of Yukl's "multiple linkage contingency model to include spiritual leadership from a multi-religion perspective" (p. 791). This model differs significantly to the previous models. One of the main differences of the model is that it has an extensive focus on the impact of religions on spiritual leadership. It indicates that religion is a significant part of spiritual leadership, whereas in previous models, religion does not occupy such a central place (Kruger and Seng, 2005). The other significant difference from previous models is that those models were developed to demonstrate spiritual leadership, whereas Kruger and Seng's (2005) model was established to demonstrate a very different form of leadership, which was then later altered by the authors to include a religion-based spiritual leadership. This model is unique in comparison to the other models because of the strong connection between spiritual leadership and religion. While this model's differentiated interpretation of spiritual leadership is not negative, it promotes a religion-based perspective of spiritual leadership.

Vandenberghe (2011) has produced a spiritual leadership model that focuses on workplace spirituality and its influence on employee commitment. Extending Fry and Matherly's (2006a) causal model of spiritual leadership, the model explores the different levels of commitment that spiritual leadership may offer. It is suggested that the level of commitment may be influenced by the individual's personal spirituality and the workplace climate (Vandenberghe, 2011). The model also indicates that organisational performance can be positively influenced by spiritual leadership, but that this is dependent upon the ability of spiritual leadership to influence commitment.

The focus of the present study, Sangeeta Parameshwar's (2005) model considers spiritual leadership in a social setting. She examined ten internationally renowned human rights leaders (Parameshwar, 2005). Whilst her study suggests managerial implications, its non-organisational contextual setting does limit its use in an organisational setting. The model also considers spiritual leadership from an ego-transcendence perspective. Let us next examine this model in more detail.

### **Parameshwar's (2005) ego-transcendence-based spiritual leadership model**

Ego-transcendence is defined by Parameshwar as working towards a higher purpose in a non-violent manner, being self-sacrificing through working for a purpose, further to this, Parameshwar understands ego-transcendence to manifest itself at various levels (Parameshwar, 2005). For example, she uses her model to consider the actions that spiritual leaders take when faced with challenging circumstances (Parameshwar, 2005). One of the key aspects of this model is that leaders are deemed as being "spiritual leaders" when their behaviour represent the generative capacity of ego-transcendental processes driving the transformation of challenges into opportunities by leaders reacting exceptionally to challenging contexts (see Figure 1). This exceptional response distinguishes the extent of spiritual and non-spiritual character of leader behaviour. Thus a leader with a higher purpose enacted through a cause related not-for-profit business initiative responding in an everyday, ordinary manner to business challenges would demonstrate little spirituality compared to a leader who responds in an



**Source:** Reprinted from Parameshwar (2005, p. 695), copyright (2005), with permission from Elsevier

**Figure 1.**  
Spiritual leadership  
through  
ego-transcendence

exceptional manner. The higher purpose in the model is not necessarily a religious higher purpose but may instead be doing what leaders believe is “right” because they feel that is their higher purpose (Parameshwar, 2005). Parameshwar’s (2005) contribution offers a unique insight into how spiritual leaders operate and how they are viewed by both their followers and those they challenge.

The first attribute of the model considers unproblematized discourse. Unproblematized discourse, according to Parameshwar (2005, p. 711), is a “facet of social reality consisting of oppressive beliefs and practices that are reproduced within a particular worldview”. The second attribute challenging circumstances considers the difficulties leaders have faced as well as how these leaders were able to overcome these challenges. Parameshwar (2005, p. 711) defined challenging circumstances as “discrete events that arise from the unproblematized discourse”. As Parameshwar used challenging circumstances in a non-organisational setting, what constitutes a challenging circumstance for the purpose of this study will need to be defined as an event arises from unproblematized discourse (i.e. an aspect of social reality comprising of oppressive beliefs and practices that are regenerated in a particular worldview) that is perceived as problematic to the leader’s success.

The third attribute of the model is the leader’s gaze and actions. Parameshwar (2005, p. 711) defines this attribute as leaders having “a perceptual gaze aspect and an action aspect and is in response to the Challenging Circumstance”. Gaze can be explained for the purposes of this study as being the way in which the leader perceives an event. For example, Ghandi had a gaze that Indians should not suffer oppression, he acted upon this by trying to generate change. This study will take a similar approach to gaze and actions of the leader. Triangulation of the data will be particularly important in the analysis of quotes relating to this attribute of Parameshwar’s model, as a leader may

present a gaze that is not representative of their actions, therefore quotes will be chosen that are both supported through other sources, and that reflect the practising actions and gaze of the leaders.

The fourth attribute is higher purpose. Higher purpose “embodies the leader’s ego-transcendental goal or moral principle that is being violated and is both, the antecedent and the consequence, of the Leader Gaze/Actions” (Parameshwar, 2005, p. 711). This attribute is critical as the higher purpose of the leader is likely to significantly affect the leaders’ views, actions and responses; as such it is likely that the responses in this higher purpose section will be reflected in other leader quotes.

The fifth attribute that will be considered for each leader is follower actions. Parameshwar (2005, p. 711) determines follower actions to “heed the leader’s call”. The quotes on the follower actions will be from the leader; therefore, it is the leaders’ perspective on the followers’ actions that will be considered in this study. Therefore, the quotes relating to this attribute will also benefit from a consideration of the triangulated data so as to indicate an accurate view of follower actions.

Oppressor action is the sixth attribute to be considered in the analysis of the eight leaders in this study. Parameshwar (2005, p. 711) indicates that “Oppressor Actions becomes the new Challenging Circumstance”. This broad definitional construct of oppressor actions allows for both the oppressors’ actions to be considered as well as the leaders’ thoughts on the oppressors’ actions. Oppressor actions for this study may come from a variety of stakeholders.

Social innovation is the final attribute considered for each leader. Parameshwar (2005, p. 711) defines social innovation in a non-organisational setting as “a joint accomplishment that takes place at the intersection of the leader, the follower, and the oppressor as they recursively engage in both ego-based as well as ego-transcendental responses”. Whilst social innovation will be considered from a similar perspective in this study, the understanding will be slightly altered to gain an organisational perspective. This attribute is important, because it is through the contribution of a social innovation that the leader has the opportunity to significantly contribute to society.

## Methodology

### *Research approach*

The study used research tactics available within a phenomenological framework (Moustakas, 1994). As in Parameshwar’s (2005) study, we used phenomenography (Marton, 1986) to study phenomena containing in written reports about leaders. This method aims to capture ways in which reality can be experienced by various people; and how they develop a sense of their worlds from the reports. According to Richardson (1999), phenomenographic researchers “are more like 19th century anthropologists, who typically relied upon the second hand accounts of distant correspondents” (p. 58). Using publicly available secondary data, key statements made by the selected business leaders were captured. The aim was to ask “of ‘what’ was experienced in textual descriptions, and ‘how’ it was experienced in structural descriptions” (Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell, 2004, p. 20). The selected key statements were then clustered into groups, so as to better understand the relationship between leaders, their attributes in Parameshwar’s (2005) model. A key aspect in the present study was the selection of key words in leader statements. Key words were selected from leader quotes because they are vital to understanding the motivation for leader behaviour. Due to space constraints not all the quotes with key words can be presented here. Key words used by each leader in a variety of different sources were analysed

within the quotes analysed. This allowed key words in each sentence to support or dismiss key words from the other quotes, and as such allow for a better understanding of the leader and their perspectives.

*Leader selection*

The leaders examined in this study were selected based on five criteria: first, worked as a chief executive or similar after 2008; second, the leader is a founder of a company, with 1,000 or more employees; third, the leader has more than 150,000 hits on Google; fourth, availability of sufficient publicly held information to complete the study; and fifth, the leader is reported in the media for a socially innovative idea, product or service. Based on the above, leaders selected for this study were Merrill Fernando (Dilmah tea) and Therese Rein (Ingeus). Similar to Parameshwar’s (2005) approach, we tried to select a sample that was “maximally heterogeneous” in the types of challenges the leaders had to face (see Table I). Leadership responses to numerous challenging circumstances (e.g. economic oppression, political colonisation, educational oppression, physical disabilities) are expected to disclose consistencies in the concept studied.

*Data triangulation*

The definition of triangulation is mixing data or methods so as viewpoints or standpoints or diversity can be considered in order to add greater depth to a topic (Olsen, 2004). Triangulation is a way in which research can be tested to prove that it does contain a high level of validity and reliability. In this paper, validity and reliability will be demonstrated through the triangulation of quotes. Several sources of data were used to verify and triangulate leader quotes including academic papers, books, company documents, publicly held documents and online media sources. The leader quotes when supported by other quotes from different sources were retained while dismissing any quotes which demonstrated personal bias or those that do not accurately reflect other statements on the leader.

**Business leaders**

*Merrill Fernando – Founder Dilmah tea*

Merrill Fernando was born to a Roman Catholic family of modest means in Sri Lanka, in 1930. Merrill never pursued tertiary education; he did however gain workplace experience in the corporate sector. In 1954, Merrill started work with A.F. Jones, a British owned tea company operating in Sri Lanka followed by 12 months in London

| Leader           | Aspect of diversity | Description  |
|------------------|---------------------|--|
| Merrill Fernando | Business            | Dilmah tea   |
|                  | Religion            | Catholic   |
|                  | Geographic region   | Sri Lanka  |
| Therese Rein     | Social innovation   | The first producer owned tea brand in the world  |
|                  | Business            | Ingeus   |
|                  | Religion            | Christian  |
|                  | Geographic region   | Australia  |
|                  | Social innovation   | Employment services for the disabled and disadvantaged that may have been otherwise marginalised |

**Table I.**  
Profile of business leaders

with Joseph Travers and Sons. During this time, British East India Company came to control Sri Lanka from the Dutch. In 1955, Merrill returned to Colombo and three years after was appointed a director at A.F. Jones, and when the company owners decide to return to England, buys A.F. Jones with two partners.

Merrill's vision was to ensure that tea grown in Sri Lanka should be packed and shipped directly from Sri Lanka to global markets. He challenged the existing tea operations by resisting the pressure to mix his handpicked tea from other sources. Although mixing tea could reduce the cost of tea, it leads fresh tea to lose the garden fresh richness. For several years Merrill had to put up with larger competitors who were fearful of his eventual success and domination of the market. In 1988, Merrill set up Dilmah tea, and was the first producer of a family owned, unblended, ethically produced single origin tea (Dilmah, 2014).

Merrill founded the "MJF Charitable Foundation" as a way to allow for his success in business to contribute to the community that was directly dependent on the ailing tea industry. The MJF Charitable Foundation benefits 10,000 people in over 100 humanitarian projects. It is a representation of Merrill's belief in social responsibility. Merrill's success at building Dilmah into a globally recognised brand associated with quality is notable, especially considering his modest or middle class background. There seems to be no criticisms of Merrill in the media, in fact the media highlights Merrill's good deeds through his charitable organisation. One such example is Merrill being praised for his work promoting charities and increasing revenue for his MJF Charitable Foundation.

#### *Therese Rein – Founder of Ingeus*

Therese Rein is an Australian entrepreneur and businesswomen who in 2014 sold off her international job placement venture, Ingeus to the Nasdaq-listed Providence Service Corporation for \$US140 million. Therese was born in 1958 in Adelaide, Australia to parents John and Elizabeth Rein. John Rein was severely injured in a plane crash; these injuries left him with lifelong disabilities that forced drastic changes to both his occupation and lifestyle. John Rein's ability to overcome these obstacles inspired his daughter to launch a business that created positive change for the marginalised. Therese attended the Australian National University, where she attained an honours degree in psychology. Before Rein created Ingeus, she worked part time in a rehabilitation centre helping people with injuries to be able to gain access to the work force.

Therese's greatest achievement is improving the lives of her clients through expanding their opportunities. Therese's other great achievements come from the global and financial success of her business, as well as her philanthropy. Therese's clients are diverse in both their geographic setting and in their need for the Ingeus services. These clients include the long term unemployed, the disabled, parents, young people, migrants and refugees (Rein, 2012); helping such a diverse group of people to reach their full potential through a business is a significant achievement. Therese's success in business is also an achievement. Ingeus operates in ten countries, with 250 offices and thousands of clients, resulting in a personal wealth for Therese of over 210 million Australian dollars (Klan, 2012; Martin, 2012; Ingeus, 2012). Therese has also been named one of Australia's top female entrepreneurs (Thomson, 2010).

Therese is notable for her business success, the ability of her business to help the marginalised, her philanthropy and her marriage to a former Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd. Therese's business has succeeded in an international setting, by having a strong financial business model which has allowed her to be notable in the media. The ability of Therese's business to improve society, including the lives of



marginalised persons, is what makes her most notable. Therese's business was designed to help those that need help, to allow them access to opportunities, designing a business that delivers social wealth and providing a profitable business model. Therese supports a number of charities, including being the patron for the Indigenous Literacy Foundation, OzHarvest Food Rescue, Ability First Australia and the ACT Junior Talent Squad for athletes with a disability.

Therese is seldom criticised in the media. She is praised both for her business acumen and philanthropic efforts. One example of praise from the media is for her support of a campaign to make houses more liveable, using her personal history to recognise the importance of such campaigns (Danckert, 2012). The media has also praised her ability to be a self-made entrepreneur, with her fortune allowing her to be included in the *Australian Business Review Weekly's* Rich 200 list, at 199 (Martin, 2012).

The leadership style of Therese is supportive of her workers, recognising that their impact on the business produces positive results (O'Brien, 2009). Therese's business has been recognised as a top employer in terms of social wealth created for employees, this is a result of the principles that Therese has implemented into her business (Top Employers Publishing, 2012).

### Leader attribute analysis

In this section, quotes from the two leaders will be considered against the seven attributes of Parameshwar's (2005) model. These seven attributes demonstrate the processes that propelled the implementation of leaders' social innovations.

#### *Unproblematized discourse*

Within the context of this paper, this attribute refers to the oppressive beliefs of society that have hindered the leaders' path to success. This includes any oppressive practices by society, which have either hindered the founding of the leader's business or alternatively caused the need for their businesses to be created. Merrill on why he created the Dilmah tea brand:

In the 1950s I set out to offer tea drinkers the finest tea on earth whilst ensuring a genuinely ethical brand. It took me nearly four decades to fulfil my mission, but in 1988 I launched my family tea – Dilmah – the first producer owned tea brand in the world, handpicked, perfected and packed at source and shipped within days to tea drinkers around the world. This ensures that Dilmah tea is the freshest, brimming with antioxidants" (Merrill, Year not listed on Dilmah website).

The unproblematized discourse within this quote is represented by the idea that the tea industry was unaccepting of tea being sold by the grower under the growers' label. Further to this, although not specified in the quote, operating a tea business as a Sri Lankan in an industry that was Western dominated in ownership at the time was also a challenge. Merrill needed to overcome the oppressive beliefs of the industry on what constituted a "good" tea and how he should interact with society. The quote demonstrates the challenges that Merrill faced as a Sri Lankan businessman in a field dominated by large Western firms such as Lipton.

Another example can be drawn from Merrill that expresses the unproblematized discourse that inspired his business:

"The mixing of tea (blending) worried me at the time. Ceylon Tea at the time had 30-40 per cent of non-Ceylon origin tea," he recalled, adding "it occurred to me that eventually foreign packers would drop Ceylon Tea altogether or use just a little bit" (Samath, 2013).

This quote represents the idea that Merrill believed the tea industry was changing and that as a consequence the need for Ceylon tea would decrease. Merrill saw this as challenging to people of his country who earned a living through Ceylon tea, and as an opportunity to start a business that uses Ceylon tea and fill a gap in the market.

A useful example also can be drawn from Therese's case, on the reason why she started Ingeus, and how there was a desperate need to create an employment service for the disabled:

And I started working with people who had injuries at work and who couldn't go back to their pre-injury job because of the nature of their injury. And so they felt like they had hit a brick wall. They just didn't know what they could do. They were not in work, they were on workers compensation, and they hated that. It was a lot less money. They hated being dependent and I thought, aw, I know these people! I know what this feels like (sic) (O'Brien, 2009).

The unproblematised discourse within this quote is represented by the idea that the disabled were marginalised. This quote represents that Therese was able to contribute a social innovation to society by recognising that there was a challenge to overcome, and that it could be rectified through the creation of Ingeus. Therese started Ingeus because of a desire to help people who were not being helped. Therese recognised that these people needed to be helped, starting her business to help them. Therese's company opposed the oppressive beliefs of society about the ability of the disabled to work and found employment for this marginalised group. Therese's effort to overcome the challenges of society has seen her expand her company from a domestic operation to an international one.

Therese's understanding of the unproblematised discourse was enabled by her father sustaining a life altering injury:

He then wanted a job and they said the same thing to him, "John, nobody is going to give you a job mate, because you're handicapped." I think people don't want sometimes for people to try and fail. I think people don't necessarily want people to have go in case they'll be disappointed because living with someone's disappointment is a very hard thing. So I think they were trying to protect him from disappointment (O'Brien, 2009).

This quote shows Therese's understanding of the importance of a job to a person's identity and how this identity can be altered when a disability hinders one's job prospects. She gained her understanding of unproblematised discourse in disability employment because of her father's disability.

### *Challenging circumstances*

This attribute refers to those circumstances that the leaders have faced in either the founding or the leading of their businesses. These challenging circumstances may be caused by a variety of factors, including internal and external challenges that negatively impact the leaders' ability to successfully create or lead their businesses. Merrill on the challenges presented to him from being in a premium market segment:

Despite Ceylon Tea being in the highest price bracket in the world market, it continues to sell at high levels (Colombage, 2012).

On first appearance this quote may not represent a challenge. The challenging circumstance within this quote is represented by the internal and external challenges of creating and leading Dilmah. The external challenge is that Dilmah is producing a tea for the highest price bracket in the world. The corresponding internal challenge is that

Dilmah needs to market its tea profitably; hence Merrill's quote represents both an internal and external challenge to the company. The quote demonstrates that Merrill faces challenges outside of his control; sales are one challenge, whilst other challenges include market positioning.

Another quote represents the challenging circumstances Merrill faced when he was starting his business:

At one stage nobody wanted to know me; I was like a leper (Fonseka, 2009).

This quote represents the challenging circumstances that Merrill faced in his macro environment. Merrill felt that the Sri Lankan government at the time was not supporting his business, further he felt that the government was causing himself and his business numerous problems.

For Therese, the challenge included operating in a country in which her husband had significant political power and due to conflict of interest, selling her local companies:

No regrets about having made the decision. It was the right thing to do. It would have been impossible to have a significant government contract in this position. It's still [...] it was still a very difficult thing to do because of the people, some of the people who were in the companies that were sold I had worked with for 13 years. So that was really hard (O'Brien, 2009).

The challenging circumstance within this quote is represented by the idea that a leaders' personal life can lead to challenges within business. In 2007, Therese held a very large government contract to help the disabled gain employment. However, Therese's husband was hoping to achieve political prominence, putting Therese and Ingeus into a difficult position. Therese chose to sell the Australian branch of her international company in the lead up to the election so to avoid any potential conflict. The sale of the Australian branch was difficult for Therese for several reasons; first, Australia is where Ingeus is headquartered, second, in a purely business sense it was not a necessary decision, and finally, it was challenging to sell the branch of her business where she had begun, meaning that she had long running relationships with many of her employees. The quote demonstrates that Therese, like many business leaders, often has conflicts of interest; in fact, this is not the only conflict of interest that Therese has faced. Therese has not let her personal circumstances compromise her integrity in the business world, demonstrating her ability to be a successful business leader.

Another quote from Therese representing the challenging circumstances was what disabled people faced in finding employment:

"In my experience, only a very tiny percentage of people really don't want to work," Ms Rein said in one interview. "Like my father, a vast majority of people want to be contributing and participating members of the community, once they see what's possible for them, once they can see a way through the myriad problems they may face" (Davies, 2014).

This quote is reflective of some of society's assumptions about disabled people in the work force. With her father's experience, Therese needed to state that disabled people want to work, and want to be part of the community, a statement that she should not need to have been made. By simply stating this, Therese reflects the challenges that disabled people face in finding employment.

#### *Leader gaze/action*

Leader gaze and action within the context of this papers refers to the gaze that the leader takes of society, and how they interpret this gaze into meaning. For the purpose

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of this paper, gaze can be explained as being the way in which the leader perceives an event. This meaning is then used to determine the leaders' actions; the actions within the context of this paper will refer to those actions that impact their business as opposed to actions that only have a personal affect. Merrill, on his gaze about responsibility and the actions that he takes because of that gaze in helping those in lower social economic situations:

Everyone has a responsibility to help the poor. I have deliberately kept the social work we do low profile because in this country if we start talking about this, the message goes that this man is doing this for "show and tell". The publicity we get for it now is against the grain and I was unhappy about it until some business friends I respect said there's no harm in some publicity because this could inspire others to work with communities (Samath, 2008).

The leader action/gaze within this quote is represented by the idea that Merrill's gaze is influenced by the suffering of others. Merrill takes into consideration the situation of others as well as their suffering. This gaze then contributes to the actions that he takes. The actions that Merrill takes are twofold; first, he takes action to help those who are suffering. Second, he does not take action to publicise that he helps others, quotes elsewhere indicate that he considers it immoral to do so (see, Fernando, 2007b). However, these actions may change in the future as the quote indicates that his gaze is shifting due to the thoughts of others influencing him that it may be best to inspire others by allowing for his charity to be visible. Triangulation of the data reveals that Merrill is very active in his charity work, and that his charitable giving is not influenced by his business activities.

Merrill's community gaze is further explained by the following quote:

I visualised a situation where Sri Lanka would supply the world's finest tea. I wanted my own brand of tea, which would be the finest quality tea in the world. I wanted to give my customers the best possible deal and our workers a fair deal (The Report Company, 2007).

This demonstrates that Merrill's gaze is of creating a business that benefits everyone, as opposed to a business that merely benefits himself through profit. When Merrill talk about why he created his business he talks about creating a fair workplace for his employees. Merrill also talks about delivering a high quality tea to his customers, his motivation can be seen as wanting to provide a product that people were unable to get.

Therese's example, on how her gaze and actions were affected by the plight of her disabled father:

The first thing I learned I think from him, implicitly, was that to find your field of fascination, to find the thing that you find really intriguing. And to put your energy into that because that creates its own energy (O'Brien, 2009).

The leader action/gaze within this quote is represented by the idea that Therese's gaze is affected by her father's plight. Through watching her father's struggle, and listening to his beliefs, Therese was able to come to a belief that the work she should do in life is something that she should be passionate about, work that inspires her to do more. Therese's gaze inspired her to work with the disabled, and to help them gain employment, her actions were to start a business that allowed her to make achievements about what she is passionate about. Therese's entire gaze on life as well as the actions that she has taken has been influenced by her upbringing, in particular the plight of her disabled father to undertake higher education and then gain employment. This indicates the likelihood that Therese's gaze and actions in business are likely to be orientated towards a social good as opposed to financial gain.

Further, Therese has demonstrated many gazes reflective of her different roles, which include being businesswomen, wife of the Prime Minister and a mother. The following quote represents her gaze as the wife of the Prime Minister:

This official position, whatever it is, it's not a constitutional position, it's not defined anywhere, but there is a real opportunity to contribute and what I really want to do, what I have wanted to do, is focus on a few key areas and really get involved with those (Kearney, 2010).

This quote represents that in all elements of her life, including as her role as the wife of the Prime Minister, Therese seeks to make a positive difference to others. Rein utilises her position and opportunities afforded to her to contribute to the greater good.

### *Higher purpose*

Higher purpose refers to the primary motivator that influences leaders' gaze and actions. This higher purpose does not necessarily refer to a religious higher purpose. The higher purpose may include a belief in themselves or a belief in helping others. An example can be drawn from Merrill, on how religion is what has caused him to have a higher purpose:

We are a very religious family. I was trained to go to mass every day, and it gave me a lot of strength and courage in what I did. So even as a small boy, we had no wants. Religion was the cornerstone of my foundation and eventually as I grew up, I became very dedicated to religion (Fernando *et al.*, 2009, p. 67).

The higher purpose evident in this quote is represented by the idea that Merrill has a higher religious purpose which strongly influences who he is. As such, Merrill's higher purpose can be considered to have a significant impact on both his gaze and his actions. Merrill's higher purpose was influenced by his family, in particular his mother, a devout catholic.

It has been apparent throughout Merrill's quotes that he seeks to help others. In the following quote, Merrill demonstrates that his higher purpose is to help people in need, particularly in assisting people in need to help themselves:

During the Tsunami, people lost everything including families. The easiest thing was to give food and say nice things but we didn't do that. We selected people who had skills and had lost their small business. We helped them to re-establish the business and provided the tools. Restoring their dignity, we felt, was very important (Samath, 2013).

This quote reveals that Merrill seeks to help those in his community. Merrill could have easily given people food and money, but instead he chose to provide assistance to help people regain what they lost during a devastating natural tragedy. This was a more challenging way to help people regain their feet, however it would have provided a greater sense of purpose and help restore the dignity of the people caught up in the Tsunami. This quote shows that Merrill's higher purpose is to help people in need. In relation with the previous quote, it demonstrates that Merrill's deeply held religious convictions create his purpose of helping others.

An example by Therese demonstrates that her higher purpose involves helping others:

Ideally, I would apply my entrepreneurial skills to developing a technology that will enable life-saving medication to be administered to the 150,000+ underprivileged women around the world who die from haemorrhages associated with child birth. This not only impacts the women, but their newborn child, other children, their broader family and the community (Ernst and Young, 2010).

The most important word in this sentence is “ideally”. The higher purpose evident within this quote is represented by the fact that, in an ideal world, Therese would act on what she feels to be her higher purpose. However, the word ideally does not represent an actualised action on her beliefs. So whilst Therese believes in a higher purpose, this quote does not demonstrate action on that higher purpose. Triangulation of the data reveals that Therese feels very strongly about her religious practices of Christianity and that this influences her higher purpose.

Another quote that further demonstrates how Therese’s higher purpose is clearly influenced by her deeply held religious beliefs:

“There are two particular pieces of scripture that shout to me from the rooftops, and they are about freedom for the captive and recovering sight for the blind,” she says. “They are all about inclusion, they are all about being there to feed the hungry, to visit people in prison and hospital, to house the people who are not housed” (Bolt, 2009).

This quote demonstrates that Therese’s higher purpose to help people is fundamentally driven by her religious beliefs, which hold helping others of the highest importance. It is particularly interesting to note that the religious verses that Therese is referring to are about helping the less fortunate, which is what her business seeks to do.

#### *Follower actions*

Within the context of this paper, the followers are considered from an organisational context and as such will mostly be employees of the company. The employee actions will be considered as a response to the actions of the leaders. Merrill provides an example, on the actions of his employees and how these actions have benefitted both himself and the organisation:

I have wealth acquired through the cooperation and the assistance of many other people who worked with me (Fernando *et al.*, 2009, p. 532).

The follower actions in this quote are represented by the idea that the actions of Dilmah employees (Merrill’s followers) have allowed for Merrill to acquire his wealth. Merrill is therefore implying within his quote that the employee actions at Dilmah are positive for both the organisation and himself personally. Merrill reciprocates by taking very good care of his employees, helping them to receive healthcare and their children to receive access to educational supplies.

Merrill’s belief that his followers helped to establish his wealth and as such deserve to be rewarded is also reflected in the following quote:

I decided that while I’m still around I would like to share that wealth with those who helped me get it, and that was why I created the Merrill J. Fernando Charitable Foundation in 1999 (Fonseka, 2009).

This quote, in conjunction with the previous quote, demonstrates that Merrill believes that his follower’s actions enabled his business success, and through that success his wealth. Merrill wishes to reward his follower’s actions by utilising his wealth to help them.

Another example can be drawn from Therese, on the support that a multitude of followers provide her with:

Neither of us would be able to do the things we do without either our children’s support, our broader family support, our broader friendship support, without each other and without our teams (O’Brien, 2009).

The follower actions in this quote are represented by the idea that the support of Ingeus' employees (Therese's followers) has led to the success of her company. This quote therefore suggests that the actions of the followers are supportive, and it is through this support that Therese has been able to achieve her success. Triangulation of the data reveals that Rein feels very positively about her employee actions and, as a result, she is quite close to them.

#### *Oppressor action*

Oppressor action within the context of this paper refer to the actions that those considered to be oppressors have taken in an attempt to affect the leaders' future business success. Oppressor actions may come from a variety of sources including business competitors, those within the supply chain or governments, just to name a few.

Merrill, on the oppressive policies that the Sri Lankan government formulated on his enterprise:

After 25 years of trying to launch my own brand I did approach the government in hope of them providing assistance concerning investment and machinery. However, the questions I was subjected to by the bureaucracy shattered my hopes (Fernando, 2007b).

The oppressor actions faced by the leader are represented by governmental oppression. Merrill believed that the Sri Lankan government at the time did not actively support his company, Dilmah. Therefore, the oppressor's action was to deny Dilmah help; this is likely to have influenced the leadership actions of Merrill.

The following quote reveals that Merrill was not only oppressed by his government but also by his colleagues, who ridiculed his ideas:

I was quite young and had acquired a work knowledge of marketing. My little marketing knowledge appeared to be very significant the total absence of any among my colleagues at the time. At my first meeting we drove home the importance of developing our own brand names. That was over 40 years most members of the Board ridiculed me for my ignorance of "the realities of the market place". Nevertheless, I stayed true to my strategy for eight years (Fonseka, 2009).

Merrill's ideas were ridiculed by those colleagues who he had trusted enough to share them with. However, despite being oppressed by the ridicule of his colleagues Merrill persevered with his ideas and was ultimately successful because of them.

Another example can be drawn from Therese, on the oppressive actions of the media:

I think I felt vulnerable [...] I think I felt angry at myself that I wasn't more aware (Ireland, 2012).

That's a bit spooky, can I tell you? The thought that a series of photographs are taken of you. There was another one, apparently, taken while I was walking to work. I didn't like that. But I'm not going to carry that feeling, because it's not useful (Crabb, 2009).

The oppressor actions faced by the leader, as identified by these two quotes, are represented in Therese's belief that the media can act as an oppressive force. The quotes also show that these oppressor actions can detract from her inner well-being. The media play a significant role in Therese's life, not just because of her business practices but also because of her marriage to a former Australian Prime Minister.

#### *Social innovation*

Social innovation within the context of this paper refers to the social innovation that the leader has contributed through their business practices. Social innovation refers to the

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leaders' ability to contribute something new to society that made a positive difference to the society in some way.

Merrill, on Dilmah's ability to be socially innovative:

Our mission has always been to return to the artisanal practices that once surrounded the cultivation and enjoyment of tea (Science Letter, 2008).

In this quote, Merrill does not strongly demonstrate the development of a social innovation. The quote does however demonstrate that Merrill wants to change the way tea is made, to return to a more traditional form, and as such offer contemporary society something new and different.

Merrill's belief in creating tea a different way in order to help the community is also reflected in the following quote:

We are the only vertically integrated company in the tea business in the world, we have farmers bringing our crop to the market, with no middlemen, just the family and our workers, and of course the all important customer. Our workers benefit because the most important aspect of our family business is that we retain in Sri Lanka all the benefits of value addition that go to foreign companies in respect to all other brands (Fonseka, 2009).

Merrill's innovative tea is not only a unique blend and a higher quality, but also utilise a business model that better supports the local community. Merrill's business model benefits everyone involved, instead of simply creating profit for himself.

Therese's socially innovative business idea came not only from her experiences with her father, but also her experiences working with the disabled:

Often they had depression following all of that. They were at home. They'd lost their occupational identity. And helping them to find out that, that "ah-ha"! That field of fascination and the, "Yep, this is what I can do, rather than what I can't do." As soon as I started doing that, I thought that was "ah-ha" for me. This is what I want to be doing with my life, helping people find out what they can do and helping them then get that job and keep the job and regain their confidence and get back on their feet (O'Brien, 2009).

This quote reveals that Therese set out to have a socially innovative employment service that focused on ability as opposed to disability. She understood the value of work to one's identity, and sought to create a business that helped the disabled to achieve an identity through work that utilises all of their abilities, and to achieve an identity that they could be proud of through their meaningful employment.

An examination of quotes through Parameshwar's model by Therese and Merrill has revealed the interlinkages between aspects of the model. An example of these interlinkages is Therese's gaze meant that she was able to perceive an unproblematised discourse that others may not have. Both leaders have reflected of their religious higher purpose; however this similarity is an unintended result. Whilst religion guided the actions of both Therese and Merrill, religion as revealed by the literature is not a necessary component of spiritual leadership. The quotes reveal that the leaders' higher purpose and spirituality allowed for the implementation of social innovations.

## Discussion

Parameshwar (2005) is the only academic that attempts to explain the link between social innovation and spiritual leadership, albeit in a non-organisational setting. Earlier we noted that Parameshwar's (2005) model on ego-transcendence-based spiritual leadership is based on extreme conditions of human adversity and oppression.



According to Parameshwar (2005), “the centrality of pain and challenge to the phenomenon of spiritual leadership cannot be underestimated” (p. 691). She claims that daily life challenges involving adversity are framed as exceptions to ignored or avoided rather than as critical events for spiritual growth (Parameshwar, 2005). In her view, spiritual leadership is fundamentally based on the complexities of human suffering and its transformative power. This has so far been neglected by the largely Western dominated spiritual leadership literature. Based on the analysis of the two business leaders, it appears that there are several links between spiritual leadership and social innovation.

The central role of a higher purpose in enacting spiritual leadership as well as bringing about social innovation is most important. Therese indicated that her higher purpose was essential to creating and implementing the social innovation. Whilst Parameshwar (2005) indicates that social innovations are enabled by a higher purpose, other spiritual leadership scholars demonstrate that the higher purpose in spiritual leadership leads to improved performance (Fry, 2003; Vandenberghe, 2011; Fry and Matherly, 2006a; Fernando and Nilakant, 2008). This improved performance can stem from the leaders’ ability to better utilise their followers to design and implement social innovations. Fernando and Nilakant’s (2008) self-growth-based spiritual leadership model, for example links experiencing the ultimate or higher purpose to fulfilling goals; therefore, if the goal is social innovation, then the belief and connection with a higher purpose helps this goal to be achieved (Fernando and Nilakant, 2008). At this stage, it is worthwhile to explore further the conceptual reasons for a link between spiritual leadership and social innovation.

At a conceptual level, the Parameshwar (2005) model on spiritual leadership and the Dawson and Daniel’s (2010) model on social innovation overlaps each other in a number of key aspects. The concept of social innovation can be defined as the development, implementation and ideally, accomplishment of embracing new ideas with the intention of resolving existing social, cultural, economic and environmental issues (Mumford, 2002). In this sense, social innovation is “the interface point between sociological reflection and social action because it requires reflection on societal problems and targeted action” (Kesselring and Leitner, 2008, p. 14). Dawson and Daniel (2010) present a four part model of social innovation. It includes people, the challenge (a problem or opportunity), the process (by which the challenge is negotiated and understood) and the goal (the resolution towards increased well-being) (p. 16). These four aspects of social innovation are also embedded in the Parameshwar (2005) model on spiritual leadership. One is the focus on people. The purpose of social innovation in the Parameshwar (2005) model is to develop a better society for the benefit of all people. People in the form of followers are key in implementing social innovations in the Parameshwar (2005) model. Therese and Merrill demonstrated through their quotes that their success of providing social innovations is partly due to the actions of their followers.

Similar to Parameshwar’s (2005) model of spiritual leadership, the Dawson and Daniel (2010) model also indicates challenge (or problem or opportunity) as a key aspect of social innovation. For instance, Therese saw that there was a problem with the recently disable finding suitable jobs, her social mission became to rectify this problem through business.

Both the Parameshwar (2005) model on spiritual leadership and the Dawson and Daniel (2010) model on social innovation also include process as a key aspect. The Parameshwar (2005) model considers this process primarily through the leader’s gaze

and actions. The understanding of the challenge or problem occurs through the gaze of the leader, whilst the actions that the leader takes may be referred to as the leader's behavioural response to negotiating the challenge. The process by which social innovations are created in Dawson and Daniel (2010) is very similar to the leaders' action and gaze in the Parameshwar (2005) model. Merrill's gaze revealed that he sought to help the disadvantaged in society; he is able to do this through his business.

### Limitations and implications

There are several limitations of the study. The first limitation is the use of secondary data. There were several reasons for the use of secondary data. There is a need to analyse actual behaviour rather than professed intentions regarding behaviour. This requirement aligns with the findings of Bird and Waters (1989) that hypothetical tests of moral behaviour of management bear little or no relation to management's actual actions in real business situations. As spirituality can be a very personal and subjective topic, even if some leaders believed in a higher purpose, they would not have wanted to speak about those beliefs in an interview with an unknown researcher. Therefore while working with primary data would have been the preferred option, the study attempts to replicate the process adopted by Parameshwar (2005) in a business setting. Large volumes of secondary data are available on the two selected leaders. These data come from sources such as the media, the companies' own press releases, and previous studies and scholarly work. This large volume of data allowed a comprehensive picture and analysis of their actions to be obtained from both qualitative and quantitative sources, without the need to generate or replicate previous work.

The second limitation is in relation to the inherent weaknesses in analysis based on a single individual's interpretations (Parameshwar, 2005). As Parameshwar points out, "the validity of a statement (suppose one is theorizing that green leaves exist) is to be gauged by checking if green leaves were spotted in the written reports (pomographical) provided by the subjects, rather than by looking at a tree outside one's window to see if its leaves are green (pomological)" (p. 718). However, to overcome this weakness in phenomenology studies and a single individual's interpretation of data, this study is based on over 50 identified events from the written reports about leaders' ego-transcendent responses.

Third, the findings are limited to the analysis of two business leaders. The two leaders were selected based on Pettigrew's (1988) idea of using extreme examples when conducting studies to make the area under investigation "transparently observable". For example, while Merrill is from a developing country in the manufacturing industry, Therese is from a developed nation, operating in the service industry.

Despite the above limitations, there are several implications for theory and practice from the study. First, the main theoretical implication of the study was the remarkable overlap found between the social innovation model of Dawson and Daniel (2010) and Parameshwar's (2005) ego-transcendence-based spiritual leadership model. The study found several areas of overlap in the focus on people, challenge, process and the goal of social innovation.

Second, the attribute that appeared to significantly impact the ability of spiritual leaders to enable social innovations was higher purpose. Higher purpose is also a key element in enacting spiritual leadership (Fernando and Nilakant, 2008; Fry, 2003; Fry and Matherly, 2006a; Kriger and Seng, 2005; Vandenberghe, 2011). Therese in particular alludes to her higher purpose role in enabling social innovations. In practice,

this would mean that leaders and managers should look for the seeds of a higher purpose within the challenging circumstances of a situation. Rather than focusing on the suffering aspect of an oppressive and challenging situation, this would mean that leaders and managers should look for inspiration through a higher purpose to overcome the situation. This type of reliance on a higher purpose during an oppressive and challenging situation would allow leaders and managers to overcome personal and contextual limitations by initiating actions towards a social cause. By shaping one's behaviour to a higher purpose-related social cause than merely following rules and procedures or social conventions, leaders are more likely to develop their own personal decision-making style. This is an ideal response to the growing calls for a fresh approach to leading ethically. Higher purpose driven leader initiatives are likely to overcome temptations to further one's ego needs, and drive leaders to explore ways to generate more common good.

Third, by highlighting the importance of paying attention to the suffering of others rather than one's own suffering, the study also has implications for reducing the ego-based practices in day to day leadership in organisations. This type of empathetic understanding of others' suffering can lead to social breakthroughs that could help alleviate the underlying conditions of human suffering. This type of empathetic leadership thinking and practices are likely to generate more profit making strategies that are also aligned with a social purpose. These practices over time are likely to motivate business leaders to "walk the talk", and regain the lost legitimacy and trust with stakeholders.

There are several ways in which researchers could extend the study. Future researchers could further study on the efficacy of various leadership styles to generate social innovations. For example, the attributes of leadership styles such as transformational and authentic leadership styles can be examined to determine which style has the greatest ability to generate social innovations. The type and form of the higher purpose of a leader can also be examined to explore any links with the type of social innovation that is generated. For example, studies could explore whether religious based or self-growth-based higher purpose is more likely to generate one or more of the three forms of social innovation identified in the study (i.e. satisfying human needs that are not currently satisfied or exploiting opportunities in social relations or increasing the socio-political capability and access to resources that are needed to enhance rights and satisfy human needs). Methodologically, to overcome the inherent limitations of a single individual interpreting the data, third party triangulation could further improve the quality of the findings. This study could also be replicated with another set of leaders using a different research design. For example, rather than using secondary data and phenomenology, researchers could use direct, face-to-face interviews coupled with other types of research approaches.

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