THE CALLING OF THE KNOWLEDGE STEWARD

TURNING IDEAS INTO IMPACT

BY JON HIRST

FOREWORD BY R. SCOTT RODIN
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Resources from GMI
Mindy and I are making sure of that, regularly drilling him about managing his treasures, time, and talents.

When we give Adin his allowance, he knows we expect him to manage his money so that he uses some of it to buy the things he values and dedicates some of it to a higher purpose.

Like most kids, Adin loves junk food. Every week he saves some money from his allowance to feed the soda machine at church. He also puts a portion of his allowance in the church offering plate.

We want Adin to see the importance of sharing his treasures with our congregation and the Body of Christ. We also want him to grasp the nonintuitive concept that the money he stewards is not really his own. We hope that part of the lesson sinks in and impacts his life.

Money isn’t the only area where we’re teaching Adin to be a steward. Lately we’ve been expanding the stewardship training to include his use of “screen time.” Just like his allowance, which he carefully budgets, he knows that he only has so much screen time to spend on his favorite TV shows, movies, video games, and YouTube.

Initially, stewarding time was hard for him to grasp because time
seemed abstract. Allowance money is concrete. Adin can see it in his wallet, and he can feel it leaving his wallet when he buys a video game or gives to a cause he is passionate about. Stewarding screen time is more complicated, especially when there is so much entertainment and content competing for his attention.

But he’s starting to get the idea. There are only so many minutes and hours he can spend glued to his various screens. That makes screen time a finite resource he must manage. If he spends all his screen time on silly TV shows, he has none left for his favorite computer games.

As Adin grows older, we are amazed to see him manifesting the various gifts and talents God has given him. We are committed to working with him on stewarding these resources, too. As he has more new experiences and tries new things, we are confident he will embrace this discipline that can provide balance in his life and help him understand his world and successfully find his place.

JUST THE BEGINNING

Treasures, time, and talents. In many churches, that’s where teaching on stewardship ends. Most Christians think this stewardship trinity is the complete picture. After all, what else is there to steward? But I think these three life areas are just the beginning of the ways God wants us to steward the resources He has given us.

The approach Mindy and I embrace may be considered “stewardship on steroids” by some. But whether we’re helping Adin grow in his life, or working with Christian leaders, we stress that disciples of Jesus are called to be stewards of every resource God grants us, in every area of life.
This calling includes one powerful and rapidly growing resource that few believers really know how to steward: information.

**ADDRESSING OUR DAILY “DATA DELUGE”**

Former Google CEO Eric Schmidt was often quoted as saying the human race created five exabytes of data from the beginning of time to 2003. But now, Schmidt says, we’re creating that much data every two days.

As data multiplies, people grow more frustrated trying to track and manage it all. In 2011, the business magazine *Fast Company* published an article on a “Digital Lifestyle Information Survey” about coping with the data deluge:

“A staggering 72.7 percent described their data stream as: ‘A roaring river,’ ‘a flood,’ or ‘a massive tidal wave.’ And 48.5 percent admitted they were connected to the web: ‘from the moment I wake up until the moment I go to bed’.” This kind of around-the-clock deluge has definitely been my experience!

Here at GMI, we’ve been working with ministries and leaders involved in missions, promoting the concept of stewarding knowledge. Many people grasp this concept right away, especially those who manage information in their jobs. But there are many people in churches and Christian organizations who fail to give knowledge stewardship its due.

This oversight is a tragedy on many levels. I am writing this book to correct this oversight and to help Christians on mission with God to carve out a positive path forward through the data deluge of our era.

But first, let me make a brief comment about defining terms. Some readers may be confused by how I use the term “knowledge stewardship,” both in a very technical sense (stewarding information and the amass of data, which only a few can do) and in a more general sense (stewarding...
the knowledge we all have inside us). Throughout this book I will use the term both ways and at times I will make a distinction between the two.

**STEWARDEDING THE MIND**

When your tutor is C.S. Lewis, you do what he tells you to do. Lewis tutored an Oxford student named Harry Blamires, telling him to write. Blamires obeyed, publishing *The Christian Mind*, a Christian classic.

“The Christian mind is the prerequisite of Christian thinking,” wrote Blamires, “and Christian thinking is the prerequisite for Christian action.”

For decades, the United Negro College Fund used this simple slogan to inspire donors to support the cause of African-American education: *A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Waste*. Today, there are plenty of books and videos and sermons telling Christians what to think. But the topic of stewarding what you think gets far less attention.

At any other time in human history, such an oversight might be forgivable. But not now, a period when data is a force to be reckoned with in every corner of society.

Knowledge isn’t something you can put in your pocket and spend. You can’t turn it on and have it entertain you. But it is just as real as all the other resources we receive in life, and it’s just as deserving of our stewardship, if not even more so.

Think for a moment about all the information you have at your fingertips. Your computer’s hard drive might hold thousands of articles, documents, spreadsheets, and PowerPoint presentations. That row of books in your office or family room is a bigger library than most people could ever hope to own just a century ago. Now, the dozens of apps on phones or other digital devices can unlock vast collections of information that’s waiting for us to explore.

This data explosion has been great in many ways, but few of us have adapted as well as we could. Our era of instant and continual data demands those who seek to live and work faithfully during this era must come up with new forms of stewardship. The day is dawning when anyone lacking the ability to steward knowledge will become increasingly controlled by the dynamic “data deluge” of our day.
SEASONS OF SCARCITY AND ABUNDANCE

When a resource is finite, people naturally focus on stewarding it. But when a trickle turns to a deluge, we typically revel in the abundance.

Who hasn’t occasionally gorged on some the intriguing information at our fingertips? For example, I never knew that the database on hurricane tracking in the U.S. goes back to 1851! A quick look at the NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) website and I can zero in on how many hurricanes have occurred in every year since that time? Now I know!

The history of human life on this planet is a history of seasons of scarcity and abundance. For example, I love water. It’s commonplace but mysterious. The forces that move it and shape it (winds powered by the energy of the sun, waves and currents powered by the gravity of the moon) are powerful but invisible.

Water is also changeable. One minute, beautiful waves gently lap at the shore. The next minute, a tsunami can push you to your death.

For years I lived in Florida, where millions of people live near the water and are accustomed to dealing with its power to create or destroy. They sleep with the sounds of waves crashing on beaches. They walk along the shore. They swim in the water, float on it, sail on it, throw rocks into it, and splash each other with it.

For Floridians, water is a part of life in every imaginable way. Sometimes it is cruel and leads to a drowning or other disaster and everyone mourns. Other times it glistens against an amazing blue sky and everyone celebrates.

Things are different in Arizona. Desert living is defined by the scarcity of precious water. Instead of playing in it, you buy it, transport it, store it, drink it, and perhaps also treasure a dip in a swimming pool as a needed respite from the dryness and heat.
The desert has its own beauty. Magnificent sunsets on mesas and mountains. Wide-open spaces with plenty of room to roam.

But no matter what you do in the desert, you always need to return to where the water is. The rivers, springs, and watered towns where people gather around the edges of the desert are prized places.

Bottom line: Desert dwellers who steward water successfully survive and thrive. Those who don’t will never make it in those vast, dry expanses of sand and rock.

INFO, INFO EVERYWHERE!

My experiences in Florida and Arizona shaped my understanding of resources and how we need to steward them.

There have been similar seasons of scarcity and abundance when it comes to the role information has played throughout human history.

Most of the time people have spent on Earth they have lived in information deserts. Most civilizations offered their people very little information about the world beyond their doorstep. Plus, what little information was available was often carefully controlled or manipulated, ensuring that rulers enjoyed maximum power and authority.

But even in ancient history’s informational dry times, people cherished knowledge, founding esteemed centers of learning in Alexandria, Damascus, Timbuktu, Rome, and Cusco.

In Alexandria, Egypt, the ancient world’s greatest library gathered thousands of volumes. Ships passing through the city’s ports were searched for books and manuscripts, which were confiscated by the city’s librarians, copied, and returned to the ships’ waiting captains.

Ancient centers of learning grew and blossomed, managing the limited
information available at the time, and exploiting this precious resource to promote understanding, social harmony, and even great wealth.

Unlike today, information remained a precious resource, inaccessible to most of the human race but preserved and managed by and for a select few.

In time, developments like writing, printing, and public education meant that knowledge scarcity gave way to abundance. Before long, knowledge was growing exponentially. Information that would have taken years or decades for an ancient Alexandrian librarian to acquire could be had in a few months or weeks.

Just now, Google required only .73 second to find and organize 66,600,000 results about hurricanes!

ISLANDS IN AN INFORMATION OCEAN

For the longest time, we humans lived in an information desert. Today things are different. We live at the water’s edge. Many of us feel the ground is being submerged by massive waves of information.

Some of us respond by choosing to dive in, making the most of the information that’s available.

Others choose to live with our backs turned toward the shore. These folks only stretch out their hands now and then to scoop up the few insights they need.

Still others are denied access to information because they simply don’t own the digital devices needed to access the info, or they live in places where communication networks are poor, or power-hungry leaders control citizens’ access to information.

“Knowledge should be accessible to all,” says Richard Howell, president of EFI, an evangelical alliance serving the Indian Christian community. “Jesus said, ‘Freely you have received; freely give’ (Matthew 10:8). When economics and social power drive knowledge then stewardship and accessibility of knowledge to all is denied. The net result is that the Body of Christ suffers.”

I can feel the difference when I travel to a country where information is limited. I speak to groups all over the world, but when I speak in a
country with limited access to information, people come up to me after my presentation wanting my PowerPoint slides.

Often, my material is readily available online in various forms, but many people lack consistent Internet access or bandwidth for the ever-larger files that must be downloaded. While I’m accustomed to living in a culture of information abundance, other places in the world still face information scarcity. For people in these data deserts, I’m not just a speaker. I’m a flowing spring of valuable information, and my presence there is their only opportunity to access my material, which they studiously steward.

**HELP WANTED: KNOWLEDGE STEWARDS**

We live in a world of plenty. Info, info everywhere.

Unfortunately, our age of abundance has made us worse stewards of the mind, not better. Gone are the determined librarians of Alexandria who sought out and cataloged every available nugget of information. Amid our seemingly endless supply of data, many of us have given up being intentional about this powerful resource, simply letting it wash over us.

The truth is we need godly stewards during times of abundance, but for different reasons than during periods of scarcity. In times of scarcity, the steward is guarding the limited resource and making sure it is used wisely with the master’s wishes in mind.

In times of abundance, the steward is sorting and prioritizing the resources so that the few that can be of real use to the master end up at her disposal and all the rest of the resources are put aside.

I believe Christ is calling *some* of His servants to be information workers, people who will wade in where others fear to go, seeking to master the mass of information, and forcing it to help us answer the many important questions we face. I also believe God is calling *all* of His servants to be knowledge stewards.

What’s the difference?

Each of us is responsible to steward what we know, but we’re not responsible to steward the vast array of data that surrounds us. What
we know (i.e. information that I am aware of) is what God holds us responsible for, not what we don’t know (i.e. information that I don’t know but still exists out there).

While some are called to steward the vast amount of information that exists (identifying, catalogueing, storing and analyzing), everyone is called to steward knowledge. There are the few who are called to make useful information available to others and the many who God expects to steward the knowledge that they have.

This calling goes out not only those who consider themselves knowledge workers, such as teachers, preachers, and writers. The calling includes each and every one of us, challenging us to make the best use we can of the information that surrounds us.

Where do you start?
What do you need to follow this sacred calling?
How do you faithfully exercise this calling amid the information deluge that threatens to surround you in your life and your work?

We will address these questions and more in the pages that follow. I will also introduce you to knowledge stewards, both contemporary and ancient.

Will you join me on a journey of exploration of knowledge stewardship?

**THE SACRED CALLING OF THE KNOWLEDGE STEWARD**

I love it when the light goes on for Adin and he can connect the dots between what Mindy and I are telling him and the things he sees happening in his own life. When stewardship makes sense to him, our work is making progress.

The light goes on for many Christians when I talk about the kinds of
knowledge stewardship we practice here at GMI. One beautiful example is *Operation World*, a 50-year effort to gather data and prayer items from the global Church and present them to those committed to praying for the nations.

We’ve had the pleasure of partnering with Patrick Johnstone, (a committed knowledge steward you will meet in Chapter 3) Jason Mandryk, and the current *Operation World* research team to bring the data and prayer content to life. It’s a joy to hear amazing reports about how God has used this information, moving some believers to pray for the salvation of the world’s unreached peoples, moving others to enter missionary service.

That’s what knowledge stewardship is. My true passion goes beyond the information itself. I want to see men and women who love and serve God harness information for His glory, empowering churches and organizations around the world.

Along the way, I hope to challenge your paradigms, enlarge your sense of your duties as a disciple of Christ, and help you see your service to God’s Kingdom in a whole new light.

Before we take the next step in the journey, I ask you to stop and think about your own life, work, and ministry. Can you identify some specific areas where you can be a better knowledge steward?

Take the quiz on the next page to help get your mind around your own role as a knowledge steward.
The Knowledge Stewardship Quiz:

1. What information do I come across on a daily basis in my life, work, and ministry?

2. How does my faith impact how I respond to that information?

3. When I make decisions, do I depend on the full counsel of God (information, relationships, the situation, prayer, Scripture)?

4. Do I regularly evaluate the outcomes of my decisions and actions in a way that allows me to learn and grow as a Christian, employee, or family member?

5. When I have acquired knowledge, how good am I at sharing it with those who would also benefit from it as they seek to be faithful knowledge stewards?

Look back at your answers. What did you learn? How do you plan on responding as a knowledge steward in your daily life? Write down some of your insights for future reference.
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