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CRISIS LEADERSHIP

A little book of leadership

Morehouse Publishing
NEW YORK

Church Publishing Incorporated
19 East 34th Street
New York, NY 10016

Cover design by Jennifer Kopec, 2Pug Design
Typeset by Progressive Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A record of this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN-13: 978-1-64065-437-2 (paperback)
ISBN-13: 978-1-64065-438-9 (ebook)

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Preface

It is one thing to study and write about leadership in a liminal season. It is another thing to live through it.

In the fall of 2019, I published a book called *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season.* It is a book about leading through seasons of disorientation, when something has ended but a new thing is not yet ready to begin. Little did I know that the world would soon erupt in twin pandemics. The arrival of COVID-19 and a worldwide social justice reckoning threw all of us into deep confusion. A year of political turmoil added to the chaos. The concepts in my book suddenly became painfully personal and real.

Like so many others, my work life hit a wall in the early months of 2020. A well-planned portfolio of consulting and speaking engagements disintegrated overnight as we moved into shutdown. I was suddenly faced with zero income stream and an unknowable future. My initial shock was followed by months of reinvention, the transition of product lines into online formats, and the creation of new content. The year was frustrating, exhilarating, wildly creative, and downright scary.

Early on, I realized that the only way through this crisis was to turn inward—leaning into my own spiritual center for sustenance and guidance. I learned to quiet my frightened spirit, surrender to the inevitable losses, and trust that God would do a new thing through me.

Throughout this season, I was grateful for my training at the Shalem Institute, where five years earlier I had absorbed practices for contemplative living and leadership. At Shalem I learned to yield and to listen for the whispers of divine guidance. Relying on

my Shalem training, I found my way through the murkiness of painful endings and through the confusing early months of the in-between experience.

Looking forward, I believe that we will be in a liminal state for some time to come. We may be re-engaging some familiar old practices now. However, the unsettledness of this season will be with us for a while. There are more losses to be sustained and many new discoveries still ahead. We are not yet ready to claim a new beginning. And we are desperately in need of spiritual guides who can stand with us in our disorientation: mentors who will show us how to embrace our own unraveling and how to discover what lies on the other side of letting go. Margaret Benefiel, the executive director of the Shalem Institute, is one of our proven guides. This text is a welcome roadmap for weary travelers who still have "unlearning" to do.

The book you are about to read is a thoughtful compilation of lessons from a handful of courageous leaders. Individuals who negotiated crisis by embracing contemplative leadership practices. Each case study begins with a personal reckoning—if my organization and I perish, so be it. From this stance, each leader encourages their followers to deepen discernment practices, discover new ways to serve, engage new opportunities within the chaos, and transcend previous limitations. Spoiler alert: remarkable things happen along the way!

Throughout this text, Benefiel is a faithful steward of the stories offered and the lessons learned. Her wisdom shines through this text, garnered from decades of experience as a leadership coach and spiritual director, and punctuated with the insights of a seasoned manager and leadership educator. Enjoy the read.

Susan Beaumont
author, coach, consultant, and spiritual director

Introduction

Three major crises in 2020 plunged me into reflecting on leadership in new ways. This little book on crisis leadership grew out of my own self-reflection on leadership and organizational life, plus out of learnings from leaders I interviewed and read about. Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, and Jonathan Reckford, executive director of Habitat for Humanity, are public figures with enough material written about them that I could learn lessons from their leadership by drawing from articles I read. All the other leaders in this book I interviewed. As I listened to my own experience and that of others, chapter themes emerged.

Chapter One: "Yikes!" begins by expressing my own experience when COVID-19 hit and made its dreaded impact on the Shalem Institute, where I serve as executive director; it was followed closely by the police killing of George Floyd and the time of racial reckoning in the United States, which was followed closely by a bitter pre- and post-election season. The chapter then notes the dire straits that many other leaders and organizations found themselves in at this time.

Chapter Two: "If I Perish, I Perish" examines the importance, in crisis leadership, of building on the paradoxical foundation of letting go: both letting go of the need for personal survival and letting go of the need for organizational survival.

Chapter Three: "Stay in Liminal Space, Grounded in the Storm" examines liminality, that uncomfortable place in which we find

ourselves when the old ways have disintegrated and the new have not yet emerged. It considers the importance of staying in the liminal space long enough for next steps to emerge naturally.

Chapter Four: "Dive Deep and Discern" considers how leaders can dive deep into their spiritual practices in order to stay in the liminal space and let go of survival needs. Spiritual practice leads naturally to discernment, a rich resource for decision-making in times of crisis.

Chapter Five: "Surface to Serve" explains how a focus on mission and service keeps the eye on the ball in times of crisis and leads to clarity about what needs to be done.

Chapter Six: "Don't Waste a Good Crisis" uses Winston Churchill's maxim to examine the ways that a crisis suspends the status quo and makes new breakthroughs possible.

Chapter Seven: "Transcend and Include" focuses on organizational development and the ways crises can bring breakthroughs in organizational structures that weren't possible before.

While the chapters build on one another as the stories of the leaders highlighted in the book unfold, each chapter also stands alone. The reader may read the book from start to finish or dip into a chapter whose theme is of interest. The chapters and subsections provide bite-size chunks that, on their own, provide help for the busy leader facing crisis.

1 ▪ Yikes!

Mid-March of 2020, we found ourselves facing a rapidly spreading pandemic that suddenly forced our staff at the Shalem Institute to work from home. Just three months earlier, while on a retreat that focused on an upcoming move, we had discerned that working from home wouldn't work for our staff. Our shared meals, brainstorming meetings, lunchtime walks, and the easy back-and-forth among our workstations were all things that contributed to community and productivity. Yet here we were.

Furthermore, we had just canceled our pilgrimage to Italy and our pilgrimage to Iona, and postponed another major program, which meant a loss of $115,000 of expected income—over ten percent of our annual budget. Then the retreat center hosting our annual board/staff retreat called to cancel our late March retreat; the gathering that we counted on for community-building, creative ideas, deep prayer, and discernment: gone. As executive director of Shalem, I lay awake in bed at night obsessing, "Yikes! When will this hemorrhaging stop? I'm letting Tilden (our founder) down. I'm letting God down."

We grieved. We grieved the loss of our in-person office work environment, our lunches together, our celebrations of work achievements, birthdays, and personal milestones. We grieved the loss of our pilgrimages to beautiful places—"thin places"—with good food and deep community. We grieved the loss of our in-person program residencies at retreat centers nestled in rolling countryside, with nourishing food, prayerful connection, and good fun. Heartbreaking as it was for me, I had to tell the person who

was slated to begin as our new director of operations that the future looked uncertain and I would understand if he decided not to take the job.

Then, police killed George Floyd in late May, protests erupted, and the United States was faced with a racial reckoning, a call to face our original sin of racism. As an organization supporting contemplative living and leadership, helping people discern how contemplation and action manifest in their own lives, we were starkly confronted with the pandemic of racism in our country. We had to ask, "How are we complicit in this? And what is ours to do?"

As protests increased and the U.S. election neared, bitter political rivalries sharpened. Tempers flared. Then the election occurred, taking days to resolve, with the ripple effects lasting far longer. Exacerbated by a sitting president making baseless claims of election fraud and doing everything in his power in the two months following the election to overturn the results, the divisions in the United States widened. Violence broke out in the streets. Rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol, forcing a shutdown of Congress's certification of the election results. We asked again, "What is ours to do?"

Far from unusual, our story at Shalem mirrored that of many others, each with its own unique aspects stemming from the mission and DNA of each organization. In the short span of ten months, our lives were turned upside down. We were quarantined. We knew people who had COVID-19. We knew people who died from it. We wondered if we had it. Some of us did. We worked from home, or we lost our jobs. (Unless we were essential employees, in which case we were exposed to the virus daily.) We felt the financial impact. We felt the loss of freedom. We felt fear. We felt sadness. We felt grief.

As a two-week prohibition on in-person gatherings stretched into two months, six months, and as of this writing, ten months,

with no clear end in sight, leaders in all settings struggle. Businesses have closed, churches limp along, schools reopen then close again, nonprofits seek to reinvent themselves. Furthermore, leaders wrestle with responding to racism and responding to a bitterly divided country. This was not the world that these leaders anticipated when they took their jobs. This was not what they signed up for. The world changed dramatically in a matter of months. Leaders (if they still have their jobs) ask, "What is mine to do? What is ours to do? Will I survive? Will we survive? Does that matter?"

Reflection Questions

1. What have been the "Yikes!" moments for you in your leadership experience?
2. What do those moments reveal about your attachments?

2 ▪ If I Perish, I Perish

So there I was, along with billions of others around the world, wondering if I would survive the pandemic. And there I was, along with millions of other leaders, wondering if the organization I led would survive. But preoccupation with my own survival wore thin quickly. Even if I only had a short time remaining, I wanted to use that time well. And being preoccupied with Shalem's survival got old quickly. Even if Shalem had only a short time to live, I wanted to help it live fully during its last days on earth. I wanted to step back, face reality, and look at the bigger picture.

Facing reality meant I had to admit that, despite taking all precautions, I might contract the virus. I might die from it. Facing reality meant I had to admit Shalem might go under. If that happened, I would lose my job, and all the employees for whom I had responsibility would lose their jobs.

I remembered the words of Queen Esther, "If I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16). We are all mortal—not only individuals, but also organizations. I might die from the virus. Shalem may not survive a long siege. While I had to do my best to take personal precautions and safeguard my health as best I could, my ultimate task was not personal self-preservation. My ultimate task was serving in the world as I am called to serve. And while I had to be a faithful steward of the leadership responsibilities entrusted to me, my ultimate leadership task was not to perpetuate the institution I led. My ultimate task as a leader was serving the greater good, serving God. In the big picture, I was but one small thread in the

tapestry of humanity. In the big picture, Shalem was one small thread in the tapestry of all the good work in the world.

Furthermore I had to remember that I was human, too. As a leader, I felt fear, sadness, anger, and grief, just as those I was leading did. I needed to give myself permission to feel all my feelings. I needed people with whom I could be vulnerable and cry. I needed time for spiritual practice, to be held in the great Love that was beyond me, beyond the virus, beyond this time in history.

"If I perish, I perish" served me well in addressing the pandemic of racial injustice as well, and the unsteadiness and instability of our country's moorings during the pre-election and post-election chaos. Self-preservation was not the highest good, nor was perpetuation of the institution of Shalem. If I felt called to take risks for the sake of justice, for the sake of democracy, I wanted to respond faithfully, not letting fear for my safety or my job hold me back.

Again, my situation was not unique. Leaders in business, churches, education, health care, and nonprofits all struggled with the same thing. We all had to do our best to take care of ourselves, while at the same time acknowledging that personal self-preservation was not the highest good. And we all had to act responsibly in our leadership roles, discerning the next step and faithfully walking in it, while at the same time acknowledging that perpetuating our institutions was not the highest good. If our institutions could not adapt to the new world in which we found ourselves, it was time to ask, "Have we served our purpose in the world? Is it time for us to disband and let others carry our work forward?"

Stuart Higginbotham, rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Gainesville, Georgia, also found "If I perish, I perish" to be a foundational principle during the crisis of the pandemic. Early on, he noticed that his biggest challenge was navigating his own

anxiety. As he reflected on the massive level of anxiety he felt, he realized that he took on others' fears because he was afraid that church meant so little to people that if he didn't respond to their every concern they would leave. The pandemic had laid bare an assumption he had been carrying unconsciously. A church already in decline might be encountering its death knell, so it was up to him to save it. Furthermore, if the church died, there were personal consequences. He would lose his job and would be seen as a failure. That burden weighed heavily on him: "I felt like the fate of the institutional church rested on *my* shoulders."

Once he realized the enormous weight he was carrying, he knew he needed to let go. If the church was doing to die, it would die. If he was going to lose his job, he would lose it. Once he came to terms with those possibilities, he was able to stop, look, and listen for what *was* actually arising:

> If I can sit still long enough and be quiet, amazing things are happening all around. What is mine to do in the midst of all this? How am I being present? What my people need me to do right now is to be present. What inner work do I need to do in order to be more present?

As he kept turning his anxiety over to God, he was able to serve his people by being present and holding the space for them to feel their feelings. He asked himself, "What would happen if, in meetings when people got distressed, instead of trying to fix it, I just acknowledged it and said, 'I know. It's really sad.'" He experimented with simply holding the space, ready to let the church die if it had served its purpose and no longer had a role to play in the new world in which it found itself.

Conclusion

The paradox of leadership in a crisis is that leaders can lead well only when they give up attachment to self-preservation and to the preservation of their institutions. While a leader might hold tight the notion that trying hard to save the institution will increase the likelihood of its survival, the truth actually lies in the opposite direction. To focus on saving the institution is a self-defeating proposition because institutions are created to serve; when the focus moves from mission to self-perpetuation, the death knell sounds soon thereafter.

Furthermore, when leaders lead with an awareness of their own mortality and that of their institutions, they help the people they lead be their best selves. When people know that their leader puts mission first, they follow eagerly, even in hard times. With their people at their best, leaders can experience creativity, connection, and hope even during crises. Teams and organizations can be who they are called to be and do what they are called to do. Letting go of the need to survive, both personally and institutionally, opens the door to new possibilities. And these new possibilities lead to new life and growth.

Reflection Questions

1. What helps you let go of attachment to personal and organizational survival?
2. How does reflecting on your own mortality free you for more effective leadership?
3. How does reflecting on your organization's mortality free you for more effective leadership?