

Adversity as a Route to Leadership

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Adversity levels us all. It can make or break us, and its potential as a binding force across the generations and cultural divides is awesome. Why then do we not use it more often as a teaching tool, share our stories of struggle, and harness the inherent gifts? As educational leaders, particularly in these post 9/11 times, we hear the painful stories of many adults and children and are challenged to support them so they can continue to teach and learn in schools. But rarely, do we as leaders, receive the strategies and gifts to help us in this crucial role we play. This article suggests that we have much to learn from adversity that can be helpful in our roles as school leaders. Perhaps in our painful places lies the most effective fuel for transformation, the raw material for the inner strength and resilience required in wise leaders.

The impact of all that we have experienced travels with us wherever we go. It all enters the classroom door and creates what Carl Jung would call a “collective consciousness.” We cannot put our wounds on a shelf and collect them at the end of the day. Our creative plans and visions rest on foundations created by the way that we have tended our wounds and faced the challenges of our lives. Poet, Mark Nepo, says, “That which is not expressed is depressed. The more we give voice to our pain in living, the less build-up we have between our soul and our way in the world.” In other words, if we want to model being truly authentic as we seek to educate the hearts and minds of the young people we serve, unveiling our pain is vital.

As leaders and teachers we are expected to be a tower of strength and to have the tools to deal with all that walks through our doors, but of course what we do to ourselves we will do to our students. If we are in charge of guiding a group and have put a protection around our own pain and what we perceive as our unacceptable selves, there will be no container of safety for others to share and tap the valuable lessons offered by their life challenges. So first, we have to acknowledge our own hidden painful experiences that hold the potential to craft and strengthen our leadership qualities still further. Then we have to facilitate the growth of others. In speaking to a number of teachers and leaders who held families together post 9/11, this need was evident. The very teachers and administrators who were so strong for the children and parents in their schools did so almost without thinking. This was what they were *supposed* to do, protect the children above all else. But as I listened to the stories of these courageous leaders, I recognized that they had not found the space to share their own stories. They carried their pain within and were in need of an opportunity to release it and to honor the steps they took during these horrific challenges.

How then do we begin to foster positive transformation from our places of pain and inspire others to do likewise? This has been my quest for over a decade. Severe adversity was my personal catalyst into an inner strength that I had hitherto merely glimpsed. In 1992 my life was shattered in an instant when my five-year-old son, Benjaya, fell down a riverbank while playing with friends. He drowned. There one minute, gone the next. I was faced with the most challenging task of my life. Initially the task was survival -- living through the nightmare without losing my sanity. Later the task matured with the question, “Now that I have survived, how can I thrive and use my learning to help others?”

I began a five-year research and writing project, a quest to discover if those who face the biggest challenges in life have the greatest opportunity to wake up from automatic pilot and discover their innate resilience. By interviewing people who have experienced and healed from the effects of major adversity I sought to discover what *keys* help us to break through instead of breaking down.

In this paper I will share in some depth three of the more prominent keys: *Share Your Pain, Find the Hidden Gifts, and Reclaim Your Heart and Spirit*. Firstly, however, let me set the cultural container in which most of us must wrestle to free the resource of our pain.

Unfortunately, most of us have been conditioned with the pattern of trying to protect our soft spots by avoiding subjects of pain at all costs. Our role models have taught us to deny the depth of our vulnerability, even to ourselves. The infrastructure to share pain and so prevent the pressure cooker build-up of our emotions has generally broken down in the west. Separation, fragmentation, and isolation are the sad side effects of our modern quest for freedom and individual expression. No longer do our family and social networks receive our daily woes, or even our pleasures. In our nuclear family and single parent culture many of us are starved of an effective outlet, or the time to integrate our minor daily experiences, let alone the bigger issues of our lives.

Separation from the sources of wisdom in a community – especially the wisdom of our elders – has increased our sense of vulnerability and loneliness. And if there is no one to hear our pain we can become desperate and do anything to get attention, to be heard and noticed. As leaders, we need to know that this impacts adults and young people alike in our schools. There is an urgent need in our society to be heard, and perhaps for young people that place could be in their educational communities where most of their days are spent.

Teachers, school counselors and other support personnel are often privy to children's stories, which could be a wonderful resource for healing in our school communities. However, as adults, we must remember and remind each other that we too need our safe place to be heard. We are often not aware of the human consequences of knowing, caring and facing the reality of trauma. When we empathetically engage with others and open our hearts to someone else's story of devastation, we, as the helper, experience "vicarious traumatization" an occupational hazard that is an inescapable effect of our work.

The first key, *Share Your Pain*, is one of the major keys to healing that emerged from the stories of my interviewees; a finding supported by trauma researchers and authors including, Dr. James Garbarino, Peter Levine, and Daniel Goleman. We are told, "find a constant ally who will listen to your story."

During the weeks after the 9/11 tragedy, some schools set up grieving rooms where adults could take time out when they needed respite, but generally most of the attention went to helping young people cope because the need was so great. Yet school leaders also needed to understand their own vulnerabilities in order to restore their own sense of hope and resilience. It was precisely because of this need that two women – Linda Lantieri of Educators for Social Responsibility and Cheri Lovre of Crisis Management Institute – combined their expertise to create a handbook for school personnel to encourage them to give space to their grief and to work with others in the process of releasing it. This guide was given to 2,000 teachers in the Ground Zero area at the end of the school year 2002 when there would be time in busy schedules to use it well. There was interest from many other school systems, and from this beginning Project Renewal was born, a project specifically to support New York City school leaders with their recovery process.¹ Among other services, Project Renewal created retreats where at last the pain could be shared and truly heard.

Some schools, P.S. 150 being one, chose to create an inclusive creative event to mark the first anniversary of September 11th. Parents, teachers, and students shared breakfast together at school, supporting each other that intense windy morning. Close to the time that the planes hit the towers, all eyes were lifted together to the sky, this time at the sight of many big colorful butterflies flying free from the boxes held by children representing each class. It

was the togetherness, the mutual sharing of such a poignant day, as well as the amazing symbology of transformation, that created a deeply healing impression for that school community.

There are many ways we can encourage the sharing of students' pain. A middle school assistant principal told of the way in which the school set up a lunchtime counseling center to help young people cope with the loss of a well-loved fellow student who had been run over and killed by a man with impaired vision. The school arranged for individual counseling at lunchtime as well as group counseling and a number of after school grieving ceremonies to allow the young people to cope with their loss. Moments of silence were incorporated into the school days as appropriate.

It is important to recognize the stories that young people may be holding inside and unable to reveal. It is also important to recognize how we can help our young people to turn this adversity into leadership in service for others. Our nation's schools are replete with immigrants from all over the world. Many of these have left their troubled countries and arrived on our shores to try and heal the pain of the past and to build a new future. Those young people sit silently in our classrooms... along with young people who are traumatized by domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse, and neglect.

Arn Chorn-Pond, a child of war in Cambodia, is one of those young people. He believes that being heard was his saving grace. Arn was forced from his home by the Khmer Rouge at nine years old, separated from his family, and made to work in a child labor camp where children were dying of starvation and overwork all around him. Here is a snippet of his story:

"One time it was raining hard and I was looking out the window. The Khmer Rouge were having a good time punishing people in the rain. There was one guy who they punished every day until he became weak, hitting him with a screwdriver in his knees. Finally they brought him close by my window. One guy was so angry, he found a stick on the ground and hit him in the neck until he was dead. They put him in a tree right outside my window, sitting there wearing an American helmet with a cigarette in his mouth. His eye was still open. These are the things I remember from childhood..."

Arn was put on the front line of the war when the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and given a gun to kill "the enemy". When he could take no more, he escaped into the jungle to live with the monkeys. Many months later he was found close to death, nursed to health and eventually brought to the U.S. by an American aid worker who became his foster father. He attended school where he was bullied mercilessly because the students knew nothing of his past.

"Finally, I began more and more to heal myself and was encouraged to go out and talk... I didn't want to talk about it because I thought nobody cares a shit about my life. First I learned from my heart a few words, 'My name is Arn. I'm from Cambodia. I live in the camp. My family die.' People listened and then they made a line to hug me and cry too. For the first time I felt cared for and I felt powerful... I began to work for Amnesty International and I was asked to speak at St. John the Divine Church to 10,000 people. It was about peace and disarmament in New York. Half way through my speech I couldn't take it and I cried uncontrollably. Then there were 10,000 people crying. They asked me if I want to stop and I said, 'No, I want to finish it. This is a turning point for me.' When I finished I felt I was on the top of a mountain.

"I think I am alive today because I had the courage to speak out my story and I learned how to love again and how to feel the pain of others as well as my own."

Arn's story epitomizes the potential of adversity as a route to leadership. Having successfully motivated himself through his trauma and shared his story repeatedly over the years, he felt enthused and compelled to assist others to do likewise. Much of his sharing was done in schools he visited accompanied by other children of war. These young people encouraged their listeners to become good citizens and to help prevent conflict, thus

empowering themselves and others. Arn has also masterminded many inspirational projects including working with street gangs to help them understand the effects of violence, and assisting the survival of his cultural heritage by discovering the few remaining Cambodian master musicians and performers and helping them pass on their “treasures” before they die. He now lives in Cambodia and runs “Cambodian Volunteers for Community Development” which has 50,000 young members – traumatized children and orphans from the war. They are rebuilding their country, planting trees, learning English and trying to heal themselves. “*I was saved and others were not,*” said Arn, “*so I'm wanting to do something good before I die. I want to grow up to be a good adult and hopefully be a role model for other kids.*”

Arn’s story is an extreme example, but even minor challenge offers wisdom that can be harnessed for the good of self and others.

The trust that sharing pain holds the power of transformation creates a safe space for healing and bonding to occur, which in turn will allow a more fertile ground for learning. It does not require the “leader” to be fully healed, only to be willing to be honest with the emotions that are passing through in the moment. Real life stories are riveting teachers, and faster healing and deeper connections are two rich rewards of sharing stories in a group. As school leaders, it would serve us well to create safe places for our school community to tell their stories, and to remember to find a place for us to tell ours as well.

A second key -- *Find the Hidden Gifts* – holds an approach that is central to the discovery of our resilience. The French word for wounded is *blessé*, which is from the same root as blessing. The discovery and constructive use of the blessing/opportunity inherent in life’s challenges results from asking the simple, down-to-earth questions – What can I learn from this? What is the gift?

More often than not we try to wriggle free from the discomfort of pain and yearn for the joy we believe we don’t have, as if joy is an illusive quality outside of ourselves, far away from the sorrow we feel. The two qualities usually remain separated in our minds, perceived as mutually exclusive. In the paradigm held by those I interviewed for my book, *Mourning Has Broken*, nothing could be further from the truth. I, for one, found big, fat pearls of joy and wisdom at the same source as my anguish and became convinced that the further we fall, the higher we can climb.

The idea is not to escape or suppress the pain by looking for positives to take its place; it is to accept the cloud of pain while opening our eyes to the silver lining that *already exists*. To hold the pain and joy, the bitter and the sweet, side-by-side is the aim – the two halves making a whole and providing us with a feeling of our own fullness.

Karen Proctor, a young African American, is another example of how adversity can strengthen leadership qualities. Karen became determined to succeed in spite of being a “triple minority” – not white, male or Catholic -- at her Notre Dame University. She became super controlled, describing herself as “a rock-like woman of control.” Then, age 34, she found herself in a horrific car crash. Rendered helpless in the hospital she said, “*my lesson was to let go of control and soften my heart. The car crash told me I can't always be in control. I hated dependency because my mother was dependent, but I found myself in a situation where I was totally dependent on others, including degrading things for someone so proud and haughty. I am so grateful that life gave me the opportunity to break down my pride and become more humble. I could have died. Now I see the beauty in people and my eyes are wide open. Life is such a gift. Why we forget that is astounding to me.*”

Finding this gift from her excruciating pain positively transformed Karen’s attitude to life. She is quick to admit that she needed a big shake up to stop her in her tracks, and is convinced that trauma such as hers offers the opportunity to build strength of character that then can be used to help others. During her rehabilitation at the hospital she was able to inspire many others who had been badly injured to find enough inner strength to go on. Her doctors called her “the miracle girl” because, after she grasped an understanding of the inherent gift the crash was offering her, the speed of her healing began to surpass all their

predictions. At one point the doctors had all expected her to die. Karen, now physically whole again, uses her newfound qualities in her position as Vice President of Community Affairs and Government Relations at Scholastic Inc., the global children's publishing and media company where she directs Scholastic's corporate citizenship initiatives.

Our children need to see these examples. These stories of those who have not only survived, but who have overcome diversity are central to their own development of resiliency and self-efficacy. In your school communities there are many heroes and sheroes who could share their stories including the learning they have gained from their most painful experiences. The challenge for you as leaders is to create the culture that supports this sharing, and also encourages and honors it.

The third key I'd like to share is: *Reclaim Your Heart and Spirit*. We live in a society where consumerism is the name of the game, the size of our bank balance, the level of our IQ, and where we stand on the career ladder are paramount. Reason and logic are deified in this drive for material success, leaving our hearts, spirits and emotional lives to fight for space on the back seat. Severe adversity, however, has the knack of purging the unnecessary things of life by questioning what really matters. And if status, reputation, possessions and money were high on our list before the challenge hit, we may find ourselves struggling to find resources and strength in the foundations of who we are. This key is about discovering the power of our inner world – finding out who we are behind what we do and what we have. It is about reinforcing our hearts and spirits and making a shift toward consulting the heart as well as the head, and toward valuing emotional and spiritual intelligence.

In 1992, Mary Manti was assistant principal to Patrick Daly at P.S.15 in Brooklyn, and had 25 years teaching experience. Then, in a horrifying incident, Mr. Daly was shot dead in the crossfire of a drug deal gone sour, and Mary, catapulted into the job of acting principal, found herself applying this key to the shocking situation before her. She focused primarily on using love and the harnessing the natural human spirit in helping herself and her school community. She told me: *"In difficult times people have to fall back on the inner qualities that are developed throughout life such as faith, hope, love, kindness, patience, and courage. These traits connect you with your heart and spirit.*

"It took a leap of faith by a lot of members of the school community to believe that things could move on in the school in a positive way. I've heard such a leap compared to a trapeze artist who must let go of the bar with one hand while reaching toward the next with the other hand. There's that second in between when it appears you aren't holding onto anything. We were called on to take that leap, having faith that whatever we needed to sustain us would be there... a belief that everything works toward the ultimate good.

"The entire staff joined me in reminding the children of how much Mr. Daly loved them and of how he knew they loved him in return. We spoke of how we were all going to be sad for a long time, and the children knew tissues were available all over the building. If we felt like crying we did. We also told 'Mr. Daly stories' to the children that would bring smiles to their faces. We encouraged them to speak of Mr. Daly, draw pictures, write letters and remember positive things.

"We didn't hang Pat's picture on every wall. Rather we tried to make the spirit of what he stood for come alive in order that we could emulate that spirit. All I could do was what was placed in front of me, a step at a time, and the big picture would be taken care of by the Director of Life."

Mary was role modeling staying in touch with her heart and spirit throughout the experience of external loss – perhaps the ideal scenario. She was so rock solid in her own inner resources that this created a safe container for all those around her to grieve in their own way. It is essential when working with people experiencing trauma to help them find their innate resources, and of course necessary that the "helper" is deeply resourced before beginning his/her work. When we look to Mary's resources we see that from the beginning she was using the qualities she already had.

Identifying resources is a simple activity. We all have them just waiting to be claimed and used. The problem is that we tend to be on automatic pilot and suffer from resource amnesia when in shock. I suggest that you spend time making a list of your resources and then, as you go about your day leading others, perhaps you can use this strategy to help others identify the resources they already have and see how they can be applied to whatever the challenge is at hand. There are inner and outer resources that we can draw from for ourselves and the young people we are developing.ⁱⁱ

Inner resources include spiritual beliefs, connections to one's essential self, good physical health, creative thinking, communication skills, an ability to feel a full range of emotion, a sense of feeling safe in the world, the ability to be in contact with others and maintaining a sense of self.

External resources include access to community groups and workshops, spiritual practice, friends, family, having a home, emotional support, access to transport, to the natural world, and to cultural educational and creative community resources.

In conclusion, we have seen that the challenge to school leaders is to both model and encourage a culture of safety and learning that is more transparent. Leadership qualities in both children and adults is created and enhanced when we succeed in:

- a) opening fully to our pain, using the resources we already have to support us
- b) recognizing our pain as a source of strength as opposed to a sign of weakness
- c) sharing our story and encouraging deep listening
- d) seeking out the wisdom and gifts within our challenges
- e) deepening our connection to heart and spirit

Twenty-first Century administrators must extend beyond the current focus of teaching our children to read, write and problem solve mathematically. The call is to create the cultural context for children to feel safe enough to also learn by using the rich yet painful challenges of life to heal, inspire and help them become the leaders of tomorrow.

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Mourning Has Broken and ***Benjaya's Gifts*** are available from Carmella's website.

ⁱ Project Renewal, now called the *Inner Resilience Program*, is an initiative of Educators for Social Responsibility National. <http://www.innerresilience-tidescenter.org>

ⁱⁱ From an article by Pat Ogden in the *Hakomi Somatics Training Manual* (Hakomi Somatics Institute)