

To the Stars Through Adversity (Ad Astra per Aspera)

Consider Bruce. He had enjoyed nine years of a fulfilling, productive high school principalship, replete with accolades for leading a successful, high-performing school. He was known in the community as a tough but fair and honest principal. People appreciated his constant visibility at school events and his taking the time to know the students. Yet one morning he woke up to find in the local newspaper a scathing letter to the editor, condemning him as a corrupt principal. His whole life suddenly screeched to a halt. An angry parent, who also happened to be a prominent member of the community, was accusing Bruce of manipulating grades so that certain favored athletes could compete in the upcoming semifinals of the football season. Bruce knew he had done no such thing and was deeply disturbed that his ethics were being challenged, especially in this public forum.

He thought the school could move on after he told everyone the truth—that, in fact, the charge was an outrageous lie. The truth apparently was not sufficient. The situation got progressively worse. The letter had unmasked certain questionable practices in the athletic department, and Bruce found himself embroiled in a major controversy. The crisis escalated, with the school board using the incident, in his mind, as a political football. The next thing he knew, agitated parents were storming his office, the superintendent was breathing down his neck, and the story became headline news.

Gone was the interest in exploring the merit of block scheduling; gone was the focus on school improvement; gone was the peaceful, compatible relationship he had established with his faculty and community.

These events consumed Bruce, leaving him with mixed emotions. He feared he was being misunderstood by a number of his constituents. It hurt to have his honesty and integrity wrongly questioned, particularly in a public arena.

As we listened carefully to Bruce's story, it became evident that he was emotionally disconnecting from the people he served and was starting to doubt his own leadership. The defensive, angry person he was becoming did not seem to fit him. Disconnection is, unfortunately, an all-too-common form of wounding that we have witnessed over and over again as we talk to school leaders across the country. Like Bruce, leaders may—or may not—use this crisis as an opening to learn about themselves and their leadership.

Against the backdrop of all the tension and questions surrounding leadership work is a fundamental faith that a leader's influence over a school is healthful for all. In our experience, however, and in the stories of the school leaders such as Bruce whom we have interviewed, most could never anticipate or prepare themselves and others for the events that came their way. Neither could they have a perfect answer, or even a good one, for every problem. Most important, to the extent that they felt out of touch with themselves, people they affected, and people they were affected by, the school leaders felt unable to trust their own leadership. This is the beginning of the wound. It seems to us that the deepest obligation a leader has is to engage continually in a reflective process of making sense of his or her effect on others and on the school, and of understanding personal wounds.

There are inevitable boundaries drawn between professional life and personal life, outer life and inner life, mind and body, illness and health, psyche and spirit, even life and death. Organizations such

as schools tend to live with fairly strict boundaries, trying to keep things neat and tidy. But most school leaders recognize that their own lives, and particularly their inner lives, are not like that. This is not to say that boundaries do not serve a useful purpose; they do. If you are a principal, for example, and trying to maintain a reasonable family life, you have to draw boundaries somewhere. Our interest in the wound is not a challenge to all boundaries. But to experience life with a threatening illness, or to experience school life from the perspective of a leadership crisis, is to potentially find oneself crossing boundaries one may have thought impermeable and encountering other boundaries one did not even know were there. For the school leader, the crossing often begins as a significant collision with the organizational environment; it inevitably leads to conflict, anguish, and more. Yet it is precisely in the midst of these environmental and psychic challenges that school leaders may find the meaning of their own wounds.

Chronic Work-Life Tensions

Today, schools and school leaders are caught in a strong riptide. Leadership itself seems increasingly at risk. There is widespread agreement that in the United States schools are facing a dearth of leaders capable of providing good leadership. Constant reports on the shortage of school leaders, as well as concerns regarding the job itself, find more wounded leaders leaving or languishing in the world of schools than ever before. Retirement, the decreasing number of applicants, and inadequate leadership support and development account for some of these conditions (National Association of State Boards of Education, 1999), but not all. School leaders and those aspiring to leadership persistently cite job-related stress and time fragmentation, the growing pressure of high-stakes testing and accountability, and the social problems that schools are assuming in trying to instruct students as major factors influencing their standing (National Association of

Elementary School Principals, 2001). It is not surprising that many school leaders today are increasingly reluctant to assume a job as difficult as leadership has become.

The conditions just described capture some present-day demands and realities affecting the quality of leadership life out there, a life that seems increasingly less sustainable for leaders themselves. Leadership must, among other things, attend well to a school's needs and be healthful and replenishing for those who lead (Ackerman, Donaldson, and van der Bogert, 1996). Nevertheless, there are endemic conditions on the ground floor of most schools that make it challenging for the leader to influence the school positively (as well as maintain it as a healthy place for the leader).

Donaldson (2001) describes some major attributes of schools that contribute to a "leadership-resistant architecture" reflected in what he calls a "conspiracy of busyness" (p. 11). There is, according to Donaldson, little time for the school leader to convene people to plan, organize, and follow through. Contact and the transaction of business often take place catch-as-catch-can. Results from a formal staff meeting may be inadequate, or characterized by competing forces, limited time and energy, and overall lack of quality time. Informal gatherings, Donaldson points out, are the most continual means of communication, but opinion setting and relationship building in schools are mostly inaccessible and even resistant to the principal's formal attempt to guide and structure the direction of the school. Important information is communicated informally and sometimes haphazardly. The larger the school, the more complex and impersonal the environment, and the fewer the opportunities a principal has for individual relationship building or problem solving.

Donaldson concludes that these structural conditions in schools work against the success of classical leadership. Frustrated principals find themselves pressing to get their message across, sometimes making decisions in a way that is counterproductive and fosters

resistance. Principals come to be seen for their positional authority, not for their ability to facilitate good practices and policies. These are prime conditions for wounding.

The Story in the Stories

The chronic work-life tension, conditions, and issues facing the school leader today and the resulting personal challenges form the heart of this book. What does it mean to become yourself in your leadership? What are the integral elements school leaders find difficult to face about their relationship to work and their own leadership? How do leaders nurture themselves so they can continue to care for their schools through such demanding work? To what extent does concern with the issues of the wounded leader forecast a new direction for leadership work itself?

A unifying theme of this book, the story within the stories, is this: understanding the meaning of wounding through the prism of the educational leader's experience offers a potentially remarkable path, not only to real leadership but to being a real person in one's leadership. The leadership wound itself represents an extraordinary source of learning and a critical opening to what may be most at stake in the practical exercise of leadership, namely, oneself.

Three core understandings emerge from the stories in this book. The first is that leadership roles often do not support, confirm, or resonate with the psychic needs of the person who becomes a leader. The second is that wounding is an inevitable part of leadership. This leads to the third, that woundedness is a double-edged (at least) sword. A wound has the potential to be a catalyst for the leader to grow or to be enmeshed in crisis. The wound presents the leader with an opportunity to explore and question the actual foundation of her leadership and herself. How a leader responds to being wounded can define her as a leader. The wound, at its best, can lead her back to her own true story.

Behind the Mask

Leadership lives are, for the most part, determined by role expectations. These roles often do not fit with the deeper personal needs of a leader. In times of crisis, questions of identity and role are usually heightened and move to the forefront. A wounding experience, inextricably linked to a leader's role, can serve as a painful reminder that the very role itself can put a person at odds with his own needs and identity. A crisis experience, then, is apt to provoke a leader to ask, "Why can't I be myself and be the leader? If I'm not really being myself, who am I?"

The leadership role that administrators assume shapes how they approach their practice, what they are able to accomplish, and how they think about their work; most important, it also shapes what they feel and believe the role permits them to feel. Leaders are often told "Don't get angry," "Don't be wrong," "Don't look weak," "Don't look like you don't have the answers." Many principals, superintendents, and headmasters that we talked to felt they were defined and confined by the boundaries of their leadership role. For some, this meant being faithful to their role but not to themselves. Although living the role of leader, they found they were out of tune with their emotions and growing ever less true to themselves. They also found they were losing their connection to the people they served. What is it about leadership that makes it difficult for a person to be a person in his leadership?

To be a school leader is to be more than a screen on which the wishes of others are projected. The stories suggest to us that in a leader relationship the leader can be overly influenced and defined by the desires of significant others. If a leader feels he needs to act out of the wishes of others, considerable ambivalence is experienced. Nevertheless, parents, teachers, and students do expect to see certain qualities in their leaders and ascribe meaning to the leader's action or lack of action. How a leader manages this process is, in fact, a skill of leadership. The ability to preserve a hold on reality, such as

control over the definition of one's public self, is a challenge of leadership, and perhaps also of experience and maturity. If the community's expectations for leadership clash with how the leader perceives the role, the leader may experience self-doubt. Yet even if the community and the leader agree on the role but it does not fit the reality of the school structure and culture (as discussed earlier in this chapter), the leader begins to question herself, her motives, and her own capacity for understanding, controlling, and perhaps leading the flow of events. This seemed to be the case with Bruce, the principal who was falsely accused of changing student athletes' grades and who was wounded at the core of his identity. His mantra became "But that's not who I am." He felt he was not being understood and that he had lost control of how others saw him.

A misfit between the leadership role and one's identity, or between the role and the reality of work life, can diminish a leader's chances of being genuine. To be sure, environment and behavior are always interacting elements. Leaders must bring their personalities to the roles they play. Who they are influences how they play their roles. Most school leaders, including those we interviewed, would admit that the role itself requires a certain amount of method acting, a style obliging a performer (leader) to respond as much to his own inner feelings as the requirements of the role. However, the goal in method acting is dramatic effectiveness, with the emphasis placed on understanding the character. Such a method can lead in some cases to largely undisciplined acting; that's the rub. If a leader goes too far in acting the leadership part, he may begin to lose himself in the process. That is the wound. It is a daily struggle to allow all sides of oneself to be acknowledged; to be whole is especially difficult during a crisis.

The search for identity is not a modern problem. All of us are engaged in the struggle, in one way or another and throughout our whole lives, to discover our identity, the person we are and choose to be. The practice of leadership makes that search public and pervasive, involving role, style, and appearance. At a more personal

level, it involves the leader's choice of values and relationship to staff, students, parents, schooling, and society. The literature and media typically tell of heroic leadership. The leader is often cast as larger than life, a Hollywood-type character who is supposed to be the lone hero fixing the crisis and saving the day. This traditional and public perception of leadership has filtered into the culture of the school so much that the community expects and feels entitled to heroic qualities in its administrators.

Most of the individuals we interviewed would consider themselves ordinary leaders. Some would acknowledge they were in the process of becoming more authentic leaders because they used their wounding experience as an opportunity to learn and develop. As in being faced with a serious illness, the leader may use this occasion in her career to peer behind the mask, to question how she can maintain her leadership identity and self-image, and question even if she should.

Inevitability of Wounding

Wounding is an inevitable part of leadership; it might have to be considered part of the job. It seems virtually impossible to avoid wounding; if one chooses such an approach, then that too perhaps is a wound. A secondary school principal put it well: "The non-negotiable that I come back to most often is being true to myself—heeding the call of my heart, my core, for better or worse. Sooner or later, a true leader is going to stir the pot and, if great things happen as a result, is going to get splattered and slopped on. Spillage is inevitable" (Hallowell, 1997, p. 55).

Spillage is inevitable, no matter how much the heart is heeded. Leadership life is a messy business, as most administrators will attest. We have talked to many school leaders and have yet to find one who has not been wounded in one way or another. Each practitioner we invited to participate in our study had a story of wounding to tell; in fact, some leaders needed time to think about which story

to share. When we speak to veteran administrators, they too affirm that crisis and wounding are simply part of the leadership realm.

The school-life riptides, mentioned earlier, often thrust leaders into currents that have the potential to take them away from their goals and dreams. External forces and demands infiltrate schools and can have a powerful influence on the career of an administrator. A school leader today, for example, is apt to be experiencing the pressure of budget cuts; overcrowding; shortage of qualified teachers; and a set of local, state, and federal mandates, many of which are unfunded. Harsh realities from the outside, such as poverty, inadequate health care, and unemployment, create enormous challenges for a leader inside the school. Such challenges undoubtedly cause dissonance and can contribute to the crisis that becomes a wounding experience for a leader.

The culture and norms found within schools, discussed previously, present unique challenges for the leader. The ground-floor conditions that we described—including the way time, space, and communication patterns are structured—are integral parts of the messy world of school leadership. An administrator has virtually no time for reflection or talk with trusted colleagues about concerns and fears. Although surrounded by teachers, students, staff, and parents, a leader can easily be isolated and may have to bear the burden of leadership alone. The chronic work-life tensions a leader experiences present him with significant personal obstacles.

Although we say that wounding is inevitable, we recognize that a leader may try to defy the odds. Some individuals believe that for them it will be different; they can avoid getting hurt. A leader may put up barriers, but try as he may, the ebb and flow of political streams, social forces, and human foibles sooner or later lead to wounding. Bruce, whose story we just heard, may have been able to do something differently in his leadership practice that would have averted that particular crisis and wound, yet in time something else would likely have gone awry. That's the nature of schools and leadership. No one is immune.

Leadership wounds may inhabit a leader's far past or present life, or even both. Some leaders vividly described wounding experiences that, as we listened, turned out to have happened decades earlier, yet they spoke as if it were only yesterday. Some leaders said the wound had become a touchstone for them, a way to recall their vulnerability and learning from crisis experiences. Wounds may help to fuse past with present and present with past.

Practicing and aspiring leaders will understand better the complexities of their role if they acknowledge the ever-present possibility of crossing over to the kingdom of the wounded leader (Sontag, 1978). Understanding that wounds are part of the cycle of leadership may make it a little easier for a leader to respond with grace and accept the inevitability of wounding.

A Double-Edged Sword

Leadership is often shaped by the response to what can be seen as inevitable challenges and crises. Of course, leadership life is, in most respects, no different from any kind of life; it must, by nature of the reality and complexity of school life, alternate between the cycles of risk and loss, jubilation and frustration, openness and fear. Leaders therefore respond to these cycles in different ways. How a leader responds can define him or her as a leader. As we said, a wound is a potential catalyst for a leader to grow, or it can enmesh a person in crisis. Indeed, it is a double-edged sword. The surprising thing is still how surprising this truth can be.

Facing a crisis can be a time to focus sharply on what it means to be a leader. Interestingly, the same experience can be perceived as exhilarating to one leader while wounding to another (consider how some school leaders struggle with standardized testing and accountability and others do not). However, a leadership achievement can become a trap in just the same way as a so-called leadership failure. The ambivalent nature of wounding obliges us to differentiate between the necessary wound that serves as a catalyst to the next

stage of growth and one that inflicts further injury. A wounding experience reminds the leader that life is shaped by the cycles of success and failure. Yes, even in descent, the wound is the chance to examine a leadership life anew.

Bruce was unable to convince the school board that along with not knowing this was happening he personally disapproved of such unethical practice. Ultimately, he was fired. We witnessed in Bruce a tangle of anger, hate, and determination as he attempted to exact revenge on individuals who he believed were responsible for his demise. Elusively, almost imperceptibly, responsibility for the misdeed—for the culture that allowed this to occur—appeared in his remarks and then quickly disappeared again. When we left Bruce, he was trapped in the raw bitterness of his leadership wound. He could see only one side of this wound's legacy. His wound was deep and infected by the raging bitterness of revenge. In time, he may choose to see it all differently, to meet it with understanding and let it go, trusting that something new will eventually be born for him.

We fully acknowledge that not all school leaders are willing or ready to ask the hard questions and face their shadow. A wounding experience can change people and also remind them how hard it is to change. The meaning of a wound itself can change with time; the sword can be turned. Not surprisingly, we find that leaders talk about their pain differently afterward than while enduring it. Although we frame the response in binary terms, we recognize that a leader's work life and learning are experienced fluidly and dynamically.

The Sacred Call

The wound thus can serve as a call to examine the foundation of one's leadership. Like illness, a leadership wound brings not only difficulty and danger but also awareness and opportunity. For some of the leaders we met who had sacrificed their identity and integrity in the name of leadership, the wound was a wake-up call to their

real self. They found the means—some call it courage—to shed inauthentic ways of being and became truer to themselves, more whole again. For others, the change was not about being different, but finding new meaning in what they were already doing. Some leaders used the moment to resist becoming anything else, hoping to move forward into the future unaltered. Some were changed spontaneously and unthinkingly from within or without. Still others were changed deliberately and consciously, never easily, never for sure, and only with effort, insight, and courage. The experience of leadership suffering—of the wound—is itself a defining characteristic of leaders and leadership. It is, in days and in times of crisis, a most perplexing, and at the same time potentially life-changing, search.