Thinking Clearly Amidst a Catastrophe

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Clear thought becomes most difficult when it is most necessary.

A pandemic assaults us. It severs connections. It confronts us with vast and frightening unknowns. It looms ahead, gathering exponential force, even as we look out at a natural world beginning to wake as if it were an ordinary morning in an ordinary March.

Clear thought requires taming and focusing of the mind. In a world gone dangerous, when the familiar and simplifying norms have slipped away, four principles might guide our focus:

1. Affirm deepest commitments
2. Hammer out core models to steer by
3. Become present
4. Widen the circle of concern

Panic pushes the mind frantically to the surface, seeking air. Slow down: this is a crisis in which wisdom counts, not a crisis in which seconds need to be shaved.

1 - Affirm Deepest Commitments

The commitments to affirm will be simple. They may take hard thought and courage to crystallize, but once crystallized, they will require only feeling and an open mind to grasp. Montesquieu wrote, “A really intelligent man feels what other men only know.”

It would be foolish to prescribe a method to affirm commitments that are already underneath, those fundamentals that when confusion is stripped away are revealed to have always mattered most. Instead, let me share a passage from Robert Coles’ *Lives of Moral Leadership* to offer a vivid picture of what this stripping away to the core feels like, how it happens.

The year is 1967. We're in a black church in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston. A group of parents has, with the help of private funding, secured a bus to take their children to better, less crowded schools in the city's white neighborhoods, taking advantage of an open enrollment rule "long on the books but rarely used."

Albert Jones is a janitor. As he tells it:

> When I went to the first meeting in the church, I heard people talking about whether they should send their sons and their daughters over to "whitey territory." One man shouted no, and some agreed. But others said yes – and I began to understand that we all were teetering, that's what: mothers and fathers, not sure of ourselves, what to do, and let me tell you, scared, scared out of our minds, and when you're scared you tremble, and you're afraid you'll make a mistake, and here were our children, and they'd be the ones to suffer, to pay for our errors, for all the mistakes we made.

He continues:

> …. there's a crowd of people… they're going one way one minute, and the next way the next minute, and they're headed for trouble and more trouble, for a fight and another fight, and this won't stop until someone starts telling it like it is, and speaking big, speaking the truth, speaking above himself and way beyond himself, even if he's scared, like anyone else (but everyone is!) and he's decided to roll the dice, not to make dough but to put his heart on the line, no matter what, and his soul, too – and that's being a leader. "What's a leader" I asked myself that, right in the church, so help me God. I asked myself: what should you say now, Albert? But I heard nothing, except my heart beating hard, and I saw my fingers moving, my right hand shaking, and I could feel my toes, ready to go – get out of there, rather than take a chance and stay and say what seems right.…
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> I've gone to church all my life, and I know when a meeting is going to end, when we've all been together, because of the faith in us, and the music – but there, at that discussion about school, it was different, I realized: this is going to be over in no time fast, that's what I realized – that's what came to my mind, and I don't rightly remember that I thought about much of anything, until I heard my own voice, and it wasn't spoken long, because I was short and to the point. "Let's go," that's what I said, just two words.

At first, Albert isn't understood. He clarifies. But it's all still stuck.

> I could see that guy wasn't out to argue with me, but he was wondering: okay, buddy, but how do you (should you) go do that. It was written all over his face, and it was running all through my head: hey, Mr. Albert, it's time to "go," all right, to let go with an idea, a *proposal*, that's the word. Say it like you believe, I told myself, say it so others will get going themselves, in their minds, like it's going in your mind. So I started myself up again – I was talking high, talking loud. I said, "Listen folks, this is important," I said, "It really will make a difference, what we do."
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> I said this: "Don't you see, Mr. Charlie, he's out there, and he'll decide what happens to

> our kids, whether they go here or there or some other place – he'll decide according to what suits him. But these are *our* kids, and we can forget that, and let them become Mr. Charlie's, his property, or we can say no, nothing doing – it's up to us to stand up and speak up and take the lead, that's the difference now: we're going to be the ones who make the decisions, or we're going to sit back and be – *theirs*, *their* people….

Another voice joins him – "for a second, I was with him, like he was with me" – and echoes the message, and then Albert speaks again.

> He had his say, and he was stopping, and I stood up, and I said, "Yes, sir," and I said, "Let's go" again, and then he said it, too, and then people were repeating themselves, and it was amazing, because we were all together, united.
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> Afterwards, as we were leaving, people were hugging and smiling and that's when a man came up and said, "You get this going, but then what… ?" It was then that I thought to myself, all right: if you start something, you're part of doing the starting, then you'd better not disappear. You owe it to what you've begun, to the kids, your own and everyone else's here. That means you volunteer, you drive, you go, you go with them. So, I said that, I told the minister, as we all were talking, walking to go home. I said, "I'll go with the kids, and drive the bus, if it comes to that."*

Albert did drive the bus, and then rode with the kids on the city bus, and then drove another bus, to South Boston, as that became the next frontier of integration. He became a kind of teacher, schooling the kids he drove, in the respite before they entered their newly hostile world. Coles rode the bus with Albert, listening: "Stop and think while we're moving, all of you! Hear me? You're on your way to school – but you're on your way to the head of the class! You're leading your people! For a long time we were kept outside, outside America. Now we're going inside, inside America, and you kids, you're our leaders. We're following your direction. You go in there, that school, and learn what's right. You get 'correct' on all your tests. You *be* correct! We'll learn from you! You'll make us better, better off. *We'll* become correct, too, on your account."

Those who are designated leaders by title or acclaim still find themselves where Albert did, in the midst of some kind of crowd. A CEO's crowd consists not only of her own body of executives, but the ecosystem of competitors, supply chains, investors, regulators, reporters, and so on, that liquid multitude which forms her operating theater. In this crowd, the leader, like Albert, experiences "they're going one way one minute, and the next way the next minute" -- and, at best, confronts the same vertigo and summons the same clarity as Albert in his pew.

It might seem that the CEO's power and responsibility force affirmation of deepest commitments, but the higher the chair, the more attention tends to be scattered by the sheer multitude of issues, each tugging in a different direction, pulling at the sleeve, competing for focus. Albert at least knew the question of consequence before the crowd. His work was to act and lead before the crowd dispersed -- while the question of the children's schooling, for all it divided hearts, at least had undivided attention. Affirming deepest commitments requires leaders at the top to gather and focus attention that has already scattered, holding their own minds still for the disparate strands to become a unity.

2 - Hammer Out Core Models to Steer By

The essence of crisis is to disorient. Deepest commitments provide a beacon; in themselves, they don't create a road.

Albert's heart raced and, for a moment before settling, his mind reeled – but he fundamentally *knew what to do*. At the top of an organization, action must be concrete, in the sense of tangible, effective, material: decisions that create results. And, at the top, actions must have the reach that only concepts have. Direction must be set to purposefully guide the complex, interdependent mesh of many people acting in ways that can neither be prescribed nor approved by one center.

In this context, the models we steer by cannot be precise. Exponential forces blow past point projections. When at some point curves flatten and contraction begins, our extrapolation factories again lead us astray. With COVID-19, we are confronted with a wicked mix of bafflements to the human mind: the powerful exponential force of communicable disease; outcomes observed with a lag; testing limitations that distort measures of incidence; and second-order effects to the economy and our civic systems which take us outside any range previously experienced.

Simple models can help us in an environment of complexity, but to be adaptive, these models need to be placed in tension with one another. For instance:

- Model 1. Long-term demand will stabilize, with a lag behind the point the crisis ends. Except where needs and preferences are permanently altered, the drivers of demand will reassert themselves after a period of suppression.
- Model 2. Demand could fall 70% or more, and resumption could take several months. Our whole industry has a fixed cost structure that will create unparalleled losses at this level of contraction. This implies either a public bailout – directly or through dramatic expansion of finance backed by government actors – or a broad restructuring of the industry.

Such beliefs in tension create a paradox. The question isn't whether Model 1 or Model 2 is *right* – both could be "coming true" at once – but what each model illuminates about how to navigate. Paradoxes can be managed, at least some of the time. "Managing" a paradox requires a leap of some kind; a paradox cannot simply be willed away, or reduced to one horn of a two-horned dilemma.

Even before any creative leap has arrived, a set of core models help orient and steer. Affirmation of deepest commitments grounds us and tells us what to reach toward. Core models become the touchstones we come back to as we reason our way through the successive dilemmas that a crisis presents.

"Is this action increasing my ability to survive Model 2, recognizing that it only addresses part of a gap that I can't currently see how to address in full?"

"Is this action enabling us to be as prepared for the future of Model 1 as we practically can be, given everything we must do to contend with the current storm?"

While the specifics of the models above are illustrative, most organizations at this moment need a concept of the largest negative impact they are preparing themselves to withstand, and a (grainy,

high-level) picture of the future – or the scenarios – that they're aiming to arrive into on the other side, as well positioned as they can be after the travails ahead. Of course, these models can and should evolve as conditions shift.

In addition to these two, a couple models that I'm experiencing to be broadly relevant include:

- **Rethinking Practices**. Remote work demands a rethinking of how people interact and how work gets done. "Doing what comes naturally" and largely porting over how people were working face-to-face will miss the mark. This reinvention will have great value not just now, but over the longer term. In every great story, the hero learns in her crucible experience things that were unlearnable in ordinary life, and the new strengths formed in this crucible far outlast the harrowing ordeal.
- **Connectedness**. Everything speeds up in a crisis. A small span without information can feel like a dizzying gap. Isolation is exacerbated by fear. Team members can come to feel cut off quickly, and can easily lose their bearings and their sense of agency. What counts as sufficient communications has changed: frequency needs to go up, directness and vividness are crucial, and the emotional quality of communications becomes more central. Networks are essential, and team members need both breadth of connectedness and closeness to a critical few.

One can only keep a small number of ideas consistently in mind. The classic formulation for the number of things that can be held in short term memory is "seven plus or minus two." Stress frays our capacity. A leader who has clarity on a few core models that relate to the current external context, a few core principles regarding the organization's strategy and priorities (e.g., we can't currently influence X, but what we can influence is Y), and a couple core models of the organizational "how," like Rethinking Practices and Connectedness above, will possess a practical compass by which to steer. All these could be written on one page.

One of the hardest practical questions for an executive, in any weather, is what to think about when. As a crisis brings on the "fog of war," this difficulty becomes acute. While none of us know what will happen when with COVID-19, a usefully simplifying model is to think of the crisis unfolding in four stages:

1. **The Mounting Storm**. In the early stages, the number of cases expands exponentially. Our health systems are largely still operating inside their breakpoints. Markets fall and swing rapidly, in response to changing expectations. It is very difficult to know whether strategies for limiting spread, preparing for critical care and containing economic damage will have anything like their desired effects. More and more measures are deployed, without clear initial feedback loops.

2. **Inside the Worst**. Whether or not the curve is flattening, the consequences of the pandemic become increasingly severe. Deaths rise. The capacity of our health systems is strained beyond the breaking point, at least in places and potentially pervasively. Economic breakdowns begin to cause large second-order effects. Parts of our social infrastructure break down in these new conditions, causing new dangers and new harms.

3. **Sighting Harbor**. Even as the pandemic continues to unfold, the end game becomes clearer.

Whether that manifests by the curve flattening and then new cases contracting in enough places that a pattern has become clear; through the successful development of a vaccine; or, in the worst case, simply through the curve of disease working its way through the population, we can see through to the other side. Sighting the harbor may happen even amidst prevalent disease and great economic turmoil, but it marks a new phase in how actors relate to their context – whether governments leaning forward into the emerging work of recovery, or enterprises now finding they know enough to take stock, look forward, and plan for a future that is beginning to have a clearer outline.

4. **Reaching Harbor**. We have reached a new normal. There may be a prolonged and severe recession or a rapid recovery. There may be a spectrum of outcomes in terms of the future incidence of coronaviruses. But whatever this new normal is, we've progressed out of a state of hot crisis and into the stage that follows.

These stages may play out at different times in different places. China has reached the third stage – or at least their official communications take this stance. Italy is in the maelstrom of the second stage. In the United States, we're in the first stage, progressing at different speeds in different regions. This framing of the stages doesn't predict much of anything about the future – the order of magnitude of loss of life, the time frame during which whole domains of economic activity are suspended – but without having any predictive power, it still helps clarify what different stages will be like, and what kinds of questions are worthy of attention as the stages unfold. In Stage 1, for instance, unknowns are so large that a roadmap is far too much to ask. Practical questions at this stage include:

- What level of contraction and disruption, sustained over what period, can we practically prepare ourselves to withstand?
- What are the choices these thresholds imply?
- Which choices do we make now, and what triggers do we envision that would trip the wire for choices we're deferring?
- What are the important actions to take now in order to build readiness and capacity for the even harder conditions we believe will soon be upon us?

Without having any privileged insight into what is to come, one can still see clearly in the first stage that Stage 2 will create more danger and more stress. Stage 1 is not just a time for coping and adapting, but a time for building whatever reserves of clarity, capability, energy, cash, and other resources can be created in advance of the second stage. Because Stage 2 will create the conditions for panic, part of the work of Stage 1 is to begin to shape an understanding of what can be withstood, what would pull the enterprise outside that envelope of preparedness, and what more desperate maneuvers might be called for in the event that those worst cases emerge. Part of readiness is readiness for our own fears to manifest.

Amidst the dark days of the second stage, leaders will have a challenge to perceive when Stage 3 is arriving, and to summon the bandwidth, the presence of mind and the creative power to take in how

their environment has shifted and to formulate a strategic response. Crises break the equilibrium, and opportunities with a short shelf life can be realized by those who have created the mindspace to perceive, when that time comes, how they now know enough to look ahead, and who have taken the dimensions of assets and risk to understand they have the capacity to act.

3 - Become Present

Even in ordinary times, attention slips, emotions erupt, resolve falters. Amidst catastrophe, these human frailties are amplified a thousand-fold.

The only antidote is a discipline of becoming present. By affirming deepest commitments and hammering out the critical few models to shape and guide decisions, we create the capacity for wisdom. To act wisely, we must make space in the moment to let these touchstones do their work. To navigate a crisis, we must make this space over and over again, hour by hour, day by day, week by week.

Pema Chödrön writes:

> I'd heard Zen teachers talk of meditation as the willingness to die over and over again. And there it was – as each breath went out and dissolved, there was the chance to die to all that had gone before, and to relax instead of panic.**

Like Albert in the church, the leader becoming present is aware – of her own racing heart, of the pivotal nature of *this moment here*. Standing grounded in this moment, becoming present stretches us backward to the still-living core of what we've been, and forward into the already-alive commitment to how we will go forward.

Such presence matters most in crisis, because our best choices push us into the arms of outcomes we've worked hard to avoid. No alternatives come without heavy costs. There, in the church in Roxbury, the community chose to put their children in harm's way, to send those they loved most into a place where they would be subjected to hatred their parents could do little to prepare them for and nothing to prevent.

Clarity and even a kind of calm lie on the other side of this reconciliation. As he readied himself to command the crossing of the Delaware, Washington wrote to Robert Morris:

> I agree with you that it is vain to ruminate upon, or even reflect upon the authors of our present misfortunes. We should rather exert ourselves, and look forward with hopes, that some lucky chance may yet turn up in our favor.***

Washington's decision, like so much in that campaign of independence, could have ended in tragedy. With "an abundance of caution," as today's phrase goes, he would have called off the attack when the crossing was delayed by storm, when it became clear the troops could not reach the British in Trenton before dawn. But he had chosen his peril, and history would own the consequences of his choice.

4 - Widen the Circle of Concern

Under threat, our world constricts. Threat requires immediate action; it requires a narrowing of what we can protect.

These maxims are true – and insufficient. The windows of what we thought we knew have shattered, and the outside is storming in. In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King wrote:

> I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states.... We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.

The virus shows us this as literal ground truth. Whatever distinctions we might draw – the borders between jailed and free, between countries, between industries -- a virus follows only the mathematics of contagion. Effects cascade. All the most valuable nodes in a global network are highly connected; all are vulnerable.

Acting on yesterday's picture of what concerned our particular enterprise will not be enough. The practical leader of a business must widen her circle of concern simply to understand the causal factors shaping enterprise performance. The visionary leader will look beyond.

Wartime provides one set of precedents. Peter Drucker was asked by General Motors "to study and report on managerial policy and organization from the standpoint of an outside consultant" in the fall of 1943. He answered that call at a time when the war in Europe was turning, Italy had surrendered – but the siege of Leningrad had not yet ended. D-Day was still several months away, and the United States was learning the human cost of offensives in the Pacific.

In the winter of 1946, in *Concept of the Corporation*, the published account of this study of GM, Drucker wrote of the lessons of wartime production:

> We learned that mass production is much more than a technique.... The new understanding has tremendously expanded the field to which mass-production methods can be applied. We have learned that any operation can be handled by modern mass-production methods if the volume is only large enough. Neither the difficulty of the operation nor the precision required make much difference. This is perhaps the greatest single technological advance made in this generation.****

What will be our equivalents? This time of urgent need, this speeded-up crucible, can be the school in which we learn new disciplines of collective action, disciplines we will need to address the slow motion crisis of a changing climate and the other existential risks that this period of history presented, even before the pandemic upon us now. On a smaller stage, from the ashes of this catastrophe, competitive orders will change in industries, and leaders in old and new markets will arise. By turning outward, by widening our circle of concern, we can see in others' need the seeds of our own future flourishing.

For the leader at the top, it is inescapably difficult to make space, as the crisis accelerates, to take the wide view and the long view. Because the leader at the top cannot absent herself from urgent work, cannot fail to be visible, cannot escape the demands of being at the nerve center of onrushing events and decisions, she needs *others* to think ahead – so that in her brief moments of reflection, there is an intellectual baton to be handed to her, and a next runner at the ready.

Every enterprise of scale has talented broad thinkers already on the inside, whose capacity can be unlocked to do this work. As so much of what is “strategic” inside companies rightly pauses to conserve bandwidth and resources, many of the very people whose abilities best enable them to help top leaders widen the circle of concern will find themselves with time and space. Organizations that invest even the smallest quantum of time now to pose powerful questions and to enlist people who aren’t at the core of driving mission critical work to think about these questions will unlock vast potential. This could be as simple as the CEO spending 30 minutes scribbling five questions on a proverbial napkin and sending a photo to an aide, with an idea of a handful of names of people who can begin to give these questions form and shape. This first handful can enlist others in the work of seeking answers, careful not to diminish the focus of those colleagues doing the most direct work of addressing the crisis at hand.

Perhaps the emphasis here on reflection will seem impractical to many, under the current circumstances. One could look to Winston Churchill in the depths of war as a counterexample. Robert Coles writes of visiting the pastor of the church where Albert Jones worshipped and where we’ve seen him take on the mantle of leadership. As Coles made to leave their conversation, the pastor said:

You’re a busy man – and you know, that’s what Brother Albert told us once, at a meeting we had in this church…. He kept saying that every day counts, and true, we have to keep busy and keep going, but sometimes, there comes a time, when here and now everything counts, and you have to be here and stay here, because there’s no choice – “not if you want to do right, be on the Lord’s side.”

These are times that demand better than our current best -- and that better is within us, illuminated by the commitments we already hold most deeply, guided by models we can readily find, apparent to us as we become present, as we look inward to what we are called to do, outward to the wider circle of our mutual concern.

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* Robert Coles, *Lives of Moral Leadership*, pp. 207 – 9, quoted with many ellipses here, but a beautiful essay that deserves reading in full.

** Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart*, p. 19

*** David McCullough, *1776*, p. 274

**** *Concept of the Corporation*, p. 183