
Introduction

Man was made for Joy & Woe
And when this we rightly know
Thro the World we safely go

—*William Blake*

ONE AUTUMN DAY, I spotted this droll poster tacked to the office wall of a seasoned leader at a state department of education:

—— NOTICE ——

The objective of all dedicated department employees should be to thoroughly analyze all situations, anticipate all problems prior to their occurrence, have answers for these problems, and move swiftly to solve these problems when called upon . . .

However . . .

When you are up to your ass in alligators, it is difficult to remind yourself that your original objective was to drain the swamp.

Sound familiar? In fact, do you ever find yourself bogged down in difficulties, fretting about expectations, or just plain swamped by the biting stress of leadership?

If so, you are not alone. Nearly half of school principals report being under great stress, and 75 percent feel their job has become too complex, says a 2013 MetLife Survey.¹ Indeed, there are “so many pressures crushing administrators today,” a school principal recently wrote me, “it is enough for many to question why they made the decision to come out of the classroom in the first place.”

A similar point is made by Paul Ash, a central office administrator for thirty-six years, who has spent the last ten as superintendent of the Lexington Public Schools in Massachusetts. In a note to me, he describes in stark language the stress and emotional impact of dealing with the relentless pressures facing education leaders today: “Superintendents often feel like they’re going to be ‘killed’ by conflicts caused by parents, school boards, teachers, unions, and media. In fact, the English word ‘leadership’ originates in the ancient root ‘leith,’ which meant ‘to go forth and die,’ as in battle. While superintendents are not expected to launch actual life-threatening battles, it often feels this way when they’re at the center of intense conflicts that could cost them their reputation or employment.” Talk about snapping alligators.

It seems like leaders today live in what the US Army calls a VUCCA world—one marked by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, chaos, and ambiguity—with unyielding pressures to work harder, longer, and smarter and to do more with less. To make things worse, few venues exist to honestly discuss such topics as fear, anger, shame, loneliness, isolation, self-doubt, or feeling unappreciated. Little wonder many leaders are stressed out—and in their whimsical moments might dream about creating a new app, Stress Toys “R” Us.

We all yearn to flourish in these stressful times, and scientific studies show that a modicum of stress actually enhances performance.² But the unwelcome truth is that leaders often experience their work as emotionally painful and draining, even if they don't want to admit it. No matter what form it takes—frustration, regret, anxiety, shame, exhaustion, self-doubt, isolation, hurt, depression, you name it—emotional discomfort is an inevitable feature of leadership work today. I should know. I've been there—and have learned firsthand the hard fact: like it or not, there's no leading without bleeding.

Not surprisingly, we dislike the emotional discomfort triggered by our stressful circumstances, which we believe lie at the root of our difficulties. It turns out, however, that outside pressures are often not the chief problem, as counterintuitive as that may sound. Instead, a big threat to flourishing as a leader comes from responding unskillfully to the internal stress of leadership, which can turn inevitable discomfort into debilitating anguish.

As we will see, leaders respond unskillfully mainly by (1) ruminating excessively over upsets, (2) resisting discomfort and trying to escape it, and (3) rebuking themselves for falling short. In chapter 2, I explain how these three ways of responding can aggravate everyday discomfort and turn it into mind-made misery, which can in turn undermine leadership work. In the face of pressure, we often react rashly, sidetrack our work, forget to nourish ourselves, and lose sight of what really matters to us. All too often, our effectiveness deteriorates, our joy evaporates, our energy dissipates—and far too many leaders become dispirited and tune out, bow out, or burn out.

If this pattern ever rings true for you, there's good news. Everyday discomfort may be inevitable, but mind-made misery is avoidable. You can learn how to constructively handle the pressures and discomfort you encounter without making them worse. Indeed, leadership work need not be as hard as it often is.

What's more, you can actually flourish. Even in a pressure-cooker world, you can be at your best, living life fully with grace and zest as a high-performing leader. You can learn to lead without going off the rails every time you feel overwhelmed. Indeed, you can learn to take stress more in stride, make wiser choices, and retain your sense of humor. You can seize the wonderful opportunities that leadership work provides and live a life that embodies meaning and vitality. This book aims to start you on this journey.³

WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT

Given my spotlight on flourishing, you may be wondering what flourishing has to do with being an effective leader. Building on *The Free Dictionary* definition—"to fare well"—I believe the meaning is aptly captured in the metaphor of dancing in the rain, an image intended to convey an upbeat, and realistic, way of leading and living in stressful times.

For those old-timers who recall a giddy-with-love Gene Kelly dancing through puddles in the delightful movie *Singin' in the Rain*, alas, his trouble-free circumstances aren't exactly what leaders encounter. Instead, by rain, I mean that stressful upsets, like storms, are an inevitable feature of leading and living on earth. We may not like stormy weather, but it is here to stay whether we want it or not—it's OK to get wet. Rain further implies that we humans usually try to escape life's storms by raising an umbrella or running for cover. Such strategies work with real rain, but when we try to escape our feelings, as we will see, we can drown in them.

The metaphor of rain also suggests that troubling thoughts and feelings are often like summer squalls, which have various durations and levels of intensity. And the metaphor suggests that sometimes what we experience as difficult and unpleasant can also be a surprising gift. Just as rain is vital for seeds to sprout,

emotional pain can foster personal growth and creativity by motivating us to look inside ourselves and do things that otherwise we wouldn't consider.

Dancing implies taking action. It is the very opposite of being off somewhere lost in our heads, just fretting over the rain in our lives. And dancing means engaging wholeheartedly in different kinds of activities that make us come fully alive: action inspired by our values, which fosters a sense of meaning, purpose, and vitality; mindfulness practices, which develop peace of mind, presence, and perspective; and other nourishing activities that soothe our souls by bringing a sense of joy, satisfaction, and accomplishment.

Dancing further implies getting out of our way and being fully present with all our senses—in step with the music, in synch with the changing beat. And dancing implies action marked by skill and grace. You may be feeling bad because of the rain in your life, but you still can take action that makes you come alive. And as a bonus, you can make yourself feel better in the process.

Dancing in the rain stands for living life fully, especially in the midst of life's storms, and it entails a number of things:

- a new way to respond to our difficulties, *being* with them instead of *being* them, which reduces their hold on us and opens us to the joy of being fully present and engaged
- a conscious choice to be guided by our core values, rather than meandering through life whipsawed by upsetting circumstances and at the mercy of our inhibitions
- a willingness to stand up and dance even when we are unmotivated to do so, on the theory that we can change how we feel by changing what we do
- a recognition that sometimes—often—we'll encounter setbacks because heavy downpours will divert us from our priorities

At its core, dancing in the rain is a way of being, a way of flourishing as a leader—and as a human being—in a world brimming with sunny skies and gloomy storms, a buoyant and constructive

way of leading and living, which you can learn and put into practice, at least some of the time.

What's more, the capacity to dance in the rain is central to sustained effectiveness in today's world. After all, it's hard enough to find able educators willing to take on leadership tasks, but an even harder job is identifying promising leaders with the motivation and skills to handle the challenges without losing their edge or throwing in the towel. And beyond the benefits of sustained effectiveness, the perception that a leader is dancing in the rain can directly enhance organizational productivity. A display of vitality in the face of challenges, for example, can be inspiring and energizing—it sets an infectious tone that motivates others to perform at high levels.

Most important, I prize dancing in the rain because this way of leading frees us from preoccupation with our difficulties and helps us cultivate the inner strength to look outward to serve others effectively and to promote broader issues of justice. This is no easy task, say Dan Edwards and his coauthors at the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society: “Burnout is a growing trend in the social justice community and one of the most difficult challenges we confront . . . [T]he best way to sustain ourselves while working for change is with the help of contemplative practices: activities that, when incorporated into our daily life, bring us strength, peace, and inspiration.”⁴

Donald Rothberg, a meditation teacher, echoes this point of view:

Those of us who aim to transform both ourselves and the world come under heavy pressure, both from outside and inside, that make[s] it very challenging to take care of ourselves and the world over the long haul . . . [T]he inner difficulties are perhaps more daunting than the outer difficulties, for they can paralyze and end our engagement. We must somehow sustain ourselves over a lifetime and work with and through such challenges as burnout, despair and

hopelessness, fear, an often burning anger at injustice . . . and a sense of being overwhelmed by pain and suffering.⁵

And as the well-known meditation teacher Matthieu Ricard reminds us, the “ultimate reason” for doing this work is to “transform ourselves in order to transform the world.” He adds, “We transform ourselves so we can become better human beings and serve others in a wiser and more effective way.”⁶

Taken together, the various aspects of learning to dance in the rain facilitate focused attention and engagement, sustained productivity and effectiveness, and service to others—and lie at the heart of just plain living the way many of us want to live.

WHOM THIS BOOK IS FOR

This book is aimed mainly at top education leaders and those aspiring to these positions, at all levels of education—school principals, district superintendents, college deans, university presidents, and other administrators. It is especially aimed at high-functioning leaders who want to enhance their inner strengths so that they can better lead and flourish in a stress-filled world.

The book is also aimed at those who prepare education leaders in schools of education and elsewhere. With a few exceptions, strikingly little attention is paid to how leaders should deal with emotional upheavals at work. Indeed, the usual message is to ignore your feelings—keep a stiff upper lip and soldier on—shortsighted advice.

In addition, the perspectives and practices presented in this book are sufficiently universal to hold lessons for others beyond those in high-level education posts. Officials in nonprofit organizations, government, and even for-profit businesses are likewise wrestling with the nonstop demands of a turbulent world. Moreover, teachers, counselors, caregivers, and others who may not formally head organizations, but who do act as informal leaders in complex

and difficult settings, face challenges in mobilizing people to make good things happen. Finally, this book is aimed at a general audience—all of us ordinary mortals who long to flourish and live effective lives that matter in the face of common obstacles.

FILLING A GAP

I have written this book—a primer, if you will—to help fill a large gap in the education leadership literature, namely, the need for a succinct and user-friendly guide that addresses the inner lives of busy leaders and how they can better lead and live in difficult jobs. This volume grows out of my personal experiences as a dean at the Harvard Graduate School of Education; my years teaching leadership courses; lucky—and not so lucky—circumstances that have forever changed my research, my teaching, and my life; and some recent workshops that have helped me develop and test-drive many of the ideas presented here. I also share a few personal experiences that especially help the reader see tangible examples of the everyday stress in leadership.

This book introduces seven concrete steps to flourishing as a leader, a framework whose acronym is MY DANCE (see the box “Seven Steps of MY DANCE”). The seven steps, introduced in chapter 3, are intended to supplement the important work on the external lives of leaders—work that I and others have addressed elsewhere, with its focus on organizational, political, and interpersonal skills. The exercises interspersed in the discussion of MY DANCE can be used to cultivate inner strengths directly tied to the effectiveness of leaders: clear thinking, focused attention, steadiness under fire, resilience, and a broad perspective, to name just a few.

I’ve also written this book to complement the emergent—and inspiring—new literature linking mindfulness and leadership.⁷ I, too, emphasize the importance of being mindful, as defined by Jon Kabat-Zinn, a pioneer in bringing meditation to the West: “Mindfulness,” he explains in his popular formulation,

Seven Steps of MY DANCE

M*ind your values:* Take action inspired by what matters most to you, so that you can live a vital and meaningful life instead of getting sidetracked by upsets or just drifting along without a sense of purpose.

Y*ield to now:* Slow down and focus your attention on the present moment so that you can be fully engaged, balanced, and even joyful instead of racing through life on autopilot and ruminating about the past and the future.

D*isentangle from upsets:* Mentally step back, observing and making room for upsets so that you can gain the perspective needed to constructively handle upsets instead of overidentifying with them, which can make things worse.

A*llow unease:* Open up to upsets even if you dislike them. In this way, you can wisely embrace what is already here and you can pursue your values instead of resisting discomfort in a futile attempt to escape your inner reality.

N*ourish yourself:* Engage in everyday activities designed to replenish your energy, restore your perspective, and revitalize your sense of well-being instead of depleting your reserves.

C*herish self-compassion:* Give yourself the kindness you need and deserve instead of rebuking yourself for your shortcomings, so that you can enhance your resilience and reach out to others with compassion.

E*xpress feelings wisely:* Carefully reveal your human side to build trusting relationships instead of damaging your credibility by lurching between reacting rashly and concealing any hint of feelings.

“is awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a sustained and particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.”⁸

Mindfulness can be helpful in calming the mind, maintaining focus, making clear and wise decisions, and dealing with stress—among other benefits that scientists are beginning to document. Indeed, the cover story in the November 2014 issue of *Scientific American* sets out the growing neuroscientific evidence that meditation makes a difference:

When we learn how to juggle or play a musical instrument, the brain undergoes changes through a process called neuroplasticity. A brain region that controls the movement of a violinist’s fingers becomes progressively larger with mastery of the instrument. A similar process appears to happen when we meditate. Nothing changes in the surrounding environment, but the meditator regulates mental states to achieve a form of inner enrichment . . . [R]esearch has begun to show that meditation can rewire brain circuits to produce salutary effects not just on the mind and the brain but on the entire body.⁹

But this is not just a book about mindfulness. Indeed, I draw on a wide range of related methods that help us build the skills needed for establishing our own sense of meaning and purpose in leadership, for self-compassion, for creating everyday nourishing activities, and for expressing emotions wisely in public.

My aim is to help leaders help themselves flourish in these stressful times and in turn improve their effectiveness, thereby enhancing the quality of education. To this end, I distill perspectives and practices from modern psychology and ancient wisdom traditions and draw on personal lessons from work and home. The impediments to flourishing are not just the outside pressures we face, but also how we respond to them inside ourselves. All too often, we become prisoners of self-defeating habits that

undermine our effectiveness, cause needless suffering for us and others, and sidetrack what gives life a sense of purpose.

In emphasizing our internal responses to external pressures, I am decidedly not suggesting that leaders simply roll over and play dead in the face of pressures inappropriately imposed upon them—for example, conditions that result from unfair school-finance laws. Rather, educators need to develop the internal skills and wisdom to play the cards they are dealt when necessary, while simultaneously looking for openings to create a more supportive and just work environment.

Few complex problems have one-size-fits-all solutions. But the seven steps of MY DANCE can give you a variety of approaches for tackling many everyday leadership challenges. The book offers ways to help you act on what matters most to you, tune into the present moment, take setbacks less personally, and nourish yourself frequently. You can learn how to share your emotions wisely and how to dodge three unhelpful Rs: resisting reality, ruminating unduly, and rebuking yourself for falling short. With practice and persistence, you too can advance toward dancing in the rain as an effective leader.

I write not as a psychologist, brain scientist, Buddhist, or coach, but as a lifelong teacher and veteran leader committed to social justice and education reform. I know firsthand both the upheavals of leading and the benefits of practicing the steps developed in this book. As a synthesizer, I also write as a bricoleur, putting together approaches with whatever resources are available to me at the time.

Taken together, some ten years of inquiry, both professional and personal, has resulted in this progress report on an unexpected adventure. Earlier in my life, I never could have imagined taking this illuminating voyage to a completely new territory and writing a book—and I know I still have so much more to learn. For now, I hope these efforts are helpful as you ponder how to lead and live in stressful times.