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Leveraging Life's Experiences

A Generation of Orphans

Victor Dukay was 15 years old and away at boarding school when his life fell apart in its entirety. It wasn't because of anything that happened at school, but rather what happened at home.

On the morning of November 5, 1971, Victor's father, a psychiatrist who had been suffering from clinical depression, came down to the breakfast table with a revolver in his hand. With unexplainable and systematic disregard, according to Victor, he shot and killed his wife and his daughter. He took two shots at Victor's brother, missed, and then shot himself. A double murder suicide.

For Victor, at the un-adult age of 15, it became the defining moment of his life. Instantly, Victor was unmoored and lost. He was horrified with the present and suspicious of any promise of future happiness. With despair looming large, Victor made an agreement with himself that involved the possibility of ending his own life.

"I made a pact with myself," Victor remembered. "By the age of 40, if I actually felt the way I felt after losing my parents, I would kill myself. That was what actually allowed me, at the darkest moments, to know that if it continued as painfully as it was, I would have an out."

This radical ultimatum forced Victor to search for some sense of meaning to his life. For some time, he found none. His teens and

twenties were spent in high school, in college, and acquiring a master's degree in business. After graduate school, with experience flying planes since he was 17, Victor started an executive jet business and made money. He then sold his business and went back to graduate school again, this time for a doctorate in human communication.

But through all of the searching, a meaningfulness to his life was nowhere to be found. Then Victor and a friend named Steve Lundy, whom he had met through church, began volunteering at Mother Teresa's Hospice in Denver, Colorado. When meaning finally did arrive, it arrived unannounced, and with existential weight.

"I started to make the connection at Hospice," Victor told us. "That's where I actually had enough time to feel. Up to that point, I was disconnected with heart and brain because I was so tired and emotionally exhausted. When I actually had time to be connected and to feel once again, that's when the path became clear as to what I should be doing. Not exactly the path, or exactly the feeling, but that I should be doing something that involved service."¹

Sadly, not long after Victor and Steve began volunteering at the hospice, Steve revealed that he was HIV positive. "At that point in the journey, drugs had not yet been developed," Victor explained. "I became his caretaker and caregiver, and we developed an intimate friendship as he was dying. Steve told me he wanted to leave some money to make a difference. I told him I had just sold a company. We each put in \$100,000 and created the Lundy Foundation."

The Lundy Foundation was established as a public operating charity in 1991. Today, the foundation is active in HIV/AIDS-related issues, most notably a major project to eradicate the deadly pandemic through regular HIV testing, followed by immediate antiretroviral treatment for those who test positive. The foundation is also an active participant in an international initiative to assess the effectiveness of AIDS programs that target orphaned and vulnerable children in East Africa.

Why Africa? Because, Victor said, he had come to the painful realization that the AIDS epidemic in Africa would create an entire generation of orphans, just like himself. "I am an orphan. I will always be orphaned," Victor told us. "No matter how much money I have

or how many friends I have, I will always be orphaned. There is a piece of me that I lost at an early age. That's what I get connected to when I am in Africa.”

Victor pointed out that the terrible tragedy that happened to him has paradoxically had the very positive effect of motivating him to do the work he is doing in Africa with kids. “There were people when my parents and sister died who took me in and decided they were going to help this one lonely soul,” Victor said. “I think I am doing the same thing with my life right now. I am trying to help the 60 kids that I can and hopefully make a difference in their lives because somebody helped me. I know what it feels like at a very deep level of having somebody reach their arm out and say, ‘Come with us.’”

For Victor, life became more meaningful while he was caring for a dying friend. Through his friendship with Steve Lundy, a compassion emerged for those who are alone—whether living or dying. “I reached 40, and it seemed that not all of the pain goes away, because it never does, but I responded to it differently,” Victor said. “I know at some level, not exactly, but at some level, what those kids are feeling and I can help somehow or another.”

Although profoundly moving, the way in which Victor made a deep emotional connection with the AIDS orphans of Africa is not unusual among our interviewees. In fact, making an empathic connection² is the first of seven choices we observed among those we interviewed. We'll look at the other six choices in the following chapters of this book.

Empathic Connections

Like Victor, all of our interviewees allowed us passage into their inner circle of one, where they gave us a detailed reflection of their own lives. Good leadership begins with self-awareness. Proponents of the *authentic leadership* approach contend such self-awareness is rooted in an understanding of the larger meaning of the stories leaders tell about themselves.³ Indeed, as our interviewees narrated their life stories, they described personal experiences and connections they said deepened their desire to help others.

These emotional connections have drawn the attention of other researchers as well, and there is now increasing interest in understanding the kinds of connections people make with one another, as well as their biological basis.⁴ A remarkable groundbreaking discovery called *mirror neurons*,⁵ for example, has prompted a new interdisciplinary field, social neuroscience, to investigate empathic connections. Using brain imaging and other leading-edge technologies that allow scientists to peer inside the human brain, researchers have discovered that we can mirror another person's neural activities and "share" pain, disgust, taste, smell, and other feelings and sensations.⁶ We have observed a heightened capacity in our interviewees to "share" the internal states of others.⁷

In fact, all of the leaders we interviewed for this book have demonstrated a compassion and empathy for the people they serve that is immediately obvious.⁸ What's not so obvious are the reasons behind this strong underlying presence of empathy. What we discovered in the course of our interviews is that in each case, their compassion and desire to help are in some way leveraged by a personal experience, often occurring in childhood, that imprinted them with an understanding and appreciation for how another person might feel when challenged by one of life's circumstances. As we learned, their empathy has its early roots in one or more of three sources: exposure to role models and positive values, experiencing a troubling awareness, or having a traumatic personal experience.

Role Models and Positive Values

Many of our interviewees told us that positive experiences they had early in their lives created a lasting impression about the importance of social responsibility. Not surprisingly, these experiences often included an altruistic role model. That role model was most often a mother, father, or other family member, who passed on their own values of serving others.⁹ But a role model need not be a family member. It also can be a teacher, community worker, religious leader, or even a friend. Leadership researchers Kouzes and Posner underscore the power of "modeling the way" as a means of transmitting a set of

values to others. They write that we trust leaders—or, in this case, parents, teachers, and other role models—when their “deeds and words match.”¹⁰

In 2001, Meg Campbell founded Codman Academy Charter Public School in Dorchester, Massachusetts, a high school that has had tremendous success in preparing students from disadvantaged families for admission to 4-year colleges. A graduate of Radcliffe College (now part of Harvard), Meg had her choice of prestigious, well-paying jobs after graduation. But Meg had clearly been influenced by her large, socially committed family. Her mother was a history teacher, whom Meg modeled herself after, even as a little girl. “I was always playing school,” she told us. “There’s something kind of magical for me about schools.”

Another important role model for Meg was Anne Sullivan, the gifted teacher who led a young Helen Keller out of her closed world of darkness and silence. Meg told us that reading about Sullivan influenced her choice of Radcliffe, which the renowned teacher had attended. She also said that she identified with the young and inexperienced Sullivan, who faced the daunting challenge of reaching a blind and deaf girl, but who told herself, “I’m the best one here; I’m the only one here.” Herself undaunted by those who said high school was too late to change young people’s lives, Meg succeeded in starting a secondary school that sought to shape students’ characters, as well as advance their academic prospects, thus setting them on the path to a better life.

Other people we talked with were similarly influenced by positive role models. Margaret Vernon joined the Peace Corps right after her graduation from Georgetown University. She told us her decision was influenced by her father, who is a general surgeon, and her mother, who works in international health. Together, Margaret’s parents reinforced the importance of taking responsibility for improving health care for people in developing parts of the world. Margaret, who at the time of our interview was a public health volunteer in West Africa, said, “A large part of what I am doing now is probably due to their teachings and what they showed me as I was growing up.”

Dave Ulrich spent 3 years with his wife in Quebec leading missionaries for his church. To do so required Dave to take a sabbatical from

his professorship at the University of Michigan, as well as leave behind a lucrative consulting practice. Dave told us his decision was strongly influenced by his experience as a child helping his father make chili every Sunday and then taking it to a local homeless shelter. “When our family talks about service, there are no ifs, ands, or buts,” Dave said. “You give back.”

Harry Leibowitz is the founder of World of Children, an organization that honors individuals who make a difference in the lives of children around the globe. Even though Harry grew up poor as the son of immigrants in Brooklyn, New York, he told us he learned the beginnings of social responsibility from his grandmother, who taught him to follow the Jewish tradition of giving some of his few coins to Israel. Although she was “an old-world person” who didn’t speak English very well, Harry’s grandmother was “really critical in my understanding of and appreciation of people,” Harry told us.

Peter Samuelson is the founder of the Starlight Children’s Foundation, which helps seriously ill children and their families cope. Peter told us he was strongly influenced by his high-achieving and philanthropically engaged father, “who cast a very long shadow.” Born in London, Peter came to Los Angeles after university to begin his career as a motion picture and television producer, but he said, “We carry the legacy of our parents with us.” For Peter, that legacy bore fruit in his own now wide-reaching philanthropic ventures.

Dr. Irving Williams is the founder of Adventures in Health, Education & Agricultural Development. Irving remembers his father, a farmer, telling him as a boy, “We must grow more things than we think we will need for ourselves. Grow some things for the birds and animals to eat. Grow some things to give to other people.” Irving has followed the spirit of this advice, devoting his life to improving the health and well-being of people in developing countries, where children often suffer from malaria, polio, diarrhea, and other preventable diseases. Through his efforts in rural African communities for the past 26 years, thousands of children’s lives have been saved. Moreover, Irving has taught doctors, nurses, and other health care specialists how to grow high-quality, nutrient-rich foods, thereby sharing the knowledge and skills he learned as a boy growing up on his family farm.

While many of our interviewees were inspired to help others by the example of role models, nearly all also pointed to their faith as a guiding force that shaped their values about service. Perhaps most strikingly, Father Gary Graf, a priest in Waukegan, Illinois, offered to give 60 percent of his liver to a parishioner he barely knew, a man named Miguel Zavala, who would have otherwise died. Reflecting back, Father Gary places the decision in the context of his spiritual life, noting that donating part of his liver “seems to make sense in the larger context of who I am and what I would do and should do.”

Of course, one doesn't have to be a priest or other religious leader to be guided by faith. Dr. Jane Aronson, the founder of Worldwide Orphans Foundation, grew up in a Reform Jewish family and describes herself as “traditionally and spiritually a Jewish person.” She told us that she follows the Jewish teaching of *tikkun olam*, or repairing the world, which she described as “a very old Hebrew concept that is embedded in the thousands of years of Jewish life and which means that we are put in this world to be committed to justice in the world.” Jane, a pediatrician, has made that concept a reality in her life's work. Through her foundation, she has helped better the lives of more than 5,000 children around the world who are orphans or who live without consistent parental care.

Hui-jung Chi of Taiwan also has been guided and sustained by her Christian faith, which she describes as her core value. Like many of the people we interviewed, Hui-jung experienced an intersection of positive role models and faith; she was inspired to attend Sunday school and learn the Bible by her devout Christian parents. A former journalist, Hui-jung has been an important voice against child prostitution, domestic violence, and sexual abuse. Hui-jung revitalized the Garden of Hope Foundation, now a network of counseling centers, emergency shelters, and long-term halfway houses for girls rescued from forced prostitution or otherwise in need. Her work has benefited more than 150,000 children in Taiwan, but fighting for the rights of abused children in a country where the government has long ignored the problem and where children have been seen traditionally as property has taken great courage, perseverance, and skill. “I can get through anything with the help of God,” Hui-jung told us.

A Troubling Awareness

While for some of our interviewees empathy was nurtured by role models and positive values and experiences, other interviewees described their deep connection as the result of a troubling awareness about some aspect of society. Once again, we observed a consistent pattern.

Consider how a sudden awareness of reality resonated deeply with the following interviewees. In each case, the awareness ignited a passion to do something to help that could hardly have been arrived at by chance alone.

Makenzie Snyder, the young founder of Children to Children, was only 7 years old when she attended a Children's World Summit meeting with her two brothers and met foster care children for the first time. Makenzie, 16 at the time of our interview, said she was "appalled" to discover that many foster children are forced to take their belongings with them in plastic trash bags as they move from home to home, an indignity that compounds the already harrowing situation for a youngster of being separated from parents and siblings. The kids Makenzie met told her they had been in as many as 13 different homes.

"I felt sympathy for them," Makenzie said, "and I knew what they were going through in a way, like I understood." She found what she had learned from the foster care children so disturbing that she convinced her parents to go with her to yard sales to collect duffel bags and stuffed animals that she could donate to foster children. Shortly thereafter, she began collecting donations from businesses, including Freddie Mac, and individuals alike. To date, Makenzie has handed out more than 60,000 duffel bags, each containing a small stuffed animal, to foster children. "When I'm upset, I like to have a stuffed animal to cuddle with," Makenzie confided, demonstrating the compassion she has for youngsters in less fortunate circumstances than her own.

Craig Kielburger, at the age of 12, founded Free The Children to fight oppressive child labor practices. While looking for the comics section in the newspaper, Craig came across a story of a young Pakistani boy, a boy his same age, who was murdered for speaking out against child labor. Craig was so upset by this blunt awareness

that he stood in front of his classmates and asked for their help. He formed a group of 12 students that began raising money, awareness, and petitioning against forced child labor.

Ryan Hreljac, at the age of 9, founded Ryan's Well Foundation, which has helped build more than 630 wells and other water projects in 16 countries. Ryan was moved when his first grade teacher explained to the class that many people in the world were dying because they didn't have access to clean water. "When I was 6 years old, I guess I was pretty naïve, and I thought there were two towns in the world, and our town had water and another one didn't, and one well would fix it," Ryan explained. "Now, you grow up and you learn there are a billion people in the world who don't have clean water, and every 8 seconds another child dies."

Cheryl Perera is the founder of OneChild Network, dedicated to eliminating the commercial sexual exploitation of children. At the age of 16, Cheryl was enraged to learn that Sri Lanka, the land of her own heritage, was a perilous trap for nearly 40,000 children forced or conned into prostitution. Cheryl was so disturbed by these statistics that she took several months off from high school to investigate child prostitution in Sri Lanka. She even played the main role in a treacherous undercover sting operation that removed a dangerous pedophile from the streets. During the sting, Cheryl connected in a profound way with the horror of what she was witnessing. "For that little while," she told us, "I understood what it was to have my childhood seen as a commodity."

Jennifer Adler, a former corporate attorney, is the past executive director of Invest in Kids, an evidence-based community program dedicated to improving the health and well-being of children from low-income families. Jennifer was inspired by the courage of her mother, a former Miss America, after a newspaper reporter identified her as a child victim of sexual abuse, and the story became front-page news. Jennifer told us that after the revelation, which was met with shock and disbelief in their community, her mother held a meeting at their church that was attended by more than 1,100 people. The meeting became a pivotal moment in Jennifer's life. From then on, she told us, she knew she wanted to work with children, so that others would not have to endure what her mother had experienced.

A Traumatic Personal Experience

Not unlike Victor Dukay, whose life was shaped by losing both of his parents and sister at an early age, several other interviewees reported experiences that were, in their own way, challenging enough to shape their empathy and fuel their desire to help others.¹¹

Kathy Giusti, along with her twin sister, Karen, established the Multiple Myeloma Research Foundation (MMRF) in 1998 soon after Kathy received the devastating diagnosis of multiple myeloma, an incurable cancer of the blood. The 5-year survival rate is one of the lowest of all cancers. Nearly 20,000 adults are diagnosed with multiple myeloma in the United States every year, and 11,000 people are predicted to die from the illness. But Kathy, a mother of two who has now had the disease for 15 years, is a fighter.

Kathy was determined to apply the management skills she had learned as a successful corporate executive to battling the disease. As the world's number-one private sponsor of multiple myeloma research, the MMRF, which facilitates collaboration among researchers, funds nearly 120 laboratories worldwide. The results have been significant. Today, the MMRF supports 70 new compounds and approaches in clinical trials that are extending and improving the lives of patients until a cure can be found.

We have already met Susie Scott Krabacher in this book's introduction. She's the founder of Mercy & Sharing Foundation, which feeds and provides health care to abandoned children in the desperate slum of Cité Soleil in Haiti. Susie, you will recall, told us that her desire to help children grew out of her own experience growing up in a physically and emotionally abusive family. When she saw an impoverished Mongolian boy on television one night, she identified with the look of despair on his face, a connection that spurred her to take actions that eventually led her to help the children of Haiti.

While a deep connection between a need they saw in society and their own experiences was made in many different ways, each interviewee made one. The connection between their inner reflection and the outer world became an inflection point in their lives. In the case of role models and positive values, the connection represents continuity from the lessons learned by the examples of others to becoming an

example themselves. It required accepting a passing of the torch and assuming personal responsibility. Someone showed them how to serve society by serving the needs of others. Our interviewees have simply completed the loop.

Completing the cycle of learning is also true for those interviewees who experienced a troubling awareness: there are child slave laborers; some people have to travel long distances for a drink of water; foster children often carry their belongings in a trash bag; or discovering one's mother, a former Miss America, was sexually abused as a child. In each case they were required to answer a few simple questions. What should I do about this new awareness? Should I do something or should I do nothing? Making a personal connection with such troubling aspects of humanity required our interviewees to face a stark reality, one that left them exposed, looking eye to eye with their own values, asking themselves, "Knowing what I now know, what do I do?"

It's an even harsher reality for those interviewees who were subjected to a more personal trauma, such as Victor Dukay, Susie Krabacher, and Kathy Giusti. It's easy for us to imagine how their experiences could have resulted in an inward focus and even a negative outcome. Victor could have decided to take his own life at the age of 40. Susie could have become abusive to others, mirroring her own upbringing. Kathy Giusti could have attended privately to her own cancer and her family's needs.

But in each case, the opposite occurred. Our interviewees rebuilt, and even resculpted, their lives beyond the disappointment into something more. They did not indulge feelings unhinged by anger, but instead reconciled their feelings into a positive purpose. They found the motivation to transform their trauma into a meaningful mantra: orphans must not be alone, children must not live in terrible poverty, a deadly cancer must be cured.

It's about alternative lives sourced from the same experience. Somehow, they came to understand that they were free to choose how they played it out, positively or negatively, and they chose the positive. In short, they made the absolute best of a bad experience. It's what the renowned Viennese psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, who spent 3 years in the concentration camps of World War II, termed

“tragic optimism.”¹² It is human potential at its best, turning suffering into human achievement, changing oneself for the better and taking responsible action.

Deep connections begin with what we know. Whether encouraged by a positive virtue of a childhood role model or self-coaxed out of despair, our interviewees are deeply familiar with feelings that resonate in sharp, clear images. The faithful acknowledgment of their own experiences is liberating. They don't ignore the values they were taught, the insights they came across, or the trauma they experienced. They embrace them and focus on the need. They don't look for someone who is worthy of their time or generosity. They know the need itself is worthwhile: hunger, shelter, water, safety, and so on all stand on their own importance.

When he turned 40, Victor Dukay was still absorbing the impact of having been made what he calls an “instant orphan” at a young age. Somehow he found a way to reassemble his fractured youth into a higher purpose. He saw a connection between his life experiences and some deep cut in humanity. He knew with AIDS a generation of orphans would emerge. Victor Dukay rose to the occasion. Perhaps the poet Kahlil Gibran understood best the nature of our deepest connections when he wrote: “Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars.”

Empathy is a feeling with its own temperament. Some needs resonate with us; others do not. The reasons are more unknown than known. The lesson from our interviewees is to begin with what we know about ourselves as a way to connect with our interest in helping others. Not everyone can work with the elderly, or spend time with a child who is dying, or look into the eyes of the homeless. But the lesson from our interviewees is that everyone can do something. It all begins by connecting with your passion and what matters to you.

As we saw in this chapter, the important first choice along the path is asking oneself, what is important to me, what do I connect with. The second choice, explored in the next chapter, leads to putting a stake in the ground about fairness in the world. This choice involves asking oneself whether people get what they deserve or are simply victims of ill fate.

Finding Your Connection

If you have a desire to help others, but have yet to make a connection with what is really important to you, there is an uncomplicated way to proceed. Consider the following three-step process.

1. Think about your own life. Is there an experience that has left a particularly strong impression on you? What is it that you understand so well and feel so strongly about that you know the details of someone else's feelings on the same issue? Such topics as divorce, cancer, unemployment, child abuse, hunger, feeling marginalized, or being alone are just a few examples. As you make your connection, were you influenced by a positive role model in your life or by a personal experience or troubling awareness?

2. Ponder and reflect. When you think about the issue with which you are familiar, what feelings emerge? What do you know about other people who experience those feelings? What do you imagine they might be going through? What would you hope for them?

3. Consider your options. Do you feel strongly enough about the issue to want to help someone else through it? Do you feel a sense of responsibility to use your knowledge for the benefit of others? What if you do nothing? Would your lack of action have any implications for others? For you?